
The Church and the Culture of Narcissism

I want to look at the biblical substitute for what I believe is rampant narcissism in individuals and in our society as a whole. I would like to suggest that in the absence of a healthy, biblically-based self image, we tend to turn to a narcissistic, superficial self love.

Let me recap just a bit of our discussion about the narcissistic personality.

Narcissistic persons are those who attempt to regulate their self-esteem through an inordinate attention to themselves and through the gratification of their needs and wishes. In other words, if persons lack a healthy sense of self esteem, they begin to look everywhere to find some way to think and feel better about themselves. They focus on themselves, how they look, what they wear, what they have, what they do, what people think of them. Then they begin to try to get ahead in areas which will give them more attention. They use people to help make them feel better about themselves. And in their attempt to compensate for a deep underlying sense of self esteem, they become self-centered.

Not only are narcissistic persons characterized by pre-occupation with themselves, but also with the search for immediate gratification. When they don't feel good about themselves inwardly, they turn their attention to what will produce temporary happiness. Narcissistic individuals are prone to focus on receiving rather than giving. They are more concerned with what others can give to them, rather than in what they can share with others. Narcissistic personalities suffer a lack of intimacy. Though they have many superficial relationships, they have difficulty establishing deep and lasting relationships.

Narcissistic personalities also tend to have a lack of interest in either the past or the future. They live in the present. They're not very concerned with a sense of history, either their own personal history, family history, or national history. They're not very concerned about the future. They live in the now. Narcissistic personalities have a poverty of inner-life — a sense of emptiness — that is rooted in their

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lack of self esteem.

What are some of the causes of this narcissistic personality? Let's look first at the narcissistic personality of the individual. Then, we'll look at the narcissistic personality in regard to our society. Thirdly, we'll take a look at narcissism as it relates to the church, because I believe that the evangelical church has been very heavily impacted by a secular narcissistic perspective. Finally, we'll talk about some possible ways of combating this problem.

What, in terms of the psychological development of the individual, causes a person to become unhealthily self-centered? There are many things, and I suspect that all of these will relate to many of us in some way. But, by and large, the problem of a superficial sense of self-esteem or a narcissistic sense of self-esteem is a false sense of self love. You may recall that the whole concept of narcissism is based on the Greek legend of Narcissus, who looked in the pool and fell in love with his own reflected image. The essence is a self love, not in a healthy sense, but in a superficial sense. The foundations for this in an individual's life are laid down in the first few years of life — certainly in the first five or six years of life, and some even in the first year.

Let me try to explain some of the rather complex psychological phenomena involved. In the first few weeks of life the infants literally cannot discriminate and differentiate themselves from their mother. Infants do not come into the world with a sense of who they are. They don't smile, say "Good morning," "Thank you, Mom," etc. They don't even know that they exist as separate persons. Literally, they do not know where they stop and their mothers begin. They can't think "This is me." But gradually, during the first few weeks and months of life and on up to around three years of age, this process is going on (especially in the latter half of the first year of life). The infant begins to find out that there are some things that hurt, such as a slap on the hand. These things go with you everywhere you go. These foods taste a certain way, those taste another way. Around one year of age they begin to realize that "All this stuff is me." If you have a young infant you remember when he or she was around a year old and they first began to speak a little bit; his or her favorite words became "I", "me", "my" and "mine". What the infant was saying is "I'm separate; it used to be Mom and me".

As they begin to differentiate, however, the children are hit with the awareness that not only are they not powerful enough to do

everything like they thought they were doing it when they did it with Mom, but they are very helpless, dependent individuals. This comes as a great shock to infants.

Several things can happen during this crucial period that can lay the foundation for the later psychological narcissism. There may be a lack of intimacy with the mother during that crucial first year or two. As a result infants never really attach or bond to the mother, nor feel secure, loved, or sense trust. Since they don't have that intimacy — perhaps because the mother is emotionally or physically distant or too anxious, angry, or frustrated — the infants begin to withdraw. They decide in themselves that they must take care of themselves. They say, "I can't get my needs met here in this intimate relationship with mother, so I'll become my own parent. I'll be responsible to see that all my needs are met. I'll care for myself. I'll love myself." In other words, a lack of parenting early in life, or conflicted parenting, can cause children not to reach out to their environment, but to withdraw and try to take care of themselves. Don't we all know people who are going through life as adults that way — still trying to take care of themselves?

Another thing that can go wrong is that parents instilled with a lack of deep intimacy often give the children their way as they begin to separate. Whatever the children want, they get. On through age one, two, three, four, five, ten, they get their own way. A permissive parenting style says that the children can do anything they want, and the children grow up with the feeling that, "Hey, whatever I want, I deserve to get." The children grow up feeling that the world owes "me" a living.

Either of these dynamics can be laid down in the very early years of life and they program persons for a narcissistic self-centered style of living.

It's interesting to see what happens or what is missing in this type of personality. There is no feeling of being deeply loved and esteemed. One doesn't have that deep inner resource which says, "I'm a significant, valuable, lovable person."

Secondly, there is a lack of trust in other people. Somehow the parents didn't meet the child's needs adequately, so narcissistic persons grow up feeling that they've got to do it themselves — they can't trust other people.

Thirdly, there is a tendency not to give unless you are getting something in return. You see, if you went through this early infant

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experience, you didn't grow up wanting to love and give to your parents and others. Your concerns were "How do I get, how do I protect, how do I get what I want or need?" Not "How do I give?" So the narcissistic person is sadly lacking in the ability to truly love.

Fourthly, the narcissistic personality is left with a tendency to see other people as objects to be used rather than people to be loved. People exist for what I can get from them for myself.

Let's look now at narcissism in our society. Have you noticed the preoccupation with self in current society? Walk into any bookstore, and what are you confronted with? Self-help books written by myself and my colleagues: *How to be Your Own Best Friend*. *How to Win Through Intimidation*. The book shelves are filled with these books about yourself, yourself, yourself, yourself! It's a preoccupation.

How about the mass media, the commercials? What do they all appeal to? They appeal to how you look. And what you have defines who you are and how you should feel about yourself. Isn't that the message of almost every commercial advertisement you see? If you have a lot, do a lot, look all right, you should feel good. You notice the absence of any message about an inner sense of strength and value and personal worth. You see, it's all on the outside. It's what you *do* that counts.

Notice the emphasis in our society on receiving rather than giving. In politics, for example, the focus is on what "I want." President Reagan is trying to change a few things, and whatever our political opinion may be, we find that people are starting to protest. They think it's a good idea to cut back on expenditures in every area except theirs. "Those other people, they're living off the fat of the land; let's cut down on them, but keep sending the money out here to us." Receive! Receive! Receive!

In the business world there are an endless number of how-to books on gamesmanship: *How to Get Ahead on the Corporate Ladder*, *How to Win at Building a Career*. It's not how you can contribute something to the organization; it's what you can get from it. It's not what managers can contribute to the employees; it's what they can get from the employees.

There is a lack of intimacy and long term commitment in our society. Premarital sexual encounters have become common place, but there is little real intimacy — just sexual, biological experiences and contract marriages. We're afraid that we can't handle the intimacy and long term commitment, so we contract for the

possibility of failure. There are limits to our vulnerability because of our fears of intimacy.

Now, let's go back to the psychological, to the infants who in the first year or two or three of life did not feel sufficiently loved; they withdrew and had to love and take care of themselves. To now approach an intimate lasting relationship terrifies those people. Many of you can relate to that. Remember how frightened you got the closer you got to marriage, because you didn't really know if you were prepared for that kind of intimacy and vulnerability? In the ministry we take a church because it will move our career along, and we may not look as we should at what the people of the congregation really need. Whether they are ready for us to leave or not, we move ahead. Or we decide we don't want children, because they would interfere with our happiness. We're not willing to make the commitment of investing twenty years of our lives in another human being because of our own selfish concerns.

Notice the limited interest in either the past or the future in our society. We have a credit card economy. We buy now and pay later; we get what we want, what will make us happy. Even in politics, we don't want to suffer now; we don't want to make the cutbacks now, but keep on getting the way we've been getting. We disregard the dangers of going bankrupt a few generations down the road. We say, "Let's get it now." Drugs? "Happiness now! Who cares what may happen later, when right now we can get a temporary high." Throughout our whole society, a narcissistic culture runs rampant.

What are the causes of our narcissistic culture? For one thing, our culture is the reflection of personal psychological narcissism. When a group of individuals has narcissistic problems, their attitudes begin to permeate the culture. Other factors, when combined with a capitalistic society, cause problems. I'm for a capitalistic system, and I try to invest my own money wisely, but the work ethic mixed with two or three other factors tends to program people for a superficial egocentric narcissism. We mix capitalism with commercialism, promoted especially through the media. Tied in with our view of the economy and the work ethic, we begin to advertise saying, "If you buy this, then you'll be happier." We apply our work ethic to the accumulation of things that improve our image, that make us look better — better clothes, better car, better home. Most people will look at our car, our clothes, our home and not have to look inside and see how empty and hollow we may really feel.

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Secondly, it involves the substitution of a secular humanism for a biblical faith. We have removed God from the center of our national life, and have put man in His place.

I realize that we may have more Christians per capita than we used to have, and that *Christianity Today* says that over a quarter of the population claims to be born again, but if the thinkers, the media people, and those who impact our culture and determine what we idealize — if they are Christian — it certainly isn't apparent.

We have a culture that has removed God from its way of looking at life and placed man in the center; God is on the periphery. Because of that, our view of both the past and the future has faded. Yet, if God were in the center, we would have to look at the stream of time; there would be a significant historical past and a significant historical future. But having removed God and having placed man in the center, the past and the future have faded and the present has become all important. Immediate gratification is emphasized. The thought is not, "What can I do to make a contribution to the future?"

Another factor which contributes to the culture of narcissism is the breakdown of the family. I don't think you can separate these three. Commercialism, the substitution of humanism for a biblical faith, and the breakdown of the family all go together. There is a movement away from a living authority of the parents. I realize that some parents have been unloving, authoritarian parents. That is often a reality, and much of the permissiveness that grew out of the 1940's — for example, John Dewey in education, Benjamin Spock in pediatrics, Carl Rogers, and others — was a reaction against an angry, naive, authoritarianism that needed to be countered. Unfortunately, the reaction went to the other extreme in terms of permissive humanism. It was a permissiveness that said, "I must give my child everything he wants or else I'm going to feel guilty." Read all the books on parenting that tell you everything your children need, and that if you don't give them everything they need, they'll be psychic casualties, and it will be your fault.

It's true that the impact of parents upon children is major and crucial, but we need to discriminate between what children need and what they want. The problem we've run into is that many parents believe that to be a good parent, they've got to give their children what they want rather than what they need. Your son or daughter is not going to come along and say, "I want some money for something"; they're going to say, "I need some money." They know

that if they say they want it, you'll respond, "You want it, that's all right. I want a lot of things too; see you later." But if they say they need it, how can you refuse to give them what they need?

Also involved is a combination of economic and personal factors related to the large instance of working mothers. The breakdown of the family unit and the lack of good mothering in the first few years of life is a critical problem in our society, and it is going to get much worse. I would encourage you, mothers, that if there is any way — especially in those first six years of life — that you can avoid working, do it! Young children really need their mothers. They need their fathers too, but in the first years of life, they especially need their mothers. There is a price mothers will have to pay if they are going to be away from their children. You should try to wait on having children until you are in a place where you can afford them or work something out.

The Scripture indicates that if people don't provide for their own, especially those of their own family, they have denied the faith and are worse than infidels. What I am suggesting is that your family comes before your ministry. Your family is your first ministry. If you understand that, you will avoid serious problems in life. I don't think there is anything we need more than a re-emphasis on the family in our society.

So what are the three major causes of our narcissistic culture that work in conjunction with our prevailing society? (1) Commercialism — look what we can do for you if you'll only use our product; (2) the substitution of humanism for biblical faith; and (3) the breakdown of the family.

Let me read II Timothy 3. I'm sure this passage has described many societies in the last 2,000 years, but I wonder if it's not more true of our society than of most: "But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents . . ."

What is disobedience to parents? It is "I am going to have my way." That's narcissism.

". . . ungrateful . . ." "Why should I be grateful? You owe me; the government owes me; my parents owe me; the school owes me."

". . . unholy, unloving . . ." Isn't it interesting — lovers of self but unloving to others. That's the narcissistic personality.

". . . irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited . . ." If you lack a

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healthy inner sense of self-esteem, you have to go around being puffed up.

“... lovers of pleasure [immediate gratification] rather than lovers of God . . .” All this is very descriptive of our culture and our society.

But how about narcissism in the Christian culture? I suggest that we’re excessively preoccupied with ourselves. Walk into a Christian bookstore and you’ll see all kinds of self-help books and testimony books. Everyone who has had an experience writes a book. “I had an experience I want to tell you about; the world should be interested in my experience.” That’s narcissism. Somebody has cancer; they write a book on it. Some of that is useful. But does every cancer patient need to write a book? Does every parent need to write a book on how to be a parent? Does everybody who has been suicidal need to write a book on it? The assumption is, everybody is interested in my story. My story! Why? Because I am interested in my story. So I assume everybody else is interested in my story. That’s narcissism.

The media tend to play up even evangelical personalities: “Look at this person. See how great he is.” The focus is on what Christianity can do for you. That’s a legitimate part of it. We ought to be saying that; but, I think we get a little out of balance. The focus is on externals and success — on Christian superstars. We emphasize talent, performance, good looks. There are exceptions, but who writes the books? Who’s on TV? Who are the famous people we have give their testimonies? Is it the talented, good looking people who perform well or is it the godly, mature people? Godliness and maturity don’t often sell well. I have publisher friends; I sit with these people and they tell me what will sell and what won’t. Talent, good looks, miracles — these things sell. But basic mature, godly, faith — often, no. The Book of James would never sell today. There is not a Christian publisher around the United States who would publish the Book of James if somebody wanted to publish it.

We seek immediate gratification. Patient Christianity — that’s “pie in the sky by and by.” We want our kind of Christianity now. To be sure it has to be lived in the now; and Christianity speaks to the present. But not exclusively! We want our Christianity to pay off right now. We have to be happy. We have to receive.

We are in danger of making God over into our own image. We are in danger of making God into a 20th Century North American male who’s oriented to success and happiness. We turn God into a God who wants to make us happy rather than a God who wants to make us

holy. We lose our vision of who God is — the God of the Bible. And what we are doing is cutting ourselves off from the only stable resource for a healthy sense of self identity. We forget that we are created in the image of the almighty, eternal, everlasting God. But in making God over in our image, we are the ones who end up suffering disintegration and dissatisfaction.

What can we do? Let me give a few general suggestions which you can work out specifically in your own lives. First of all, we need to return God to His position as the center of the universe and man to his position as a created being. We've got things reversed. We've made ourselves gods. We've got to change our focus.

Secondly, we need to reaffirm the authority of the Word of God even when it differs with our perceptions and desires. This will impact our counseling significantly. You're going to face such issues as pre-marital sexual involvement and divorce. People will say, "We love each other and this is a normal God-given expression of our love." Or, "We're married, but we don't love each other and obviously God (the god I've created) wants me to be happy." They find a verse or two that declare that in God's presence is "fullness and joy" and go on to say, "When I'm living with this woman, I'm not full of joy, therefore it must not be God's will that I stay married to this woman." When approaching the question of marrying an unbeliever, many say, "But we love each other. And I know a person who is one of the most successful ministers in this area, and he married a woman who wasn't a Christian; now she is, and everything is fine." Therefore, the scriptural passage "Be not unequally yoked together to unbelievers" does not apply. People adapt the Scriptures to fit their own desires. We must return God to the center, however, and listen to the authority of His Word, even when it differs from what we may want.

Thirdly, we need to uphold the sanctity of marriage and the primacy of the family. Because much of narcissism has its origins in the first few years of life, we are not going to be able to solve the problem on a strictly cultural, social level; we've got to solve it on a family level.

Fourthly, we must refuse to commercialize the Gospel in terms of how we communicate it. We must not place the gospel on the level of media hype with the primary message being "Here's what Christianity is going to do for you!"

Fifthly, we need to promote true intimacy and commitment in

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every area of our life and ministry. I mean that we need to work on intimate relationships in our marriages. We need to develop close friendships with students here on campus that are more than a superficial “Hi, how are you” or a quick prayer in time of emergency. We must have fun together, but we must also weep together. Develop intimate friendships and, whatever your ministry, carry those friendships into that ministry.

Finally, we need to develop a biblical humility. Chapter 1, verse 8 of Philippians says, “For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.” Do you hear the intimacy and commitment in Paul’s relationship to the people of the church of Philippi? If Paul were on the Christian circuit today, he wouldn’t write you a letter and say, “I’ll be in town, I’ll have my meeting, and then I’ll be on my way.” Rather, he’d say, “How I long for you all.”

In verse 12 he continues, “Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else.” Notice that Paul was not too given to immediate gratification. He was not afraid to suffer at the present for some long term gain. “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain,” he says in verse 21. Notice the lack of pre-occupation with self.

Looking into Chapter 2, Paul challenges the church to unity. He says this in several ways: “being of the same mind, the same love, united in the spirit, intent on one purpose . . .” Then he indicates what is going to destroy that unity: “selfishness or empty conceit.”

He challenges the Philippians to be humble and have the attitude of Christ Jesus shown in verse 6: “. . . who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped . . .” Christ knew his identity; he existed in “the form of God.” We also need to know our identity; we are created in the image of God. There is a parallel here for a Christian understanding of ourselves.

Secondly, Christ “did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.” In other words, He didn’t have to flaunt it. If I had been Christ up there on the temple and Satan said, “Cast yourself down,” I’d jump right away to prove to him I was God. If he said “Turn those stones to bread,” I’d say “Zap.” Because my identity is not strong enough, I’d have to say, “I’ll prove to you who I am.” Because Christ knew his identity, he didn’t have to flaunt it.

The third aspect of Christ’s humility is that He willingly became a

servant. “Being found in appearance as man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient” (verse 8).

The fourth aspect of Christ’s humility was His obedience.

Interestingly verse 9 reads, “Therefore, also God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him a name that is above every other name.”

These then are the four aspects of biblical humility that I believe are the antidote to a self-centered narcissism: knowing our identity, knowing who we are in the light of God’s divine revelation, willingly choosing to serve others, and willingly becoming obedient.

In essence then, the antidote to the prevailing narcissism in our society and our churches is a healthy, biblically based, self-esteem and self-identity that allows us to know who we are, why we are here, and where we are going, so that knowing what Christ has done for us, we are able to serve, to minister, and to give.