

Three Recent Books on Narcissism and Spiritual Abuse in Church Leadership



by MICHAEL GEMBOLA

The recently released podcast series *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* has been met with tremendous interest. At the time of writing, it was one of the most popular podcasts in the United States. It tells the story of how a young and talented pastor led a church that grew from a handful of people into a 15,000-member megachurch, which then collapsed almost overnight after countless allegations of bullying and domineering leadership. The stories include allegations of the pastor shouting people down in meetings, shaming and firing staff, manipulating others spiritually, talking about sexual matters in obscene ways, saying unironically “I don’t know if you’ve noticed it or not, but I’m kind of a big deal,” and much more.¹ The podcast is a postmortem study of narcissistic leader-

1. Quoted in Mike Cospser, “Episode 6: The Brand,” August 2, 2021, in *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, produced by Christianity Today, podcast, 1:01:45, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/>.

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ship, the damage it leaves in its wake, and what can be learned by those seeking to cultivate godly Christian leadership in the church.

Godly leadership needs to be a major concern for all those who minister in Christ's name. We can argue persuasively that the Bible and the church offer the deepest answers for the problems of life. But if one minister or counselor tramples on the trust given by believers under their care, it causes such immense damage that those affected may not trust Christian helpers ever again. The moral failure of Christian leaders is tremendously consequential for the ability of all ministers to serve effectively. Furthermore, counselors in particular need to understand these matters, because they sometimes occupy a unique position to intervene and help when we see these dynamics in those we provide care for, both perpetrators and victims.

Tragic stories like Mars Hill vindicate what some Christians say about pastoral ministry: *if people want you to be a pastor, run the other way. Do something else—anything else.* This was actually the consensus view of the ancient Christian church, too. Two of the earliest books written about how to be a pastor are personal defenses of why the authors tried not to be pastors.² The personal, moral dangers of pride to the soul were too grave to enter ministry unless you had to. The care of souls was much too serious to engage in unless you had no other choice. Doctors have to match the right medicine to the right illness, and this requires great wisdom and skill. How much harder is it for doctors of the soul? How much more consequential? Who would be so foolish as to sign up for it voluntarily? The risk of doing damage to the precious people of God was much too severe to enter ministry unless you absolutely could not avoid it.

Yet the early Christians who avoided entering ministry didn't get the balance right. We need gifted people to go into ministry even in the face of the risks. But all who have lived in proximity to versions of what happened at Mars Hill know that these early Christians had a point. They understood something clear from the Bible itself.

2. John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996) and Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 2: In Defence of His Flight to Pontus*, translated by Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894), <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310202.htm>.

“Not many of you should become teachers,” the apostle James writes, “because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). He understood that a sense of self-importance in ambition for ministry was not just a danger to the soul of the minister, but it led to all kinds of other problems. In the same chapter of James’s letter, the warnings continue, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice” (3:16).

The sins that can be called “disorder and every evil practice” are dangerous for all Christians, but they cause particularly far-reaching damage when we find them in church leadership. Therefore, we desperately need to be able to recognize and respond to them. Several authors have

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recently written books to help us toward this goal. We will look at three:

- Chuck DeGroat’s *When Narcissism Comes to Church*,
- Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer’s *A Church Called Tov*, and
- Diane Langberg’s *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*.

Each book has key contributions to offer to the discussion. In this review, I will theologially and contextually define the problem that all three books address. I’ll then summarize the content of each book, compare their strengths, and end with potential ways to move the larger conversation forward. Although at times I will offer my own views or a critique, my goal is not to engage these resources polemically or to offer a wholesale evaluation. Rather, I will discuss what I believe they offer to those of us who provide care in connection to the church, for both church leaders and counselors who are frequently called upon to assist in these situations.

Considering the Labels of Narcissism and Spiritual Abuse

Like the apostle James, the authors of these three books all connect “disorder and every evil practice” to the pervasive selfishness and ambition that result in devastating cruelty. Yet, our everyday language lacks the adequate terminology to capture the problem. *Bad* feels too small; even

evil doesn't quite capture how extreme sin really looks and feels in all its complexity.

We can affirm two principles here. First, we are all sinners in need of forgiveness and not one of us is righteous. Second, some sins are more egregious and have far-reaching consequences.³ With this established, we reach for words like *narcissism* and *abuse*. They are imperfect terms, but provide a way to name, in a modern American cultural context, these extreme and destructive behaviors. It's fair to argue that Christians could

There is a strong resemblance between the behavior profile of the biblical fool and the modern narcissist.

simply use biblical terminology such as the frequent, vivid Old Testament image of "stiff-necked." But there are advantages to understanding and referencing the labels that the broader culture utilizes for complex problems such as this. One significant advantage is that it connects ministers to resources that assess and describe these behaviors. It is important to recognize that these terms are best understood

descriptively rather than evaluating a person with finality. They name a cluster of behaviors but are not meant to be a totalizing or essentializing category, which reduces a person to their worst behavior pattern.⁴ So I will use these terms adjectivally, *narcissistic* or *abusive*, rather than as substantives, *narcissist* or *abuser*. The difference is subtle, but I always want to reserve hope that these kinds of labels do not claim the final word over people's lives (1 Cor 6:9–11).⁵

Narcissism. The first term, *narcissism*, locates the problem we are addressing in the larger category of disordered personality, "a way of thinking, feeling and behaving that deviates from the expectations of the

3. "All transgressions of the law of God are not equally heinous; but some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others," *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 150.

4. See Ed Welch, "They Call It Narcissism," CCEF, April 27, 2018, <https://www.ccef.org/they-call-it-narcissism/>.

5. For a broader discussion of the relative usefulness of psychiatric diagnostic categories of personality disorders, see Michael R. Emler, *Descriptions and Prescriptions: A Biblical Perspective on Psychiatric Diagnoses and Medications* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2017).

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