

Beyond Spiritual Formation: How Holistic Formation Counters Consumer Christianity

Michael Bischof – Souleader Resources
March 2006

Have you ever reached deep down in your soul in need of some resources to help you meet whatever challenge you are facing? I have. It usually goes something like this: a challenge arises (usually unexpected or unplanned), I am mildly inconvenienced by the challenge – but I know that I’m smart enough or experienced enough to deal with it, so I reach within myself (wherever it is I store stuff for these kind of emergencies) for an answer . . . or some wisdom . . . or some emotional energy. But there’s a problem. Nothing is there! Or maybe there are a few fragments of something, but definitely not enough to meet the challenge.

But how can that be? I am a leader. And leaders have become leaders because they have a certain amount of experience, or a certain amount of talent or giftedness, or at least some kind of degree to prove the leadership has some knowledge behind it. I might even be a pastor, and pastors have these extra influences sometimes referred to as “callings,” or “anointings.” But when I reach within me, hunting for whatever it is I need to meet this challenge, all I get is an echo. The chamber is empty. And now that I know its empty, I feel even worse. Now I feel empty and guilty. Because all along I thought there was something in there. I might even be getting paid by my church to periodically access the stuff that is supposed to be in there.

Its in this place of emptiness that I must face the reality that my education is not enough, my training is not enough, my experience is not enough, my gifts and talents are not enough. Somehow, I need more . . . or at least something I don’t have right now. This is a place of desolation. We might even feel like we have let others down as they have come to us hoping we would have something to provide for the needs in *their* lives. And depending on the way we view our own leadership, we might be living with a nagging sense of guilt or frustration about not being able to help others like we had hoped we could.

How did this happen? Why do I often feel empty when I think I’m supposed to feel full? A few years ago when I bought a new car I was not planning on buying the extended warranty. My thoughts were something like, “aren’t these just the way that dealers make even more money?” But I called my mechanic to ask his opinion, and his answer was surprising. He took some time to explain to me that “cars aren’t made like they used to be.” It used to be when something went wrong, just pull into any “service station” and the mechanic on duty could pop the hood and most likely diagnose the problem. But from that phone call I learned that my car had “21 computers running things.” I didn’t even know it had a computer . . . I thought I was buying a car! And I have enough trouble keeping my laptop running smoothly. His suggestion: “because the car is so complicated and has so many things that can go wrong, play it safe and get the extended warranty.”

Our lives are somewhat like my car. And our formation is somewhat like my extended warranty. Whether we like it or not, life used to be simpler (at least simpler than it is today). It was definitely slower. It contained less options, less potential stressors, less technology, fewer demands on our time, shorter commutes, and a myriad of other realities.

There are many parts that make up our life. We have a body, mind, will, emotions, spirit, social relationships, and a soul. All of these “parts” of ourselves philosophers have been debating and discussing for hundreds of years. We pretty much just want to know that they’re working when we get up in the morning. But when we reach inside of ourselves in order to access resources that will meet the stresses and demands of each day, it is then that we are most aware that something is missing in one of these areas. Or more likely, we don’t have a clue what’s missing, we just know that something is not right. Something feels out of place. We respond with anger or depression or anxiety or another favorite pathology. We are not able to meet the demands put upon us or the expectations of others. We want to . . . but we can’t.

Theologically speaking, most of us are not very aware of “the doctrine of inability.” In other words, while there are many things within our ability, there are certain things that, for whatever reason, we are unable to do. Something has been damaged, injured, or is missing. And

what's more important than what's missing is how we respond when we realize it. One option is to run and hide, like Adam did when confronted by God in the garden. Another option is to compensate in other ways by trying to focus on strengths and ignoring weaknesses, hoping no one will notice. Sometimes all we experience is the pain of the void, and we end up trying to escape or anesthetize the pain, resulting in unhealthy behaviors and even addictions. What's your addiction of choice?

Here's where it gets ugly. In our pursuit to meet this "felt need," we run headlong into the Christian marketing machine. Sadly, I've had some experience with this machine. A blatant venue of experience involved attending annual Christian Bookseller Association conventions. If something will sell, publishers will find it. And don't be fooled by the moniker "Christian." I think it was C.S. Lewis that said "Christian" should never be used as an adjective but only as a noun. A recent example this kind of marketing endangering something wonderful involves the area of spiritual formation. It breaks my heart to think of what damage might be done. For thousands of years, followers of Jesus have been involved in disciplines, practices, habits, and ways of living that nurture one's relationship with God. But it wasn't until the last ten years that spiritual formation has become another potential marketing tool. I believe something needs to be done about this. In a sense, we need to get beyond spiritual formation. What do I mean? Why do we need to get beyond spiritual formation? Mostly because it has the potential of being marketed as another fad just like every other program the church looks to in order to build a bigger or more efficient institution.

But a second reason is that it is easy to get stuck here. What's that about? Isn't spiritual formation a good thing? How can anyone get stuck in something that is good? Let me explain. For several years I worked with a ministry that provided retreat experiences where pastors and Christian leaders could experience practices which nurtured their spiritual formation, most for the very first time. The retreats were amazing. Leaders were experiencing the transformation that comes from solitude, silence, and prayer. Leaders would come to six retreats over a two-year period of time. Some even came for a second round of retreats for two more years! But I began to notice something. Many of the leaders would come back each and every retreat and have the same struggles they had at the previous retreat. Others were experiencing extreme difficulty encouraging this same kind of transformation back home in their churches. It really began to bug me! What was missing?

One day I was having lunch at the retreat center with a denominational executive who had been in the process himself for four years. As we were discussing why so many of these leaders seemed stuck, I asked him if he thought it could be that we were only focusing on one area – spiritual formation – but neglecting other aspects of the person such as their relationships, their emotional lives, their understanding of mission, etc.? His eyes opened wide as he said, "I think that's it!" Thus began my journey into holistic formation.

While we will spend more time next month discussing the details and practices of holistic formation, for now at least get a hold of the concept that holistic formation involves a focus on our whole life, not merely one aspect of our being. Rather than merely focusing on just one area of our lives (which spiritual formation sometimes has the tendency to do), it intentionally focuses on all the aspects of our lives, even if we focus on them one at a time. But more about that next month.

So how does holistic formation counter consumer Christianity? By its very nature, holistic thinking isn't about religious goods and services. It isn't about getting my needs met. It isn't about a "quick fix" for the stress or problems in my life. I heard a quote this week from someone in the Christian publishing industry who said that a majority of Christian books being published today are either narcissistic or hedonistic. If this is true, we need to grieve the degeneration of an industry meant to further the gospel of Jesus. Where is the good news now? How can it ever be interpreted or discerned in the muck of consumeristic marketing? I'm not sure that it can. We need new ways of thinking. We need new paradigms. We need some new approaches that are not as susceptible to the default practice of exploitation and niche marketing.

Holistic formation is good news. Because it is about living in a way that pays more attention to the whole than the parts. So in reality, there is very little to market to. There is nothing inherent in it which produces a consumer mentality. There is definitely no "quick fix." By its very

nature, holistic formation is very process oriented. And by its very nature, holistic formation seeks to eliminate the narcissism and hedonism that only continues to grow in our surrounding culture.

Holistic approaches to life are going to continue to increase. They address life at the core in a way that nothing else does. In fact, as I write this article, I'm sitting in the car at a gas station looking at a sign on a nearby building that reads "Holistic Skin Spa & Hair Salon." If a holistic approach is good for skin and hair, how much better must it be for our soul?

So that's my journey. What about you? Are you experiencing an emptiness or lack of inner resources to face the challenges of life and ministry? Has spiritual formation been something significant to you, but seems to be changing as it has been abducted by the Christian marketing machine? Are there parts of your soul that feel malnourished or neglected?

Next month we'll pick it up where we've left off here by discussing the various part of holistic formation and why this is the way that Jesus wants us to live.

Michael Bischof is founder and executive director of *Souleader Resources*, a non-profit organization in Southern California whose mission is empowering wholeness in leaders and churches. He loves spending time in monasteries, figuring out his dysfunctional behavior, laughing with family & friends, snowboarding three feet of fresh powder, reading till one o'clock in the morning by a crackling fire, and discussing with people how to live their lives like Jesus would live their lives if he were them. He can be contacted at michael@souleader.org.

© 2006 Michael Bischof, Souleader Resources. All rights reserved. Please inquire for duplication permission.