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Volume 3 – 2011

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

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Introduction

The hope and the goal of Christian believers is personal salvation, an objective reality. To be “saved” is to spend eternity with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. But just as important to some Christians is the *assurance* of salvation, a subjective certainty that one is already “saved,” so that one’s future with God is a foregone conclusion. To them, it is necessary not only to be “saved”

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but to *know it* beyond a shadow of a doubt. This doctrine of assurance is conspicuous among most Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, but not all. It is not to be found among most Arminians, for example, who argue that those who believe can lose their salvation because of disobedience or unbelief. Yet assurance is not to be simply equated with eternal security, for at the other end of the spectrum are certain Calvinists who believe strongly in eternal security yet make no claim to assurance of salvation because only God knows whom he has chosen. In short, one group rejects the notion of eternal security out of hand; the other accepts it, but argues that no one but God knows who the eternally secure Elect actually are. Consequently those who believe must work hard in this life to make their “calling and election sure” (2 Pet 1:10).

What is Christian Assurance?

The classic text in support of a doctrine of Christian assurance is 1 John 5:13, “These things I write to you so that you might know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God.” It is one of several texts in 1 John that state the author’s purpose in writing the letter, and it stands as a kind of sequel to John 20:31, stating the purpose of the Gospel of John, “These things are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and so that believing you might have life in his name.” If the one offers salvation, the other offers assurance of salvation.

The nature of this assurance is defined by what precedes. In the preceding paragraph (1 John 5:5-12), the author speaks repeatedly of “testimony.”² “There are three that *testify*,” he writes, “the Spirit, the water and the blood” (5:8), and he relates these to the cross and to the baptism of Jesus. “For this is the *testimony* of God that he *testified* concerning his Son,” he writes (v 9), evidently referring to the words at the baptism, “You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11), or something similar. Then he continues, “Whoever believes in the Son of God has the *testimony* in himself” (v 10a), and “this is the *testimony*, that God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son” (vv 11-12, italics added).

² In Greek, μαρτυρία; “testify” is μαρτυρεῖν.

The “assurance” promised in 5:12, therefore, is an assurance based on simple acceptance of God’s testimony, the same testimony that assured Jesus at his baptism that he was God’s “beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Paul makes much the same point in Romans: “For you have not received the spirit of slavery again to fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption, by which we cry, ‘Abba,’ or ‘Father.’ The same Spirit *testifies alongside*³ our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs, heirs of God, co-heirs with Jesus Christ, if we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified together” (Romans 8:15-17, italics added). In short, God not only chooses his Elect by grace, but by grace testifies to them that they are in fact his Chosen.

Still, it is not an assurance to be shouted to the world, but a testimony to be quietly accepted and lived out in a life of obedience. When all is said and done, Christian assurance that one is “saved” must always reckon with the possibility of self-deception. Dr. Samuel Johnson once stated in a dialogue with a Quaker, Mrs. Knowles, “No man can be sure that his obedience and repentance will obtain salvation.” She replied, quite in keeping with what we have just found in 1 John and Romans, “But divine intimation of acceptance may be made to the soul,” and Johnson responded, “Madam, it may: but I should not think the better of a man who should tell me on his death-bed he was sure of salvation. A man cannot be sure himself that he has divine intimation of acceptance; much less can he make others sure that he has it.”⁴ “Assurance” is a thorny issue in itself, whatever bearing the much-discussed “sin unto death” might have upon it. Perhaps the issue is best resolved by acknowledging that just as our salvation rests on the grace of God appropriated by faith, so our assurance of salvation rests on the testimony of God similarly appropriated by faith. And Dr. Johnson was correct that the one is not to be simply identified with the other. It is safe to say that some who are very certain of their salvation will not be saved, just as some who have no such assurance will be saved nonetheless.

³ In Greek, συμπαρατυρεῖ.

⁴ *Boswell’s Life of Johnson in Two Volumes* (Humphrey Milford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 2.223.

Prayer and the “Sin unto Death”

A corollary of assurance of salvation in 1 John is the assurance of answered prayer. The text continues: “And this is the confidence we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us, and if we know that he hears us whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we asked from him” (1 John 5:14-15). The verb for “ask” is αἰτεῖν, meaning to make a “request” (as in 3:22).⁵ This promise sets the stage for a specific instance of answered prayer, and the key reference to “the sin unto death” – or rather to “the sin not unto death,” which is what the passage is actually about:

If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which is not unto death, he will ask⁶ and he will give him life, to those who are sinning not unto death. There is a sin unto death. I am not saying that he should ask⁷ about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin which is not unto death (1 John 5:16-17).

Near the beginning of 1 John we were promised that “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and righteous, so that he might forgive us those sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). Here it is not a matter of one’s own personal sins but the sins of a “brother” or sister,⁸ that is a fellow believer. Similar concern for a “brother” is evident in 3:17: “Whoever has this world’s livelihood and sees his brother having need, and withholds his compassion from him, how does the love of God dwell in him?” Here too in 5:16, we have a situation in which a believer “sees”⁹ something amiss with regard to his brother or sister in the believing community, and takes responsibility to help. This time the brother is not simply in need, but

⁵ The vocabulary is consistent throughout: αἰτώμεθα twice for the present verb “we ask,” τὰ αἰτήματα for the noun “requests,” and ἠτήκαμεν for the perfect verb “asked.”

⁶ Greek αἰτήσει.

⁷ This is a different verb, ἐρωτήση, from ἐρωτᾶν.

⁸ In Greek, ἀδελφος, which can refer to a male siblings or generically to any sibling.

⁹ “Sees” is ἴδῃ in 5:16, θεωρῇ in 3:17, but without any discernible difference in meaning.

at fault, “sinning a sin”¹⁰ and presumably *not* confessing it so as to be forgiven and “cleansed from all unrighteousness” (1:9). Whatever the sin might be, it is something visible to others in the believing community. The brother needs help, just as surely as when it was a matter of material need, perhaps more so, and the help prescribed in this instance is intercessory prayer.

The sin to be prayed for is qualified in one important way: it is a sin “not unto death.”¹¹ Why is the qualification necessary? Evidently because sin is normally presumed to lead to death. This is the case with Paul, for example, who wrote, “Therefore just as through one man sin came into the world and death through sin, so too death came to all people, in that they all sinned” (Romans 5:12), and “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is life eternal through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). And in the Gospel of John, sin is defined as unbelief, or a rejection of Jesus. He tells his disciples that the Advocate, or Holy Spirit, will convict the world “of sin, because they do not believe in me” (John 16:9), and he tells those who reject him that “You will die in your sin” (8:21), and again, “I told you that you will die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins” (8:24).

Thus in much of the New Testament “unto death”¹² is the norm, not the exception. In the Gospel of John and in 1 John it is the archetypal sin of Cain, and of the devil before him. In the Gospel, Jesus claims that the devil “was a murderer from the beginning, and did not stand in the truth, for truth is not in him. When he speaks the lie, he speaks from his own, for he is the liar and the father of it” (John 8:44), and in 1 John the author writes, “Whoever commits sin is of the devil, for the devil sins from the beginning” (3:8). He urges his readers to “love one another, not as Cain was from the Evil One and

¹⁰ Just as redundant sounding in Greek as in English: ἀμαρτάνοντα ἀμαρτίαν.

¹¹ In Greek, μὴ πρὸς θάνατον.

¹¹ That is, πρὸς θάνατον.

¹² This means that the “sin unto death” cannot be equated with the unique and unforgiveable “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” mentioned in Mark (3:29), Matthew (12:31-32), and Luke (12:10), for the latter is carefully distinguished from “every [other] sin and blasphemy,” all of which can be forgiven.

slaughtered his brother – and why did he slaughter him? Because his works were evil and his brother’s righteous” (3:11-12). “We know that we have passed from death to life,” he continues, “because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love remains in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has life eternal dwelling in him” (3:14-15). 1 John seems to agree as well with the Gospel of John that the devil is the father of all lies, for it asks, “Who is the liar except the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ; this is the Antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son?” (1 John 2:22).

In short, sin is implicitly defined (both in the Gospel and in 1 John) as unbelief first of all, and secondarily as hatred of the “brothers,” that is, of those who do believe. All such sin is by nature “unto death.” From this standpoint, a sin “not unto death” sounds almost like a contradiction in terms. It is not the norm but the exception, yet the exception is what is in view here in 5:16-17. Why focus on the exception? Because the person committing the sin is said to be a “brother” – not someone who has cut himself off from the “brothers” by hatred or unbelief. A “brother” has been carefully defined at the end of the preceding chapter and the beginning of the present one:

And this command we have from him, that the one who loves God must also love his brother. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Parent loves the one born of him.¹³ By this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and do what he commands (1 John 4:21-5:2).

A brother or sister, then, is someone “born of God,” a Christian believer destined to eternal life. There is a sharp distinction to be made between the sin of “the world” which is “unto death,” and the sins of believers. A sin “not unto death” is by definition the only kind of sin a believer can commit.¹⁴ This appears to have been what was

¹³ “The Parent” is τὸν γενήσαντα, literally, “the One who begat” (or fathered), while “the one born of him” is τὸν γεγεννημένον ἐξ αὐτοῦ, literally “the one begotten of him.”

¹⁴ This point is made in some detail and very convincingly by David M. Scholer, “Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17,” in [*Footnote continued on next page ...*]

meant in 1 John 3:9, “No one who is born of God commits sin, for [God’s] seed remains in him and he is unable to sin, because he is born of God,” and this thought will be repeated here in chapter five in the very next verse: “We know that no one who has been born of God sins, but he who was born of God keeps him and the Evil One does not touch him” (5:18).

What then of the sins that believers can and do commit? It is clearly stated in 1 John that “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1:8), and “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us” (1:10). The author goes on to say, “My children, these things I write to you so that you do not sin, and if anyone sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous” (2:1). In 5:16-17, he is inviting other “advocates,” or intercessors, for those in the believing community who fall into sin, with the stipulation that if a person is a “brother,” whatever sin he commits must be a sin “not unto death.” Strictly speaking, then, the notion of a “brother sinning a sin which is not unto death” is redundant, but the author is willing to risk a little redundancy in order to make his point. His point appears to be that the person interceding for the brother should not be troubled over whether or not the brother’s sin is “unto death.” By definition it is not. Still, having introduced the term “not unto death” (not once but twice), the author finds it necessary to make explicit what he has presumed all along – that “sin” *normally* means “sin unto death.” So he continues (and he might have prefaced it with “Of course”): “There is a sin unto death. I am not saying that he should ask about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin which is not unto death” (5:16b-17).

The issue here is the meaning of “ask.” As we have seen (above, n. 6), the verb is not (as in vv 14, 15 and 16a) the one which unambiguously means to make a request or pray,¹⁵ but one which can mean either to make a request as in prayer, or simply to ask a

Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney (edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 230-46.

¹⁵ Gr. αἰτεῖν.

question.¹⁶ Which is it here? Is it “I am not saying that he should *pray* about that,” or “I am not saying that he should *raise a question* about that”? The first is the majority view among commentators and English translations. That is, either we are forbidden to pray for those who have committed a “sin unto death” (just as Jesus said “I do not pray for the world,” John 17:9), or at the very least, if we do pray for them, the promise of answered prayer does not apply. This view presupposes that the two different verbs are being used interchangeably; it is simply a matter of stylistic variation.

A very real distinction is evident in the vocabulary of the Gospel of John,¹⁷ however, where ἐρωτᾶν is used for the prayers of Jesus (that is, in 14:16; 16:26; twice in 17:9; 17:15 and 20),¹⁸ while αἰτεῖν is consistently used for the prayers of disciples or believers (in John 14:13-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24, 26). When ἐρωτᾶν is used of the disciples (in John 16:5, 19, 23 and 30), it does not mean to pray or make a request, but to ask a question.¹⁹ The abrupt use of ἐρωτᾶν here, where αἰτεῖν would have been expected, suggests (contrary to most commentators) that the change of verb should be taken seriously, and the verse translated, “There is a sin unto death; I am not saying that he should ask about that” – or to paraphrase, “my point is that he should not raise a question about that.”²⁰

In short, the author’s point is just the opposite of what is frequently proposed. It is not that prayer should be withheld on the

¹⁶ Gr. ἐρωτᾶν.

¹⁷ The distinction was recognized over a hundred years ago, by Ezra Abbot, “The Distinction between αἰτέω and ἐρωτάω,” in *The Authorship of the Fourth Gospel and Other Critical Essays* (Boston: Ellis, 1888), 113-36.

¹⁸ The only possible exception is John 11:22, where Martha says to Jesus “I know that whatever you ask [αἰτήσῃ] of God, God will give you,” but because this is Martha’s vocabulary, not the vocabulary of the narrator, it is arguably not a true exception.

¹⁹ Of the 27 occurrences of ἐρωτᾶν in the Gospel of John, six are requests but not prayers (4:31, 40, 47; 12:21; 19:31, 38); 15 are questions (1:19, 21, 25; 5:12: 9:2, 15, 19, 21; 18:19; twice in 18:21, plus the four listed above on the lips of the disciples), and the remaining six refer to prayer (all on the lips of Jesus, as listed above). The only occurrence in the Johannine epistles other than 1 John 5:16 is a request, but not a prayer (2 John 5).

²⁰ For this interpretation, see Paul Trudinger, “Concerning Sins, Mortal and Otherwise: A Note on 1 John 5:16, 17,” *Biblica* 52 (1971), 541-42.

ground that someone might be guilty of the “sin unto death.” Rather, the intercessor should go ahead and pray for the brother *without asking* whether or not the brother’s sin might in fact be “unto death,” proving thereby that the “brother” is no brother at all. A “sin unto death” would brand the so-called “brother” instead as an unbeliever – like the “many antichrists,” or schismatics mentioned earlier who “went out from us, but were not of us” (1 John 2:19). In other words, intercessory prayer is not to be clouded by theological suspicion, but entered into freely, in much the same spirit with which we are called to love one another and minister to each other’s material needs (3:17). The intercessor should assume without question that he is praying for a brother, and that consequently that the sin is “not unto death.” There is plenty of room for intercession, the text concludes, because “All unrighteousness²¹ is sin, and there is sin which is not unto death” (5:17). In other words, 1 John affirms a typically Johannine definition of sin as unbelief and hatred of believers, yet at the same time acknowledges a broader understanding of sin as anything that is “unrighteous” or “unjust,” that is, contrary to the will and commands of God. While commentators have been (understandably) preoccupied with the mysterious “sin unto death,” what the text has really been about is the “sin *not* unto death,” because that is the occasion for intercessory prayer among believers.

Remarkably, the intercessor does not simply “ask and it shall be given” (as in Matthew 7:7 and Luke 11:9), accenting God as the giver. Rather, he “will ask,” and consequently he himself will actually “give life” to the one being prayed for, in much the same way that an intercessor at the end of the epistle of James who “turns a sinner from the error of his way” will himself “save a soul from death, and will cover many sins” (James 5:20). In that sense, these texts assign to the intercessor a kind of derivative sovereignty over life and death that is almost breathtaking. The same is true near the end of the short epistle of Jude, where the author tells his readers, by “building yourselves up in the most holy faith,” and “praying in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20) to “Keep yourselves in the love of God, awaiting the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to life eternal. And have mercy on some who doubt, and save some snatching them from fire, and have mercy on some in fear,

²¹ Gr. *πᾶσα ἀδικία*.

hating even the garment that is stained by the flesh” (Jude 21-23). Having “life,” we can “give life” to our brothers and sisters in Christ if we will. Being “saved,” we can “save” others, and receiving “mercy” we can “have mercy” on others whose sins have put them in danger, all without necessarily asking whether their sins might or might not be “unto death.”

On the basis of 1 John 5:13 and other passages, we have “Christian assurance” of salvation, but the accent on our responsibility toward fellow believers suggests that perhaps we have it not primarily as individuals but as a community of faith. This is the lesson not only of 1 John, but of James, and the brief letter of Jude. Of these, however, only 1 John is careful to spell it out in terms of a distinctively Johannine distinction between “sins unto death,” the mortal sins of unbelief and hatred of the brothers, and “sins not unto death,” the “ordinary” day-by-day sins of pride and greed and selfishness that beset us all. The distinction is not always apparent to the naked eye, but God knows the difference, and God is the final Judge. The point of 1 John 5:16-17 is to leave it in God’s hands.



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