This book was a nationwide best seller in 1983. Therefore it has been repeatedly reviewed; my efforts are redundant. However, once I read it and reread it, I kept seeing Scriptures which reflected what the author said. I felt compelled to review just a small portion of the book in the hope that knowing what the lie is would help us in our struggle to be Kingdom ready. In order to avoid the lie we must identify that lie. Lies poison us.

This is not a book I would recommend necessarily. That is another reason I want to pass on what I have learned. Much of it involves lengthy case studies, and as the author says, it is to be handled with care.

I will keep you in suspense no longer. What is the lie he refers to? Peck believes that “the lie” is self-deception, inability or unwillingness to tolerate the pain of self-reproach. He feels that evil originates not in the absence of guilt but in the effort to escape it. He describes these people as scapegoaters, projecting onto others their own sins, while denying any wrongdoing, denying the working of conscience and failing to hate themselves when they should. “The words ‘image,’ ‘appearance,’ and ‘outwardly’ are crucial to understanding the morality of those who are evil. While they seem to lack any motivation to be good, they intensely desire to appear good. Their ‘goodness’ is all on a level of pretense. It is, in effect, a lie. This is why they are the ‘people of the lie.’ Actually, the lie is designed not so much to deceive others as to deceive themselves.”

Psalm 119:29b corroborates this as God is implored to “Keep me from lying to myself.” A strange prayer to pray indeed if lying to one’s self was not only entirely plausible but undesirable as well. Proverbs 14:8b confirms that “fools deceive themselves.”

One characteristic of the people Peck describes is a failure to ever put themselves on trial. “Unpleasant though it may be, the sense of personal sin is precisely that which keeps our sin from getting out of hand. It is a very great blessing because it is our one and only effective safeguard against our own proclivity for evil.”

Peck then contrasts the group Jesus speaks of when he says “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (or meek as we would understand this) with the Pharisees or the fat cats of Jesus’ day. Peck asks whether pride is the most basic sin — “because all sins are reparable except the sin of believing one is without sin.” This is, I think, in a nutshell, the thesis and contention of the book and of Peck’s thinking. He argues it convincingly.

I wonder if anyone is just a little bit surprised and reacts by thinking — “oh, that is just hypocrisy; it has been with us from the beginning, old hat stuff, nothing new there,” etc. I think that if I had to name what I felt was the worse possible sin, it would be betrayal, but Peck notes that all sins betray — isolating us from both God and our fellow men. Certainly there is much to consider here. Again, Peck states that “Evil originates not in the absence of guilt but in the effort to escape it.” He provides his readers with experiences which summarized are these: “to a

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1 People of The Lie, The Hope for Healing Human Evil, M. Scott Peck, p. 75, emphasis added.
2 Ibid., p. 72
3 Ibid., p. 72
4 Ibid., p. 76.
greater or lesser degree, all mentally healthy individuals submit themselves to the demands of their own conscience. Not so the evil, however. In the conflict between their guilt and their will, it is the guilt that must go and the will that must win."

Peck portrays the scenario between Abel and Cain like this: “God’s acceptance of Abel’s sacrifice implied a criticism of Cain: Cain was less than Abel in God’s eyes. Since he refused to acknowledge his imperfection, it was inevitable that Cain, like Satan, should take the law into his own hands and commit murder.”

Peck aligns himself with Scripture in acknowledging that “pride goes before a fall.” He defines this pride as a feature which “unrealistically denies our inherent sinfulness and imperfection,” and he affirms how very dangerous this is. Peck emphasizes that to “People of the Lie” self-deception is an integral part of their behavior; so much so that they are willing to sacrifice and harm and even destroy others in order to preserve their own self-image. He names this trait malignant narcissism and finds it to be the root of all evil and utterly perverse. “Buber states it well when he wrote of ‘the uncanny game of hide and seek in the obscurity of the soul, in which it, the single human soul, evades itself, avoids itself, hides from itself.’”

Adding to this very challenging thesis, Peck refers to his previous book, and says this: “It is often the most spiritually healthy and advanced among us who are called on to suffer in ways more agonizing than anything experienced by the more ordinary. Great leaders, when wise and well, are likely to endure degrees of anguish unknown to the common man. Conversely, it is the unwillingness to suffer emotional pain that usually lies at the very root of emotional illness. Those who fully experience depression, doubt, confusion, and despair may be infinitely more healthy than those who are generally certain, complacent, and self-satisfied. The denial of suffering, is, in fact, a better definition of illness than its acceptance.”

“Evil always has something to do with lies” states Peck, and again he points out the danger of the self love behind these lies. He reminds his readers that Satan is the father of lies and that his greatest power is through human belief in his lies. One has only to remember the enormous emphasis in Psalms and Proverbs on lying to make a connection with what Peck is saying. Our culture seems to have reduced lying to no more than being untidy or late (e.g. fibs and white lies). Scripture seems to view it quite differently, i.e. the difference between being a fool and not (Isa. 44:20). “The poor, deluded fool feeds on ashes. He is trusting something that can give him no help at all. Yet he cannot bring himself to ask, ‘Is this thing, this idol that I’m holding in my hand, a lie?’”

Parenthetically let me add that Peck did not begin his practice in psychology with a view of Satan as an active being, but became a believer in the power and personality of this being as a result of what he saw and experienced. The following is what he has come to believe: “Pervading this personality [Satan] is an active presence of hate. Satan wants to destroy us. It is important that we understand this…To think otherwise is to be misled. Indeed, as several have commented, perhaps Satan’s best deception is its general success in concealing its own reality from the human mind.”

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5 Ibid., p. 78.
6 Ibid., p. 79.
7 Ibid., p. 80.
8 Ibid., p. 107.
9 The Road Less Traveled, M. Scott Peck
10 People of the Lie, p. 128
11 Ibid., p. 135
12 Ibid., p. 208.
And now I come to the part of the book which I found most unsettling, not because I disagreed, but because the implications are serious and disturbing. Peck speaks about the pretense of blamelessness in today’s culture; e.g. everyone is a victim, no one is really at fault, no one made the wrong choice, these things just happen. (He is actually relating these thoughts to a war mentality but I honestly believe that they now characterize much of our thinking. It’s a “You’re OK, I’m OK, and that’s OK” kind of mentality.) Says Peck: “I denounce the position of ethical hopelessness, this abrogation of our capacity for moral judgment. I can think of nothing that would fill Satan with greater glee or better signify the ultimate success of its conquest of the human race than an attitude on the part of humans that it is impossible to identify evil.”

I find it heartbreaking that this lie which Peck speaks of (the pretense of blamelessness, etc.) has become somewhat prominent in the counseling field where the “move on” approach seems to have done away with repentance, and remorse is unnecessary. The sorrow and remorse which accompany guilt and recognition of wrongdoing are good emotions, not to be avoided or done away with. They are cleansing tools and an integral part of a healing process. The only way out is through, not avoidance. Let us not rewrite the story of the prodigal son to say that if the son sneered and swaggered into his father’s house and demanded certain things then the father would react in much the same way as he did, hugging his neck, having a feast prepared, etc. Do you think?! I get the impression, even from some Christian counselors, that there was nothing required of the son; moving on is all that matters. Repentance seems to have been done away with, considered unnecessary, replaced by group hugs. I very much fear that Peck is correct in identifying an abrogation of moral judgment; friends and I have seen this at work in the counseling arena, accompanied by an unwillingness or inability to recognize sin. And yet Proverbs 28:13b tells us that the confession of sin and the forsaking of it will gain us the mercy we all desire.

Dare we change the modus operandi as given to us in Scripture? In one sense, all of Scripture is a story of repentance and forgiveness. It is God’s invitation to change direction and walk a new path. But it is also a conversation which we must have. If one half of the agreement is removed (our part) in favor of a moving on approach, we have done it our way, and not God’s way. “For evil arises in the refusal to acknowledge our own sins.” Could we be at the point described in Psalm 12:8 where “evil is praised throughout the land”? Doing away with repentance is doing away with conscience and according to Dr. Peck’s thesis that would be a major disaster.

Peck does a wonderful job of revealing how devastating lies are, and too, how damaging it is to ignore or in other ways escape from one’s conscience. I am reminded of lepers and the fact that they cannot feel the pain which acts as a signal to escape, i.e. burning one’s fingers by touching a hot stove. The nerve endings which cause one to immediately retreat are, in fact, a blessing, saving one from further harm. So too, an active and functional conscience is our friend, preventing disaster. And should we fail, God has allowed us to be blessed by guilt.

Peck’s intense concentration on lies causes me to consider truth and how dangerous it is to be without it. We are all prey to the propaganda that truth is only subjective. The very idea of truth or a search for truth may sound foreign, and yet truth should be injected into every thought, every expectation, moral view, value system and philosophy that we operate from. One of the most important things we can do to have greater self-control is to identify lies. They then lose

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13 Ibid., p. 248
14 Ibid., p. 233
their power over us. We do this by countering the lie with the truth and denouncing the “lie in my right hand.”

Dr. Peck emphasizes that one of the most important reasons for identifying evil is the healing of its victims as his subtitle states: “The hope for healing human evil.” I am reminded of Proverbs 17:15 which warns us that “The Lord despises those who acquit the guilty and condemn the innocent.” Very interesting as it appears that one is as bad as the other. We must not be guilty of either one. It is incumbent upon us to recognize the lie so as to disown it. It is further and absolutely required of us to walk in the truth. The sole point of concentrating on this evil side of our nature and on the Evil One who tempts us is not to badger/berate/condemn but to help/heal/equip all of us who are at risk.

The People of the Lie are not correctible. That is their great sin. Both the Psalms and the Proverbs are treatises on that correction which we all need: if you are this, then you must become that. What does it mean to be meek? Our hope lies there, as not only will these be recognized by our Father but rewarded with that promised land we have all heard of.

I think a good synopsis might be this from 2 Chronicles 7:14: “Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land.” And the conclusion of the matter: “The sacrifice you want is a broken spirit, a broken and repentant heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:17).

Respectfully submitted,
Barbara Buzzard
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