

THE DOCTRINE OF SIN IN 1 JOHN

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The doctrine of sin in John's first epistle has been problematic to many generations of Bible students. The basic question is: How is 1 John 2:1 to be harmonized with 1 John 3:6 and 3:9? "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" (2:1).¹ "No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. . . . No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God" (3:6-9).

A further question also arises: How is this apparent paradox to be related to 1 John 5:16-17? "If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there a sin which is not mortal." In short, why does John claim a sinless perfection for the Christian believer in 3:1-10 but not in 1:7-2:2 or 5:16-17?

Through the years there have been, of course, numerous suggestions for solutions to the problem, and numerous writers have catalogued and critiqued previously offered solutions while setting forth what they believe to be the correct answer.² In what is, no doubt, the most recent dissertation on the subject, "Impeccability in 1 John: An Evaluation," Leon Eloy Wade cites several sources in which this is done and then proceeds to develop a catalogue of his own.³

¹All Scripture passages in English translation in this article are from the RSV.

²See, e.g., Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB 30 (Garden City, NY, 1982), pp. 413-417; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1978), pp. 178-186.

³Leon Eloy Wade, "Impeccability in 1 John: An Evaluation" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1986).

The present article does not attempt an approach or catalog of Wade's kind,* but is perhaps best described as being certain variations on an old theme, for it endeavors to build on both older and newer research and concepts, with a special view to exegetical and contextual concerns. Hopefully, it will erect on these somewhat familiar building blocks a further and fresh perspective.⁴

1. *Radically Diverse Groups in 1 John 3*

It is important, at the outset, to observe that in 1 John 3, John is writing with two distinct and radically different groups of people in mind. This is clear from the first verse: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God [the first group]; and so we are. The reason why the world [the second group] does not know us is that it did not know him." In vs. 10 it is clarified that the term "the world" as used here means "the children of the devil."⁵

While in other portions of the epistle (e.g., chap. 2), John may have in mind some particular heresy or body of heretics, that is not the case in chap. 3. Here he has in mind all people on the face of the earth who may be identified as either "children of God" or "the world." The children of God are those whom he has previously referred to as "you" or "we" in chaps. 1 and 2—those who, according to his Gospel, have become such through faith in Jesus Christ ("But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" [John 1:12]). All the rest are of "the world"; they are "children of the devil."

**Editor's Note:* The abstract for Wade's dissertation on "Impeccability in 1 John" will be published in *AUSS* later this year (currently planned for the autumn issue).

⁴Having given considerable thought to the problem of John's doctrine of sin in 1 John, I was inspired to write a paper several years ago dealing with the issue after reading two articles with conflicting solutions: Sakae Kubo, "1 John 3:9: Absolute or Habitual?" *AUSS* 7 (1969); 47-56; and David M. Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids, MI, 1975), pp. 230-246. That inspiration returned again after reading Wade's dissertation, and this time the paper, rewritten and revised, was submitted for publication.

⁵The term "world" is, of course, used in the biblical literature in a general geographical sense too, though this particular emphasis which carries negative spiritual overtones is quite dominant in the Johannine writings. A somewhat parallel expression, "earth" (*gē*), has a similar (and perhaps even broader) range of biblical usage. Cf., e.g., Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth* (Washington, DC, 1968), p. 264, for a discussion of the term *gē* in the Johannine literature.

This way of radically dividing the human race is typical of John.⁶ One may notice the similar thrust in two passages from the Fourth Gospel, wherein Jesus is quoted as saying:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19)

I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; . . . I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; . . . I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. (John 17:6-15)

Moreover, in his first epistle, John not only makes this distinction between world and children of God, but between world and God himself:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. (1 John 2:15-16)

The foregoing concepts have significance for an understanding of 1 John 3:4: "Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness." Two points in particular should be noted: (1) The term "every one" in this verse does not include the children of God—i.e., it is not universal in the sense of including both classes of people under consideration. It is clear that "every one who commits sin" does not apply to the children of God, for vs. 6 categorically states that "no one who abides in him sins," and vs. 9 adds that "no one born of God commits sin." The parallel construction in vs. 3, "And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure" (*Kai pas ho exōn tēn elpida tautēn ep autō*

⁶See, e.g., Julian Price Love, *The First, Second, and Third Letters of John, the Letter of Jude, the Revelation of John* (Richmond, VA, 1960), pp. 20-21, for a good discussion of the absolute contrast between the children of God and the world. See also Matthew Vellanickal, *The Divine Sonship of Christians in the Johannine Writings* (Rome, 1977).

hagnizei heauton kathōs ekeinos hagnos estin), and that in vs. 4, “Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness” (*pas ho poiōn tēn hamartian kai tēn anomian poiei*), refer to mutually exclusive classes of people. (2) In consequence of the above, “lawlessness” (*anomia*) as a definition for sin in this context applies only to the children of the devil. It is a *kind* of sin in the sense that it represents disobedience or rebellion colored or fostered by a *particular orientation* to sin.

2. “Lawlessness” (*Anomia*) as Reflecting the “World” Orientation to Sin

My thesis in this article is, therefore, that for John a particular attitude toward and relationship to Jesus/God issues forth in a particular orientation to sin which colors every act of disobedience, and that the term “lawlessness” in this context is a symbol or catchword for that orientation characteristic of the “world.” That is why John can say so emphatically that the children of God do not sin—where the word *hamartia* can be read *hamartia/anomia* in the light of his definition.

This thesis can, in fact, be demonstrated in a reading of 1 John 3:5-10, the context immediately following the verse we have under consideration. These verses, which use *hamartia* in the sense set forth for *anomia* in vs. 4 (i.e., *hamartia/anomia*), repeatedly express the aspect of relation or lack of relation to Christ and God. The passage concludes, “By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil; whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother” (vs. 10).

This thesis, that a particular attitude toward and relationship to Jesus/God issues forth in a particular orientation to sin, is not peculiar to John, of course. It is a basic Christian doctrine, repeatedly set forth by the NT writers. One may note, for instance, how in Rom 6 and 8 it underlies Paul’s doctrine of sin and salvation. A few excerpts are here given (in each instance, the emphasis is supplied):

Do you not know that all of us who have been *baptized into Christ Jesus* were baptized into his death? (6:3)

For if we have been *united with him in a death like his*, we shall certainly be *united with him in a resurrection like his*. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might *no longer be enslaved to sin*. For he who has died is *freed from sin*. (6:5-7)

Let not *sin* therefore *reign* in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but *yield yourselves to God* as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For *sin will have no dominion over you*, since you are not under law but under grace. (6:12-14)

For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity [*tē anomia eis tēn anomian*], so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification. (6:19)

There is therefore now no condemnation for *those who are in Christ Jesus*. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, *in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us*, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For *the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God*. (8:1-8)

In the light of the above, is there any wonder that John chose the word *anomia* ("lawlessness") as a symbol or catchword when referring to an orientation to sin on the part of the world—i.e., by the mind that is hostile to God, does not submit to the law of God, and indeed cannot?

A number of exegetes consider *anomia* to mean more than lawlessness. "Anomia may have the meaning of rejection and opposition to God's will and rule, in whatever way and form that exists."⁷ Such a definition makes, of course, the use of the term all the more appropriate in 1 John 3:4.⁸

⁷Wade, p. 231. My understanding of *anomia* is not very different from that of Wade except for his qualification, "with eschatological overtones." For me, the application is immediate, whatever it may be eschatologically.

⁸It may be of interest to notice John Calvin's perceptive interpretation of the term "sin" as it relates to 1 John 3: "To some the word sin seems light; but iniquity or transgression of the Law cannot be so easily overlooked. Yet the apostle does not make sins equal by accusing of iniquity all who sin; but he simply wants to teach us that sin comes from contempt of God and that by sinning the righteousness of the

3. *The "Sin" of God's Children*

But if *anomia* is the sin of the world—the children of the devil—what is the sin of the children of God? John does say that God's children do sin: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness [*adikias*]" (1 John 1:9).

Here the context clearly has reference to the sins of the children of God, and the key word is "unrighteousness." In 5:17, where again the context clearly has reference to the sins of the children of God, we find the following: "All wrongdoing [*adikia*] is sin." (While the RSV translation here is "wrongdoing" instead of "unrighteousness," the original Greek word is the same in both 1:9 and 5:17.)⁹

The definition provided in 1 John 5:17 provides an interesting parallel to what we find in 3:4. Thus, lawlessness (*anomia*) is sin (3:4), and unrighteousness (*adikia*) is sin (5:17). The first applies to the children of the devil; the second applies to the children of God. The first issues from alienation and estrangement from God in Christ Jesus; the second issues from a fallible and imperfect commitment in faith to God in Christ.

4. *Two Categories of Sin: "Mortal" and "Not Mortal"*

The picture is complicated, however, by John's statement, "If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that" (1 John 5:16). Attempts to explain just what this

Law is violated. . . . Moreover, to sin does not here mean to offend in some action; nor is the word *sin* to be taken for every single fault. But he calls it sin when men whole-heartedly rush into evil. And he means that only those men sin who are devoted to sin. For believers, who still labour under the lusts of the flesh, are not to be regarded as unrighteous, although they are not pure or free from sin. . . ." John Calvin *The Gospel According to St. John 11-21 and the First Epistle of John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Edinburgh, 1961), pp. 268-269. Both Calvin and Augustine (see n. 12, below) use the word "iniquity" in translating sin when defined as *anomia* in 1 John 3.

⁹It would seem of special significance that John uses *anomia* only once in the epistle, and that is when he defines the sin of the children of the devil, while he uses *adikia* only twice, once when defining the sin of the children of God and once when referring to the forgiveness of their sins.

means have run the full spectrum, all the way from a cataloguing of sins as to their degree of heinousness, to the unpardonable sin—the sin against the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 12:31). There seems to be an answer, however, in the epistle itself.

It would not seem to be too much to assume that John's mind here goes back to the thought he expressed in 2:1-2: "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 (*paraklēton*) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Thus, it is because the children of God have an "advocate" that their sin is not mortal.

On the other hand, in the absence of such an advocate, there is no hope. While Christ is the expiation (*hilasmos*) for the sins of the whole world, he is the advocate (*paraklētos*) only for those who call upon his name, who are born from above, who are raised to walk in newness of life. Because he is the expiation for the sins of the whole world, he can be an advocate for the children of God. But the children of the devil are without an advocate; therefore their sin is mortal.

We have here, then, a reference to the present priestly ministry of Christ, a ministry presented more fully in the book of Hebrews:

Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For *because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.* (2:17-18, emphasis supplied)

Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (7:25)

For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (9:24)

Perhaps the strongest objection that may be raised to the thesis that I have here set forth is that it seems to create a double standard—one for the children of God, and another for the children of the devil. At least a part of the answer to this is found in the fact that according to the NT a person's being a Christian certainly does make a difference, and that difference is more than just acts of

obedience versus acts of disobedience. It involves a whole orientation to life—an orientation to God and an orientation away from the devil and the world. Naturally, then, the actions growing out of that orientation must be seen and judged in the light of that orientation.

Furthermore, this approach to the matter does not necessarily diminish the concept of the seriousness of sin in the life of the children of God.¹⁰ To speak of a sin that is not mortal is not a negation of Paul's statement that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). The only way for a Christian's sin to be "not mortal" is for the sin to be confessed and forgiven through the ministry of the *paraklētos* or the "advocate," Christ Jesus. And in such instances, when the child of God has sinned ignorantly or unwittingly, John encourages intercessory prayer (see 1 John 5:16). On the other hand, willful and unrepented sin on the part of the child of God is not overlooked and excused, and for such sin there is no advocate: "For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment . . ." (Heb 10:26).

This perspective actually supports the argument that the child of God does not *continue* in sin¹¹—does not sin if *abiding* in Christ¹²—but it does so without falling into the pit of trying to support the argument by an appeal mainly in terms of grammatical considerations.¹³

5. Conclusion

If the thesis of this article were to be summarized by a construct, it would look something like this:

World/children of the devil → sin/lawlessness = sin that is mortal (no advocate)
 (*kosmos/tekna tou diabolou* → *harmatia/anomia* = *harmatia pros thanaton* [*no paraklētos*])

¹⁰For me, the context implies that the children of God can commit a sin unto death, although to do so would seriously affect their status.

¹¹See J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1964), pp. 135-136.

¹²See Augustine, *The Epistles of St. John* (NPNF, first series), 7:485; also Edward Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant* (Rome, 1978), pp. 245-247.

¹³Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London, Eng., 1953), pp. 78-79.

Children of God → unrighteousness/sin = sin that is not mortal (advocate—namely, Christ)
 (*tekna theou* → *adikia/hamartia* = *hamartia mē pros thanaton* [*paraklētos*—namely, Christ])

In closing this brief article, we could probably do no better than to notice the climactic summation with which John closes his first epistle—a threefold “we know” (*oidamen*) that follows immediately one of the key references we have noticed above (5:17: “All wrongdoing [*adikia*] is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal”):

We know that any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. (5:18-21)