

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire outlines the pedagogical means by which dehumanizing conditions and practices can be realized and overcome. Under oppressive conditions, the oppressed internalize the image of their oppressor and fear the freedom that is required for authentic existence. In response, the conscientiousness of the oppressed must be heightened and liberation from these oppressive conditions must derive from the oppressed themselves.

Liberative education is a complex model because it requires a deep sense of partnership between the educator and learner. Freire coins the terms “teacher-student” and “student-teacher” to emphasize the mutual nature of the pursuit of knowledge and liberation experienced by the educator and students. The educator must take intentional steps towards understanding the reality of the oppressed as they experience it, as well as developing curriculum that will allow the oppressed to determine the ways in which to respond to that reality.

“In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.”¹ The first aim, then, for educators of the oppressed is to help these ones realize themselves as persons, rather than *things* to be possessed and controlled. As persons realize themselves as such, they will begin to realize the rights and opportunities to which all persons are entitled. Further, these oppressed persons will begin to realize the vulnerability of their oppressors and the oppressive systems that bind them. So then, liberative education not only aims to assist the oppressed

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2004) 49.

in a process of conscientization, it ultimately endeavors to empower the oppressed to change their conditions. The coupling of this reflection and action is called *praxis*.

Freire's work is ultimately interdisciplinary. The theory most immediately pertains to pedagogical method; however, his work is ultimately about the social practice of human liberation. Therefore, Freire combines elements of sociology, anthropology, behavioral studies and psychology to under gird his theory.

Freire's theory is not religious in nature, though his work is of infinite value to religious persons partnering with the classes of oppressed people both domestic and abroad. Freire is Brazilian, and his work comes from years of experience with the masses of poor and oppressed laborers in Brazil. So, in some ways, Freire's work is particular to his work and experiences with the working poor of Brazil. However, Freire's work is largely theoretical and accessible and employable in a variety of settings.

When read through the lens of theology, there is an inherently eschatological sense to Freire's work. This fact is due, in large part, to the work of liberation theologians who are contemporaries and students of Freire and use his ideas to support liberative concepts like *the preferential option for the poor*. In this way, while not overtly religious, Freire's work is seminal to many of the liberation movements that have developed out of both Catholic and Protestant Christian communities.

Freire's work, along with many others, has been criticized as failing to assert historical projects for accomplishing the theoretical objectives outlined in his work. In addition, Freire's work has been criticized as too "lofty" in language and concept to be grasped by the oppressed for whom Freire is writing. The first of these criticisms may, in fact, be a fair critique of Freire's work. In chapter three, Freire describes the process by which educators have executed his theory with Brazilian laborers. However, the language

remains highly theoretical and relatively idealistic. This calls for educators who are imaginative and committed to cooperation with the oppressed, which responds to the second criticism.

While much of Freire's work is theoretical, it is informed and written from the position of one who has stood in the "trenches" with the oppressed. While some oppressed persons may not have been educated to a degree that would enable them to read and comprehend Freire's theory independently, it should be remembered that Freire's work is not intended to be enacted in isolation. Educators who have the capacity to understand and enact this theory are to partner with the oppressed in a way that "lives into" Freire's theory. In this way, whether it is the educator or learners who have read Freire's work, they are to enact his ideas together.

"Revolutionary leaders do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of 'salvation,' but in order to come to know through dialogue with them both their *objective situation* and their *awareness* of that situation."² Here, Freire makes an important point for any person, especially religious persons, involved in the work of liberation. So often, churches and individuals give to the poor and oppressed out of pity. In fact, Freire's work, when applied to the missiological aim of the church, calls for an end to pity giving. Instead, the church must commit to intentional relationships of partnership with oppressed persons and peoples in order to learn and be socially and spiritually liberated in unison.

In closing, what are the attitudes and practices regarding women, immigrants, homosexuals and other oppressed peoples that must be toppled before the American church can truly commit to liberation in unison with our own oppressed peoples?

² Ibid., 95.