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Christian Community,  
Brain Science, and  
Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation

The Other Half

of Church

## 7



# Narcissism: The Relational Infection

*Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.*

Hebrews 6:7–8

**MANY YEARS AGO,** I caught an eye infection that resisted being cured. My eyes would turn red and become swollen. Antibiotic drops would knock the infection down for a while, but a few weeks later it would return. After several months of this, my ophthalmologist said, “I think what we have here is a cultural problem.” He explained that my eyes had a culture that was conducive to growing bacteria. I had never thought of my eyes having a culture, but I followed his instructions to change the culture of my eyes through washing and warm compresses. I admit I was

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skeptical, but eventually the infections disappeared and haven't returned. I changed the culture of my eyes.

The church has both a culture and an infection. Even if there were a magical antibiotic, the infection would keep recurring until the culture changes. The culture of a church is its relational soil, and the infection thrives in depleted soil. A chain of events has left us with exhausted soil that bears little fruit. Unfortunately, the bad news gets worse. The depleted soil of half-brained Christianity not only chokes spiritual formation, it also creates a culture where a certain relational infection thrives, spreads, and returns.

Relationally impoverished soil leaves a community vulnerable to the spread of narcissism, especially in positions of leadership and influence. Enriching the soil is the only long-term solution. We can remove narcissists from their positions of influence, but without adding the essential soil nutrients, the infection will return. The consequences of this disease devastate churches and families.

### **The Disease**

It surprised me how often the topic of narcissism arose during our meetings. The training was focused on growing our character, but when Jim Wilder first talked about the relational infection in the church, you could hear a pin drop in the room. Most of us had been involved in churches and ministries for a long time. We all had bumped up against the infection that Jim was explaining. We had seen leaders act in ways that troubled us. Some of us had kept quiet. Others spoke up. Some of us were fired for speaking up. We knew something was wrong but did not have an explanation for it. We had no label for it.

After the meeting, we talked outside, lingering for over an hour. One friend shared his experience with me. He was the high-school pastor of a well-established church and worked under a

beloved pastor. During a planning meeting with the leadership team, Dave disagreed with one of the pastor's ideas and explained why. Later that afternoon, he noticed a piece of paper had been slipped under his office door. The beloved pastor wrote him a note: "Never disagree with me in front of the elders again!" Stories like this kept popping up after our meetings.

Quite a few churches were represented in our group. We heard suspicions, particularly from the millennial generation, that something was wrong with the way people were being treated. Jim shared his concern that narcissism was becoming a normal and accepted behavior in Christian churches and families. We see a narcissist and think, *There is a strong leader*. Exactly the opposite is true. We are intentionally selecting leaders with narcissistic tendencies because we have a broken picture of healthy leadership.

I have always been confused about the definition of narcissism. The common understanding is that narcissists are self-centered and grandiose. The diagnostic definition avoids a hard category of "narcissist" but provides a sliding scale for severity and a list of characteristics. People with narcissism lack empathy, have a strong need for admiration, and want to be the biggest personality in the room.

I was sufficiently confused, so I asked Jim for a definition from the perspective of brain science. He explained that a narcissist is *someone who is unable to metabolize shame in a relational way*. Whoa! That was not the answer I expected. Metabolize shame? What does that mean?

## **Narcissism and Shame**

We learned that our brains are designed to metabolize emotions. Shame is one of the six big emotions with dedicated neurological circuitry (that is, sadness, anger, fear, shame, hopeless despair, disgust). In the healthy case, shame gets digested through

relational attachments—through *hesed*. We studied this concept in the previous chapter when we saw that the first step in correcting another person's character is affirming our relationship. For example, if you see me do something that does not reflect the character of Jesus, you have a chance to change my character. This growth opportunity involves helping me metabolize the shame of my flaw.

You approach me at the proper time and say, “Michel, I really enjoy our friendship and care about you. I sense that you forgot who you were back there. Are you open to being reminded of who we are?”

I feel ashamed, and, in the healthy case, I sense our attachment and receive your message. The shame gets digested quickly and is displaced by peace and relief. If the correction is done properly and I am humble and receptive, you have helped mold my character. I am now a little more like Jesus thanks to you. In God's kingdom, shame is always combined with a strong dose of love.

However, we can also metabolize shame in nonrelational ways, and this corrupted digestion is the playground of narcissism. We view narcissism in this book in terms of character, not as a technical psychological classification. When we speak of narcissists, we are talking about people who have narcissistic traits that dominate their character. Narcissists have formed unhealthy character habits for interacting with others.

For example, if I am infected with this relational disease, I will respond differently to your loving attempts to remind me of who I am. I will see our interaction as a threat. Our conversation becomes an argument that I must win. My motivation to defeat you is especially fierce if you are correcting my character and my leadership. I think, *This person, who is trying to make me look bad, must lose!*

We will have difficulty improving our character if we refuse to accept healthy correction. In the previous chapter, we read

Proverbs 15:31: “Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise.” When we ignore this path to wisdom—by refusing to learn and grow from the people around us—we are heading toward narcissism. We cannot handle the shame of being reproved, and we do not want to learn because we are focused on winning. In this state, our character is immovable.

Narcissists will not accept a healthy reminder when their character is flawed, but they are skilled in using toxic shame against others. In the previous chapter we emphasized the importance of refusing to accept toxic shame, and this is especially crucial in the presence of a narcissist. If we are weak and untrained, the narcissist will make us think we are crazy, because they are masters of wielding condemnation.<sup>1</sup>

Communities with rich soil train their people to protect themselves from toxic shame, and this renders powerless one of the narcissist’s favorite weapons. Our example gives the narcissist hope. They see you acting in a way that seems impossible to them. You are refusing to accept condemnation, and you are also accepting the healthy shame of correction. You have given the narcissistic brain an image that creates a new option for behavior. Remember that we change through imitation. It is impossible to teach a narcissist new behavior. They must see you metabolize shame with their own eyes.

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## EXAMPLES OF TOXIC SHAME VS. HEALTHY SHAME

**Toxic:** You are so passive-aggressive!

**Healthy:** If you have a complaint against me, I’m fine with that. Bring it to me directly instead of talking to others. I’m the only one who can change me.

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**Toxic:** I'm not going to let you go rogue in your ministry!

**Healthy:** We need to ensure that what you are doing is coherent with the direction of our church. You might have some great ideas, so let's keep in close communication on this.

**Toxic:** Who are you to criticize me?

**Healthy:** Your criticism hurts, but I want to be open to learning from it. Tell me more.

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Nonrelational strategies to digest shame by winning seem necessary to us when we are convinced that all shame is toxic. When we do not know how to deal with shame in a relational way, we create complex strategies to avoid it at all costs. These anti-shame strategies drive much of the behavior that we see listed in popular and psychological explanations of narcissism. These strategies are not the disease itself but the symptoms. At its core, narcissism is a shame disease.<sup>2</sup>

### The Narcissistic Pastor

Unfortunately, the narcissistic “I must win” strategy can spill over into Christian communities, which explains why we see narcissistic behavior in leaders of organizations and churches. They manage shame by winning instead of metabolizing shame through *hesed* relationships. That is why people with narcissistic tendencies seek to be the CEO, the head pastor, the lead elder, or the hidden influencer. It's important to note that not all of these positions are filled by narcissists, but people who grapple with narcissism do crave these positions of influence because they feed their sense of being special. Once they get their hands on the power they crave,

they will not want to release it. You will see these positions turn into lifetime appointments until the people around these leaders wise up.

When a Christian community has low joy, weak *hesed*, and a poorly developed group identity, the culture is armed for narcissism to spread. If we eliminate the immediate infection, it soon returns. Without strong attachments and relational skills, narcissism flourishes—especially in leadership.

You do not have to look hard to see examples of the destruction left by narcissism. While paying more attention to this over the years and even more acutely while writing and researching this book, I have been saving articles on church-fueled narcissism gone very bad. I have a long list, but here are a few pieces:

- The sexually inappropriate behavior of a pastor is exposed, but not by the elder team. They refused to believe accusations. The pastor denies all allegations, even in the face of overwhelming evidence.
- The leader of a large Christian organization is observed labeling constituents with pejorative names. An employee describes the work environment as being based on fear. The leadership denies all charges.
- A lead minister is accused of financial mismanagement, deception, and bullying. The elder board supports him until irrefutable evidence confirms the claims.
- The pastor of a large church resigns after being accused of having sexual encounters with multiple teenage girls in a previous job. He is accused of using his position of authority to take advantage of his victims. When parents confront the church's leadership about the alleged abuse of authority, they are urged to keep things quiet.



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I could continue with more examples and make this a very long chapter, but I think you get the idea. We are not implying a clinical diagnosis of narcissism here. But these present examples of classic narcissistic character on display. Frequently, the stories feature common threads running through these organizations: a rubber stamp board, a personality-driven organization, and poor financial accountability. These issues, and others, need to be addressed, but there is usually no mention of what is going on underneath the visible behavior. What is happening in the hearts of these leaders and in the hearts of the people who surround them?<sup>3</sup> We must address the relational soil that nourishes and encourages narcissistic behavior, otherwise the church will often select a narcissistic pastor to fill the position of the recently fired narcissist. Or another narcissistic leader will emerge from the staff of the church and finally get the leadership position they felt they always deserved. The infection returns.

The perpetrators in these negative headlines suffer from the effects of half-brained Christianity like the rest of us. More significantly, they did not do the hard work of character formation and developing relational skills that would have extracted their narcissistic tendencies and replaced them with the beautiful character of Christ. They are logical consequences of the great omission. When we fail to form character in churches, we end up having leaders with poorly formed character—pastors who do not act like Jesus.

How does narcissism play out in the life of a pastor? An inability to metabolize shame inflates a person's need to be special, a narcissistic strategy of handling shame. Wanting to be special is a healthy desire we all have, a God-given desire. However, narcissists are unable to satisfy this need relationally, so they are driven to perform and succeed. We see this as good leadership. Narcissists satisfy their need to be special through performance and

winning, using Christian ministry as the vehicle.

Infected leaders use ministry to communicate, “I’m not just special, I’m more special than all of you.” Their ability to win helps them avoid shame, their greatest fear. But as we have seen, without shame, our character does not change. Giftedness, ministry success, and bold leadership may look good on the surface, but the inner motivation has been detached from relationships. We may find this confusing, because their ministries look impressive.

The apostle John wrote about such a leader who was intent on winning. He warns his readers about a certain man, Diotrephes. “I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us” (3 John 9). Diotrephes was a winner.

Paul warns, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29 ESV). The need to be first leads to an abandonment of Christlike character.

A manifestation of “I must win” leadership is a love of measurability and numbers. These leaders love motivating people by growth and numbers and put them on display as proof that “we are winning.” True discipleship gets ignored under their leadership because they have little time for activities that are hard to measure and display. That’s not to say that they don’t talk about discipleship and spiritual formation, especially in front of a crowd. They talk about discipleship to prove that they are serious about obeying Jesus, but they rarely if ever do it. The actual hard work of discipleship is neglected. Subordinates who advocate for the slow, messy work of discipleship will soon find themselves looking for a new job. They are promoting a priority that the narcissist finds unimportant.

Narcissistic leaders love a good cause, and their cause may be truly important—fighting corruption, protecting the poor, reaching university students for Christ, defending good doctrine, spreading the gospel, or planting churches in prisons. The cause is

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presented to the community as the narcissist's own grand vision, and it becomes so important that ministry is elevated above relationships rather than flowing from relationships. Let me state this again, because it gets to the center of the dysfunction: *Ministry becomes more important than relationships*. Now we are finally looking at the soil and not just the symptoms, and a soil analysis reveals depleted *hesed*.

If anyone gets in the way of the *great cause*, they get sacrificed on the altar of the leader's vision. These bold leaders get results. When they don't get results, they create a narrative that lays the fault at someone else's feet. Narcissists are good at using others' weaknesses against them while keeping their own character insulated and untouchable. They are happy to sacrifice other people because doing so feeds their sense of greatness and their ability to make tough choices—all characteristics of a "courageous leader."

Most narcissists envision themselves as great leaders. They like being the biggest personality in the room, the one in charge. They are surrounded by people who extol their giftedness and vision. It is common to hear this pastor tout his own leadership skills, and the validating bubble community surrounding him agrees. "He is such a visionary!" "He is such a courageous leader!" This language is foreign to the kingdom of God.

We often see an affirming bubble group surrounding a narcissistic leader. Instead of giving firm and gentle feedback, the group justifies and enables the flaws in the leader's character. If a person dares to push back, she is quickly pushed out. Narcissists are skilled at creating narratives, so the explanation for her leaving staff will seem quite reasonable: "She does not align with our vision, so we all agreed that it was time to transition her out." The true reason for her departure was that she was trying to pop the bubble and correct the leader's character.

A narcissist may accept correction on a peripheral issue from

time to time, to be able to say, “Look! I’m humble. I accept criticism,” but not on a central character issue. When confronted with a flaw in their character—and especially their leadership—they will massage it and redefine it until it is peripheral. They are very tricky here because they are protecting their specialness.

The pulpit is a strong magnet for narcissists, and they use it to achieve what they crave: attention, control, being at the center, being able to create the narrative. For the narcissist pastor, the sermon becomes performance art. The overemphasis on the sermon in modern Christianity is like chumming the water for narcissists. Up on a stage, the grand leader can appear to have a strong connection with the congregation while maintaining real relational distance. The stage, the image magnification, and the microphone allow pastors to appear close while avoiding real attachments to anyone who might threaten their control and sense of being special. From this exalted position they can choose their friends carefully. Surrounded by a supportive community of weakly attached people with a shallow group identity, pastors can exercise significant control.

Some scholars are attempting to measure the prevalence of narcissism in Christian leadership, but have yet to agree on the proper measurement instruments.<sup>4</sup> We will have to wait for new studies before we can quantify the extent and depth of narcissism in the pastorate. For now we can look at the prevalence of narcissism in terms of behavior. If we suspect that our Christian communities are under narcissistic influence, we expect to see certain behavioral patterns:

- A lack of concern when causing pain in others
- An emphasis on the bold visionary leadership of the pastor
- An “us versus them” mentality
- The creation of narratives that support the leader’s view of

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- reality, even if the facts get massaged to fit this view
- Harsh and abrupt firings of subordinates; firings with little explanation or communication
  - A submissive elder board that is obstructed from true input and feedback
  - A church staff that sees its job as submissively implementing the leader's grand vision
  - The leader's vision for the church is emphasized more than Christ's vision for the church
  - A culture where submissive obedience to the leader is more important than character and maturity
  - A church staff environment where the leader is seldom given feedback or critique, but where the leader readily and openly criticizes others
  - Churches where the image and personality of the leader is inflated and projected to a size that overshadows Christ
  - A church that hires a leader by looking intently at the candidate's giftedness and ability while only glancing superficially, if at all, at character and maturity
  - A leader who gets away with all sorts of behaviors that would result in the immediate firing of a subordinate
  - Elders and staff that say, "How could we ever get rid of him?" or, "The church would fall apart without her"
  - A leader who cares more about being right and winning than being good and loving
  - A leader who will turn another person from "friend" to "excluded" in an instant
  - A leader who has the ability to cut off a friendship and move on to other friends while feeling very little pain

Certain people might have come to your mind as you read the list. If you are like me, you see some of your own weaknesses

there, too. These traits reveal character that starkly contrasts what we see in Jesus, the perfect leader. What is missing is a stable and growing Christlike character and healthy soil, especially *hesed*.

## **Self-Justification**

Another characteristic of narcissism deserves our attention. How do I respond to correction? Much is revealed by our answer to this question. Do I humble myself and listen, or do I try to justify myself? Do I humbly bow my head or do I stiffen my neck? We seldom hear teaching about self-justification in our churches. If we are honest, few of us enjoy someone criticizing our character. If I have narcissistic tendencies, my reaction to your feedback will be to stiffen my neck against your correction and justify myself. I will show you that I am right and you are wrong. If I think all shame is toxic, I will interpret your admonition to mean that I am not special. Self-justification is the first weapon I reach for to defend myself.

Self-justification can be deceiving. We choose narcissists for our leaders precisely because they are so good at justifying themselves. They are good at having all the answers and sounding right. People who have not been trained to spot self-justification misjudge it for self-confidence. To the discerning, the justifications sound reasonable at first, but they know something is wrong below the surface. A stiff neck is often well hidden.

In the previous chapter we saw that Samuel offered King Saul a life-giving rebuke, but the king used self-justification to swat it away. His specialness was threatened when Samuel pointed out his flawed character. Saul was so desperate that he blamed the prophet for his own disobedience. He reflexively reached for his trustiest weapon: self-justification.

Like yawning, self-justification is contagious. If you and I are

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arguing, and I justify myself, your reflex will be to justify yourself in response. Remember what we learned about changing our automatic (preconscious) responses through group identity in chapter 5. We need a group identity that says, “We are a people who really cannot stand self-justification and will not listen to it.” God is our defender, so we do not need to justify ourselves. We must train ourselves to resist justifying. When we follow Saul’s example, it never ends well.

We practiced recognizing and withstanding self-justification every week in our basement. We built up our ability to detect self-justification in ourselves and others. I had never been trained to spot and eliminate self-justification, but I quickly understood the benefits of this exercise. Because of our practice, I feel that I spot justification quickly.

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### EXAMPLES OF SELF-JUSTIFICATION

- I don’t need to pray about it; I know what God is going to say
- We should just forgive and overlook it
- I’m not justifying myself; you are
- You are way out of line, rebelling against God’s authority, and should not speak to me that way
- We all have to make sacrifices for this vision to become reality
- I cannot believe the stupidity of what you are doing
- You wouldn’t understand it in a million years
- Do I have to tell you again? (with contempt)
- You should forgive and forget
- God put me in charge here

Taken from *The Pandora Problem*<sup>5</sup>

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One week, Jim gave us the following example of self-justification:

Someone says to you, “You wouldn’t understand in a million years.”

Does that look like a self-justification to you? It did not to me when I first heard it. Then I reflected on my years working in the tech industry. One senior coworker came to mind who had more experience than the rest of us on the team. We would occasionally need to ask him questions about our project. He had a reputation. If he had to explain something more than once, he would become angry and insulting. While he did not say it verbally, the look on his face communicated, “If I have to explain something to you twice, you won’t understand it in a million years.”

In the training, we made a list of weaknesses that hide behind this self-justification. Self-justification is a weakness that masquerades as a strength. We should be able to find hidden weaknesses if we look hard enough. Identifying the cracks in defensive statements help us see them from God’s perspective. We were training ourselves to no longer be fooled.

It seemed like once we spotted the first weakness, we started seeing many of them. We came up with the following weaknesses of the self-justification listed above:

- This statement is belittling and impatient
- It shuts down further discussion
- It keeps the self-justifier from needing to explain further
- This justification shows arrogance: “I’m so much smarter than you that you will never understand my lofty thinking”
- This statement might also be a cover-up for laziness



**Self-justification  
is a weakness that  
masquerades as a  
strength.**

Then Jim asked what can we do to ensure these weaknesses do not take root in our community. We talked about how our group can become a place where, when a person says, “You wouldn’t understand in a million years!” we would instantly spot this as self-justification and know how to help the person act in accordance with their true identity. First, we created a group identity statement that would become part of our common understanding:

*We are a people who patiently teach and help people, even when they struggle to understand, because this is how God treats us.*

Another idea was to share a story of when we were impatient with a struggling learner and how we realized that we were wrong. I remembered one time when my young daughter spilled something and made a big mess. I overreacted and she looked at me and said, “But it’s okay. It’s not a big deal.” She stopped me in my tracks because she was right and I was wrong to overreact. Stories give the self-justifier mental pictures of what Christ’s character looks like in this situation.

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**FACING SELF-JUSTIFIED PEOPLE**

- This task is for a community with mature leaders
- Demonstrate humble character
- Don’t try to prove we are right

- Avoid all condemnation
  - ✦ Don't receive condemnation
- Develop excellent judgment
- Recognize, avoid, and address Christian forms of self-justification
  - ✦ "I have faith"
  - ✦ "You cannot judge me"
- When the group has been impacted, correct the self-justification in front of the group. Keep our *hesed* clean
  - ✦ Don't hold grudges or seek revenge
  - ✦ Keep compassion high
  - ✦ Our goal is discipleship, not a one-time correction
- See things God's way
  - ✦ Observe first
  - ✦ Dialogue about observations with God in our identity group
  - ✦ Notice all self-justification
  - ✦ Notice all condemnation
  - ✦ Notice humble character
  - ✦ Make wise judgments

Taken from *The Pandora Problem*, 183

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## **Enemy Mode: Your Brain on Narcissism**

God designed a complex network of neurological circuits to work together to help us stay relationally connected and attuned to each other. When these relational circuits are running as designed, we call this "Relational Mode." Our emotional and relational sensitivity is working and we look at life through a relational filter. We

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are emotionally attuned to other people and share their pain. In this mode our identity is stable and we spread joy and life to those around us.

A surprising feature is that relational circuits can operate kind of like a circuit breaker. When we use too many electrical appliances at the same time in our kitchen, this will cause our breaker switch to pop. The electricity stays off until I find the breaker in our breaker panel and flip it back on. Similarly, in emotionally intense situations, my emotional breaker can pop. My relational circuits dim or go off entirely. Suddenly, I have difficulty feeling my connections to those around me. Relationships are no longer my first priority. I am focused on stopping pain and solving problems. I am no longer processing life through the lens of relationships.

When our circuits go off, we lose our sense of connection to people. We have difficulty sensing God's presence, too, and we even lose our sense of connection with our bodies. This brain state is called "Enemy Mode," because people start to feel like enemies to be defeated or problems to be solved. Most of the time, these "enemies" are people we usually like but, at that moment, don't seem to be on our side. I might even snap at my mother if she steps on my toe.

One of the first skills we learn in full-brained discipleship is to detect when our relational circuits have shut off and learn how to turn them back on. Before doing anything else, and especially before doing something that is relationally challenging—such as resolving a conflict—we need to first revive our relational circuits. The first step in any spiritual exercise must be to inspect our relational circuits and ensure they are on.<sup>6</sup> Our spiritual practices will be ineffective when these circuits are not working. Transformation depends on our relational circuits running smoothly.

You might be thinking, *I know where he is going with this. When people slip into narcissism, their relational circuits have turned off.*

*They are in Enemy Mode. That is why they trample people.* I would have said the same, but Enemy Mode is more nuanced. There are two types of Enemy Mode: Simple Enemy Mode and Predatory Enemy Mode.

In Simple Enemy Mode, all our relational circuits have shut down and we want people and problems to go away. We do not listen well to others, and our minds are locked on to our problems. We want to get away from a person, even if we love the person. In conflict, we will argue aggressively and will be quick to judge. We all lapse into Simple Enemy Mode from time to time.

In Predatory Enemy Mode, the circuits that govern our attachments (*hesed*) are turned off, so we do not treat weakness gently and have shallow bonds with people. Unlike Simple Enemy Mode, the rest of the relational circuits are on, but they are used for predatory advantage. This is the crafty nuance of Predatory Enemy Mode. We attune to others, not to show compassion but to exploit their weakness. We track the emotions of others in order to pounce.

When acting like predators, we hijack the circuits that notice weakness in others, and use them for a purpose God did not intend. He designed these circuits to help us show compassion for weakness and treat others gently—to act like protectors. In Predatory Enemy Mode, we use these circuits to stalk prey.

As you might have guessed, the narcissist brain operates in Predatory Enemy Mode. A relational person notices weakness in others and feels compassion, but narcissists devour the weak. When we advance ourselves by tracking the weaknesses of those around us, we are operating in Predatory Enemy Mode. We quickly divide people into “us versus them,” and the “them” are used as stepping stones. A person working under the authority of a narcissist may go from “one of us” to “one of them” in an instant.

People in this predatory state evaluate others in the light of questions like: “How can I use this person to my advantage? What

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can they do for me? Do they love me enough, or should I get rid of them?”

A community that is ignorant of Enemy Mode is vulnerable to narcissistic influences. Members of that community may see Enemy Mode as strong leadership: “He may ruffle some feathers but he gets things done.” A person in Enemy Mode is not walking in the character of Jesus.

We get our brains out of Simple Enemy Mode by quieting ourselves and talking to God about our emotions. We get out of Predatory Enemy Mode by sharing our opponent’s emotional pain and praying for them. In our full-brain training, we practiced noticing Enemy Mode and getting quickly back to Relational Mode (see Appendix D). One tool for getting out of Enemy Mode is to give someone close to you permission to tell you when they see you in Enemy Mode. Another tool is to practice the Joy on Demand exercise in Appendix B. These and other tools can be learned but require considerable practice to be useful.<sup>7</sup>

If my enemy is a narcissist, I will still treat weakness tenderly, even though he or she may not treat me tenderly. Tenderness requires stable maturity and training. In order to love my enemy, I must have sufficient joy and love so it overflows to others. I must know who I am, because a narcissist will use condemnation to corrupt my identity. I will not fall for that deception if my group identity is well-developed and I’m trained to reject condemnation.

Now you understand why our relational soil is so important.

Loving my enemy does not mean giving someone a free pass. It is time for a corrective shame message. If I am growing in good soil, my joy, *hesed*, and group identity can withstand condemnation. I keep loving the person even though they may feel like an enemy. If I have been trained to offer healthy correction, I will be a gentle confronter. We are not loving our enemies when we leave them stuck in their destructive character.

Jesus commanded us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44). Praying for someone who feels like an enemy helps us share their pain, which is the path out of Enemy Mode. When our pain sharing circuits get turned off, we must bring them back into full operation to exhibit Jesus' character.

By now, our group had been meeting for weeks. As we trained to notice Enemy Mode in our own lives, it became a regular topic of conversation for us. We would hear people share, "I sure went into Enemy Mode yesterday when my coworker blamed me for missing our deadline." We helped each other track our ventures into this dark mode and find the way out. We did this work in community.

Narcissists will resist receiving healthy correction. Since they are unable to feel special through relationships, they rely on accomplishments, position, and attractiveness. They use self-justification to defeat anyone who may seem to threaten their sense of being special. These strategies cause them to live most of their lives in Predatory Enemy Mode. They view the people around them in two ways: either people make them feel special or people are threats to them.

## **Immunizing Our Community**

Now we see a fuller picture of why healthy soil is crucial, not only for character formation but also for resisting the growth of a relational disease. If our community is deeply bonded in joyful love, narcissistic trickery does not have the same power to separate us. Our joy tanks are full, so we have the capacity to handle great distress. Our love is steadfast because a *hesed* community has learned to suffer together. We share our weaknesses, so narcissistic criticisms do not intimidate us. We develop the capacity to love difficult people.

Our group identity is well developed, so when a leader uses

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condemnation or self-justification to eliminate shame, we immediately spot this flaw. Our reaction is not to condemn the narcissist but to show love by offering correction. People with narcissistic tendencies will feel uncomfortable in our community because they cannot manipulate our identities. Jesus alone is the standard that we use to tell each other who we are and how we act. An interloper gains no ground trying to corrupt our identity.

We gently and lovingly correct narcissists when they exhibit behavior that looks nothing like how Jesus acted. We absolutely refuse to give the narcissist a pass, because giving a pass would not be loving. The narcissist might see our correction as toxic, but our community has a culture of correction that promotes relational health. This means that everyone is gently correcting everyone, and no one stands out as particularly flawed. The narcissistic mind sees many examples of people correcting each other and eagerly receiving the reproof. Our joy, love, identity, and correction work together to provide the narcissistic brain the examples it needs.

A church may be vulnerable to narcissists, but that does not make it a narcissistic church. The weakness of this church is in its soil. If you combine depleted soil with poor understanding of maturity and the “drive to dominate,” it becomes a matter of time before a narcissist takes over. Paul describes a church that acquiesces to an abusive leader in 2 Corinthians 11:19–20: “You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face.” The Corinthians lacked the nutrients in their soil to handle these defective leaders. They should have gently and firmly corrected them instead of tolerating their behavior.

Seeing narcissism through the eyes of Scripture and brain science helps us feel compassion for narcissists. They are caught in a great weakness and do not realize it. Narcissists are not our

enemies. When we show them *hesed* in a Christlike group identity, diseased leaders learn how shame can improve their character. Instead of fearing and avoiding shame, they are shown how to metabolize it relationally: “We are glad to be with you in these feelings. We are glad we get to go through this together.” Our joy, *hesed*, group identity, and correction combine to form a lifesaver that pulls the self-justifier to safety.<sup>8</sup> It may be necessary to remove a leader in order for them to heal. Their soul is more important than their job as a pastor. We must continue to welcome them in our loving community, without which they have little chance to heal.

This is some deep water, but there is good news in all of this talk about an infected Christianity. We have hope. The disease thrives in some communities and languishes in others. Half-brained churches are susceptible because they have weak soil. Full-brained churches have robust soil, and narcissism has trouble taking root.

This stiff-necked infection is a vicious relational weakness that is difficult but not impossible to treat. Treating a severe infection starts by restoring the health of the community soil. Jesus’ vision for his church is a full-brained, vibrant, loving community.

Significant changes and work are required to create a community with sufficiently healthy soil to resist narcissism, but the disease can be stopped. The infection can be cured, narcissists can be healed, and narcissism can be eradicated from the church.

Lord Jesus, help us.

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**When we fail to fortify the relational soil of our churches,  
we open ourselves to a destructive relational disease.  
Our leaders focus on winning instead of building people**



## THE OTHER HALF OF CHURCH

**up in their faith. Personalities grow large and cast a long shadow. Left unchecked, our churches drift so far from the character of Jesus that He no longer wants us to shine. He takes our lampstand away. Relationally rich soil gives a narcissist a chance to heal through loving community.**

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### GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Complete the *Soil Sample 5: Narcissism Signs* in Appendix A for your Christian community. Discuss the signs of narcissism you see in your life and your community.
2. Read 3 John 9. Have you lived or worked with someone who needed to be first? Share your experiences of what it was like to interact with this person. How did he or she influence the dynamic of your group? Was their behavior ever corrected? If not, what kept you from speaking up?
3. Read the list of narcissistic behaviors enumerated in this chapter. Which ones have you seen played out in a Christian community? In your family? Which ones do you see in your own life?
4. In your opinion, how vulnerable is your church's soil to the relational infection of narcissism? Which of the soil ingredients is most lacking?

### TRY IT OUT

1. Share a time in the last few weeks when you suspect you went into Enemy Mode. Look at the *Enemy Mode Checklist* in Appendix D and share whether you were in Simple Enemy Mode or Predatory Enemy Mode. What did it feel like when

you were in Enemy Mode? What did it feel like when you returned to Compassionate Relational Mode?

2. Make a group list of what gets you into Enemy Mode.
3. Make a group list of what gets us out of Enemy Mode and back to Relational Mode (see Appendix D for more information).
4. What are you learning (need to learn) while you are still in Enemy Mode so you can deliberately get yourself out?

## **FURTHER RESOURCES FOR THIS CHAPTER**

### **Narcissism:**

- E. James Wilder, *The Pandora Problem*

### **Exercises in spotting self-justification:**

- Barbara Moon, *The Pandora Problem Companion Guide*

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