

The *Truth* That *Lies* Within

A Christian Approach to Severe Relational Personality Disorders



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The Pastor as Counselor

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Introduction

Everyone comes into contact with a variety of people in their day to day life. This is even more certainly true for teachers, doctors, social workers, and most definitely pastors. Pastors should, then, have a more than passing acquaintance with the different kinds of people they may encounter in carrying out their ministry. Specifically, pastors should understand that with different people come different personalities. Personality, or character, might best be defined as “a consistent and enduring pattern of thinking, feeling and acting that influences in some way almost every aspect of an individual’s life.”¹ These patterns influence how people will react to relationships, their work, and their faith.

To paraphrase John the Evangelist, there simply is not enough space in the world to fill the books that could be written about the various personalities reflected in Adam’s sons and daughters. This paper will instead focus on those types of personalities that may cause the most difficulties to a pastor and his congregation. These types fall under a category known to mental health professionals as *personality disorders*.

What is a Personality Disorder?

Our bodies are complex biological machines. The range of functioning of our bodily machinery is referred to as its health. Since the Fall, our bodies are of course never in perfect “health”. Nonetheless we label a body functioning reasonably well as “healthy”, and one that does not as “ill”. A body that is “ill” is not in order, but rather in disorder. The same can be said of personalities. No sinful personality is perfectly “in order”. Everyone displays some degree of “disorder”, whether emotional, behavioral or in our relationships with one another. Some amount of “disorder” is “normal”! Personality disorders should not be confused with “personality types”, or the natural and normal differences between all human beings. A personality considered by health professionals to be in “disorder” is one that has “a cluster of deeply ingrained personality traits (that have) become inflexible, no longer hav(ing) the capacity to function properly...”² These are not medical, psychotic or neurotic disorders.* Disorders do not affect or reflect on a person’s intelligence or knowledge. But they do affect a person’s ability to interact with others and carry on their lives. They can also have a tremendous impact on the people around them, such as their pastor or their fellow parishioners.

The Concern for Pastors

Why should pastors be concerned about people with so-called “personality disorders”? First of all, as many as 15% of people in the United States may display some form of personality disorder.³ This figure may be elevated. But it points to the fact that pastors will be called on to deal with people who are, quite frankly, difficult to deal with. Certain types of less prevalent disorders, however, can more than make up for their small number in the general population by the impact they have on those around them. These more serious disorders “present a problem which must be better understood by lawyers, social workers, schoolteachers, and by the general public before a more satisfactory way of dealing with them is to be worked out.”⁴ People with more severe disorders are also more likely to see their problems as spiritual rather than psychological.⁵ One author, Dr. M. Scott Peck, points out that certain serious personality disorders are even more likely to be found in the church than elsewhere.⁶

* Psychotic disorders are those that involve a withdrawal from reality. The psychotic are those people that tend to be labelled as “crazy”: they are hallucinatory, paranoid beyond any normal limit, or incoherent. Neurotic disorders include what would be called “phobias”, as well as crippling anxieties and depression. Evaluation of these well-known “labels” from a biblical and confessional perspective are beyond the scope of this work.

A Christian Approach

This paper will, as mentioned, focus on some of the personality disorders that may be most significant in a pastor's ministry. The approach will be threefold. First, these disorders will be evaluated from a psychological perspective, evaluating what health professionals have said and are saying about personality disorders. The second will be to evaluate these disorders from a biblical and confessional perspective, looking at how these disorders might be understood from a theological perspective. The last will be to synthesize these two and consider how pastors might work with those who may be displaying so-called "personality disorders." This will include a brief look at how people with these disorders might impact a congregation.

A Psychological Approach

Introduction to Personality Disorders

Types of Disorders

The psychological category of "personality disorder" might be broken up into four general categories.⁷ These categories are disorders of thought, emotion, behavior and relation. Disorders of thought include those people commonly called "paranoid", "obsessive", or "hysterical". The general characteristic of those with "thought disorders" is an inability to think "rationally and dispassionately" about events and problems.

Disorders of emotion reflect an inability to subjugate the emotions so that "reason" might, at least on important occasions, have the upper hand. Some people who display an emotional disorder tend toward "aggressivity" beyond what would be considered normal. They can become angry in situations where most people would not, or they are not able to control their anger when most people would be able to do so. Other people have a disorder of "apathy", and are unable to "feel" emotion in circumstances when most people would. Still others are "temperamental", alternating between aggressivity and apathy without any seeming rhyme or reason.

Disorders of behavior include those who are "compulsive" and those who are "impulsive", and are often unable to control their actions when other people would be able to. Some are "compelled" to do things that otherwise normal people would think ridiculous and without purpose. Others act "impulsively" so often that it begins to have a negative impact on their life.

The last category of disorder, and the one that will be the focus of this paper, are disorders of relation. These are disorders, as the name suggests, that impact the affected person's relationships with other people. The health of church is dependent, perhaps more than any other "organization", on the relationships between its members.[↑] Therefore people with these disorders can have a tremendous negative impact, not just on their own life, but on the life of others in their congregation and on the life of the pastor. Furthermore, people with these types of disorders can become antagonists within a congregation, especially when their disorder is accompanied by a paranoid outlook on life.⁸

Origins of Personality Disorders

Psychologists and psychiatrists are not unanimous on the reason for these disorders. Some causes posited include brain abnormalities, repressed self-hate, inadequate self-learning, and a bad home environment.⁹ Separation anxiety between 16-30 months, in other words the fear of losing or the actual loss of the mother, is another possible cause. One more cause often suggested by researchers is abuse, especially during early childhood.¹⁰ However, in opposition to this view one researcher wrote: "most parents of such patients personally studied impress me as having been conscientious and often very kind and

[↑] See especially St. Paul's exposition of the corporate life of the church in 1 Corinthians 12:12-30

discerning people.”¹¹ In other words, the research community is in no wise in complete agreement on the cause of personality disorders. The dominant thinking, however, is that these disorders are related in some way to early childhood development.

Relevant Personality Disorders

The lists of “personality disorders” can be as long as a list of personality types. Yet there are some disorders that bear a marked similarity, and whose impact on a pastor and his congregation could be significant.* These are the antisocial and narcissistic personality disorders. Those who strongly display the characteristics of the former are those labeled “sociopaths” or “psychopaths”. Peck has sought to establish an additional sub-category of the latter which he calls “malignant narcissists”. These are people whom he considers to be clinically “evil”. The characteristics of each category, and its area of overlap with the others, are presented below.

Narcissistic Personality Disorders

Those with a narcissistic personality disorder tend to be extremely self-centered, and overvalue their own importance in the world. The world in their mind *does* revolve around them. They display an abnormal lack of empathy and a hypersensitivity to criticism. They are unable in any meaningful way to “walk a mile in another’s moccasins.” They are vain, they are arrogant, and they are very difficult to deal with. Their faith in God, if they are religious, is centered on themselves and how God might meet their needs.¹² “Spiritually, theirs is the sin of pride.”¹³

Antisocial Personality Disorders

The antisocial personality shares with the narcissistic personality a self-centeredness and lack of empathy. One of the two unique characteristics of the antisocial personality is a disordered life. They are unable to keep jobs or deep friendships. The other characteristic is dishonesty. “They tell outright untruths, they distort facts, they tell just enough misleading partial truth to allay suspicion; they confess to have lied, announce that they are going to tell the truth, and then tell another lie. They offer sincere apologies, and make promises they do not intend to keep.”¹⁴ They have little ability to trust others, and give others few if any reasons to trust them. They display little emotion and an undeveloped conscience.¹⁵ Those people with an antisocial disorder who are also “religious” are so in order that others “may look upon them as being good people or outstanding benefactors of the church.”¹⁶ People who demonstrate an antisocial personality disorder can be either passive or aggressive. Confidence artists – con-men – are often the former. Yet they may not do so very successfully; their disorder often gives them away in time. Those who are aggressive may display violent, although usually not homicidal, behavior.

Sociopaths

Sociopaths, sometimes called psychopaths, were first classified as a form of personality disorder in 1952.¹⁷ They are as unknown and misunderstood a quantity as the narcissistic and antisocial personalities, and share many of the same characteristics. In fact there is little to distinguish a so-called “psychopath” from someone with an antisocial personality disorder. They are treated separately here, however, because both “sociopath” and “psychopath” have become a part of our everyday language and are most often misunderstood.

First of all, sociopaths are not, as is commonly believed, identical with serial killers and homicidal maniacs. In fact, the typical sociopath is not likely to have ever committed crimes severe enough to warrant a long prison term.¹⁸ Second, sociopaths are not actually “insane” in the way that the mental health community understands insanity. They usually display no delusional thoughts, or indeed any sign

* These personality disorders are arbitrarily broken into three categories, although the dividing line between is very hard to establish. The suggestion is to simply identify all of these disorders as “Severe Relational Personality Disorders”.

of mental disease.¹⁹ They can appear completely normal, with apparently high moral standards, and even hold or desire to hold high positions in the church.²⁰ One researcher writes: “even the most severely and obviously disabled psychopath presents a technical appearance of sanity, often one of high intellectual capacities, and not infrequently succeeds in business or professional activities for short periods, sometimes for considerable periods.”²¹

What they do display is an inability to form attachments to other people. They have no concept of responsibility, or what it might mean to care for themselves or others in a conscious manner.²² Their life seemingly has no goal, with sudden fugues and flights of fancy characterizing their journey through this world. As one author writes, “In the psychopath we confront a personality neither broken nor outwardly distorted but of a substance that lacks ingredients without which normal functions in major life issues is impossible.”²³ They are, to put it bluntly, people without a conscience. They have no sense of right or wrong, and so find it difficult to “do what is right”. They differ from the narcissist, who has repressed his or her conscience to the point where he or she can ignore it, but deep down still has a sense of right and wrong.

Malignant Narcissistic Personality Disorders

Beyond these different and yet similar severe relational personality disorders lie those whom Peck calls the truly evil. Peck has formulated a clinical category, somewhere between and including the narcissist and the sociopath, for those who are both and neither at the same time. These people Peck dubs the “People of the Lie”. While they bear many similarities to the narcissist and the sociopath, they also have unique characteristics of importance to the pastor and his congregation. Peck labels them as having a malignant narcissistic personality disorder.

One of the chief characteristics of those that Peck calls evil is deception. They lie in layers, building a web of deception that can be almost impossible to unravel.²⁴ In the presence of such a person a normal person may feel confused or disoriented, finding the lies so subtle that they almost manipulate the unconscious of the listener. Describing one such evil person, Peck writes “to herself she was a ‘light unto the people’, emanating joy and happiness wherever she went. All that I and others experienced of her, however, was the irritating chaos and confusion she invariably left in her wake.”²⁵ Like all the other personality disorders, those that have them are perfectly “sane” in the clinical sense of the word. They may be of high or low intelligence, with much or little education. They do, however, share with the antisocial an inability to hold work. Such a person will often have in their history long periods of unemployment despite their high intelligence²⁶

In terms of the ‘evil’ person’s unique traits, the most important is their opposition to life. Peck calls them necrophilic (death-loving) as opposed to biophilic (life-loving). This should not be taken in a superficial sense, as meaning that those who are evil enjoy spending time in cemeteries and morgues. What it means is that they are the ultimate example of being turned in on oneself, rather than out toward others and God. The best example of the necrophilic nature of the evil in fictional literature may be Gollum in Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings.²⁷ Gollum was once a hobbit, half-sized beings that lived contended country lives in the north of Tolkien’s fictional “middle-earth”. But once he came in contact with the ring forged by the Dark Lord Sauron, he became twisted and focused inwards, so that all his thoughts were of possessing and keeping the ring at all costs. It became his “precious”. Gollum does not even realize how much it has consumed him, and turned him from a gentle hobbit into a deceitful, wasted, half-dead creature.²⁸ This is what the “evil” are like; they are so turned inwards that they cannot objectively examine themselves.

The evil are also to be distinguished from the sociopath and the “benign” narcissist (if we can call any narcissistic tendency ‘benign’). The sociopath is blissfully ignorant of his or her lack of morality. The evil, on the other hand, do have a conscience, but for whatever reason have chosen to submerge it. To

quote Peck, “they are continually engaged in sweeping the evidence of their evil under the rug of their own consciousness.”²⁹ The narcissist may be moral, at least in a general sense. “There are many who are clearly – even grossly – narcissistic in one way or another but are not evil.”³⁰ But the evil are narcissistic to such an extreme that they utterly lack any ability to empathize at all. Peck points out that the central, defining characteristic of the evil is not their evil itself – their sin – but the refusal to acknowledge that it even exists. While most people – even narcissist – struggle with their consciences at some level, the evil do not struggle in the least, but have shunted their consciences completely aside.³¹

One may ask how it is that a psychiatrist can put forward “evil” as a possible clinical diagnosis. Peck makes some interesting arguments as to why such a diagnosis should be perfectly acceptable. He points out that “the concept of evil has been central to religious thought for millennia. Yet it is virtually absent from our science of psychology – which one might think would be concerned with the matter.”³² It is also true that much of psychiatry depends on the worldview of the practitioner. A Christian psychiatrist, then, will treat patients out of a Christian worldview. This makes an excellent transition from the psychological approach to these disorders to one that is theological.

A Theological Approach

Natural Law and the Conscience

Scriptural and Confessional Perspective

The Scriptures teach that the Law of God – which holds all things together and which is also the basic morality of the universe – is accessible to all people. Paul writes in Romans that those “who do not have the law, (but) by nature do what the law requires, are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts...”(Ro. 2:14-15)[↓] This is the true basis of all morality in the world, even if the peoples of the world are not consciously aware of it.

The Law of God, of which the Ten Commandments are the best known summary, but which Jesus reduced to only two principles*, is not part of special revelation but is generally known by all cultures. The knowledge of this Law in its particulars may vary. But the general notion that taking from others is wrong – whether taking their possessions, their spouse, or their life – is present in some form all over the earth. “even the non-religious submit themselves, whether they know it or not, to some ‘higher power’ – be it truth or love, the needs of others, or the demands of reality.”³³

The confessions speak the same way about the Law’s presence to all people. The Formula of Concord’s Article II on Free Will declares “...man’s reason or natural intellect still has a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as well as of the teaching of the law (Rom 1:19-21, 28, 32)...”³⁴ Article XVIII of the Augsburg Confession declares that “man possesses some measure of freedom of the will which enables him to live an outwardly honorable life and to make choices among the things that reason comprehends.”³⁵ This is the “first use of the Law” spoken about in Article VI of the Formula of Concord and elsewhere in the confessions. It is God’s law at work in sinful humanity, maintaining order and discipline. As Gustav Wingren, a Lutheran theologian wrote, “To be human means to encounter God unceasingly, but apart from the Gospel.”³⁶

The Law, when spoken of in this first sense, works both outwardly and inwardly. Outwardly the Law is present to all people through governments that exercise their responsibilities in maintaining order.

[↓] All biblical quotes are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

* And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39)

Inwardly, however, the Law is present through our conscience. When the conscience informs an individual of the rightness or wrongness of an action, God's Law is at work. Wingren writes, "Conscience relates to a man's actions and judges them as evil. The judgment of conscience is a prelude to the last judgment."³⁷ This is what Paul is speaking of in Romans 2:15. So the conscience itself, and even the most hardened atheist's "good works", are signs that God is at work in the world according to the first use of the law, restraining evil. "When the law assumes this function (of accusing), the Spirit is at work in the midst of death."³⁸

The corollary of all this is that any and all good that happens in the world is due to God's work. Jesus himself said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." (Luke 18:19). The apostle James also wrote, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..." (James 1:17).[↑] Without God's law, humanity would fly off the handle in acts of inexpressible evil, the likes of which we have only seen in a mirror, dimly. The often asked question, then, "Why is there evil in the world?" would be better phrased "Why is there good in the world?" As Peck writes, "It probably makes more sense to assume this is a naturally evil world that has somehow been mysteriously 'contaminated' by goodness."³⁹

The "Evil" Personality

Repression of Conscience

The narcissistic, the antisocial, the sociopath, and the "evil" person are displaying some deficiency in the normal operation of God's law in their life. Just as there is evil in the world despite God's providential care through his law (witness September 11, 2001), there are also evil people from whom God has withdrawn, partially or almost fully, the inward exercise of his Law. Whereas in most persons the conscience restrains their more evil desires, in some this does not seem to occur. These people appear to us to have some form of relational personality disorder.

Loss of Conscience

The narcissist is at one end of the extreme; his or her conscience remains, but doesn't seem to be present as strongly as in other people. We may even say they are more influenced by the external pressure of the threat of punishment than by their own conscience. The antisocial personality, and in its most extreme form the sociopath, seem to have no conscience at all. The outward pressure of the law exercised through government is the only thing restraining the actions of such a person. Some authors speak of sociopaths as being "moral imbeciles". When that sort of person gains power in government, disaster occurs. Fortunately, those people who lack conscience normally also lack an ability to organize and plan, skills needed to come into positions of leadership over people. The ability to organize, to bring order out of chaos, is also a godly ability. God's withdrawal of his Law in one area, that of conscience, would then seem to lead to loss of abilities in other areas as well. This makes theological sense of the fact that sociopaths have highly disorganized lives, are unable to keep jobs, and seem to have no long-range goals. The sociopath may be an example to all of us of where we would be without God's Law in our life and society.

Incapacitation of Conscience

Peck's "evil" personality type, or malignant narcissistic personality disorder, is a different case. Like the milder case of 'benign' narcissism they still have a conscience. But they willfully repress their conscience to such a point that they bear some of the characteristics of the sociopath. The difference is

[↑] Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (*James 1:13-17*)

that they retain an ability to function socially in the world. But their will is allowed to run roughshod over their conscience. Peck writes, “In the conflict between their guilt and their will, it is the guilt that must go and the will that must win.”⁴⁰

Demonic Possession

Up until now, the discussion of personality disorders has included God and man but not spoken of the role, if any, the demonic may play. It is worth mentioning that a very small minority of non-Christian people* who display these symptoms may be possessed. However, as Peck writes, “Genuine possession, as far as we know, is very rare. Human evil, on the other hand, is common.”⁴¹ Those who are possessed will tend to present the additional feature of dual personalities, one the genuine personality of the possessed and the other that of the possessing demon.⁴² Apart from demonic possession however, the devil is still at work in the evil. Luther writes in his treatise “Against the Heavenly Prophets”: “The devil so blinds and possesses hearts, that they do not always feel this law. Therefore one must preach the law and impress it on the minds of people till God assists and enlightens them, so that they feel in their hearts what the Word says.”⁴³ A further exploration of demon possession is beyond the scope of this paper.

The Personality as “Star/Blackhole”

One metaphor for the human is that of the sun. We perceive suns, or stars depending on your chosen point of view, as coming in various shapes and sizes. Some burn brightly but with little warmth; others are small and seemingly insignificant and yet have a weight and energy that belie their stature. What all stars share in common is that they give out light. When interacting with others, we receive light from them and they in turn receive light from us.

But some suns are no longer able to maintain a stable size, due to the ending of the nuclear fusion reactions which give a sun its characteristic heat and light. When those reactions cease, and are no longer able to maintain a star’s stability, it collapses into what is known in common parlance as a “black hole”. Such a collapsed star gives no light, and cannot be seen save by its incredible gravitational effect on its immediate surroundings. Once light crosses the “event horizon”, the critical boundary of a black hole, it never returns. Likewise anything actually “emanating” from the black hole itself will never be seen by the outside world. Energy in any form emanating from a black hole simply curves in on itself, and is never able to interact with anything beyond the event horizon.

Normal, healthy personalities come in a variety of forms, like suns. The form a personality takes depends on how brightly the spark of natural law glows within a person, and how much or little God allows that spark to be repressed. Yet for reasons known only to God in his majestic glory, that spark seems to collapse in some. These personalities become so curved in on themselves that they no longer can give out or receive light, but have become, in a sense, “black holes”. The fact that they are so can only be seen by the effect these people have on their environment, on those around them. Civil righteousness arising out of the conscience is unavailable to them. They cannot express faith in the Triune God, because such a God is by definition beyond their “event horizon”, beyond their universe. They have been given over, as the Apostle Paul writes, “to a depraved mind”.⁴⁴ They are in the truest sense what all of us are without the mercy of God. They are blinded and possessed by the influence of the Devil, as Luther says.

A patient of Dr. Peck’s best characterizes this type of personality. She professed to be a nominal Christian, and was active in her congregation’s life in various ways. However after months of counseling sessions Dr. Peck sensed in her what he has termed the “evil” or malignant narcissistic personality type.

* The Scriptures teach that a genuine Christian can not become demon possessed. They have been taken out of the realm of the Evil One and into the realm of Christ, as evidenced in the Lutheran baptismal rite by the threefold renunciation of the Devil, all his works, and all his ways. Note especially John 5 in this regard. However, it is possible for a Christian to fall from faith and then be seduced by the demonic.

Dr. Peck tried to confront her with her narcissism by asking her to tell him the prime goal of the Christian life. She finally admitted that it was to live for God, and not for self. After a brief moment of thought she turned on Dr. Peck and exclaimed, “I don’t want to live for God. I will not. I want to live for me. For my own sake!”⁴⁵

A Pastoral Approach

The psychological and theological background to these particular personality disorders has been presented. How, then, as pastors should we approach people who may be displaying the symptoms of these disorders? First of all, the importance of diagnosis needs to be stressed. The temptation as pastors is to diagnosis all problems with our favorite “illness”. Care should be taken in applying labels to parishioners too quickly. Pastors should not be like the Sunday School student whose answer to every question was always “Jesus”. Second, after diagnosis, there is the need for proper care. Working with those with disordered personalities involves management, not “cure”. Lastly, pastors should be reminded that they have been called to care for the whole flock. The pastor dare not lose sight of the rest of the sheep who are also being affected by people with disorders. The pastor may need to care more for those impacted by the disordered than for the disordered themselves, as will be discussed below.

Importance of Diagnosis

Pattern of Behavior

One of the first signs that someone may have a severe relational personality disorder is their behavior. Look for an employment record with several, short-term jobs and periods of unemployment. Another symptom is a lack of care or concern for those around them, both family and other parishioners. An inability to take responsibility for actions is an important feature of these disorders. A last but perhaps more important indicator is antagonism. People with these disorders will often be at the center of conflict in the church, and can hurt the church’s work in devastating ways.⁴⁶ This makes identification all the more important.

The People of the Lie

One identifier is not found in the behavior of the disordered, but rather in the pastor and those who deal with them. They will experience confusion. Peck himself writes, “when confronted by evil, the wisest and most secure adult will usually experience confusion.”⁴⁷ Conversation with the effected person will leave the pastor feeling disoriented, as if the conversation almost had a surreal quality. This may be due to the affected person giving answers to questions that seem perfectly reasonable, yet don’t “seem right”. It may be because the person’s reactions to when confronted with their behavior is not what people under the rule of God’s Law would expect. It may also be because of the sane, but irrational, logic used by the disordered. But chiefly it is because the pastor, parishioner, or family member is dealing with someone who lies well, and with conviction. For this reason Peck calls those with malignant narcissistic personality disorders “People of the Lie”.

Adjustment of Expectations

A Cosmic Battle

The most important part of dealing with someone who has one of the disorders that have been discussed is management of expectations. Pastors are usually caring people who want to help, to heal, and to restore. *There is no simple solution for dealing with people with these disorders.* People with these disorders can be managed, and parishioners and family may need to be protected from them. But there is no easy-to-administer cure. The pastor must always remind himself and others that evil continues to exist

and that the whole world still groans in anticipation of its full emancipation. We fight not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers.[↓]

No Easy Cure

One of the reasons for the difficulty in dealing with people who have these disorders is that they themselves do not want to be cured. Consider what a number of researchers have to say on this point. “They are difficult to treat because their motivation for counseling...is poor.”⁴⁸ They display “an almost uniform unwillingness to apply (for treatment)”⁴⁹ “All-in-all, the prognosis for a cure, or even a partial cure, is poor.”⁵⁰ “It is not just that they can’t change – sometimes they don’t want to change.”⁵¹ “They rationalize and use belligerence to avoid treatment, in order to avoid guilt.”⁵² Peck considers this one of the hallmarks of the most severe malignant narcissists. They exhibit sinful human nature at its most raw; they are utterly unwilling to acknowledge their own sin toward others and toward God. Pastors, therefore, should not attempt to “counsel” such a person in the hopes of curing them. However, neither should they avoid them. They must instead “manage” them, using the most powerful tool at their disposal: the Word of God.

Law and Gospel

“All good psychotherapy does...is combat lies.”⁵³ One could well argue that that is one, if not the, chief task of the pastor. The brilliant insight of Luther into understanding Scripture as Law and Gospel – God’s “No!” and God’s “Yes!” – is one of the gifts of God to his church. We are always under God’s wrathful judgement, and yet as Christians we always stand forgiven and acquitted before God for Jesus’ sake. Our work as pastors, when done well, uses the Law of God to expose and lay bear the lies of our lives, that the disease of sin can be healed by the Good News of God’s mercy in Christ. The tool we use in dealing with those who have these disorders - the Law and Gospel of God given to us in the Holy Scriptures – is not different than what we use for anyone else. In the case of narcissists and sociopaths, however, the Law must truly be spoken in full force.

The pastor and congregation must, in Christ’s words, “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16) when dealing with people with these disorders. They cannot be simply “wished away”, or simply “loved” and left alone. They must be dealt with lovingly, for sure, but also with authority. Since they have no inner Law to restrain and temper their behavior, God’s Law is applied to them through outside, God-given means. Only the raw application of the Law from the outside can restrain their unregenerate will. While the church and its pastor are strictly speaking “ministers of the Gospel”, they are also to speak the Law when necessary. Dealing with the disordered is such a time.

Consider this hypothetical example. Someone who has been identified as potentially disordered attends a congregational meeting. He or she asks to speak, and suggests that “many people” in the congregation have confided to him or her that the treasurer (who is not present) may be “borrowing” money from the church. This continues on for several minutes, with the disordered person, “in the strictest confidence”, sharing his or her concerns. Under normal circumstances, Christians want to let the person have their say. Isn’t it better to allow people to speak and consider what they are saying, and so defuse the conflict? But in this circumstance, the person must be confronted rather than indulged. The Law must be spoken. The pastor, or another member, might raise a point of privilege and say “These are unsubstantiated rumors, and this is an inappropriate place for them to be brought up. I ask so-and-so to sit down and be quiet, and for his or her comments to be struck from the record.” The chairmen should ensure that the person is not recognized again. If the disordered person later approaches the pastor about how they’ve been mistreated, the pastor should be blunt and point out the sinful way in which the person has acted. He should point out what would be a Christian, God-pleasing response.

[↓] “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (*Ephesians 6:12*)

In applying the Law and exercising authority, however, the pastor and the church should not forget that “there but for the grace of God go we.” As Peck writes, this should be a “reflection that should accompany every judgment of another’s evil.”⁵⁴ When we deal with the disordered, we should see in them what we too would be without God’s gifts to us. Christ died for the disordered too, although for reasons beyond our understanding God has left them to their natural lusts, without the faith that would receive the benefits of the atonement.

Protecting the Sheep

The Congregation

Previously the point was made that the disordered often end up being “antagonists” in the church. This is the first reason why they cannot simply be “loved out of the way” without any discipline. For the good of the flock, the shepherd must manage and at times expel the wolf. Left unchecked, the antagonistic disordered person may destroy an entire congregation and the pastor’s ministry as well. In normal church conflict, there is an ability to reason with those on different sides of an issue to arrive at a resolution. Though the two sides may not be able to agree, that they will at least be able to agree on the reasons *why* they disagree. When the relationally disordered become full-fledged “antagonists”, this is simply not possible. “Healthy resolution requires that those involved value one another as human beings... Unfortunately, antagonists do none of these consistently.”⁵⁵ This alone should be reason enough for pastors to take seriously those in their midst who may be relationally disordered.

Consider a further example. While I was on vicarage, an antagonist began attending our church. Fortunately my bishop and the congregation’s leadership had a strategy for dealing with the situation before it had a chance to get out of hand. The signs that the individual might be an antagonist included the following: he had left several area churches, had charged several pastors with “false doctrine” and had tried to turn their congregations against them. When he attempted to continue this pattern of behavior at my vicarage site, the pastor met with him and removed him from communicant fellowship until he resolved the outstanding issues at his former churches. The elders were informed of his history and told to keep an eye out for his reappearance.

The Children

A second reason for identifying and managing people with disorders is for the sake of the children that may be under their care. Peck writes, “The most typical victim of evil is a child. This is to be expected, because children are not only the weakest and the most vulnerable, but also because parents wield a power over the lives of their children that is essentially absolute.”⁵⁶ The children of the disordered person may be the most vulnerable, but the least obvious, victims of a person’s personality disorder. The pastor should therefore take care to identify not only people with these most severe disorders but who may be under their guidance. These little ones should be watched to ensure that they are not being abused, especially emotionally and psychologically.

Peck tells the story of a young boy who had stolen a car and was brought to him for counseling by his parents. The boy’s older brother had committed suicide by shooting himself, and Peck felt there might be more happening here than was obvious at first sight. He began to suspect it was the parents, not the boy, who were the problem. It was difficult, however, to get the boy to speak freely with him. One time they met after Christmas, and Peck thought to ask the boy what presents he had received. He said his parents gave him the gun. Not just any gun, but the same gun the boy’s older brother had used to kill himself. The parents, when confronted with this seemingly evil act, pleaded that they didn’t have enough money to buy another present. Besides, they told Peck, it was a perfectly good gun!⁵⁷

Conclusion

“Narcissists”, “Sociopaths”, “Personality Disorders”; by whatever name we use, there are people, even in our congregations, who are evil. We have become accustomed to thinking of the evil as the Hannibal Lectors, the Hitlers, the Darth Vaders of the world. Not so. Satan does not always appear as the roaring lion, but sometimes as the angel of light.* It behooves the pastor to understand those who may have relational disorders, and to know of what they are capable. The pastor should be aware of how to deal with them: openness, a hug, and a listening ear will not be effective in these cases. Only the Law of God can break through their disorders, and only as God wills. In the meantime, the pastor must protect the flock from potential harm. Sometimes there is no solution but the one Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 5:11-13:

“But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’”

End Notes

¹ Richard P. Vaughan, *Pastoral Counseling and Personality Disorders* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 1

² Vaughan, 16

³ Vaughan, 17

⁴ Hervey Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity*. 4th ed. (Saint Louis: The C.V. Mosby Company, 1964), 32.

⁵ Vaughan, 72

⁶ M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 77.

⁷ Paul Schmidt, *Coping With Difficult People* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA: 1980), 12

⁸ Kenneth C. Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal With Destructive Conflict* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 27.

⁹ William H. Reid, ed. *The Treatment of Antisocial Syndromes* (New York: Van Nostrand - Reinhold Company, 1981), 4-5.

¹⁰ Hatherleigh Press, *The Hatherleigh Guide to Psychiatric Disorders* (New York: Hatherleigh Press, 1996), 119.

¹¹ Cleckley, 42

¹² Vaughan, 40

¹³ Schmidt, 106

¹⁴ Vaughan, 64

¹⁵ Vaughan, 71

¹⁶ Vaughan, 70

¹⁷ Cleckley, 29

¹⁸ Cleckley, 36

¹⁹ Cleckley, 82

²⁰ Cleckley, 110

²¹ Cleckley, 198

²² Cleckley, 250

²³ Cleckley, 422

²⁴ Peck, 66

²⁵ Peck, 165

²⁶ Peck, 166

Endnotes continue on next page

* Both of these metaphors are used for Satan in the New Testament. The first is used in 1 Peter 5:8. The second appears in 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, where Paul writes: “For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.”

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- ²⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965)
- ²⁸ Peck, 42-45
- ²⁹ Peck, 76
- ³⁰ Peck, 80
- ³¹ Peck, 69
- ³² Peck, 39-40
- ³³ Peck, 162
- ³⁴ The Book of Concord, 521
- ³⁵ The Book of Concord, 39
- ³⁶ Gustav Wingren, *Gospel and Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964), 44.
- ³⁷ Wingren, 213
- ³⁸ Wingren, 111
- ³⁹ Peck, 41
- ⁴⁰ Peck, 78
- ⁴¹ Peck, 183
- ⁴² Peck, 194
- ⁴³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1958), 97
- ⁴⁴ Romans 1:29, ESV
- ⁴⁵ Peck, 168
- ⁴⁶ Haugk, 36
- ⁴⁷ Peck, 62
- ⁴⁸ Vaughan, 16
- ⁴⁹ Cleckley, 35
- ⁵⁰ Vaughan, 76
- ⁵¹ Schmidt, 17
- ⁵² Peck, 63
- ⁵³ Peck, 185
- ⁵⁴ Peck, 256
- ⁵⁵ Haugk, 36
- ⁵⁶ Peck, 107
- ⁵⁷ Peck, 57

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