

change your mind

THE THIRD CHAIR

Why discipleship requires community

by Jim Van Yperen

Imagine two chairs in the center of a room. Each chair represents a core “seat” of your life. The chair on the left represents your identity—who you are, what you believe and how you claim otherness in an overcrowded world. The chair on the right represents your activity, what you do. A brief look at both chairs will help us understand the need and purpose for a third.

The Identity Chair

In Western culture, identity is a declaration of self-perception; a statement of quality that makes one different from others. Identity may be claimed in countless ways. For instance, I might claim identity as: human, male, Dutch, American, North-easterner, Christian, friend, son, brother, husband, father and grandfather. The list goes on and on. We select attributes that distinguish who we are, and often who we are not.

Most people resist being lumped in with others. It is important to us to be different, different enough to distinguish “me” from the masses. We want to be unique, an individual. Yet, there is also a deep desire to belong. We fear being stereotyped on the one hand and becoming isolated on the other. Navigating these two needs causes tension. So, we shape our identity by inclusion and exclusion, choosing what factors provide greatest distinction—more clearly delineating our specific Tribe—while staking claim to our unique self. But we are always ready to change whenever our exclusivity becomes too common.

The result: we move from one identity crisis to another.

The Activity Chair

The other chair in the room is named Activity. It represents what one does, how one behaves, the habits and practices of one’s life. Again, the choice is limitless. So, I breathe, laugh, cry, play, pray, read, write, fly-fish and so on. Of course, the most common factor for claiming identity among Western people is vocation. At social gatherings, one of the first questions asked is, “What do you do for a living?” Here, the two chairs intersect, activity informs identity. What we do “for a living” forms how we think about ourselves. “I’m a lawyer.” “I’m a school teacher.” The phrase, “for a living” of course, refers to one’s profession, where one works and earns income to pay the bills. The inference, however, is that identity is earned, or worse, making money is living. This points to how deep-seated our identity has been formed by Western values. Choice infers commodity, and we are, more than anything else, consumers. The problem, of course, is that our need to consume reveals how much we are alone and in competition with others for gaining what we want, including our reputation.

When we realize this, if we allow ourselves to think truthfully about

it, another picture of our identity and activity begins to emerge—an image that we would rather not look at because it challenges how we want to think about who we are and why we do what we do. We are confronted with that part of our nature we would rather ignore, that part of who “I am” and what “I do” that is not quite whole; that is broken, missing or disordered.

My first dim inkling of this universal problem came fifty years ago. My family and most people in my small world were Christians. This was a big part of our identity and activity. We went to church every week, three times a week. I heard about sin and salvation, was taught an elevated sense of right and wrong. I learned that there was a part of me that inevitably did wrong and that the consequence of doing wrong was trouble. Further, I learned,

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there is no escape. Everyone is born with the same disease. It is in our DNA. That is, something broken needs mending; something wrong must be made right. What's more, I cannot find or earn this mending myself. No one can. But a good and loving God could do the job, if He wanted to. But would He?

The Story I learned as a child told me, "Yes." God chose to do for humanity what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus defeated the powers of sin and separation by bearing them on a cross. One day, this Story somehow clicked. I don't know how or what I understood exactly, but there was a shift in my eight-year old soul. Somehow, whatever made me "me" was now claimed by this Jesus. A new identity was being formed. I took my seat on a chair called, "New Creation."

Naturally, I learned that my new identity should impact my old activity, that what I do from now on should be related to what I professed to believe. But it did not take long to see that this does not automatically follow. In fact, Christians, on the whole, did not appear to be much different from other people. They seemed to lie, cheat and fail just as much. Why the disconnect?

The Disconnect

When cogs in a wheel do not align, friction results. Things break down; fall apart. The same is true of any community that does not live worthy of its claims. Disconnect causes tension and tension demands relief. To relieve this tension, the church commonly employs three remedies: legal, spiritual and practical.

Legal: The first way to make behavior conform to belief is to urge people to try harder. Rules, and there are lots of them, define what is right and wrong. Guilt and fear are the prime motivators. I try, but fall short. I fail because I am weak, or lazy, or stiff-necked. I feel shame, beg forgiveness and promise to do better. But, inevitably I fail again, only to be exhorted to try harder. This unending cycle leads to dread, guilt and frustration.

Spiritual: Another remedy is to spiritualize the tension. The real problem is not my nature, but about the presence of evil in the world. I fail because, well, "the Devil made me do it." Evil is all around me, hanging out at the corner, lurking outside my door. I need power, signs and wonders, to defeat the evil. I pray, rebuke, claim victory. But the power wanes and does not sustain me like they said it would. I must not truly believe, I'm told, or believe enough, or believe in just the right way. So, I feel defeated and unworthy.

Functional: Against these fear- and power-based remedies, a more tolerant and loving brand of Christianity has emerged. God does not condemn

us, He accepts us. People are not bad. They are generally good and able to do good things. Sure, I fail and sometimes I do and say things that hurt myself or others. (After all, "Nobody is perfect!") But God knows my weakness and accepts me unconditionally. "Relax, be yourself," I am told. And if being myself includes occasionally doing things that might be immoral or unacceptable, well, "That is between me and God. Who are you to judge?" Thus, I eliminate the tension not by aspiring to be better, but by lowering expectations. "I'm okay, you're okay." Still, there are plenty of days when I wake up knowing that I'm not okay at all.

Which remedy have you chosen? What way does your church teach you to resolve the tension between who you are and what you do? Are you trying harder, believing more, or simply changing perspective?

The Reality Chair

Now, imagine placing a third chair between the other two. We will name this chair, "Reality." This chair represents the space where your attitudes, thoughts and actions are lived out. For the Christian, reality is (or ought to be) the visible, spiritual community where Jesus is present; where you belong to God and others; where embodying certain habits and practices with others creates a space for true transformation.

This, I believe, is the missing chair in discipleship. We have not created a social, spiritual space for people to live, learn and grow. Instead, we are trying to transform lives primarily through teaching without inviting any meaningful engagement in the lives of others. So we design great worship experiences, and craft insightful sermons with inspiring applications while unwittingly forming people to consume more data and feelings about Jesus without providing the space or the skills to actually follow or obey Him. So, we go from service to service and study group to study group trying to remember the three things we "learned" or felt or were supposed to do, knowing deep down that we will forget and fail to do each step this week because we never did the three steps from last week and have already forgotten the three steps from the week before, and the week before that. This is madness, yet we believe we are discipling people. It is akin to believing that all one must do to prepare a football team is to make every player memorize the play book, but never actually pick up a football or go on a field to practice the plays.

What the church is missing most is a dynamic community where God's Word and will is visible in and through a people who are committed to "working out their salvation with fear and trembling." This is the new reality that makes a new activity achievable for a new creation people.

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IDENTITY
CRUCIFORMED,
NEW CREATION



REALITY
SPIRIT
COMMUNITY



ACTIVITY
COMMON LIFE,
TRANSFORMATION

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Stanley Hauerwas¹ likens discipleship to a craft, like brick-laying, that can only be learned through practice under the tutelage of a master. Disciples learn by following, by actually practicing what they see, hear and experience the master doing. But this requires a willingness to submit; to place oneself under and alongside others.

During the past twenty years serving churches across North America and in Europe, we have found in the church what is prevalent in Western culture, a deep, even visceral resistance to submission because "I am my own."² This self-seeking attitude has schooled church-goers to believe in two myths:

1. Discipleship is optional. God accepts me as I am. I go to church to get "fed," not to be transformed. I want to know more about Jesus, not become like Him. I do not see myself as a "new creation," but as a kinder, nicer or better person than I used to be. I'm learning, perhaps not as fast as others, but I'm making progress. We have become deaf to the radical call of Jesus: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me."³ Weekly is already too much; daily is much too much.

Submission and self-denial are foreign concepts to a consumer Christian, as is serving others.

2. Relationship is voluntary. We choose where to worship like we choose melons at the market. What style fits our taste? What people best meet our needs? We have no inkling about being called into common life to love, serve and grow with people whom we do not choose, but whom God names our brothers and sisters. We make god in our own image instead of discovering the

Jesus revealed in others, particularly the stranger.

Genuine belonging in one another community is the missing piece for spiritual health and wholeness. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a communal and relational God, One who desires relationship with His children and Whose very nature is community. He is the father who loves, the Son who redeems and the Holy Spirit who transforms. The Trinity pictures a God of complete integrity; One God in three persons Who are never in competition. Western culture has no way of understanding this picture. We have been formed by the ideals of autonomy and independence where everyone must look out for oneself. Others exist to serve "my needs." As Stephen Fowl writes: "The Gospel's call to common life is unimaginable, even repellent, to the majority of Western Christians. To those deeply schooled in individualism, common life sounds alienating and threatening."⁴

Fowl shows how far our thinking and acting have departed from the ideals of Scripture by comparing the values of capitalistic democracy with the Kingdom of Christ:

SELF IN DEMOCRACY

- Product of chance
- Good
- Independent individual
- Self-seeking security
- Voluntary relationships
- Others are potential threat

SELF IN KINGDOM

- Created by God
- Redeemed into New Creation
- Koinonia: common life
- Find joy and security in God
- Not voluntary relationships
- Others are friends; brothers and sisters

The Third Chair welcomes us into a Kingdom-way of being, thinking and acting; a new social, spiritual reality where the habits and practices of common life re-order our disordered lives; where community claims us rather than we consume it. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "We belong to one another because we have been claimed by Jesus Christ."⁵

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Discipleship as a Craft*

² George MacDonald calls this the, "one principle of hell", Unspoken Sermons, *Kingship*

³ Luke 9:23

⁴ Stephen Fowl, *Commentary on Philippians*, Eerdmans, 2005

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*



Community is what you were created for, and what the church is called to be.

The Third Chair is the “visible fellowship,” and “physical presence” where Jesus Christ is Lord.⁶ In community, we not only study the “play book,” we practice the disciplines that are basic and crucial to the Christian life--breaking bread together, praying together, confessing sin together, opening God’s Word together, serving communion to one another. In this space, we learn to love, serve, submit, encourage, admonish and forgive one another. Character is formed and unity is built as we share the tragedies and joys of our lives together, drawing strength and comfort by remembering and reclaiming the Story that Jesus has entered our human condition before us. Only in this new reality--in the honest and loving give and take of others--am I able to see my attitudes, feelings and actions that I was blind to before. I can discover the wound in my soul driving these behaviors so that I may be healed and truly transformed. Meeting with others who accept and love me, I can hear the truth about myself that I could not hear before, or would not accept by myself. I can receive God’s Word through the counsel of others who will walk with me to discover and enact ways to overcome failure. I can unlearn the disordered ways of thinking, feeling and acting that have been formed over years of sincere but utterly insufficient remedies for the disconnect in my life.

What I have described here may sound radical, and it is, but it is not new. I am picturing what Luke tells us actually happened in the first church. Community is what we were created for, and what the church is called to be.

Metanoia’s mission is to help the church discover such a reality.

⁶ Ibid

Acts 2:37-47

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, *what shall we do?*” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Oneness

Jesus’ prayer for the church is unity. When unity is broken, the church stops being the Church. Your conflict is an opportunity to grow, to change, to practice being the Church. Start living Jesus’ prayer. Restore oneness. Reorder your church. We can help. Call us.

diagnosing

Invite us to assess your church—to identify the systemic sources of your conflict. We’ll provide unbiased findings with innovative solutions to restore unity and peace.

nurturing

Allow us to help you discover, create and implement new practices for rebuilding trust and growing redemptive community.

equipping

Ask us about our custom-designed resources to engage and equip your people to lead like Jesus—with humility, courage, integrity and justice.

We offer unmatched experience and expertise

20 YEARS EXPERIENCE

90 CHURCHES

40 DENOMINATIONS

3 CONTINENTS

12 INTENTIONAL INTERIM PASTORATES

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