

An Ever More Critical Dialogue

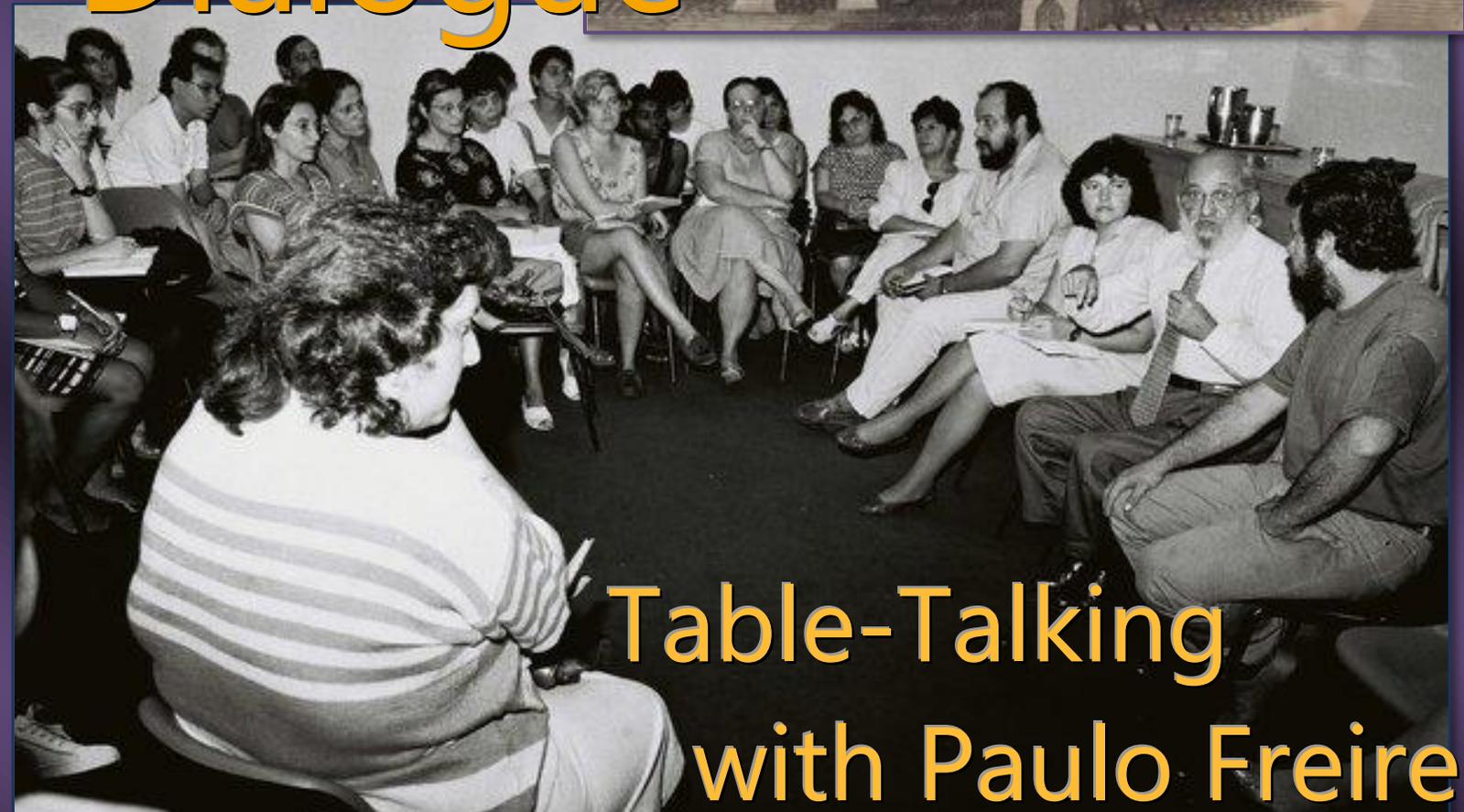


Table-Talking
with Paulo Freire
on Education and Liberation

An Ever More Critical Dialogue: Table-Talking with Paulo Freire on Education and Liberation

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While at first glance it might seem that the sixteenth-century German reformer Martin Luther and the twentieth-century Brazilian educator Paulo Freire have little in common, a closer look at the life and work of both reveals parallels that are actually quite striking.¹ The work of both was a reaction to their pain at seeing the suffering imposed on the common people among whom they lived as a result of systemic injustice, oppression, inequity, and corruption. Both sought to identify and expose the root causes of that systemic injustice and generated a great deal of conflict and opposition as a result of their efforts to combat it. And most

¹ For a couple of reasons, it is difficult to include references and quotations from Freire's works in the present paper. First, Freire never systematized his main ideas and tended not to enter into detailed discussions of them in his writings. In most cases, he simply refers to them in passing or discusses certain aspects of those ideas in short passages scattered throughout his works. Second, in the context from which I am writing I do not have access to most of Freire's works in English but only to the Spanish translations with which I work at my school in Mexico. For that reason, throughout this paper I will simply reference the English translations of Freire's works and indicate the chapter numbers in which the ideas mentioned may be found. Quotations and references to Luther's writings throughout this paper are taken from the American edition of *Luther's Works* (hereafter *LW*), ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia 1955-1986).

significantly, both were convinced that the way in which the common people would be liberated from the forces that were oppressing and impoverishing them was by being enabled to read and think for themselves and on that basis engage in inclusive dialogue in which their voices would be heard.

After being trained as a lawyer, Paulo Freire began working in the slums or *favelas* in Recife, Brazil and there became interested in teaching people to read and write.² Convinced that the literacy programs in use at that time were paternalistic and authoritarian, he developed an alternative methodology in dialogue with the people among whom he worked that focused on critical thinking and what he called "conscientization." This was defined in terms of helping bring people to a greater awareness of the oppressive conditions in which they lived as well as a clearer understanding of why those

² For a summary of Paulo Freire's life and trajectory, as well as the main ideas of his pedagogical thought, see especially Heinz-Peter Gerhardt, "Paulo Freire," in *Prospects: The Quarterly Review of Comparative Education* 23/3-4 (1993), 439-458, which can be found online at: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/freire.PDF>. Freire's own reflections on his life and work can be found in the first chapter of his *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Continuum, 1992), as well as the first chapter of Edson Passetti and Paulo Freire, *Conversação libertária com Paulo Freire* (São Paulo: Editora Imaginário, 1998).

conditions existed, how they were kept in place, and what might be done to change them.³ The success of his literacy method led to its adoption throughout the country, yet it also generated intense opposition among the conservative elements of Brazilian society, who saw Freire's method as subversive and dangerous.⁴ In April 1964, a military coup overthrew the Brazilian government and Freire was first imprisoned and then stripped of his citizenship rights and exiled. He eventually landed in Chile, where he continued to develop his literacy method and his pedagogical methodology in general while also helping to work toward agrarian reform there. After spending a year teaching at Harvard University, in 1970 he took a position with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland as an educational consultant. Freire spent nine years in that position until he was finally able to return to Brazil, where he continued to work in the area of education and served as the Secretary for Education of São Paulo prior to his death in 1997.

While Freire published numerous books throughout his career, often in the form of written or spoken dialogues with other thinkers, his most important work was the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which appeared in English in 1970.⁵ There he criticized what he called the "banking

model" of education, which regards those to be educated as empty vessels devoid of knowledge who are to be treated as passive objects rather than active and capable subjects.⁶ The task of the educators is to "deposit" the knowledge that they alone possess into the students, who in turn are simply to absorb that knowledge without questioning or critiquing it. Such an approach is dehumanizing and oppressive, since it is aimed at defending the interests of the elites in power by preserving the status quo and keeping the oppressed in subjection through a paternalistic control that disguises itself as a concern for their well-being. Those "educated" do not learn to think for themselves, ask and explore their own questions, or construct a new reality that truly responds not only to their own interests but to the interests of all, including the oppressors, who must also be liberated from the system that dehumanizes them as well.

The problematizing pedagogy that Freire proposes as an alternative to the banking concept revolves around dialogue and critical thinking.⁷ As students and educators engage with one another as subjects who strive to bring together the knowledge they already possess in order to expand that knowledge and generate new knowledge, they educate one another. They constantly take as a starting-point their experience of the reality around them, their past history, and the contexts in which they find themselves in order to subject these things to critical analysis by raising questions and posing

³ For a summary of Freire's understanding of conscientization, see Paulo Freire, *Conscientization and Liberation: A Conversation* (Geneva: Institute for Cultural Action, 1973; Document, 1).

⁴ Freire's own summary of his literacy method can be found in the latter part of his book *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury, 1973).

⁵ See *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramo (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970). The Portuguese original *Pedagogia do oprimido* was published in 1968.

⁶ On this point and what follows, see especially chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

⁷ For Freire's understanding of dialogue and its role in the educational process, see especially chapter 3 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as well as chapter 4 of Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1987).

problems in dialogue with their world and with one another.⁸ In this way, they gain the knowledge they need to free themselves and others from the forces that oppress them and are empowered to transform reality. While to some extent the educators assume the same roles as those being educated, at the same time the skills, knowledge, and experience that the educators have acquired enable them to direct and facilitate the process of learning among others. Of course, through the same process they also enable those being educated to acquire the same types of skill, knowledge, and abilities so that they are able to help educate others as well. Above all, they learn how to articulate their ideas, listen to and judge the ideas of others, and think for themselves. In this way, they become liberated from the forms of oppression and control to which they were subject and are able to liberate others as well.

As Freire knew all too well, those who are aligned with the systems that are oppressing others generally regard this type of education as dangerous and seek to repress it by silencing and demonizing those who advocate and promote it. They use the power, resources, and authority they possess to impose their own ideas on the multitudes and discredit and ridicule the ideas of others. Rather than openly opposing dialogue, they learn to manipulate their anti-dialogical discourse so as to give the impression

that it is they who are promoting dialogue rather than their opponents.⁹ Because they are able to make their voices heard publicly in ways that the common people cannot and are able to craft and articulate their ideas very forcefully and effectively as a result of their having had access to forms of higher education that have been denied to most people, they are able to exert an inordinate amount of influence on public opinion and policy-making and to present their views in ways that are highly convincing to the general public.

While Freire concerned himself primarily with social and political issues rather than theological and ecclesial questions, his pedagogical thinking and methodology had a profound impact on many theologians, including especially those associated with Latin American liberation theology.¹⁰ These theologians looked to Freire's thought to define their theology in terms of a method rather than a series of contents. This method involved analyzing the social and political reality in one's context and then carrying out biblical and theological reflection on the basis of that analysis in order to define the praxis necessary to transform that reality and promote liberation. An integral part of that analysis involves exposing and unmasking the strategies and tactics used by the powerful elites to maintain their domination over the populace and to

⁸ Freire especially emphasized the importance of teaching students to formulate questions and stimulating their curiosity; see Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation*, trans. Tony Coates (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989). On the importance of curiosity in the process of education, see Letter 2 of Paulo Freire, *Teachers As Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, trans. Donald Macedo, Dale Koike, and Alexandre Oliveira (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2005).

⁹ For Freire's understanding of anti-dialogue, see chapter 4 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

¹⁰ On the role that Freire's pedagogical thought played in Latin American liberation theology, see Irwin Leopando, *A Pedagogy of Faith: The Theological Vision of Paulo Freire* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 145-190. For Freire's own reflections on the subject, see Paulo Freire, "Education, Liberation, and the Church," *Religious Education* 79/4 (1984), 524-545.

justify their position of privilege and authority in the name of the common good.

In contrast to Freire, Luther focused his attention primarily on theological and ecclesial questions, yet he did so motivated in large part by social, political, and economic concerns. What moved him to publish his 95 Theses, for example, was the devastating impact that the sale of indulgences was having on the common people among whom he worked.¹¹ Whereas Freire's analysis of the injustices in his day led him to focus on the problem of illiteracy and the pedagogical methodology and practices being used to preserve an unjust status quo, Luther's analysis of the injustices and oppression in his context led him to see the belief system being promulgated by the church as lying at the root of the problem. As a result, in his teaching and writings he dedicated himself to unmasking and exposing the elements in that belief system that were enabling those in power to maintain their domination and control over the lives of the common people. Because this involved seeking to make people aware of the oppression and abuses to which they were being subjected as well as the causes and mechanisms underlying that subjection, in effect he was doing what Freire referred to as conscientization.¹²

Initially, of course, Luther sought to bring about the changes and reforms he regarded as necessary by addressing himself to other theologians and authorities within the church.

¹¹ On this point, see my editorial "Here We Stand?," *Dialog* 60/2 (2021), 112-116.

¹² Perhaps the best example of Luther's efforts at conscientization is his 1520 treatise *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (LW 36:11-125). There he seeks to make the people aware of the manner in which the doctrines and practices he criticizes were being used to oppress them and enrich the powerful elites in both church and society.

He wrote his 95 Theses in Latin and apparently was not pleased when they were translated into German and began to circulate publicly in printed form. It was not long, however, before he decided to take his case directly to the common people themselves, writing short tracts and pamphlets in German that began to spread everywhere. As Andrew Pettegree has demonstrated in his book *Brand Luther*, Luther quickly became the most published author ever in Europe, with both the volume of sales of his works and the number of editions surpassing by far those of any other author in the sixteenth century and reaching levels that were truly staggering.¹³

Of course, the project that was by far dearest to Luther's heart was his translation of the Bible for the common people, which he continued to edit and improve up until the day of his death. The impact that Luther's Bible had on the German people and language was beyond measure. While Luther never developed a pedagogical method aimed at teaching people to read in the way that Freire did, his writings and his Bible had the same effect of promoting literacy among the general population on a massive scale.

Behind Luther's efforts to reach the common people through his writings and his translation of the Bible were some of the same presuppositions and beliefs that characterized the thought of Paulo Freire. Like Freire, Luther

¹³ See Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe – and Started the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2015), xi-xii, 24-25, 104-105, 333-336. In these passages, Pettegree notes that within five years of penning his theses, Luther had become Europe's most published author ever and that between 1517 and 1546 one in three books published in Europe were written by Luther.

was convinced that the common people were capable of thinking for themselves and making their own judgments regarding truth and reality. Luther's claim that a simple lay person armed with Scripture is to be trusted more than a pope or council without it is well-known.¹⁴ In response to those who justified ignoring or silencing the voice of the common people and a simple monk such as himself on the grounds that they were not worthy of being heard and could not possibly possess the truth, Luther often pointed to the story of Balaam's ass in Numbers 22 to claim that, if God could speak through the mouth of an ass, then God could speak through anyone, no matter how lowly or insignificant.¹⁵

If that is the case, then it follows that the voices of all must be listened to, no matter what their status or level of education. This conviction is reflected not only in Luther's work as a parish pastor, by means of which he was in constant dialogue with the common people, but also in his stress on the importance of carrying out visitations in order to get out into the places in

¹⁴ See, for example, *LW* 31:386-387; 32:80-81; *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, ed. J. F. K. Knaake, Karl Drescher, and Konrad Burdach (Weimar: Boehlau, 1883), 2:649.

¹⁵ I have collected Luther's sayings on this subject in my online article "Luther on Balaam's Ass," available at: <https://94t.mx/luther-on-balaams-ass/>. Luther stresses the same idea in other passages from his writings. In *LW* 39:250-252, he points to Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Christ himself as examples of low, poor, and unimportant persons who nevertheless were sent by God to reprove the princes, priests, and leaders of the people in God's name. Similarly, in *LW* 45:377 he recalls the story of Jethro counseling Moses in Exod 18:17-24 to affirm: "It has happened before that a fool gave better advice than a whole council of wise men. Moses was obliged to take advice from Jethro."

which people lived in order to listen to them and remain immersed in their everyday reality.¹⁶ This ongoing contact with the general populace and immersion in their contexts closely parallels Freire's practice.

At the same time, although like Freire Luther recognized the value and importance of listening to the voices of all rather than simply dismissing them on the grounds that they were ignorant, he was also conscious of the fact that in many regards the common people in general *were* ignorant, primarily because they had been kept in ignorance by a system that willfully marginalized them and saw no point in attempting to educate them. As is well-known, Luther's insistence on the need for a quality education that would reach all sectors of the population, including especially neglected groups such as girls and young women and those living in rural areas, had a profound and lasting impact on German life and culture.¹⁷ In

¹⁶ On Luther's program of visitations, see Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 39-40. On Luther's work as parish pastor, see Timothy J. Wengert, "Introducing the Pastoral Luther," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Wengert (Lutheran Quarterly Books; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 1-32. There Wengert notes that Luther's biographers have unfortunately "consistently treated his parish work in Wittenberg as a sidelight," and adds: "Next to chapters on Luther as monk, professor, and reformer, one searches in vain for a single chapter on Luther as pastor, despite the fact that, next to his work in the lecture hall, more of Luther's daily life in Wittenberg was taken up with pastoral duties than with anything else" (2).

¹⁷ On these points, see Mark A. Noll, "The Earliest Protestants and the Reformation of Education," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43/1 (1980), 97-131; Andrea Schulte, "Martin Luther

addition to advocating for more schools and encouraging both parents and the civil authorities to make sure children were sent to school, he criticized heavily the traditional forms of education that simply sought to drill ideas into students through the use of force and compulsion. In his appeal *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, Luther rejoices that the schools that are being established “are not what they once were, a hell and purgatory” in which students were tormented with useless matters and ignorant teachers, but instead now offer an education that truly improves and motivates the students and makes learning pleasurable.¹⁸ Above all, Luther expresses his satisfaction that “the common [person] is learning to think....”¹⁹

Luther also stressed the importance of teaching the humanities and liberal arts, including the classical languages and musical education, rather than simply providing practical and vocational skills aimed at producing an efficient labor force.²⁰ While for Luther education in the Christian faith was also important, he criticizes not only those who

neglect religious education but also those who want to provide only religious education and ignore instruction in other areas.²¹ In addition, he mentions the importance of having good libraries that include books in a wide variety of areas, including those written by pagan authors.²² In all of these regards, his thought clearly coincides with that of Freire, who similarly sought to promote teaching and learning in all different areas, stressed the importance of the humanities, and emphasized pedagogies that were stimulating and enjoyable for students and allowed them to research and explore subjects and themes that truly interested and motivated them.²³ All of these things are in fact vital for teaching critical thinking, since they stimulate curiosity, research, and exploration and enable students to gain a wide variety of perspectives on reality.

Due to his idea that all possess knowledge and are therefore capable of educating others, Freire has often been understood as minimizing the need for specialists and experts in the various branches of knowledge and for educators who are much more knowledgeable and experienced than their students in the subjects that they teach, including pedagogical methods themselves. Similarly, his criticisms of the traditional pedagogies in which the educators simply expound ideas that the students are to absorb uncritically have often been interpreted as a rejection of expository methods altogether. A careful reading of Freire’s works reveals that, on the contrary, he insists on the need and the importance of listening to those

and Female Education,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 29/6 (2002), 437-439.

¹⁸ LW 45:369-370. Cf. LW 46:242-244. On this point, see also Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 263-266. For Luther’s critiques of the traditional methods and contents of the education offered in Germany, see LW 45:373-375.

¹⁹ LW 45:116.

²⁰ For Luther’s stress on the importance of the liberal arts, humanities, and music, as well as his emphasis on artistic creativity, see LW 40:314-320; 45:356-358, 369-370, 376-377; 46:252. See also John S. Reist, “The Knife That Cuts Better Than Another: Luther and Liberal Arts Education,” *Perspectives on Religious Studies* 21/2 (1994), 93-113.

²¹ See LW 40:318.

²² See LW 45:372-373, 376-377.

²³ On Luther’s pedagogical methodology, see Norma Everist, “Luther on Education: Implications for Today,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12/2 (1984), 76-89 (82-85).

who have more expertise and experience on the subjects being discussed as well as the value of expository methods.²⁴ What he stresses, however, is the need for these things to be accompanied by inclusive dialogue in which those being educated respond critically to that which has been presented, pose questions, and “problematize” together what those who have more expertise and experience share in dialogue with them.

In writings such as his treatise *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture*, Luther in effect proposes the same approach. He insists that, while it is the task of the preachers and leaders to proclaim God’s Word, since they have been called for that task and have received the formation necessary to carry it out properly, it is nevertheless the right and responsibility of all of the members of a congregation or community to judge whether what is being proclaimed is in fact the Word of God. To make this argument, he appeals to passages such as John 10, where Jesus says that his sheep are able to distinguish his voice from those of the false shepherds.²⁵ In the same way,

²⁴ On this subject, see especially Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, chapter 1.

²⁵ According to Luther, Christ “takes both the right and the power to judge teaching from the bishops, scholars, and councils and gives them to everyone and to all Christians equally when he says, John 10[4], ‘My sheep know my voice.’ Again, ‘My sheep do not follow strangers, but flee from them, for they do not know the voice of strangers’ [John 10:5]. Again, ‘No matter how many of them have come, they are thieves and murderers. But the sheep did not listen to them’ [John 10:8]. Here you see clearly who has the right to judge doctrine: bishops, popes, scholars, and everyone else have the power to teach, but it is the sheep who are to judge whether they

even though the lay people do not have the knowledge and expertise of their leaders, they are able to judge whether those leaders are proclaiming God’s Word faithfully. This assumes that, as Freire argued, even those who are not trained as experts possess forms of knowledge that must also be taken into account in the efforts to arrive at the truth and construct even greater knowledge among all those involved in that process.

Like Freire, therefore, Luther stresses that the common people are in some ways *already* knowledgeable and literate even before they are able to engage actively in activities and programs designed to expand their knowledge and literacy. At the same time, they need educators and leaders who have the skills, training, experience, and expertise necessary to guide them in the learning process, not merely by depositing facts and knowledge into them but by teaching them to problematize reality in order to make solid judgments of their own, defend their own interests, and transform their reality in ways that benefit all.²⁶ This conviction regarding the capability of the common people is behind his repeated claim that “the “children and crude peasants” are often more knowledgeable than the pope, cardinals, bishops, and priests and their followers.²⁷ In fact, it was that conviction that led Luther to address himself so persistently to the common people rather than simply dismissing them as ignorant and unworthy of his attention in the way that many leaders and authorities of his time did.

teach the voice [i.e., the words] of Christ or the voice of strangers” (*LW* 39:306-307; cf. 308-311). On this point, see also *LW* 31:386-387; 40:31-32.

²⁶ For Luther’s insistence on the need for capable teachers who are skilled at instructing others in these ways, see *LW* 14:341; 28:289; 40:314; 45:375.

²⁷ *LW* 39:219-220.

Luther's teaching on the priesthood of all believers and his understanding of the vocation that all have received from God by means of their baptism was another factor that led him to stress the importance of education.²⁸ Believers cannot minister to others and exercise their vocation properly if they have not been given the training, knowledge, and education necessary in order to fulfill the tasks to which they have been called. While some are called to particular ministries and to assume positions of leadership, at the same time all Christians have the right, duty, and calling to proclaim God's Word and teach others.²⁹ Luther's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and his understanding of vocation therefore reflect Freire's insistence that all persons are to be regarded as subjects and none as mere objects, no matter what their background, level of education, or social standing.

The caustic and polemical tone of many of Luther's writings can easily give the impression that he was not interested in dialogue but demagoguery and simply sought to impose his ideas on others. There are good reasons, however, to reject such a view. It is often overlooked that his 95 *Theses* were not a call to rebellion or resistance, or even a call for reform, but a call to *dialogue* over the doctrines and practices that he had come to question.³⁰ In the

years immediately following the publication of his theses, Luther grew extremely frustrated that his desire to dialogue over the questions and issues he raised there and elsewhere in his writings was constantly met with deaf ears. At Worms, he asks once again that any errors in his teaching be pointed out to him and indicates his willingness to listen to anyone who wishes to question him, whether educated or uneducated, of high or low estate.³¹ A couple of months later, in an open letter addressed to the people of Wittenberg from his secluded cell in Wartburg

reverend father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology and regularly appointed Lecturer on these subjects at that place. He requests that those who cannot be present to debate orally with us will do so by letter" (*LW* 31:25). Many scholars question the idea that Luther actually intended for such a debate to take place, given especially the lack of evidence that it ever did, yet it is nevertheless significant that Luther presents his ideas in a manner that calls for dialogue and discussion.

³¹ "However, because I am a man and not God, I am not able to shield my books with any other protection than that which my Lord Jesus Christ himself offered for his teaching. When questioned before Annas about his teaching and struck by a servant, he said: 'If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong' [John 18:19-23]. If the Lord himself, who knew that he could not err, did not refuse to hear testimony against his teaching, even from the lowliest servant, how much more ought I, who am the lowest scum and able to do nothing except err, desire and expect that somebody should want to offer testimony against my teaching! Therefore, I ask by the mercy of God, may your most serene majesty, most illustrious lordships, or anyone at all who is able, either high or low, bear witness, expose my errors, overthrowing them by the writings of the prophets and the evangelists. Once I have been taught I shall be quite ready to renounce every error, and I shall be the first to cast my books into the fire" (*LW* 32:110-111).

²⁸ On this point, see especially Marilyn J. Harran, "The Contemporary Applicability of Luther's Pedagogy: Education and Vocation," *Concordia Journal* 16/4 (1990), 319-332 (321-326).

²⁹ See especially *LW* 39:232-237, 307-311; 40:31-37.

³⁰ Luther very intentionally phrased his ideas as theses for discussion and debate. Prior to stating his theses, he writes: "Out of love and zeal for truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following theses will be publicly discussed at Wittenberg under the chairmanship of the

Castle, Luther complains that he has made himself available repeatedly to those who condemn him—including Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg, Johannes Eck in Leipzig, and the emperor and church authorities at Worms—, anxious to enter into a serious discussion and debate over the points he has raised in his teaching, yet in every instance his opponents have persistently refused to do so and instead simply demand that he recant.³² This frustration at the refusal of others to enter into serious dialogue with him comes out constantly in his writings, not only in his observation that his adversaries condemn him without engaging his ideas but also in his expressions of exasperation that those who do bother to engage him utter pure nonsense and put forward arguments that can hardly be taken seriously.³³ Even when Luther burns the papal bull in response to the pope's command to burn his writings, he begins his explanation as to why he has done so with

³² "Whether they are willing or not, they have to admit and hear with great pain and grief that I have now made myself available three times—not to my friends, but to them, my enemies—and offered to give reason and basis for our belief: First I appeared at Augsburg before the Cardinal, [and thus] immediately before the most prominent of my worst enemies, who would rather have fled than hear the basis of my teaching and would have preferred that I had not come. Then, as you know, I appeared at Leipzig before those people who really did not want to see us. But all their malice and guile did not help them. The third time I now appeared at Worms, where I even offered to set aside the Imperial safe-conduct and place myself completely in their hands. O what mockery they put on then! I expected that bishops and doctors would fully investigate me there; but everyone's attention was focused only on my recanting" (*LW* 48:249-250). Cf. *LW* 34:10.

³³ See, for example, *LW* 23:210-211; 27:153-154; 32:148-149.

the affirmation: "Let whoever wishes also declare why they have burned Dr. Luther's books."³⁴ In other words, he recognizes the right of others to reject and condemn his ideas and even burn his books, yet he insists that they engage those ideas seriously before doing so. What upsets him is that "with closed ears and eyes they blindly damn and burn evangelical teaching in order to confirm and preserve their antichristian, devilish doctrine."³⁵

The importance and centrality of dialogue for Luther is reflected in many of the other things he writes as well. For example, he often insists that no one can be forced to believe and therefore that it is both senseless and wrong to attempt to impose the Christian faith or a particular understanding of that faith on people by the use of force.³⁶ Instead, people can be brought to true faith only by means of arguments that they find convincing. When he publishes his translation of the Bible and his catechisms, he not only encourages the readers to listen to other voices but also invites others to produce their own Bible translations and catechisms, which may even be better than his own.³⁷ Undoubtedly, Luther wanted for his own voice to be heard, yet he also calls on others not only to raise their own voices but to listen carefully and intentionally to others as well in order that all may make judgments of their own. In addition, Luther readily acknowledges his ignorance and his willingness to be taught on many subjects and in many areas, including the

³⁴ *LW* 31:383.

³⁵ *LW* 31:384.

³⁶ See, for example, *LW* 13:62, 64; 36:254; 45:107-109.

³⁷ See, for example, *LW* 31:394; 34:10; 35:183; 45:372, 377, as well as Luther's Preface to his *Small Catechism*.

Bible and Christian doctrine, yet he insists that others do the same.³⁸

All of these views lead to the same type of pedagogy proposed by Freire, a pedagogy that revolves around dialogue. Rather than presenting one's ideas and beliefs as fact or seeking to impose them on others, one must simply share them with others and then subject them freely to discussion and analysis in dialogue with others while at the same time listening to their ideas and analyzing them in the same way. All must come to their own judgments and are free not only to disagree with the ideas of others but even to reject and condemn them, but only after they have first engaged those ideas and taken them seriously. At the same time that they seek to make themselves heard, they must also help and enable others to make their voices heard as well and call on others to listen to all of the voices and not only their own.

For both Luther and Freire, however, there is one other component of a liberating education that is vital, a component that both regarded as the most important of all. That component is love for others and a love for the truth. Throughout his works, Freire frequently insisted that all education must be an act of love for one's fellow human beings.³⁹ While it is especially important to reach out to the poor, marginalized, excluded, and oppressed by means of a liberating education out of love for them, such an education is also an expression of love for those who are oppressors, since they too suffer tremendous harm as a result of their oppressive ways and need to be liberated from them. Luther, of course, would have agreed wholeheartedly with Freire on this point. If one

truly loves others as one's neighbors, that love will take the form of seeking that they be educated in ways that transform and liberate them. Such an education will not only be an expression of love in relation to them but will also lead and enable them to love others in the same way by serving their neighbor and promoting the well-being of all in society.⁴⁰

The urgent need for the same type of liberating critical analysis and education proposed by Freire and Luther could hardly be more evident today. Oppression, systemic violence, propaganda, censorship, and control have assumed new forms in our contemporary world that are much more subtle, veiled, and complex than those that existed in the days of Luther and Freire. The struggle against these modern forms of oppression must focus first and foremost on enabling people to acquire the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that enable them to understand the causes, methods, and mechanisms of oppression and to develop and implement forms of praxis that allow for liberation to take place. In order to provide such

³⁸ See, for example, *LW* 34:286-288, 327.

³⁹ Freire particularly stresses this point in Chapter 3 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

⁴⁰ After insisting that he is not seeking his own advantage but "the welfare and salvation of all Germany," Luther ends his appeal to the German councilmen regarding education: "Herewith I commend all of you to the grace of God. May he soften and kindle your hearts that they may be deeply concerned for the poor, miserable, and neglected youth, and with the help of God aid and assist them, to the end that there may be a blessed and Christian government in the German lands with respect to both body and soul, with all plenty and abundance, to the glory and honor of God the Father, through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen" (*LW* 45:377). On the idea that education is to be an expression of love and to generate love and concern for the well-being of others in society, see also *LW* 39:307-311; 40:314-320; 45:354; 46:241.

an education, a pedagogy based on principles such as those emphasized by both Luther and Freire is necessary, a problematizing pedagogy aimed at conscientization and critical thinking that promotes things such as creativity, cultural expression, curiosity, and the pleasure of learning. Equally important is the task of making this type of education accessible to *all* in the ways that Freire and Luther sought so that none are excluded, silenced, or ignored.

Efforts on behalf of liberation must also focus on enabling and promoting genuine dialogue in response to the anti-dialogue and pseudo-dialogue that is so predominant today in a world in which dialogue has been reduced to “chat,” voices are silenced by means of cacophony, and informed debate has been replaced by shouting matches. Priority must be given to teaching people to listen to one another carefully in order to grasp accurately their ideas and to articulate their own ideas clearly. Programs aimed at immersing people in contexts that are distinct from their own are also vital. In order to listen to the voices of those who are silenced or excluded by the powerful and those who control access to public discourse, it is necessary to go out to the places in which those people find themselves and insist that others do the same.⁴¹ At the same time, we must not only encourage critical analysis of all of that is said and done but also unmask the systems

and mechanisms that allow some to impose their views on others either by the use of force or by recourse to privileges that give them greater power and influence. In addition, people must be taught to distinguish true dialogue from the anti-dialogue and pseudo-dialogue that passes itself off as dialogue.

While there are no doubt many different ways to work for justice and equity, struggle against oppression, and strive for the common good, both Freire and Luther would have agreed that there is none more important or critical than education. Although in Luther’s day the main problem may have been the neglect of education, in Freire’s day and ours the main problem may instead be that the education being provided is not transforming and liberating in the way it should be. In either case, as we seek to change our reality by means of educational programs and projects that promote the type of inclusive dialogue necessary for the liberation of all, I think we could hardly hope for two better dialogue partners than Paulo Freire and Martin Luther.

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⁴¹ This point is particularly stressed by Richard M. Chapman, who also compares Luther and Freire in this regard in his article “Freire Meets Luther: Pedagogies of Reflection and Action in a Global Education Setting,” *Journal of the Lutheran Historical Conference* 2 (2012), 77-91. Chapman relates the thought of both Luther and Freire to his experiences at the Center for Global Education in Cuernavaca, Mexico run by Augsburg College (Minneapolis), which focuses on education by means of cross-cultural immersion programs.