

Helping the Unassertive Find Their Voice



by MICHAEL GEMBOLA

There's a certain kind of person who prefers that you pick the restaurant and that you order your food first. This same person is so conversationally accommodating over dinner that you feel heard, understood, and cared for. Maybe you leave refreshed, but you resolve to be the person asking more questions next time, rather than talking so much. Maybe you wish you knew this person better. Or maybe you are this person.

In Flaubert's novel, *Madame Bovary*, when Charles Bovary is pressed to agree that going to the theatre isn't sinful, this is his response and the narrator's commentary:

'No doubt,' replied the doctor carelessly, either because, sharing the same ideas, he wished to offend no one, or else because he had not any ideas.¹

Whether it was out of fear or purposeful ignorance, he had nothing to say. Similarly, some Christians seem to have nothing to say. They pull back in the majority of their interactions, sometimes out of desire to retreat from opinions that risk offense, or, just to be safe, they retreat from opinions in general. This retreating manner might even feel "Christian." Wasn't Christ himself the one

¹ *The Works of Gustave Flaubert*, trans. M. Walter Dunn (New York: Harold J Black, 1904), 136.

who made himself of no reputation, who emptied himself, who came to serve, not to be served? What's more, isn't self-denial, self-abnegation, *death* to self, a fundamental component of Christian faith? Christians have a hard time following popular assertiveness advice to "be more selfish."² Christian self-denial does not seem immediately compatible with assertiveness.

Assertiveness also doesn't fit well with the contemporary mindfulness movement that focuses on helping people peacefully endure challenges in hard relationships, rather than trying to change their circumstances. Assertiveness advocates like Dr. David Allen see this mindful endurance approach as "an abomination." He continues, "It's a bit like giving an opiate to people who are being followed around by someone who is continually stabbing them in the shoulder with a pen knife."³ Allen laments that an assertiveness emphasis has largely fallen by the wayside in recent years,⁴ though the interpersonal problems that gave rise to assertiveness trainings in the first place have not gone away. In some ways, I agree. I often see sensitive Christians struggle with how to become appropriately assertive.⁵ And since these strugglers disproportionately come to counseling, it's vital for counselors to understand the key dynamics of this problem and know how to help.

In what follows, I will explore how Christian faith interfaces with overly compliant, unassertive personalities. I will offer a biblical vision for finding one's identity and voice. Unassertiveness at its core is an anxiety. It is a deficiency of

² John Rampton, "How to Say 'No' to Anyone Without Feeling Guilty: 'Sorry, I Can't,' Is a Great Response and the Only One You Need Ever Give," *Entrepreneur*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/329376>.

³ David M. Allen, "Whatever Happened to Assertiveness Training? Therapists Teach Distress Tolerance Skills Instead of Problem-Solving Skills," *Psychology Today*, Sept 28, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/matter-personality/201509/whatever-happened-assertiveness-training>.

⁴ Assertiveness training has certainly not disappeared. The theme of assertiveness appears frequently in the emerging literature on sexual victimization and consent, as well as in business and educational psychology (especially with respect to commonly marginalized populations).

⁵ For example, with a sequel to her massively popular *Girl, Wash Your Face* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2018), Rachel Hollis taps directly into the felt need for assertiveness in *Girl, Stop Apologizing: A Shame-Free Plan for Embracing and Achieving Your Goals* (Nashville, TN: HarperCollins, 2019).

mature Christian confidence. Maturing in Christian faith and living out of a strong sense of identity in Christ leads us all to speak to the Lord differently in prayer and to exercise our gifts for the good of others. We'll see how this clear, confident voice is precisely what God the Father has invited us to learn and practice through our relationship with him. Along the way, I will also speak directly to those who struggle to help them step out and assert their God-given voice.

The end goal of any Christian sense of assertiveness is to live out of faith rather than retreating in fear, and to step confidently forward in pressing on toward the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Unassertiveness and Christian Maturity

It is important for those of us with indecisive and unassertive personalities to proactively work on these weaknesses so we add virtue to our faith.⁶ Of course, the end goal of any Christian sense of assertiveness is not to be a little more vocal with your restaurant preferences. The stakes are far higher. The goal is to live out of faith rather than retreating in fear, and to step confidently forward in pressing on toward the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. The way forward is through a Christian maturity that gives you a humble but confident voice.

Christians have been concerned with assertiveness for a long time. One church father, Gregory the Great, provides thoughtful pastoral recommendations for the problem. He was concerned for people with a deficiency of assertiveness—and also for those with an excess. He labels the unassertive person *fickle* and the overly assertive person *obstinate*. The fickle person has trouble with decisions and preferences, and with exercising resolve. The fickle misunderstands what it is to be a person, and a Christian. Gregory says they need to “be encouraged

⁶ For more on how personality forms an important element of the context of every believer's discipleship, see my article “Quietness: A Lost Virtue in a Loud World,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28:2 (2014), 39-52.

that they disregard and undervalue themselves too greatly and, as a result, in the indecisiveness of their thoughts, fluctuate in their judgment from one moment to another.” He continues, “If they would at all consider what they are, the wind of mutability would not turn them in so many directions.”⁷ Why are the fickle so indecisive? Gregory says it is because they don’t know who they are.

He explains through several passages of Scripture that those who are fickle are like a building without a foundation. They lack an underlying firmness to their words and actions. They lack a sobriety or weightiness and are tossed around (Eph 4:14). And so, they unhelpfully communicate both a yes and no (2 Cor 1:17).

Problems with decisiveness (whether excess or deficiency) are not just socially inconvenient. As vices, Gregory says, they are root problems that cause other problems.⁸ And the risks are real. The fear of man, or in this case the social anxiety that inhibits voice and personhood, brings all kinds of snares (Prov 29:25). Gregory builds his argument for personhood from Ephesians 4. Christians need firmly rooted faith to be able to speak up and say *no*, in this case to false teachers. The apostle Paul details a grave vulnerability that comes with a deficit of rootedness or, in his words, *maturity*:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, [for equipping] his people for works of service, [for] the body of Christ . . . [to] be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be *infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there* by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. (Eph 4:11–14)⁹

⁷ Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Press, 2007), 134.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 135

⁹ Translation emendations of the ESV are my own, following the argument of T. David Gordon in “Equipping’ Ministry in Ephesians 4?” *JETS* 37-1, March 1994, 69-78.

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