

"It's not whether you win or lose that matters; it's how you look while you play the game."

This solemn insight is confided in a television advertisement for sportswear. It is by no means said merely in fun. For many folk today, looking good really is 'what matters'.

HUGE AMOUNTS of time and money are spent on appearance. Naomi Wolf has written of how women yield harmfully to pressure to improve their body-image;¹ so, increasingly today, do men. When it comes to dress, 'label' garments attract a huge price mark-up. Amongst a new generation of children the significance of label clothing has become such that last year when one intermediate school held a mufti day, children mocked classmates who lacked label clothing so cruelly that the school threatened to stop holding 'mufti' days.

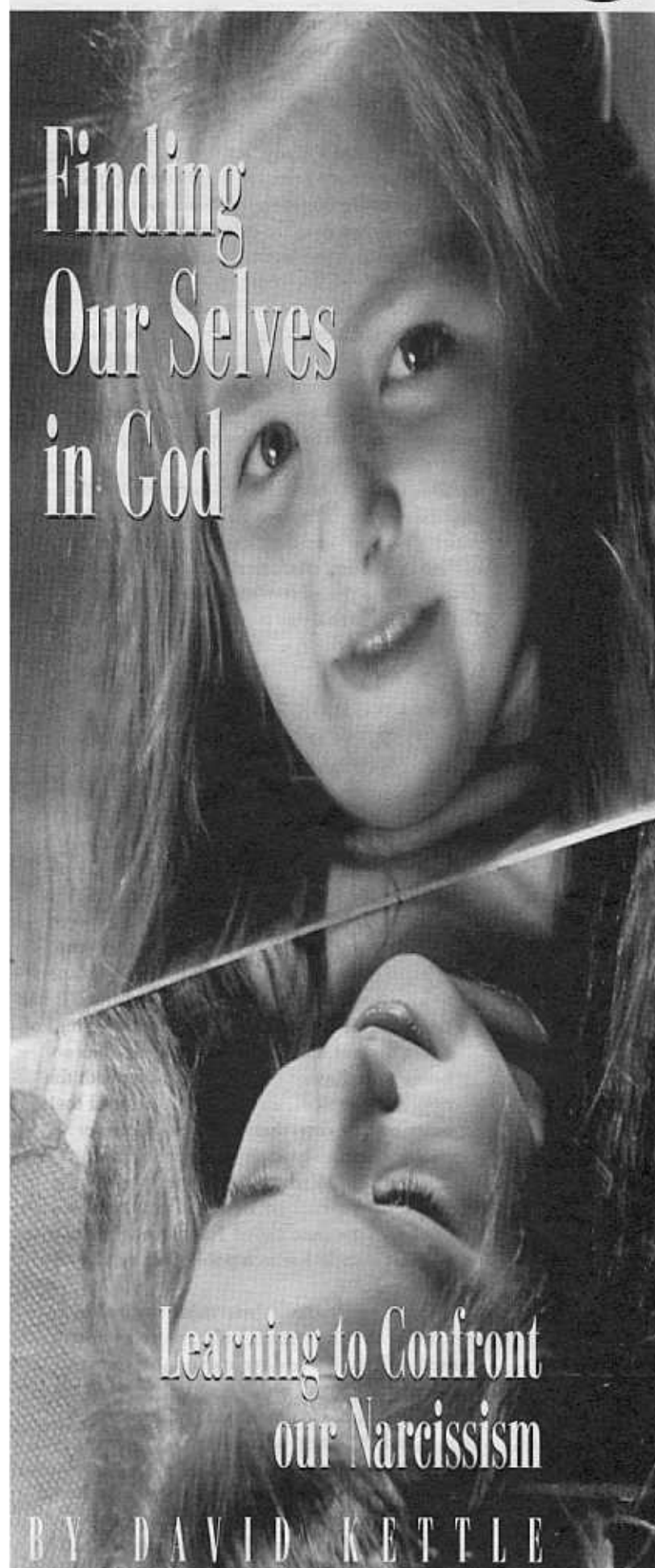
What is going on here? Do we have any particular view of this as Christians?

BECOMING AN IMAGE

THE PHENOMENON of label clothing is a good indicator of what is happening. I belong to a generation which has a continuing sense that advertising intrudes and is parasitic upon the community life in which we all participate.

When I wear clothing which advertises its manufacturer to my friends and colleagues, I am conscious of a commercial voice intruding into our relationship. If I should decide freely to sell myself as a walking billboard this way (which is an unlikely prospect), I think the manufacturer should at least pay me for doing so!

In contrast to this viewpoint, many people pay dearly today for the privilege of wearing a 'prestige' manufacturer's label on their clothing. Wearing the right clothes has become itself the means of participation in society – but this 'participation' is not about being taken as we are, and contributing what we have. It is about having an image which makes us 'someone' in the superficial and often narrow judgement of others.



Finding Our Selves in God

Learning to Confront our Narcissism

BY DAVID KETTLE



This kind of game-playing is not something completely new, but today it pervades general society more than it has in previous times. Why has this happened? It surely reflects an anxiety within us – an anxiety centred on the unresolved question: “Who am I? Am I really ‘someone’ at all?”

In an attempt to resolve this haunting question we try to secure our identity in the eyes of others (and in our own eyes) *as an image*. But this strategy does not resolve the question at all; rather it keeps it alive, unresolved, haunting us.

The development of which I have spoken has its setting in a change taking place in the course of the twentieth century among people in western society. This change has been most pronounced in the United States and especially during the past two decades. It is a change in the character profile of the general population.

This change has been depicted by a number of writers. Erich Fromm², describing the directions in which character can develop, has discerned the rise of “the marketing character”. David Riesman³ has described the rise of the ‘other-directed’ character. But the richest analysis is provided by those who have written of the rise of the ‘narcissistic’ personality.

THE NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY

FREUD COINED the term ‘narcissistic personality disorder’ to designate a particular sexual disorder. However, by the 1970s this term was being used more widely in psychiatric circles. Peter Moore writes:

“Psychiatrists began observing that people were no longer coming in large numbers complaining of feelings of guilt. Rather they were coming complaining of a sense of inner emptiness, of unsatisfied relationships, of an incapacity to love and of feelings of meaninglessness. It had become rare for people to come with feelings of being uptight, unable to express emotions and bottled up. Rather they were coming with the opposite problem: an inability to control their emotions, to keep their passions in proper balance, and to gain any satisfaction from the relationships in which they were involved.”⁴

The term ‘narcissism’ derives from the classical myth of a young man called Narcissus who, infatuated with his own image in a pool of water, drowns trying to reach it.

Accordingly today, a ‘narcissist’ is someone who sees the world, the ‘other’, only as a reflection of himself or herself. He devours and transforms everything in pursuit of his own image – but never with satisfaction. He never really affirms other people and the world as they are in their own right, but sees them only as part of himself, to be controlled according to his needs. He does not reach out personally into the world, discovering in this experience both the world and himself. Instead he seeks – through his reflected image – a self which he

lacks. Ironically, by this very act he perpetuates his lack and subverts discovery both of the world and of himself.

Clinical indicators of narcissism have been listed as including “a grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness; preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; exhibitionistic need for constant attention and admiration; feelings of rage, inferiority, or emptiness in response to criticism or defeat; lack of empathy; sense of entitlement without assuming reciprocal responsibilities”.⁵

Narcissism and its various traits have been described very fully by Heinz Kohut.⁶ The origins of narcissism are held to lie in early childhood, in the experience of not having one’s needs met for personal attention and affirmation. The young child who does not find herself ‘mirrored’ well enough by her mother or by other important figures withdraws from primary, personal, trusting, exploratory engagement with the world. She no longer trusts herself to the outside world, for fear that she will be let down again.

Concealed within her is a huge rage, and a passionate refusal to forgive. She may become grandiose and contemptuous, denying her vulnerability by maintaining the illusion of being in control. Or she may become depressed, submissive, and inclined to aimless, vagrant promiscuity. Feeling abandoned, violated or victimised, her worth in question, she fails to engage responsibly or creatively with the world around her. Either way, within her are concealed a false dependence and shame.

While it may seem that she is totally absorbed in self-love, her deeper attitude towards herself is more akin to self-hatred. It will be apparent how easily such patterns may repeat themselves from one family generation to another: the narcissistic mother will not ‘see’ her child but only use him or her to feed her own narcissistic hunger, thus reproducing her own emptiness in her child.

THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM

IT HAS BEEN SAID that the illnesses prevalent in a society tell us much about that society. The rise of clinical narcissism is the tip of an iceberg. The features of narcissistic depletion are, in milder form, widespread in western society today, and they reflect characteristics of western society. A wide-ranging account of this can be found in Christopher Lasch’s book *The Culture of Narcissism*.⁷

CHANGES IN CHILD-REARING

WHY HAVE narcissistic tendencies become more prominent today than in the past? Three contributing factors may be identified. The first contributing factor – and this is Lasch’s main answer to this question – is changes in child-rearing this century.

Lasch says he was prompted to write his book by studies “which had led me to the conclusion that the family’s importance in our society had been steadily

declining over a period of more than a hundred years. Schools, peer groups, mass media, and the 'helping professions' had challenged parental authority and taken over many of the family's child-rearing functions".⁸

This invasion has "created an ideal of perfect parenthood while destroying parents' confidence in their ability to perform the most elementary functions of childrearing".⁹ This has made parents more self-absorbed, ironically subverting the quality of parent-child interaction, and so has fostered narcissistic depletion in the child.

The past few generations of parents in the United States have probably been more self-absorbed regarding their parenting skills than their counterparts in other western societies. However, two more recent developments in parenting which have spread through the wider western world must be expected to foster narcissistic depletion in children. They are the erosion of parent-child interaction by long hours of television watching, and the movement of young mothers into the workforce (where this involves placing children too early and too long in creches). Penelope Leach points out that in western societies the total amount of time parents and children spend together has dropped by 40% in a single generation.¹⁰

A WORLD IN WHICH WE ARE REDUNDANT

THE EFFECTIVE UNDERMINING of parental authority by the professions as described by Lasch is, as Lasch himself recognises, part of a wider picture.

In particular, many developments in recent decades have directed our attention away from a world in which we are personal, creative participants and towards a world 'out there' in which we are personally unknown and redundant. This newly experienced 'lack of mirroring' is a second major contributor to narcissistic tendencies.

Consider the range of fronts on which this has happened. Our loss of personal participation in:

- community life – city life and high mobility have increased our anonymity;
- production – vegetable gardening, home baking, car maintenance, knitting etc are fading, and are increasingly seen as a substitute for the 'professional job', instead of themselves being 'the real thing';
- making and influencing joint decisions – small businesses give way to chain stores, government becomes more centralised, local media fall into the hands of a few large owners.

In particular, the mass media bring us news of a world beyond our influence in which we do not feature; soap dramas in which we do not participate; and products which we have not sought to buy. The personal significance to us of such developments is reflected in a cartoon about a baseball player who becomes a TV star: "from being nobody in the hearts of anyone, anywhere, he became somebody

in the eyes of everyone, everywhere" (the 'from zero to hero' picture).

THE EFFECT OF ADVERTISING

Narcissistic tendencies offer a particular opportunity for those wishing to sell us products. Instead of having to convince us of the usefulness or attractive properties of a product, they need only to associate their product with 'being someone', both in our own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Narcissism is the advertiser's dream. It is the means to unlimited market creation. It turns people from hard-headed, discerning purchasers into malleable, fashion-conscious, impulse-driven consumers with insatiable needs. No product ever meets these needs, of course. Yet this fact does not lessen the effect of a new appeal to these needs when the next new product is advertised. The narcissism within us never learns. In this way advertising practices resonate with, and reinforce, narcissistic depletion. This is a third contributor to narcissistic depletion in western society today.

FAITH, FALSE AUTONOMY AND FALSE DEPENDENCE

IN MODERN western society we are accustomed to meeting people who ignore or reject Christian faith in a spirit of autonomy and self-sufficiency.

In a spirit of autonomy people count themselves free to decide for themselves what to do and what to believe without reference to God. They see God as wanting only to dictate to them, imposing his will upon theirs. In a spirit of *self-sufficiency*, people see themselves as able to discover what they need to know, and able to do what they want to do, without depending on God.

Accordingly we are accustomed to thinking of the gospel as calling sinners to 'hand over' to God. The gospel calls sinners from proud autonomy and self-sufficiency to obedience and dependence upon God.

Our reflections on narcissism, however, suggest that we must recognise another face to sin. Not so much a spirit of proud autonomy as a spirit of servitude, expressed in compulsive, addictive or vagrant behaviour driven by insatiable narcissistic hunger. Not so much a spirit of self-sufficiency as a spirit of false dependence which is expressed in self-absorption and insatiable need.

But is it reasonable to see this as sin? Some have thought not. Surely the last thing a narcissist needs is to be accused? The narcissist already secretly hates himself. Does not God call us warmly to accept and affirm him, and attentively to mirror him, bringing healing love into his emptiness?

Indeed God does. But God also asks him to take responsibility for himself, confessing that he has colluded with his own deprivation.

The narcissist sins by refusing to forgive the world for depriving him, and by insisting that this deprivation negates his very being. In so doing he attacks the possibility of a good, trustworthy God. And he sins by prescribing with rigid authority what is required to put this right, and without which, by his own resolve once again, he remains radically deprived.

Indeed, we see in false autonomy and false dependence two images of boundless, satanic evil. The first image is of the utterly amoral person who in a cold, calculating way exploits other people in pursuit of his own ends. This is the image of the ruthless criminal and the heartless dictator.

The second image is quite different – that of the evil person who intensely enjoys having over someone else the destructive, devouring power which grips those who are being terrorised or seduced. Such a person, despairing of the emptiness within him, enjoys feeling 'somebody' by this false means. He is a vampire, a parasite, feeding upon other people's vulnerability to destruction.



FINDING OURSELVES IN GOD

GOD HAS REVEALED HIMSELF in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Confronted by this event both in the context of Jesus' ministry and (more widely) in the context of the Jewish religious tradition, we see God's forgiving love and our sin.

We are accustomed to think of Jesus' death and resurrection as addressing our sinful spirit of proud self-sufficiency and autonomy, calling us to confess our need of God's forgiveness and humbly to delight in honouring him in worship and service. But we must also ask how Jesus' death and resurrection addresses the other face of sin – our sinful spirit of narcissism, of false dependence.

I suggest it addresses the two contradictory faces of narcissism – that of the helpless victim and that of the controlling oppressor – as follows.

In the first place Jesus' death and resurrection addresses us as helpless victims. As we identify narcissistically with the crucified Jesus, alone before God and the world, we meet the most compelling grounds for despair. The worst nightmare of our narcissism comes to pass.

In Jesus we are shown our own abandonment and victimhood fathomed to the depths and more. Jesus, God's final initiative, love's final word, is here rejected by God's own people. Jesus, God's anointed one, the one who most faithfully trusted God and deserved to be upheld by him, is here abandoned by God.

And yet now, in a moment of dramatic disclosure, we find ourselves radically challenged. For we see that Jesus is not, like us, full of passionate hatred at this outrage. Rather, he responsibly embraces it.

He stays himself – alive with hope where hope is utterly groundless, with trust where trust is utterly gratuitous, with meaning where life is utterly senseless. And in the dawning light of the resurrection, we see that the hope and trust and meaning Jesus has continued to place in God is vindicated by God himself. God claims the last word.

Now the world becomes a new place; we are new people. We are empowered to face our own abandonment fully, no longer defeated by it, but rather taking responsibility with Jesus for believing and trusting God who unfailingly holds us in his hand.

In the second place, Jesus' death and resurrection addresses us as controlling oppressors. As narcissistically we view Jesus himself over against ourselves, we seek to control him, to make of him our own reflection; but we always fail. Even when we get caught up in the most extreme efforts to control him – enforcing a tortured death – still we cannot control him; he remains free of our grasp. But in his freedom he simply goes on loving us.

And now in a moment of radical disclosure his free love, embracing the worst we can do to him, shows us that our controlling behaviour is both futile and unnecessary. We are challenged to entrust

ourselves to his sovereign love, daring to believe that we do not *need* to live by exercising control. We are called to leave for dead our narcissistic, controlling selves, and live anew by his love.

Here, then, is the twofold challenge of Jesus' death and resurrection to the narcissist within us: with Jesus, to rise above the bondage of self-preoccupied victimhood and take responsibility for ourselves, for life, and for hope, even where these are most outrageously violated; and to let go our controlling behaviour as futile, and entrust ourselves to God's love. We are to move from the contradiction of false dependence and narcissistic control to the paradox of creative responsibility in true dependence on God. In so doing we enter into the life and work for which God has made us, in the communion of the divine Trinity.

IN OUR OWN generation many Christians emphasise the need to 'inculturate' the gospel in the diverse cultures of the world. But how does the gospel speak to our own changing culture, in which narcissism has become prominent?

If we do not take this question seriously, there is danger not only that we shall fail to speak the gospel to those outside the faith 'where they are at', but also that we shall not recognise when narcissism distorts faith within the church itself.

We must start by no longer seeing sin exclusively in terms of proud autonomy, but seeing it also in terms of the false dependence of narcissism. The crucified Lord calls us from this false dependence. We are to take new responsibility for ourselves, and to offer ourselves freely to God's service; and we are to let go our false 'controlling' behaviour and trust the reality of God's love for us.

This change of heart must be claimed and lived out in practical ways as we immerse ourselves in the community of God's church and in its works of service.



NOTES

1. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, Vintage, London 1990.
2. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*, London 1949.
3. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, Yale University Press 1950.
4. Peter Moore, *Disarming the Secular Gods*, IVP 1989, p82.
5. Moore, p82.
6. Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders*, New York 1971.
7. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, New York 1979.
8. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, afterword to 1991 edition, p238.
9. Lasch, p170.
10. Penelope Leach, interviewed by Val Aldridge, *Dominion*, February 27th 1995, p9. The interview was occasioned by the publication of Penelope Leach's book *Children First*, Penguin 1994.



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