# Discipleship as a Craft, Church as a Disciplined Community

By Stanley Hauerwas

The church seems caught in an irresolvable tension today. Insofar as we are able to maintain any presence in modern society we do so by being communities of care. Any attempt to be a disciplined and disciplining community seems antithetical to being a community of care. As a result the care the church gives, while often quite impressive and compassionate, lacks the rationale to build the church as a community capable of standing against the powers we confront.

That the church has difficulty being a disciplined community, or even more cannot conceive what it would mean to be a disciplined community, is not surprising given the church's social position in developed economies. The church exists in a buyer's or consumer's market, so any suggestion that in order to be a member of a church you must be transformed by opening your life to certain kinds of discipline is almost impossible to maintain. The called church has become the voluntary church, whose primary characteristic is that the congregation is friendly. Of course, that is a kind of discipline, because you cannot belong to the church unless you are friendly, but it's very unclear how such friendliness contributes to the growth of God's church meant to witness to the kingdom of God.

In an attempt to respond to this set of circumstances, the primary strategy, at least for churches in the mainstream, has been to try to help people come to a better understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Such a strategy assumes that what makes a Christian a Christian is holding certain beliefs that help us better understand the human condition, to make sense of our experience. Of course, no one denies that those beliefs may have behavioral implications, but the assumption is that the beliefs must be in place in order for the behavior to be authentic. In this respect the individualism of modernity can be seen in quite a positive light. For the very fact that people are now free from the necessity of believing as Christians means that if they so decide to identify with Christianity, they can do so voluntarily.

In short, the great problem of modernity for the church is how we are to survive as disciplined communities in democratic societies. For the fundamental presumption behind democratic societies is that the consciousness of something called the *common citizen* is privileged no matter what kind of formation it may or may not have had. It is that presumption that has given rise to the very idea of ethics as an identifiable discipline within the modern university curriculum. Both Kant and the utilitarians assumed that the task of the ethicist was to explicate the presuppositions everyone shares. Ethics is the attempt to systematize what we all perhaps only inchoately know or which we have perhaps failed to make sufficiently explicit.

Such a view of ethics can appear quite anticonventional, but even the anticonventional stance gains its power by appeal to what anyone would think upon reflection. This can be nicely illustrated in terms of the recent movie, *The Dead Poets Society.* It is an entertaining, popular movie that appeals to our moral sensibilities. The movie depicts a young and creative teacher battling what appears to be the unthinking authoritarianism of the school as well as his students' (at first) uncomprehending resistance to his teaching method. The young teacher, whose subject is romantic poetry, which may or may not be all that important, takes as his primary pedagogical task helping his students think for themselves. We watch him slowly awaken one student after another to the possibility of their own talents and potential. At the end, even though he has been fired by the school, we are thrilled as his students find the ability to stand against authority, to think for themselves.

This movie seems to be a wonderful testimony to the independence of spirit that democracies putatively want to encourage. Yet I can think of no more conformist message in liberal societies than the idea that students should learn to think for themselves. What must be said is that most students in our society do not have minds well enough trained to think. A central pedagogical task is to tell students that their problem is that they do not have minds worth making up. That is why training is so important, because training involves the formation of the self through submission to authority that will provide people with the virtues necessary to make reasoned judgment.

The church's situation is not unlike the problems of what it means to be a teacher in a society shaped by an ethos that produces movies like *The Dead Poets Society.* Determined by past presuppositions about the importance of commitment for the living of the Christian life, we have underwritten a voluntaristic conception of the Christian faith, which presupposes that one can become a Christian without training. The difficulty is that once such a position has been established, any alternative cannot help appearing as an authoritarian imposition.

In this respect it is interesting to note how we - that is, those of us in mainstream traditions - tend to think about the loss of membership by mainstream churches and the growth of so-called conservative churches. Churches characterized by compassion and care no longer are able to retain membership, particularly that of their own children, whereas conservative churches that make moral conformity and/or discipline their primary focus continue to grow. Those of us in liberal churches tend to explain this development by noting that people cannot stand freedom, and therefore, in a confusing world devoid of community, seek authority. Conservative churches are growing, but their growth is only a sign of pathology.

Yet this very analysis of why conservative churches are growing assumes the presumptions of liberal social theory and practice that I am suggesting is the source of our difficulty. The very way we have learned to state the problem is the problem. The very fact that we let the issue be framed by terms such as *individual* and *community, freedom* and *authority, care* versus *discipline*, is an indication of our loss of coherence and the survival of fragments necessary for Christians to make our disciplines the way we care.

For example, one of the great problems facing liberal and conservative churches alike is that their membership has been schooled on the distinction between public and private morality. Liberal and conservative alike assume that they have a right generally to do pretty much what they want, as long as what they do does not entail undue harm to others. The fact that such a distinction is incoherent even in the wider political society does little to help us challenge an even more problematic character in relationship to the church. Yet if salvation is genuinely social, then there can be no place for a distinction that invites us to assume, for example, that we have ownership over our bodies and possessions in a way that is not under the discipline of the whole church. Recently I gave a lecture at a university that is identified with a very conservative Christian church. The administration was deeply concerned with the teaching of business ethics in the university's business school and had begun a lectureship to explore those issues. My lecture was called "Why Business Ethics Is a Bad Idea." I argued that business ethics was but a form of quandary ethics so characteristic of most so-called applied ethics. As a result, I suggested that business ethics could not help failing to raise the fundamental issues concerning why business was assumed to be a special area of moral analysis

After I had finished, a person who taught in the business school asked,."But what can the church do given this situation?" I suggested to her that if the church was going to begin seriously to reflect on these matters, it should start by requiring all those currently in the church, as well as anyone who wished to join the church, to declare what they earn in public. This suggestion was greeted with disbelief, for it was simply assumed that no one should be

required to expose their income in public. After all, nothing is more private in our lives than the amount we earn. Insofar as that is the case, we see how far the church is incapable of being a disciplined community.

However, one cannot help feeling the agony behind the questioner's concern. For if the analysis I have provided to this point is close to being right, then it seems we lack the conceptual resources to help us understand how the church can reclaim for itself what it means to be a community of care and discipline. Of course, "conceptual resources" is far too weak a phrase, for if actual practices of care and discipline are absent, then our imaginations will be equally impoverished. What I propose, therefore, is to provide an account of what it means to learn a craft, to learn--for example--how to lay brick, in the hope that we may be able to claim forms of care and discipline unnoticed but nonetheless present in the church.

To learn to lay brick, it is not sufficient for you to be told how to do it; you must learn to mix the mortar, build scaffolds, joint, and so on. Moreover, it is not enough to be told how to hold a trowel, how to spread mortar, or how to frog the mortar. In order to lay brick you must hour after hour, day after day, lay brick.

Of course, learning to lay brick involves learning not only myriad skills, but also a language that forms, and is formed by those skills. Thus, for example, you have to become familiar with what a trowel is and how it is to be used, as well as mortar, which bricklayers usually call "mud." Thus "frogging mud" means creating a trench in the mortar so that when the brick is placed in the mortar, a vacuum is created that almost makes the brick lay itself. Such language is not just incidental to becoming a bricklayer but is intrinsic to the practice. You cannot learn to lay brick without learning to talk "right."

The language embodies the history of the craft of bricklaying. So when you learn to be a bricklayer you are not learning a craft *de novo* but rather being initiated into a history. For example, bricks have different names--klinkers, etc.---to denote different qualities that make a difference about how one lays them. These differences are often discovered by apprentices being confronted with new challenges, making mistakes, and then being taught how to do the work by the more experienced.

All of this indicates that to lay brick you must be initiated into the craft of bricklaying by a master craftsman. It is interesting in this respect to contrast this notion with modern democratic presuppositions. For as I noted above, the accounts of morality sponsored by democracy want to deny the necessity of a master. It is assumed that we each in and of ourselves have all we need to be moral. No master is necessary for us to become moral, for being moral is a condition that does not require initiation or training. That is why I often suggest that the most determinative moral formation most people have in our society is when they learn to play baseball, basketball, quilt, cook or learn to lay bricks. For such sports and crafts remain morally antidemocratic insofar as they require acknowledgment of authority based on a history of accomplishment.

Of course, it is by no means clear how long we can rely on the existence of crafts for such moral formation. For example, bricklayers who are genuinely masters of their craft have become quite scarce. Those who remain command good money for their services. Moreover, the material necessary for laying brick has become increasingly expensive. It has therefore become the tendency of builders to try as much as possible to design around the necessity of using brick in building. As a result, we get ugly glass buildings.

The highly functional glass building that has become so prevalent is the architectural equivalent of our understanding of morality. Such buildings should be cheap, easily built and

efficient. They should be functional, which means they can have no purpose that might limit their multiple use. The more glass buildings we build, the fewer practitioners of crafts we have. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more buildings and/or morality we produce that eliminate the need for masters of crafts and/or morality, the less we are able to know that there is an alternative.

In his Gifford lectures, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition,* Alasdair MacIntyre develops an extensive account of the craftlike nature of morality. In contrast to modernity, MacIntyre argues that the moral good is not available to any intelligent person no matter what his or her point of view. Rather, in order to be moral, to acquire knowledge about what is true and good, a person has to be made into a particular kind of person. Therefore transformation is required if one is to be moral at all. In short, no account of the moral life is intelligible that does not involve some account of conversion. This is particularly true in our context, because to appreciate this point requires a conversion from our liberal convictions.

This transformation is like that of making oneself an apprentice to a master of a craft. Through such an apprenticeship we seek to acquire the intelligence and virtues necessary to become skilled practitioners. Indeed, it is crucial to understand that intelligence and virtues cannot be separated, as they require one another. Classically this was embodied in the emphasis that the virtue of prudence cannot be acquired without the virtues of courage and temperance, and that courage and temperance require prudence. The circular or interdependent character of the relationship between prudence and courage suggests why it is impossible to become good without a master. We only learn how to be courageous, and thus how to judge what we must do through imitation.

When the moral life is viewed through the analogy of the craft, we see why we need a teacher to actualize our potential. The teacher's authority must be accepted on the basis of a community of a craft, which embodies the intellectual and moral habits we must acquire and cultivate if we are to become effective and creative participants in the craft. Such standards can only be justified historically as they emerge from criticisms of their predecessors. That we hold a trowel this way or spread mortar on tile differently than on brick is justified from attempts to transcend or improve upon limitations of our predecessors.

Of course, the teachers themselves derive their authority from a conception of perfected work that serves as the tools of that craft. Therefore, often the best teachers in a craft do not necessarily produce the best work, but they help us understand what kind of work is best. What is actually produced as best judgments or actions or objects within crafts are judged so because they stand in some determinative relation to what the craft is about. What the craft is about is determined historically within the context of particularistic communities.

But what does all this have to do with the church? First it reminds us that Christianity is not beliefs about God plus behavior. We are Christians not because of what we believe, but because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus. To become a disciple is not a matter of a new or changed self-understanding, but rather to become part of a different community with a different set of practices.

For example, I am sometimes confronted by people who are not Christians but who say they want to know about Christianity. This is a particular occupational hazard for theologians around a university, because it is assumed that we are smart or at least have a Ph.D., so we must really know something about Christianity. After many years of vain attempts to "explain" God as trinity, I now say, "Well, to begin with we Christians have been taught to

pray, 'Our father, who art in heaven. . .'" I then suggest that a good place to begin to understand what we Christians are about is to join me in that prayer.

For to learn to pray is no easy matter but requires much training, not unlike learning to lay brick. It does no one any good to believe in God, at least the God we find in Jesus of Nazareth, if they have not learned to pray. To learn to pray means we must acquire humility not as something we try to do, but as commensurate with the practice of prayer. In short, we do not believe in God, become humble and then learn to pray, but in learning to pray we humbly discover we cannot do other than believe in God.

But, of course, to learn to pray requires that we learn to pray with other Christians. It means we must learn the disciplines necessary to worship God. Worship, at least for Christians, is the activity to which all our skills are ordered. That is why there can be no separation of Christian morality from Christian worship. As Christians, our worship is our morality, for it is in worship that we find ourselves engrafted into the story of God. It is in worship that we acquire the skills to acknowledge who we are--sinners.

This is but a reminder that we must be trained to be a sinner. To confess our sin, after all, is a theological and moral accomplishment. Perhaps nowhere is the contrast between the account of the Christian life I am trying to develop and most modern theology clearer than on this issue. In an odd manner Christian theologians in modernity, whether they are liberals or conservatives, have assumed that sin is a universal category available to anyone. People might not believe in God, but they will confess their sin. As a result, sin becomes an unavoidable aspect of the human condition. This is odd for a people who have been taught that we must confess our sin by being trained by a community that has learned how to name those aspects of our lives that stand in the way of our being Jesus' disciples.

For example, as Christians we cannot learn to confess our sins unless we are forgiven. Indeed, as has often been stressed, prior to forgiveness we cannot know we are sinners. For it is our tendency to want to be forgivers such that we remain basically in a power relation to those who we have forgiven. But it is the great message of the gospel that we will find our lives in that of Jesus only to the extent that we are capable of accepting forgiveness. But accepting forgiveness does not come easily, because it puts us out of control.

In like manner we must learn to be a creature. To confess that we are finite is not equivalent to the recognition that we are creatures. For creaturehood draws on a determinative narrative of God as creator that requires more significant knowledge of our humanity than simply that we are finite. For both the notions of creature and sinner require that we find ourselves constituted by narratives that we did not create. As I indicated earlier, that is to put us at deep odds with modernity. For the very notion that our lives can be recognized as lives only as we find ourselves constituted by a determinative narrative that has been given to us rather than created by us, is antithetical to the very spirit of modernity. But that is but an indication of why it is necessary that this narrative be carried by a body of people who have the skills to give them critical distance on the world.

In some ways all of this remains quite abstract because the notions of sinner and creature still sound more like self-understanding than characteristics of a craft. That is why we cannot learn to be a sinner separate from concrete acts of confession. Thus in the letter of James we are told, "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church, and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (5: 14-16). Such

practice, I suspect, is no less important now than it was then. We cannot learn that we are sinners unless we are forced to confess our sins to other people in the church. Indeed, it is not possible to learn to be a sinner without a confession and reconciliation. For it is one thing to confess our sin in general, but it is quite another to confess our sin to one in the church whom we may well have wronged and to seek reconciliation. Without such confessions, however, I suspect that we cannot be church at all.

For example, when Bill Moyers did his public broadcast series on religion in America, the taping on fundamentalism was quite striking. He showed a fundamentalist pastor in Boston discussing a pastoral problem with one of his parishioners. The parishioner's wife had committed adultery and had confessed it to the church. After much searching and discussion, the church had received her back after appropriate penitential discipline. However, her husband was not ready to be so forgiving and did not wish to receive her back.

The fundamentalist pastor said, "You do not have the right to reject her, for as a member of our church you too must hold out the same forgiveness that we as a church hold out. Therefore I'm not asking you to take her back, I am telling you to take her back."

I anticipate that such an example strikes fear in most of our liberal hearts, but it is also a paradigmatic form of what I take forgiveness to be about. In this instance one with authority spoke to another on behalf of the central skills of the church that draw their intelligibility from the gospel. There we have an example of congregational care and discipline that joins together for the upbuilding of the Christian community.

Of course, if the church lacks masters who have undergone the discipline of being forgiven, then indeed we cannot expect that such discipline will be intelligible. But I do not believe that we are so far gone as to lack such masters. Indeed, they are the ones who continue to carry the history to help us learn from our past so that our future will not be determined by the temptation to live unforgiven and thus unskillful lives.

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