

1 JOHN 3:9: ABSOLUTE OR HABITUAL?

SAKAE KUBO

Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan

If we place 1 Jn 3:9, "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God," alongside 2:1, "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous," we would have either to admit a contradiction or to understand the former in the habitual sense, deriving it from the present tense in contrast to the aorist of the latter. Thus, "He cannot sin" is not understood absolutely but in the sense, "He cannot continue in a habitual life of sin." However, some have questioned whether such an explanation is entirely satisfactory. Brooke, although following the above interpretation, admits that "the writer speaks, here as elsewhere, in the absolute language of the prophet rather than with the circumspection of the casuist."¹ Dodd doubts "whether the reader could be expected to grasp so subtle a doctrine simply upon the basis of a precise distinction of tenses without further guidance."² Further, he concludes that "the apparent contradiction is probably not to be eliminated (though it may be qualified) by grammatical subtlety."³

Some find support for the absolute view by referring to parallel ideas in contemporary Jewish apocalyptic literature. Hans Windisch⁴ refers to Enoch 5:8, 9: "And then shall

¹ A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, "The International Critical Commentary" (Edinburgh, 1912), p. 90.

² C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, "The Moffatt New Testament Commentary" (London, 1946), p. 79.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴ Hans Windisch, *Die katholischen Briefe*, "Handbuch zum Neuen Testament," Band IV, 2. Teil (Tübingen, 1911), p. 118.

be bestowed upon the elect wisdom, and they shall all live and never again sin, either through ungodliness or through pride: But they who are wise shall be humble. And they shall not again transgress, nor shall they sin all the days of their life." ⁵ Similar ideas are found in Jubilees 5:12 ⁶ and in Ignatius, Eph. 8:2. Dodd countenances this view although, it seems to me, with some hesitation. While this Jewish apocalyptic background must be kept in mind, it is not adequate to explain Christian eschatology, since there is a basic difference between them, as Cullmann has shown. ⁷ Described in Christian terms, eschatological fulfillment in Jewish apocalyptic is still in the future and coincides with the parousia. It is at once complete and final. In Christianity, eschatology begins with the coming of Christ but finds its complete fulfillment at the parousia. In Judaism then, one can speak of sinlessness in the eschatological era, but in Christianity sinlessness cannot yet be considered in that final sense. For the Christian the decisive event has taken place on the cross and in the resurrection, but he lives in a tension between the "already" and the "not yet." The victory is assured; the enemy has been dealt a mortal blow, but the battle still rages. The author of 1 Jn describes this condition when he designates the Christian as a child of God (3:1, 2; 5:1), as the possessor of eternal life (5:12), as one who abides in God and in whom God abides (4:16), as one in whom God's seed abides and who cannot sin because he has been born of God (3:9). But he needs to be warned against following unchristian practices (disobeying God's commandments, 2:4; hating his brother, 2:9; loving the world, 2:15-17; etc.); furthermore, he can sin (2:1; 5:16), and needs to purify himself (3:3). Throughout this Epistle the indicatives

⁵ R. H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English* (Oxford, 1913), II, 190.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷ Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd Filson (London, 1951), pp. 81-93.

stand beside the imperatives, the "already" beside the "not yet." The eschatological background of the late Jewish writings does not fully explain the situation in 1 Jn since no absolute perfection is envisaged as in those writings. This means that the absolute view cannot be supported by parallels from Jewish apocalyptic literature because there are no genuine parallels and, therefore, the comparison is misleading and inadequate.

However, support for the absolute view can be found in the context of the verse. In this particular passage the author has in mind those who are morally indifferent. Their conception of sin is not based on its relationship to morality. Sin is ignorance, not lawlessness. Perfection consists in being enlightened. The author, therefore, gives the Christian definition of sin over against theirs. Sin is lawlessness. Sin has to do with moral relationships. This has to be made clear because righteousness, to the heretics, is connected merely with a religious experience; in Dodd's words, "as though a man might be righteous in a religious sense even though his actual conduct showed no marked conformity with recognized moral standards." ⁸

This kind of sin Jesus Christ came to take away, and there was none of it in Him. Therefore, sin is the complete antithesis of what a Christian should do. If we abide in Him we will not sin. Jesus is the chief representative for righteousness and His counterpart is the devil, who sinned from the beginning. Two antithetical forces, righteousness and sin, are at war against each other. How one lives indicates on which side he stands. The one who sins shows thereby that he stands with the devil, for the one who is born of God does not sin. The children of God are shown to be such when they do what is right and practice love, and the children of the devil when they do wrong and hate their brother.

The kingdoms of light and darkness are distinguished by sharp contrast. The Gnostic and the Christian likewise are

⁸ Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

sharply distinguished. The Gnostic is morally indifferent; he does not call sin what the Christian calls sin and, therefore, brazenly sins. The Christian, on the other hand, knows what sin is and that it stands directly opposed to what Christ stands for. If he is a Christian, therefore, he does not and cannot sin. Sin is what the heretic does; righteousness is what the Christian does. The verse needs to be understood in this sharp contrast. There are only two sides, and for the moment there are no gradations or intermediate stages between or within them. Either you sin and are a heretic, a member of the forces of darkness and of the devil, or you do not sin and are a Christian and a member of the forces of right and of God. To say in this context that the author means only that the Christian does not habitually sin is appreciably to weaken his point. He cannot and he does not sin because he is a child of God. As Dodd has said, "Of the personal problem raised for one who acknowledges all this, and yet is conscious of sin, he is not at this moment thinking." ⁹

The author has isolated in his thinking this one situation and is speaking forcefully to it. The heretic who defines sin as ignorance and not as lawlessness can sin, but the Christian who recognizes sin as lawlessness and that Jesus came to destroy sin and its instigator, the devil, cannot sin. The sharp antithesis is intentional and any qualifications or reservations at this point would undermine the argument. The sharp antithesis must stand. The absoluteness of the statement must remain.

This does not mean, however, that in actual fact the Christian never sins. For he has already been said to do so, in 2:1. We must therefore, when speaking comprehensively, say both things: In the idealistic context of 1 Jn 3:9, the Christian cannot sin, but in the realistic context of 2:1, he may. It is possible for a Christian to sin; but this possibility must not qualify 3:9, and thus weaken and even destroy the author's argument.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

While the supporters of the absolute view must take into consideration 2:1, the supporters of the habitual view must note 1:8: "If we say *we have no sin*, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." If the tense is pressed and one concludes that 3:9 is habitual, then 1:8 must likewise be habitual where a present tense stands. But as Dodd reminds us, "Logically it is not clear why a person of whom the former statement [3:9] is true should not make the latter statement [1:8] about himself. Yet the former is affirmed, the latter is denied." ¹⁰

However, not all commentators agree with Dodd's interpretation of this verse in making ἀμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν identical in meaning with ἀμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ and οὐ δύναται ἀμαρτάνειν. Many commentators ¹¹ follow Westcott ¹² in interpreting ἀμαρτία in 1:8 as sinful principle instead of sinful acts. These commentators make the distinction between these two meanings on the basis of verses 8 and 10, the former referring to a sinful principle and the latter to sinful acts. "Thus 'to have sin' is distinguished from 'to sin' as the sinful principle is distinguished from the sinful act itself." ¹³

This meaning goes against the usage of the expression in the Fourth Gospel (9:41; 15:22, 24; 19:11), where Law maintains that it "specifically denotes the guiltiness of sin." ¹⁴ According to this interpretation, the heretics are denying their guilt, which would imply that they have not sinned. Brooke feels that even if it means "guiltiness" in the Fourth Gospel, that does not exhaust its meaning, and further-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹¹ Among these are David Smith, "The Epistles of John," *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1956), V, 172; George Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal: An Exposition of the Epistles of St. John* (London, 1909), p. 106; Brooke, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹² B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (Cambridge, 1892), p. 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Edinburgh, 1909), p. 130.

more, it would not necessarily bear exactly the same meaning in the Epistle.¹⁵ Westcott connects the meaning of sinful principle with that of the Fourth Gospel by including the idea of personal guilt within the principle. It seems difficult to get around the meaning of personal guilt for the expression in the Fourth Gospel. However, Brooke is right in contending that such a meaning cannot automatically be transferred to the Epistle even if the author is the same. In the Gospel itself the meaning of the expression is determined by its use and so must it be here.

Of course, if these commentators are correct, the contradiction is resolved, since 1:8 would mean that the heretics were claiming that they had no sinful principle and therefore could not sin. Such a claim no Christian would make (cf. 2:1).

Alfred Plummer does not think that it is necessary to inquire into the specific meaning of 1:8—"The expression is quite general, covering sin of every kind."¹⁶ Friedrich Hauck¹⁷ asserts that it refers to an act of sin and that verse 10 is a repetition of verse 9 but with a more severe consequence. While in verse 8 "we deceive ourselves" by this claim, in verse 10 "we make him a liar."

This distinction which Brooke¹⁸ and Westcott¹⁹ make between verses 8 and 10, though convenient to explain the differences in expression, is difficult to maintain. While we are not bound by the meaning that the Fourth Gospel places on this expression, there is no reason to depart from it. While

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, "The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges" (Cambridge, Engl., 1938), p. 83.

¹⁷ Friedrich Hauck, *Die Briefe des Jakobus, Petrus, Judas und Johannes*, "Das Neue Testament Deutsch" (Göttingen, 1957), X, 122. Rudolf Schnackenburg (*Die Johannesbriefe*, "Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament" [Freiburg, 1953], p. 73) cannot see the distinction made by Brooke on the basis of the Greek expressions found in verses 8 and 10.

¹⁸ Brooke, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁹ Westcott, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Hauck's "act of sin" does not mean the same as "guiltiness of sin," the former is certainly implied in the latter. Verse 9, "If we confess our sins," follows very well if this meaning of "guiltiness" is maintained. The heretics are not saying that they are *not* guilty although they sinned, but that they are not guilty because they have *not* sinned (verse 10). The tense here (1:8) is an aoristic present as in Jn 19:11, where Jesus describes Judas as the one who "has the greater sin." The Christians are encouraged to confess their sins and not deny them because God is true to His word and will forgive. The whole point of verse 8 is again emphasized in verse 10 by means of a more serious consequence of such a claim. Therefore, "not to have sin" virtually means the same as "not to have sinned." They are not guilty, because they have not sinned.

If such is the case, to say that this (1:8) is an aoristic present does not immediately solve the problem of the tenses, because even though it is aoristic the basic meaning remains unchanged. For cannot the Christian affirm that he does not sin and at the same time say that he does not have sin because he has not sinned? ²⁰ Yet he must affirm the former and deny the latter.

Dodd admits the similarity of these statements which are denied, in 1:8 and 10, to what is affirmed in 3:9. What he objects to is the forthright assertion of moral innocence—"to assert roundly, *we are not guilty*, is self-deception." ²¹ But he confuses the situation when he states that the Christian does sin, and therefore, must acknowledge it, since he had compared this verse with 3:9 where it is asserted roundly that the Christian does not sin. And it is Dodd himself who states, "Logically, it is not clear why a person of whom the former statement [3:9] is true should not make the latter

²⁰ This must have reference to his Christian period and not his pre-Christian period, for no one, including the heretic, would make such a claim for the pre-Christian period. It would obviate the necessity for his becoming a Christian.

²¹ Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

statement [1:8] about himself." ²² Is it only because it is asserted *roundly*, *i.e.*, because of pride in one's accomplishments even assuming that he really does not sin, or is it because it is not so, *i.e.*, that the Christian does sin? Dodd says the latter, although one would have expected the former. However, is it not more precisely the case that, as Dodd himself implies,²³ the author is not speaking to the situation of a genuine Christian and his occasional failings but to the claim of the heretic who believed that he had a new nature superior to that of other men and consequently was already sinless? The author is not dealing with orthodox Christians but with Gnostic heretics who were making such claims because they considered themselves to be sinless.

The previous verses indicate that the author is trying to show that one who has fellowship with God walks in the light and not in darkness, *i.e.*, that one who has fellowship with God lives a righteous life. The heretic was claiming this fellowship and also the righteous life by insisting that he had no sin because he had not sinned, while all the time living a life of sin. That is why he deceives himself and makes God a liar.

The heretics were making claims which were not supported by tangible moral results. It is not merely the claim that is being criticized but the claim without support. They could make the claim because their definition of sin allowed them to do so; according to them, because sin is ignorance, the possession of gnosis by means of a mystical communion with God brought them to a state of perfection. Therefore, they could make such claims; and yet from the Christian's standpoint these were empty claims because according to his conception of sin these persons were far from sinless. The claim placed beside 3:9 is not any more inappropriate, as Dodd indicates,²⁴ than the claim that they had fellowship with Him or that they were walking in the light.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

It is the very delicate task of the author throughout the Epistle to deal with heretics who had taken over certain Christian expressions for their own use. They were legitimate expressions such as, "We have fellowship with God," "We walk in the light," "We have no sin," "We know him," and so forth. But the mere verbalizing of these formulae did not guarantee orthodoxy. He, therefore, sets up criteria to test their validity, but this he does not need to do for an expression that in itself is clearly unorthodox, such as, "Jesus has not come in the flesh" (1 Jn 4:2-3). In such a case a categorical judgment can be made merely on the basis of the statement apart from any moral demands. And superficially this may seem to be the case with 1:8. But this verse along with verse 10 is part of the discussion beginning with verse 5. Verses 8 and 10, furthermore, are in parallel construction with verse 6. Both of these verses, then, ought to be qualified with the phrase "and walk in darkness," as in that verse. Thus, "if we say that we have no sin [and walk in darkness], we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us," and verse 10 should be read in the same manner. His purpose in 1:8 is not to indicate that Christians cannot make these assertions. Rather it is to point out the falsity of such statements made by those who were walking in darkness, who were living in sin, but who could make these claims because their conception of sin was altogether different from that of the Christian.

Dodd's solution to the problem posed above, given in a different context from his previous statement,²⁵ is that the heretical teaching had different effects. "Some of them were

²⁵ His previous statement was made in the context of 1:8 and this in the context of 3:9. Dodd, I think, is misleading and confusing in saying first that he can see no reason why the Christian cannot say what is denied in 1:8 if 3:9 is true, and then saying that he cannot roundly assert it even though he is not expected to sin. By this statement he has shifted the argument, directing it against the Christian rather than against the heretic, whom he seems to have in mind in his previous statement as well as in this one. The confusion would have been avoided if he would throughout see the claim made in 1:8 as that of the heretic.

led to assume that, being 'enlightened,' they were already perfect in virtue. Others thought it did not matter whether they were virtuous or not, provided they were 'enlightened.' " The former he applies to 1:8 and the latter to 3:9. Actually as we have seen it is very difficult to make this kind of subtle division among the heretics. In fact, even Dodd's description does not make a clear-cut distinction. The heretics described in 1 Jn are quite homogeneous and it is not necessary for our interpretation of these verses to require distinctions among them. On the contrary our interpretation requires just the opposite. They are the same people making the same claims on the same basis. In 1:8 they claim to be sinless; in 3:9 they claim to be born of God. Both claims arise from a common ineffable experience and one implies the other. In 1:8 the reason their claims are denied is that they continue to walk in darkness; in 3:9 because they sin. Both claims are denied on the same grounds, their sinfulness. In 1:8 they make the claims because their understanding of sin is different from that of the orthodox Christians (this is implicit rather than explicit); in 3:9 for exactly the same reason (3:4). There is no difference between those dealt with in 1:8 and those in 3:9. They are the very same people. The author in his circular method is approaching the same subject again and again but from different angles.²⁶ This is an illustration of it.

We conclude, then, first of all that the absolute view is more in line with the author's context in 3:9; that the habitual view actually plays havoc with the author's intention and argument. Secondly, 2:1 is not really in contradiction with this view; it is realistic while the other is idealistic. Third, 1:8 is dealing with the very same people as 3:9, and the expression "to have sin" must be taken to mean "guiltiness." Furthermore, it is not in contradiction with 3:9 but in complete harmony with it, more so than is apparent on the surface.

²⁶ See Brooke, *op. cit.*, pp. xxxiv-xxxviii, but especially Dodd, *op. cit.*, pp. xxi-xxvi, for evidence of the use of this method in 1 Jn.