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**The Sin Unto Death in 1 John:  
A Threat to Christian Assurance?**

Rev. Dr. Terry Griffith  
Pastor, Trinity Baptist Church  
Bexleyheath, Kent, UK<sup>1</sup>

The phrase ‘sin unto death’ (ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον) in 1 John 5:16 comes out of the blue in the conclusion to John’s first letter.<sup>2</sup> Given the fact that conclusions are rhetorically significant for purposes of emphasis and importance, it is safe to assume that this is not some minor matter that John raises or just an afterthought. Both the terms ‘sin’ (ἁμαρτία) and ‘death’ (θάνατος) are concepts that have occurred earlier in the letter, but never together until this point. John’s treatment of ἁμαρτία and its cognate verb ἁμαρτάνω in the letter is orderly in that 25 out of 27 occurrences are found in three tight knit passages, 1:6-2:2 (8 times); 3:4-10 (10 times); and 5:16-18 (7 times).<sup>3</sup> We should expect, therefore, that John’s treatment of sin in the letter as a whole has a logic and order to it. John’s previous use of the term ‘death’ is restricted to two occurrences in 3:14: ‘We know

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<sup>1</sup> See [terry@tgriffith.plus.com](mailto:terry@tgriffith.plus.com).

<sup>2</sup> I use John as shorthand for the author of the Johannine Letters and the Gospel of John without specifying who this ‘John’ is.

<sup>3</sup> In the remaining two isolated occurrences (2.12 and 4.10) it is found as part of a thematic formula concerning forgiveness.

that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death.’ In both 3:14 and 5:16 we find that the concept of death forms part of a dualistic schema with ‘(eternal) life’ (ζωή). The concept of life does not feature in John’s previous discussions of sin, but now forms an important part of the context in which sin is now analysed, occurring seven times in 5:11-20. It is this immediate context which provides the foil for defining sin in terms of ‘not unto death’ (i.e., ‘life’) and ‘unto death’.

It is important to understand that John’s dualistic or antithetical schema functions in the letters as a device that serves to promote assurance and certainty.<sup>4</sup> John’s treatment of the ‘sin unto death’ and ‘sin not unto death’ is firmly tied into this schema by the repetition of the sin theme at the start of the section 5:18-21, ‘We know that anyone born of God does not sin’ (5:18a). The triple use of ᾔοιδαμεν (‘we know’) at the beginning of 5:18, 19, 20 gives emphasis to the certainty that the believer possesses. This certainty is heightened further by the antitheses introduced in this section between ‘the One born of God’ (= Jesus) and ‘the evil one’ (5:18); between those who are ‘of God’ and ‘the world’ (5:19); and between ‘the true God’ and ‘idols’ (5:20-21). Such certainty gives rise to the assurance that believers are kept ‘safe’ (5:18) and that believers ‘are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ’ (5:20).<sup>5</sup> The result of using a dualistic framework in this way is to strengthen the sense of election (with regard to God) and identity (with regard to the believing community) of those who accept the premises underlying John’s theology, and his interpretation of their experiences.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed treatment of how John’s antithetical rhetoric functions to promote certainty and assurance, see K.D. Tollefson, ‘Certainty within the Fellowship: Dialectical Discourse in 1 John’, *BTB* 29 (1999), 79-89; and Ernst R. Wendland, “‘Dear Children’ Versus the ‘Antichrists’: The Rhetoric of Reassurance in First John”, *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics* 11 (1998), 40-84.

<sup>5</sup> The theme of assurance also prefaces the statements about sin in John’s conclusion. Thus, ‘I write these things [...] so that you may know (εἰδῆτε) that you have eternal life’ (5:13); ‘This is the confidence (παρρησία) we have in approaching God’ (5:14); and ‘And if we know (ᾔοιδαμεν) that he hears us’ (5:15).

<sup>6</sup> For further details on John’s use of dualism, see Judith Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 39-41, 80-87.

However, the introduction of the theme of sin within John's theology, and his interpretation of their Christian experience, produces a potential tension within this overall dualistic framework. This is indicated by the fact that while recognising that 'all wrongdoing is sin' (5:17a), and presumably belongs to the realm of death and not life, there is 'sin that does not lead to death' (5:17b). Such sin may be prayed for and as a result 'God will give them life' (5.16a), which is another description for God's forgiveness of such sin with all its attendant consequences for the forgiven believer. It is precisely in this immediate context that John introduces his dual definition of sin as 'unto death' (for which prayer is not encouraged) and 'not unto death' (5:16b).

One may legitimately ask what the difference is between these two sins and who it is that commits these two sins. This difference, whatever it is, must be open to observation otherwise it makes no sense for John to say, 'If you *see* any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death' (5:16a). This requires that the believer is able to distinguish between these two categories of sin and sinner, and presumably is also able to see someone who does in fact commit the sin unto death. In terms of John's dualistic scheme in the immediate context, death is placed on the same side as 'the evil one' (5:18); 'the whole world' (5:19); and the 'idols' (5:21). The last term is especially significant as John is here drawing on the Old Testament polemic against idols, which functioned both to prevent and describe apostasy from the one, true and living God.<sup>7</sup>

The resolution of the tension introduced by defining sin under two types must also make sense of the other teaching about sin given in the rest of the letter. This tension is immediately felt in 5.18a which returns to the language of sin *simpliciter* without definition in terms of 'unto death' or 'not unto death'. To which sin is John now referring? The difficulty is felt in the translations and commentaries where 5:18a is glossed as 'does not *continue to sin*', or 'does not *keep on sinning*', or 'does not *habitually sin*'.<sup>8</sup> However, the wider context

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<sup>7</sup> See T.M. Griffith, *Keep Yourselves from Idols: A New Look at 1 John*, (JSNTSup, 233; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 28-81.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., TNIV; GNB; ESV; Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC 51; Nashville: Nelson, 2007), 279; Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 194-95; I.Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of* [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

of the letter provides a clue for us in that 5:18a is a virtual repetition of 3:9a. In both these verses the subject is ‘anyone born of God’ (πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ) and the verb is expressed by ἴσχυς ἁμαρτάνει in 5:18a and by ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ in 3:9a. Furthermore, 3:9 goes on to heighten the tension by insisting that those who have been born of God *cannot* sin (οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν).

The passage in 3:4-10 will prove helpful for determining what is going on in 5:18 in that it, too, is cast in dualistic terms and in antithetical forms, while also providing a definition of sin in 3:4 which is significant for our purposes. The definition of sin in the phrase καὶ ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐστὶν ἡ ἀνομία (3:4b) represents an intensification of what is meant by sin rather than a mere tautology.<sup>9</sup> It is unlikely that the meaning ‘lawlessness’ is relevant here for nowhere in 1 John is the issue of ‘the law’ as νομός raised. John prefers the language of ‘commandment’ (ἐντολή) and, in fact, the only commandment outlined as such in 1 John is the dual command: ‘And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us’ (3:23).

The special nature of sin in 3:4-10 is further defined within this passage as the sin which the devil himself commits from the beginning (3:8). The stress on ‘the beginning’ is significant, for the dualism of this passage is one that focuses on origins. The behaviour in view reveals whether one is ‘of / from God’ (see 2:29b; 3:9, 10) or ‘of / from the devil’ (3:8, 10). It is therefore crucial to define what the sin or type of sin is that distinguishes between the children of God and the children of the devil. Sin defined as ‘lawlessness’, in the sense of

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*John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 242. There is no grammatical justification for glossing the present tense in this way now that the way in which verbal aspect functions in the Greek of the New Testament is much better understood. See the work of S.E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood*, (SBG 1; New York: Peter Lang, 1989), and B.M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), especially Fanning’s treatment of the present tenses in 1 John 3:4-10 on pages 212-17.

<sup>9</sup> BDF, §273.1, with reference to 1 John 3:4, states: ‘Predicate nouns as a rule are anarthrous. Nevertheless the article is inserted if the predicate noun is presented as something well known or as that which alone merits the designation (the only thing to be considered).’

breaking God's laws or commands ('unrighteousness' or 'wrongdoing'), will not suffice for this purpose. For John has already insisted that the children of God do sin and hence require cleansing by the blood of Jesus, God's forgiveness, the advocacy of the 'Righteous One' and his atoning sacrifice (1:5-2:2).

However, when it is realised that 3:4-10 is to be read in its wider eschatological context we find the key to understanding why ἀνομία is introduced at this juncture. Immediately prior to 3:4 we read: 'But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (3:2). And a little further back, John has already mentioned 'the last hour' and 'the antichrist' (2:18) which clearly signal an eschatological setting and dimension for this passage. When used in eschatological settings ἀνομία takes on the meaning of 'ultimate iniquity' or 'rebellion'.<sup>10</sup> It describes what is characteristic of the evil times preceding the parousia in terms of the ultimate hostility of Satan to God's plan. Evidence for this equation is widespread and in the New Testament is found in Matthew 13:38-41; 24:10-12; the Freer manuscript (W) of the longer ending of Mark; and 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 8.<sup>11</sup>

The nature of the sin in view here in 3:4-10, given its dualistic and eschatological context, can be nothing other than the denial of the Johannine confession of faith. It is 'the typical sin of the 'Antichrists', who reject Christ, the Son of God (2:22-23)'.<sup>12</sup> If this is the case, then 3:9 makes perfect sense if 'God's seed' (σπέρμα θεοῦ) means 'God's offspring / children' rather than some kind of internalized divine principle.<sup>13</sup> It also explains why those 'who

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<sup>10</sup> F. Manns, ' "Le Péché, c'est Bélial": 1 Jn 3.4 à la lumière du Judaïsme', *RevScRel* 62 (1988), 1-9 (with rabbinic evidence for this equation); R. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1992), 171-72; R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB, 30; New York: Doubleday, 1982), 399-400.

<sup>11</sup> See also *Barn.* 4:9; 15:5; 18:2; *Did.* 16:3-4; *T.Dan* 6:1-6; *Ps.Sol.* 17:11; *Sib.Or.* 2:252-62; 3:69; *Apoc.Abr.* 24:5; *Apoc.Elij.* 3:1-13; 5:10; and *Mart.Isa.* 2:4; 4:2.

<sup>12</sup> I. de la Potterie, ' "Sin is Iniquity" (1 Jn 3.4)', in I. de la Potterie and S. Lyonnet, *The Christian Lives by the Spirit* (New York: Alba House, 1971), 33-55 (50).

<sup>13</sup> J. de Waal Dryden, 'The Sense of ΣΠΕΡΜΑ in 1 John 3:9: In Light of Lexical Evidence', *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 11 (1999), 85-100.

remain in him' do not sin (3:6) and cannot sin (3:9) if sin is defined as apostasy or rebellion.<sup>14</sup> Understanding sin here in this particular sense also provides a very clear basis on which the children of God may be distinguished from the children of the devil (3:10a). Thus, reading 3:9 as 'Everyone who has been born of God does not commit *anomia*, because God's offspring remain in him [God]; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God', provides the template for understanding 5:18 correctly.

It might be objected that the immediately prior definition of sin in 5:17 (πᾶσα ἀδικία ἁμαρτία ἐστίν) should control the interpretation of 5:18, rather than the definition given in 3:4. However, it should be noted that 5:17 does not function to provide a definition of sin as 3:4 does. The difference in form demonstrates this: ἁμαρτία in 5:17 is neither the head term nor is it articular; and ἀδικία (unlike the articular ἀνομία) is qualified by the generalizing πᾶσα. John is rather at pains to insist that although sins not unto death can be forgiven, this does not imply that such sins are to be regarded any the less seriously for the Christian.

Thus, if 5:18 picks up the theme of the 'sin unto death', and reinterprets it through the language of 3:9 in its context, then we have a good purchase on John's intent as he concludes his letter. That purpose is to reassure believers within the believing community and to strengthen their identity so that they will continue to remain firm in their faith. To paraphrase 5:18: 'We know that anyone born of God does not commit this particular sin of denying the faith, precisely because the One who was born of God, namely God's Son, keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them.'

The reflex of this conclusion is that the rejection of the christological confession of Johannine Christianity finds its sociological analogue in the rejection of fellowship with those who do make this confession. I have argued that the correct interpretation of 3:9 is essential for understanding not only 5:18 but also the distinction between sins 'unto death' and 'not unto death'. This dualism of sin serves to distinguish the children of God from the children of the devil (3:10). This is worked out in 3:10 in terms of behaviour rather

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<sup>14</sup> See also this conclusion in Tim Ward, 'Sin "Not Unto Death" and Sin "Unto Death" in 1 John 5:16', *Churchman* 109 (1995), 226-37 (237).

than belief: ‘those who do not do what is right are not God’s children; (namely) [epexegetical καί]<sup>15</sup> those who do not love their brothers and sisters.’ The concept of righteousness is thus also narrowly defined in the context and this is not surprising in that the only specific commandment given in 1 John has both this christological and ethical aspect: ‘And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us’ (3.23). Significantly, the generic term ἀδελφός found in 3.10 is picked up again in 5.16.

Whatever sins are committed by believers *qua* believers are sins that can be forgiven by the atoning blood of Jesus (1.7). This enables believers to ‘walk in the light’ which is the realm of God (‘God is light’ [1.5]). These are the sins committed by those whose destiny (πρός) is not death because they make use of the atoning provision of God for sins (2.2; 3.5; 4.10). However, apostasy is that sin which places one beyond the reach of forgiveness because the only provision for atonement is rejected, and thus places the perpetrator on the side of death in John’s dualistic template.

Some scholars prefer to avoid the use of the term ‘apostasy’ to describe the ‘sin unto death’, because it implies that those who are described as having left the community were once true Christians.<sup>16</sup> This is a view that John seems to be at pains to deny: ‘They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us’ (2.19). This issue highlights a point of tension within John’s dualistic approach to sin. For there is some ambiguity in the phrase at the end of 2.19: οὐκ εἰσιν πάντες ἐξ ἡμῶν. Does this phrase refer only to those who have gone? Or does the present tense indicate a doubt that not all those who currently remain are really ‘of us’ (taking the οὐκ with πάντες and not with εἰσιν)? However, the word order is against this construal of John’s thought and it is very unlikely that John would introduce this new thought into

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<sup>15</sup> With G. Strecker, *The Johannine Letters* (Hermeneia: Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996) 105 (n.86).

<sup>16</sup> For example, Christopher D. Bass, *That You May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John*, (NAC Studies in Bible & Theology [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008]) 172-73.



his discussion at this point.<sup>17</sup> I am happy to use the term apostasy to describe the defection John describes in that it still describes the rejection of a confession of faith even if it turns out that it was not genuinely held in the first place.

The uncertainty surrounding the precise circumstances of this defection and the opacity of John's expression here needs to be acknowledged. However, there is no doubt that the defection is defined by the rejection of the constitutive confession of Johannine Christianity concerning the Son. The denial of Jesus as the Messiah (2.22; see also 5.1) makes one a 'liar' and an 'antichrist', and separates one from the Father (2.22-23).<sup>18</sup> Conversely, 'whoever acknowledges/confesses the Son has the Father also' (2.23; see also 4.15; 5.5). This denial can hardly be ambiguous because it has resulted in an actual departure from the fellowship (2.19; 1.7). Those who 'remain in the Son and in the Father' thus possess 'eternal life' (2.24-25). The unexpressed corollary just beneath the surface of the text must be that those who deny the Son must belong to the realm of death. This distinction is clear and manifest (φανερῶσιν [2.19]; cf. φανερά [3.10]) to those who remain. Assurance is therefore tightly bound up with both a true confession of Jesus *and* remaining within the fellowship of those who make this confession. And this is precisely what is expressed in the only specific 'commandment' enunciated in this epistle at 3.23, and this is also precisely what is illustrated by John's use of the Cain motif in 3.10-15.

It remains to undertake a summary explanation of the three main passages that deal with the topic of ἁμαρτία to see the coherence of John's thought regarding his treatment of sin in 1 John. The first passage is 1.6-2.2. The antitheses operating in this passage are those of light and darkness, and truth and falsehood. The christological material relates primarily to Jesus being God's Son (1.7), the 'advocate with the Father' (2.1) and 'the Righteous One' (2.2). The focus is on the forgiveness of sins which need to be confessed (1.9) and which is provided for through Jesus' atoning sacrifice and blood

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<sup>17</sup> See Brown, *Epistles*, 340-41.

<sup>18</sup> I argue that the confessional material in 4.2-3 is also to be interpreted as a denial of the messiahship of Jesus (Griffith, *Idols*, 166-91).



(2.2; 1.7). The purpose and result is that fellowship with God and with other believers is maintained (1.6-7).

It is important to note that nowhere in this passage are the defectors in view. Indeed, the only group referred to in this passage that is outside the fellowship is ‘the whole world’, not some specified sub-group. Many scholars introduce the defectors into this passage by arguing that John refers to the ethical ‘slogans’ of the defectors or secessionists, in order to refute them. These putative ‘slogans’ are supposedly introduced by the phrase ‘if we claim’ (1.6, 8, 10). This is a big mistake and completely unwarranted. For a start, the opposition group is not introduced until 2.18 and before then John is dealing only with generalities and not with the specifics introduced by the issue of the antichrists.<sup>19</sup> John’s concerns here are purely pastoral and not polemical and are expressed by an inclusive ‘we’. He is dealing with the perennial issue of how Christians are to keep their relationship with both God and each other in purity, in the truth and in the light. Sin is thus an acknowledged reality within Christian experience and within Christian fellowship, but all sin can be dealt with if it is confessed and covered by the blood of Jesus through his atoning sacrifice. This kind of sinning does not cause a break with the Christian community because it is confessed and forgiven thereby restoring the sinner to fellowship with God and with brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second passage is 3.4-10. The antitheses in this passage are those of God and the devil, and sin and righteousness. The christological material relates to Jesus being without sin (3.5) and being the Son of God (3.8). The focus is on sin specified as ἀνομία (3.4) as we have discussed above. The purpose and result is to manifest the fundamental difference between the children of God and the children of the devil (3.10).

This is the clear reason why the sin spoken of in this passage cannot be the same as the sin spoken of in 1.6-2.2. If this is not the case, the logic would then require that because the children of God sin (which John has clearly demonstrated is the case in 1.6-2.2) then they must also be the children of the devil. The quality of the sin under discussion in 3.4-10, therefore, must be such that it identifies the

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<sup>19</sup> For a full justification of this position see Griffith, *Idols*, 116-24.

perpetrators as children of the devil. The specific nature of this sin is such that it must also define how the devil sinned ‘from the beginning’ (3.8). The specific quality of that sin is ‘ultimate iniquity’ or ‘rebellion’ and manifests itself as the rejection of God’s plan. John makes this plain by placing this passage within the eschatological context of the antichrists which appear in 2.18, 22 and 4.3, and who manifest supremely what sin as ἀνομία is (3.4). Namely, the rejection of God’s plan to save the world and forgive sins through the death of Jesus, the Messiah. If Jesus is the one who takes away sins (3.5) then there can be no forgiveness or life for those who reject him as the Saviour of the world (4.14). It is also important to recognise that not only does sin have a specific meaning in this passage but also that righteousness has a specific meaning here. Righteousness is defined as loving God’s children (3.10-18, 23). The children of the devil not only reject the claims that Johannine Christianity makes for Jesus, but they also reject the Johannine Christians. Thus, by definition those who are born of God do not and cannot commit the sin that characterizes the children of the devil.

The final passage is 5.16-18 which is the focus of this study and with which we began. The antithesis in this passage is that between death and life. The christological material is focused on the sonship of Jesus (‘the One born of God’ [5.18] = ‘the Son of God’ [5.20]). The focus is on sin as ‘not unto death’ and ‘unto death’. The purpose and result is to promote assurance for the believer.

It is only here that John defines sin under two types. He feels no need to define further what he is talking about and just assumes the distinction. The reason he feels he can do this is because he has already outlined two discussions on the topic of sin in 1.6-2.2 and 3.4-10, and it is to these two discussions that he is alluding.<sup>20</sup> John summarizes his discussion under the new rubric of sins ‘not unto death’ (his main pastoral concern) and ‘unto death’ (mentioned only once and in passing). The crucial verse for understanding 5.16-17 is, in fact, 5.18 with its verbal and conceptual parallels with 3.9. The key is to understand that ‘God’s seed’ refers to those who are ‘born of God’. John believes that God’s seed/children ‘remain in him’ and as

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<sup>20</sup> This approach to understanding the topic of sin in 1 John is found in Tertullian.

such *cannot* sin (the sin unto death). 3.9 is a statement of John’s belief about the security of the believer and 5.18 supplies the reason why this must be so: ‘the One born of God keeps them safe (ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ τηρεῖ αὐτόν), and the evil one does not harm them’ (5.18, my translation).<sup>21</sup> Ultimately the believer’s assurance is in the person and work of Christ. Those who are ‘of God’ (5.19) and ‘in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ’ (5.20) do not and cannot commit the sin unto death.



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<sup>21</sup> Some apply the whole of this verse to the believer and read the variant reflexive pronoun ἑαυτόν. Against this is the observation that the verb τηρεῖν never governs a reflexive pronoun without a modifier of some kind in the New Testament. Furthermore, the change in the tense of the participle from perfect to aorist, and the fact that a second articular participial phrase is introduced is strong evidence that a new subject has been introduced. John 17.12, 14 express exactly the same thought so this is a thoroughly Johannine concept. See further on this Griffith, *Idols*, 92-93.