

# Gaslighting and the Christian Response

Self-esteem can be measured on two criteria: confidence and humility. One who has low self-confidence can be said to have low self-esteem. One who has a large degree of self-confidence can be said to have either narcissism or high self-esteem. The difference between narcissism and high self-esteem is whether one is prideful (seeks to put self first) or humble (sees everything as part of a whole). Those with narcissism and high self-esteem can, superficially, act in similar ways. But the critical difference is not what they do, but rather why they do it. A narcissist will act to glorify oneself while one who has high self-esteem will act to glorify all. For example, both may very well place themselves in danger to rescue someone from peril. The narcissist will do it hoping to be praised for the effort. The one with high self-esteem has decided that the danger to oneself is worth the chance of saving the other.

So, while self-confidence is common to all three self-esteem positions, humility only identifies those with high self-confidence as having high self-esteem. This is important, as high self-esteem is *not* the happy medium between low self-esteem and narcissism, but rather that narcissism and high self-esteem are equals in terms of confidence. Therefore, both narcissism and high self-esteem are the opposite of low self-esteem.

Since self-confidence is key to all three self-esteem positions, and since self-esteem is also key to how people behave, it is to be expected that attacks on one's self-confidence will be made by those who wish to control how others behave. And not only do such attacks take place, but they have been developed to a terrifying degree of efficiency and have been married to industrial level efforts in merchandising, politics and social media. And this effort, both at personal and world power levels, has a name: gaslighting.

There are, of course, different expressions of what gaslighting is, although they all are fairly similar. I will use the Newport Institute definition: "Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which the abuser attempts to sow self-doubt and confusion in their victim's mind." It goes on to say, "Typically, gaslighters are seeking to gain power and control over the other person, by distorting reality and forcing them to question their own judgment and intuition." As can be seen in this definition, the sole purpose of gaslighting is to encourage low self-esteem.

Gaslighting is not limited to an abusive person in a relationship; it is everywhere. Stores attempt to gaslight customers into buying things one could live without (the "keeping up with the Joneses" syndrome). The woke culture is attempting to gaslight anyone who disagrees with even the smallest part of their ideology (calling all whites "white supremacists" and blacks "Uncle Toms" are just two examples). Pro-abortionists attempt to gaslight pro-lifers (ironically, often by calling pro-lifers "killers"). Critical theorists gaslight everyone equally (whites are the cause of all social ills, and non-whites helpless to do anything about it). I could go on, but I hope my point is made as to just how institutionalized gaslighting is, especially with so-called "social justice warriors."

And while most institutions, like the Newport Institute, will confine the definition of gaslighting to those who deliberately seek to destroy self-confidence for their own purposes, there are a few who claim *any* attack on self-confidence is a form of gaslighting. But while I reject this as going too far as a formal definition, I do agree that harm done by accident is just as bad as that done deliberately. Indeed, it may even be worse, as such mistakes are done by those whom the victim values and trusts the most. So, in addition to wanting to help the victim in becoming aware of attacks made on them and what to

do about it, I also want to help keep the honest person from inadvertently hurting those he loves.

I will start with what is hopefully the easiest fix, stopping (or at least reducing) inadvertent harm. As I will argue shortly, I believe recognizing "truth" is the key to fighting gaslighting and the damage it causes. I think the easiest thing parents, guardians, teachers, and any other leadership figure can do to avoid this inadvertent harm is to speak the truth and to speak it consistently. It is better to admit one doesn't know something than to give a poorly thought out answer to a question. And we have to be humble when the tables are turned and they teach us something. It is not disrespectful for others to tell us a truth when we are wrong. If we want others to be confident, and since confidence comes from knowing the truth, then we have to realize that others will learn some things better than we did. Far from being a problem, becoming "smarter than us" is exactly what we should want to see happen from those who look up to us. Now, *how* others present the truth may be disrespectful, but we can separate correcting inappropriate manners from the truth being shared. Indeed, teaching others how to present the truth in a diplomatic way is another way to build self-confidence.

Now, let's move on to the victims of gaslighting. All three self-esteem states are going to be victims of gaslighting. Those with already low self-esteem will be gaslighted to ensure they stay compliant. Narcissists will be subject to attacks intended to humiliate them into low self-esteem, and those with high self-esteem will be accused of being narcissists.

Next, I want to talk about what one can do to repair damage to one's self-confidence, and how to stop further damage from taking place. How much self-confidence one has is based on many factors, and there is no way I could do justice to each one here. So I will categorize them as those beyond one's control, and those within one's control.

For aspects outside one's control, professional help is necessary. As high self-esteem is the ideal position to be in, and since high self-esteem is defined by humility, then recognizing one needs help is a step towards this ideal all by itself. But there is a whole industry seeking to make money off those seeking such help. Some practitioners are narcissists, while others have a genuine calling through their high self-esteem. One should be careful which one goes to. I realize that this is easier said than done, but I will at least give one tool in helping to determine this. It is no guarantee, but it is useful, and it is Christian-based.

While techniques will vary from one practitioner to another, there are two main approaches to dealing with low self-esteem. The first one is the idea that "I'm okay, you're okay," and therefore one only needs to realize that one is okay. The other approach is "It's not okay, but I still accept you." *Prima facie*, it may seem the first approach is the humane one and the latter is cruel, but I propose that this is not the case. This second approach is the Christian approach. There is nothing more Christian than to say, "I accept your brokenness because I am broken myself."

As Christians, we believe we are made in God's image. Thanks to Immanuel Kant, even skeptics can agree that, as moral agents, we all have equal dignity because we are all "ends in themselves." Either way, low self-esteem is a problem because one is not living up to one's potential. To say this is "okay" is an untruth. Any help from this perspective cannot fix the problem because it pretends the problem does not exist. Furthermore, even if this approach could work for those with low self-esteem, it ignores the problems of the narcissist. It is only when we face the real problem that any healing can take place. Low self-esteem and narcissism are both problems.

The second approach, the Christian approach, is not cruel. Real cruelty would be to ostracize

the other from the community for being broken (it would also be hypocritical for a Christian), but the second approach reaffirms one's value to the community (this itself is a boost to self-confidence and humility).

As for areas one can control, how one proceeds depends on what type of self-esteem one has. For the one with low self-esteem, one needs to avoid what undermines self-esteem and seek things that affirm it. For the narcissist, one needs to realize that pride is making one lonely, and to try to be more humble. For the one with high self-esteem, the challenge is to stay where one is. In all three cases, I think the key element is to hold onto truth.

Now, I realize that "truth" is a controversial term, but what else can one seek if one wants to be confident? Does one really expect to be confident by embracing lies? I'm not talking about cognitive dissonance, where one mistakes a falsehood as the truth (and a snare difficult to escape from for the prideful). I mean being confident in a lie one recognizes as a lie. So what do we call the truth? While I don't deny that skeptics have their own idea of what the truth is, for the sake of brevity I will focus on the Christian idea of truth. And it is very easy to focus on, because Jesus is truth incarnate (John 14:6). Any time we seek Jesus, we seek the truth. And the reverse is true as well, as anytime one seeks the truth, one is seeking Jesus. And Jesus has advice for all self-esteem positions. I won't go into great detail here on all the wealth of advice that is available, but I will give one example of advice for each self-esteem type.

For the one who suffers from low self-esteem, the scripture that comes to my mind is "if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away ... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away." (Matthew 5:29-30). I do not want to imbue even more guilt (of sin) on the poor sufferer of low self-esteem, but rather to focus on the solution. While there are things outside our control, remember that there are things *in* our control. Some changes can be easy, such as listening to different music. Some may be difficult, such as getting new friends or even leaving one's family. But this is not a strategy of "leaving," it is a strategy of "replacement." To move from one broken situation to another is, in my opinion, not really "leaving" anything. But when one replaces the broken with the unbroken, then one has made progress.

For the one who suffers from narcissism, the scripture I want to quote is "Why do you call me, Lord, Lord, but not do what I command?" (Luke 6:46). The biggest problem a narcissist can have is to not realize one has a problem. Narcissism is driven by pride (putting oneself first), so one finds oneself alone sooner or later. But even when a narcissist makes this realization, he still has a problem. The narcissist does not need to change his confidence, but rather his point of view. My advice here is obedience. Before one acts, ask if this is what Jesus would want one to do. If one has the opportunity to play the hero, take a moment to ask if Jesus wants you to do it or if someone else should do it. If someone else can do it, give them a chance to volunteer. If no one does, then volunteer. It is not my intent to suggest one should not be charitable, I'm just pointing out how the narcissist must struggle with doing what he has already been doing, but for a different reason.

For the one who has high self-esteem, the scripture I have in mind is "If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first." (John 15:18). When one acts humbly to promote truth, one is walking in the way of Jesus. One will be persecuted for the same reason Jesus was -- because the world does not want to know the truth. For one who is humble and is known to seek the good of others before self, being told one is selfish (a narcissist) can be especially hurtful. Even those who do want to hear the truth have learned to be skeptical from dealing with others and may not listen as they ought to. One's own friends may gaslight as well, confused about the difference between high self-esteem and narcissism.

These are perhaps the greatest wounds one with high self-esteem will suffer: being rejected by those one tries to help and not being understood by those who one loves the most.

But whatever one's self-esteem is, my advice is that, the worse gaslighting gets, the more closely one needs to embrace the truth.

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