

## **A Mild Case of Narcissism?**

By- Dana Robert Hicks

Several years ago, my sister was working on a graduate program in counseling at a large Christian university. During an abnormal psychology class, the topic turned to Narcissistic Personality Disorder. If you are unfamiliar with this psychological disorder, it is defined as “A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy.”<sup>1</sup> In layman’s terms, it is a person who has an excessive sense of how important they are. They demand to be admired and praised and are limited in their ability to see life from someone else’s perspective.

The professor relayed something interesting to my sister’s class. He said: “Without question, the profession in which I have seen the most narcissists, is pastoral ministry.” As my sister relayed this story to me, my gut reaction was complete skepticism. Most pastors I know are humble servants. They are often underappreciated and underpaid. But since that fateful conversation several years ago, I have observed behaviors from pastors that, from a lay-observer, looks like her professor knew what he was talking about:

- Pastors who exaggerate (lie) about their achievement, talents, or attendance numbers.
- Pastors who remove or sabotage associate ministers from the church who become popular in the church family.
- Pastors who take enormous financial risks with the church’s finances in order to prop up an appearance of success.
- Pastors who think their children are entitled to large salaries from the church in spite of their children’s lack of ability or experience in ministry.
- Pastors who are constant name droppers of high profile ministers or denominational figures that they imply come to them for advice.
- Pastors who refuse to disclose how the money in the church is spent OR who keep two sets of books.

Certainly pastors have a fair share of narcissists among their ranks and hopefully churches get wise to them before they destroy what is entrusted to them. Overall, I am confident that most pastors are doing the best they can with limited resources, trying to make a difference for God’s Kingdom, in places that will never be recognized this side of Heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV), Fourth Edition, American Psychiatric Association, Washington, D.C., 1994.

That conversation with my sister gnawed in my brain and had affected how I viewed my own ministry. Clinically speaking, I am not a narcissist, but I think at times (especially in my younger years) I acted not out of humility or with a servant's heart, but with an amplified sense of self. I suppose it is a job hazard, but most pastors, are often vulnerable to mild cases of narcissism from time to time. For example:

- 1. Wanting to be liked** --- Everyone wants to be liked. There is nothing wrong with this. However, some people have entered into pastoral ministry with the mistaken belief that it is a way to get people to like them. Moreover, we are usually hired because we are likeable. The desire to be liked becomes destructive to a church when pastors are more interested in being liked than in being significant, when our desire to be liked overpowers our ability to have difficult conversations or deal with difficult problems.

When I first became a pastor, the only employee that the church had, besides me, was a part-time janitor that was related to half the congregation. She was terrible at her job, but I was afraid of hurting her feelings to ask her to do her job correctly. Instead, I avoided talking to her about the issue for months. Out of the blue one day, she submitted her resignation because we weren't paying her enough money. It wasn't until she left my office that I realized that I was held captive by my dysfunctional need to be liked and to not rock the boat. I wanted admiration but didn't want to do the hard work of gaining it. As a result, I realized that every leader in the Bible faced opposition and any pastor worth their weight will probably not be liked by everyone either.

- 2. Confusing position with influence** – I began pastoring my first church at 27 years old. My first week as a senior pastor I was stunned by the number of questions that people asked me. They gave me the benefit of the doubt even when I had no idea what I was doing.

Over time, when a pastor makes wise decisions that move the church forward, they gain influence. When pastors make poor decisions, we lose influence. Pastors often crash and burn in a ministry when the decision they want to make is bigger than the influence that they carry. They may still have the position, but they do not have influence.

Bad pastors will leverage their position to try to garner influence by using theological gymnastics and language like, "covering" and "umbrellas of authority." Some pastors hold on to their titles as leverage for entitlement. These pastors may be able to coerce people to comply, but can never make a lasting impact in their lives. Erwin McManis says it this way: "You can either invest your energy in attempting to control people's actions and thereby lose their hearts, or you can focus on winning their

hearts so that, in the end, their actions will represent the values that are important to you.”<sup>2</sup>

I learned, after the first year in a ministry assignment, a person’s title really doesn’t make much of a difference. Our wake is felt most by the influence we garner over time.

- 3. Confusing “artist” with “servant”** – I once had the opportunity to interview the founding and Lead Pastor of one of the largest churches in the US for some academic research I was conducting on evangelism. In the course the conversation, he told me that his church was hiring a new worship pastor. In a rare moment of unfiltered transparency, he said to me, “This whole movement in the church these days about musicians being artists is bunk. Here is what I tell the musicians at our church: you are not an artist; you are a servant. Your job is to serve this church and to help us to focus on Jesus. Your job is not to express yourself artistically. If you need to express yourself, get a gig playing in a bar.”

His ranting made me think about the ways all pastors (music pastors, senior pastors, youth pastors) can succumb to the temptation of wanting to “express ourselves” – all the ways we trick ourselves un to thinking that what is going on in our heads has to be seen by others. When I am working on a sermon now and I am tempted to rant and rave about my pet peeves or to say something that will make me look smart or clever or funny, I hear this wise old pastor’s gravelly voice in my head, “If you need to express yourself, write a blog. When you preach, you are a servant of God’s people; not an artist.”

- 4. Dealing with Dissent** – My older brother is a layperson who was elected to serve on his local church’s board. After his first few board meetings, he called me and asked, “Why is it when the church board wants to help our pastor think through some important church decisions, the pastor thinks we are against him? I thought that was our job.” I wasn’t sure how to respond to him, but I know the tension he was talking about. Pastors are often tempted to view dissent as a personal attack or to frame it in spiritual terms.

Most sane people do not like disagreement. It is a lot easier to have a church board that is passive and will go along with any plan the pastor comes up with, no matter how foolish. What some pastors do not recognize is that a compliant board is a disengaged board. Usually a board is compliant not because they agree with the brilliance of a pastor’s plan. A board is usually compliant because they don’t care about

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<sup>2</sup> McManus, Erwin Raphael. An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind. Colorado Springs, CO: Group, 2001, p. 103.

the outcomes. They don't have the time or energy to do the hard work of seeing if the pastor's plan is credible and they are not invested enough in the outcome if the decision fails.

If we truly believe in the priesthood of all believers, then we can be confident that pastors are not the only ones to whom God speaks. We can trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in our disagreements. In the words of Patrick Lenceoni: "Trust is knowing that when a team member does push you, they're doing it because they care about the team."<sup>3</sup> When people don't feel like they can express how they really feel, they may comply with a decision but they will not be engaged with executing the decision.

Pastoral ministry comes with a precarious temptation: whether we like it or not, we often represent God to people. Sometimes, in some people's minds, we even speak on behalf of God. If we are not careful, sometimes we believe that we really do. When we begin to believe our press clippings, when we feel a sense of superiority because of our ordination or training, when we fail to listen to others by virtue of our position, we are succumbing to mild cases of narcissism.

Jesus has modeled for us another way to lead: in the position of a servant. Servant leaders are like a shepherd defending his sheep or a mother protecting her young. They sacrifice without grumbling, give without calculating, and suffer without groaning. Years ago, I read this quote from one of my seminary professors. I wrote it out and taped it to my desk in hopes that this daily reminder would keep me from the temptation of pastoral narcissism:

*"Stand and lead. But never forget that we purchase the right to direct the church with the currency of our obedience. Therefore, speak only after you have listened. Lead only as you follow. Stand only after you have sat quietly in His presence. Raise your chin and command, only after you have bowed your head and obeyed."*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Patrick Lenceoni, [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin Miller, [The Table of Inwardness](#) Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984.