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The Disappearance of Sin—A Flight from Reality

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Karl Menninger was a famous American psychiatrist, and he was among the first mental health professionals to suggest that some psychological disorders were actually treatable. The established thought at the time was that virtually all mental disorders were incurable, but Menninger was unwilling to accept that assumption. His innovative treatment of psychological diseases largely shaped the modern practice of psychiatry.

Nevertheless, Menninger was not without controversy. Perhaps his most controversial contribution came in the form of his 1973 book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* The psychological community had almost universally banned the word “sin” from its vocabulary. In fact, therapists blamed the notion of sin for producing guilt, which seemed to be psychologically unhealthy. How's that for a reversal of reality?

Menninger wrote with moral indignation. He understood the reason the notion of sin had been rejected by psychiatry, but he found that he could not explain all human behavior as either “neurotic” or “healthy.” There was another category of behavior as Menninger observed—and that category was sin. Menninger's book was a powerful and influential call for recognizing sin as sin. He demonstrated that the psychological community was not alone; society at large had rejected the notion of sin.

Words such as “disease,” “anti-social behavior,” and “lack of moral development” had replaced “sin” as explanations for human behavior. Menninger attacked this evasion.

He wrote: “I believe there is 'sin' which is expressed in ways that cannot be subsumed . . . as 'crime,' 'disease,' 'delinquency,' 'deviancy.' There is immorality; there is unethical behavior; there is wrong doing. And I hope to show that there is usefulness in retaining the concept, and indeed the SIN, which now shows some signs of returning to public acceptance.”

Menninger's call was heard by some of his fellow psychologists, but rejected by many. His recovery of “sin” was seen by many of his colleagues as a giant step backward for a progressive science. Furthermore, his hope that sin might return as a public concern was not realized.

Genuine Christianity cannot escape dealing with sin. The Gospel will not allow any evasion of sin as the universal human condition of revolt against the Creator, the God of absolute holiness and absolute love. Nevertheless, Menninger's question still remains an indictment of the church as well as society: *Whatever became of sin?*

The famous psychiatrist noted the absence of “sin” in his profession, but we should notice the decline of “sin” within

the church. Some leading churches and television preachers have followed the lead of the psychological community in rejecting the notion of sin. The word is seldom uttered in many churches—even some who would describe themselves as evangelical.

This is an abdication of the Gospel. Where sin is not faced as sin, grace cannot be grace. What need have men and women of atonement, when they are told that their deepest problem is something less than the Bible explicitly teaches? Weak teaching on sin leads to cheap grace, and neither leads to the Gospel.

Scripture identifies sin as humanity's willful revolt against God. It is rebellion and disobedience. Furthermore, it is "missing the mark" of faithfulness to God's holy standard. It is the most fundamental human problem, and it is the reason we need a Savior. It is a revolt against God's authority and an insult to God's glory. It is the human in moral revolt, usually disguised as personal autonomy.

Christians have had a hard time striking a biblical balance. Some minimize sin so that it seems not to apply to their behavior. Others may fixate on certain "pet" sins as their only concern, and neglect the more pressing commands. Some churches deal with sin, but never get to the gospel. Liberal denominations have abandoned the biblical doctrine of sin, and now locate sin only in the structures of society. None of these perversions is worthy of the gospel.

Whatever became of sin? It has been redefined, ignored, rejected, neglected, and denied. Yet human beings know of its reality. Those who deny its reality were once described by another psychiatrist as "People of the Lie."

The church must be the people of the truth. Though society and popular culture may reject sin as unsophisticated and outdated, the church must speak the word of truth. Therapy has its rightful place, and Christians should not disparage the legitimate use of psychological insights. Christian psychologists and psychiatrists should serve, in the truest sense, as healing ministers. Nevertheless, the Christian knows that the most fundamental problem faced by humanity cannot be overcome by therapy but only by atonement. And that is the gospel truth.

