

# **Voices: Soul freedom: An antidote for abusive church cultures & a balm for the abused**

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Churches, entities and anyone or anything else connected in some way to the Southern Baptist Convention have been rocked over the past few weeks by revelations of sexual abuse and how they were mishandled in numerous churches and other institutions. In response to these reports, there rightly has been lament, analysis and discussions about how we can prevent and respond to abuse correctly in the future.

In the midst of these responses, two questions keep coming to my mind:

- What is an antidote to abusive church cultures?
- What is a balm for the abused?

Soul freedom may be one answer among other possibilities.

Baptists have discussed and debated soul freedom for centuries. One definition of soul freedom is the belief that the soul should be free from any human coercion and interference concerning an individual's response to God, and the only mediator between an individual and God the Father is Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5).

How does soul freedom so understood answer the above questions?

# An antidote to abusive church cultures

A church culture may become abusive for many reasons. Leaders focused on authority at the expense of other values are at the core of abusive church cultures.

Leaders whose desire to control others often can try to function in a mediatory role between other people and God. Such leaders believe others cannot relate to God without them as a go-between.

As this type of leadership takes root within a church culture, the church and its leaders become focused on conformity, image maintenance and silencing critics. In its most extreme form, these cultures become cult-like.

Sadly, the most vulnerable—usually women and children—are the ones most in danger of being abused within these cultures.

Soul freedom can be an antidote to abusive church cultures primarily because it orders the role of leaders properly and empowers followers. When a leader embraces soul freedom, the focus shifts from controlling others to the sufficiency of God and his working in peoples' lives.

People do not need leaders to mediate God's work in their lives. Jesus is the only sufficient mediator. The awareness of this reality hopefully will result in leaders pointing people to Jesus rather than trying to control others.

The sufficiency of Jesus also provides leaders with the freedom to see themselves as servants like Jesus.

It is not enough, though, for leaders to *affirm* soul freedom. Leaders also must *encourage* soul freedom in their churches and commend members when they exercise soul freedom.

I think of Berea in Acts 17. Paul commended the church in Berea because

they “...examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (17:11).

The church in Berea is a wonderful example of a healthy church culture. Paul led and taught, while also commending the people in the church for exercising soul freedom by reading Scripture themselves. He did not silence or shame the people for not automatically believing something to be true just because he said it.

On the other hand, the church members in Berea did not wait for permission to study the Scriptures themselves. As spiritually healthy Christians, they were eager to receive what Paul taught and were willing to examine it for truth.

Soul freedom—encouraged by leaders and exercised by members—can be an important antidote to abusive church cultures.

## **A balm for the abused**

Since I am not a victim of abuse and have no idea what the experience of abuse is like, I am cautious in giving advice and seek first to listen.

I listen by reading testimonies and social media posts from those who have been abused. As a pastor, I listen as people share their experiences with me.

One of the painful realities I’ve heard is how the behavior of abusers in the church and the abuse itself can undermine the faith of the abused profoundly. In one of the ugliest, most violent and sinful ways possible, the abuser in the church coerces and interferes with an individual’s response to God.

When abuse undermines a person’s faith in God, the principle of soul freedom can be part of restoring faith. The concept of soul freedom

reminds us there is no person, priest, pastor, church, family or creed that can function—in reality or perception—as a mediator between an individual and God. Again, Jesus is the only sufficient mediator.

Because Jesus is sufficient, the abuser's supposed power to function as a barrier between a person and God is revealed to be a lie that has nothing to do with truth or God's kingdom.

I pray one of the ways those abused might experience healing is to recognize that the abuser ultimately does not have the power to keep anyone from God. Jesus is enough.

I recognize typing these words does not make it feel true and does not remove the pain.

If you are a victim of abuse, you are not wrong in how you feel.

My prayer is the beauty of soul freedom and Jesus as the sufficient mediator will provide a balm for wounded souls.

*Ross Shelton is senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Brenham.*