

Margaret Aymer*

TEACHING CHRISTIANS TO “READ”:
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
AND THE CHURCH

Let me begin with an incident out of the life of Frederick Douglass. The young boy Douglass had just been sent away from the plantation to the home of Mr. Hugh and Mrs. Sophie Auld of Baltimore, MD. There, he was to be the slave and companion of the Aulds' young son. Shortly after Douglass arrived, his mistress discovered that he could not read, whereupon she determined to teach him to do so. When Mr. Auld discovered this practice, he forbade it.

To use his own words. . . , he said, ‘If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world.’ ‘Now,’ said he, ‘if you teach that nigger. . . how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.’¹

Sisters and brothers: I suggest to you that, among some pastors in some churches a similar charge goes forward: “if you

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¹John W. Blassingame, John R. McKivigan, and Peter P. Hinks, eds., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 2: Autobiographical Writings, Volume 1: *Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 31.

give a Christian an inch, she will take an 'ell.' A Christian should know nothing but to obey her pastor—to do as she is told to do. Learning would spoil the best Christian in the world. Now, if you teach that Christian how to read, there would be no keeping her. It would forever unfit her to be a slave."

Strong words, yes. And I will not be so crass as to point to specific churches or denominations—the tendency is there in all of us and is as old as the Bible. It is, what I call, the "Corinthian tendency": the "I belong to Paul; I belong to Cephas; I belong to Apollos."²

Friends, let us be honest in our dealings with each other. Unlike Paul, we want our congregants to identify with the pastor, rather than with the God who calls every Christian into ministry. We want our congregants to listen to the pastor, even if it means they don't listen to Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount. We want our congregants to celebrate the history of the pastor rather than the history of the faith.

Seminary education threatens that "Corinthian tendency," because it shifts our focus away from cults of personality toward the ongoing, complex search for meaning in the face of difficult, confusing times. As a result, too many of our alumni—even our distinguished alumni—rail against what happens in seminary. Too many of our alumni act as if no one ever told them about interpolation and redaction. Too many of our alumni preach as if they have never heard about the Marcionite heresy. Too many of our alumni rail against the years of research that have gone into the yellowed notes of a lecture, equating thoughtful soft-spokenness to dullness and complexity with a misunderstanding of the truth. Too many of our alumni are guilty of telling younger women and men, "Don't bring that seminary stuff back here."

What is that seminary stuff, anyway? Fundamentally, at

²1 Corinthians 2:12 (NRSV).

the core of the education at a seminary is the practice of teaching a Christian to read, of giving a Christian an inch, that she may take an "ell." In my field, Christians are taught to read the Bible—to read it with their minds as well as their souls; to read it thoughtfully and at times critically. They are taught to ask some of the questions that African Americans have always asked of the Bible—How can "slaves obey your masters" be Christian? They are taught to understand the Bible not as a GOD but as a collection of writings by human beings that bear witness to an incomplete—even if it is inspired—understanding of who God is, was, and will be. And I encourage my students: bring this back! Bring exegesis back to the church that those in the congregation may read as well. But, they tell me that their pastors, caught up in the self-serving need to be the "authority" on all things biblical, will not let them do so. So I must ask, today, do we dare to teach Christians to read?

Nor is exegesis the only important kind of reading that Christians learn here at ITC. They learn to read history, both for what it was and for its implications on what is going on in the church today. They learn to read theology—to engage with fellow Christians in coming to voice about who God is, who Christ is, what the Spirit of God does, and the mission of the church. They learn to read and to evaluate liturgy and worship. They learn to read and to do missiology. They learn to read context and culture, and to minister in light of that. They learn to read the internal struggles that people have and to give them pastoral care. They learn to read learners and to teach them in effective ways. Seminary, especially these six constituent seminaries of ITC, is about the business of giving Christians an inch that they might take an "ell." It is about the business of "unfitting" Christians for slavery. It is about

the business of teaching Christians to read.

There was a time when the education of the community was at the center of the Black Church. This must still be our challenge. Today, when biblical illiteracy, historical amnesia, and theological oppression are growing faster than some of our largest churches, it is time that the church should return to the business of teaching Christians to read. Today, when a singular context is presumed—even in a quickly globalizing culture; when Christian ethics is far too concerned with people's bedrooms and far too unconcerned about the blessed poor who are eating out of McDonald's garbage cans; when the education of poor and middle-income black Christians is left to the written materials of rich white and black prosperity theologians with dubious motives, it is time for the church to be about the business of teaching Christians to read.

But in order to be about that business, we must be willing to relinquish our pastoral need to be icons. Consider a conversation I had with a student last week. "Doc, this place has set me free, but how do I bring this stuff back?" he asked. I suggested he start a Bible study, using that as a setting to teach the fundamentals of exegesis. Then he could preach on the texts that the group studied together every week. "Your congregation would become a congregation that really reads and understands its Bible, that really wrestles with God's will for its life," I said. "But, doc," he countered, "wouldn't that take away my. . ." And he stopped.

But we both knew what he was going to say. Wouldn't that take away my power? And the answer is this: if our power rests on the congregation's ignorance, then of course it will; if our power rests on the congregation's illiteracy, then absolutely. But, if we are called to help raise up the priesthood of believers; if we are called to help make manifest the reign of God on earth even

as it is in heaven; if we are called to break every yoke and to set the captive free—then we must bring seminary back to the church. We must teach our fellow Christians to read.

But I warn you, it will forever unfit them to be slaves.

