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SIN AND PERFECTION IN 1 JOHN[1]

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ABSTRACT: Early in 1 John, the author portrays authentic Christian living as involving honest and ongoing acknowledgment of one's sins, God's forgiveness of the same, and the cleansing from all unrighteousness (1:8-9). However, later in the same letter, while seeking to distinguish his opponents from those who were the true children of God, he says: 'No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him' (3:6); and 'those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God.' (3:9). These latter statements stand in tension with his earlier statement which says that anyone claiming to be without sin is a liar. In one place he rejects sinless perfection, in the other he appears to assume it. In this article these apparently contradictory statements are examined and a possible resolution of the tension existing between them is suggested.

KEY WORDS: Sin, perfection, fellowship, children of God, anomia, assurance, eternal life.

A couple of years ago the Second Edition of my commentary on the Letters of John was published (Kruse 2020). One of the difficult issues I encountered writing that commentary was the apparent contradiction in what the author says about sin in the believer's life. In one passage he says that those who claim not to have sinned are liars, and in other passage he says that those born of God cannot sin because 'God's seed' dwells in them. The aim of this article is to review these passages seeking to understanding what they affirm and to see if the charges of contradiction made against the author are valid.

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A scenario

Anyone working with the Letters of John needs a working hypothesis concerning the events which lie behind them. Such a working hypothesis involves historical reconstruction, and this will be based upon assumptions about literary matters. The following scenario proceeds upon the assumption that there is a very close relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the three letters of John. If they are not all written by the same person, then the person(s) who wrote the letters had been deeply immersed in the thought of the Gospel and used its language. For example, parallels to words and ideas used in the letters are nearly always to be found in the Gospel. There are many examples of this, [Compare, e.g., the following: the word of life from the beginning - 1 John 1:1-2/John 1:1-4; the light - 1 John 1:5-7/John 1:6-9; the Paraclete - 1 John 2:1/John14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; the new commandment - 1 John 2:7/John 13:34; the love of fellow-believers and the world's hatred - 1 John 3:13/John 15:9-25; passing from death to life - 1 John 3:14/John 5:24; Jesus lays down his life for us - 1 John 3:16/John 10:11, 15, 17, 18; 15:12-14; God's command to believe in Jesus Christ - 1 John 3:23/John 6:29; no one has ever seen God - 1 John 4:12/John 1:18; the 'Saviour of the world' - 1 John 4:14/John 4:42; being born of God - 1 John 5:1/John 1:12-13; water and blood - 1 John 5:6/John 19:34; eternal life - 1 John 5:13/John 3:16; the love commandment - 2 John 5-6/John 13:34.], but most striking are the similarities between the prologue of the Fourth Gospel and the opening section of 1 John, and the fact that the purpose of writing both the Fourth Gospel and 1 John has to do with faith in Christ and receiving eternal life (John 20:31/1 John 5:13). These similarities have led several recent scholars to conclude that the one who wrote the Gospel in its original form is also responsible for the writing of 1 John, and also perhaps 2 John and 3 John (Westcott 1886: xxx-xxxii, xliii-xlvi; Marshall 1978: 42-48; Burge 1996: 38-40), though some scholars would deny this (Brown 1982: 30; Bultmann 1973: 1; Schnackenburg 1992: 40-41), and others prefer to leave the question open (Burge 1996: 38-40; Thompson 1992: 20-21).

For the purposes of this article, it is assumed that an early form of the Fourth Gospel had been completed before the writing of the letters, and that the Beloved Disciple, an eyewitness of most of the events described in the Gospel, was responsible for producing that early form (Blomberg 2001: 22-41). The Gospel deals primarily with the ministry of Jesus and reflects the conflict between Jesus and some of his Jewish contemporaries. At a secondary level, the way the story of Jesus is told may reflect the experience of the Christian community of which the Beloved Disciple was a member when he wrote his Gospel. This community consisted of a number of churches, probably located in and around Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia (Bauckham 1998).

Following the writing of this early form of the Gospel, difficulties arose within this community. Some of the members had taken on board beliefs about the person and work of Christ which were unacceptable to the author [The singular expression, 'author', is used without prejudging the question whether all three letters were written by the same person. This is done to avoid what would otherwise be rather cumbersome expressions.] of the letters and those associated with him. These new beliefs involved a denial that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, come in the flesh (1 John 4:2-3), and that his death was necessary for the forgiveness of sins (1 John 5:6-7). A sharp disagreement arose which resulted in the secession of those who embraced these new views (1 John 2:19) [For a discussion of the secessionists and their teaching, see Kruse, *The Letters of John*: 16-27.]

The secessionists (as we shall call them hereafter) were not content to keep their new beliefs to themselves. Instead they organised a group of itinerant preachers who circulated among the churches and propagated their beliefs with a view to winning people over to their understanding of things (1 John 2:26; 4:1-3; 2 John 7). This created confusion among the believers who remained loyal to the gospel as it had been proclaimed at the beginning, the gospel that had come down from the eyewitnesses. As a result of the confusion, these believers began to question whether they really knew God, whether they really were experiencing eternal life, and whether they were really in the truth. The author of 1 John wrote to bolster the assurance of such people by providing them with criteria they could use to evaluate the claims being made by the secessionists, and with which they could reassure themselves that they were in the truth (1 John 1:5--2:2; 2:3-11; 3:7-10, 14-15; 4:4-6, 7-8, 13-15; 5:13, 18-20). 1 John appears to have been sent as a circular letter around the churches affected by the mission of the secessionists [As a circular letter, it would not need opening and closing greetings (these were to be provided in each place by the courier), yet would still deal with particular problems (all churches were experiencing similar problems because of the secessionists); and would not make reference to particular readers (omitted because the letter was intended for a number of different churches).]

As a follow up to this circular letter two other letters were written. The first, 2 John, was sent to one of the churches involved (to 'the elect lady and her children') to warn the members about the itinerant teachers who represented the secessionists and were peddling their new and heretical teaching, trying to deceive people (2 John 7-8). The elder who wrote 2 John urged his readers not to aid and abet these teachers by providing them with hospitality. To do so would be to participate, as he says, in their 'evil work' (2 John 10-11).

However, it was not just those who represented the secessionist teaching who were itinerating among these churches. There were also people of good standing

who had gone from the elder's church 'for the sake of Christ' [lit. 'the name'] (3 John 7). These people needed to receive hospitality in Christian homes as they travelled about. The second of the follow-up letters, 3 John, was written by the elder to an individual named Gaius. He was commended for providing hospitality for travelling preachers of good standing (3 John 5-6), and was informed of the actions of another person, named Diotrephes, who lived in the same town but refused to provide this hospitality, and who was at loggerheads with the elder (3 John 9-10). It is not clear whether his refusal was based on doctrinal reasons (e.g., he agreed with the secessionists against the elder) or personal conflict (e.g., a rejection of the elder's authority) [For discussions of the nature of the conflict between Diotrphes and the Elder, see (Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* 3, 1953: 375-378); (Harnack, Über den dritten Johannesbrief', Texte und Untersuchungen 15, 1897: 16ff.), cited by (Taeger, 'Der konservative Rebell: Zum Widerstand des Diotrephes gegen den Presbyter', *Zeitschrift* für die *neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 78, 1987: 268, 286-287); (Storm, 'Diotrephes: A Study of Rivalry in the Apostolic Church', *Restoration Quarterly* 35, 1993: 196-198, 201); (Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 1971: 93); (Bonsack, 'Der Presbyteros des dritten Briefs und der geliebte Jünger des Evangeliums nach Johannes', *Zeitshrift* für die *neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 79, 1988: 46-50); (Käsemann, 'Ketzer und Zeuge. Zum johanneischen Verfasserproblem', *Zeitschrift* für *Theologie und Kirxhe* 48, 1951: 310-311); (Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 1996: 262-263); (Price, 'The Sitz-im-Leben of Third John: A New Reconstruction', *Evangelical Quarterly* 61, 1989: 114-119); (Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 1982: 296-299, 738).]

Sometime after the writing of the letters of John the Beloved Disciple died (John 21:23). It was then that later editors revised and added to the Fourth Gospel and issued it in the form we know it today, complete with assurances about the trustworthiness of the testimony of the Beloved Disciple (John 19:35; 21:24).

We do not know what happened to the secessionist movement, whether it developed into the sort of second-century Gnosticism we know through the writings of Irenaeus, or whether it simply died out. We do know that the position adopted by the author of the letters of John won the day in so far as it was these letters which found their way into the New Testament canon.

Purpose of writing—1 John

1 John repeatedly sets forth criteria which, when applied to the secessionists' teaching, show that their claims to know God, to have fellowship with him and have eternal life, were spurious. The author's purpose, however, was not to correct the secessionists (the letter was not written to them), but to show his readers that the secessionist claims were false. By doing this he wanted to prevent them from being de-

ceived by secessionist teachings [In recent times some scholars have argued that the interpretation of 1 John with the secessionist challenge in mind is unnecessary. (Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, 1991: 16), whilst recognising that a schism has occurred, argues that the purpose of the letter is not so much to deal with the effects of the schism, but 'to engender a debate within the framework of the author's or community's theology'. (Griffith, 'A non-polemical reading of 1 John: sin, Christology and the limits of Johannine Christianity', *Tyndale Bulletin* 49 1998: 275), believes that a return of some Jewish Christians to Judaism is sufficient to account for the rhetoric of 1 John, and that the author's aim is pastoral, i.e., 'to secure the boundaries of the community against further losses'. However, the author's reference to those 'who went out from us' (2:19) and his view that they are antichrists (2:18), together with his reference to false prophets who 'have gone out into the world' (4:1) and his identifying them with the spirit of antichrist (4:3), do seem to indicate that the author had a polemic purpose in writing.] Alongside the provision of criteria to show the secessionists were wrong, the author provided other criteria which, if applied to the readers themselves, would show that they were in the right; they were the ones who know God, who have fellowship with him, and who have eternal life. The author's purpose was to bolster the assurance of his readers by the double strategy of showing the secessionists' claims were false and showing his readers that they were in the truth [Cf. B. A. du Toit, 'The Role and Meaning of Statements of "Certainty" in the Structural Composition of 1 John', *Neotestamentica* 13, 1979: 84-100; (Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John*, 1968, [reprinted from 3rd edn., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913]) 279-305.] All this accords with the one explicit statement of purpose in the letter: 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life' (5:13). The readers needed this reassurance because their confidence had been shaken by the propaganda of the secessionists and their claims to Spirit inspired teaching which went beyond what had been received from the beginning.

The problem of sin and perfection in 1 John

The teaching of the secessionists can be inferred from the letters of John by a judicious mirror reading of the text. Included in their teaching were claims to sinlessness which the author alludes to and rejects in 1:6—2:10. The author portrays authentic Christian living as that which involves honest and ongoing acknowledgment of one's sins, God's forgiveness of the same, and the cleansing of believers from all unrighteousness (1:8-9).

However, later in the letter, while seeking to distinguish the secessionists from those who were the true children of God, the author says: 'No one who abides in him

sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him' (3:6); and 'Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God.' (3:9). Clearly, this stands in tension with 1:6—2:10 where the author says that anyone claiming to be without sin is a liar. In one place he rejects sinless perfection, in the other he appears to assume it. In this article then I want to examine these two passages and the tension existing between them.

1 John 1:6—2:10

The author's rejection of sinless perfection is reflected in six key texts in 1:6--2:10, and epitomised in 1:8:

1:6 a If we say
b that we have fellowship with him
c while we are walking in darkness,
d we lie and do not do what is true.

1:8 a If we say
b that we have no sin,
d we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

1:10 a If we say
b that we have not sinned,
d we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

2:4 a Whoever says,
b 'I have come to know him,'
c but does not obey his commandments
d is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist.

2:6 a Whoever says,
b 'I abide in him'
e ought to walk just as he walked.

2:9 a Whoever says,
b 'I am in the light,'
c while hating a brother or sister,
d is still in the darkness.

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Each text begins with an introductory formula (a), either 'if we say' (*ean eipmen hoti*), or 'whoever says' (*ho legn*). Each text has a statement of what is claimed (b), to have fellowship with God, to be without sin, and so on. We then find that three of the texts (1:6; 2:4, 9) describe concomitant behaviour which is inconsistent with the claim (c), walking in darkness, not obeying his commandments etc. The fourth text (2:6) describes the sort of behaviour (e) which should accompany such claims, i.e., walking as he walked. In three texts (1:6; 2:4, 9) those who make these claims without the appropriate concomitant behaviour are said to be liars or still in darkness (d). In two texts (1:8, 10) no inappropriate concomitant behaviour is mentioned, and the claim itself is said to be inappropriate, and constitutes those who make it liars (d).

What all this suggests is that four out of the six claims are regarded by the author as appropriate, as long as the concomitant behaviour of the claimants is consistent with their claims. It is legitimate to claim that one has fellowship with God; has come to know God; abides in God; and abides in the light. But it also suggests that two of the six claims are regarded by the author as inappropriate altogether. It is never legitimate to claim that one has no sin/has not sinned. Putting it in other words, 1:6—2:10 says that the claim to intimacy with God is legitimate as long as one's behaviour does not invalidate such a claim. But the claim not to have sinned is never legitimate.

Based on these texts alone we could conclude that the secessionists' claims to perfection included some sort of claim to be sinless. The author's understanding of perfection included intimacy with God, but involved no claim to sinlessness. To use Bogart's words, as far as the author was concerned the secessionists' claim to be perfect was both 'heretical' and 'hypocritical'—heretical as far as the claim to sinlessness is concerned, and hypocritical as far as the claim to intimacy is concerned (Bogart 1977: 37.) To reinforce his own approach, the author introduces the traditional belief in Christ's atoning sacrifice for sins, and expresses his understanding of perfection, i.e., it involves intimacy with God, which is based on cleansing from sin, not a complete absence of sin in the believer. This viewpoint obviously stands in tension with statements the author makes in 3:6-9.

1 John 3:6-9

In 1 John 3:6-9, in the process of drawing the lines between those who are the children of God and those who are the children of the devil, the author makes the following absolute statement: 'Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God' (3:9). It appears that what he rejected as a heretical (and not merely hypocritical) claim when made by the secessionists, he is now claiming for the orthodox. On the surface of things we have a contradiction. People have dealt with this apparent contradiction in various ways.

The traditional way of explaining the apparent contradiction is to argue that 3:6-9 is saying that those born of God cannot sin *habitually,* whereas 1:8-9 recognises that they do sin *occasionally.* Such a distinction is based upon the use of present tense forms of the verbs in 3:6-9 when speaking about sinning which, it is argued, denote habitual sinning. However, the use of the present tense says nothing about the habitual or non-habitual character of the sinning, but only shows that the author has chosen to depict the sinning as something in progress, rather than as a complete action. And, in any case, the present tense is also used in 1:8 where the author says, 'If we say that we have no sin (i.e. 'if we say that we do not sin habitually'), we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' In both cases, where sinning is said to be impossible for those born of God, and also where those who deny they have sin are said to be self-deceived, the present tense of the relevant verbs is used, depicting the sinning as something in progress or ongoing.

Swadling argues that the problem is more apparent than real. His suggestion is that troublesome texts, 3:6 and 3:9, are in fact quotations of heretical secessionist slogans claiming that Christians cannot sin, i.e. that their spirits are unaffected by their behaviour. They claimed immunity from sin by virtue of knowing God. The author's allusion to these slogans would have been recognised by his readers. The words, 'knowing', 'being born', and 'his seed' as an indwelling principle, are all gnostic commonplaces. Swadling suggests that the slogans of 3:6 and 3:9 stemmed from a 'free thinking gnostic separatist segment of the Johannine church', which was the target of the author's polemic. The reason the author introduced these slogans was immediately to refute them and to urge his readers to assess the claims involved using the criterion that those who do right are righteous, and those who do evil are of the devil (Swadling 1982: 206-209.) However, this approach is faulty because the author uses these so-called 'slogans' as the basis for his criteria for distinguishing the children of God from the children of the devil, and therefore they cannot be written off as heretical secessionist slogans.

Kubo argues that the affirmations of 3:6-9 must be interpreted absolutely, i.e. sinning in this context is an absolute impossibility for those born of God, and to deny this is to weaken the point being made by the author. To resolve the tension between this text and 1:8-9, Kubo argues that what the author is rejecting in 1:8-9 is the claim to have no sin made *by those who walk in darkness.* It is not inappropriate for those who walk in the light to make such a claim. However, this stands in contradiction to 2:1-2 ('If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins'). But Kubo argues it does not stand in contradiction to 2:1-2, because 3:6-9 is idealistic, whereas 2:1-2 is realistic [Kubo, 'I John 3:9: Absolute or Habitual', *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 7, 1969: 50,

55-56.] However, Kubo's approach nullifies the author's point in 3:6-9, because it is no help in distinguishing the children of God from the children of the devil to say that the children of God do not sin ideally but do so realistically.

Kotzé argues that the contradictory statements about sinning are to be understood against the background of the author's eschatology. 'The believer is born of God but he is "not yet" what he will be when Christ comes again.' Christ dwells within believers, and therefore it is true to a certain extent to say that they cannot sin, but in their daily lives they still face the temptations of the world. Christian existence is then both secure and insecure. Kotzé concludes: 'With respect to life one can say that the believer already has it but in a sense he does 'not yet' have it. In a negative sense, he says, the same must also be true with respect to sin.' (Kotzé 1979: 68-83, especially 81.) Kotzé appears to be saying that in one sense believers do not sin but in another sense they do. Schnackenburg also says the tension between the two passages is best explained in terms of the eschatological tension in which believers live (Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*: 257-258.) However, the Kotzé and Schnackenburg approach also undermines the author's purpose. You cannot distinguish the children of God from the children of the devil by saying the children of God in one sense do not sin, but in another sense they do.

Brown believes that a contradiction does exist and that it cannot be explained away. He says: 'No other NT author contradicts himself so sharply within such a short span of writing'. He argues that two types of perfectionism are reflected in 1 John, the heretical and the orthodox, and that they represent heretical and orthodox interpretations of Fourth Gospel. The heretical view resulted from an absolute interpretation of texts in the Fourth Gospel like those which speak of Jesus making people free from sin (John 8:31-34) and those in which Jesus himself tells the disciples that they are already clean (John 13:10) (Brown, *The Epistles of John*: 81-83.) The weakness of Brown's approach is that it leaves the author's argument in 3:4-10 in tatters, because the basis of the author's criterion for distinguishing the children of God from the children of the devil turns out to be heretical perfectionism.

Bogart likewise says there is an unresolvable contradiction in 1 John in the matter of perfectionism. He also recognises two types of perfectionism in 1 John, but rejects Brown's suggestion that they both may be traced to different interpretations of the Fourth Gospel. Bogart agrees that orthodox perfectionism is to be accounted for by a development of statements about freedom from slavery to sin in the Fourth Gospel. However, he argues that the heretical perfectionism arose as a result of those who once belonged to the Johannine community being contaminated in their thinking by gnostic anthropology [Bogart, *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism*: 90-91, 120-121.] In gnostic writings human ignorance is often mentioned but there is no

mention of human sin, and therefore sinless perfectionism is inherent in the gnostic systems [Bogart, *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism*: 115-117.] But Bogart's views are subject to the same criticism as Brown's: the basis of the author's criterion for distinguishing the children of God from the children of the devil again turns out to be heretical perfectionism.

None of these solutions appears satisfactory. Is there another way in which we can interpret the author's statements about sin and perfection without accusing him of contradicting himself and without nullifying the argument of 3:4-10.

Is *Anomia* the key?

One way forward is to recognise that the passage, 3:6-9, is part of the treatment of the connection between knowing God and doing righteousness found in 2:29—3:10. In this passage the author provides a basis for distinguishing the children of God from the children of the devil. In doing so he makes a connection between sin and the devil three times. This connection is made both by explicit references to the devil (3:8, 10) and implicitly by equating sin (*hamartia*) and lawlessness (*anomia*) (3:4).

Anomia is found only in 3:4 in 1 John. De la Potterie points out that in the LXX *anomia* translates about twenty different Hebrew words, and becomes virtually synonymous with *hamartia.* In some places in the LXX *anomia* has satanic associations, and in two places it is used to translate *Belial* (2 Sam 22:5; Ps 17:4 [ET Ps 18:5]). These things pave the way for the teaching in later Jewish texts that the sins of the people of Israel were brought about by the powers of wickedness--by Satan and his spirits (cf. e.g., *T. Dan* 5:4-6; 6:1-6; *T. Naphtali* 4:1; 1QS 3:18-21; 4:9, 19-20, 23). People who commit sins are then called the children/men of iniquity (1QS 3:20; 5:2, 10; 10:20) [Ignace de la Potterie, '"Sin Is Iniquity" (I Jn 3, 4),' in: Ignace de la Potterie and Stanislaus Lyonnet, *The Christian Lives by the Spirit,* 1971: 36-55]

Among the gospels only Matthew uses the word *anomia*, and he does so consistently in association with false prophets or others who oppose God's kingdom, and always in association with the last days or the final judgement (Matt 7:23; 13:41; 23:28; 24:21). In the Pauline corpus the singular form of *anomia* in all cases but one is used to denote a sinful power at work in the world and one to which Christians must not submit themselves (Rom 6:19; 2 Cor 6:14; 2 Thess 2:3, 7). In the NT *anomia* meaning transgression of the law is completely absent [De la Potterie, '"Sin Is Iniquity" (I Jn 3, 4): 40-46.]

All this suggests that when the author of 1 John says 'sin is *anomia*' (3:4) he does not mean sin is the violation of the Mosaic law (the word *nomos* does not even appear in 1 John). Rather he is saying that human sin is *anomia* when it involves opposition to and rebellion against God, and so is similar to the opposition and rebellion of Satan. If this is the case, then is the author really saying that those who claim to have

seen God and know God, yet persist in sin, certainly do not know God, and are in fact in league with Satan. If we recognise the connection between sin and *anomia* (rebellion) in 3:4-10, we can say that the sin which distinguishes the children of the devil is sin which has its roots in *anomia*, i.e. rebellion against God. It is this sin which believers cannot commit because God's 'seed' remains in them. The children of God do sometimes commit sins (2:1), but the one thing they do not do is commit *anomia,* the sin of rebellion, the sin of the devil.

If this interpretation is acceptable, we may say that the author has not contradicted himself, and we can do so without nullifying the argument of 3:4-10 in which he sets out criteria for distinguishing the children of God from the children of the devil.

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