

**Literature Review**

**The Impact of Narcissistic Pastors on Church Health and Church Culture:  
Creating an Environment of Humility in the Church**

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GCN 503 OA: Research Methods & Analysis

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March 22, 2023

## **Introduction**

*Narcissism* is a label that sometimes elicits a binary reaction of good and evil where narcissism is evil and, thus, should not find its place in a church setting. However, the reality for every person is that good and evil can exist within our hearts, and it is through relationships and community that we can hold those narcissistic impulses or tendencies accountable when brought to light. Jesus declared, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Crossway Bibles, 2016, Matthew 10:16 ESV). It is a guarantee that narcissistic pastors and churches will exist, so we must be wise in discerning and helping to create an environment of humility in the church to hold our fellow brothers and sisters accountable who struggle with a specific pattern of thinking, feeling, and behaving that may not always align with the example Jesus set forth for his disciples. This paper will focus on the impact of narcissistic pastors on churches and the need to create a community around humility; humility can help keep church communities and their pastors healthier and safer.

*Humility* is a characteristic that aligns with Christian values, and Christian clergy and leaders who can exhibit humility follow Christ's example of leadership (Ruffing et al., 2018). Three articles by Lee (2021), Ruffing et al. (2018), and Jankowski et al. (2021) look at narcissism and humility in the church setting and how those traits impact religious leaders, congregational conflicts, and the health of the church. Subsequently, two other articles by Dunaetz et al. (2018) and Puls (2020) focus on what type of church tolerates narcissistic pastors and when narcissistic pastors pass on narcissistic traits to a church system. Next, Cooper et al. (2016) look at the impact of narcissism on church pastors as it relates to decision-making in ethical situations and how to get to a place of true peace and reconciliation with forgiveness.

Finally, we must look at the relational dynamics of narcissism and humility in the church setting and understand how to hold each other accountable for the church's and its leaders' health.

### **Narcissism Defined**

On the one hand, narcissism displays characteristics one would want to find in a leader, such as charisma, confidence, vision, and extraversion, making it easier for people to follow such a leader (Lee, 2021). In essence, healthy narcissism can display wisdom, empathy, and an understanding of personal limitations. On the other hand, however, the negative side of narcissism comes in two categories: grandiose and vulnerable (Ruffing et al., 2018). "Grandiose narcissism involves a repression of both negative self-perceptions and negative perceptions of the self by others, an inflated self-image, manipulateness, domineering behavior, and the pursuit of interpersonal power and control. Vulnerable narcissism also involves entitlement and a need for admiration but is characterized by hypersensitivity, shame, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, helplessness, and a tendency to idealize others (as cited in Ruffing et al., 2018, p.527).

### **Humility Defined**

*Humility* is a trait that includes knowing one's strengths and limitations, having an open stance toward others, having the ability to accept differences, and having the capability to self-regulate one's emotions, especially around pride and shame (Ruffing et al., 2018). In addition, humility is about sharing power with others, reaching out for help, and working through conflict rather than avoiding conflict or dismissing conflict (Jankowski et al., 2021). Humility is a necessary character trait of religious leaders and is considered a virtue among religious and spiritual practices (Jankowski et al., 2021). However, the role of a religious leader sets up a "religion-humility paradox" (as cited in Jankowski et al., 2021, p.103), whereby a call for

humility in these leaders is crucial while the actual job of being religious leaders lends itself to having or developing narcissistic traits.

### **Prevalence of Narcissism in Clergy**

A study by Lee (2004) found that clergy had significantly higher levels of overt narcissism than the general sample population (as cited in Ruffing et al., 2018). Another study by Ball and Puls (2015) found "that 31.2% of the 210 active clergy surveyed in the Presbyterian Church of Canada had scores on the Netherlands Narcissism Scale self-report measure that would suggest diagnosable narcissistic personality disorder" (as cited in Ruffing et al., 2018, p.532). Since New Testament times, pastoral narcissism has been a source of worry, so it is not surprising that narcissism in pastors continues to be a concern to this day (Dunaetz et al., 2018). However, it is important not to judge or point fingers because the vocation of being a clergy may decrease the capacity to regulate emotions due to work-related stress, increasing the likelihood of developing more narcissistic traits (Ruffing et al., 2018). Therefore, whether some pastors come to the vocation with their narcissistic traits or others develop them due to the demands of the vocation itself, narcissism will always impact the church.

### **Symptoms of Narcissism in Clergy**

Narcissists express more anger and aggression when in conflict than non-narcissists, discouraging any concerns from being voiced (Dunaetz et al., 2018). In addition, narcissists tend to be weak listeners, have difficulty putting themselves in someone else's shoes, and hold grudges until they can get payback for even the slightest grievance (Cooper et al., 2016). Narcissistic clergy leadership affects the organizational health of a church. For example, Williford and Williford found six distinct signs of narcissism in clergy: "1) all decision-making centers around 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; and 6) needing to be the best and brightest in the room" (as cited in Ruffing et al., 2018, p.532).

Other symptoms include defensive strategies like communicating in a self-protective way and blaming others. In addition, grandiose narcissistic factors include high risk-taking behaviors and impulsivity (as cited in Ruffing et al., 2018). Religious leaders are particularly susceptible to developing narcissistic traits the longer they hold the role because the community and the church may idealize them, creating a sense of isolation in their calling (Jankowski et al., 2021).

### **Relational Impact of Pastoral Narcissism on the Church**

Since narcissists strive for control and dominance in their environments, the narcissistic pastor will impact the church's health by making the church organizationally into his image (Puls, 2020). For instance, creating a vision and mission are fundamental to church growth (Puls, 2020). Therefore, narcissistic pastors will offer a vision of how the church will grow and be a unique place where God is at work. Chuck Degroat (2020) describes, "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?" (p.23). Congregant members accept and follow this type of leader because of their initial success, even if they begin to see other behaviors that conflict with their gut feelings, senses, and wisdom (as cited in Puls, 2020). In addition to the impact on church health, the staff turnover rate is high, and the leadership work environment is ripe with hostility (Puls, 2020) and false peace. Although the church appears successful for a time, it most likely becomes isolated from the community and shifts to an "avoidant organization," a term coined by Jerkiewicz and Giacalone (2014) (as cited in Puls, 2020, p. 82). The church enters a negative cycle where dysfunctional beliefs prevent learning

more effective behaviors with healthier relational outcomes. Without humility and the courage to learn a different way of relating and letting go of control, the church under a narcissistic pastor will develop "ethically dysfunctional traits, including deception, distrust, and paranoia" (Puls, 2020, p.82).

### **Impact of Narcissistic Pastors on Church Health and Culture**

Narcissistic pastors often need complete control and hand-pick loyal leaders to serve. Unfortunately, healthier leaders will leave or become passive with these selected leaders in positions of power (Puls, 2020). Thus, the cycle continues as new leaders with stronger narcissistic tendencies rise to replace old leaders. "Overt narcissistic pastors may demand complete and unquestioning obedience, leading the church to develop cult-like characteristics that influence beliefs and values..." (Puls, 2020, p.80). On the other hand, a vulnerable narcissist pastor "works hard to avoid conflict, criticism, competition, and even striving for achievement while submitting to circumstances; these unspoken norms are projected into the church" (as cited in Puls, 2020, p.81). This type of passive church may lack accountability, thus allowing abuse and financial deceit to occur.

Duchon and Drake (2009) applied organizational research to churches and found that narcissistic churches lost their moral identities, thereby allowing space to behave unethically (as cited in Puls, 2020). Although unintentional, narcissistic churches show self-obsession, a sense of entitlement, self-aggrandizement, denial, and rationalizations as part of their unhealthy church culture. As churches develop narcissistic traits, and as people become part of the church, the "church becomes part of them in a reciprocal transfusion of culture, personality, and needs" (as cited in Puls, 2020, p.83). Congregants who may not exhibit narcissistic traits may have their gifts and service exploited without understanding the underlying dynamics.

## **Cultivating Humility-Self Awareness**

Christians in leadership roles have a particular need for humility. According to Apostle Paul, he states "A church leader is a manager of God's household, so he must live a blameless life. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered; he must not be a heavy drinker, violent, or dishonest with money. Rather, he must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must love what is good. He must live wisely and be just. He must live a devout and disciplined life" (*Holy Bible: New Living Translation.*, 2015, Titus 1:7-8). Unfortunately, many fall short of this kind of church leadership description, particularly narcissistic pastors. Therefore, accurately knowing one's strengths and weaknesses (as cited in Lee, 2021) is crucial to cultivating humility and holding each other accountable, including those in leadership positions. We all have blind spots, and it is through relationships with people that we can become more self-aware of the relational impact we leave around us. The humility to be open to hearing how others experience us can lead to greater self-awareness.

## **Cultivating Humility-Attachment Styles of Clergy**

Ruffing et al. (2018) proposed looking at the developmental ability of a secure attachment in clergy to promote mature relational spirituality. Leaders with a secure attachment style have a more positive self-perception and a sense of acceptance and love regardless of expectations placed on them, thus showing more openness to hear different perspectives. However, those with an insecure attachment lacked an empathetic and attuned caregiver when they were young, so they do not feel safe in relationships which can affect their openness to new ways of relating. There are three categories of insecure attachment style: "preoccupied (having a low view of self, high anxiety and vigilance concerning rejection and abandonment, seeking emotional closeness), dismissive (having a low view of others, high avoidance, discomfort with

closeness), and fearful (low view of self and others, high anxiety, and high avoidance)" (as cited in Ruffing et al., 2018, p.536). These relational attachment styles also impact attachment to God and how pastors or church leaders feel secure or insecure with their relationship with God and others.

Some studies mentioned in Ruffing et al. (2018) describe the resulting positive connection between insecure attachment styles and vulnerable narcissism, while findings around grandiose narcissism showed mixed results concerning attachment styles. Nevertheless, insecure attachment styles can significantly impact how a pastor leads and relates with his church. Cultivating secure attachments with God and others can develop more humility which is essential for clergy. The challenges that clergy must face with intense needs, high expectations, and constant criticism from congregants and society can be better endured and handled lovingly with the cultivation of humility and self-awareness of the type of attachment style clergy exhibit.

### **Cultivating Narrative Humility**

Congregational conflict will always be prevalent, so moving through those conflicts well will lead to a healthier church. The conflict can be between staff members, church members, or pastors and members. Churches with narcissistic pastors, in particular, or church systems that have adopted narcissistic traits may have many unhealed relational wounds or conflicts within the church, creating a sense of false peace and disunity while promoting unity through perceived ministry success. Effectively communicating through the cultivation of narrative humility is a way to get to a place of true peace and reconciliation around those relational wounds.

In his article, Lee (2021) proposes that part of a pastor's vocational formation should include embracing a narrative humility perspective to help cultivate humility within himself, ministry leaders, and the church members. According to Lee (2021), narrative humility "entails

the capacity to recognize and accept that 1) one's reactions to a conflict situation are to some extent the result of interpreting it through the narrative frame of one's own life story, 2) our interpretations therefore make sense to us but are not for that reason objectively true, 3) the other person may have quite a different story to tell about the same situation, and 4) there is value in listening carefully to that alternative story" (p.86)

Narrative humility helps pastors humbly understand that congregation members are "participants in God's story, not as problems that we can fix" (as cited in Lee, 2021, p.86). This humble stance and placing God as the ultimate authority over our lives and the lives of others will help protect and keep narcissistic tendencies in check. When ministry success is going smoothly, narcissistic pastors and their church members usually work together well to achieve that common goal. However, once conflicting feelings, perspectives, or opinions appear, how each side responds to the other relationally shows the depths of their narcissistic way of relating. Lee (2021) proposes that pastors or ministry leaders take a step back and use some questions to help guide and reflect on their part in any conflict:

- 1) To what extent has God become a character in my story as opposed to my being a character in God's story?
- 2) Do I need the other to be wrong for me to be right?
- 3) What does my version of the story minimize or overlook?
- 4) If I were the other, how might I tell the story differently?
- 5) What are the best reasons for me to get to know the other's story? (Lee, 2020, p.88-90).

Pastors and religious leaders are in a position of power in a church that lends itself to the growth of narcissistic traits if not kept in check by taking a narrative humility stance and actively and intentionally cultivating humility within the church. Churches must be wise as serpents and

innocent as doves as they challenge keeping false peace from growing for the health of their pastors and churches. "However, the culture of politeness found in most churches inhibits truthful conversation and requires parishioners to regularly compliment the pastor whether the compliment is earned or not" (as cited in Puls, 2020, p.72-73). Large churches, in particular, must stand vigilant to guard against encouraging narcissistic traits in their leaders. In a study by Dunaetz, Jung, and Lambert (2018), evangelical church members' experiences showed that the larger the church, the more forgiving of narcissistic behavior the church will be (as cited in Puls, 2020, p.80). Tolerance of the narcissistic behavior of leaders can lead to a culture of keeping abuses or other sinister behavior in the dark, where poor ethical judgments made by the narcissistic pastor "can be lethal for the church" (Cooper et al., 2016, p.49)

### **Conclusions**

Narcissistic pastors and narcissistic religious leaders profoundly impact the church's relational health, so cultivating good relational soil will allow the Word of God to grow correctly in people's hearts to produce good fruit. Cultivating an open stance to narrative humility in ministry leadership can have a corrective impact on the narcissistic influence everyone can have when interpreting events in the face of conflict. Narcissistic leaders have difficulty regulating emotion, especially in the face of different perspectives and opinions. However, if they actively cultivate humility, they will have a better chance of growing spiritually and relationally mature. In addition, cultivating this type of humility within a church can decrease the pride and shame around speaking the truth in love when conflicts arise. "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (*ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*, 2008, John 8:31-32). Part of the truth that will help set a church free to grow correctly is having honest

conversations around unhealed relational wounds. Narcissistic pastors and churches leave a relational debris field around them. The church and its leaders must learn to cultivate a culture of narrative humility where all are encouraged to develop the ability to listen and empathize humbly to a different perspective to maintain health and grow spiritually and relationally mature.

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