

THE NARCISSIST PASTOR AS MARRIAGE PARTNER AND PARENT
American Association of Christian Counselors Mega-Conference
Hilton Anatole Hotel, Dallas, Texas
September 27-29, 2018

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As was demonstrated in our 2015 conference paper, *The Frequency of Narcissistic Personality Disorder in the Clergy: A Preliminary Study*, a national study of ordained clergy in a large, theologically conservative Protestant denomination in Canada concluded that 31.2 percent scored in the diagnostic range for NPD on a validated test instrument (Ball and Puls 2015). This was a preliminary study and is an indication of the levels of toxic and non-toxic narcissism to be found in pastors, but it was not definitive and still needs replication.

We then gathered anecdotal stories from our own experiences as illustrations of how narcissism plays out in the real world of the pastoral profession, which led to the publication of our book, *Let Us Prey: The Plague of Narcissist Pastors and What We Can Do About It* (2017, Cascade Books).

The resulting emails and stories from around the world indicate that we have opened a largely unexplored field, and much is left to be discovered. From the dozens of stories received from current and former spouses of narcissist pastors it becomes apparent that the dynamics of intimate clergy relationships need further study when toxic narcissism is a factor. While there is a body of literature addressing this topic in general, this paper will explore the dynamics of Narcissistic Personality Disorder in pastoral marriage.

A large majority of pastors are male, and it is in this context that this paper is written, although there are female narcissist pastors as well. We believe that the problems faced by the families of male and female narcissist pastors are very similar.

Defining NPD

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5* (2013, American Psychiatric Association) defines Narcissistic Personality Disorder as follows:

- A. Significant impairments in personality functioning manifested by:
 1. Impairments in self functioning (a or b):
 - a. Identity: Excessive reference to others for self-definition and self-esteem regulation; exaggerated self-appraisal may be inflated or deflated or vacillate between extremes; emotional regulation mirrors fluctuations in self-esteem.
 - b. Self-direction: 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 own motivations.
- AND
2. Impairments in interpersonal functioning (a or b):
 - a. Empathy: Impaired ability to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; excessively attuned to reactions of others, but only if perceived as relevant to self; over- or underestimate of own effect on others.
 - b. Intimacy: Relationships largely superficial and exist to serve self-esteem regulation; mutuality constrained by little genuine interest in others' experiences and predominance of a need for personal gain
- B. Pathological personality traits in the following domain:

1. Antagonism, characterized by Grandiosity: Feelings of entitlement, either balanced or covert; self-centeredness; firmly holding to the belief that one is better than others; condescending toward others.
 2. Attention seeking: Excessive attempts to attract and be the focus of the attention of others; admiration seeking.
- C. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual's personality trait expression are relatively stable across time and consistent across situations.
- D. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual's personality trait expression are not better understood as normative for the individual's developmental stage or socio-cultural environment.
- E. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual's personality trait expression are not solely due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, medication) or a general medical condition (e.g., severe head trauma).

The narcissist pastor, being self-preoccupied, assumes that God must also be self-preoccupied. Preoccupation with the self results in predatory rivalry. Therefore, if everyone is a rival, then God must be the supreme rival (McWilliams 1992, 124). The result is that the object of that envy, the rival, must be diminished if not destroyed (Schwartz-Salant 1982, 41). Such overt hostility is not tolerable in a pastor, of course, leaving him or her to more subtle devices to attain ascendancy and eventual supremacy. This presents an unrelenting paradoxical tension for the narcissist who apprehends God as a rival to be vanquished rather than an overpowering love to be served (Ball and Puls 2015, 4-5). Thus, the NPD pastor equates his sermon to a performance where God is the titular object but he or she, the pastor, is the true object of affection. This creates a pseudo-intimacy between pastor and congregation and the belief in the narcissist that he or she is relating to others (Pinsky 2009, 105).

Given the pathological drives noted above, the narcissist pastor faces several layers of unresolvable paradox: 1) Protestant Christianity expects them to be married and to be an exemplary spouse (Eph. 5:25; Col. 3:19) and parent (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21; Lk 11:11-12, etc.); 2) they are expected to be faithful and monogamous; 3) Scripture requires that spouses be honored and protected (1 Pt. 3:7); 4) they are to train their children in the way they should go (Prov 22:6), and 5) treat their children with kindness and respect (Eph 6:4).

Now add the expressed and *sub rosa* expectations placed on pastors by their churches. Thomas Rainer (2013) questioned hundreds of church members on what they wanted most in their pastor. Here are the top 10 responses with the counterpoint of a narcissist pastor:

1. **Love of congregation.** "If we know that our pastor loves us, everything else falls in place. If he doesn't, nothing else matters." *The narcissist pastor loves the attention, power, and control granted a pastor—but not the congregation or the people within it. He is a chameleon and expert in the art of camouflage and will steadfastly profess his love of all, even though he holds them in contempt.*
2. **Effective preaching.** "I don't have any expectation that my preacher be one of the best in the world, I just want to know that he has spent time in the Word each week to teach us effectively and consistently." *Extraverted narcissist pastors tend to see preaching as performance art with themselves as the focus and spend considerable time in preparation. Covert narcissists have a few favorite verses and themes and tend not to prepare much if at all (Puls and Ball 2015).*
3. **Strong character.** "No pastor is perfect, but I do want a pastor whose character is above reproach on moral, family, and financial issues." *The narcissist pastor believes that the rules of*

conduct regarding morals, family and finances do not apply to him. However, he will do his best to keep his illicit, and even illegal, activities out of view.

4. **Good work ethic.** “I don’t want either a workaholic pastor or a lazy pastor. Unfortunately, our last two pastors have been obviously lazy.” *The narcissist pastor claims long hours of arduous work but has little to show for it. Our study indicated that the narcissist pastor does as little as possible while claiming as much as possible.*
5. **Casts a vision.** “Our church has so much possibility; I want to hear what we will do to make a difference in our community and the world.” *The narcissist pastor is full of wonderful ideas which are usually not his own. They tend to “churn” projects until something works and may claim that the church is so amazing that others are copying what they do—which is the first step in creating a narcissist church.*
6. **Demonstrates healthy leadership.** “Most of the pastors in my church have demonstrated a good balance; they have been strong leaders but not dictators.” *The narcissist pastor violates all boundaries and may be inspirational to the congregation but will single out and attack (scapegoat) anyone he sees as a threat, and his staff will live in fear. One hired and then attacked and drove out 21 associates before being forced into retirement.*
7. **Joyous.** “Our current pastor is a man of joy. His joy and enthusiasm are contagious. I love him for that!” *The narcissist pastor does not know or understand joy, laughs only at the expense of others, and tends not to understand humor. It is rare to see more than a grimace of a smile.*
8. **Does not yield to critics.** “I know that every pastor serving today has his critics. And I know it’s tough to deal with them. I just want these pastors to know that we supporters are in the majority. Please don’t let the minority critics dictate how you lead and serve.” *We learn from critics. An old proverb says, “Listen to your enemies, for God is speaking.” The narcissist pastor does not tolerate or allow criticism, but instead attacks and belittles critics and will try to drive them out. That is how he maintains a “critic-free zone.”*
9. **Transparent.** “Every pastor that I have had has been open and transparent about the church and the direction we are headed. It sure has made our church healthier.” *The narcissist pastor will proclaim transparency but not practice it, particularly in financial and personnel matters. In one church, an elder was dismissed after he asked to see a budget.*
10. **Models evangelism.** “Our pastor is passionate about sharing the gospel. His heart and attitude are contagious.” *The narcissist pastor is passionate about promoting himself.*

Perhaps one of the most desired and assumed personality factors in pastors is that of humility. Grandiose narcissism tends to eclipse humility, while covert narcissism carries with it a false humility where the narcissist puts himself down in self-deprecating ways in the expectation of being corrected with praise. “Despite its centrality to Christianity and its complex theological background, there is a dearth of empirical research on the prevalence of humility among clergy. This is particularly surprising given that existing research suggests that humility may be relevant to clergy’s individual well-being and the well-being of the institutions they lead (Ruffing et al. 2018, NP).”

The narcissist pastor, being pathologically dishonest and fearing exposure as a fraud, finds most of these impossible and may only be able to do two of them: cast visions (he lives within a fantasy of unlimited power and ability) and not yield to critics. Narcissist pastors tend to be vision casters extraordinaire in the fervent hope that something will work. Having little actual imagination, they tend to copy what others have done. And, since they believe they are always right, they rarely yield to critics, instead disparaging them as ignorant fools (Ball and Puls 2017).

Now add the dynamic of creating the “perfect family” in the hopes that he can pass successfully as a caring, dedicated and called man of God, even though he sees God as a rival to be diminished by his own ascendancy. It begins with “the seduction.”

Narcissistic men are highly predictable in their “narcissistic love patterns,” states Associate Editor of *Gestalt Review* Elinor Greenberg (2017). She has observed that the same patterns are reproduced “over and over again with different women,” but with the same dysfunctional results. The pattern she terms The Romantic as most problematic because he believes that he is in love with the woman he pursues but is in reality in love with the concept of being in love, which is not love at all. In fact, and as numerous studies have shown, the true narcissist is incapable of the empathy necessary for love, is unable to form strong and healthy attachments, and thus is incapable of loving another in the conventional sense. His pattern is one of showering his targeted victim with gifts, praise, appreciation, and of being together in a fantasy of the perfect couple in the perfect marriage, until she succumbs.

The seduction is intentional and carefully executed with the sole intent of pulling the victim into an “intimate” relationship totally controlled by the narcissist.

The problem, of course, is that his being in love is a fantasy that dims over time as he sees her faults and imperfections, which means she is beneath his consideration and he must move on to the next romantic victim.

Greenberg writes, “If you have ever been wildly and passionately in love with a Narcissist who left you crying and wondering what happened, you may have asked yourself: ‘Did he really love me at all? Does he ever think of me? Will he come back to me?’ Narcissists idealize their romantic partners at first, but when imperfections become apparent they develop feelings of contempt (Quoted in Masterson, 1988). No, he did not really love you. Yes, he remembers you for the pleasure he found in victimizing you. He might come back, but only to relive his conquest and perhaps try for more.

Narcissists do not make warm, caring partners. Narcissism is characterized by feelings of superiority and entitlement, expectations for special treatment, exaggerations of abilities and personal qualities, demands for attention and admiration, exploitation of others, contempt, and lack of empathy. Narcissists believe that they have greater alternatives for romantic partners than non-narcissists, and this leads them to be less committed to their relationships (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Individuals higher in narcissism report greater vindictiveness, domineering and controlling approaches to others, and intrusiveness in their relationships (Ogrodniczuk, Piper, Joyce, Steinberg, & Duggal, 2009). Narcissists react with shame-based rage when thwarted and monogamy is not characteristic of the sexual narcissist.

Narcissism is also associated with aggression, hostility, and disingenuousness. The two most common rationalizations that Romantic Narcissists use to justify leaving a romantic partner are:

You aren’t who they thought you were. This explanation allows them to relieve themselves of any blame. It is your fault that things did not work out, not their inability to stay committed. Now that the narcissist knows you well enough to see your flaws (and in a narcissist’s mind, to be flawed is to be worthless) there is no point staying with you. The truth is that they were never actually in love with you; what they were in love with was the idea of being part of a perfect couple that everyone envied. The emphasis here is on “perfect.”

What is happening: The novelty of enacting the perfect loving couple has worn off and he is beginning to see you more realistically. He has started to see things about you that do not exactly fit his fantasies of perfect love. He is also getting slightly bored. He has run through his repertoire of romantic gestures and now that it is time to seal the deal and either move in with you or propose; otherwise, he wants out of the relationship (Greenberg 2017).

The covert/introverted/shy narcissist has been closely tied to physical assault and sexual coercion. According to Ryan, Weikel and Sprechini (2008), “men were higher than women in sexual narcissism and sexual coercion, and women were higher than men in physical assault. However, neither covert narcissism nor sexual narcissism significantly correlated with the aggression measures in women. In contrast, *for men, covert narcissism significantly correlated with physical assault and sexual narcissism significantly correlated with their partner's sexual coercion*” (807) (emphasis added). (See also, Widman and McNulty 2010).

The covert narcissist is hypersensitive to his own physical aggression in romantic relationships and his added hypersensitivity to criticism. This could reflect his inflated view of his own power in the relationship. Ryan, Weikel and Sprechini (2008) speculate that it may be likely that men who are hypersensitive to criticism might be more likely to be violence-prone in their relationships, if it is true that violence is a result of threatened egotism (808).

Covert/shy and grandiose / extraverted narcissists are often seen as opposite sides of the same coin, but in fact flow along a spectrum of severity. Grandiose narcissism “increases the willingness of the narcissist to consistently behave badly in public whereas the covert narcissist is intensely aware—and avoidant of—social ostracism. Feelings of thwarted entitlement are positively related to expressions of anger towards God (Grubbs et al. 2013) and negatively related to willingness to forgive others (Exline et al. 2004, 196). Both of these, entitlement and God-as-rival, are anathema in Christian clergy.

The narcissist pastor, then, must maintain a duality of living. At church and before the congregation, he must project an image encompassing leadership, charisma, scholarship, deep empathy, and humility. This façade breaks apart at home, where he can be sexually aggressive, demeaning, demanding, self-focused, arrogant, and nonempathetic. “Shedding one’s shame over nakedness and gently overcoming the partner’s shame are important tasks here. Fears regarding the real and imaginary blemishes of one’s body have to be put aside. For this, genuine self-regard and trust in the partner’s goodness is needed. The narcissist lacks both and is therefore uncomfortable with foreplay. . . .The narcissist shows a proclivity to disregard the partner's needs, lacks tenderness, and tends to move too quickly toward the next step” (Akhtar 2009, 188). “These findings support the hypothesis that narcissistic persons are obnoxious and frustrating to their partners” (Ryan et al. 2008).

Pastors are typically not paid on a level with similarly educated peers in other professions. Their unfulfilled belief in entitlement often leads to frustration and rage. Interestingly, “. . .vulnerable narcissism is even more strongly associated to high levels of entitlement rage than grandiose narcissism. Covert or vulnerable narcissists report that they become more upset or angry when they do not receive what they think they deserve. Thus, vulnerable narcissists are much more sensitive to judgments of outcome fairness, ruminating over the outcomes they did not get but believe they deserved. This creates a paradox in vulnerable narcissism that does not exist in grandiose narcissism. Vulnerable narcissists’ entitlement leads them to think deep down that ‘I deserve more!’ but then they doubt this sentiment, consequently turning to other individuals for assistance with self-regulation and approval. As a result, these characteristics create the perfect storm” (Freis et al. 2015, 878). The most convenient and available targets for that rage are the spouse and children.

The results can be devastating to the victims. The spouse may not dare say or do anything to contradict the narcissist for fear of emotional and physical retribution. In fact, the narcissist spouse may answer questions directed to the non-narcissist spouse as a means of control. In one case, a narcissist pastor was fired from his small, rural Lutheran church and took the church records hostage. The elders filed criminal theft charges and the former pastor filed a lawsuit against the elders for breach of contract and unlawful termination. The case went to mediation, and this writer was the mediator. It was obvious that the narcissist pastor’s wife looked thoroughly uncomfortable. When asked a question, he squeezed her hand

and answered for her. She winced but said nothing. This happened every time a question was asked of her. It appeared that she had lost her sense of self in this codependent relationship.

Others have contacted me to relate their stories of victimization at the hands of their narcissist pastor husbands. They report severe psychological abuse through “Gaslighting,” “. . . which is a form of psychological abuse in which narcissists systematically undermine other people’s mental state by leading them to question their perceptions of reality. Narcissists use lies and false information to erode their victims’ belief in their own judgment and, ultimately, their sanity. Common gaslighting techniques come in the form of denying and projecting: After an abusive incident, narcissists refuse responsibility, blame the abused, or outright deny that the abuse took place. They may say things like, ‘You’re too sensitive,’ ‘You’re crazy,’ ‘That’s not what happened,’ ‘Why can’t you let anything go,’ or ‘You made me do it.’ The term gaslighting comes from the 1944 Hollywood film *Gaslight*, a classic depiction of this kind of brainwashing” (Hall 2017).

Some reported physical abuse and sexual sadism from pastor husbands.

The children are at particular risk. Seth Meyers writes in *Psychology Today* (2014), “Young children of narcissists learn early in life that everything they do is a reflection on the parent to the point that the child must fit into the personality and behavioral mold intended for them. These children bear tremendous anxiety from a young age as they must continually push aside their own personality in order to please the parent and provide the mirror image the parent so desperately needs. If these children fail to comply with the narcissist’s wishes or try to set their own goals for their life—God, forbid—the children will be overtly punished, frozen out or avoided for a period of time—hours, days or even weeks depending on the perceived transgression in the eyes of the narcissistic parent.”

Now add in the pressures of being a “preacher’s kid” and the duality of private and public life under a narcissist parent and it would seem that the children are more than set up for a variety of dysfunctional behaviors and mental disturbances. “Research studies indicate that certain personality disorders, notably Antisocial Personality Disorder and Borderline and Narcissistic personality disorders in parents show relationships to both parental behavior and ensuing childhood problems” (Dutton, Denney-Keys & Sells 2011, 268). According to Hall (2017), there may be a Golden Child singled out unfairly for favoritism, such as special privileges, more attention, high regard, exemption from discipline, and exemption from certain chores and responsibilities. Such favoritism is typically at the direct expense of a disfavored scapegoated child and pits the children against each other.

There has been some research on risky behavior in what are called “preacher’s kids,” but the results showed little correlation: We found that being a PK significantly reduced alcohol use. This effect came exclusively from a reduction in the probability of any alcohol use and this increased abstinence among children of the clergy persisted into adulthood. We found no significant effects of being a PK on cigarette uptake or intensity of use but some evidence of a negative PK effect on the uptake of marijuana and other drugs” (Delaney and Winters 2014, 473-474).

Narcissist parents may produce narcissist children, as the children adapt to their environment to survive by reflecting and being subsumed by the narcissist parent. Efrain Bleiburg (1994) writes in the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, “In pathological narcissism, by contrast, youngsters crystallize their reliance on an omnipotent sense of self, refuse to acknowledge their shortcomings and vulnerabilities, project onto others disowned self-experiences, and demand public affirmation of their illusory power” (30).

Surprisingly, there is very little specific research on the effects of a narcissist pastor-parent on the psychological health of the child or the pressures of being a “preacher’s kid” in the first place. However, when taking into account the extant research on the formation of narcissism in the family and the behaviors of narcissists towards their children, I speculate that the combination of a narcissist pastor-

parent coupled with the duality of church and home life, and with the added expectations of congregations of pastoral children, there exists the strong potential to produce significant psychological trauma in those children.

Finally, the narcissist pastor may engage in a “secret life” where he is free to do those things prohibited by his church, marriage vows, and society. This may include drug use, sexual perversion, frequent infidelities, and even sexual addiction. These serve as emotional pressure relief valves for pent up feelings of entitlement, rage, and unmet needs.

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