

Human Defensiveness: The Third Way¹

David Powlison

David Powlison serves as editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. He also teaches at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation and at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania. Dr. Powlison is the author of numerous articles and several books including *Power Encounters: Reclaiming Spiritual Warfare* (Baker, 1995) and *Competent to Counsel? The History of a Conservative Protestant Anti-Psychiatry Movement* (Powlison, 1996).

Introduction

Change is brought about, not by new observations or additional evidence in the first instance, but by transpositions that were taking place inside the minds of the scientists themselves. In this connection it is not irrelevant to note that of all forms of mental activity the most difficult to induce, even in the minds of the young who may be presumed not to have lost their flexibility, is the art of handling the same bundle of data as before, but placing them in a new system of relations with one another by giving them a different framework.²

This article will introduce no new observations and evidence. Indeed, it will work with some of the oldest and most familiar pieces of both “psychological” and “theological” data. But it is a transposition of that data, for it presents a new framework—a new system of relations. It asks for a flexible mind to relate what often functions as two discrete “departments” in the minds of Christians. It aims to portray such a tight relationship between biblical data and psychological data—between these two “departments”—that neither one can ever remain the same.

In some ways we are simply reassessing the nomenclature with which familiar things are discussed. The French chemist Antoine Lavoisier revolutionized chemistry in the 1780’s, and the core of his achievement was the introduction of a new set of terms. Subsequent to Lavoisier, even those who wished to dispute him were forced to fight on turf defined in Lavoisier’s terms. Something very similar happened with the

revolutionary psychological systems of the twentieth century: they changed the terms in which we think about people and their problems. A reawakened biblical worldview will engage our culture in its terminology; we must offer something more clear-headed, comprehensive, fruitful, economical, and true.

Lavoisier’s goal was to improve science by improving its nomenclature:

However certain the facts of any science may be, and however just the ideas we may have formed of these facts, we can only communicate false impressions to others while we want words by which these may be properly expressed.³

Our goal is to improve both the “science” of understanding people and the “technology” of trying to help them. Christians often have been virtually forced to discuss human problems in the distorted terminology of secularized psychology. For example, how common—and insidious—is the use of the nomenclature for “improved self-esteem.” Yet the very terminology casts our insight into people in a framework that is severely constricted and warped; false impressions are inevitably communicated, and false counseling implications are drawn from false impressions. Language about “more accurate self knowledge, both causing and caused by a higher esteem for Christ” is a far more accurate and comprehensive way to handle the observations made of people who experience futility and a deep sense of failure. It also handles observations of people

who are cocky and confident about their abilities and successes.

This article, however, is not about self-knowledge but its obverse: self-deception. We will examine nomenclature related to the ways people hide from themselves and from others. We will seek to redefine the turf of “defense mechanisms” in such a way that will markedly “improve the science,” as well as improve the counseling which flows by implication from one’s framework of interpretation. This article is in two parts. First, we will generally discuss human “defensiveness” as it has been seen and analyzed by ego psychology and by behavioral psychology. The classic studies of “ego defense mechanisms” are rooted in the Freudian tradition; the more contemporary behaviorist discussion of “self-exonerating mechanisms” has been initiated by Albert Bandura. Second, we will comment and interact from the biblical world-view. The topic is vast, and the paper is short; hence, the discussion will be in broad strokes.

Human “Defensiveness” in Ego and Behavioral Psychology

Much of the persuasive power of Freud’s and Bandura’s analyses of human motivation rests on their explorations of human hiding and self-justifying: they see many ways that we all put on a “good front” both to ourselves and to others. Ego psychologists interpret these things as arising from an inner dynamic process; they are intrapsychic mechanisms. Put in simplest terms, these psychological activities (“ego defense mechanisms”) are designed to protect ourselves (“ego”) from invasive anxiety, which arises when our desires (“id”) contravene the image we have of ourselves (“ego ideal”) and in turn our internalized conscience (“super ego”)

accuses us. Bandura interprets these same things as behavior that is both internally represented (i.e., cognitive behavior) and outwardly expressed. These psychological and verbal activities (“self-exonerating mechanisms”) are designed to protect ourselves from the unpleasant experience (“self-contempt”) that arises when our behavior transgresses internalized standards of performance that we have learned from people we respect (“models”). The parallels between these two interpretations are obvious: both are psychic “mechanisms;” both deal with failure to attain standards we have for ourselves; both describe some process of internalizing standards from others; both describe aversion to unpleasant emotions that threaten to destroy our sense of integrity and “OK-ness.” The differences in interpretive framework are also obvious: the one is a psychodynamic paradigm; the other is a behavioral paradigm. Different as they are, each is persuasive in its own way for each “covers the facts.”

But each is also a serious distortion of how people work. We want to reinterpret their data. People do the things that are described, but the correctness of the terminology and the theoretical system in which those terms function are highly debatable matters. Freud and Bandura differ seriously with one another, but they are united in this: they attempt to account for human “defensiveness” without seeing human life in its totality—behavior, psychological dynamics, interpersonal relations, physiology—as related to God. Accuracy about human defensiveness is anchored in one’s understanding of the relationship between man and God. Defensiveness cannot be reduced to psychosocial mechanisms. The biblical view drastically differs with both Freud and Bandura.

Before we get to the biblical view, we want to look briefly at the bundle of data. What follows is a representative sample of a number of “defense mechanisms” (1-10) and “self-exonerating mechanisms” (11-15). I have attempted to recast each in more descriptive and less technical language because, as we have noted, nomenclature incarnates a theoretical framework. Secular psychologists often have observed people doing these things. Psychologists bring an interpretation to the observed behaviors, seeking to distinguish among the many varieties of defensive behavior. But the interpretive categories are distortions—we might even say they are counterfeits—of the truth.

1. We fear that others harbor the same sinful motives we harbor and have not dealt with. We often *accuse* others of these things. Lust, anger, greed, and competitive pride are things often attributed to others. For example, a man has persistent fears that his wife is unfaithful to him, and he grills her about the slightest seeming inconsistency in her behavior, often making up wild interpretations. In fact, the man has an active sexual fantasy life, an ongoing problem with masturbation, and guilt over premarital sexual intercourse that he has never acknowledged. This has been termed “projection,” and extreme cases of such fear, accusation, hostility, and pride are termed “paranoia.”

2. People *cover up* their failures, sin, and guilt by trying to be good or to make up without genuine repentance to God and others. They *deny* the truth about themselves to God, to others, to themselves. People try to *manipulate* and *control* others with niceness and great demonstrations of “love,” at the same time hiding from themselves all awareness of what they are doing. Judgmentalism, anger, disappointment,

sexual lust, and desire to control others are frequently covered. For example, a woman exudes a kind of sticky-sweet love and piety, with great verbal protestations of the same, when she is extremely frustrated and angry with her husband. This has been termed “reaction-formation” because the truth is concealed from consciousness by an “opposite reaction.”

3. People *misdirect their attention* from important issues to secondary matters. Any area of failure or guilt can be avoided in this way. For example, a Christian is preoccupied with minutiae of eschatology and continually boosts the necessity of Christians carrying tracts, while all the time he has very poor relations with family and co-workers (because of his perceived judgmentalism and hypocrisy) and visits prostitutes about once a month. This has been termed “substitution” because all sorts of secondary preoccupations are substituted for attention to personal and interpersonal problems (i.e., issues of sin).

4. People *fantasize* rather than face their problems biblically. Fantasy can cover failed hopes, laziness, unrealistic ideals of success, unforgiven hurts, loneliness, etc. It can also express directly sexual, financial, or status lusts, as well as a fundamental thanklessness. For example, a lonely single woman with a job she considers boring reads romance novels, watches soap operas, and daydreams about being glamorous, successful, and beloved. This has been termed “fantasy” for obvious reasons.

5. People *whitewash* or candy-coat reality about others rather than facing things honestly and responding constructively (i.e., biblically). For example, a widow whitewashes the memory of her deceased husband in her own mind and in conversation with others. He was a drunk, adulterer, and deadbeat, but she reiterates that,

“He was really a good man.” This has been termed “inversions” because the truth is turned inside out.

6. People *generate physical symptoms* of problems rather than face them. Pride, unreal images of oneself, anxiety, anger, and a host of other things can be expressed in “psychosomatic” ways. For example, a man who has an image of crying as a sign of womanish weakness will get intense headaches whenever he thinks of his wife’s death. A pastor who will not face that he is afraid of what people think of him tends to get sick on Saturdays and is developing an ulcer. This has been termed “conversion” because a genuine addressable problem is converted into physical symptoms.

7. People *scapegoat*, blame, and attack innocent, helpless, or even guilty parties (or inanimate objects) rather than face and solve problems biblically. For example, a man yells at his wife, kids, and dog after a tough day at work. He throws an ash tray through the television screen when his football team loses; he perpetually grumbles and rages at minor injustices done against him—drivers who tailgate him, a mechanic who ripped him off—and never recognizes the fundamental pride that rules his life. This has been termed “displacement” because the emotion is directed away from its genuine object. The problem that needs to be solved is avoided.

8. People *deny or avoid reality* to save face, preserve their pride, or hide from consciousness of guilt. For example, a mother excuses her son’s drunkenness and troubles with the law by saying, “He’s really a good boy; he just got in with a bad crowd.” This has been termed “denial” and can serve as a kind of catch-all for the whole gamut of defensive behavior.

9. People *cover failures* with other successes instead of facing problems and limi-

tations constructively and realistically. For example, a woman with a bad marriage pours herself into her children and volunteer work. This has been termed “compensation” for obvious reasons.

10. People *rationalize*, make excuses, and shift blame to put themselves in the best light. For example, a man and woman rationalize their fornication by saying, “We really love each other. Society’s standards are wrong, and people need to be free.” A woman says she is justified in her bitterness at her husband because he is an alcoholic. A homosexual says God made him that way, and Romans 1 only applies to natural heterosexuals who engage in homosexuality. This has been termed “rationalization” and, like denial, can serve as a catch-all for many of the masks people put on.

11. People *use euphemisms* about themselves and others to avoid guilt or any attribution of responsibility for something. For example, “I’m just irritated, not angry.” “I just had a few drinks.” “He acts that way because he has a low self-esteem.” “When you said to me, ‘You have a problem with anger,’ you became fused with a primitive and punitive part of my super-ego and that made me very angry with you.” This has been termed “euphemistic labeling.”

12. People *compare themselves to others* to try to look good and justify themselves. For example, “I know I have my faults, but I’m not as bad as a lot of other people.” “Well, I might have slacked off some on my job, but at least I didn’t smoke dope in the bathroom like most of the employees.” This has been termed “advantageous comparisons.”

13. People *shift blame* from themselves to others, God, circumstances, sickness, etc. For example, “It’s only human to get angry. It’s just the way God made me. If my wife

would only treat me with respect I wouldn't get angry." "My life is messed up because my parents got a divorce." This has been termed "attribution of blame."

14. People *spread around responsibility* to avoid culpability. If everybody does it, the law allows it, or society accepts it, then it is OK. For example, "Everyone cheats on his income taxes." "The Supreme Court decision makes abortion all right, and 68% of the American people agree we ought to be free to choose." This has been termed "diffusion of responsibility."

15. People *ignore and minimize consequences of their actions*. For example, "I suppose my wife is hurt when I curse her out and threaten to leave, but she should know I don't mean it." This has been termed "disregard of consequences."

These are but a sampling of the "ego defense mechanisms" and "self-exonerating mechanisms" that various psychologists have detailed. There are all sorts of examples of similar behavior evident in all sectors of daily life. The theoretical freight these fifteen samples carry in psychology (they are given technical labels and supposedly describe real entities) can mask the fact that these sorts of things are only a few examples plucked from among many. These same things can be described in very untechnical terms: we "wear masks"; we duck, weave, and dodge "the light" of self-knowledge and honesty before God and man; we wear fig leaves.

The following provides only a smattering of further examples of the fig leaves that we wear:

1. We change the subject or crack jokes if an awkward or threatening (i.e., anything we are not dealing with biblically) subject comes up.
2. We ramble and monopolize conversation, filling silences to keep ourselves from seeming to be fail-

ures and to keep others at bay.

3. We live or die vicariously with a sports team.

4. We "run from problems" by watching TV, drinking, smoking, promiscuity, work-alcoholism, compulsive eating.

5. We mock or "put in a box" others whose opinions or problems would threaten our own commitments and behavior.

6. We "get defensive" and testy, talk loud or get accusatory, try to bully others to defend ourselves and make a show of competency.

7. We overdo penance by, "Poor me; I'm so horrible and such a failure," express maudlin repentances, and wallow in failures.

8. We minimize the seriousness of problems—"It's nothing"—or the difficulty of change—"I promise I'll never do it again."

9. We lie outright, either to look good or to avoid looking bad.

10. We lie subtly, putting the best light on ourselves by innuendo, embellishment, or careful selection of data. This is often allied with subtle expressions of contempt or criticism for other people.

11. We think highly of our own opinions on every issue.

12. We tie up our identity in certain grandiose roles, like "counselor" or "parent" or "pastor." Any of our functions and successes, real or imagined, can become fodder for self-deception.

13. We pray for help before performing a certain responsibility, and then rehearse our own success afterwards without thought of God.

It should be evident that it does not take a psychologized theory of ego defense mechanisms or self-exonerating devices to track down countless instances of self-deception, self-aggrandizement, manipulation, and deception of and by others. In fact the powerhouses of modern thought are precisely the dissectors of false consciousness, who pierce the illusions of individual and collective life, exposing the shame and game: Marx, Kierkegaard,

Nietzsche and a host of others join Freud. Nietzsche once observed, "I did that," says my memory. 'I could not have done that,' says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually—the memory yields."⁴ Or as T. S. Eliot put it, "Human kind cannot bear very much reality."⁵

A Biblical Evaluation of Human "Defensiveness"

The greatest critic of human hypocrisy and dissembling, however, is the Bible, which speaks the mind of the Searcher of hearts and exposes illusions and false consciousness, using an entirely different grid than those of Marxists, existentialists, or psychoanalysts. There is much that can be said biblically on the subject of human defensiveness, but in this article we will make seven general points.

First, the data of human defensiveness looks like the biblical description of the workings of sin. "Defensiveness" incarnates all the blindness to the truth about oneself which might be denominated "pride." It has that combination of self-deception and deception of others that fits under the heading "the deceitfulness of sin." It embodies a primal resistance to honesty about oneself, an evasiveness, excuse making, and blame shifting, all of which are captured in a host of colorful metaphors: stiff-necked, hardened or darkened in heart, foolish, and so forth.

Also, the bundle of data describing defensiveness is clearly not well explained by calling it a set of intrapsychic mechanisms. It has an evident interpersonal component. Defensive people are almost invariably offensive as well. There is a curious blindness in the psychological analyses of the phenomena, for self-deception and defensiveness are only one side of the story. The other side is the trouble

such behavior causes for others: spouse, children, parents, boss, fellow employees, and counselors all suffer hardship and frustration in attempting to build meaningful, honest, and constructive relationships with "defensive" people. They are variously aggressive, evasive, deceptive, manipulative, and yet all the while somehow blind and driven, unable to help themselves. Of course, they are we! We all recognize ourselves in these descriptions of defensive behavior. Also it is no accident that others suffer hardship and frustration in cultivating good relationships with us.

We also intuitively recognize that psychological diagnosis does not ring true to the whole picture of what a human being is. It fails to capture that perverse combination of desire for good relationships, yet suspicion and fear of others; of tolerance for others' failings, yet self-aggrandizement and despising of others; of moments of brilliant self-awareness, yet habitual blindness to what about us is obvious to others; of patience with counselees, yet petty anger with family members; of love for self-knowledge, yet stubborn resistance to correction. In picking a good metaphor to capture the vast data of "defensiveness," the metaphor "mechanisms" would never do. The metaphor "warmaking" is far more cogent; it gets at the interpersonal component; it includes both the defensive and offensive activities, both fear and aggression; it includes the self-justifying rationalizations for what we do; it describes people with vast competencies and aspirations who somehow have gone awry; it implies we are both victims and victimizers; it implies the peacemaking that the gospel accomplishes in order to transform habitual warmakers into peacemakers. The idea of "defense mechanisms" represents a severe constriction of the data; it only has

appeal because of a presuppositional tunnel-vision that looks at people as “psychological” entities rather than as covenantal beings existing in relationship to God and neighbor.

“Warmaking activities” explains the data far more lucidly and comprehensively than does “defense mechanisms.” It should not surprise us that this is so. Secular psychology is always hamstrung by its precommitment to view human problems as “ontological” problems—as “things” that are not working right. Hence something as basic as self-deception is inevitably analyzed as a psychological “mechanism.” But the Bible never views human problems as ontological but as relational or “ethical” at their cores. Problems exist *between* man and God and *between* man and man. That our psyches are unhinged—or futile, darkened, alienated, ignorant, hardened, deceived, and desire-ridden, as Ephesians 4 puts it—does not mean our problems are psychological. The disorientation that manifests itself in our psychic life is only symptomatic of an interpersonal disorientation: our alienation from God. The very efforts of Freud, Bandura, *et al*, to describe these problems as essentially ontological things or mechanisms is a manifestation of that same disorientation.

Second, if we are going to understand so-called “defense mechanisms” as part and parcel of human sin, how do we make sense out of the seemingly “unconscious” character of so many of the problems that “defensive” people manifest—those things that usually are spoken of as “psychological or emotional problems”? It is evident that in part of the discussion above (for example, the “fig leaves” culled from daily life) I have indiscriminately mingled relatively “conscious” acts, like lying, with relatively “unconscious” acts, like projec-

tion by an angry paranoid. Psychodynamic psychology has stressed the relatively unconscious character of defense mechanisms in neurosis and psychosis. For example, compare the concealed anger of a “reaction formation” with the concealed intentions of a Casanova on the make: the former genuinely does not seem to know or to be able to admit the truth; the latter could admit in a moment the sexual motives under the debonair and caring exterior. The whitewashing and image-manipulation of a political ad campaign is a calculated affair. The “inversion” of a widow whitewashing her husband’s memory is automatic and unconscious. Conscious dissembling is not “ego-defense mechanisms” according to the theory. But the failure to connect these two things derives from a constriction of vision in the psychological theory.

In practice, conscious and unconscious are not that easy to distinguish. They are on a continuum. It is remarkable how the most “unconscious” person knows he is responsible for his sinful reaction as soon as it is brought out into the light. The sticky sweetness of a “reaction formation” vanishes as soon as the person becomes honest. And the most “conscious” person is deeply deceived. How full of rationalizations the Casanova is. However much the guilt has been denied and twisted, the “defensive” person is guilty. The well-psychoanalyzed person may be able to identify each of his defensive machinations as it happens, but in a sense he remains wholly deceived as to what those “mechanisms” really are. The fear of the LORD is always the beginning of true wisdom, however things may appear when another interpretive framework is forced onto human life. The “phenomenological status” of a particular problem is no safe guide

to what that problem is. However unconscious or conscious a particular pattern of warmaking activity seems, it is still fundamentally warmaking. The biblical doctrine of sin easily accommodates the reality of “unconscious” actions: sin is a darkening of the mind, a blind compulsion, a slavery, an automatic and indelible proclivity. Especially as sin is understood in terms of its inner hold on human life—variously analyzed as pride or unbelief or idolatrous desires or self or a drive for autonomy from God—then the fact of the automatic character of so-called “defense mechanisms” is simple and poignant testimony to the deceitfulness of sin, to human culpability, not to the excuse of “psychological problems.”

Third, people (psychiatrists, the man on the street, many Christians) have trouble seeing “emotional and psychological problems” as intimately related to sin. Casanova had a sin problem. But a troubled person has “emotional problems.” And a paranoid schizophrenic or a case of reaction formation is a matter of “psychosis” or “neurosis.” It is common to view defensive behavior such as we have been describing in some other category than sin. There are two simple reasons for difficulty in seeing such problems as matters of human sin. First, the typical view of sin is that it consists in outward acts consciously chosen, where one could have chosen the righteous alternative. Second, the typical attitude or stance taken towards sin is a moralistic one, condemning the person and/or telling them to shape up by an exercise of will power. The paranoid—to pick the extreme case—seems clearly not to have chosen to become that way. And telling such a person to shape up has never worked in the whole history of mankind!

But the view of sin that focuses on willed

actions is a denial of the biblical view of sin. It is the heresy known as Pelagianism in the history of theology. That it is the “natural” theology of the man on the street (psychiatrists included!) and that for Christians it is the most common functional view of sin do not make it even an approximation of biblical truth. Where sin is viewed primarily as willed outward acts, overt evil with “malice aforethought,” then the deep and complex inner troubles people have will tend to be absorbed under other categories. But this typical view of sin which creeps almost spontaneously into all of our thinking misses the deep inner hold of sin, the dislocation and confusion of our hearts that is the core of the biblical view of sin. Both the “high-handed” sins and the subtle sins, like anxiety, are embraced within the biblical view. Other categories communicate false impressions.

The attitude or stance taken towards sin naturally follows from the view of sin. An external view of sin will imply a moralistic stance towards sin. But an attitude of criticism or an exhortation to will power is a frank denial of the gospel. For most people “sin” connotes criticism or moralistic exhortation. But for the Bible—and for a counselor or counselee who desires true self-knowledge rather than some species of rationalization—it both denotes and connotes the saving grace of Jesus Christ. It implies compassion and love offered to those who would know both themselves and God. Christ did not come to judge or to say, “Shape up!” He came to save, to invite to an inner transformation of mind, heart, motives, will, identity, and emotions. He came to draw to himself people who, standing on their own, are already judged and are powerless to change themselves. “Christianity transformed the lives of men

not by appealing to the human will, but by telling a story. The lives of men are transformed by a piece of news.”⁶

Historically, attitudes towards troubled people have often been moralistic in Western society and in the church. Secular psychology might even be viewed as a “tolerant” reaction against moralism, for it sought to accept people rather than judge them, to show acceptance rather than to promote guilt, to make problems be psychological or behavioral maladjustment rather than sin. Such themes are prominent in the life histories of men like Carl Rogers, B. F. Skinner, Ernest Jones, and many of the other founders of psychiatry. It is no accident that the history of secular psychology and psychiatry is intertwined with theological liberalism and has continued to appeal where there is a “liberalizing” trend going on in the church. The pendulum swings from error to error, from moralism that condemns men before God to liberalism that sets men free of God. The paradox is that, in the name of tolerance (i.e., non-judgmentalism and supposedly objective psychological science), the truth that troubled people have a deep sin problem is withdrawn—and so is the gospel that deals with that sin problem. A person whose heart is tangled up—is “deceitful beyond all finding out; who can understand it?” as Jeremiah 17:9 so eloquently puts it—is taught psychological euphemisms to diagnose his problems. He is then given the unconditional regard and acceptance of the therapist as a substitute for the self-giving love of the Lamb of God. “The wound of my people is healed lightly for they say ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 8:11). Both legalism (“this is willful”) and psychologism (“this is a defense mechanism”) are profound distortions. Jesus Christ is a distinct third way.

Fourth, both Bandura and the ego psychologists assume that the only two alternatives are either stifling moralism (“character flaws,” lack of will power, judgmentalism, the way most religionists and the man on the street interpret behavior) or liberating psychological science (deeply penetrating into unconscious and dissociated behavior; non-judgmental; the way most psychologists interpret behavior). The gospel, however, is a third way. It is exactly the truth—of the radical and denominating nature of sin and of the radical and reorienting power of the Light, of the forgiving love of Christ—that defensive people need and respect. In counseling it is striking how “schizophrenics,” the paradigm case for powerful unconscious defensiveness, “track” to the themes of pride and hiding. They are large children, full of “folly” in the Proverbial sense, and they know it. It is striking as well how “madmen” become sane as they begin to grasp the implications of justification by faith, the substitutionary atonement, the alien righteousness of Christ, adoption as children of the Father, the Lordship of the crucified Savior (of course not in such polysyllabic language at first!). Biblical Christianity is a third way. It is hard truth that heals deeply. It is not a set of euphemisms, like “ego defense mechanisms.” It is not a set of criticisms, like, “If he wanted to, he could shape up.”

Fifth, when we look closely at the thought structure in which ideas like “ego defense mechanisms” or “self-exonerating mechanisms” are generated, we realize that they involve a deadly irony. These very categories are a case in point of the things being described. Their own categories condemn them. The nature of rationalization is to hide oneself from hard facts, from blows to one’s pride. The notion of uncon-

scious defense mechanisms that define one as “sick” (rather than profoundly deceived and/or deceptive) is a choice illustration of a “defensive” self-exonerating rationalization. Human responsibility is muted; there are “other reasons” for our problems. The psychodynamic explanation of human hiding and self-deception is itself a systematized and well institutionalized “defense mechanism.” It is a self-exonerating rationalization. Similarly Bandura’s theory of self-exonerating mechanisms is itself an example of euphemistic labeling taking place. He takes the data of human sin and euphemizes it. He writes, for example, “It is self-exonerative processes rather than character flaws that account for most inhumanities.”⁷ It would be much more accurate to write that sin—in all its self-deceptive power—evidences itself in inhumanities, character flaws, and self-excusing. Euphemism makes deep (serious) things shallow, and Bandura is shallow in his analysis of human knots. Some of Paul Vitz’s recent work, in which he shows how Freud’s analysis of the Oedipal complex is a damning explanation of Freud’s atheism, makes an analysis similar to the one we are making here.

Sixth, one of the most persuasive arguments in favor of a view of problems as “emotional and psychological” has always been that people with such problems almost invariably have had real scars from their upbringing. Especially when one has a moralistic view of sin, it seems somehow cruel to say, for example, that a woman with multiple personalities (an extreme form of the defense mechanism “fantasy”) has a basic sin problem. Such a person typically underwent constant criticism, was sexually abused, had horrendous role models, and lived a life of constant failure and danger. But a biblical view of sin and coun-

seling is tailor-made to help people with such deep problems. She was sinned against grievously and repeatedly—both in being given negative models of how to live, and in the direct attacks against her. Jesus Christ has great compassion on those sinned-against: He can give this woman courage and a reason to face now what happened and to forgive. She is also enslaved in sin—she lives multiple lies, is ruled by fear and bitterness, gives nothing to others, manipulates, does no work, has blasphemous ideas about God, and does not trust in Jesus. That she was both extremely provoked and consistently taught to sin does not lessen the fact that her life is controlled by sin. In fact, her sin against God is the “10,000 talents,” for her life is owed to him and is completely alienated from him; the sin against her is the “100 denarii,” a huge amount (a denarius is a day’s pay). Such large pain of being wronged will be converted into forgiveness when she sees her bigger wrong against God. Jesus Christ has great compassion on sinners: as she faces Him, responsible for who she is and has become, and finds forgiveness, she will gain reason and courage to live and to forgive.

Seventh, all this is to say that the “ego ideal” which “ego defense mechanisms” are defending and the violations of one’s internalized moral code which “self-exonerating mechanisms” are busy justifying are far from being mere “psychological” categories. These are “theological” issues to the core: the pervasive outworkings of human pride in seeking—automatically and blindly as well as willingly—to live autonomously from the Creator and Redeemer. Let us carefully use the descriptions and observations of secular psychologists. People indeed do and say the things reported, and secular men and women

have often been more careful to observe these than Christians have. But an interpretive framework is incarnated in the reports of these observations. Technical terminology is the bearer of unbiblical, speculative theory. Let us be wary of the terminology, for it sets the terms of the discussion of human problems in a world view that is false. “Projection,” for example, is a mechanical term for a decidedly human, interpersonal, and covenantal activity! It is a term freighted with distorted theory. It communicates false impressions. Machines project; people act. Human beings do not have mechanisms, however automatically they react. Seemingly automatism in human behavior are better seen as illustrations of “slave-like behavior,” not machine-like activity. Just as the notion of “warfare activities” thrusts us into a personalistic world, so the notion that behavior is “ruled,” not mechanical, forces us to see people more accurately and personally. Sin, the desires of the flesh, the world around us, and the devil are all portrayed as rulers that enslave and command behavior.⁸ They are personalized powers that deceive people and induce them to “warfare activities,” whether people know that they are ruled or not. Slaves and machines have many similarities. To show a slave how he is a machine may give him a sense of control and a world-view in which to interpret his experience. But though his anxiety level is reduced and he functions more self-confidently, he has been deceived more profoundly.

If they could be isolated from their system, none of the terms would be

bad. Euphemistic labeling, fantasy, rationalization, and others are reasonably concrete words with which to describe behavior. But functioning as technical terms, they are theory-laden. The triumph of Lavoisier’s nomenclature was the triumph of Lavoisier’s system! Simple descriptive language that incarnates a personalist world-view may be more useful than technical terminology, so long as the secular theoretical framework continues to be implicit in the vocabulary. Freudians and Bandurans have some notion of truth which serves as a framework within which to determine what is euphemistic, fantastical, or rationalistic. But their notion of truth is a shallow and distorting gloss when seen next to Scripture. They observe the evidences of human sin in massive detail, but they do not see sin nor hear Jesus. There is a vast difference between saying, “That is a case of euphemistic labeling,” and saying, “You are using euphemisms.” The former places us in a world of secular mechanisms needing repair; the latter locates us in the world of human sin needing redemption.

Conclusion

Let us be ruthless to root out theoretical structures that view people as psychological or socio-psychological abstractions: the phenomena observed are not “ego defense mechanisms” but are pride’s offensive, defensive, and deceptive strategies. And let us also forswear the therapeutic assumptions that are consequent to the theory: they are poor and deceptive substitutes for the gospel of Jesus Christ. If—and it is a large *if*—biblical categories con-

trol, we can revel in the descriptive acuity and case-study riches of psychologists. With biblical categories, we ourselves will mature as psychologists in the best sense of the word: acute observers of human life, experienced in cases and case studies, consistently wise in our counseling methods. We will know people deeply enough to know exactly how they need Jesus Christ. We will remember that Christianity is a third way. The alternative to moralism is not psychologism; the alternative is Christianity. “Warmaking activities” are omnipresent. Jesus Christ came and made true peace. Blessed are the peacemakers who help others into the peace of God that is in Jesus Christ. With biblical categories we will become men and women who know people—including ourselves first of all—and who know how to help with the help that is help indeed, with the *paraklēsis* (“comfort”) with which we ourselves have been comforted by God (2 Cor 1:4).

ENDNOTES

¹“Human Defensiveness: The Third Way” was first published in the *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 8 no. 1 (1985) 40-55. Used by permission.

²Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science* (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 1.

³Antoine Lavoisier, *The Elements of Chemistry*, trans. in *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 45 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952) 1.

⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (London: T. N. Foulis, 1914) 86.

⁵T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt,

Brace & World, 1971) 14.

⁶J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923) 47-48.

⁷Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 158.

⁸Eph 2:1-3 is an exceedingly rich summary passage that includes all of these. Rom 6:11-22; Gal 5:16-24; Rom 12:2; and 2 Tim 2:26 describe each in turn, as well as the alternative: “slavery”—to righteousness, to the desires of the Spirit, to God’s will—a “slavery” which is freedom.