

WHEN NARCISSISM COMES TO CHURCH

HEALING YOUR COMMUNITY FROM
EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL ABUSE

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FOREWORD BY
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CHAPTER ONE

WHEN NARCISSISM COMES TO CHURCH

*Appear to be what thou art, tear off thy masks.
The church was never meant to be a masquerade.*

CHARLES SPURGEON

In my high school youth group, we were asked to memorize Philippians 2. The heading in my Bible back then said something like “Imitating Christ’s Humility.” The invitation to humility was predicated on that of Christ,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Naively, I assumed most Christians were all about navigating this humble way. So when I met my first Christian “celebrity” while still in high school, I expected an incarnation of Jesus. On

stage, he wooed and wowed, with arms waving and a smile so big you could see it from the back row of the auditorium. When I met him in person afterward, however, he was distant and cold—far from a Jesus incarnation—and way above a conversation with some teenage fan, too self-important for trivial encounters like this one.

On that day, I first encountered narcissism's ugly bite. I felt small and worthless—too insignificant even for a brief conversation. I wondered what was wrong, what he didn't see in me. Narcissism's bite always seems to leave you asking, "What's wrong with me?"

Narcissism came to church for me that day. I didn't have a descriptor for it, but I had the ugly aftertaste of a narcissistic encounter. About ten years later, narcissism's bite returned with a vengeance, this time from a charming and charismatic ministry peer whose affirmations of me would cause my soul to soar, but whose secretive, suspicious, and sometimes sinister machinations confused and even frightened me. After a season of feeling crazy, I sat with a therapist who said in no uncertain terms: "You're dealing with a narcissist."

A what? I didn't have the psychological vocabulary back then. The word was vaguely familiar, likely from the ecclesial and political scandals rocking the nation in the '90s. My therapist started connecting the dots. I felt crazy. I felt scared. I blamed myself. I felt like I had irreconcilable truths about this person's goodness and evil.

The picture that unfolded before me was far more complicated and crazy-making: a smart, seemingly wise and influential person in my life who was at the same time manipulative, abusive, and conniving. Charm and rage. Wisdom and folly. Righteousness and wickedness. Jekyll and Hyde.

In the coming months, my trust in humanity wavered. I began to see the dynamics of narcissism playing out in spiritually and emotionally abusive relationships from my earliest memories, through my formative college years, and into my seminary experience. For a season I became overly suspicious and judgmental of everyone. “Narcissist” became a label I’d brand people with far too freely. In my counselor training program, we’d toss around diagnostic categories liberally: “I’m seeing my borderline client tonight” or “I’ve got my sex addict at 4 p.m.” In time I realized that this was a form of power: a way of coping with my feelings of insecurity and disappointment. Health and healing in my own journey, I realized, could not come from simply flipping the script and becoming the powerful one, armed with clinical categories and a new expertise to judge others. I’d need to confront my own latent narcissism.

Of course, we’re all susceptible to narcissistic behavior. There are times when we all feel superior. We lay in bed at night thinking we deserve more. We compare and compete. These are general traits that might be shared by someone who is narcissistic. But narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is something far more serious, characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. Those who are diagnosably narcissistic may be talented, charming, even inspiring, but they lack the capacity for self-awareness and self-evaluation, shunning humility for defensive self-protection. Christian psychologist Diane Langberg says of the narcissist, “He has many gifts but the gift of humility.”¹

While it seems as if the church should be the last place narcissism shows up, it does indeed—in ordinary laypeople, in clergy across all theological spectrums, and in systems that protect narcissistic people and foster abuse. Let’s begin our exploration together by looking at each of these in turn.

THE NARCISSIST IN YOUR CHURCH

When we come to church, we often hide behind spiritual masks with smiles that cover our pain. As a client of mine once said, “I’m more myself on Wednesday nights at the church than on Sunday mornings.” He was referring to his Wednesday Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

The nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, “Appear to be what thou art, tear off thy masks. The church was never meant to be a masquerade. Stand out in thy true colors.”² I suspect the “Prince of Preachers” didn’t own a *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, but he hints at an important dynamic—hiddenness is the breeding ground for narcissism. You ask why churches are breeding grounds for abuse and coverups, and I’ll offer an epidemic of hiding. It’s as old as Genesis 3, so we shouldn’t be surprised.

I’ve seen this in spades over the years. Consider a couple that looked and dressed the part in their affluent suburban church, but whose narcissistic and abusive relationship was masked for years.³ Years ago, I worked with Jade, a lifelong Christian and wife of twenty-three years to Vance. Many would say they were the model Christian couple, serving in various ways both up front and behind the scenes, and proud of their three beautiful teenaged kids. He was a successful doctor. She was a stay-at-home mom. She came to me for counseling to address what she considered to be depression around her daughter’s impending move away to college, but it didn’t take long for the tears to come in a torrent. There was much more going on.

Jade began to describe a long-time pattern of emotional abuse, though she didn’t have those technical words. She walked on eggshells with a husband who was controlling and condescending. For years he’d criticized her weight, her cooking, her friendships,

her faith. Over time she awakened to this toxic dynamic, eventually naming it to her husband as a significant problem in their marriage. She appealed to church leaders for help as Vance evaded hard conversations, and she began to share her story with a few safe friends.

Jade and Vance were essentially hidden for a decade in their church. They spent years in a small group. Friends had seen Vance publicly scold Jade, even taking her aside during a small group meeting to lay into her for not cooking enough food. On a dime, however, he'd revert back to the larger-than-life, charismatic charlatan that he was. She'd shrink, smiling along, ever the submissive wife. The church showed little support, even as she made repeated requests to different pastors asking for their intervention. There were whispers of her "mental instability" among some. She eventually resigned herself to an abusive marriage and discontinued counseling. Years later I saw her in the supermarket. She smiled as she passed by, hiding her pain even from one of the few people who knew its depths.

Or consider Beth. Beth served as an elder at a large church. She worked her way into the inner circle of leaders with her ingratiating and charming ways. Once in, she made herself so indispensable that some argued that she was an unpaid staff member, while others thought the church might fall apart without her genius and savvy. Over time, she fostered a narrative that the senior pastor was inept and incapable of growing the church, leading to the pastor's resignation.

Gradually, Beth's grand plan began to come into view. She proposed calling her good friend and former pastor in another state, a married man with whom she'd been intimately involved in the past. His own narcissistic tendencies had come onto the radar of his local presbytery, and he was ready to move. Evading

accountability, he was called to Beth's church, with Beth pulling the strings all the while.

These two stories serve to illustrate how narcissism plays itself out among ordinary people in ordinary congregations. Most people in both churches were blind to the realities of the situations, but there were clear victims, obvious manipulation, and profound pain. The previous pastor at Beth's church didn't reenter ministry. Jade never did get the help she needed. Vance and Beth were both formidable people, whose big personalities and crafty ways won people over—even those who wondered at times if they could be trusted. Sadly, many of us naively trust the Vances and Beths of the world. They are convincing. They are charming. They are certain. And tragically they are deemed credible.

NARCISSISTIC PASTORS

The beloved priest-psychologist Henri Nouwen wasn't trying to define narcissism, but he might as well have been, when he wrote:

The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are the true saints. One thing is clear to me: the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love.⁴

This sad abandonment of the humble way of Jesus shows up today in pastors of large and small churches, in beloved Christian celebrities, prolific clergy authors and bloggers, dynamic church planters,

and seemingly godly men and women. The frightening reality of narcissism is that it often presents in a compelling package. Narcissism is the “glittering image” we present to the world, as novelist Susan Howatch describes it in her novel *Glittering Images*, which tells the story of a mid-twentieth century clergy narcissist.⁵ Could it be that the very men and women who are called to be shepherds of the flock struggle most with narcissism?

Sadly, narcissism in the clergy is under studied. When I did my doctoral work over a decade ago, I discovered vast resources on pastoral well-being, including studies on burnout, addiction, and depression. I found popular articles on narcissistic leadership but an absence of studies on the prevalence of narcissism. I had a sense that we didn’t want the world to know our dirty little secret. When I started doing psychological assessments for pastors and church planters, I saw that narcissistic traits were often presented as strengths. Narcissism can be interpreted as confidence, strong leadership, clear vision, a thick skin.

A colleague of mine often says that ministry is a magnet for a narcissistic personality—who else would want to speak on behalf of God every week? While the vast majority of people struggle with public speaking, not only do pastors do it regularly, but they do it with “divine authority.” In my own work, which includes fifteen years of psychological testing among pastors, the vast majority of ministerial candidates test on the spectrum of Cluster B *DSM-V* personality disorders, which feature narcissistic traits most prominently (as we’ll see in the next chapter). The rates are even higher among church planters.

Elevations on the narcissistic spectrum are coupled with testimonies that include fear of major failure (often moral failure), profound shame, and secret addictions. Hidden in the heart of these shepherds is profound shame. Power keeps the shame and

fear at bay—at least for some time. The narcissistic mask is an armor of self-protection that both defends the fragile self within, but offends, oppresses, and alienates the other.

Narcissist pastors are anxious and insecure shepherds who do not lead the sheep to still waters but into hurricane winds. I've attended and spoken at dozens of pastor's conferences, and I see this anxiety abuzz in the comparison and competition, the showmanship and dress, the addictions to substances and fitness and social media and approval. I hear it in the anxious voice of a young pastor who was recently contacted by a literary agent and proudly proclaimed, "It's my time. Now I launch!" I feel it in the inauthenticity of a prospective church planter whose overly optimistic answers to my sincere queries about his health leave me wondering whether he's ever been honest with anyone. I sense it in the endless selfie posts of a trendy clergywoman whose daily social media displays seem to be a cry of "notice me." I see it in the veteran pastor who deems himself wise and enlightened and speaks with condescension to young staff members.

In my lifetime, the classic image of the devoted parish pastor who could be trusted to rightly preach the word, diligently care for souls, and wisely lead the church has shifted dramatically. With major scandals in both Protestant and Catholic churches, trust in clergy is down significantly over the last twenty years. Clergy trust has "dropped steadily since 2009, down from a high of 67 percent in 1985, the pollster reported. Pastors are now seen as less trustworthy than judges (43%), day care providers (46%), police officers (56%), pharmacists (62%), medical doctors (65%), grade school teachers (66%), military officers (71%), and nurses (82%)."⁶

Seminaries tasked with training the next generation of ordained clergy are also in decline.⁷ Amidst scandals ranging from

televangelists to Catholic priests to megachurch superstars, the pastorate is no longer seen as a noble vocation as it once was. Given this general decline, there is even greater pressure for those pursuing ministry to be good enough, smart enough, winsome enough, inspiring enough, and confident enough to bring revitalization, start new churches, and draw the dechurched back. The vocation of parish pastor is not as sexy as it once was.⁸

Interestingly, in my earliest years in ministry serving as a hybrid pastor-therapist, I was often asked to write references for prospective planters. My warnings about their narcissism were often read as recommendations of their gifts to inspire, their quick wit, strong leadership, charisma, charm, and influence. In retrospect, I see the damage done by those deemed ready to lead and plant churches. In too many postdenominational ministry networks today, where traditional ordination processes have been abandoned, young leaders are snatched up and deployed without proper training or soul formation, simply because they've been successful in other arenas.

We've not yet learned. But as stories of damaging narcissism increase, and as social media serves as an amplifier for victim's voices, we may be approaching a reckoning.

NARCISSISTIC CHURCHES

For centuries, ecclesial systems have been structured hierarchically, privileging particular people over others. Male leaders, the educated, people with resources, or the well-connected traditionally have greater access to power than others. Structures are not necessarily to blame for narcissism, but particular structures do create an environment where it can grow unchallenged.

Historically, Christendom's conflation of church and empire undermined the "kenotic configuration" of the church, replacing

cruciform humility with hierarchy, patriarchy, and power.⁹ The grandiosity, entitlement, and absence of empathy characteristic of narcissistic personality disorder was translated into the profile of a good leader.¹⁰ Those affected by narcissism's bite were led to believe it was their fault—a lack of humility, a failure to submit. Systems of power and wealth that fostered abuse were perpetuated from generation to generation, even as leaders came and went.

Narcissistic systems thrive in structures that prop up those with authority and persona, while subordinating others according to gender, social status, theological understanding, perceived giftedness (or lack thereof), ability, and more.¹¹ What's more, these systems perpetuate shame among those who are not as holy, connected, charismatic, intelligent, or powerful. This insider-outsider dynamic keeps many hoping (and praying) that they can ascend the ladder and make up what they are lacking. But the system holds down those who don't measure up and props up those who feed the narcissistic beast. The system seeks to control any dynamic that undermines its effectiveness and longevity. These three factors—structure, shame, and control—are key aspects of narcissistic systems.

And while many ecclesial systems are structured for accountability, those in power often find ways to avoid it. Feedback is not given honestly in a narcissistic system. If it is given, it is tempered, qualified by a long list of strengths and gifts. Loyalty to the narcissistic leader and the system's perpetuation is demanded. It might be said, "This is how we do things" or "This is how we've grown so large." To question this is to express disloyalty and to experience shame and disconnection from the system.

Moreover, when the narcissistic leader is under attack, his response is defensiveness and a victim complex. Narcissistic leaders experience a victim-martyr-hero identity that postures them

as the inevitable targets of frustrated subordinates. Their persecution complex actually enhances their status among some who view them as a hero for standing tall amid the battle. The system comes to the rescue of the leader at the expense of his victims. The lack of feedback, fear of disloyalty, and victim complex make it hard to engage, let alone change, this system.

Churches are particularly susceptible to a phenomenon called “collective narcissism,” in which the charismatic leader/follower relationship is understood as a given. Sadly, in recent years we’ve witnessed too many instances of charismatic Christian leaders gaining a massive following, both within the church and on social media, only to be exposed as manipulative, abusive, and dictatorial. Jerrold Post argues that a mutually reinforcing relationship exists between leader and follower.¹² The leader relies on the adoration and respect of his followers; the follower is attracted to the omnipotence and charisma of the leader. The leader uses polarizing rhetoric that identifies an outside enemy, bringing together leader and followers on a grandiose mission. The followers feed off the leader’s certainty in order to fill their own empty senses of self. Interestingly, in this mutually reinforcing relationship, both are prone to a form of narcissism.

How can it be that narcissism thrives among those who seek to become like Christ?

First, these systems attract people who want to be a part of something special. The narcissistic system parades its specialness: the unique way God is working mightily in this church or movement or denomination. Who would dare question God’s work? Because the mission is tied to God’s apparent movement, people are more likely to question their own judgments than God’s obvious blessing. However, staff members are often asked to make

large sacrifices for little or no remuneration and are often promised more with little delivery. Those who ascend tend to collude with the system. Those who ultimately refuse to idealize the leader are chewed up and spit out. But because the mission is a seemingly spiritual one, the system goes unchallenged.

Second, the system often compares itself to others and finds others wanting. The narcissistic system may feature the compelling personality or style of its leader, the strategic nature of its location or mission, the orthodoxy of its doctrine, the authenticity of its worship, the beauty of its liturgy, the integrity of its activism. Those within the system are led to believe that the church down the block isn't as blessed, special, or faithful. A collective sense of grandiosity is common in these situations.

I knew one church in which many of the staff and key leaders were not theologically trained in a seminary but were equipped through the lead pastor's own self-created internal program. In this program, they were led to believe that no church planting movement had ever experienced more radical or faster growth. As a result, the church fell into a kind of ecclesial "manifest destiny." Those who questioned policies, tactics, and even apparent abuses were quickly dismissed. Most, however, believed they were in an extraordinary place and moment in time, consecrated by God, resulting in criticism of other churches and even secular organizations that were perceived as less effective than theirs.

Narcissistic systems exist for themselves, even though their mission statements and theological beliefs may be filled with the language of service, selflessness, justice, and care. Those within the system find this contradiction exhausting. This is why many who get close to the epicenter of leadership either forfeit their integrity or resign.

HUMBLE US

The kenosis passage from Philippians 2 presents a vision Christians long to live into but which we sabotage time and again. The cries of “I like Jesus, but I don’t like the church” are often borne out of frustrating and even abusive experiences, when the faithful experience shame and humiliation from congregants, leaders, and systems. Pastors and churches lose credibility when instead of embracing the way of Jesus, they go the way of empire, forgoing vulnerability for power and preying on the weak. The narcissistic pastor becomes like the corrupt kings of ancient Israel, whose royal consciousness is marked by power and self-protection rather than solidarity with the wounded sheep. Walter Brueggemann writes,

In both his teaching and his very presence, Jesus of Nazareth presented the ultimate criticism of the royal consciousness. He has, in fact, dismantled the dominant culture and nullified its claims. The way of his ultimate criticism is his decisive solidarity with marginal people and the accompanying vulnerability required by that solidarity. The only solidarity worth affirming is solidarity characterized by the same helplessness they know and experience.¹³

The long, sordid history of the church testifies to our arrogant love of power, position, wealth, prestige, success, and privilege. As Henri Nouwen says, we long to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful, the toxic cocktail refused by Jesus in his wilderness temptation but gladly embraced by many pastors today.

But given changing ecclesial dynamics and a growing social movement that takes clergy narcissism and abuse seriously, the church and its servants may be in a season of needed humiliation and reckoning. My hope is that we will respond to it humbly.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Walter Brueggemann. *The Prophetic Imagination*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.

Marva Dawn and Eugene Peterson. *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

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