



“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

Galatians 5:13

During our time living in Texas, Compton and I wrestled a good bit with the meaning of *freedom in Christ*. Texas really is a cowboy state in that values are very much based on each individual. For people there, freedom means little to no regulations on things like education, employment, and one’s own home. In the home we owned, Compton was able to do all kinds of work himself without a license or any kind of inspection. When we sold our house, the inspector said it was absolutely comparable to a professional. That wasn’t always the case, though!

It is difficult to be a part of a *community of faith* while also prioritizing individual freedom. Many of the churches in Texas are Evangelical – specifically Southern Baptist. They are stand-alone churches loosely affiliated with one another. The pastor is the main authority, so when the pastor misbehaves, it is really up to the congregation to determine how to proceed. On Sunday May 22, 2022, an independent investigative report was released documenting widespread sexual abuse of church members by pastors and elders across the SBC. No one was surprised, but the sheer volume of cases was horrifying none-the-less.

It is easy for those of us outside the SBC, to see how their system of hierarchy and complementarianism* gave too much space to abuse. The lack of accountability for the men at the top allowed them to misbehave egregiously. In the ELCA, we have three expressions of the church all working together and holding each other accountable: churchwide (national), synod (local), and congregation. For me to serve as pastor of St. Timothy, I have to be in good standing with all three. Two things that lead to a pastor being removed from the roster – meaning we are no longer ordained – are sexual and financial misconduct. The ELCA has zero tolerance for either of those things. This doesn’t mean abuse doesn’t happen, but this system has been effective in holding pastors accountable and providing care for healing of victims when abuse has happened.

Texas is at one end of a spectrum that defines freedom by a lack of regulations, but all across the USA, there are increasing numbers of people that would agree with that. A shocking number have elevated individual freedom or liberty to even higher than the gospel of Jesus Christ. Or they have confused the two, because of scriptures about the *freedom of Christ*. I've heard this from preachers (many of whom have been named in the sexual abuse report that came out recently). When they have preached freedom of the individual as the highest ideal, what they have really sought is the license to abuse without consequences.

This kind of freedom has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. *Freedom in Christ* is the gospel message that we are not responsible for our own salvation. That, by the grace of God, we are freed from the tyranny of sin, freed from damnation. *Freedom of Christ* means that there is no longer immigrant or citizen, there is no longer black and white, there is no longer male or female for all of us are one in Christ Jesus (paraphrase of Galatians 3:28).

The biblical definition of freedom has nothing to do with individuals or regulations. It has to do with letting go of ourselves to care for others. Following Christ means that we cannot enslave or oppress people, who are different from us. Following Christ means that we cannot put our own rights or desires above other people's basic needs. It's both very simple and incredibly difficult, but it is our calling as church.

*The belief that God has created men and women with specific complementary purposes: women are nurturers/caretakers; men are warriors/leaders. Extreme complementarians teach that women cannot work outside the home, speak in church, or even vote in elections, because they are not permitted by God to make decisions that would affect men.