REPENTANCE AS “RECOVERY”:  
WHAT THE CHURCH CAN LEARN FROM THE TWELVE STEPS  

BY CHED MYERS  


The great obstacle is simply this: the conviction that we cannot change because we are dependent upon what is wrong. But that is the addict’s excuse, and we know that it will not do. (Wendell Berry)

"THE VOCABULARY OF CHRISTIAN FAITH SUFFERS from misunderstanding at every turn," writes Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, “but no one term is as badly understood in both society and church as the little word, 'sin'. " Most modern critics of Christianity would concur. Dour Christian discourses of sin have been a favorite target of the culture of narcissism. For such critics, however, the problem lies in churchly concepts of sin that are too severe, too absolute, and too ubiquitous—in short, too big. Hall’s argument, however, is that the notions of sin circulating in the North American churches persist in being too small.

A fatal mistake is made, Hall contends, whenever the church switches its focus from sin, a matter pertaining to the human condition, to sins, discrete transgressions to be catalogued and controlled. "The individualism fostered by pietistic and liberal expressions of Protestantism has greatly aggravated the tendency to identity sin with negative qualities (sins)—specifically, negative personal failings."

Dominant culture Christianity in the U.S. has indeed domesticated the language of sin. Conservatives tend to focus upon personal morality while equivocating about structural and historical manifestations of human alienation. Such religion continues to prosper in our social context because it is congruent with the privatizing culture of late capitalism. Liberals, meanwhile, having long ago assimilated into the optimistic secular myth of Progress, tend to be embarrassed by the rhetoric of sin. The notable exceptions—the social gospel, Christian realism and liberation theologies variously attempted to reassert the public and political character of sin—remained marginal, proving the theological rule: the mainstream church riding shotgun with a self-congratulatory imperial civilization.

The problem is that neither privatistic nor positivistic theologies could account for the horrors of the 20th century. Nor can they help us with what is perhaps our most pressing 21st century crisis. Despite our growing sense as a society that our relentless economic exploitation of the earth is utterly unsustainable, there are few serious widespread efforts to curtail the consumption that makes this exploitation both profitable and inevitable. Affluent North Americans are unable to stop their
self-defeating, neurotic responses to a way of life that is out of control. (This is perhaps best symbolized by today’s most popular vehicle, the inefficient and gas-guzzling SUV. “A typical Ford vehicle on the road today gets fewer miles per gallon than the Model-T did 80 years ago,” remarked an environmental activist recently. “Ford is driving in reverse.”)

In his classic book *Whatever Became of Sin?* psychologist Karl Menninger presaged this dis-ease of American empire:

We glowed; we gloried; we prospered; we preempted; we evicted; we extended; we consolidated; we succeeded! We shut our eyes to all that was unpleasant about these words and these processes. We were too busy to discern the misery created everywhere, too smug to see the devastation we were wreaking, too greedy to recognize the waste and the inequity and the ugliness and the immorality... Suddenly we awoke from our pleasant dreams with a fearful realization that something was wrong.

What is wrong, says Wendell Berry plainly, is that “we all live by robbing nature, but our standard of living demands that the robbery shall continue.” We have become reliant upon a socioeconomic system that destroys the land, exhausts its resources and alienates human labor. And we are so captive to our illusions, excesses and appetites that we can no longer imagine the world differently—and our little theologies of sin can't explain why. We are using “the addict’s excuse, and we know that it will not do.”

**WHAT MIGHT IT MEAN**, wonders Hall, for North American Christians to rediscover "a hamartiology (doctrine of sin) that was truly—and not just rhetorically—biblical"? In scripture, of course, the discourse of sin and repentance go together. The prophetic traditions embodied a difficult but necessary dialectic. On one hand the prophets stood in profound solidarity with their people’s pain and anxiety. On the other, they did not shrink from questioning or even condemning the national project, unmasking illusions of a benign past and an equally benign future (see for example Isaiah 6 or 58, or Jeremiah 7). The true prophet, in other words, loves the people enough to tell them the hard truth.

Standing firmly within this tradition of "tough love" was the late Second Temple prophet John the Baptist. According to the gospels, his preaching relentlessly attacked Judean ideologies of entitlement:

Who warned you of the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance! Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor," for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." (Lk 3:7f)

John offered a *radical* analysis of the system--"Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees" (Lk 3:9). It was not a moral exhortation to "be better" but an *ultimatum*—directed primarily to the people as a whole, not just individuals—to “change historical direction.” The synoptic gospels portray Jesus of Nazareth as taking up
this very message after the authorities had silenced the Baptist (Mk 1:14f).

A prophetic discourse of repentance that calls for radical discontinuity with the social, economic and political order enjoys little hospitality today among the mainstream churches of the U.S. The reason is simple: for those entitled within the system, the greatest social value is continuity. From their perspective the system works, has no fatal contradictions. This is why conversion—a theme once taken seriously by 19th century Protestantism—is today either wholly ignored (by liberal Protestants) or spiritualized (by evangelicals).

Repentance as discontinuity resonates strongly, however, with those in recovery from addiction. And I believe that these brothers and sisters may hold the key to our theological and civilizational crisis.

Addiction in North America today is epidemic. We would do well to ask what social forces engender and sustain the current high levels of substance abuse and compulsive behavior among the populace. At the same time, the recovery movement (particularly Twelve-Step programs) is probably the most widespread form of individual and group transformative work current in the culture, cutting across gender, race, and class lines. The ubiquity of the addiction/recovery phenomena represents a socio-cultural gestalt that cries out for theological reflection.

There have been three recent notable attempts by North American theologians to do just that. Psychologist Gerald May’s Addiction and Grace (1988) sees addiction as universal in the human experience, and thus a primary metaphor for sin and alienation. "We succumb because the energy of our desire becomes attached, nailed, to specific behaviors, objects, or people. Attachment, then, is the process that enslaves desire and creates the state of addiction." May identifies two classes of addiction—the attractive (which attaches compulsion) and the aversive (which attaches repulsion)—and explores their psychological, neurological and theological character.

Reformed theologian Cornelius Plantinga, in Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin (1995), acknowledges addiction as tragic. "Like the fallenness of the human race, the chaos of addiction comes out of particular human character and sin but also out of the temptations and disorganizing forces resident in an addict’s home and neighborhood and maybe even in her genes. The serpent is both within and without."

Catholic moral theologian Patrick McCormick’s Sin as Addiction (1989) considers the traditional "stain" and "crime" models of sin, and then proposes a "disease" model that allows us to move from punitive to therapeutic strategies of intervention. He defines addiction as "a pathological relationship with a (normally) mood altering substance or process":

[It] promises the "user" a consistent, dependable and repeatable solution to the anxieties and pains of life... As the person becomes more and more immersed in and dependent upon this substance or process he/she
experience himself/herself as less free, more compulsive. At the same time the addictive process begins to produce tangible and painful side-effects or consequences. More of the substance or process is required to kill the pain... The solution has become the problem, but continues to be employed as if it were a solution... The addiction operates as a chronic and progressive disease, disintegrating the physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological life of the person...

McCormick contends that addiction arises from a "denial of creatureliness," our inability or unwillingness to live within limits, seeking instead the fantasy of omnipotence. It represents also a denial of the Creator by its idolatrous fixation on the addictive object. Addiction seduces with the promise of liberation from pain, only to deliver progressive enslavement, which it masks through a delusional world of Denial.

THE ADDICTION MODEL CORRECTS a moral anthropology that presumes humans make "free" choices. Because the addict in denial cannot "see" her addiction, though surrounded and consumed by it, moral exhortation alone is impotent to change her behavior. Addiction is understood as a captivity, which means the addict is victim as well as victimizer. Recovering addicts, consequently, must address both their _injury_ and their _culpability_. On one hand they must seek to understand how severance from the true self—because of life-texts of abandonment, violation, poverty, etc.—generated the void that addiction tried to fill. On the other hand addicts must also confront the damage they have caused and shoulder responsibility for their actions.

The model of addiction also moves beyond behavioral symptomology ("sins") to a radical analysis of a dysfunctional _way of life_ ("sin"). It emphasizes the predatory, lethal and even demonic nature of sin. Addiction spirals exponentially toward destruction. It has been noted before that the apostle Paul's meditation on the enslaving power of sin in Romans sounds to modern ears like someone wrestling with the advanced stages of addiction:

> I am sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I see in my limbs another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my limbs. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Rom 7:14f,23f).

Unlike the "sins" that moral philosophies seek to manage, the wages of addiction are _death_ (Rom 6:23). "The Devil is a murderer from the beginning... a liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44).

The popular addiction model is not without problems. As understood by most First World psychological and religious professionals, addiction has, like our theologies of sin, been domesticated as a strictly personal pathology. The social implications of the model are rarely addressed. While the role of the addict's family system is acknowledged, the role of the economic or political system is not. But addiction is
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biologically and socially *systemic* in its genesis and maintenance, dependent upon social networks of complicity. Human appetites and deficits, engendered by the society at large, are exploited by addictive substances and relationships. Indeed, addiction has a complex personal and collective *history*.

Thus it is both theologically and politically necessary to speak not only about "household addiction" (individual pathologies), but also about "public addiction" (collective pathologies). This acknowledges the social character of addiction, and of pathological behavior that can be engaged in quite publicly—and even be *rewarded*. McCormick names several examples in the First World context: consumerism, colonialism, militarism and sexism. Anne Wilson Schaef (*When Society Becomes an Addict*, 1987, and *The Addictive Organization*, 1988) has pioneered thinking along these lines. The personal and political dimensions of addiction are ultimately inseparable.

IF ADDICTION IS THE PRIMARY CONTEMPORARY ANALOGUE for "sin," then how can the meaning of “repentance” be illumined by practices of recovery? The Twelve-Step movement has emerged over the last half-century as a genuinely popular insurrection against the epidemic of household addiction in the First World. Alcoholics Anonymous emerged from the pietistic Protestantism of the "Oxford Movement" of the 1930s. These origins explain the Twelve-Step tradition’s oft-noted congruence with conversion theology, but also caution us to beware of its limitations. Because the Twelve-Step tradition has worked within the privatizing religio-psychological paradigms of capitalist modernity, it has tended to give non-political, personal definitions of recovery. The problem is, if I am liberated from household addiction, but ignore the public addictions, I have only learned to function better in a pathological social and political system.

Still, I believe the Twelve-Step tradition reflects three important insights for a theology of repentance. First, as a conversionist model it is "apocalyptic." The journey of recovery seeks to overthrow the dominating system, but understands that the power to do so must come from "outside." *Step One*, as essential as it is uncomfortable, is the acknowledgment that the addictive system which controls me is destructive to me and all those around me. To be liberated from the nihilistic logic of that system I must:

- appeal to and yield to a "Higher Power" (*Steps Two and Three*);
- accept my culpability in the addictive system and "confess" it to others (*Four and Five*);
- seek to "repent" of those practices (*Six and Seven*); and
- make reparation to those I’ve wronged (*Eight and Nine*).

The assumption here is that the addictive system (in Exodus language, “Egypt”) cannot be reformed. We must “leave that land,” and struggle to live in radical discontinuity with the former way of life: As the Deuteronomist puts it: “You must never return that way again” (Dt 17:16).
The second key insight of Twelve-Step—particularly for North Americans—is that it begins with our own experience of pain, oppression, culpability and responsibility. McCormick points out that whereas the classic models of sin have been defined and adjudicated by clerics, judges and psychologists, the diagnosis of addiction and the practice of recovery has largely been the domain of addicts themselves. This moves beyond abstract of professionalist diagnoses and makes us subjects of the struggle for change. This is crucial if we are to take seriously what Michael Lerner calls "surplus powerlessness"—the tendency of individuals within postmodern capitalism to feel powerless to effect any significant change.

To be sure, such a focus on oneself risks degenerating into subjectivism, as it has in both religious and therapeutic culture. But we cannot avoid this error by falling into the opposite trap, which concludes that structural problems are so vast and remote that "nothing I can do will make any difference." We must acknowledge and understand how we are part of the addictive system and how it is part of us. This allows us to recognize the power of the system over us (our addiction) in a way that does not concede impotence or resignation (the "addict's excuse").

The third, and perhaps most important, aspect of the Twelve-Step recovery process is its grounding in an ongoing community of accountability and support. The addictive status quo is forever attempting to constrain fundamental changes in the system, forever trying to get us to "revert" rather than "convert." The family or social system, while rhetorically affirming the addict's quest for recovery, often refuses to acknowledge its own complicity or co-dependence. As the recovering addict tries to stand her ground while refusing to cooperate with old patterns, therefore, an alternative community becomes crucial as a place of understanding, new identity and support.

Recovery is, of course, much more difficult in the case of public addiction, because it means breaking with the national "family" and its myths. (Think of how difficult it was for those who opposed the recent war in Iraq to speak publicly.) Moreover, there is no socially-constructed "shame" in our culture when it comes to, say, consumption-addiction the way there is with alcoholism. Because the economic, social and ideological mechanisms of seduction are so powerful, a community of resistance and alternative consciousness-formation is key. If our diagnosis of the public addictions that define life in the U.S. were clearer, our recovery groups (and churches!) would necessarily become more "politicized"—as base Christian communities in the Third World long ago discovered.

MOST CHURCHES IN THE U.S. TODAY have at least one Twelve-Step group that meet in their building during the week. This model, so close yet so far from our ecclesial lives, could help church members to confront household and public addictions in ways that traditional moral theology has failed to do. After all, liberals are discovering that people do not simply reform their behavior just because they are so exhorted, even when it is argued that it is in their self-interest to change. And evangelicals are discovering that highly emotive "experiences of salvation" prove
inadequate for the long-term struggle against the "old self" in a society that rewards pathological behavior.

A First World theology of repentance should reconsider the congruence between the old biblical language and the new discourse of the Twelve-Step tradition. Let us explore repentance as a strategy of intervention in an addictive system and conversion as a strategy of recovery. Our churches, of course, a long way from functioning as communities of discontinuity with both household and public addiction. We have to re-imagine Sunday services not as a venue for religious performance, in which most attendees are essentially spectators) but as a committed community of recovering addicts, in which each member is what Augusto Boal calls a "spec-actor," struggling for sobriety.

In order for the church to recover its vocation as a counter culture to the addictive and addicting patterns of the dominant society, Brazilian theologian Rubem Alvez reminds us, we will need to embrace both "communal discipline" and "political practice." Discovering their shape would seem to be the most appropriate agenda for pastoral reflection today. It won’t be easy; we will soon learn the truth of Jesus' parable about casting out one unclean spirit only to have "seven spirits more evil than itself return" (Lk 11:24f). This is why neither politics nor piety will be an adequate substitute for the authentic inward journey here (Step Eleven). But it will have the happy consequence of also renewing our vocation of evangelism: “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we will carry this message to other addicts...” (Step Twelve).

Today in North America we face an ever-starker choice between the path of ignoring or feeding household and public addiction, and that of facing it and embracing the demanding work of recovery. It is unlikely that many of our mainstream institutions will have the courage to embrace this challenge. Our churches, on the other hand, with their tradition of repentance and conversion, are uniquely situated to shatter the denial, name the addiction, and model a variety of practices of sobriety. Only as we become communities of repentance-as-recovery can we truly proclaim the good news that "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the rule of sin and death" (Rom 8:2).