

# Recovering a Healthy Sense of Sin

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In 1973 Karl Menninger published his renowned book *Whatever Became of Sin?* (Hawthorn) pointing out that if we don't have the proper diagnosis we will have no clue what the cure might be. His basic premise was that we were burying and ignoring the reality of sin. It seems this trend has continued unabated.

Sin as defined in orthodox Christianity is the condition of being separated from God's intent for us as a part of a good creation. It is the condition of being divorced from holiness, the central attribute of God. "But as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" - 1 Peter 1: 15-16 (NIV). Holiness is, to put it another way, the original specification for human health and wholeness. Sin is the human revolt against God's blueprint for a whole humanity. Rather than loving God, and seeking to glorify God by loving our neighbors (Matthew 22: 37-39), humans turn inward to their own understanding and gratification. Sin is manifest in people when they feel life is essentially about them, their desires, feelings, and appetites; as opposed to glorifying God in all things and contributing to the physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of others.

Our captivity to sin is the reason behind our unhealthy personal and social propensities and the negative results we often achieve in our personal lives and the cultures we create. It is why our hoped-for progress is rarely as positive as we would expect.

So how can we, as Christians, work with God in recovering God's image in us? How can we bring health and wholeness to a broken and sick world? How can we help clear the way for God's redeeming work? We must recover and acknowledge the profound reality of sin and an understanding that in its place God intends for humanity to reflect God's holiness. We must recover the ability to name sin and be bold in saying "no" to it. Why? Because not all ways of living either personally or in community reflect God's intention for humanity. Love, after all, sometimes requires us to say "no." This is the necessary first step in any correction of our chronic problem in life. Saying "no" in these circumstances is a part of acknowledging sin. This opens the way for God's redeeming love. Knowing we cannot accomplish restoration on our own, God has provided a remedy specific to the problem of sin. This requires new birth in God's image through faith in God's personal act of intervention in Jesus Christ. When we come to faith in Christ, and what God has done, a new life begins, a life that glorifies God and honors God's intent for a good creation. At this new birth we become a new creation and there begins a life-long journey guided and nurtured by the Holy Spirit. This is a journey toward living into God's original, good, and excellent plan for us and the whole of creation.

The United Methodist Church can only faithfully find a way forward by leaving behind any theology or belief structure that ignores or attempts to bury the reality of sin and God's objective of reforming humanity with holiness.

As the church deals with its present impasse regarding whether or not Christians can condone homosexual practice, we need to have enough love to say "no." In the greater context of the issue we need to clearly state what holiness requires in all areas and issues of human sexuality. Then by God's grace, we need to recover a theological base in The United Methodist Church that is not dismissive of manifestations of sin and enables us to address the health and wholeness of humanity as it was meant to be in God's good creation.