

HIDDEN WOUNDS: HOW A PASTOR CAN RESPOND TO NARCISSISTIC ABUSE IN  
THE CHURCH

BY  
ABEL BAIN

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

MICHAEL HELWIG, MDiv, LPC, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WI

FEBRUARY 21, 2026

## CONTENTS

|                                                                                           |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| CONTENTS.....                                                                             | II |
| ABSTRACT.....                                                                             | V  |
| INTRODUCTION.....                                                                         | 1  |
| LITERATURE REVIEW.....                                                                    | 2  |
| PART I: WHAT IS IT? UNDERSTANDING NARCISSISM WITHOUT WEAPONIZING...                       | 4  |
| Narcissism in Scripture                                                                   | 4  |
| Narcissism: Traits vs. NPD                                                                | 7  |
| Narcissistic Origins and Defense Mechanisms                                               | 12 |
| A Brief History of Narcissism                                                             | 15 |
| Types of Narcissism: Spiritually and Clinically                                           | 17 |
| PART II: THE NARCISSISTIC HEART: A LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF SHAME<br>AND CONTRITION..... | 20 |
| Guilt & Shame: A Necessary Lutheran Distinction                                           | 20 |
| Shame-Based Identity and the Narcissistic Mask                                            | 22 |
| Do Narcissists Go to Heaven: The Issue with Narcissistic Contrition                       | 23 |
| Contrition is Not What Saves                                                              | 24 |
| Contrition as God’s Word ( <i>Regeneratio</i> )                                           | 25 |
| Why Narcissists Struggle With Contrition                                                  | 26 |
| Active and Passive Contrition: The Problem of Performative Repentance                     | 27 |
| Can a Narcissist Go to Heaven? False Contrition and Real Hope                             | 28 |
| Gospel Assurance: Righteousness Outside of Us                                             | 29 |

## PART III: PASTORAL DIRECTION: RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING TO

|                                                             |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| NARCISSISM WITHIN THE CHURCH .....                          | 33 |
| Speaking and Listening in Love to Narcissistic Persons      | 33 |
| Pastoral Referring: Staying in Our Lane for God’s Kingdom   | 34 |
| Pastoral Referring: Pastoral Collaboration                  | 36 |
| Tools For Healing Narcissistic Persons                      | 40 |
| Containment: Step 1                                         | 41 |
| Curiosity: Step 2                                           | 43 |
| Cycles: Step 3                                              | 45 |
| Conflict: Step 4                                            | 48 |
| Concluding Pastoral Tools                                   | 50 |
| Narcissism in Church and Family Systems                     | 52 |
| The Narcissistic Pastor                                     | 53 |
| The Narcissistic Church                                     | 56 |
| Grandiose (Overt) Narcissistic Churches                     | 57 |
| Vulnerable (Covert) Narcissistic Churches                   | 59 |
| Weaponizing Christian Identity (FOG)                        | 62 |
| The Narcissistic Christian Family                           | 66 |
| For Survivors of Narcissistic Abuse                         | 72 |
| Healing from Narcissistic Abuse Using the 5 Stages of Grief | 74 |
| CONCLUSION.....                                             | 84 |
| APPENDIX.....                                               | 87 |
| Narcissism Recovery Journaling Template                     | 87 |

|                                                          |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Setting Boundaries in Christian Love Counseling Template | 89 |
| The Quick Guide: “What is Narcissism?”                   | 93 |
| A Deeper Description of Narcissistic Subtypes            | 94 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....                                        | 97 |

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores narcissism through theological and psychological lenses in order to equip pastors and congregations to respond faithfully to narcissistic patterns within church systems, families, and individual relationships. Drawing upon contemporary psychological research, psychoanalytic theory, and confessional Lutheran theology, the study examines the developmental origins of narcissistic behavior, the spiritual dynamics that reinforce it, and the ways Christian language and authority may be distorted for control. Particular attention is given to the distinction between narcissistic traits and narcissistic personality disorder, the role of shame and defensive formation, and the misuse of law and gospel in vulnerable and grandiose church systems. The thesis also provides pastoral guidance regarding confrontation, boundary-setting, referral to mental health professionals, and spiritual care for both victims and narcissistic individuals. Ultimately, the study argues that while narcissism represents a destructive manifestation of sin, it must be addressed not with condemnation but with theological clarity, pastoral wisdom, and confidence in Christ's redemptive grace.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. ChatGPT was utilized in the writing of this Abstract. ChatGPT was also utilized to edit grammar, phrasing, and structuring of this thesis. Last accessed 2/21/26.

## INTRODUCTION

“1 in 6 people are narcissistic.”<sup>2</sup> If that statistic is true, we are years too late in appropriately identifying narcissism in the church. This paper doesn’t give you permission to self-diagnose people you think are narcissistic. They very well might be, and if this paper gives you tools for healing, growth, and a better future, God be praised! However, there is power in labels. A label might finally validate a member’s pain and initiate healing, coping, and grief. A label is also a powerful accusation that tears down without intention to build up in Christ (2 Cor 10:4-5, 1 Thess 5:11). Chuck DeGroat wisely says,

I encourage wisdom and patience with labels. Ultimately, a descriptor like “narcissist” names the persona, the mask, a part of someone, but like other descriptors (doctor, father, diabetic, autistic) it does not account for our core “true self” hidden with Christ in God. I hope my use of the words narcissist or narcissism shows both honesty and compassion.<sup>3</sup>

In dealing with souls, we want to treat God’s creation with utmost respect and with the proper goal: to love them and win them for Christ. Narcissism is a broad topic, and so is its audience. With all the conflicting issues narcissism proposes, I hope that this is a useful diving board into the NPD pool. I hope it answers some of your questions and directs you to further useful research. This might be where your narcissistic journey starts, but it certainly doesn’t end.

---

2. Ramani Durvasula, “*The Narcissism Doctor: ‘1 In 6 People Are Narcissists!’*,” “*Are Narcissists Better In Bed?*,” “*Can A Narcissist Change?*”” (interview by Steven Bartlett, *The Diary of a CEO with Steven Bartlett* podcast, February 29, 2024).

3. Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 10-11.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Clinical and Theoretical Foundations

Any serious engagement with narcissism must begin with its clinical and psychoanalytic foundations. Sigmund Freud's *On Narcissism: An Introduction* established narcissism as a developmental concept, identifying early self-investment as a normal stage that may become pathological when fixation occurs. Heinz Kohut's *The Analysis of the Self* reframed narcissism as injury rather than indulgence, emphasizing the role of empathy failure and compensatory grandiosity. Otto Kernberg's *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* further clarified defensive splitting, idealization, and devaluation as central dynamics in pathological narcissism.

Craig Malkin's *Rethinking Narcissism* provided a helpful corrective by arguing that narcissism exists on a spectrum and that a complete absence of healthy self-regard is also problematic. Though not central to the thesis, his work helped to clarify content. Donald Capps' *The Depleted Self* bridged clinical narcissism and pastoral care, demonstrating how narcissistic dynamics manifest within religious life and require particular pastoral sensitivity.

Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* offered cognitive insight into how repeated experiences reinforce automatic patterns of response. While not a work on narcissism specifically, it helped frame the development of defensive reactions through habitual reinforcement.

Finally, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* provided essential clinical criteria for narcissistic personality disorder, grounding this study in established psychiatric definitions and preventing careless overgeneralization. Together, these sources supply the psychological and diagnostic structure for this thesis.

### **Counseling and Applied Resources**

While clinical theory defines narcissism, counseling literature demonstrates how it functions in the real world. Dr. Ramani Durvasula's *It's Not You*, and related resources, offer practical insight into narcissistic abuse, relational manipulation, and recovery. Renee Swanson's work on covert narcissism provides accessible guidance for individuals navigating narcissistic relationships, with an understanding of Christian contexts. Dr. Mazzella's counseling materials contribute applied therapeutic insight, particularly in understanding patterns of control, projection, and emotional regulation. If you have been hurt by NPD, these sources are invaluable.

Mark R. McMinn's *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling* was especially formative in maintaining theological balance. McMinn's insistence that Christian counseling must take both sin and grace seriously prevented this study from reducing narcissism to pathology alone or collapsing it into purely spiritual categories. These counseling-oriented sources helped translate NPD theory into pastoral and relational applications.

### **Congregational Application**

Chuck DeGroat's *When Narcissism Comes to Church* deserves particular recognition. DeGroat uniquely integrates clinical understanding within church dynamics, examining how narcissistic patterns appear within congregations and leadership structures. His analysis of grandiose and vulnerable systems, "theologically approved bullying," and spiritualized control significantly shaped this thesis's exploration of narcissistic church culture. DeGroat's work stands as the most direct bridge between clinical narcissism and congregational life and serves as a foundational resource for this study. His personal experience with narcissism in the church is invaluable

## PART 1: WHAT IS IT? UNDERSTANDING NARCISSISM WITHOUT WEAPONIZING

### Narcissism in Scripture

#### Genesis 3:1–5

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”*

*The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>4</sup>*

As Adam and Eve hid their nakedness behind fig leaves, so we hide our sense of shame behind denial and distortion. – *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling*, Mark R. McMinn, 57.

The Christian conversation of narcissism begins where sin begins. The addiction to human achievement and deserved glory is a tale as old as the Fall. Satan’s promise, “You will be like God,” is the flint and steel to the rioting and emblazoned passion for sin within us. The serpent harmonizes with the sinful flesh that longs to define worth, truth, and righteousness apart from God. Self-deification is a glorious trap. After all, being God? That’s the oldest narcissistic fantasy.

This is where narcissism finds its theological origin—not in a DSM<sup>5</sup> diagnostic checklist, but in the ancient temptation to dethrone God and enthrone ourselves. The temptation to define our own worth, truth, and righteousness apart from God forms the soil in which narcissistic tendencies grow. Satan’s temptation isn’t generic. His question, “Did God really say?” distorts the truth, gaslights, and is filled with empty promises. This is not to suggest that narcissism is the first sin, nor that every act of pride constitutes narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), but the

---

4. This thesis will primarily use NIV 2011 unless otherwise noted.

5. Stands for *The Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorder*.

narcissistic patterns do not fall far from the tempter's tree. Some conclude that Satan himself is the birthplace of narcissism.<sup>6</sup> This is clear in Satan's own ambitions: "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God." (Isa 14:13) When Satan tempts and promises, he invites humanity into his own delusion of grandeur, and we all take a bite.

Narcissists are sinful. The typical sins of narcissism leave both tablets of the law shattered: the desire to love the self over God and our neighbor. Scripture locates this problem within the First Commandment. "You shall have no other gods" is broken when the self becomes the object of worship. Narcissism is not merely a heightened, harmless pride, but often destructive idolatry, the substitution of the Creator with the creature, the enthronement of the self where only God belongs. As Luther observed, "They all made a god out of what their heart most desired."<sup>7</sup>

In a broad sense, all sinners share this condition. All sinners desire validation, love, and recognition. However, clinical, pathological narcissism is the manifestation, addiction, and outright necessity of these sinful behaviors to desire self. Scripture diagnoses the heart. Psychology diagnoses the behavior. Where theology speaks of idolatry, psychology speaks of narcissism. Where theology names sin and grace, psychology describes symptoms and treatments. Together, they reveal both the spiritual and structural depth of the human ego. Narcissists are sinners, yet their sin manifests in a particular and persistent pattern. This thesis addresses the complex dilemma of a Christian narcissist, pastoral challenges, and faithful care. In order to recognize narcissism, we need a definition. Briefly, *narcissism* may be described as

---

6. This is shown throughout Brian Howard's *The Christian Narcissist: How to Recognize This Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*.

7. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, "*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*," (Minneapolis, 2000), 388. The Large Catechism, Explanation of the First Commandment.

dismissive, destructive, and defensive grandiosity exercised at the expense of others to mask underlying shame.<sup>8</sup>

Before diagnosing narcissism in others, we must confess our sinfulness. Only then can we understand both the depth of the wound and the hope of its healing. The DSM-5 defines narcissism as “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy.”<sup>9</sup> Clinical psychologist Ramani Durvasula expands: “They are deeply entitled, emotionally shallow, and prone to manipulation and rage. They make promises they never intend to keep yet rarely take responsibility for their betrayals.”<sup>10</sup> These clinical observations reflect the same spiritual corruption first seen in Eden. Clinically or theologically, this self-exaltation is ultimately unsustainable.

After committing the sin that plunged humanity into death, Adam and Eve did not celebrate or walk boldly in divine glory. They are naked, exposed, and afraid. Shame followed sin, and with shame came hiding. While some sins are publicly paraded, even such displays can function as a distraction—an attempt to draw attention away from the deeper problem of exposed shame. In some ways, all avoid shame. Narcissistic grandiosity often functions in a similar way. Overt pride may serve not as confidence, but as a defense against the shame the sinner cannot bear to face.

Because sin is pervasive and clings to humanity from conception (Ps 51:5), an important question emerges: are narcissists simply sinners like all others, or does narcissism represent something categorically different? This question lies at the heart of Christian counseling. As one

---

8. Explaining all narcissism in a single sentence is near impossible. The following examples clarify.

9. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 762.

10. Durvasula, “*The Narcissism Doctor*.”

survey of Christian counseling leaders observed, “Is the problem a consequence of sinful choices or of a psychological or neurological disorder? Sin should not be the cause of every disorder. Neither should it be dismissed or minimized as a root cause either.”<sup>11</sup> This tension frames the paradoxical term *the Christian Narcissist*. Accordingly, this thesis will explore narcissism through both clinical and pastoral lenses—attending to psychological development and mental health concerns, while also addressing theological categories of sin, grace, culture, and healing. Throughout, narcissism will be treated with moral seriousness and pastoral restraint, recognizing both the real harm it causes and the enduring truth that even the narcissistic sinner is a soul for whom Christ shed his blood.

### **Narcissistic Traits vs. NPD**

Before proceeding further, a crucial distinction must be made between narcissistic traits and narcissistic personality disorder. This distinction protects against two common errors: over-diagnosing others and minimizing a disorder that is profoundly destructive to relationships, families, and communities. Narcissistic traits are common and often situational. Most people, at times, desire recognition, seek validation, or act self-centeredly, particularly in moments of insecurity or stress. People react defensively and typically avoid shame. Shame is a common motivating factor for those with or without NPD. Scripture consistently pairs shame with nakedness: before sin, humanity was fully exposed and unashamed (Gen 2:25); after sin, nakedness became unbearable, producing fear and hiding (Gen 3:7–10). All people attempt to cover shame in various ways, sometimes even through narcissistic behaviors. NPD, however, is not defined by isolated behaviors but by a pervasive relational pattern rooted in a distorted

---

11. Mark R. McMinn, *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling: An Integrative Paradigm* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 25.

identity and maintained through defensive strategies.<sup>12</sup> This defensive structure functions as a mask, shielding a fragile sense of self from exposure. Just as clothes cover the shame of nakedness, their narcissistic identity covers their deeply rooted shame.

As awareness of narcissistic traits increases, they can begin to appear ubiquitous. This does not indicate a sudden rise in NPD, but rather heightened perception. Psychologists describe this as the Baader–Meinhof phenomenon, or frequency illusion: once a concept is learned, it seems to appear everywhere, though its actual frequency remains unchanged. Similarly, familiarity with narcissistic behaviors can create the impression that either everyone—or no one—is narcissistic. Such false dichotomies reinforce the need for careful distinction between traits and disorder. Heightened awareness can easily lead to overdiagnosis. Sadly, narcissism has become a buzz-word.<sup>13</sup> Not every difficult, self-centered, or disagreeable person has a personality disorder. Even persistent arrogance or rudeness, while sinful and damaging, does not by itself indicate NPD. Many behaviors that resemble narcissism may instead reflect immaturity, unresolved wounds, or ordinary selfishness rather than narcissistic pathology.

One helpful distinction between narcissistic traits and personality disorder lies in patterns of relational consistency. A generally difficult or abrasive individual tends to behave similarly across contexts. The “jerk” is often a jerk to everyone: to coworkers, supervisors, friends, and family alike. While such behavior may be sinful, immature, or damaging, it does not necessarily indicate NPD. Pathological narcissism, by contrast, reveals strategic inconsistency. The narcissist

---

12 . The phrase *consistent inconsistency* helps to understand the narcissistic cycle.

13 . This is echoed by The American Institute of Health Care Professionals, “Today, many times, the label of Narcissist is used too liberally. Many an offended partner, will diagnose one’s ex partner as a Narcissist, when in reality, the nature of breakups and divorces are difficult times when everyone is out for oneself. Selfish tendencies are inflated to point to Narcissism at every turn when in reality there is pathology but only selfish motives.” Dominick Flarey, “*Christian Counseling and Dealing with a Narcissist*,” American Institute of Health Care Professionals, April 5, 2023.

may appear charming, respectful, and cooperative in settings where admiration or status can be gained, such as with supervisors, church leaders, or the public, while acting cruel or dismissive toward those who offer no such advantages, particularly within intimate relationships. This is not a random inconsistency. It's unconscious, yet practiced, and strategic; governed by the narcissist's need for control, admiration, and dominance. This inconsistency develops to avoid shame.<sup>14</sup>

This pattern reflects the structural core of NPD. The DSM-5 defines a personality disorder as “an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment.”<sup>15</sup> In NPD, the disorder is not merely inflated self-esteem or situational abrasiveness, but a pervasive relational defense organized around maintaining a grandiose self-image while externalizing responsibility and shame. As a result, long-term relationships often deteriorate under the strain of blame-shifting and lack of accountability. By contrast, individuals with narcissistic traits may behave selfishly yet retain the capacity to recognize faults and accept consequences. A practical indicator may be the pattern and stability of long-term relationships. Pathological narcissism frequently produces relational instability marked by repeated rupture and blame-shifting. Ultimately, however, the distinction is perspectival: the narcissistic structure persistently locates the problem outside the self, whereas those with tendencies retain some capacity for self-accusation and repair.

---

14. This is echoed and advanced by the AIHCP, “Narcissism is beyond selfish motives at a given time, but is a habitual state of self-love that becomes pathological in all dealing with other people. Narcissists have sociopathic tendencies, are incapable of empathy, and find total glory in the magnification of self. Flarey, *Christian Counseling and Dealing with a Narcissist*.”

15. American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 196-197.

Spectrum-based models of narcissism that distinguish “healthy” from “toxic” narcissism risk obscuring this crucial distinction. When narcissism is framed primarily as a matter of degree—too much or too little self-love—the focus shifts away from structural pathology to mere ego management. Such framing may unintentionally minimize the seriousness of NPD and blur the lines between ordinary self-regard, insecurity, and clinically significant disorder. Another critical distinction between narcissistic traits and NPD concerns boundaries and accountability. Individuals without NPD, even when defensive, generally recognize the separateness of others, where they end, and where another person begins. When confronted with wrongdoing, they may initially resist, but they retain the capacity for guilt, apology, and relational repair. Pathological narcissism operates differently. Others are not experienced as fully separate persons with independent rights and limits, but as extensions of the self—sources of validation, utility, or threat. Renee Swanson discusses narcissistic boundaries with an illustration: an egg white and an egg yolk.<sup>16</sup> As a child, you are completely immersed in your parents’ identity; egg yolk in egg white. As you mature, the yolk moves into a healthy separation. In adulthood, most recognize proper boundaries. But narcissists struggle to tolerate these boundaries because they do not experience others as fully separate yolks with independent rights and limits. Instead, others are viewed as egg whites, supporting the narcissist. Their relationships are often organized around usefulness, supply, and control. When boundaries are asserted or behavior is exposed, the response is typically defensive rather than reflective. Individuals with narcissistic tendencies can experience guilt or shame without losing their sense of identity; those with NPD experience confrontation as an assault on the self. Accountability is therefore

---

16. Renee Swanson, *Guilt vs Shame: The Emotional Crossroads That Defines Healing*, Episode 2.

processed not as an opportunity for repair, but as intolerable exposure—often resulting in denial, devaluation, or counterattack.

Another crucial distinction between NPD and narcissistic tendencies concerns how behavior is experienced internally. In psychological terms, NPD is largely ego-syntonic,<sup>17</sup> meaning the behavior aligns with and reinforces the individual's self-concept. Actions are experienced as justified, necessary, or even virtuous; the problem is consistently located in others—those who “misunderstand,” “overreact,” or “attack.” By contrast, most individuals experience moral failure as ego-dystonic.<sup>18</sup> Even when defensive, they retain the capacity for internal conflict, discomfort, and guilt when confronted. This inner tension makes repentance, apology, and relational repair a reasonable option because identity is not entirely threatened by correction. It helps explain why confrontation produces such different reactions. What feels to one person like loving correction feels to the narcissist like an existential threat. When you pair this with another distinction: the ability to feel empathy, the differences between NPD and narcissistic tendencies become clear. Not only do narcissists experience themselves differently, but they also experience others differently. The DSM-5 states, “Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder generally have a lack of empathy and are unwilling to recognize or identify with the desires, subjective experiences, and feelings of others.”<sup>19</sup> The narcissist not only feels justified by their actions and decisions, but to do otherwise would compromise their narcissistic identity. They demonstrate a lack of empathy through unhealthy boundaries. They struggle to recognize the emotional impact of their actions on others. Those with narcissistic tendencies can

---

17. [From Latin *ego* I + Greek *syn-* together + *tonos* tone + *-ikos* of, relating to, or resembling], “Ego-Syntonic,” *Oxford Reference*.

18. [From Latin *ego* I + Greek *dys-* bad or abnormal + *tonos* tone + *-ikos* of, relating to, or resembling], “Ego-Dystonic” *Oxford Reference*.

19. American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 762.

and will admit that their actions are wrong and have hurt you. The common narcissist apology is a half-hearted: “I’m sorry you feel that way.” This is deflective rather than restorative, and it avoids taking ownership of harm. To accept any more responsibility would be to compromise their identity. Apology, when offered, may be performative rather than restorative, since full responsibility would destabilize the fragile self-structure.

These patterns reveal that the fundamental difference is not simply behavioral, but experiential. Some sinners can experience guilt without losing their sense of self; guilt exposes wrongdoing while preserving identity, so that by God’s grace, you may repent and seek to restore the relationship you broke. The narcissist, however, experiences exposure itself as catastrophic. What others experience as guilt, the narcissist experiences as overwhelming shame; an unmasking that threatens the fragile structure holding the self together. This distinction between shame and guilt is not merely clinical, but deeply biblical. In Genesis 3, shame drives hiding, defensiveness, and self-protection. In contrast, 2 Corinthians 7:10 distinguishes between worldly sorrow, which leads to death, and godly sorrow, which leads to repentance and life. Understanding how shame functions differently in narcissistic pathology clarifies why accountability so often appears impossible. To consider narcissistic healing, the relationship between shame and guilt must now be examined more closely.

### **Narcissistic Origins and Defense Mechanisms**

#### **Romans 1:21-25**

*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

A personality disorder is an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the norms and expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment. - DSM-5, 734

Where does narcissism originate? Is it rooted in DNA or is it shaped through experience? This is the classic debate: is narcissism nature or nurture? Dr. Theresa Covert understands the complexity of narcissistic development and encourages that we consider narcissism as a reaction, not a gene, saying, "It is important to note that people are not born narcissists, the personality is formed as a result of many different factors involving nature and nurture, which are too complex and various to nail down on a general scale." Some research disagrees and considers narcissism to be fairly genetic and highly heritable,

Behavioral genetic investigations of moral reasoning per se have been quite limited, although Vernon et al. reported a high heritability for psychopathy (.64) and narcissism (.59). Insofar as these traits are related to lower moral development, it may therefore be expected that moral reasoning will show similar heritability.<sup>20</sup> Yet others seem to find no genetic connection and find these moralistic issues with narcissism to be influenced by environmental factors. To summarize their research, they said,

This is of considerable interest because it indicates that high moral development may be acquired through experiences: perhaps parents, teachers, role-models, and other people and things that we encounter can be influential in determining whether we attain a high level of moral development. Moreover, insofar as high moral development relates to other personality traits, it represents one of a very few, if any, such traits that show no genetic influence.<sup>21</sup> While temperament may contribute to personality tendencies, most scholars acknowledge that lived experience plays a decisive role in whether those tendencies harden into enduring patterns.

---

20. Jennifer Campbell et al., "A Behavioral Genetic Study of the Dark Triad of Personality and Moral Development," *Journal of Personality* 87 (2019): 133–148, here 133.

21. Campbell et al., "*Behavioral Genetic Study of the Dark Triad*," 135.

Psychoanalytic theory helps explain how this narcissistic shaping occurs.<sup>22</sup> Freud described early self-focus as a normal developmental, child-like stage. Kohut later suggested that when caregivers fail to provide healthy empathy and affirmation, the child compensates with fantasies of perfection or superiority. Kernberg added that inconsistent early relationships can produce defensive patterns of idealizing the self and devaluing others to manage shame. Together, nature may provide a framework, but nurture furnishes the structure. Repeated experiences of shame, criticism, neglect, or conditional love teach a person how to protect themselves. Think of the classic hot stove illustration. After a child touches a hot stove, they form subconscious reactions. Their neural pathways have been reinforced to avoid glowing red stove tops, to recognize the sensation and proximity of heat, and they develop many other subconscious associations that influence their future reactions. What's the narcissist's hot stove? In a similar way, emotional wounds can reinforce protective behaviors. If failure is repeatedly met with humiliation, a child may learn that safety comes through control, comparison, or moral performance. What began as protection gradually becomes identity.

Imagine Lydia. She grew up believing mistakes made her unlovable. To protect herself, she learned that outward moral excellence kept her safe. When she was praised for discipline or piety, her anxiety briefly quieted. Over time, performance became instinct. When she feels exposed or corrected, she reacts quickly: lecturing, comparing, emphasizing "righteousness." The behavior feels holy, yet its function is defensive. Her performance is less about honoring God and more about covering shame. The pattern repeats: fear of exposure, performance, validation, temporary relief. What once was a conscious strategy becomes an automatic response.

---

22. This is explained further in the following section, *A Brief History of Narcissism*.

Romans 1 describes a similar progression on a theological level. Humanity exchanges the glory of God for self-crafted alternatives. What begins as a refusal to honor God becomes a settled pattern of distorted thinking and desire. Sin is not merely an isolated act; it is reinforced over time. The heart grows accustomed to its defenses. Narcissistic patterns often follow this trajectory: sinful inclination, repeated reinforcement, and eventually a hardened, self-protective identity. Understanding narcissism this way does not excuse sin. It does, however, cultivate pastoral clarity. Behind grandiosity or defensiveness often lies fear and shame. These patterns were learned. And what has been reinforced through repetition can, by God's grace, be reshaped through truth, repentance, and renewed trust in Christ.

### **A Brief History of Narcissism**

*May he who loves not others love himself.*

*The great goddess Nemesis, which means righteous anger, undertook to bring this about. As Narcissus bent over a clear pool for a drink and saw there his own reflection, on the moment he fell in love with it. "Now I know," he cried, "what others have suffered from me, for I burn with love of my own self—and yet how can I reach that loveliness I see mirrored in the water? But I cannot leave it. Only death can set me free." And so it happened. He pined away, leaning perpetually over the pool, fixed in one long gaze. - Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of God's and Heroes*, 88.*

The term *narcissism* derives from the Greek myth of Narcissus, who, upon seeing his reflection in a pool of water, fell in love with his own image and ultimately perished in self-absorption. The myth portrays self-love as self-destruction: the addiction to his image was his ultimate enemy. There are many practical solutions one can offer a narcissist, but none satisfy the desire to stare deeper into the pool of their narcissistic image. Since the tale of Narcissus, some have noticed this strange self-obsession and complex pride and have explained it through psychology. Havelock Ellis, a British physician, introduced the phrase "*narcissistic-like tendency*" in his work, *Auto-eroticism: A Psychological Study*. A year later, Paul Näcke finally coined the term,

calling the sexual attraction of self, *Narcissus*.<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud expanded the term in his work, *On Narcissism: An Introduction*. He claims that narcissism is the egocentricity of children continued in adulthood. It's a failure to mature. Freud says,

This ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject's narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value. As always where the libido is concerned, man has here again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he had once enjoyed. He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when, as he grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgement, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal.<sup>24</sup>

Heinz Kohut advances narcissistic psychology, noting that the failure of empathic attunement from caregivers and inadequate mirroring during developmental stages in early childhood contribute to narcissistic vulnerability. Kohut says,

It may thus be assumed that the patient suffered many disappointments in the mother's phase-appropriately required omniscient empathy and power during the first year of his life and that the shallowness and unpredictability of his mother's responses to him must have led to his broad insecurity and narcissistic vulnerability.<sup>25</sup>

Otto Kernberg, by contrast, highlighted defensive structure, describing narcissism as organized around primitive defense mechanisms. In this view, narcissistic grandiosity functions not merely as immaturity but as protection against shame and fragmentation. Kernberg adds, "They present a predominance of primitive defensive mechanisms such as splitting, denial, projective identification, omnipotence, and primitive idealization."<sup>26</sup>

---

23. Havelock Ellis, "The Conception of Narcissism," *Psychoanalytic Review* 14 (1927): 131.

24. Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (London: Read Books Ltd., 2013), 11.

25. Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971), 45.

26. Otto F. Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975), 229.

In recent decades, the term has expanded beyond clinical settings into common usage. Works such as Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell's *The Narcissism Epidemic* argue that contemporary culture amplifies narcissistic traits through social media, individualism, and self-promotion. As a result, "narcissism" has become both a clinical diagnosis and a cultural descriptor, often applied broadly and imprecisely, claiming a nationwide problem with more narcissists than ever before.<sup>27</sup>

Whether in Narcissus' pool, Freud's ego ideal, our social media feeds, or the theological mirror of God's law, the concept of narcissism has evolved significantly. What began as a poetic warning about self-absorption has become a clinical category and, more recently, a cultural diagnosis. To move from historical development to clinical clarity, we must now distinguish the primary forms narcissism takes in contemporary psychological literature.

### **Types of Narcissism: Spiritually and Clinically**

#### **Luke 18:9–14**

*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:*

*"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

*The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

*"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*

*"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

Narcissists' own efforts to repair the damage are therefore counterproductive, and they reveal that a more forceful effort to acquire what is felt to be lacking in their lives is no real solution to the problem. - Donald Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 27

---

27. Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 1.

Luke warns us of the temptation to ground one's value in personal righteousness. Jesus exposes this desire in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee's prayer is strikingly narcissistic: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." If narcissism were always so explicit, the pastor's job would be much easier. But narcissism, particularly within Christian contexts, is rarely so obvious. It often presents beneath competence, charisma, or spiritual zeal. A leader may appear gifted and admired in public while family members quietly experience control, volatility, or emotional neglect. The worst part, they are not nameless monsters, but people you love. The narcissists are in your pews; the leader of the praise band, the pastor's "golf buddy", church council members, mothers, fathers, assistant pastors, and spouses; narcissists are people you know. The concept of the "Christian narcissist," if such language is warranted, must therefore be approached carefully. Narcissism does not outright reject righteousness, but lives by the letter of the law and finds comfort in a performative, human righteousness. They devote themselves to this religious narcissistic identity, this mask, because if anyone were to see the shameful sinner behind it, their entire world would crumble.

Unfortunately, this narcissistic mask doesn't always look like the Pharisee. In many church contexts. It resembles the tax collector. They cry and beat their chest, confessing a heart-touching story that captivates their audience. Their vulnerability may appear sincere and can understandably draw a pastor's compassion and gospel assurance. This is not a failure of pastoral care; it reflects the church's instinct to comfort the suffering. Some narcissists don't overtly parade their successes, some covertly gather attention and display feelings of inadequacy, depression, unhappiness, vulnerability, or sensitivity. It appears like emotional trauma, but this is another masking attempt. You aren't seeing the real them, just the Christian performance; the bereaved, suffering Christian becomes their narcissistic identity. This is still a defensive structure

revolving around self-preservation. For this reason, pastors must notice more than emotional intensity. Prayerfully consider these questions: Does their confession lead towards fruits of repentance, or do they avoid change? Does their vulnerability seek repair, or does it get them their way? Does this cyclical trauma orbit the individual's needs and wants? Ultimately, ask yourself if there is a noticeable pattern. Recognizing patterns helps the pastor understand the narcissist.

While authors propose numerous subtypes of narcissism, most group them broadly into overt, covert, communal, and malignant. These categories describe different presentations of the same underlying structure: a grandiose self, organized to defend against shame.

**Overt:** Externally confident, admiration-seeking, status-oriented, superiority-expressing.

**Covert:** Shame-sensitive, victim-oriented, self-focused through suffering narratives.

**Communal:** Grandiosity expressed through perceived moral superiority, service identity, or public virtue.

**Malignant:** Narcissistic structure combined with antisocial traits; coercive, exploitative, potentially dangerous.

## PART II: THE NARCISSISTIC HEART: A LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF SHAME AND CONTRITION

### **Guilt & Shame: A Necessary Lutheran Distinction**

#### **Ezra 9:5-6**

*Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God and prayed: "I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.*

Ezra's prayer holds together two realities that are often confused: shame and guilt. Put simply, there is a difference between "*I am bad*" and "*I did bad.*" Shame collapses the self into worthlessness and exposure; guilt names wrongdoing and seeks repair. This is Dr. Anthony Mazzella's definition:

**Shame:** Shame is a deeply disorganizing affective state that arises when one feels exposed, judged or misunderstood. So shame arises in response to a thought, feeling or behavior that feels condemned or rejected. Shame is more than just an emotion. It's a relational and intrapsychic experience, which is often unconscious as well. Shame is the regression back into oneself.<sup>28</sup>

**Guilt:** Guilt arises from a conflict between internalized values. First, you're violating some inner standard. Second, you're causing harm to somebody that you care about. Guilt is tied to empathy. It is the ability to manage somebody else's pain and desire to repair it. Guilt is organized around somebody else as a separate person with their own feelings.<sup>29</sup>

This distinction matters because pathological narcissism is organized around shame-avoidance.

The narcissist's inner world is not primarily governed by guilt that can be confessed and restored, but by shame that must be hidden, managed, or displaced. When the self feels threatened by exposure— "*I am the problem*"—the narcissistic structure reflexively builds defenses. This is where common patterns emerge: splitting and fragmentation, rage, projection,

---

28. Renee Swanson, *Shame vs Self: The Invisible Wound Behind Narcissistic Traits*, Episode 1.

29. Swanson, *Guilt vs Shame*, ep. 2.

devaluation, withdrawal, denial, and the many tactics used to escape responsibility and regain control. Dr. Mazzella recognizes that this shame is often unspoken, expressed through defense mechanisms rather than words.<sup>30</sup> When the self feels exposed, the narcissistic structure reacts quickly: standards tighten, blame shifts, or others are subtly devalued. In a church setting, this may look like projecting personal insecurity onto communal expectations. A pastor who feels inwardly inadequate may unconsciously insist on visible markers of spiritual “rightness,” equating faithfulness with dress, tone, or outward performance. In this way, private shame becomes public law.

Renee Swanson recalls how easily this shame permeated a church setting. Swanson recalls the church having a very shame-oriented mindset: I’m faulted. I’m human. Therefore, I’m a sinner in need of redemption. Swanson remembers her Christian shame, saying, “I am only worthy inasmuch as I’m willing to accept God’s love in my life.”<sup>31</sup> In such settings, people can slide into an “all-or-nothing” self-understanding—either idealized righteousness or total failure. Mazzella describes how a church setting can ultimately be the “arbiter of truth.”<sup>32</sup> that shapes the narcissistic shame-based cycle. Here is what the cycle looks like: *shameful proclamation of God’s law → you are unworthy → follow ‘rules’ of church → temporary peace → break ‘rules’ of church.*

---

30. Swanson, *Shame vs Self*, ep. 1.

31. Swanson, *Shame vs Self*, ep. 1.

32. Swanson, *Shame vs Self*, ep. 1.

### Shame-Based Identity and the Narcissistic Mask

The law of God truly exposes unworthiness. As Paul writes, “the letter kills” (2 Cor 3:6). The law must reveal sin, crush pride, and silence self-

justification. The problem is not the law itself, but the

isolation of law from gospel. When the law is

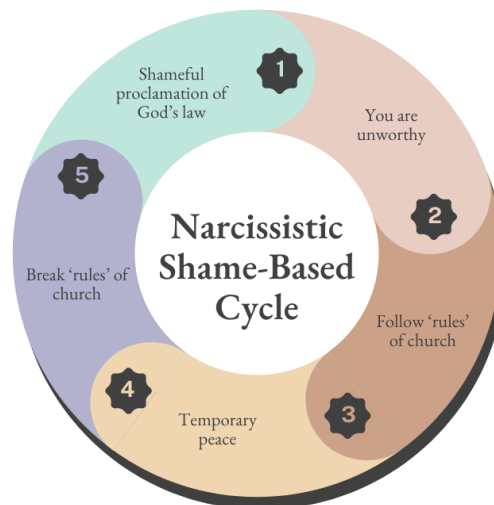
received apart from gospel assurance, it can be

internalized not as conviction leading to Christ, but as

identity-condemnation: I am unworthy, and I must

perform to escape that reality. This dynamic can

foster what might be called narcissistic adaptability. If



a person consistently internalizes the message, “You are unworthy,” without the stabilizing proclamation of Christ’s finished righteousness, the psyche seeks relief. Swanson notes that such adaptability can function as a survival mechanism in childhood but becomes maladaptive in adulthood.<sup>33</sup> The individual constructs a defensive identity, a mask, to escape the crushing weight of shame. Beneath it lies the fear: If people truly knew me, they would leave. In church settings, this dynamic can be unintentionally reinforced. Sermons that emphasize obedience and visible sanctification without equally proclaiming forensic justification may subtly encourage performance-based Christianity. Even well-intentioned preaching that stresses application can drift toward measuring faithfulness by achievement. When conformity becomes the evidence of worth, failure breeds shame rather than repentance. This is not an argument against preaching the law. The law must kill. But when the gospel does not predominate, Christians may begin to relate to God primarily through performance. The result is not holiness, but anxious self-

33. Swanson, *Shame vs Self*, ep. 1.

monitoring. In such environments, shame can masquerade as piety, and identity can become tethered to visible markers of spiritual success. The pastoral question, then, is not whether to preach the law, but how to ensure that the proclamation of unworthiness always culminates in the declaration of righteousness apart from works. Forensic justification disrupts narcissistic performance by grounding identity entirely outside the self. Where Christ's righteousness predominates, shame loses its oxygen.

### **Do Narcissists Go to Heaven: The Issue With Narcissistic Contrition**

#### **2 Corinthians 7:8-10**

*Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*

The question arises naturally: *Can a narcissist go to heaven?* Those who have suffered narcissistic abuse often ask it with trembling. If a person claims to be Christian, yet repeatedly exhibits selfishness, manipulation, or emotional harm, what are we to conclude? The central issue is not the severity of the narcissist's sin. God forgives *all* sins. The concern is deeper: narcissism appears structurally resistant to repentance. Paul distinguishes between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Godly sorrow leads to repentance and life. Worldly sorrow produces death. The pastoral difficulty with narcissism is not that narcissists sin uniquely, but that narcissism often converts repentance into performance. The primary soteriological difficulty for narcissists is not the greatness of their sin, but the avoidance of contrition.

The Lutheran Confessions speak with striking clarity about the necessity of contrition. “For genuine contrition must take place first.”<sup>34</sup> This statement appears in Article III, *Concerning the Righteousness of Faith before God*. At first glance, it may sound as though contrition functions as a prerequisite to justification, especially when read alongside the confession that “we are justified on the basis of sheer grace.”<sup>35</sup> If justification is entirely by grace, how can contrition be said to come “first”? To answer the pastoral question about narcissism, we must carefully examine how the Confessions define contrition and how it relates to faith. The Confessions, therefore, hold two truths together without contradiction: there is no saving faith without contrition,<sup>36</sup> yet contrition contributes nothing to justification.<sup>37</sup> Contrition is necessary not as a work we supply, but as the Spirit’s crushing of the Old Adam that drives the sinner to Christ.

#### Contrition is Not What Saves

Before going further, we must state clearly: contrition does not merit salvation. Faith relies solely on Christ’s obedience, not on the intensity of our sorrow.<sup>38</sup> Salvation rests on *sola gratia* through

---

34. Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 566. SD, Article III, Paragraph 23.  
Mark 1:15 highlights this sorrow and logical sequence, “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

35. Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 563. SD, Article III, Paragraph 9.

36. Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 566. SD, Article III, Paragraph 26.

37. Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 498. Ep, Article IV, Paragraph 7.

38. Pieper shows the flaw in Agricola’s thinking, “Furthermore, Agricola wants contrition or repentance taught from the Gospel and not from the Law, because a contrition or repentance from love of God can come only from the Gospel. The last part of this sentence is true, of course. But when he then says of the contrition which flows from love of God: This is “the first rung of the new birth, the real blowing and breathing upon by the Holy Spirit; after that the heart gains the sincere confidence in God that He will overlook its foolishness,” he is actually making trust in God, or faith in the remission of sins, follow on the contrition which proceeds from love of God, hence dependent on renewal and sanctification. With his new “methodus” he is not saving the doctrine of justification, but has turned his steps toward Rome.” Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 3. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 227.

*sola fide*. The Formula of Concord protects this truth: “By faith alone we become righteous before God and are saved... good works are excluded from the article on justification before God so that they may not be drawn into, woven into, or mixed into the treatment of the justification of the poor sinners before God.”<sup>39</sup> Contrition, therefore, is not a spiritual contribution that prepares God to justify us. It is not a rung on a ladder that climbs toward righteousness. Works, including sorrow or visible fruit, are excluded from the article of justification.

Yet this exclusion does not suggest that faith can exist apart from contrition. As Pieper reminds us, “faith finds entrance only in crushed hearts.”<sup>40</sup> When discussing contrition, then, we must resist two errors. We must not treat contrition as a meritorious condition for salvation, nor should we presume to judge the authenticity of another’s sorrow. “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.” (Rom 8:33). This framework shapes how we approach the narcissist. We do not declare condemnation based on emotional presentation. Rather, we proclaim the Law clearly, that the Spirit may crush self-exaltation.

#### Contrition as God’s Work (*Regeneratio*)

Contrition is a crucial part of repentance; repentance flows from the regenerate Christian, *regeneratio*, and the reborn Christian has been declared righteous, justified in God's sight through faith alone. Where the Holy Spirit grants faith, Christians naturally grieve their sin and trust in Christ alone for righteousness. Therefore, contrition isn't a vague process of moral renewal nor a human contribution to salvation, but God's work in the heart. It's a false dichotomy

---

39. Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 568. SD, Article III, Paragraph 36.

40. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol 1. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–1953), 30. As Pieper reminds us, “Faith finds entrance only in crushed hearts, and it is the very nature of the Christian faith to rest on the *sola gratia*. A consistent synergist cannot be a believer.”

to pit contrition against justification; God works both. David confesses God's active nature in his contrition; God's hand was active, and the sorrow was heavy (Ps 32:4). The crushing weight of sorrow over sin is a gracious gift, not self-generated or performative. This must be so, for “the heart is deceitful above all things” (Jer 17:9).<sup>41</sup> If contrition depended on human sincerity, no one would be saved. But this raises a sobering pastoral question: What of the narcissist who does not feel contrition? If sorrow over sin is God's work, does the absence of contrition indicate resistance to God's work? Is this the Old Adam hard at work? This tension forces us to examine more closely why narcissistic structures so often resist God's work of faith, and how narcissism is a unique stumbling block. Once we recognize this issue, we can provide pastoral care.

#### Why Narcissists Struggle with Contrition

This is why understanding contrition is so important. Narcissism shows why contrition must be God's work and not ours. The narcissistic heart is constructed around the preservation of the self: image maintenance, defensiveness, denial, blame-shifting, and a deep resistance to vulnerability. These patterns make it profoundly difficult for the narcissist to experience the very thing the Lutheran Confessions identify as the beginning of repentance: sorrow over sin and the collapse of self-trust. To balance theology and psychology, narcissism is not simply pride, but a defensive architecture against contrition. The narcissist does not want to be exposed, condemned, or ashamed. The pastor suddenly understands the intense spiritual danger of narcissism: not that narcissists are worse sinners, but that the narcissistic structure naturally resists God's work of contrition. Their heart is skilled at avoiding the Spirit's scalpel. Even more so, this is why contrition must be God's work. If the narcissist's repentance depended on a self-generated

---

41. And it's oppositional to God due to our sinful nature, “Likewise, we believe, teach, and confess that the unregenerated human will is not only turned away from God but has also become God's enemy, that it has only the desire and will to do evil and whatever is opposed to God, as it is written, “The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth” [Gen. 8:21].” Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 492. Ep, Article II, Paragraph 3.

sorrow, they are hopeless. Contrition does not depend on psychological capacity. It is God who justifies, crushes, and works contrition. Their salvation depends on what every sinner's salvation depends on: the Spirit's power to break down the defenses of the old Adam and create genuine sorrow that flees to Christ. This makes narcissism a pastoral challenge—but not a theological impossibility for salvation.

#### Active and Passive Contrition: The Problem of Performative Repentance

When the Confessions state: “For genuine contrition must take place first,” the natural question arises: what makes contrition genuine? Scripture speaks of μετάνοια, repentance, literally a change of mind.<sup>42</sup> Repentance is expressed in two parts: contrition and faith. Yet contrition is further distinguished as active or passive. Pieper makes the distinction: active contrition is manufactured repentance, and passive is a true sorrow of the heart, a torture of conscience.<sup>43</sup> As the Smalcald Articles clarify, this is not “active contrition, a contrived remorse, but passive contrition, true affliction of the heart.”<sup>44</sup> God works passive contrition so that we run to him for forgiveness, restore the relationship our sin shattered, but active contrition is worldly sorrow – grief over consequences rather than sin. It fears punishment, exposure, or loss of status. It is political sorrow: “I am sorry I was caught.”<sup>45</sup> This distinction is critical when considering

---

42. William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 640.

43. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol 1, 66. As Pieper defines, “This is not activa contritio, or manufactured repentance, but passiva contritio [torture of conscience], true sorrow of heart, suffering, and sensation of death.”

44. In the footnote above. Pieper is commenting on The Smalcald Articles, III, Concerning Repentance, “Now this is the thunderbolt of God, by means of which he destroys both the open sinner and the false saint and allows no one to be right but drives the whole lot of them into terror and despair. This is the hammer of which Jeremiah speaks: ‘My word is a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces’ [Jer. 23:29\*]. This is not ‘active contrition,’ a contrived remorse, but ‘passive contrition,’ true affliction of the heart, suffering, and the pain of death.” Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 312. Smalcald Articles, Part III, Paragraph 2.

45. Not like how God works contrition in David's heart. David cries out in the agony of guilt, “I have sinned against the Lord.” (2 Sam 12:13)

narcissistic repentance. Narcissists are often capable of striking emotional displays — tears, apologies, dramatic confessions. But emotion alone does not equal repentance. Narcissistic repentance frequently functions as image management. The goal is relief, restored control, or repaired perception. Statements such as, “I’m sorry you feel that way,” or, “Let’s just move forward,” reflect discomfort with consequences rather than sorrow over sin. It is sorrow over humiliation, not over guilt.

Jesus warns against this performative spirituality: “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do... they have received their reward in full” (Matt 6:16). Outward display can mask inward resistance. Narcissistic repentance may appear devout while remaining structurally defensive. It has emotion, but not empathy; words, but not confession; sorrow, but not

---

As *The Book of Concord*, The Smalcald Articles, III, Paragraph 18, says, “Here we see how blind reason gropes around in the things of God and seeks comfort in its own works, according to its own darkened opinions. It cannot consider Christ or faith. If we look at this now in the light, then such contrition is a contrived and imaginary idea. It comes from one’s own powers, without faith, without knowledge of Christ. In this state, a poor sinner who reflected on this lust or revenge would at times have more likely laughed than cried—except for those truly struck down by the law or falsely plagued by the devil with a sorrowful spirit. Otherwise, such contrition was certainly pure hypocrisy and did not kill the desire to sin. They had to be contrite, but would rather have sinned more—had it been without consequences.” 314–315.

surrender.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, false repentance is sorrow over sin without trust in the promise. This false repentance, this shame-based, politically law-focused, active contrition, is fruitless.<sup>47</sup>

### Can a Narcissist Go to Heaven? False Contrition and Real Hope

In explaining active and passive contrition, a painful question naturally arises: If a narcissist only performs repentance and does not experience genuine contrition, are they doomed? If their apologies are strategic, their tears self-protective, and their sorrow centered on consequences rather than sin, can such a person truly belong to Christ? The question is not theoretical for those suffering narcissistic abuse. However, the answer is both simple and profoundly sobering: yes, a narcissist can go to heaven. Salvation is not earned by emotional depth, psychological insight, or demonstrated empathy. Salvation is God's work alone. Christ died for narcissists as surely as He died for liars, adulterers, addicts, cowards, and hypocrites. The decisive question is not whether a sinner exhibits narcissistic traits, but whether God grants repentance and faith (2 Tim 2:25; Ezek 36:26–27). At the same time, narcissism presents a unique spiritual danger. It is not that

---

46. In *The Book of Concord*, 317. The Smalcald Articles, Part II, Paragraph 29, Luther calls out this performance spirituality in the Monk's habits and in Rome, "Such people did not need repentance. For why did they need to be contrite since they had not consented to evil thoughts? What did they need to confess, since they had avoided evil words? For what did they need to make satisfaction, since their deeds were guiltless to the point that they could sell their excess righteousness to other poor sinners? At the time of Christ the Pharisees and scribes were such saints, too."

Luther, in the following paragraphs, also points out this audacity, saying, "At this point, the fiery angel St. John, the preacher of true repentance, comes and destroys both sides with a single thunderclap, saying, 'Repent!' The one side thinks: 'But we have already done penance.' The other thinks: 'We do not need repentance.' John says, 'All of you together repent! You here are false penitents; those over there are false saints. You all need the forgiveness of sins because you all still do not know what true sin is, let alone that you ought to repent of it or avoid it. Not one of you is any good. You are full of unbelief, stupidity, and ignorance regarding God and his will. For God is present over there, in the One from whose fullness we all must receive grace upon grace and without whom no human being can be justified before God. Therefore, if you want to repent, then repent in the right way. Your penance does not do it. And you hypocrites, who think you do not need repentance, you brood of vipers, who assured you that you will escape the wrath to come, etc.?'"

47. In no way do I want to condemn the righteous, but this is a serious calling of *genuine* repentance. Ingenuine repentance damns. As shown in the FC: "One who justifies the wicked and one who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord" (Prov. 17:15); Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 495. Ep, Article III, Paragraph 7.

Also, "However, faith does not remain in those who lead a sinful life, lose the Holy Spirit, and reject repentance." Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 579. SD, Article IV, Paragraph 33.

narcissists commit special sins beyond forgiveness. Rather, the narcissistic structure of self resists repentance with unusual force. The narcissist may apologize without confessing. They may cry without yielding. They may speak religious language, but live spiritually hollow. When confronted, they often shift blame, reinterpret reality, or experience correction as annihilation of identity. In this way, narcissistic repentance can become a form of image management rather than a surrender to God's verdict.

This does not mean the narcissist is beyond saving. It does mean they are often far from contrition and therefore far from the comfort of the Gospel. The pastoral task is not to pronounce final judgment but to recognize hardened patterns that require clearer Law, deeper patience, and greater reliance on the Spirit's power. Every sinner resists repentance: narcissism simply mechanizes that resistance. If a narcissist is saved, they are saved the same way every sinner is saved: through God's crushing Law and resurrecting Gospel. The Spirit must do what the narcissist cannot—break the defensive architecture of the Old Adam and create genuine sorrow that flees to Christ. Where God grants such contrition, the narcissistic heart is certainly not beyond grace. We all confess and call upon the same Savior; we confess our sins and unite together, saying: "Merciful Father in heaven, I am altogether sinful from birth. In countless ways, I have sinned against you and do not deserve to be called your child. But trusting in Jesus, my Savior, I pray: Have mercy on me according to your unfailing love. Cleanse me from my sin and take away my guilt."<sup>48</sup>

---

48. *Christian Worship: Altar Book* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 104.

It's interesting to note that in CW 21, the general proclamation of sins doesn't emphasize guilt. On page 282 of CW 21' in Individual Confession and Absolution, it does reference our guilt, with the penitent saying: "I confess that I am by nature sinful. I am guilty of many sins. I am distressed by the sins that trouble me." After some reflection, it's reasonable not to emphasize guilt in our hymnal for the sake of mimicking Roman Catholic confessions; however, I hope we teach guilt correctly through other means.

Another aspect that isn't mentioned in CW 21's confessions is the verbal recognition and repentance of sins we don't know or aren't aware of. Again, nothing wrong with that, but after studying narcissism and the sins associated with frequently unrecognized disorders, I will include Psalm 19:12 as a familiar prayer, and encourage

Narcissism is not primarily a sin category, but a defensive anthropological pattern rooted in shame. This pattern resists contrition. Contrition is necessary for saving faith, yet contrition is God's work. Therefore, narcissism presents not a barrier to grace, but a resistance that only the Spirit can overcome.

### Gospel Assurance: Righteousness Outside of Us

At the heart of this discussion stands the doctrine that guards both terrified consciences and exhausted pastors: righteousness is outside of us. Luther prays, "Lord Jesus, You are my righteousness, I am your sin. You took on you what was mine; yet set on me what was yours. You became what you were not, that I might become what I was not?"<sup>49</sup> The innocent is declared guilty so the guilty may be declared innocent. The Holy One is condemned so sinners may be counted righteous. This is not a metaphor. It is imputation. It is the great exchange. For this reason, contrition does not function as our contribution to salvation. It is not a spiritual payment offered to God, nor an emotional threshold we must reach before grace applies.

Contrition belongs to this life of faith, but it does not ground it. It is the Spirit's work in the regenerate heart — the daily rhythm of being crushed by God's Law and raised by His Gospel. It flows from justification; it does not produce it. Because contrition is God's work, it cannot be measured by outward intensity, prescribed like a spiritual formula, or authenticated by visible fruit. Fruits will come, but they come in God's way, in God's timing, and according to God's purpose; not as proofs of our sincerity, but as the natural fragrance of a forgiven sinner (2 Cor 2:14-16). The comfort is clear: our righteousness rests not in the depth of our sorrow but in

---

others to do the same: "*But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.*" After all, sacrifice and forgiveness for unintentional sins are important. This is shown in Lev 4:27-28 and Job 1:5.

49. Luther's Works 48:12. Sourced from, [Beggars All: Reformation And Apologetics](#)

the depth of Christ's mercy. Even as weakness and frailty cling to us until death, the contrite believer remains certain of this: God has justified us for Christ's sake.

### PART III: PASTORAL DIRECTION: RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING TO NARCISSISM WITHIN THE CHURCH

#### **Speaking and Listening in Love to Narcissistic Persons**

Pastors who encounter narcissistic persons must remember that beneath grandiosity or defensiveness, there is often profound insecurity, shame, and fear. What appears as arrogance, stubbornness, and abrasiveness may often conceal deep anxiety and insecurity about losing control, status, or belonging. If we respond only to visible behavior, we risk reinforcing the very defenses that keep the person from honest growth. Scripture calls pastors to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15), but it also calls them to listen with sympathy, compassion, and humility (1 Pet. 3:8). Listening is an act of love. As Wendland notes, listening in love seeks to understand a person “on their own terms” before rendering judgment.<sup>50</sup> For the narcissistic person, who often expects criticism, dismissal, or humiliation, careful listening is critical to inform the pastor on how to continue. The pastor’s goal is not instant rebuttal, but asking clarifying, patient questions. Narcissistic individuals frequently experience confrontation as an attack on identity. A minor critique can feel like total rejection. Therefore, pastoral speech must be intentional. Admonition should aim not at exposing weakness for the sake of correction, but at restoring gently (Gal 6:1). The goal is not to “win” an argument but to win them for Christ. Practically, this means slowing down conversations. Try avoiding sarcasm or public correction since the narcissist most likely will internalize it as shame. Sometimes, the most proper response to narcissism is no response at all. NPD provides the pastor with an opportunity to practice active listening.

Finally, pastors must remember that transformation is slow. Narcissistic defenses were often formed over decades. Speaking and listening in love will require patience. But Christ

---

50. Paul O. Wendland, *“Speaking and Listening in Love: A Meditation and an Encouragement, Part I,”* 4.

himself bore insult without retaliating (1 Pet 2:23), and his strength in gentleness is an example for pastoral care. With Jesus as the example, pastors aim to create spaces where truth can be communicated without instinctive narcissistic reactions, to win them over to Christ, and to tend to their hurting souls.

### **Pastoral Referring: Staying in Our Lane for God's Kingdom**

Pastors are not clinical therapists. They are doctors of souls. As John Scheutze observes:

With only a handful of courses in some field of counseling on the seminary level, pastors enter the ministry and are recognized as those who can offer counseling to their members. As such, they are very limited in their ability to address mental health problems and disorders. But they do have an extensive background in the study and application of Scripture.<sup>51</sup>

This does not diminish pastoral counseling. A pastor can apply Scripture to an impressive range of life's crosses. Yet theological training does not automatically equip one to assess trauma, severe personality disorders, addiction, or complex mental illness. The pastor is not called to hold the Bible in one hand and the DSM-5 in the other as if both vocations were identical. Therefore, he must not avoid referral when it is warranted.

Avoidance of referral can stem from many places: a subtle Savior complex, fear of losing relational influence, distrust of clinical professionals, or concern over how the member will interpret the recommendation. That's why referral must be well done, otherwise a counselee may quietly wonder, "Is my problem too big? Is pastor giving up on me?"<sup>52</sup> For this reason, Carl Toelke rightly reminds us, "Good referral is good pastoral counseling."<sup>53</sup> Referral is not abandonment; it is an extension of care. It must not be rushed, nor indefinitely postponed. It

---

51 . John Scheutze, *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2016), 269.

52. Carl H. Toelke Jr., "Referral in Pastoral Mental Health Counseling," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 4, no. 1 (February 1977): 39.

53. Toelke Jr., "Referral in Pastoral Mental Health Counseling," 39.

grows out of relationship, trust, and pastoral tact. The goal is not to pass off a problem, but to surround a suffering person with appropriate help while continuing spiritual oversight.

Ultimately, doctors of souls should reflect Jesus' spiritual care in John 6. Pastors deal with the more important problem of sin and have the privilege to offer an eternal prescription: "Your sins are forgiven."

Why should the pastor refer? Can't the pastor just review his Pastoral Theology notes or skim *Psychology for Dummies*? Dr. William Oglesby outlines three understandable reasons why pastoral referral is necessary. Pastors have limited time, skill, and emotional reserve.<sup>54</sup>

First, time. In your desire to care for the specific psychological needs of your flock, are you inadvertently ignoring your vocation as shepherd? The pastor is not being a good steward of his time by taking away from the opportunity to preach and teach in this unique work with the means of grace. In his schedule, he will often find little time is "left over" for "in-depth counseling."<sup>55</sup> Everything in ministry takes time. When your pastoral counseling is causing you to neglect the ministry of Word and Sacrament, it is faithful to find partners who help the pastor's work in God's word remain focused. Acts 6:1-7 is a great example of stewardship, delegation, and partnership. Finding faithful partners in your counseling ministry may greatly benefit God's kingdom.

Second, skill. While some pastors may have a particular aptitude for counseling, no shepherd is equally equipped to handle every intricate psychological situation. Oglesby notes that exposure to deep suffering can sharpen pastoral sensitivity. Yet he also admits there is "no

---

54. William B. Oglesby Jr., "Referral as Pastoral Care," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 41, no. 2 (June 1987): 181.

55. Oglesby, "Referral as Pastoral Care," 181.

hard and fast rule,”<sup>56</sup> and that the basic task is balancing the whole scope of ministry. Just as pastors preach 1 Corinthians 12 and celebrate the diversity of gifts within Christ’s body, so they must acknowledge their own. Not all are counselors. Not all are equipped for complex clinical care. Faithfulness sometimes means seeking those whom God has gifted differently. Ultimately, “each of us has gifts and interests; the crux of the matter is the way we follow these creative dimensions of ourselves without neglecting the ‘whole counsel of God.’”<sup>57</sup>

Third, emotional reserve. Oglesby warns that “our own lives are inevitably involved in the process... but when the involvement is intense, then our competence is diminished.”<sup>58</sup> He draws the analogy that no physician treats his own family. Pastors are inevitably close to their members. In cases involving narcissistic dynamics, manipulation, abuse, or severe dysfunction, the emotional drain can be significant. When frustration rises, objectivity narrows, or the pastor approaches quiet exhaustion, referral is not retreat. It is protection for the pastor’s soul and for the counselee’s care. There are stretches of ministry more stressful than others. Pastors are warned against those false assessments; when pastors are close to the brink of collapse, they are not “fine.” Referral is a critical way to share the emotional burdens with trusted clinical support.

#### Pastoral Referring: Pastoral Collaboration

Referral can feel risky. A pastor may fear losing influence, damaging trust, or sending a member into counseling that undermines the gospel. Wise referral is partnership. The key is intentional collaboration. Important guidelines to consider: Work with someone you can actually work with,

---

56. Oglesby, “Referral as Pastoral Care,” 182.

57. Oglesby, “Referral as Pastoral Care,” 183.

58. Oglesby, “Referral as Pastoral Care,” 183.

use existing resources wisely, what to look for in a counselor, and how narcissism will be particularly difficult.

Stephen Saunders emphasizes that referral should never be random.<sup>59</sup> The pastor must be able to collaborate with the counselor. This means meeting them beforehand if possible. Ask about: Their theoretical approach, licensure and training credentials, willingness to communicate with pastoral leadership (with proper consent), and view of the relationship between faith and emotional health. Transparency matters.<sup>60</sup> A counselor unwilling to explain their methods is not someone you can responsibly partner with. Proper licensure from credible sources is essential. Competence is not optional simply because someone uses Christian language. Pastors often assume that finding a “Christian counselor” is the primary requirement. But that phrase can mean many things. When someone says, “I’m a Christian counselor,” ask what they mean.<sup>61</sup> Do they integrate faith explicitly into sessions? Do they merely share personal Christian beliefs? Do they understand theological categories like justification and sanctification? Focus on what’s more important: are they skilled, ethical, collaborative, and respectful of the counselee’s religious commitments?

Saunders rightly cautions against confusing faith with feelings.<sup>62</sup> Not every psychological struggle is resolved by repeating forensic justification. Thinking that a pastor is equivalent to a counselor would be like calling an electrician to fix your plumbing. The pastor addresses sin and

---

59. Stephen M. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness: Helping Christians Obtain Treatment for Mental Illness*, Vol. 2 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2019), 509–510.

60. In chapter 24 of *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, Saunders highlights these requirements and gives lists of what questions to ask the counselor on pages 515 and 518. Those graphics are helpful, and Saunders give much more detail on referral.

61. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 518–521. He also highlights what to look for in Christian counseling and the possible issues.

62. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 520.

identity before God. The counselor addresses trauma patterns, attachment wounds, emotional regulation, and behavioral restructuring. When each stays in their lane, the person receives fuller care.

Ideally, a confessional Lutheran counselor with whom you have strong agreement would be excellent. Realistically, that is not always available. In many cases, it is more important that the counselor is clinically competent, respectful of faith, and willing to refer spiritual matters back to you as the spiritual shepherd.

It's important for the pastor to use existing resources wisely. For WELS pastors, Christian Family Solutions is a significant gift. Their counselors understand Lutheran theology and are accustomed to working collaboratively with pastors. If available, it is wise to: call them, meet face-to-face if possible, ask about referral processes, and clarify expectations for communication and boundaries. Even if Christian Family Solutions is not geographically accessible, building relationships with reputable counselors in your area is valuable. There may not be an official referral list, but having counseling resources can significantly strengthen your ministry. A thirty-minute meeting with a local licensed therapist may serve dozens of future pastoral situations. Be proactive; referral is strongest when the relationship precedes the crisis. Pastors might wonder what to look for in a counselor. Saunders highlights characteristics that matter deeply in partnership: Friendly and empathetic, confident but humble, flexible, respectful of religious convictions, and willing to collaborate.<sup>63</sup> A counselor who mocks faith or attempts to replace pastoral authority will undermine care. A counselor who understands the distinction between clinical treatment and spiritual shepherding will strengthen it. It should be clear, with appropriate consent, that when theological or spiritual questions arise, the pastor remains the

---

63. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness*, 517–518.

doctor of souls. The counselor need not become a theologian. Both doctors stay in their lane, respect their expertise, and collaborate with care. Online counseling may also be an option, particularly in rural contexts. Collaboration remains the same: transparency, competence, and mutual clarity of roles.

This thesis must add how narcissism will be particularly difficult. The narcissist may resist counseling entirely. They may attempt to manipulate the counselor. They may describe the pastor as incompetent. They may split caregivers against one another. For this reason, collaborative communication (with proper consent) is especially important. Clear boundaries must be established early. The pastor, or counselor, must not be triangulated. If the narcissistic individual refuses referral, the pastor may seek advice for moving forward with proper church discipline. Referral in narcissistic cases will most likely be difficult, but the isolated pastor dealing with the narcissist is worse.

Referral might still be intimidating, and the pastor might wonder how to suggest a referral to their member. Here is a suggestion. Instead of saying, “I think this is beyond me.” Try, “I believe additional support could serve you well. I would like to continue walking with you spiritually while we bring in someone trained specifically for this area.” In

### ***When Considering Referral: A Pastoral Checklist***

#### ***Before Referral***

- Have I clearly identified the limits of my time, skill, or emotional reserve?
- Am I reacting out of frustration, fear, or ego?
- Have I built sufficient trust to introduce referral carefully?

#### ***When Choosing a Counselor***

- Is this person properly licensed?
- Are they transparent about their methods?
- Are they respectful of the counselee's faith?
- Can I collaborate with them if needed?
- Do they understand that I remain the spiritual shepherd?

#### ***When Framing Referral***

- Present it as partnership, not dismissal.
- Continue pastoral care alongside clinical support.
- Clarify roles: *therapist treats mental health; pastor shepherds the soul.*

this way, pastoral care doesn't disappear; rather, it is highlighted and intentionally focused on the particular needs of the member. Referral is not a weakness. It is humility. Christ did not give every gift to every servant. When pastors recognize their limits, collaborate wisely, and remain faithful to Word and Sacrament, the sheep are protected, not abandoned. Here is a checklist that might potentially help the pastor.<sup>64</sup>

In churches where referrals are proving more difficult, the pastor might still seek tools to help heal those inclined to narcissism. The following section presents a simple model and tools to encourage narcissistic healing and instill hope in the shepherd.

### **Tools for Healing Narcissistic Persons**

#### **Romans 12:1-2**

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Our feelings are immensely important. They define who we are... Our feelings are what make us unique. Anyone who denies our feelings denies the essence of who we are. This has led to the absurd idea that feelings are always correct. If this were true, how could we help anyone with depression or anxiety? - Stephen M. Saunders, *Martin Luther on Mental Health*, 34.

Stephen M. Saunders rightly cautions against treating feelings as final authority: when feelings are taken as truth, people find confidence in their self-made verdicts. This is pastorally significant. The narcissist isn't intentionally hurting others or choosing evil in a cold, calculating way. Many of their reactions are habitual and defensive, formed over time to mask exposure and manage shame. This does not reduce culpability. Sin remains sin. Yet if the pastoral goal is

---

64. I'm hoping that this checklist, heavily based on criteria sourced in Saunder's work can be useful for the pastor. This checklist was made with the help of ChatGPT.

hopeful care rather than mere diagnosis, we must address not only behavior but the inner logic that sustains it. Romans 12 frames that goal: not conformity to the old pattern, but transformation through the renewing of the mind. For that reason, this paper speaks of healing in terms of *integration*: bringing what is fragmented and hidden into the light so that sin can be named truthfully (guilt) rather than merely managed privately (shame), so we can deal with the sinner as a whole. In pastoral terms, the aim is to move the person from “I am irredeemably bad and therefore must defend myself” to “I *did* evil in God’s sight, I *can* confess it, he *did* redeem it.” Guilt, as shown in sinful actions, not in sinful identity, naturally leads to confession and absolution. Shame, by contrast, tends to conceal, perform, or retaliate. When shame shifts to guilt, refocusing the Christian’s identity, they can finally hear the gospel as personal and real: “In Christ you are forgiven.” God sees the real you, the one you attempt to hide, and he doesn’t flee; he clings. The goal is not to deny feelings, but to put them under God’s truthful verdict— “you are guilty yet forgiven”—rather than under shame’s lie— “you are fundamentally unlovable.”

This also sets necessary limits. It is not the pastor’s task to treat narcissistic personality structures single-handedly; ordinarily, complex cases require referral to competent clinical care. Yet pastors are not powerless. They provide a theological framework, a stable spiritual foundation, and informed collaboration with clinical care. God’s word is alive and active; it cuts straight to the heart (Heb 4:12). While it’s not the pastoral obligation to be a clinical doctor, we are doctors of souls, and that’s not a light responsibility. Pastors ought to recognize that this takes time, patience, humility, and caution. Healing narcissistic defenses is rarely quick and cannot be accomplished with a single verse or a single conversation. However, we trust God’s

word is powerful and acknowledge our responsibility to be prepared to respond in hope (1 Pet 3:15). The proposed framework that follows is *Containment* → *Curiosity* → *Cycles* → *Conflict*.<sup>65</sup>

### Containment: Step 1

Containment is the creation of a steady, non-shaming pastoral presence in which defensive reactions can slow down. Narcissistic patterns are often triggered when the person feels exposed or diminished. When vulnerability is sensed, grandiosity, blame, or anger can quickly surface as a form of protection. The pastor's first task is not confrontation but steadiness towards containment. Clinically, healing narcissistic structures requires careful dismantling of defensive patterns while strengthening what is authentic beneath them.<sup>66</sup> Theologically, this mirrors the biblical rhythm of tearing down and restoring (Eccl 3:3; Isa 61:4). Yet pastors must resist the urge to rush that process. Containment means creating space where the person can acknowledge both their sin and their dignity, especially through Christ, without collapsing into shame or inflating into superiority. This is where the Lutheran confession of *simul iustus et peccator* becomes pastorally powerful. The narcissistic person tends to oscillate between "I am exceptional" and "I am worthless." Containment gently introduces a third category: you are both sinner and justified saint in Christ. This reality allows honest confession without annihilation of the self. It frames growth not as image management but as living into the identity already given in baptism. Paul Marceau introduces our pastoral goal: "Every human being is called to grow to become the person God created."<sup>67</sup> I think this helps us to create a framework of self-

---

65. This is derived from Dr. Anthony Mazzella, *The Narcissism Decoder*, Episode 1–4, "The Truth About Healing Narcissism."

66. Dr. Anthony Mazzella, *The Narcissism Decoder*, Episode 1, "If You Want to See Change—Start Here."

67. Paul Marceau, "Narcissism in the Spiritual Life," *Pastoral Psychology* 26 (1977): 23.

acceptance. We create an environment that can accept the vulnerable, sinful reality while recognizing the grandiose, sainted reality (Ps 34:18; Rom 15:1).<sup>68</sup> For pastors, you should walk them down the Lutheran Middle of *simil justus et peccator*. To create this environment, we candidly set our goal: to help you grow into God's intention for you. This isn't shameful, for we have all fallen short of God's expectations (Rom 3:23-24). Rather, this is setting the stage to understand actions and reactions that we are culpable of committing, so that we can try to be God's creation. This isn't performative. This isn't a good works overemphasis. We are simply setting the stage for embracing our conflicted saint-sinner reality without engaging in defensive mechanisms.

Practically, containment requires the pastor to resist playing the narcissistic game. It can be tempting to offer exaggerated affirmations to keep the person calm or cooperative. But feeding grandiosity only reinforces the defensive structure. As one clinician notes, appeasing destructive narcissism is like releasing a monster into the village.<sup>69</sup> Containment is not utilizing flattery, but calm truthfulness. The pastor does not inflate the false self, nor does he attack it. He remains present, clear, and grounded so that shame and rage do not rupture the relationship. Marceau reminds us of our goal and the time commitment, saying: "To live in the world and act out of our true self, the self that God created, demands a continual creation of that self in the

---

68. When fractured, they are primarily functioning with a single identity in mind. I am not trying to say that our identity of saint is related to grandiose narcissism, but rather that the ideal, and less ideal, are both present. We are saint and sinner. God declares us righteous, yet we suffer and sin.

69. Malkin addresses that, saying, "We certainly can't stop the threat of destructive narcissism by feeding their need to feel special. That's a bit like letting the monster loose to terrorize the villagers." Craig Malkin, Malkin, Craig. *Rethinking Narcissism*. (New York: HarperWave, 2015.) 22–23.

Not to mention, that would be sinfully manipulative. We don't want to trick the narcissist into more faithless, performative righteousness. We want to dismantle the warped narcissistic identity and its hidden shame to find complete reliance on Christ.

world...That takes integrity, honesty, intentionality, many acts of self-surrender and lots of faith.<sup>70</sup> This process is slow. Containment establishes this framework and curiosity. Containment communicates we are not here to humiliate you, nor to celebrate your defenses, but to help you grow into the person God created and redeemed you to be. Once a steady, deep relationship has been established, deeper work can begin.

### Curiosity: Step 2

Once containment has been established, the next step is curiosity. Yet, if the conversation cycles back to classic narcissistic defensive mechanisms, go back to step one and create that trusted framework. To continue with curiosity is to create steadiness in which you can embrace these conversations. Remember the intensity of this moment: for the narcissistic person, it can feel as though their entire way of making sense of the world is unraveling. That takes time and trust. It's important to remember that "we don't begin by directly confronting the grandiosity."<sup>71</sup> That would just target their defenses rather than the pain underneath.<sup>72</sup>

Dr. Mazzella offers some counseling phrases that encourage curiosity and self-reflection without engaging their defense mechanism:

"It seems like that response feels important to you in the moment." Or more advanced: "I can see that it's important for you to respond that way. We just don't yet know what purpose that anger serves. Do you have any thoughts on that?"<sup>73</sup> If they blow up to your assessment, respond: "What just happened right now?" Or, "Did we hit a nerve?"<sup>74</sup>

---

70. Marceau, "Narcissism in the Spiritual Life," 31.

71. Dr. Anthony Mazzella, *The Narcissism Decoder*, Episode 2, "What to Do When You Can't Win."

72. Mazzella, *Narcissism Decoder*, ep. 2.

73. Mazzella, *Narcissism Decoder*, ep. 2.

74. Mazzella, *Narcissism Decoder*, ep. 2.

The goal of your questioning is to understand the thought process. Focus on the *process*, not the *content*. Arguing about what was said — whether a harsh comment to a spouse was justified — typically leads to escalation. Exploring what was happening internally when it was said opens the door to growth. The question is not merely, “What did you say?” But “What was happening inside you when you said it?” “It’s about noticing how the conversation is happening, not about what’s being said.”<sup>75</sup> If you win the content argument but lose the relationship, you’ve only driven the shame deeper. Curiosity about the process keeps the door open. Curiosity is not self-analysis for its own sake, but pastoral preparation for contrition. When narcissistic shame cannot hear the truths of the law, curiosity slows the defensive reflexes and helps the person move from identity crisis to spiritual reflection. In this way, curiosity prepares the soil for the Spirit's work to grow genuine fruits of repentance and to flee to Christ.

Again, this process requires patience. Narcissistic structures have often been reinforced for decades. It will take more than one ‘breakthrough’ conversation. However, a person may demonstrate what appears to be insight — nodding, agreeing, even articulating their patterns clearly — without genuine vulnerability emerging. This “pseudo-insight” can masquerade as progress while the core shame remains untouched. Intellectual agreement is not the same as transformational understanding, or genuine curiosity. This narcissistic loop is frustrating, and it will feel as though progress is lost or change is impossible.<sup>76</sup> The goal for a difference-making change is engaging with curiosity. When curiosity becomes mutual — when the person begins asking, “Why do I react this way?” or “What am I afraid of in that moment?” — vulnerability is beginning to surface. At that point, deeper pastoral work becomes possible. Only when the

---

75. Mazzella, *Narcissism Decoder*, ep. 2.

76. Mazzella, *Narcissism Decoder*, ep. 2.

hidden fear, unworthiness, and shame can be spoken without immediate defense can the Law be heard properly and the Gospel received as mercy rather than threat. Curiosity does not excuse sin. It prepares the heart to name it truthfully.

### Cycles: Step 3

If curiosity helps a person notice their reactions, identifying cycles helps them recognize their patterns. We are no longer only asking, “What were you feeling?” We are asking, “What do those feelings consistently produce?” Narcissistic behavior is rarely random. It tends to follow repeatable relational cycles: A perceived slight or threat → A surge of defensiveness, anger, or withdrawal → A relational rupture → Intensified shame → A renewed commitment to self-protection → And then the pattern repeats. The pastoral task at this stage is to help the person see both the present cycle’s impact and its deeper roots. We are not merely interested in feelings; we are interested in what those feelings lead them to do. These actions, patterns, or cycles affect real relationships. It’s one thing for a narcissist to say, “I get defensive when criticized.” It’s another to say, “When I get defensive, it hurts others, and their thoughts of me change.” Recognizing relational impact comes from curiosity and self-exploration. Dr. Mazzella wants us to reach “a growing reflective capacity and a dawning awareness of ambivalence in forming deeper connections and attachment.”<sup>77</sup> Their relational impact can be easily seen in the church. Consider the church president at a voter’s meeting. He strongly advocated for his preferred logo. When others criticized it, he aggressively defended himself. When the vote went against him, he exploded: “This whole church can burn for all I care!” and left for another congregation. Not every strong opinion at a meeting is narcissism. But if you find a consistent pattern in this

---

77. Dr. Anthony Mazzella, *The Narcissism Decoder*, Episode 3, “They Finally Open Up—Now What?”

individual's life of insecurity, rage, negative relational impact, and isolation. Then it's an opportunity to recognize the pattern and get deeper.

After having a trusted relationship, the pastor could probe curious questions: "What was happening in your mind when the vote didn't go your way? What did the moment feel like? What did you assume would happen when you left? What were you trying to protect?" After curiosity, you can notice patterns, demonstrate the hurt inflicted through their words. Yet the more the church president reveals, the deeper the questioning can dig. You might learn that he worked tirelessly on his favorite logo, but he has never felt good about his art. He always felt ashamed of his work because his drawings as a child ended up in the trash can when his brothers were on the fridge. He always worked hard but was never seen. This was just another reaffirmation of the grandiose self, taking control. Continual curiosity helps develop a reflective capacity. Dr. Mazzella explains that this is actually growth, saying:

When you see someone go back to an early childhood memory, and use it in a connected way (not defensively), it often shows a shift in flexibility between past and present. That flexibility is often what's missing in personality disorders. So it's worth highlighting. This kind of work invites *him* to consider how early experiences—needing to adapt to her mother's *shaming*—may have shaped a false self. And that false self makes emotionally honest moments in adulthood feel incredibly painful.<sup>78</sup>

Recognizing that you might be the problem can be destabilizing. When exposing a harmful pattern and deeply rooted shame, the pastor attempts to deconstruct their developed protective structure. Understandably, this requires patience. Uncovering childhood shame does not simply produce bad memories, but it requires patient personality rebuilding. The pastor's focus is on establishing our righteousness in Christ. Childhood experiences may explain formation, but they

---

<sup>78.</sup> Mazzella, *Narcissism Decoder*, ep. 3. The words in italics are edited to reflect the gender in the previous example.

don't excuse sin. Once patterns are recognized, they pave the way for healthy inner conflict. The task is to hold both realities together: "You were shaped by painful experiences" and "you are responsible for how you now respond." When a man recognizes that his rage is not strength but fear, that his withdrawal is not independence but self-protection, the cycle begins to loosen. Reflective capacity grows when past and present are connected without defensiveness. That flexibility—being able to say, "This reminds me of something older"—signals movement toward true integration. The pastor's role is not merely to expose schemes but to gently redirect the search for security. Psalm 139:23–24 becomes an invitation: not exposure for condemnation, but exposure for transformation. The Spirit searches not to shame, but to lead "in the way everlasting." Growth requires helping the individual see that they are more than their defenses. The shame they carry does not need to be managed through superiority. Their worth is not secured by winning votes, dominating rooms, or avoiding vulnerability. In Christ, the self does not have to be impressive to be secure. When identity shifts from performance to standing securely in Christ, the protective mask can slowly soften. This is slow work. It requires safety, repetition, and patience. But when someone begins to say, "I see the pattern," then "I see what it protects," and finally "I no longer need it," pastoral formation is taking place.

#### Conflict: Step 4

Embracing the internal conflict is, in many ways, carrying the narcissistic cross. When the narcissistic structure begins to crumble, real, painful grief follows. As Dr. Mazzella notes, "They *are* losing something real—real to them... The illusion, to them, is very real, and its collapse feels like an internal death. It's the emotional fallout from a collapsing fantasy of specialness."<sup>79</sup> Dr. Mazzella outlines what this conversation could look like, saying:

---

79. Dr. Anthony Mazzella, *The Narcissism Decoder*, Episode 4, "What Follows the Collapse of Narcissism?"

For example, a patient may say: “It’s just so sad. I always thought I was meant for something big—and now maybe I’m not. I keep thinking: if I let that go, then what’s left? Who am I without that hope?”

At this moment I might say something like: “That’s such an important question. Who are you if you’re not the person you imagined you would become? What comes up when you sit with that thought?”

Hypothetically, the response may look something like: “I guess I’m just... me. Just this regular guy with an okay job who’s trying. And that’s it. And that sounds so pathetic.”

And then, at this point, I may ask: “What’s it like to imagine being ‘just you’—without the promise of being great someday? What does that bring up for you right now? Or, if you weren’t holding on to this idea of needing to be extraordinary, what do you think you’d start noticing or feeling about who you are right now? Who are you today?”

These kinds of questions invite him to sit with the ordinariness that he has long avoided. And remember, to him, “ordinary” feels pathetic.<sup>80</sup>

Pastoral care at this stage resists dismissal and premature reassurance; the art is to distinguish the application of law and gospel. This creates a safe space for confronting reality. Yet for the narcissistic personality, “ordinary” does not feel neutral. It feels like erasure. It feels like failure and nothingness. This is where pastoral theology shines and offers something outside of psychology: a redefinition of greatness found in vocation and in cross-bearing. For the narcissist, the fantasy self is “great” because it imagines itself above need, above failure, above dependence. Scripture presents a different greatness: the Son of Man who “did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mk 10:45); the call to “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life” (1 Th 4:11); the God who chooses what is weak and foolish to shame the strong (1 Cor 1:26–31). In this light, ordinariness is not defeat when the victorious Christ lives in us, and we in him (Gal 2:20; Phil 3:7–11). In that sense, no Christian is ordinary. The narcissist’s “collapse” is often the

---

Dr. Mazzella highlights how this is a distinction from depression, saying, “From a psychodynamic perspective, this depression isn’t just a **mood disorder**—and that’s one of the mistakes I commonly see. These patients come to me on a triple cocktail of antidepressant medications that just isn’t working, because this isn’t just “depression” in the usual sense.”

80. Mazzella, *Narcissism Decoder*, ep. 4.

first time they are in a position to hear that God's verdict over them does not depend on their specialness. Here, pastors have something precious to say: "You are not loved because you are exceptional; you are loved because you are in Christ."

In the context of internal Christian conflict, distinguishing between shame and guilt becomes pastorally crucial. When the individual says, "I'm pathetic... I'm nothing special," shame is speaking: "I am the mistake." Shame attacks identity and leaves no path forward. Guilt, however, speaks differently: "I have sinned. I have harmed others. I have believed lies about myself and about God." Guilt tends to confession and absolution. Shame often festers in secret. So, in a sense, the collapse of the grandiose self is a strange gift: it exposes the wound in a way that can finally be brought to the cross.

Practically, this means the pastor does not rush to "cheer them up" or slap a Bible verse over the void. Lament psalms (Ps 13; 51) may be more faithful than quick reassurance. You might say: "It makes sense that this feels like a death. The self you built for survival is dying. Let's bring that grief to God instead of pretending it's not there." Over time, you can begin to connect this to their baptismal dying and rising (Rom 6:3–4; Col 3:1–4): the old self—fantasy, omnipotence, false righteousness—really is crucified with Christ, and a new self is a reality. That doesn't remove the pain, but it locates it inside God's story rather than inside their private catastrophe. This is where the Lutheran confession of *simul iustus et peccator* becomes pastorally powerful. God's law names real sin: the inner critic often goes further, declaring the sinner beyond help. That voice must be contradicted with clear gospel: "Christ died for you while you were still a sinner, not when you became impressive."

So, conflict, in this final step, is not something to be eliminated. It is something to be carried. The narcissist will live for a long time in a genuine tension: between the fantasy of being

exceptional and the call to be faithful in small, ordinary vocations; between the old shame story and the new baptismal name; between the desire to be admired and the slow learning of being loved. Helping them stay with that conflict—without fleeing back into grandiosity, defensiveness, or despair—is part of what it means to “carry the narcissistic cross.” The pastor cannot carry it for them. But they can stand beside them, acknowledge what is happening, nourish them in Word and Sacrament, and keep pointing them to a Lord who embraced humiliation, defeated death, and rose in glory. That is the only story strong enough to hold the “internal death” of narcissistic collapse and turn it into resurrection.

### Concluding Pastoral Tools

This section has not tried to turn pastors into amateur psychologists. Instead, it has offered a modest framework, *Containment* → *Curiosity* → *Cycles* → *Conflict*, that pastors might utilize with their law and gospel application as they cooperate with God’s extraordinary work in deeply disordered personalities. In *Containment*, the pastor offers what the narcissistic person has rarely had: a steady, truthful, non-shaming presence. No flattery, or agreement with grandiosity, but also no panicked rejection. This develops the security needed for *Curiosity*: gently inviting the person to wonder about their own reactions rather than simply acting them out begins to recruit a renewed mind (Rom 12:2) rather than letting fast, automatic defenses run the show.

As curiosity grows, *Cycles* can be named. The pastor helps the person trace patterns, how early shaming or neglect shaped a protective false self, how present explosions repeat old stories, and how their efforts to protect themselves keep re-wounding others. This is not an exercise in blame-shifting or excusing sin. It is a way of bringing both shame and guilt into the light, where confession and forgiveness are actually possible. Finally, *Conflict* is embraced. When the narcissistic mask begins to crack, the pastor expects grief, fear, even a sense of internal death.

Instead of rushing past this, they help the person mourn the loss of their fantasy greatness, reframe shame as confessable guilt, and slowly teach them to tolerate being “just” a baptized, forgiven, ordinary human with ordinary vocations. That is, in fact, the highest dignity: to be the person God created and redeemed, not the person their grandiosity invented.

None of this is quick. None of it is a guarantee that a particular narcissistic member will change. Pastors must respect their limits and often refer to clinical care. Yet within those limits, pastors have a worthwhile purpose. By preaching law and gospel in a way that takes shame seriously, by reinforcing containment instead of panic, by fostering curiosity instead of mere compliance, and by embracing the painful conflict of dying and rising with Christ. Pastors have real tools for healing narcissistic persons, but more importantly, are real instruments by which the Holy Spirit may renew even these minds according to God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will. With these tools in mind, we widen the lens to see where these narcissistic systems appear in the church. What does it look like when a church or family itself begins to operate defensively, protect its image at all costs, or mistake performance for faithfulness? What should we expect?

### **Narcissism in Church and Family Systems**

#### **Jude 4, 12-13**

*For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord... These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.*

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. - Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 16.

Jude's warning is not theoretical. "Certain individuals... have secretly slipped in among you... shepherds who feed only themselves... clouds without rain... wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame" (Jude 4, 12–13). Scripture assumes that destructive people will sometimes inhabit Christian communities, and that their presence will not always be obvious at first. Sin can hide itself in the language of spirituality; wolves can learn church vocabulary. Chuck DeGroat's observation presses the point further: churches become "breeding grounds for abuse and coverups." Is that true? If the church hid its sin in Eden, why would we expect that instinct to disappear? Now, the fig leaves look different, but the result is the same. In a community built on Christian morals, what can be overlooked for the sake of success and labeled as "for the ministry."

This is why narcissistic dynamics can thrive in church settings. Church culture often provides ready-made platforms for significance, authority, and moral credibility. These are exactly the kinds of masks a shame-driven person can use to stabilize a fragile self. When narcissistic patterns enter a congregation, the danger is not only the individual's sin, but the way the system learns to accommodate it: confrontation feels "unchristian," speaking up feels "divisive," and the victim's pain is quietly reframed as a lack of grace towards the narcissistic abuser. In other words, the church's best words—grace, forgiveness, submission, unity—can be bent into tools of control. The following sections broaden the lens from the shepherd to the congregation to the household, showing how narcissistic patterns operate not merely as personal quirks but as narcissistic systems that distort the life of the church.

### The Narcissistic Pastor

#### **Ezekiel 34:1-6**

*The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of*

*the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.*

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? - Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 19.

Ezekiel 34 is blunt. Scripture knows that spiritual leaders can become self-serving. God rebukes the shepherds who don't care for their flock. DeGroat observes that ministry can function as a magnet for narcissistic personalities.<sup>81</sup> This warning is serious. The pastoral office provides authority, visibility, and theological credibility. The pastoral office is extremely attractive to those who want high validation in exchange for their interpretation of "hard work." For those training to be pastors, as well as those well-seasoned, we need to be aware of and repent of the temptations of narcissistic shepherding. This section is not written to diagnose others from afar, but to invite self-examination. Before pastors analyze narcissistic systems in others, they must first ask whether those patterns exist in themselves.

This is a sensitive temptation that we must search deep into our hearts and honestly ask ourselves: Do I resemble the Pharisee or the Tax Collector in Luke 18? An honest reflection should bring us to tears and pray in boldness, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mk 9:24). Luther models this humility, saying,

What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone ... How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name? ... I simply taught, preached, wrote God's

---

81. Chuck DeGroat in his work, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, references Narcissistic Pastors at great length and is worth reading.

Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.<sup>82</sup>

The pastor is not the Savior. He is a jar of clay (2 Cor 4:7). Yet, God says he's pleased with our foolish preaching (1 Cor 1:21) and gives sinful pastors the privilege to say, "I forgive you all your sins." If Satan can bring down the shepherd, what becomes of the sheep? The state of the congregation suffers. In Luke 15, we are reminded of the intensity of God's love to save an individual soul. Wouldn't any pastor desire to leave the ninety-nine for the sake of one? Isn't one lost soul worth the pastor's time? For the narcissistic pastor, probably not. The temptation to avoid boring, ordinary, pastoral duties—to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, or bind up the injured—doesn't give them the admiration they seek. It doesn't quite fill their narcissistic supply like the ninety-nine others. The shepherd begins to measure ministry by visibility rather than faithfulness. Social media engagement can feel more rewarding than hospital calls. A promising seminarian may imagine his future congregation as a stage. A seasoned pastor may interpret criticism as persecution rather than reflection. Leadership positions within the synod can become identity anchors and rungs to the ladder of synod power and influence, rather than ministry. None of these behaviors automatically indicates narcissism. However, when questionable motivations and persistent patterns emerge, deeper issues may be the cause.

The narcissistic shepherd isn't new. John warns us of these selfish shepherds in 3 John, naming the culprit: "I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious

---

82. Martin Luther, Second Invocavit Sermon, (1522), LW 51:71

This is how DP Phil Hirsch begins his paper, *So, You're a Pastor, a Lutheran Pastor, Serving Where the Lord of the Church Has Placed You: And I Thank God For You in My Prayers*. This paper was written for the 2025 WLS Symposium on the Ministry of the Word. It's a valuable read to remember the humility and awesomeness of God; that he would use *maggot sacks*, his favorite term, to preach Christ crucified. What an honor for us Lutheran pastors.

nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.” (3 John 9–10) Diotrephes demonstrates the narcissistic tendency to control the church’s image for his benefit. Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 exposes similar tendencies: “Everything they do is done for people to see... they love the place of honor at banquets... they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others” (Mt 23:5–7). These aren’t dead critiques. Spiritual leaders today face the same temptations: consistently monitoring who belongs in your church, the idea that visible righteousness counts, finding confidence in titles, etc. That’s why the qualifications for pastors are, not surprisingly, anti-narcissistic. Titus 1:7: “Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.” Again, in 1 Timothy 3:1–6:

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)

We know yeast affects the whole loaf (Gal 5:9), but how often do we admit that pastors are the yeast? When the shepherd operates from narcissistic patterns, the congregation eventually absorbs them. The damage is not merely administrative; it is spiritual. Sheep scatter when leadership becomes harsh or self-serving (Ezek 34).

For the sake of Christ’s sheep, pastors must take the sin of narcissism seriously. Shepherds are not immune to the devil’s familiar temptations—pride, image management, the hunger for affirmation. These sins often attach themselves subtly to the pastoral office, cloaked in theological language and spiritual authority. Yet this is not a call to despair. Scripture has

already shown us what God can do in corrupt systems and hardened hearts. Through Habakkuk, the Lord declares, “Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe” (Hab 1:5). The same God who overturned empires and judged covenant infidelity is not intimidated by pastoral pride. His Word remains alive and active, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb 4:12). If narcissistic patterns are recognized in a shepherd, the answer is not concealment but confession. The righteous shall live by faith (Hab 2:4). God has entrusted His treasure to jars of clay (2 Cor 4:7), not because they are impressive, but because His power is. With that in mind, if a pastor can fall into narcissistic patterns, what about congregational systems?

#### The Narcissistic Church

##### **1 Corinthians 5:6**

*Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?*

How can we know whose fault it is? We all learned that God's favor falls on those who follow God's good rules. Maybe then, it's just best if we offer a sympathetic side-eye and let the chips fall. There are rules, after all. - Jill English, *The Casserole Rules*

Narcissistic dynamics rarely remain isolated within a single person. As Paul warns, yeast spreads. This doesn't necessarily mean that everyone becomes narcissistic, but maybe they enable the narcissist's ideals to permeate the congregation's culture through leadership, traditions, or unspoken loyalties. Such dynamics are difficult to recognize from within. Members acclimate, leaders defend, and outsiders might see what those involved cannot. An outside perspective can be invaluable. Without this intentional reflection, churches may drift toward misplaced markers of success: numerical growth, financial security, or synodical influence. DeGroat identifies two common church systems that mirror NPD subtypes: Grandiose (Overt)

and Vulnerable (Covert).<sup>83</sup> If you walk into a narcissistic church atmosphere, what might that look like, and how might it change? One crucial warning: “removing a narcissistic staff member does not necessarily remove the narcissistic infection.”<sup>84</sup> The narcissistic pastor, church elder, or long-time member might be removed, but the dough, the church, is still fermented. You need to throw out the batch and start new. “Rigorous self-reflection is imperative for any system to change.”<sup>85</sup>

### Grandiose (Overt) Narcissist Churches

While the multi-million media empire may not be typical within WELS, the underlying tendency toward grandiosity is not foreign to any church body. A grandiose system measures “faithfulness” primarily by visibility, growth, influence, and perceived success. “A large church or successful parachurch ministry revels in the affirmation it gets on social media or at conferences. A successful capital campaign prompts a collective sense of pride that God is blessing us (and not that church across the street).”<sup>86</sup> The grandiose narcissistic church might have many “outreach initiatives” that are driven by a desire for more attention. God is smiling on our church because the pews are full and we have a great praise band. This dysfunctional church system lacks “gospel vibrancy.”<sup>87</sup> Often the distinctions between a non-profit and a grandiose, narcissistic church are very little. It’s about impact and awareness but called the gospel and Jesus. This system looks “more like a cut-throat corporation than a Christlike ministry.”<sup>88</sup>

---

83. Please see chapter 6 in *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, for a fuller picture, but this paper will attempt to outline possible issues and stumbling blocks for WELS congregations.

84. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 103.

85. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 106.

86. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 104.

87. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 105.

88. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 106.

Grandiose systems normally reject input and change because they get results. Ultimately, the ends justify the means if their message gets results. Some mention Mark Driscoll's Mars Hill Church, who said, "There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus (laughs) and by God's grace it'll be a mountain by the time we're done. You either get on the bus or you get run over by the bus. Those are the options; but the bus ain't gonna stop."<sup>89</sup> The success of Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church has given him a 17,000-square-foot mansion.<sup>90</sup> This paper is not suggesting that these men or their churches are narcissistic, but you could see influence or money become the "mission" of the church. That's a real temptation. For this reason, Paul's warning is clear in 2 Timothy 4:2-5:

Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

Faithfulness isn't popularity, it's truthful proclamation. Enacting change in a grandiose system is difficult precisely because it appears successful. Change isn't impossible, but it will be difficult. DeGroat suggests beginning within the heart of the congregation. The culture can shift when members are gradually freed from the pressure to perform, to impress, or to validate their church's reputation, and are instead anchored in Christ's completed work. This takes leaders who welcome critique and a congregation that would rather be faithful than famous.

### Vulnerable (Covert) Narcissistic Churches

---

89. "Mark Driscoll's 'Dead Bodies' and Chris Rosebrough with 'Another One's Off the Bus,'" *Apprising Ministries*, July 3, 2012.

90. "Charismatic Leadership or Collective Delusion? Analyzing the Impact of Joel Osteen," *Righteous Cause* (blog), January 13, 2025. This isn't used to shame or criticize his church. Rather, it is acknowledging that this success could easily be a stumbling block for some, and maybe the motivation for a narcissistic system.

If grandiose systems are marked by visible success and external validation, vulnerable, or covert narcissistic systems, are marked by fragility, defensiveness, and an emphasis on doctrinal purity. These churches may be smaller, painfully orthodox, and deeply committed to being faithful. However, instead of forming their identity on Christ's mercy, it embodies being "not like them." DeGroat defines a vulnerable, covert narcissistic church, and maybe it sounds painfully familiar:

A hundred-person church in a university town in the Midwest boasted of its commitment to "faithfulness to the inerrant word of God." But identity in the church and on staff seemed to center on a shared imagination of how bad they were. One elder said, "These other churches are so humanistic, but we know how sinful we are." While other churches were exploring pathways to vital mission, this church had a commitment to not doing whatever other churches were doing. Indeed, this church expected that they wouldn't grow or thrive like others and were instead rigorously committed to preserving the "truth" despite systemic dishonesty and unhealth.<sup>91</sup>

In confessional traditions that prioritize doctrinal clarity and the full preaching of the law, a subtle temptation can arise. The *opinio legis*, the deep human instinct that righteousness can be secured through law-keeping, exposes how easily even confessional Christians can source identity in moral performance. The law is powerful. It exposes sin, crushes pride and demands reaction. Lutheran theology has never minimized the necessity of the law. Yet, when a church's identity begins to center more on its seriousness about sin rather than letting the gospel predominate. The danger is not love for the law. The danger is finding value in being the people who preach it hardest. In contexts where identity is drawn from the law, faithfulness is measured less by trust in Christ and more by piety. The congregation becomes fluent in diagnosing cultural sin, but less practiced in walking patiently with the sinner. Over time, this heightened attention to the precision of the law without equal attention to the precision of Christ's mercy can foster what DeGroat calls "theologically approved bullying."<sup>92</sup> This is a dynamic where God's law is

---

91. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 108-109.

92. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 109.

selectively applied and certain sins are publicly magnified while others are quietly normalized. The congregation involved with theologically approved bullying draws its authority and confidence from its identity as the guardian of orthodoxy. For the church, this selectivity most likely doesn't feel intentional. It's masked as faithfulness. However, patterns emerge. Preaching may disproportionately highlight the sins "out there" while minimizing the sins "in here." Then, a subtle narrative develops, we are the faithful remnants, and those who fall must not have truly belonged. Let's hear the story of Kevin.<sup>93</sup> When Kevin's adultery became public, the vulnerable system did not share in his suffering; it experienced it as a threat to the church's identity. They did not respond with restorative sorrow, but with distancing from the broken. "How could this happen to us?" The underlying logic became, "He must not have really believed like we do." To preserve the purity of the church system, Kevin's failure was reframed as evidence that he was never truly one of us. This dynamic protects the identity of the group but isolates the sinner. This isolation doesn't occur in a single action of grandiose resistance, or a moment of public shaming. It can start with sneers, silence, forgotten invitations to church events, until the sinner is assured that he just doesn't belong anymore. DeGroat mentions:

Vulnerable narcissistic systems, while not as blatantly arrogant, display a quiet self-righteousness that is just as troublesome as grandiose systems. In some ways, they can be more resistant to change than the grandiose system. The rigid belief systems and arrogant certainty of a vulnerable system often demand a high level of allegiance along with painful consequences for those who leave the system.

However, in both systems the tug toward loyalty and uniformity is strong.<sup>94</sup> The idea is that this is the church that takes sin seriously, but the irony is evident. A church deeply committed to justification by grace alone can slowly cultivate a culture in which belonging feels conditioned on moral consistency and visible stability. When this occurs, true

---

93. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 110.

94. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 110.

confession is too risky. Those struggling with sin remain silent. Sin is hidden. Doubt is treated as rebellion rather than weakness that turns to Christ's power. The system communicates implicitly: failure threatens identity. The gospel isn't dead in this structure, yet these churches survive because the law subtly becomes the emotional center of the congregational life.

In a confessional synod such as ours, we must examine ourselves and repent when necessary. Is the vulnerable narcissistic system more appealing? If so, "What should we do?" Congregations might seek decisive action, such as a structural overhaul, leadership change, a public statement, or another dramatic gesture. Quick solutions are just another temptation to perform righteousness, a visible change that demonstrates seriousness without a change of the heart. Narcissistic dynamics are not merely institutional problems; they involve real people with hearts and souls. Scripture offers a deeper change, "'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart... Rend your heart and not your garments'" (Joel 2:12–13). Joel does not call Israel to theatrical displays of contrition, but to repentance from the heart. The problem isn't necessarily behavior, but trust. For congregations, heartfelt repentance might look different, but it asks the hard questions to move forward while trusting in God for guidance. Christ sustains the church, not our performance. When a church trusts in Christ for its future, it becomes easier to remove the yeast of success-driven motivation or of a pious, orthodox defense of fragility. The Church's survival does not depend on preserving an image. It depends on the Savior who conquers sin and death. How does this church move forward? Preaching the gospel as specifically as the law and basking in God's unending mercy. Providing a safe space for confession without social exile; in other words, treating the church as a hospital for sinners, as it was intended. To not be surprised when sinners sin. Ultimately, to value critique as we all fight Satan's temptations. When congregations rend their hearts rather than their garments, shame

loses its grip. Identity finds itself in Christ, not our failures. The law points us to Christ, not ourselves. Then, the church doesn't suffer the burden of preserving God's remnant, but rather the joyous fellowship of God's forgiven children gathered around Word and Sacrament.

Yet even when a congregation begins to rend its heart rather than its garments, cultural habits do not disappear overnight. Systems shape instincts. When Christian identity has long been intertwined with performance, fear, or image, those patterns are often carried into marriages, friendships, leadership dynamics, and family life. The vulnerable church system does not remain confined to congregational structures; it trains people in how to use Christian language. And when that language is bent toward control rather than confession, the distortion becomes personal. To understand how narcissistic dynamics persist, we must now examine how Christian identity itself can be weaponized.

#### Weaponizing Christian Identity (FOG)

Is the church a breeding ground for narcissism? In one sense, no institution creates narcissism. Yet church culture can unintentionally provide a uniquely fertile soil for narcissistic distortion. Christianity speaks in the language of authority, repentance, forgiveness, headship, submission, sacrifice, and holiness. In healthy hands, these words give life. In disordered hands, they can become instruments of control. When confronted with sin, the narcissistic Christian often resists personal culpability. Direct confrontation, though biblical (Matt 18:15–17), is difficult and uncomfortable. More often, sin is addressed generally from the pulpit or in Bible study. The narcissistic listener rarely hears conviction. They might assume the pastor is preaching about others who struggle. Instead, he might hear affirmation of his narcissistic identity, missing the point entirely. The narcissist's Christian identity can morph this control into life's other vocations. Narcissistic parents might tell their children, "Christ has put me here, so you will

listen to me!” Narcissistic spouses can abuse: “I am the head of the household. God said so!” Narcissistic relationships can use their piousness as leverage: “You did what? You’re lucky that a good Christian like me would stay with you.” Even more wicked are spiritualized forms of superiority utilized to manipulate: “I know your faults, but I love you anyway, just like Christ.” What masks as grace becomes condescension and is often passive-aggressive. The narcissistic entitlement that can derive from a Christian identity is terrifying, but not unique. This distortion is not new. Jesus repeatedly exposed religious leaders who clothed pride in piety (Matt 23; Jn 5:44; Lk 11:43). The narcissist has always bent the beauties of Christianity for their own advantage. Renee Swanson summarizes common dynamics within Christian narcissistic dynamics with the acronym FOG: Fear, Obligation, and Guilt.<sup>95</sup> These are common to Christianity, but destructive when manipulated.

**Fear** - that I’m not doing the right thing. The Christian life involves real spiritual struggle (Rom 7:15–19). Believers know the tension between sinner and saint. But this tension can be exploited. The narcissistic Christian intensifies fear: “Are you sure that’s godly?” “Do you think a real Christian would do that?” “God sees what you’re doing.” The implication is subtle: spiritual safety depends on meeting *their* standard. Fear becomes a leash. Instead of fear driving the sinner to Christ, it drives the person toward the narcissist’s approval. Heaven is not ours to earn, but the narcissist echoes Satan’s words as they make us wonder, “We could lose it.” The Christian narcissist finds it advantageous to keep you fearful. That gives them validation.

**Obligation** - to do the right thing. A Christian can’t help but do good works for God. A narcissist will most likely exploit the Christian’s obligation, and this is much different from fear. The Christian narcissist will abuse the desire for good works by measuring performance in

---

95. Renee Swanson, *Covert Narcissism and Christianity with Guest Kathy*.

reference to what they define as a “good” Christian. A “good” Christian will go to the narcissist’s required amount of bible studies, have a near-spotless church attendance, and listen to the narcissist’s every suggestion on how a Christian would live. You might wonder how the narcissist doesn’t see this high standard as obviously hypocritical. One must remember that the narcissist doesn’t register their flaws, but instead, grounds their identity in the fact that they are nearly the perfect Christian. When they aren’t, not only can you not mention their shame, but you must “take his words and actions in the kindest possible way,”<sup>96</sup> or you aren’t being “Christian” enough. If that isn’t enough, one ought to only remind the narcissist of how great they are, after all, they might remind you of Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” This quotation silences others’ critique. They claim that a single act of kindness demands that one forget all patterns of harm or abuse; one must think only of their kindness above all else. Here, obligation does not flow from gospel freedom. It flows from image maintenance and control.

Guilt - that I wasn’t doing enough. The law properly convicts, as Luther explains, “Since we are still clothed in flesh and blood, the preaching of the letter [law] is also necessary in order first to put people to death by the Law and destroy all their self-confidence, so that they may know themselves, become hungry for the Spirit, thirsty for grace, and so be a people prepared for the preaching of the Spirit.”<sup>97</sup> When the soul is hungry for the Spirit and thirsty for grace, the narcissist takes advantage and uses vulnerability for behavioral control. The narcissist will often

---

96. David P. Kuske, *Luther’s Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 106.

97. What Luther Says, Elwald M. Plass, p. 736, par. 2284. This quote is used in Luther’s Small Catechism, Second Edition. Stephen Giegler, Joel M. Otto, John T. Braun, and Ray G. Schumacher, *Luther’s Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 37.

belittle passively-aggressively: “Do you think God would approve of your actions?” “Would you say that to God?” “You know, God is always watching.” The Christian narcissist uses the guilt derived from the law and strips it of all gospel direction to create an instrument of dominance. Gospel reassurance is withheld or rationed, and approval is only granted conditionally. The narcissistic “gospel” is positive reinforcement for acting the way they prefer. This manipulation warps how people understand their God. They learn to hate the God that allowed these abusers to be in power. They learn to question God’s love since it is modeled through conditions and manipulation. To withhold the gospel from someone suffering guilt, the full weight of the law, is heartless. This creates a spiritual imbalance. An abundant law with little gospel leads the Christian to walk on eggshells around their God. They are living in constant fear of God’s threat of punishment, assuming that his conditions match their narcissistic abusers.

These distortions rarely remain abstract. They are learned and reinforced in relationships. For many Christians, the first experience of God’s authority, grace, discipline, and love is mediated through parents, spouses, and family structures. When Christian language is consistently intertwined with fear, obligation, and conditional approval, those associations sink deep. What began as a misused doctrine in the church becomes a lived reality in the home. To understand how narcissistic dynamics shape faith, we must now look not only at congregations but at the Christian family itself.

### The Narcissistic Christian Family

#### **Colossians 3:18-21, 25**

*Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.*

*Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.*

*Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.*

*Fathers do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.*

*Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.*

“Her word against mine. After all, there are no bruises,” he said. - Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 121.<sup>98</sup>

It is especially painful to recognize a narcissistic dynamic within a Christian family. Many cling to Christian optimism; Mom and Dad can always change. Dr. Ramani recognizes how the beautiful structure of Christianity—forgiveness, redemption, and patience—can actually encourage narcissistic behavior. She says, “Your happy family may believe in redemption, but as a result, they may also unwittingly enable your narcissistic relationship situation and suggest loving the narcissistic person even more and sticking together.”<sup>99</sup> The result is not peace but walking on eggshells and constantly editing your behavior to avoid conflict. Often, children in these narcissistic systems abide by “unwritten rules,” or narcissistic assumptions. In such systems, appearance matters. It is the currency of the family; the image of being spiritually faithful, musically gifted, academically successful, or synod-wide respect. Behind the appearance, shame and insecurity are managed through control. The narcissistic parent sets the standard for what is “Christian enough,” and family members learn that love and approval are contingent upon meeting that standard. Colossians 3 calls fathers not to embitter their children; yet in these systems, the home atmosphere is one of discouragement and anxiety. If you don’t perform, expect a lecture.

What can this look like in the WELS? After all, there are narcissists in our synod. It’s possible Satan could twist such an identity to become performative and establish its grandiosity in something as little as WELS’ popularity. Does this mask seem far-fetched:

---

98. This is a powerful story of a potential narcissistic church planter. His wife shared her concerns with Chuck DeGroat, one-on-one, and after little prying and high numbers on a narcissism test, he heard these words. The abuse, generally, isn’t physical. Nobody can see the emotional bruises or scars. That is one of the worst parts of narcissistic abuse.

99. Ramani S. Durvasula, *It’s Not You: Identifying and Healing from Narcissistic People* (New York: Penguin Life, 2024), 114.

The father was a respected pastor from a historic line of WELS pastors. He seems to know everybody in the synod, after all, everybody knows their last name.<sup>100</sup> His need for validation affects everyone in the family. His wife is tired of maintaining an image, living out his narcissistic fantasy. She must organize *Mommy and Me*,<sup>101</sup> teach at the grade school, lead women's bible study, among so much more. Her husband, who is her pastor, has stated that this is the standard for a pastor's wife. Anything less is unfaithful. Often, she finds her efforts are never enough. She wants help, but how could she expose his sins? Who would believe her? After all, he is the pastor. The wife isn't the only one who suffers; so do their children.

The *fixer/peacekeeper*, Amanda, exhausted herself trying to be the perfect Christian girl. She would dress how dad wanted and only talk to boys who would go to MLC, since that's who he approves. At home, she tried to keep everybody laughing through every stressful devotion, argument, and vacation. When things were tense, her humor and validation she offered her father provided temporary peace. She gave so much for others but often felt empty and spent. Who was there to support Amanda?

The *golden child*, Josh, was often oblivious. His four years at a Synod Preparatory School were a success; he was a great athlete, aced Latin and German, and was the star of the musical. If he didn't, he'd get a lecture on abusing God's given gifts, so it was easier to just comply and be the best. As senior year came to a close, he felt absolute terror. How would he tell his dad he wasn't pursuing the pastoral ministry? This would be the first time he disappointed his parents.

---

100. This is not to shame any last name, or to even assume that this is an issue. Instead, this thesis recognizes the unique pressure that some might feel to live up to a family standard, and how the sinful nature can twist God's gifts.

101. A wonderful opportunity to share the gospel with new mothers. I've heard this takes much time to prep, but it is a wonderful service for so many families. In no way is this diminishing this work, but rather showing how taxing it can be with many additional tasks.

Would he lose all their affection? He is under so much pressure, but all his siblings are secretly jealous of dad's approval.

The *invisible child*, Derek, was left to his own devices and made some suboptimal choices as he approached adulthood with little guidance. He didn't have the preferred friend group at a Synod Preparatory School. He couldn't come home and share stories about the good ole' days at Northwestern like the golden child, Josh. Dad loved Josh because he saw his success through him. What did he see in Derek? Failure. He was often ignored unless he achieved something worth highlighting to friends and family. But the attention isn't worth it. He would rather hide. Derek feels the pressure of performance. He isn't the favorite, and everybody knows it. Not just the family, the congregation knows it. Sometimes the pastor, his father, will use sermon illustrations that feel humiliating or exposing. The humiliation has gotten so bad that people ask, "How are Derek and Josh even related?"

*Helpful and truth-seeking* Samantha experienced burnout. She kept the home together. She supported Mom and Derek. She wanted to protect, but she quickly got married and hoped her husband would be a pastor, teacher, or really anything, as long as it was so far away that she would never have to return. She couldn't compromise the truth: Dad is abusive. She doesn't know how Amanda keeps it together. She knows the pressure Josh is under yet feels conflicted because her upbringing taught her to be jealous of the attention. She cries about Derek constantly. Samantha feels guilty for leaving him behind. However, for her safety, she leaves. Sadly, distance didn't remove all trauma. Her identity with the synod is spent because at each WELS church she goes to, she is still asked, "Hey, is \_\_\_\_ your dad? He's such a great guy!" But the lies stop with her. Her dad is not great. To Samantha, he's basically Satan.<sup>102</sup>

---

102. This is based on Dr. Ramani's explanation of roles in the narcissistic family. If this sounds like your life, please go and read her section on this. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 118.

Dr. Ramani introduces these roles and their flexibility. Some children assume the role of golden child and truth-seer. She explains, “These roles allow the narcissistic parent to retain unquestioned power and control within the system as well.”<sup>103</sup> This type of identity-based control can happen in any close-knit Christian culture, including our own, and the spiritual danger is subtle but severe. When a parent’s approval becomes intertwined with God’s approval, children may internalize the belief that divine love is conditional. Law-heavy correction without gospel comfort distorts the image of God. In extreme cases, the parent’s voice becomes confused with God’s voice. The child might conclude that, if this is the true God, then I want nothing to do with him.

Pastors must approach these families carefully. The presenting issue may not be overt abuse but exhaustion, shame, confusion, or chronic guilt. Survivors often hesitate to speak critically about their parents, especially if those parents are respected leaders. If they do speak out, it might be shut down as a sin against the fourth commandment, an act of disrespect towards God’s authority. When narcissistic parents abuse God’s word and frame it in such a way, the child might assume they are the problem. They feel dirty with shame.<sup>104</sup> A pastor’s first task is not to diagnose, but to listen. What are the patterns? What are the hidden rules associated with forgiveness or repentance? Is the family’s image prioritized over truth? The pastor should take note of what the children say. In our example above, Samantha said that her dad is basically

---

103. Durvasula, *It’s Not You*, 119.

104. As Edward Welch says in *Shame Interrupted*, “Shame is not a mirage. It is very real. A sexually violated woman feels contaminated by what has been done to her, and she really is contaminated. A person who has lived with rejection can’t neutralize it with happy thoughts. Shame is like dirt. No matter how it happened, you are a mess and something has to be done about it. When you are dirty, there is no feel-as-if about it. Wishful thinking is ineffective. Psychiatric medications, drugs or alcohol, a change in perspective, and self-affirmation are equally ineffective. Shame demands something much more potent than these superficial treatments.” Edward T. Welch, *Shame Interrupted* (Charlotte: New Growth Press, 2012), 3-4.

Satan. Samantha's language is emotionally intense. Yet beneath it is a theological instinct: accusation without gospel mirrors the work of the Accuser (Rev 12:10). If that's Satan's job, why does her father accuse? If it's Satan's job to bring up the dirty shame of her past, then why does her father constantly bring up memories she's not proud of? That is one example of many that expose the many terrible excuses of a Christian narcissistic household. They claim it's in the family's best interest. "In narcissistic and invalidating family systems, the dynamic is often 'see something, say nothing.' If you call out a narcissistic family member, you are viewed as the problem or are silenced, gaslighted, or ostracized."<sup>105</sup> This is critical for the pastor to recognize. When the children speak, this is an opportunity to listen. Their trust has been misused by their narcissistic parent in the past. In such systems, children will infrequently speak out. When they do, it's time to listen, take notes, notice patterns, and intervene with God's truth.

The pastor might feel pressure or be unequipped to recognize narcissistic abuse. Dr. Ramani introduces a useful tool. She calls it the *rule of three*: First time is a blip, second a coincidence, third a pattern.<sup>106</sup> To reinforce this recognition, she encourages reflection. Do you feel refreshed or empty after spending time with them?<sup>107</sup> Are they consistently mean or are they hot-and-cold?<sup>108</sup> Is your empathy creating excuses for their way of life, or do they actually feel that way?<sup>109</sup> These subtle tests can help us soberly discern narcissistic family dynamics.

---

105. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 127.

106. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 129

107. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 129-130. You feel refreshed with people who are healthy.

108. As we established earlier, one of NPD's recognizable traits is a consistent inconsistency.

109. One can cover their empathy with their own, saying, "They are only like that because they had a hard day, or because their dad treated them poorly as a child." Empathy can unintentionally create excuses for their abusive behavior.

Dr. Ramani is intentional in recognizing that this isn't about diagnosis or changing others, saying, "recognize that this isn't about labeling a person as narcissistic and walking away, but about identifying unhealthy behaviors that are simply not good for you, and realizing that these patterns don't really change."<sup>110</sup> We have mentioned the hope of narcissistic change, but whether they change or not, you can heal. "By digging deep and exploring these patterns, you start excavating your authentic self—not the version that was shaped to cater to the needs and preferences of the narcissistic people, but the actual you."<sup>111</sup> Healing begins when individuals realize that their worth before God does not depend on meeting a parent's shifting standards. Excavating the "authentic self," as Ramani describes, aligns pastorally with reclaiming one's baptismal identity in Christ.

For the pastor, care in these situations requires clarity and courage. Scripture must not be weaponized to reinforce control. Colossians 3 commands submission, but it equally commands gentleness and forbids embittering authority. There is no favoritism before God. The law exposes sin in every role within the system, including the controlling parent. The gospel comforts those who have been crushed under misused authority.

Appendix 1 provides a guided tool for pastors walking with individuals emerging from narcissistic Christian family systems. The aim is not family rebellion, but godly restoration. The ultimate task is to re-anchor the wounded soul not in a family image, but in Christ alone.

### **For Survivors of Narcissistic Abuse**

#### **Revelation 6:10**

*They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"*

---

110. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 131.

111. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 134.

The phrase “death by a thousand paper cuts’ often surfaces in client narratives about narcissistic abuse – and for good reason. – Marielle Babb, MS, LPC<sup>112</sup>

One of the most fear-inducing questions survivors ask is: "Am I like them?" After years of living within a narcissistic system, you begin to question how much of their behavior lives inside you. You notice your anxiety in relationships. Your hyper-awareness of your environment: tone shifts and cold shoulders. The compulsion to keep everyone emotionally stable. The deep need to be seen and affirmed. These are not signs that you are becoming the abuser. They are signs that you adapted in order to survive. Narcissistic abuse normally doesn't express itself in explosive regret, such as broken bones or hospital visits; it is cumulative. It is what many describe as “death by a thousand paper cuts.” Over time, repeated invalidation, shame, and emotional manipulation reshape the way you interpret yourself and others. Dr. Ramani describes how survivors often internalize the narcissist's shame: “The narcissistic relationship can work only if you internalize the narcissistic person's shame and make it your own. In essence, you become the storage unit for the narcissistic person's shame.”<sup>113</sup> That shame was never yours to carry. Yet you carried it anyway.

For Christians, this shame-dynamic can be especially disorienting. When spiritual language is manipulated to control, the lines between selflessness and slavery blur. Are your actions to serve Christ, or to serve the narcissist's preferred outcomes? Questions about church participation, career choices, friendships, or personal interests may have been proposed as options, but in reality, predetermined. Intentional and habitual shame reinforces you to think Christianity means always choosing correctly. Over time, shame begins to attach itself not only

---

112. Babb, Marielle. “Narcissistic Abuse: Death by a Thousand Paper Cuts.” *KDH Collective*. July 11, 2025.

113. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 100.

to the narcissistic parent or partner, but to God himself. You may begin to fear that divine love is as conditional as the love you experienced at home. You become paralyzed. You either choose correctly, or you aren't enough. This leads you not only to fear your earthly parents, but also your heavenly Father.<sup>114</sup> The Christian narcissist abuses your beliefs and leaves you in the storm of insecurity, carrying and internalizing their shame for too long.<sup>115</sup> Yet, an inkling still remains, "Am I the problem? Am I just like them?"

If this resonates, hear this clearly: you are not the problem. Your adaptations were learned responses to instability and invalidation. Your hypervigilance was an attempt to preserve peace. Your anxiety was a survival mechanism. Your questions about faith are not rebellion; they are wounds seeking clarity. When Revelation records the cry, "How long, O Lord?" it empathizes with your experience of injustice. Scripture does not silence that cry. It points us to the God who promises to carry our burdens, understand our pain, and give us peace; today and forever.

Yet recognizing the injustice is only the beginning. Survivors often discover that awareness feels like loss. The image of the loving parent, spouse, or leader they believed in begins to fracture. The relationship, as they once knew, dies. What follows is not merely clarity, it is grief. Healing from narcissistic abuse, therefore, is not simply boundary-setting or diagnosis. It is mourning the living. It is grieving the relationship that never was. And like all grief, it unfolds in stages.

The following section focuses on the term *narcissistic death*. Narcissistic death explores this complex grief of mourning the living. This thesis explains how the five stages of grief

---

114. Renee Swanson, *Covert Narcissism and Christianity with Guest Kathy*.

115. Renee Swanson, *Covert Narcissism and Christianity with Guest Kathy*.

provide a helpful framework for understanding this unique healing journey. Not because recovery is linear, but because grief validates loss—and what you lost was real.

### Healing From Narcissistic Abuse Using the Five Stages of Grief

#### **John 16:22**

*So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.*

Jesus, I just don't understand. Why do I feel so numb? Why do I cry so much? In the midst of my grief, let me see your loving face. - Richard E. Lauersdorf, *With Tears In Our Eyes, God's comfort as I grieve the death of my loved one*

Recognizing narcissistic abuse in a long-term relationship can feel like a death. The partner, parent, sibling, or friend is still physically present, yet the relationship as it was imagined no longer exists. The loving image once trusted begins to fade. The person remains, but the illusion dies. Healing from narcissistic abuse involves mourning. It's not the death of a body, but the death of a belief. You believed in your parents, spouse, or friend. They are not the beautiful memory you have. That false narrative collapsed when you found clarity. What makes this grief uniquely painful is that survivors must mourn the living. They may still share holidays, church pews, and family gatherings with the very person whose image they are grieving.

Dr. Ramani wisely cautions that, "There is no easy five-step healing hack for narcissistic abuse."<sup>116</sup> Recovery is neither linear nor formulaic. Yet the five stages of grief offer a helpful lens for understanding the emotional turbulence that follows awareness. These stages were never intended to package emotions neatly, as Kübler-Ross and Kessler explain, but to describe common responses to profound loss. Grief is individual and unpredictable. Healing from narcissistic abuse is similar. The survivor may move rapidly between clarity and confusion,

---

116. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 109.

anger and longing, strength and despair. Progress does not follow a straight line. What matters is not the speed of recovery, but the honest acknowledgment of loss. To grieve is not weakness; it is recognition that something meaningful has been taken. For the Christian survivor, this grief is held within a greater promise. Jesus acknowledges seasons of sorrow yet anchors them in future joy (Jn 16:22). Healing from narcissistic abuse does not erase injustice, nor does it minimize pain. It permits mourning in the presence of hope. Some days, you will feel in control of your emotions. Rejoice in that! In others, you will feel like all your progress is for nothing. Rejoice that your future is in God's hands and give yourself some grace. Have you expected others to heal automatically when they lose a loved one? Give yourself that grace. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler summarize the goal of the five stages of grief: "The stages have evolved since their introduction, and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives."<sup>117</sup> The following sections explore how denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance often appear in survivors of narcissistic abuse. These stages are not steps to complete, but experiences to understand. Naming them can help dignify the loss and orient the survivor toward future healing.

### Denial

Although the stages of grief are not sequential, denial is often immediate when survivors begin to recognize narcissistic dynamics. The mind resists this diagnosis because it is easier to reinterpret their behavior than accept the relationship is disordered. One might find oneself making excuses for their loved one. "They can't be a narcissist... they're too generous!" "He only reacts that way

---

117. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 22.

because of stress.” “She means well.” Highly empathetic individuals are especially prone to filling in emotional meaning where little exists. They supply explanations that preserve the image of the relationship. In doing so, they attempt to protect both the loved one and themselves from the painful truth. Denial also appears in permissive language: “If we just keep the peace, everything will be fine. Let’s just do it their way; we don’t want them to be upset.” When stability in a family or church depends on one person’s emotional regulation, others adjust. This isn’t patience or peacemaking; this is more likely fear-driven accommodation to maintain the narcissistic system. Kübler-Ross and Kessler describe denial in terminal illness as a refusal to believe what is unfolding: “In a person who is dying, denial may look like disbelief. They may be going about life and actually denying that a terminal illness exists.”<sup>118</sup> Anyone can overlook disorder or avoid diagnosis. Survivors of narcissistic abuse may continue participating in the relational system while suppressing the mountain of evidence that proves dysfunction. Denial allows temporary emotional survival and softens the shock.

Denial is not stupidity or weakness. It is a protective response. Survivors cling to good memories, hoping for a change. Just like a normal death, “You begin to question the how and why... You are no longer in an external story telling mode; now you turn inward as you begin the search for understanding. You explore the circumstances surrounding the loss. Did it have to happen? Did it have to happen that way? Could anything have prevented it?”<sup>119</sup> In the context of narcissistic abuse, denial might delay grief. However, patterns eventually become too consistent to ignore. When the evidence breaks through denial, the survivor needs to mourn.

---

118. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 22.

119. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 25.

## Anger

Anger in grief is surprising. When a loved one dies, you might be mad at doctors for failing, at yourself for not intervening earlier, your loved one for living unhealthily, and a righteous anger for sin's destruction. Narcissistic death also brings anger. Anger at yourself; how could I be that gullible? Anger at the narcissist; how could they be so heartless? You'll feel anger at your friends or family who minimize your situation. Intellectually, the survivor may recognize that responsibility is complex. Emotionally, however, the injustice feels sharp and personal.

Narcissistic abuse often leaves little visible evidence. When the abuse is subtle or psychological, the survivor may be told that their perceptions are exaggerated or flawed. The anger that follows is not merely reactive; it is the body's recognition of betrayal. "It is important to remember that the anger surfaces once you are feeling safe enough to know you will probably survive whatever comes." <sup>120</sup> As clarity increases, so does emotional intensity. This anger coexists with so many emotions: embarrassment, worthlessness, shame, anxiety, loneliness, lingering attachment, and the list continues. These emotions or stages do not unfold in a neat sequence. Grief isn't a checklist, and you aren't failing when you're feeling. It's all a part of the process. In this process, you might doubt and find yourself questioning if they really are narcissistic. Dr. Ramani introduces a useful metaphor: *Entering the Tiger's Cage*. What happens when you enter a Tiger's cage? You get hurt. Sometimes, we need to be reminded that narcissists are like tigers; they hurt you. When you start to question if they truly are narcissistic, Dr. Ramani suggests directly communicating a need to the narcissistic person and paying attention to the invalidating response. The resulting anger is not failure; it is confirmation of their pattern. The painful

---

120. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 25.

realization is that one cannot force another person into empathy or change. The sad reality: “The will to save a life is not the power to stop a death.”<sup>121</sup> This includes narcissistic death.

Anger in narcissistic death can feel isolating. Unlike physical death, this loss is not publicly acknowledged. The relationship continues outwardly—family gatherings, church attendance, shared spaces—while inwardly the survivor is grieving an isolating, fractured reality. Well-meaning friends or family may suggest reconciliation strategies that unintentionally reinforce the abusive dynamic. Such responses can intensify the survivor’s sense of invisibility. Yet anger serves a purpose. “Underneath anger is pain, *your* pain.”<sup>122</sup> *Your* pain needs to be dealt with by *you*. Nobody can grieve for you. In this pain, you can acknowledge love, hope, and loss. Exploring what was lost will help you understand how to move forward. How will you process this anger? When examined, anger can clarify boundaries and help you to emotionally regulate the next time you find yourself near the tiger’s cage. What can you do to change the tiger’s nature? Nothing. Yet reflection is personally powerful. Your “anger affirms that you can feel, that you did love, and that you have lost.”<sup>123</sup> However, you haven’t been consumed by the tiger. You are living, you are loved, and you have a future.

### Bargaining

The bargaining in a narcissistic death is a common yet dangerous part of the grieving process.

Survivors may attempt to regain control via negotiation. “After a loss, bargaining may take the

---

121. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 26.

On page 26, they continue describing narcissistic death almost perfectly, “You may be angry at this unexpected, undeserved, and unwanted situation in which you find yourself. Someone once shared, ‘I’m angry that I have to keep living in a world where I can’t find her, call her, or see her. I can’t find the person I loved or needed anywhere. She is not really where her body is now.’”

122. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 28.

123. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 29.

form of a temporary truce.”<sup>124</sup> You might be tempted to make “truces” to restore chaos. You might say, “Well, if I just do what he says, life isn’t that bad... I can just pretend that we are a happy family. After all, the good days outweigh the bad... They are right, I must be the problem. I’ll do it his way from now on.” This bargaining can easily become religious and intensify this stage: “A Christian spouse never gets a divorce... I’m a pastor. I can’t break this relationship... What kind of mother would I be to leave?” All these narcissistic manipulations lead you to make a truce. In these moments, faith becomes entangled with fear. This fear might tempt you to comply in exchange for temporary peace. Ultimately, “we become lost in a maze of “if only . . .” or “What if . . .” statements. We want life returned to what it was; we want our loved one restored. We want to go back in time.”<sup>125</sup> At its core, bargaining seeks restoration of the imagined relationship. It asks, “If only I were more patient... If only I had explained myself better... If only I prayed harder.” These “if only” statements are the narcissist’s companion. They want you to think that if you changed, everything would be perfect. The reality is that things can’t go back to the way they were.

Bargaining isn’t an admission of weakness. It reflects the desire to maintain something meaningful. “Bargaining may fill the gaps that our strong emotions generally dominate, which often keep suffering at a distance. It allows us to believe that we can restore order to the chaos that has taken over.”<sup>126</sup> Bargaining will most likely happen, and then one might find themselves back in the narcissistic cycle they desperately tried to leave. Bargaining needs boundaries. Boundaries help set our reasonable limits. Boundaries do not attempt reconciliation at all costs,

---

124. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 30.

125. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 30.

126. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 30.

but they protect dignity, safety, and values. In the grieving process, they mark the movement from attempting to repair the illusion to learning how to live without it.

### Depression

Depression in the aftermath of narcissistic abuse is often minimized—both by the survivor and by observers. Because the relationship continues outwardly, the loss may feel invisible. Others may say, “Everyone deals with difficult people,” or assume that the situation does not warrant prolonged sorrow. “Depression after a loss is too often seen as unnatural: a state to be fixed, something to snap out of. The first question to ask yourself is whether the situation you’re in is actually depressing.”<sup>127</sup> Unlike physical death, narcissistic loss rarely brings communal acknowledgment. There are no public rituals of mourning. The survivor may return to work, church, or family gatherings as though nothing has changed. Internally, however, something has shifted permanently. Grief is private.

Kübler-Ross and Kessler describe depression as an unwanted guest that you should invite into your home. However, when the unwanted guest, your depression, walks in, this is a moment for personal discovery. What were the insecurities that your narcissistic abuser was targeting and manipulating? Having an in-depth conversation with your depression might lead you to understand yourself much more and how you can heal. Understanding depression isn’t about never being hurt again, but about taking away narcissistic control. In the past, your narcissistic abuser utilized your depression to manipulate you. Understanding your depression makes you that much stronger to assert your boundaries and stay calm in front of your abuser. You get to tell your abuser and yourself; I already cried about this, and I can cry about it again if I need to. I’m not scared of my depression, and I’m not scared of you.

---

127. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 33.

Depression does not have the final word. It is a passage through grief, not a permanent identity. In the Christian framework, sorrow coexists with hope. The one who weeps is not abandoned (Ps 34:18). The goal is not to eliminate feeling, but to grieve honestly without surrendering to despair.

### Acceptance

Acceptance is often confused with the notion of being all right or okay with what has happened. This is not the case. Most people don't ever feel okay or all right about the loss of a loved one. This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality.<sup>128</sup>

In the context of narcissistic abuse, acceptance can be especially difficult for Christians. Scripture rightly proclaims forgiveness, redemption, and the power of God to change hearts. Yet hope can become confused with denial. Survivors may interpret momentary affection, apology, or temporary warmth as lasting transformation. The longing for restoration is not wrong; it reflects love. But acceptance requires sober recognition of consistent patterns. Dr. Ramani explains how a narcissist will abuse your forgiveness, saying, "If you are a committed forgiver, that raises tremendous vulnerability because instead of embracing forgiveness as a call to be better, narcissistic people view it as a sign that there will not be consequences for their behavior."<sup>129</sup> Acceptance is not avoidance, it's clarity. It acknowledges that the relationship as imagined may not exist. It recognizes that one cannot force change or empathy.

"Acceptance doesn't mean you are a doormat."<sup>130</sup> Acceptance is a healthy shift of focus. It's realizing that the previous way of life with your narcissistic abuser is destructive and

---

128. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 36.

129. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 112.

130. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 137.

harmful. It's recognizing abuse without dismissing. Energy once directed toward fixing the relationship at all costs can now be focused on one's own spiritual and emotional health.

"Acceptance is not about liking a situation. It is about acknowledging all that has been lost and learning to live with that loss."<sup>131</sup> "Radical acceptance gives you permission to heal... The alternative is to remain stuck in the unfounded hope that it could get better and stay in these invalidating cycles in perpetuity."<sup>132</sup>

Acceptance of narcissistic death is liberating because ultimately, there was nothing you could do. There was no deep conversation, magic present, or selfless action you could do to fix them. You tried everything, and you know that. Acceptance will be hard for Christians. You might think there must be a Bible verse you missed, a sermon they should hear, or a Bible Study that will bring them back into the person you loved. Chance is, they know the verse, heard the sermon, wrote the Bible study, and they still haven't changed. Changing the narcissistic heart was never your job. You aren't a failure. God loves you. Acceptance concludes the grieving cycle not with triumph, but with steadiness. The loss is real. The sorrow is real. Yet so is God's sustaining presence. Identity is no longer anchored in the shifting approval of another, but in the unchanging grace of Christ.

---

131. Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 37.

132. Durvasula, *It's Not You*, 137.

## CONCLUSION

Narcissistic temptations are not new. Scripture has long described pride, self-exaltation, image management, abusive authority, and hardened hearts. What modern psychology names as NPD, Scripture recognizes as the created exalting itself over the Creator (Rom 1:25). Yet the language of psychology helps pastors notice patterns that might otherwise remain hidden beneath charisma, religious performance, or achievement. It creates an awareness that pairs essentially with theology.

Throughout this thesis, narcissism has been approached not as a label to weaponize, but as a dynamic to understand. We have seen how narcissistic patterns may develop, how they distort Christian families, how they manipulate religious language, and how they leave survivors grieving the living. We have considered pastoral referral, the necessity of boundaries, and the slow, non-linear path of healing. None of this work exists to condemn, but to clarify. The pastor remains, above all, a doctor of souls. He is not a clinical psychologist, yet he cannot ignore psychological realities that deeply affect his flock. Narcissistic dynamics challenge pastors because they often mimic spiritual maturity yet demonstrate profound misunderstanding. Narcissists can hide behind orthodoxy, authority, or service. They can hurt families to preserve an image. To shepherd wisely requires humility, patience, and much prayer.

At the same time, this thesis expresses caution. Not every difficult person is a narcissist. Not every conflict is abuse. Labels carry weight, and pastoral speech must be intentional. The goal is not quick diagnosis, but truth spoken in love. Since we live under God's grace, an important goal of this thesis is to spark a healthy conversation regarding personality disorders in the church. Will heightened awareness lend itself to natural solutions? Can we take the power shame wields and use its absence to fuel helpful strategies in the future? This thesis will

hopefully spark useful conversation so that personality disorder isn't such a taboo subject, but rather a means to better understand theological application.

For survivors of narcissistic abuse, the message must be equally clear: you are not the problem. The shame you carried was not originally yours. Grief is not weakness. Boundaries are not rebellions. Healing is not selfish. Survivors need a healthy helping of the nutritious gospel: “Nor darkness nor doubting nor sin and its stain can touch my salvation: with Jesus I reign.”<sup>133</sup> Ultimately, narcissism is proof of humanity's deeper disease—sin curved inward on itself. Like every sin, it meets its answer at the cross. The cross exposes pride, and it condemns injustice. More importantly, the cross offers mercy, even to those who wound others. That mercy does not erase consequences, nor does it eliminate the need for boundaries, but it anchors hope in a Savior superior to any personality disorder.

Several avenues for future research would greatly benefit the church. First, how might we edit our preaching with personality disorders in mind? Can we more accurately preach shame and guilt without turning sermons into psychological lectures? Second, what recognition of personality disorders is necessary in our pastoral training system? Are narcissistic pastors a problem, or is it just how we deal with them? Third, how do other personality disorders uniquely intersect with law and gospel application? A deeper study of personality disorders in the context of theology could further refine pastoral care. Finally, a biblical deep dive into narcissism in scripture would only benefit our understanding of scriptural application. What personality disorders do we find in Scripture, and how do we apply that research?

Narcissism is not beyond grace. Neither are those harmed beyond healing. The pastor stands between neither sinner and Savior, nor victim and comfort, but points both to Christ.

---

133. *Christian Worship: Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2021), 518. This is hymn 518, *Christ Be My Leader*. The text is by Timothy Dudley-Smith.

There, pride is humbled. Shame is uncovered and forgiven. Identity is restored. And even in households marked by control or grief, the gospel remains what it has always been: sufficient.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix #1: Narcissism Recovery Journaling Template

**Grounded in Christ** - *A Journaling Page for Healing from Narcissistic Abuse*  
*Healing is not fixing yourself. It's remembering the truth.*

Take this page slowly. Stop whenever you need.

#### **1. Pause + Ground** (*Thinking without reacting*)

Take three breaths and say a quick prayer: “God, be with me as I learn more about myself and trust in you.”

What am I feeling right now? (emotion, body, mind)

---

---

#### **2. What Set This Off?** (*Naming without blaming*)

What happened, or what was said, that made me feel this way?

(*Take time to describe the moment or the narcissistic offense.*)

---

---

Does this feeling connect to something older (a past role, family pattern, fear of being at fault)?

☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Not sure

If yes, what does it remind me of?

---

---

#### **3. How Did I React?** (*Observing without judging*)

Why did I feel I *had* to do?

- ☐ Fix or rescue
- ☐ Explain myself
- ☐ Apologize
- ☐ Shut down
- ☐ Retaliate
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What were my thoughts?

---

#### 4. What Does God Say About Me? *(Identifying without assuming)*

**Isaiah 43:25** *I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.*

What accusations, thoughts, or words are trying to define me right now?

---

What does God **not** hold against me here?

---

What does God's truth reveal about how I feel right now?

---

#### 5. Slowing Down Fear: What is my worth? *(Valuing without losing)*

**Isaiah 43:1** *Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.*  
**Romans 8:31-35** *If God is for us, who can be against us?... Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... No one.*

What am I afraid of losing right now? *(approval, safety, love, standing)*

---

What cannot be taken from me, no matter what another person says or does?

---

#### 6. I Do Not Have to Retaliate *(Growing without judging)*

**1 Peter 2:23-24** *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."*

What part of this situation am I trying to judge, fix, or make right?

---

What would it look like to hand judgment back to God? *(God is the judge. I am not. Romans 12:19)*

---

React to this truth: Jesus reacted perfectly for me.

---

### **7. I Am Strong and I Have Boundaries** *(Recognizing without despairing)*

**Isaiah 54:4** *Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated.*

**Deuteronomy 33:25** *Your bars shall be iron and bronze, and as your days, so shall your strength be.*

Where do I feel weak or exposed right now?

---

What does it mean that Christ is strengthening and guarding me **today**?

---

What boundary will you try to establish?

---

### **8. Prayer or Promise** *(Remembering without avoiding)*

A prayer I need today **or** a Scripture I want to cling to:

---



---

*(Optional prayer)*

**Jesus, You have already carried what I am trying to fix.**

**Ground me in Your mercy. Guard me in Your truth.**

**Let Your word, not my fear, have the final say. Amen.**

### **9. Going Forward** *(Planning without criticizing)*

One goal for the next time I feel this way:

---

Remember: You are not defined by your reaction. You are declared righteous, not because you handled this perfectly, but because Christ already has.

## **Appendix #2: Setting Boundaries in Christian Love Counseling Template**

**Setting Boundaries in Christian Love** – *To Establish and Maintain Healthy Relationships*  
*Sometimes the best way to respond in love, is to say nothing at all.*

Take this page slowly. Stop whenever you need.

### 1. Clarify Your Limits *(Setting Clear Boundaries)*

**Romans 12:18** *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

Setting boundaries in relationships is necessary. It helps others love you, and it helps you show love to others. In this specific relationship, what can I realistically endure without sinning in response? Write down your limits/boundaries for this relationship below:

---



---



---

Remember: Boundaries are not punishments, but loving limits to minimize sin, and protect us.

### 2. Identifying Patterns *(What consistent behaviors violate these boundaries?)*

**Ephesians 5:11** *Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.*

**Galatians 6:7** *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.*

**2 Timothy 4:2** *Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.*

The above passages clarify that recognizing sinful behavior is a good thing. God sees sin clearly, and sinful behaviors should be made clear, so that we can encourage building each other up (1 Thess 5:11).

Take time to reflect these harmful patterns. Are there periods of peace, or intense attraction, followed by shameful accusation or abuse? What sinful behaviors do we need to expose, so that we can move forward with an appropriate, loving response?

*(Take time to describe the moment or the narcissistic offense.)*

First this occurs:

---

Then this response:

---

It results in:

---

Further explanations:

---



---

### 3. Responding Without Escalation. *(How do I assert boundaries with my words?)*

**Ephesians 4:26** *In your anger do not sin.*

**Proverbs 17:14** *Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.*

**1 Peter 2:23** *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.*

It's important to remember, as we practice responding, we remember that Christ is our example. When pressed, Jesus speaks truth and doesn't sin. We aren't perfect, but we pray that God will give us the strength to respond in love for our neighbor, and love for ourselves.

Why did I feel I *had* to say? *(JADE is a common acronym to describe our improper reactions)*

- ☐ "I had to because..." (Justifying your actions to them)
- ☐ "Why can't you just listen to me?" (Arguing your position)
- ☐ "You always do this!" (Defensiveness to protect self)
- ☐ "This happened because..." (Explaining your situation to them)
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What was the trigger?

---

How did they soften my boundaries?

---

What did my reaction accomplish?

---

How could I *edit* my response to keep a boundary, without escalation? *(Changing the acronym)*

- **J** – "I've made my decision." (My boundary stands without your approval)
- **A** – "I'm not arguing this." (My boundaries are not up for debate)
- **D** – "I disagree, and that's ok." (My boundaries are stable)
- **E** – "I don't need to explain further." (My boundaries are clear)

**REWRITE** your common reaction to this individual to end the cycle.

---

#### 4. Maintaining Boundaries *(How to be consistent)*

**Proverbs 25:28** *Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.*

What lessons have I learned from the attacks on my boundaries in the **past**?

---

What is one way I can *strengthen my walls* and maintain my boundaries **today**?

---

What attacks should I expect on my boundaries in the **future**? How do I plan to respond, and what are the necessary actions when this boundary is crossed again?

---

#### 5. Trust God with the Outcome *(God has control over our relationships)*

**Colossians 1:16-17** *For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

**Psalms 62:1-2** *Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.*

You are not saved by how well you manage this situation.

**Name** one way your boundaries are showing trust in God.

---

Who has control over the heavens and the earth, including our relationships?

**Name** one way we can release and let God hold all things together.

---

Maintaining boundaries takes effort.

**Name** one way we can turn to God and find rest as we spend energy on our boundaries.

---

#### 8. Prayer or Promise *(How I can continue to trust God with my future)*

A prayer I need today **or** a Scripture I want to cling to:

---

---

*(Optional prayer)*

**Jesus, You have responded perfectly when my words fail.  
 You are my sure foundation, of whom should I fear?  
 Help me find confidence to live faithfully in your word.  
 Be with me today, and tomorrow, until eternity. Amen.**

Remember: You are not defined by your reaction. You are declared righteous, not because you handled this perfectly, but because Christ already has.

### Appendix #3: The Quick Guide: “What is Narcissism?”

Take a moment to jot down your current definition here,

Narcissism

is: \_\_\_\_\_<sup>134</sup>

Now, let’s compare your definition to professional opinions. The DSM-5 responds by providing a summary and nine characteristics,

A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements).
2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
3. Believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).
4. Requires excessive admiration.
5. Has a sense of entitlement (i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations).
6. Is interpersonally exploitative (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends).
7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.
9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.<sup>135</sup>

Dr. Ramani responds to the same question,

---

134. Dr. Ramani asks Steven Bartlett the same question in their interview. She didn’t want to contaminate his experience with her definition, at least not yet. I think this practice is useful for recognizing where your information may be misguided. Narcissism has become a widely used term, and before we can grow, we need a definition.

135. American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 761

Grandiosity. Arrogance. The meanness, a manifestation of their traits. They have variable empathy and typically have low empathy. They are deeply entitled. They truly think they are more special than anyone else, and that the rules should apply to them very differently. They have an excessive need for admiration and validation. They are very superficial; they don't really have the capacity for deep, sustained, intimate relationships. They are very much referential to the world outside of them to set goals; they don't have an internal sense of what matters to me, or what I want to do, they do what they do to get admiration and validation. There is a real emotional shallowness to narcissism; those are the patterns and traits that we see. They are very self-centered, very preoccupied with themselves, good and bad. It is very rare for them to lift their heads up and genuinely notice the experience of another person. That's what narcissism is. How does it show up? It shows up as devaluation, dismissiveness, manipulation, and gaslighting. They get angry very quickly, especially when they are frustrated or disappointed, and that can show up as overt rage and anger, yelling, screaming, or even violence; that can show up as passive-aggression, withholding, and withdrawing. They are prone to betrayal, they lie, they cheat, they make promises about the future that they never keep, but they do that to keep people around, so they never leave them. It's a larger manipulation; they will dominate people, they have to get the last word, they will shift blame onto other people, they will rarely take responsibility for their misdeeds, even when they're clearly caught in them, and if they do, they will still blame the other person; they are very neglectful and careless in relationships. That is narcissism.<sup>136</sup>

#### **Appendix #4: A Deeper Description of Narcissistic Subtypes**

##### **OVERT NARCISSISM**

This is your classic narcissism. The overt narcissist is “showy, charismatic, pretentious, preening, charming, attention seeking, and actually, quite often successful.”<sup>137</sup> These people are larger than life and extremely desirable. They get their validation through admiration and success. Their narcissistic identity lies in their overt achievements, hiding the shame of their inferiority.

Where do pastors see this? The pastor will find them in highly coveted and visible positions. After all, the overt narcissist is amazing in public and loves the spotlight: the self-proclaimed right-hand man at voters' meetings, the charismatic praise band leader, the church president at the center of every photo, and the well-known pastor admired for his leadership and big church. In public, overt narcissists seem spiritually impressive.

How does the overt narcissist fool the church? Often, the overt narcissist is misinterpreted as God's gift until their shameful private actions are exposed. Really, this charisma and narcissistic identity were masking their deeper, destructive, relational patterns. You didn't see who has been burned or abused by their “strong personality.”

How does overt narcissism hurt the home? Maybe they behave well in public, but in private, when at home, is where an overt narcissist is frequently destructive. Their spouses and

---

136. Durvasula, *“The Narcissism Doctor.”*

137. Durvasula, *“The Narcissism Doctor.”*

children usually experience emotional neglect, overbearing control, impossible religious standards, rage, devaluation, harsh lectures, and reminders of their God-given superiority. The family's abuse is normally kept secret to maintain the narcissistic image.

### COVERT NARCISSISM

You might find covert narcissism surprising. Covert narcissists aren't the extroverted, successful, in-your-face narcissists. Some call them closeted, vulnerable, or hypersensitive narcissists. Covert narcissists are normally perceived as victimized, socially anxious, angry, aggrieved, sullen, depressed, and resentful. They convey the same shame-covering grandiosity. The overt narcissist says, "I have it the best, look at me!" The covert, "I have it the worst, look at me!" Where do pastors see this? Pastors often encounter covert narcissists as chronic complainers, self-proclaimed martyrs, or emotionally fragile congregants. They may dominate Bible studies, prayer requests, or pastoral conversations with persistent stories of hardship, mistreatment, or disappointment. These individuals often present as anxious, depressed, or deeply wounded. However, their pain always needs an audience.

How does the covert narcissist fool the church? It's deceptive because it mimics humility, brokenness, or spiritual suffering. Empathetic Christians may mistake the narcissist's emotional intensity for emotional depth, repeatedly offering care, sympathy, and attention. Because questioning their narrative feels unloving and unchristian. The covert narcissist's self-centered motives go unchallenged while the community is subtly reorganized around their narcissistic identity framed as the perfect, humblest, downtrodden Christian woman that is ultimately the world's biggest victim. The covert narcissist abuses spiritual guilt.

How does the covert narcissist hurt the home? The covert narcissist's loved ones are often burdened with being the source of unending support. They need to support their identity by constantly reaffirming their painful past and validating their suffering. Any attempt to name dysfunction is reframed as cruelty, betrayal, or spiritual failure, leaving family members confused, exhausted, and blamed.

### COMMUNAL NARCISSISM

Communal narcissists don't find their grandiosity through specific achievements or pity, but rather through the admiration gained through their community. They have an extremely public component to their narcissism. They want to be "perceived as saviors, grand rescuers, humanitarians."<sup>138</sup> This individual seeks out grandiose communal opportunities to enhance his societal portfolio.

Where do pastors see this? They will see this in highly visible service opportunities in the church or society. Communal narcissists gravitate towards social causes that will fuel their validation through their service-based identity. Their efforts in the community will be publicly praised, or the event won't be worth their time.

---

138. Durvasula, *"The Narcissism Doctor."*

How do communal narcissists fool the church? The communal narcissist is masked by a servant heart. Sadly, that heart isn't focused on the overall help offered, but the praise and social standing gained. This will generally be dismissed because the communal narcissist might be rough around the edges or have misplaced priorities, but so much good is being done, it isn't confronted.

How does the communal narcissist hurt the home? Unless they participate in supporting and advancing the communal narcissist's public image, they are often neglected. They are secondary to the "greater good" that the communal narcissist has fully embraced. Unless you help them to achieve their misplaced goals, you aren't worth their time, love, or attention.

### MALIGNANT NARCISSISM

This is the most dangerous form of narcissism. Their lack of empathy makes them cold, callous, and eager to control through any means necessary. Their moral compass has disappeared, and they need more power, control, admiration, etc., at the planned, conscious price of others. Malignant narcissism "shows up as manipulateness, explosiveness, willingness to take advantage of people, coerciveness, isolation, and using menace as a tool for control. It can be quite dangerous. That is why I always say that malignant narcissism is the last stop on the train to psychopathy station."<sup>139</sup>

Where do pastors see this? Hopefully, the pastor won't see this form of narcissism in the church. While less common, malignant narcissists do appear in religious systems when authority and loyalty can be leveraged. Their presence is marked by broken relationships, fear-based leadership, and escalating conflict. Their morals and empathy are explicitly void. If you run into a malignant narcissist, their path of destruction will be evident: broken relationships, public conflicts, and heavy accusations.

How do malignant narcissists fool the church? This might be more popular among narcissistic pastors who utilize the "us against them" motto. This mimics the security of spiritual stability. Malignant narcissists are powerful, confident, and not afraid of their opposition. This can be misrepresented as a strength.

Malignant narcissism is devastating to the home. Malignant narcissism will express open abuse and manipulation. They clearly set their agenda. Generally, this form of narcissism is unsafe during conflict.

---

139. Durvasula, *"The Narcissism Doctor."*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM–5*. 5th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013.

Apprising Ministries. “Mark Driscoll’s ‘Dead Bodies’ and Chris Rosebrough with ‘Another One’s Off the Bus.’” July 3, 2012. <https://www.apprising.org/2012/07/03/mark-driscolls-dead-bodies-and-chris-rosebrough-with-another-ones-off-the-bus/>

Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Babb, Marielle. “Narcissistic Abuse: Death by a Thousand Paper Cuts.” *KDH Collective*. July 11, 2025.

Capps, Donald. *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Campbell, Jennifer, Julie Aitken Schermer, Vanessa C. Villani, Brenda Nguyen, Leanne Vickers, and Philip A. Vernon. “A Behavioral Genetic Study of the Dark Triad of Personality and Moral Development.” *Journal of Personality* 87 (2019): 133–148. <https://www.cambridge.org>.

*Christian Worship: Altar Book*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993.

*Christian Worship: Hymnal*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2021.

DeGroat, Chuck. *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020.

Durvasula, Ramani S. *It’s Not You: Identifying and Healing from Narcissistic People*. New York: Penguin Life, 2024.

Durvasula, Ramani S. “The Narcissism Doctor: ‘1 In 6 People Are Narcissists!’, ‘Are Narcissists Better In Bed?’, ‘Can A Narcissist Change?’” Interview by Steven Bartlett. *The Diary of a CEO with Steven Bartlett* (podcast), February 29, 2024. Accessed December 6, 2025.

Ellis, Havelock. “The Conception of Narcissism.” *Psychoanalytic Review* 14 (1927): 129–153.

English, Jill. “The Casserole Rules.” *Red Tent Living*, September 13, 2019. <https://redtentliving.com/2019/09/13/the-casserole-rules/>. Accessed December 6, 2025.

Flarey, Dominick. "Christian Counseling and Dealing with a Narcissist." *American Institute of Health Care Professionals*, April 5, 2023. <https://aihcp.net/2023/04/05/christian-counseling-and-dealing-with-a-narcissist/>.

Freud, Sigmund. *On Narcissism: An Introduction*. London: Read Books Ltd., 2013.

Geiger, Stephen, Joel M. Otto, John T. Braun, and Ray G. Schumacher. *Luther's Catechism*. 2nd ed. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017.

Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. New York: Little, Brown, 1942.

Hirsch, Phil. "So, You're a Pastor, a Lutheran Pastor, Serving Where the Lord of the Church Has Placed You: And I Thank God For You in My Prayers." Paper presented at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on the Ministry of the Word, Mequon, WI, 2025.

Howard, Brian. *The Christian Narcissist: How to Recognize This Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*. Cross Match Press, 2023.

Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

Kernberg, Otto F. *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*. New York: Jason Aronson, 1975.

Kolb, Robert, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Kohut, Heinz. *The Analysis of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press, 1971.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, and David Kessler. *On Grief and Grieving*. New York: Scribner, 2005.

Kuske, David P. *Luther's Catechism: A Comprehensive Explanation of the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017.

Lauersdorf, Richard E. *With Tears in Our Eyes: God's Comfort as I Grieve the Death of My Loved One*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012.

Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. Vol. 48. Edited by David G. Truemper. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963.

*Luther's Works*. Vol. 51. Edited by John W. Doberstein. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959.

Malkin, Craig. *Rethinking Narcissism*. New York: HarperWave, 2015.

Marceau, Paul. "Narcissism in the Spiritual Life." *Pastoral Psychology* 26 (1977): 23–31.

Mazzella, Anthony. *The Narcissism Decoder*. Four-part video series. Accessed December 6, 2025.

Oglesby, William B., Jr. "Referral as Pastoral Care." *Journal of Pastoral Care* 41, no. 2 (June 1987): 176–185.

Pieper, August. *Christian Dogmatics*. Vol. 1-3. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950.

Plass, Ewald M. *What Luther Says*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959.

Righteous Cause. "Charismatic Leadership or Collective Delusion? Analyzing the Impact of Joel Osteen." January 13, 2025. <https://novus2.com/righteousncause/2025/01/13/charismatic-leadership-or-collective-delusion-analyzing-the-impact-of-joel-osteen/>

Saunders, Stephen M. *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness: Helping Christians Obtain Treatment for Mental Illness*. Vol. 2. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2019.

Schuetze, John. *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2016.

Swan, James. "Luther: 'Lord Jesus, You Are My Righteousness.'" *Beggars All: Reformation and Apologetics*. August 2, 2020. <https://beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2020/08/luther-lord-jesus-you-are-my.html>

Swanson, Renee. "Covert Narcissism and Christianity with Guest Kathy." Podcast audio. November 1, 2024.

Swanson, Renee. *The Covert Narcissism Podcast*. Three-part video series on Shame and Guilt.

Toelke, Carl H., Jr. "Referral in Pastoral Mental Health Counseling." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 4, no. 1 (February 1977): 33–41.

Twenge, Jean M., and W. Keith Campbell. *The Narcissism Epidemic*. New York: Free Press, 2009.

Welch, Edward T. *Shame Interrupted*. Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012.

Wendland, Paul O. "Speaking and Listening in Love: A Meditation and an Encouragement, Part 1." Paper delivered at the Michigan Circuit Pastors' Meeting, January 27, 2011.

