

“When Narcissism Comes to Church”
Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse
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Book Note by Dave Kraft

I am not like other men. Once a leader has started down this path there is no limit to the evil his self-satisfaction may drive him to do in the name of God and of His love, and for His glory. Narcissism is the longing to be free from longing. Narcissism, as is clear throughout these pages, is one means that individuals employ to alienate themselves from their true humanness. Narcissism in the public sphere can be dramatic and grand, a spectacle to behold, and even traumatic to experience. Perhaps he’s the church planter whose charm and sense of authority appears compelling but whose leadership style produces a relational debris field.

We swim in the cultural waters of narcissism, and churches are not immune. The narcissist cannot tolerate the limitations of his humanity. Our desire to be superhuman dehumanizes us, wreaking havoc on our relationships. There is a shift from a guilt-anxiety society to a shame-narcissism society. Bradshaw traced the origins of shame in a way that helped me see it as jet fuel for narcissists. I became convinced that narcissism was not only a growing reality but a misdiagnosed one. When it’s the water you swim in, it’s hard to see and even harder to confront. Ministry leaders and churches today are obsessively preoccupied with their reputation, influence, success, rightness, progressiveness, relevance, platform, affirmation, and power.

Nowhere have I seen the narcissism-shame dynamic more pronounced than among church planters, some of whom have become megachurch pastors. Narcissism in many young men in particular is baptized as spiritual giftedness in a way that does a great disservice to them and ignores deep wells of shame and fragility lurking within.

I do not resist naming a person as a “narcissist”—as a description of a pattern of living and relating. Naming our heart’s deceits as pathological patterns of relating, often born out of life’s brokenness and shame. Dismantling the narcissistic false self is an act of dying—dying to illusion, to control, and to fear. Perhaps we’ll all tire of the masks we wear and come out of hiding. Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is something serious, characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. Christian psychologist Diane Langberg says of the narcissist, “He has many gifts but the gift of humility.”

“Hiddenness is the breeding ground for narcissism” ~ Henri Nouwen

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. 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. The frightening reality of narcissism is that it often presents in a compelling package. Narcissistic traits were often presented as strengths.

Hidden in the heart of these shepherds is profound shame. Power keeps the shame and fear at bay. Narcissist pastors are anxious and insecure shepherds who do not lead the sheep to still waters but into hurricane winds.

I see it in the veteran pastor who deems himself wise and enlightened and speaks with condescension to young staff members. Young leaders are snatched up and deployed without proper training or soul formation, simply because they've been successful in other arenas.

These three factors—structure, shame, and control—are key aspects of narcissistic systems. While many ecclesial systems are structured for accountability, those in power often find ways to avoid it. 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.

Narcissistic leaders experience a victim-martyr-hero identity that postures them as the inevitable targets of frustrated subordinates. Because the mission is a seemingly spiritual one, the system can go unchallenged. Those who questioned policies, tactics, and even apparent abuses were quickly dismissed. 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." Many leaders are stuck on a never-ending hamster wheel.

Narcissism is born in the soil of shame and self-contempt, not healthy self-love. Goal-setting is based on gaining approval from others; personal standards are unreasonably high in order to see oneself as exceptional, or too low based on a sense of entitlement; often unaware of our own motivations and excessively attuned to reactions of others.

Grandiosity: Feelings of entitlement, either overt or covert; self-centeredness; firmly holding to the belief that one is better than others; condescending toward others. Attention seeking: Excessive attempts to attract and be the focus of the attention of others; admiration seeking. Grandiosity and attention seeking. The narcissist is always out of touch with himself and others. In ministry, pastors use their congregations to validate a sense of identity and worth. When we're loved well, we develop a healthy and holy confidence.

Over the years, I've met many gifted pastors, for instance, whose public persona might be construed as narcissistic because of their confidence and charisma, but whose humility and self-understanding demonstrate health instead of pathology. Style is not a pathology, but as a clinician I want to pay close attention to how it plays out in a person's life and what animates it from within. The more elevated someone is, the more pronounced the narcissistic behavior may be, Her ego-defensiveness is the product of years of self-protection.

And most clinicians would be skeptical about the prospect of substantial change. While diagnostic definitions are helpful, they do not reveal the mammoth iceberg of shame that hides beneath the surface and that drives narcissistic behavior. It's only when we see below the waterline that we begin to understand and have empathy for a narcissist. Shame drives narcissism. All addictions begin in shame. We walk the earth using others and using things to satisfy the deep ache within.

Shame is fundamentally about an inner disconnection, arising from our childhoods. A massive iceberg of shame is driving narcissism. Those who are drawn into the gravitational pull of narcissism may even enable the narcissist by letting him off the hook for his behavior.

We look beneath the waterline as a means of understanding, even empathizing, but never excusing narcissistic behavior.

Thomas Merton warns us of the implications of mistaking our mask for our true face:

Thomas Keating explains that as a result of our childhood wounds, we seek to meet our needs through the pathways of esteem. Humility recedes as leadership advances.

Exhaustion and resentment are the burdens of what author and therapist Michael Cusick calls the “Benevolent Narcissist.”

Indeed, the rage of a narcissist is often accompanied by a simmering jealousy of anyone who steals attention, power, or admiration from them. There is an addictive need for admiration.

Merton writes, “Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real.”

Gabbard writes that hypervigilant narcissists “listen to others carefully for evidence of any critical reaction, and they tend to feel slighted at every turn.”

Narcissists cannot identify with someone else without seeing the other as an extension of themselves. To compensate for insecurities, narcissists become sarcastic and belligerent, blaming others for their problems, taking a tough stance toward ‘outsiders. They can become highly reactive and defensive, dividing people into friends and enemies, while looking for threats to their own security.

The faces of narcissism are more diverse than we typically imagine; fierce retribution amidst perceived disloyalty, a dictatorial leadership style, We’ve still not dealt with the pervasive reality of narcissism among clergy. the grandiosity of a narcissistic pastor only hides his long, dark shadow. Shame, rage, self-doubt, inner chaos, and intense fear—the fear of not being enough, the fear of not living up to their own expectations or the expectations of others, the fear of moral or vocational failure, the fear of not being right. In the end, the threat of humiliation and shame keeps the narcissist self-defended and in control. The narcissist’s sense of self-identity may be his greatest addiction.

In their helpful book *How to Treat a staff infection: Resolving Problems in your Church or Ministry*, Craig and Carolyn Williford identify six primary characteristics of a narcissist

1. All decision-making centers on them
2. Impatience or a lack of ability to listen to others
3. Delegating without giving proper authority or with too many limits
4. Feelings of entitlement
5. Feeling threatened or intimidated by other talented staff

6. Needing to be the best and brightest in the room

I've identified four additional characteristics

1. Inconsistency and impulsiveness
2. Praising and withdrawing
3. Intimidation of others
4. Fauxnerability (phony vulnerability)

ALL DECISION-MAKING CENTERS ON THEM

A narcissistic pastor cannot step away. In fact, in his mind he is essential in every decision. The narcissistic pastor cannot relinquish control. Significant meetings or decisions cannot happen without his blessing or presence. He arranges leadership structures and polity in such a way as to protect his authority at every level of decision-making. Indeed, the pastor's supposed spiritual authority is often cited or invoked to defend his right to decide.

IMPATIENCE OR A LACK OF ABILITY TO LISTEN TO OTHERS

In the end, his impatience reveals an absence of empathy. In his self-referential reality, others are a mere commodity. He is impatient with the limitations of others. The narcissistic pastor sees others as an extension of his own ego. The narcissistic pastor will interpret his own impatience as decisiveness, and rebuff accusations of a lack of empathy with his own accusations about "weak" or "selfish" staff members who aren't good "team players." Staff members who depart will almost always be subject to the narcissistic pastor's slanted narrative

DELEGATING WITHOUT GIVING PROPER AUTHORITY OR WITH TOO MANY LIMITS

Many narcissistic pastors have little ability to empower others in meaningful ways. They keep staff in ambiguous roles, perhaps changing titles often or realigning structures. He may be perfectionistic and unable to trust another to fulfill a task up to his standards.

FEELINGS OF ENTITLEMENT

Power, privilege, and entitlement are expressed in toxic ways by narcissistic pastors. The ecclesial authority prompts followers to a holy deference to his calling and role. They feel that normal limitations don't apply—overdrinking Even the smallest pinprick of challenge or concern from another leads to defensiveness and self-protective strategies.

FEELING THREATENED OR INTIMIDATED BY OTHER TALENTED STAFF

Narcissistic leaders are notoriously insecure. While exhibiting the typically grandiose and omnipotent traits, narcissistic leaders are often hypervigilant. Unable to trust anyone, they cannot feed the sheep, they feed off the sheep.” Any sign of disloyalty or any inkling of advancement that could undermine his authority or image would lead to a fierce and direct encounter.

NEEDING TO BE THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST IN THE ROOM

He longs to be the center of attention, where his need to be special is affirmed. His need to be special and grandiose is affirmed by his “talented” staff, who stay if they live in service of his ego and leave, often messily, if they do not. The narcissistic pastor is the only one who can occupy the limelight.

INCONSISTENCY AND IMPULSIVENESS

A pastor who doesn’t see the impact of her hurricane winds on a staff will quickly find a tired, overwhelmed team. Indeed, some may be terminated for not keeping up. The narcissistic pastor must live in a constant state of ego inflation. Because she was seen by many as especially prophetic and courageous, Jen wasn’t held accountable for her frenetic leadership.

PRAISING AND WITHDRAWING

When she risked pushing back on an idea Jim had at a staff meeting, she did not anticipate the consequences.

INTIMIDATION OF OTHERS

Some narcissistic pastors are bullying intimidators who use their power to wield control. The loyal ones, mostly out of fear, became fierce guard dogs for the narcissistic pastor. Bullying intimidators ordinarily lead in contexts with little ecclesial accountability. If you cross this kind of leader, you’ll find yourself on the outside, wondering about your future.

FAUXNERABILITY

An emotional dump is not necessarily an act of vulnerability but may in fact be a way of using you to engender sympathy or to take their side.

Followers will tend to overlook narcissistic behavior in light of powerful sermons, persistent success, and perceived authority. Accusers can be seen (and narrated) as whiny, vindictive, and jealous. Many victims need to remain silent to keep a job or to get a job in the future. Some are driven out of ministry. Being wounded by a narcissistic pastor is a particularly painful trauma. Too often, the wounded boy grows up to become a wounding man, inflicting.

Narcissists do not feel like the world is safe. The shadow dance of a narcissist is a dance of radical avoidance of anything that threatens his grandiosity, his control, his certainty. At his core, he is a scared little boy.

Too often, the wounded boy grows up to become a wounding man, inflicting upon those closest to him the very distress he refuses to acknowledge within himself.

SHAME AND RAGE IN THE NARCISSISTIC PASTOR

These narcissistic pastors hold power in a way that intimidates and silences. Many followers are unwittingly set up for disappointment, betrayal, or abandonment when the omnipotent leader is revealed to be less than ideal. This pastor is often the most impenetrable of all. He simply has too much to lose. They live not by the humble strength of Jesus but by power and personality, an egocentric false self, constructed to dominate and never be dominated. I know capable and gifted women and men who are no longer in ministry because of their abusive and harmful experiences with pastors like these.

SHAME, RAGE, AND THE PASTOR WHO ASSAULTS

Those who've explored their inner lives and family-of-origin stories are often the most self-aware, living congruent lives of integrity and wholeheartedness. A salvation prayer doesn't magically heal our shadow side. The phrase "keep watch" is sometimes translated "take heed" or "pay attention." I've noticed that people choose to believe the best, overlooking possible inconsistencies, minimizing minor relational violations along the way, dismissing their own suspicions. Healthy churches simply do not hire narcissistic pastors. Do not mistake numerical growth for flourishing. Narcissistic infection shows up in our inability to be personally and organizationally honest,

Grandiose narcissistic systems. Each person in the system fed off of the grandiose posture of the organization.

Rigorous self-reflection is imperative for any system to change.

Integrity gives way to pragmatism; honesty gives way to illusion.

WHAT DOES A HEALTHY SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

Sometimes health begins with the prophetic act of truth-telling. The leader willing to lean into self-discovery is the leader who will inspire others to that work.

We want God and we want to be god. Perhaps this is about us, an invitation to wake up to the many ways in which certainty trumps curiosity, uniformity trumps unity, hubris trumps humility, control trumps connection, loyalty trumps love.

TRAUMATIC EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Spiritual authority is invoked to silence someone because of their gender, a difference of opinion, or a rigorous hierarchy. Those who speak may be scolded and will likely feel shame around having a voice or opinion. Hierarchy in abusive situations isn't empowering but disempowering. Those who are not in charge are made to feel small, insignificant, and unenlightened.

Some may wonder why they're not good enough or smart enough to be given some authority or at least be considered. Jesus says that the Pharisees put loads on other people that they themselves are not willing to carry. Their lives are characterized by grandiosity and ego rather than humility. Abusers intend to stay in a powerful, one-up position. Their intent is revealed in a deep need to be in control, to remain invulnerable at the expense of the other. It is intended to break the will of the other, and it often succeeds. There is no escape from the problem of leadership. Everything depends upon the pattern of leadership. A wife can leave a narcissistic abuser. A church can fire a narcissistic pastor. But after this, the real work begins.

Lead pastor Bart fired most of the talented leaders before they could threaten him, and those who remained were mostly passive, compliant, and fearful.

As leaders, we need to listen and understand rather than agree or disagree. Anxiety often propels teams into reactive rather than reflective processes. I confess that it's easier to have a box to put someone in or a label to define someone with.

I am inviting you to answer a question:

How do you experience me?