

## Holistic Formation (Part 4): Relational Formation – How God Uses People in Our Transformation

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My friend had told me about this group that meets on Monday nights to talk about the pain in our lives and how relationships are crucial to deal with the pain. When the pain gets bad enough...one gets desperate, so I was willing to give anything a shot. Eight months of depression was enough to make me desperate. So my wife and I decided to give it a try.

There were a lot of people there. Some looked okay, some even laughed and looked rather happy, and a few didn't look too good. I wanted to stay away from those people – the ones who didn't look too good – because whatever they had, I didn't want it rubbing off on me. There was a speaker who talked about why we need people in our lives. Then we had a time of questions and answers. My conclusion at the end of the night? I turned to my wife and said "I think all these people are crazy."

But for some strange reason, I came back the next week though I'm not exactly sure why. This time my observation was slightly different – "I don't think these people are so crazy after all." But it was the third week that did me in. As my wife and I left after three weeks immersing ourselves in this giant "support group," the only thing that came to me to say was "I think we're the ones who are crazy!"

Context is strong. And my context for the past fifteen years or so had given me many messages. Maybe you know some of them. "God is enough . . . people will always let you down." "Jesus is sufficient. . . so if you're struggling it must be because there is sin in your life." "We have God to confess to so why would anyone talk about their sin with other people?" And there are many others. But there is a huge problem: These messages are devoid of what some have called "a theology of relationship."

### Theologies of Relationship

As the Christian community comes to discover the importance of relational formation, more and more books and resources become available which help to integrate the concepts of relational formation into a complete system. While these are early and often incomplete attempts at forming a "relational theology," their contribution to the understanding of relational formation is significant. The following are three descriptions or emphases that have arisen and are becoming even more prominent.

#### Relational Theology

Possibly the most extensive attempt at describing and systematizing a relational theology has been undertaken by the late Stanley Grenz. In his *Theology for the Community of God*, Grenz presents the traditional categories of Christian doctrine within an emphasis of God's central program for creation, which he asserts is the establishment of community. Grenz describes how the modern Western fascination with individualism is waning and as a result, many thinkers are realizing that the understanding of the human phenomenon must reflect a more adequate balance between its individual and social dimensions. This awareness has led to the development of a new model of the relationship between the individual and society called "communalism," "communitarianism," or "culturalism."<sup>1</sup> Grenz goes on to describe that:

*"Community" is important as an integrative motif for theology not only because it fits with contemporary thinking, but more importantly because it is central to the message of the Bible . . . the drama of the Scriptures speaks of community. Taken as a whole the Bible asserts that God's program is directed to the bringing into being of community in the highest sense – a reconciled people, living within a renewed creation, and enjoying the presence of their Redeemer.<sup>2</sup>*

#### Communitarian Theology

To become slightly more descriptive in their approach to a relational theology, some are moving in a direction of what is being called "Communitarian Theology." The most prominent proponent of this theological approach is Dr. Larry Crabb. Crabb has been one of the major contributors to an understanding of relational formation in the past twenty years. Beginning as a Christian counselor in the 1970's, Crabb argued that counseling is relationship. This became a major focus of his life, as shown by his books *Connecting* which came out in 1997, and *The Safest Place on Earth* in 1999.<sup>3</sup>

Crabb believes that the healing of non-organic disorders should not be in the hands of specialists like therapists, but should be in the hands of the church. He also believes that spiritual direction should

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997) and *The Safest Place on Earth* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999).

replace therapy. In fact, he turned his back on diagnostic counseling methods in order to care for people's souls in a more unprofessional context: that of caring relationships. He now believes that there is no better psychotherapy than that which is provided by friendships.<sup>4</sup>

### **Trinitarian Theology**

The theological background of the communitarian theology described above is derived from an emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, over the past several years, a resurgence of interest in Trinitarian spirituality has occurred. Some theologians believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is the cornerstone of the Christian religion. For example, James Houston has said that if the church recovers the doctrine of the Trinity, it may launch the next Reformation.<sup>5</sup> Dallas Willard says, "Only when rooted in that divine Trinitarian circle can the broken individuals . . . recover from the wounds received in their circles of origin and find wholeness on their long journey from the womb to the eternal City of God."<sup>6</sup>

### **What is Relational Formation?**

Relational formation is the process of spiritual transformation that results from being deeply involved in authentic and life-changing relationships with other people. A journey through emotional formation (see last month's article) has the potential to bring a spiritual leader to a place of realization that no one has the resources within to deal with issues of life and humanity. Therefore, the logical next step in the process is to find these resources through relationships with others.

As I shared in previous articles, in my own personal journey, I struggled with eight months of clinical depression, leaving me in a very low place. Through listening to the wisdom of some wise friends and Christian counselors, I came to the place where I realized that there were at least two dynamics going on in my life. First, my family of origin issues had left me in a place where I was continually searching for a father figure. In other words, there was a relational void in my own nuclear family that was creating major implications for my ability to cope with life and ministry.

Second, my church experience during the formative years of discipleship and ministry internship had led me to rely only on God and the Bible for my spiritual, emotional, and relational needs. People were not viewed as a significant source of spiritual growth, healing, or transformation. I had many acquaintances and a number of people I called "friends," but no one in my life with whom to share the deep parts of myself. I did not know what it meant to live as part of a biblical community. So when I was challenged by life circumstances that were more difficult than I had the character or structure to face, my lack of resources propelled me into a very lonely place that resulted in a reactive depression. I was in crisis and needed a way out. After some searching, I discovered several friends who became a community of people who cared for me and for one another. M. Scott Peck says that genuine communities frequently develop in response to crisis.<sup>7</sup>

### **Biblical Perspectives of Relational Formation**

In Genesis 2:18, after creating man and having the opportunity to see him function in day-to-day interaction with the rest of creation, God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." It is short-sighted to see this as merely a "marriage passage." For everything else that God had created was declared by him as being "good." However, the contrast of man's aloneness with the rest of creation caused even God to observe the universal principle that it is not good for a human being as created in the image of God to be alone.

Thus, the existence of humankind in community was a part of God's signature. In Genesis chapter three, sin enters the human race and something changes. Community as originally created by God is greatly affected because of the fall. After the sin of Adam and Eve, the narrative in Genesis describes what God did to Adam:

*So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.<sup>8</sup>*

A little further on, Adam and Eve's son Cain experiences the impact of sin on community: "Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the Lord's

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<sup>4</sup> Agnieszka Tennant, "A Shrink Gets Stretched," *Christianity Today*, (May 2003), 53-54.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>6</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002), 180.

<sup>7</sup> M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum – Community Making and Peace* (New York: Touchstone, 1987) 77.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 3:23-24.

presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”<sup>9</sup> At the very beginning of God’s creation, community is replaced with very negative relational dynamics such as pride, selfishness, narcissism, and hiding.

The Old Testament provides numerous examples of relational formation. One that stands out as a powerful example is the relationship of David and Jonathan. In the New Testament, it is clearly evident how important relationship and community are from the life and teachings of Jesus and the apostles. In John 17, Jesus prays for the state and condition of his followers after his death. The one thing he prays for is that they might be one.<sup>10</sup> Unity is a concept that is foundational to the relational formation for which followers of God and churches must strive. The apostle Paul has much to say about relational formation. In his letters to the Corinthians, he offers many details of what a godly relational formation looks like. In the context of teaching how a church is to function in the exercise of spiritual gifts, he describes the foundational principle of love in 1 Corinthians 13.<sup>11</sup> In 2 Corinthians, Paul gives what might be considered his theology of ministry:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*<sup>12</sup>

God uses people to model his attributes. Thus, one of the most important ways the New Testament encourages relational formation is through various passages of Scripture that explain and describe how followers of God are to treat and be with one another. The “one another” passages in Scripture are specific ways in which relational formation takes place in the church.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Importance of Relational Formation in the Lives of Leaders**

Relational formation is much too easily ignored by spiritual leaders. Even worse, many leaders justify or even hide behind the fact that they are involved in many “relationships” throughout their ministries, but in actuality are void of the deep, life-giving relationships characteristic of a holistic relational formation. There are staff meetings, board meetings, committee meetings, prayer gatherings, retreats, small groups, and dozens of other opportunities that pastors have every week where they are in close contact with people. The fact is, not one of these environments provides the intimate and authentic connection that is characteristic of relational formation if the spiritual leader does not understand how to relate to others in deep and meaningful ways.

Julie Gorman quotes C. Norman Kraus who has said “the most conspicuous weakness of evangelical Protestant theology has been its lack of understanding and witness to authentic community as the fulfillment of the believer’s personal relation to God.”<sup>14</sup> The problem is deepened by those pastors and teachers who hide behind the pulpit or the positions of authority they hold. For many years, seminaries trained spiritual leaders to be preachers and teachers, but ignored and neglected the crucial necessity of relational formation. This results in pastors who know how to study the Bible but do not know how to study, and even be with people in a mutually satisfying way. They might know how to exegete Scripture but do not have any tools or experience in what it takes to understand the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. So not only are they isolated and devoid of life-nurturing relationships, but they are ill-equipped to provide teaching and guidance to their congregations about biblical principles of healthy relationships.

The importance of relationships to physical and mental health is well-documented today. Doctors know that outside of community people struggle to remain healthy and even die. In a nine-year-long Harvard study, people who were isolated from others were found to be three times more likely to die, even when they had great health habits as part of their lifestyle. The Journal of the American Medical Association published a study where volunteers were infected with a cold virus. Doctors discovered that people with strong emotional connections with other people had a four times better chance of fighting off the virus. Research such as this clearly points out that relational formation has an impact on many

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 4:15b-16.

<sup>10</sup> John 17:11, 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent phrase-by-phrase analysis of this important section of Scripture, see Lewis Smedes, *Love Within Limits – The Ideal of Love in Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. The author is indebted to Archibald Hart for his thought on Paul’s theology of ministry.

<sup>13</sup> A thorough list of “One-Anothering in Christ” can be found in Gareth Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations For Small Group Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 289-290.

<sup>14</sup> Julie Gorman, *Community That is Christian* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), 23.

aspects of life.

Relational formation is instrumental to the definition of leadership itself. Walter Wright suggests that “leadership is a relationship – a relationship in which one person seeks to influence the thoughts, behaviors, beliefs or values of another person.”<sup>15</sup> Based on this understanding or definition of leadership, to be deficient in relational formation will affect a spiritual leader’s ability to influence – the very act at the heart of leadership.

### Issues Related to Relational Formation

Churches often try to substitute programs and activities for the vacuum of relationship and undeveloped community. In a popular book on the subject of developing authentic community, Randy Frazee shares what he believes are the three primary barriers to relationships: individualism, isolationism, and consumerism.<sup>16</sup>

#### Individualism

The predominant environment in North America today is a culture of individualism. “Individualism” means that people tend to gather as a group of individuals who are concerned about their own individual wants and needs, not as a community united around common characteristics. This is primarily a Western condition and has been labeled as “atomization”: a condition that results from the continual breaking apart into smaller and smaller segments until people inevitably drift away from each other.<sup>17</sup> As a result, individualism slowly and effectively erodes any sense of community.

This type of individualism has been examined in-depth by sociologists and researchers. For example, Robert Bellah and a team of associates conducted a massive five-year study of various American communities. They arrived at the conclusion that Americans have lost the language needed to make moral sense of their lives because they have been largely confined to a vocabulary of individualism. These authors warn against the dangers and ambiguities of this sort of individualism where people think they can stand alone with no need of others.<sup>18</sup>

Because most people in the United States are born into this individualistic culture, they have a very difficult time seeing the damage it is doing, and an even harder time conceptualizing an alternate way of relating. Individualism has not only affected North American society, but has affected the North American church as well. As Frazee states, “the ‘hard to swallow’ premise is that today’s church is not a community but rather a collection of individuals.”<sup>19</sup>

#### Isolationism

Isolation is an outgrowth of the attitude of individualism just described. Culturally speaking, experts in sociology point to the 1950s as a pivotal period in the development of a cultural isolation. Frazee asserts that “a modern-day prison” was created as Americans began to build and live in different places known as “the suburbs.” Prior to the 1950s urban planners designed residences, retail stores, and workplaces within walking distance of each other, facilitating basic and essential relational needs. The suburbs, however, idealized private space, thus isolating people from one another. Frazee for one exhorts church leaders to take a long, hard look at the negative effects of suburban life on the development of biblical community.<sup>20</sup>

This reality has not only affected neighborhoods, it has also affected the spiritual growth of those who want to follow God but are lacking the relational support for a balanced and relational spiritual growth. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has described this reality well: “The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown.”<sup>21</sup>

This is a perfect example of how emotional formation has a direct influence on relational formation, for there are emotional areas in the life of a spiritual leader that determine a leader’s ability to effectively relate to the people he or she is called to restore, love, and serve.<sup>22</sup> For example, how can a

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<sup>15</sup> Walter C. Wright, *Relational Leadership* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Publishing, 2000), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> John Locke, *The De-Voicing of Society: Why We don’t Talk to Each Other Anymore* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 122.

<sup>18</sup> Robert N. Bellah, et.al., *Habits of the Heart – Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 143.

<sup>19</sup> Frazee, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Frazee, 111-117.

<sup>21</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper, 1954), 112.

<sup>22</sup> An excellent work on the emotional issues that bring about isolation is John Townsend, *Hiding From Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991). The book is subtitled “How to Change the Withdrawal Patterns That Isolate and Imprison You.” Townsend deals with thirteen different hiding styles that contribute to unhealthy isolation.

pastor who has not effectively dealt with his or her own narcissism or grandiosity counsel someone else about the importance of humility in relationships? This is where the ministry of spiritual leaders becomes very personal. For the most effective and powerful ministry is life-to-life, and has the potential of exposing all the weakness and vulnerabilities that one might desire to hide. Again, Nouwen hits the target by concluding:

*No one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with his whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded or even destroyed in the process. The beginning and the end of all Christian leadership is to give your life for others.*<sup>23</sup>

## **Consumerism**

The biblical precedent set in the New Testament book of Acts initiated the church as an organism of relational functioning. Due to many cultural realities in the twentieth century, there was a drift away from the church as a relational center. The church became an institution that in many cases chose to compete with the entertainment and marketing industries of modernity. This was bolstered by a pervasive attitude of consumerism that moved very readily from the marketplace into the church.

In brief, consumerism is primarily about consumption: the process of consuming things in order to meet a person's needs and wants.<sup>24</sup> The perspective of a consumer is a desire to receive whatever will fulfill one's felt needs. The tension is that relational formation is not always about the fulfillment of one's personal felt needs. Relational formation involves a mutual interaction that is process-oriented, as opposed to an independent spectatorship that takes place during a program or performance orchestrated by an ecclesiastical person or group.

### **Principles and Practices for Relational Formation**

Relational formation is profoundly social in the sense that it cannot be kept to oneself.<sup>25</sup> The overflow of spiritual formation is by necessity manifested in relational formation. So what are some practices or attitudes that allow leaders to grow in their pilgrimage of relational formation?

## **Acceptance**

For a healthy relational formation to take place, grounding in acceptance is essential. This begins with the knowledge of being totally and unequivocally accepted by God, and moves to less secure places of acceptance from other human beings. For when one does not feel accepted, he or she is more likely to function according to various defense mechanisms. Brennan Manning describes this truth:

*Tenderness awakens within the security of knowing we are thoroughly and sincerely liked by someone. The mere presence of that special someone in a crowded room brings an inward sigh of relief and a strong sense of feeling safe. The experience of a warm, caring, affective presence banishes our fears. The defense mechanisms of the imposter – sarcasm, name-dropping, self-righteousness, the need to impress others – fall away. We become more open, real, vulnerable, and affectionate. We grow tender.*<sup>26</sup>

There are two sides to acceptance. Acceptance is truly integrated when one is able to pass on the same type of acceptance received from God to others. This has a huge influence on the way one views others. Philip Yancey describes this act of acceptance:

*One who has been touched by grace will no longer look on those who stray as "those evil people" or "those poor people who need our help." Nor must we search for signs of "loveworthiness." Grace teaches us that God loves because of who God is, not because of who we are.*<sup>27</sup>

Acceptance also creates an atmosphere of safety within the community. Where there is lack of acceptance or the presence of judgment, the "un-safety" will hinder relational development. Bonhoeffer addresses this when he says:

*The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself*

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<sup>23</sup> Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 72.

<sup>24</sup> Frazee, 177.

<sup>25</sup> For a thorough expansion of the influence of spiritual formation on relational formation, see Willard, *Renovation*, Chapter 10 – "Transforming Our Social Dimension."

<sup>26</sup> Manning, 64.

<sup>27</sup> Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, 280.

*and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkable horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!*<sup>28</sup>

### **Non-Anxious Presence**

Edwin Friedman calls for spiritual leaders to live what he calls a “non-anxious presence” in order to help facilitate self-awareness and healing. He states that “the capacity of members of the clergy to contain their own anxiety regarding congregational matters, both those not related to them, as well as those where they become the identified focus, may be the most significant capability in their arsenal.”<sup>29</sup> This is true because it enables spiritual leaders to be clearly focused about potential solutions, more competent in triangles, and able to have a calming effect on the anxiety throughout the entire congregational system.

An essential aspect of a non-anxious presence is the value of playfulness. In terms of relational formation, it is helpful to grasp this because anxiety’s major tone is seriousness, its major antidote is playfulness. The act of being playful frees others by forcing them away from their anxiety and out of their serious ways of functioning and coping. Furthermore, the cultivation of a non-anxious presence avoids diagnostic thinking about a situation that tends to intensify anxiety.<sup>30</sup>

### **Relationship and Its Contribution to Holistic Formation**

For too long the importance of people and relationships in the lives of spiritual leaders, and even Christians in general, has been underemphasized and even ignored by the church and other institutions that train and equip for ministry. This is a travesty considering the impact of relational formation on one’s life.

Psychologist David Seamands has said, “Our deepest needs are for personal relationships with other humans and, above all, with God. If these needs are reasonably well met, our divinely designed selves will develop with the potential of becoming whole persons.”<sup>31</sup> John Powell has stated: “What I am at any given moment in the process of my becoming a person, will be determined by my relationships with those who love me or refuse to love me, with those I love or refuse to love.”<sup>32</sup> These statements both confirm the integration of relational formation to the foundational reality of one’s relationship with God, and indicate the holistic benefits that result.

As with other areas of formation, one of the primary hindrances to the ongoing development of relational formation is the intense busyness and pressure spiritual leaders put on themselves. This creates an environment that does not allow time for relationships. An honest and vulnerable contemporary spiritual leader wrote the following confession in his journal:

When there is always a book to be read or a book to write, a sermon to prepare or a retreat to lead, a letter to write or a call to make, my self-imposed pressure leaves little time to simply live, for being human and playful, for delighting in pecan waffles and Scrabble. Is my life slipping by without making time to be a friend with my friends?<sup>33</sup>

This is the type of hard reflection that spiritual leaders need to do if relational formation is to become integrated into the life and character required to withstand the pressures of ministry today. It’s going to take time. It’s going to take effort. But you have to start somewhere. If you already have a close friend or two, then make a commitment to go even deeper in that relationship. If you don’t have a close friend, but have some acquaintances who have the potential to be safe and nurturing friends, then do whatever it takes to expand those friendships. A small group environment is a great place to expand these types of friendships. If you have the opportunity to participate in a regional pastor’s gathering (or some forum for leaders who do what you do) then check it out. And if there isn’t such a thing, consider starting one. I am still close friends with a fellow pastor that I met almost twenty years ago when both of us were part of a regional youth pastors group in our city. If you don’t have any relationships that feel safe, then you might want to begin by seeing a spiritual director or Christian counselor. Whatever you do . . . do something! We have been created by God with a need to connect with others. Don’t wait for a crisis to find the support you need.

Spiritual leaders must make whatever sacrifices are necessary, prioritize their lives, and take the

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<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer, 110.

<sup>29</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 208.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 209.

<sup>31</sup> David A. Seamands, *Healing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988), 93.

<sup>32</sup> John Powell, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* (Allen, Texas: Tabor Publishing, 1969), 43.

<sup>33</sup> Brennan Manning, “Fall Newsletter From Brennan” (October 2003).

time to develop deep and authentic relationships. The process of relational formation becomes the canvas for spiritual formation to be lived out in day-to-day circumstances, and emotional formation has the resources it needs to see lasting change in a leader's life. This sets the stage for sharing all of this with others – what we will deal with next month on the topic of missional formation.

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