

# What Kind of Sin is in view in 1 John 3:9?

Exegesis paper for

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Candidates and Credentials Committee

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## **I. Introduction: How should we understand 1 John 3:9?**

In the KJV 1 John 3:9 reads, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” The RSV and NKJ read similarly. This is a good translation of the Greek, but it has led Christians to two incorrect conclusions: the Christian says either “Because I still sin, I must not be born of God,” or “I am born of God, so I do not sin.” Is either conclusion correct?

Clearly John intends to teach us that being “born of God” and “sinning” are *incompatible* with one another; each is *mutually exclusive* of the other’s presence. The antithesis could not be more absolute. Yet just as clearly John also teaches that “Now we are children of God” (1 John 3:2), and “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8) John teaches that the Christian *has* sinned in the past (1:10), *may* sin in the future (2:1), that when the Christian *does* sin gracious provision has been made for him through Christ’s propitiation and advocacy (2:2), the Christian should confess these sins and thereupon receive forgiveness (1:9), and that the Christian actively seeks to purify himself from the sin that remains in him (3:3). John teaches, then, that those who are born of God both *do* and *do not* sin. How can this be?

## **II. Proposed answers**

John Stott lists seven ways commentators have sought to resolve the problem.<sup>1</sup>

1. By narrowing the definition of “sin” to refer only to more heinous sins. Augustine, Bede, Luther, and Roman Catholic commentators choose this option. The problem with this definition of “sin” is that John stipulates his working definition of sin in v. 4, and does not narrow it to only heinous sins. He says “sin is lawlessness,” ἀνομία, a state characterized by personally acting as if the law does not bind an individual, the absence of obedience to the law, or the presence of actions contrary to the law. If v. 9’s “sin” is only heinous sins, the definition given in v. 4 must

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<sup>1</sup> Stott, 131-136.

mean “[heinous] sin is [one form of] lawlessness.” While this narrower definition of “sin” would not render the meaning of vv. 4-6 unorthodox, it does not respect the simple absoluteness of John’s form of expression. “Sin is lawlessness” rather appears to make the two terms interchangeable, in order to confront the reader with the righteous standard of the moral law, with its detail, and with its binding authority. John is saying that ἁμαρτία is not merely the inadequacy of “missing the mark,” but is a flagrant transgression of God’s law. When John’s broader concern in the book is to warn us to avoid *all* sin (2:1), what use would it be here to warn only against *heinous* sins and not the rest as well?

2. By saying God does not regard a *believer’s*, but only an *unbeliever’s*, actions to be sins. This view clearly runs aground on those passages in 1 John quoted above which teach that believers sin. Particularly, the statement that God will “forgive us our sin” (1:9) means He regards them to be sins. Given this background, v. 4’s “*Everyone* who commits sin commits lawlessness” includes *believers* as well as unbelievers.

3. By saying the Christian’s *new nature* cannot sin, only the *old nature* sins. Romans 7:17 is used as support. But it is clear in Rom. 7:15-20 that not only the old *nature*, but the whole *person* (Paul’s “I”), sins, and again here in v. 9 that it is not the *seed* (perhaps the new nature), but the whole *person*, that is born of God and cannot sin. In his phrase σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ μένει John must mean that αὐτῷ refers to Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, “everyone who is born of God,” not only because of the meaning of the term “seed” in the realm of biological propagation—something that becomes implanted in & gives life to the one who is born—but also because it is not clear how God’s seed could prevent man from sinning were it to remain in God. As such, it is not the seed, and thereby not the new nature, but αὐτῷ, “him,” the whole person, who “does not sin” in 9a.

4. By saying John does not describe *reality*, but the *ideal*. Alford takes this view, following

Düsterdieck; C. H. Dodd and William Barclay mention it as a possibility. While John would not intend to deceive a *Christian* by writing of ideals (in v. 7 he says “Let no one deceive you”), John’s opponents would readily consider John’s statement about what is *ideal* to mislead his audience about what is *real*. He has denied their teachings that “we have fellowship with Him” (1:6), “we have no sin” in our nature (1:8), and “we have not sinned” in practice (1:10). He proves they are in error by referring to what is *real* in their lives—they “walk in darkness,” have sin in their natures, and have sinned in practice. It will not do to combat their error with anything but a statement of what is *real* about the Christian. Further, an ideal or an obligation would be more naturally expressed in the subjunctive, as John does in 2:1, ταῦτα γράφω ὑμῖν ἵνα μὴ ἀμάρτητε, rather than in the indicatives ποιεῖ and δύναται in 3:9.

Law rejects this view, yet proposes that John refutes the heretics’ theories with exaggerated truths which are themselves only “theoretically...true.” (Stott, 133) But we must ask how John, who expresses his desire throughout for us to know the *truth*, would combat error with half-truths! John would not say “we have no sin” in the sense he uses in 1:8—“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” He says “no lie is of the truth” (2:21).

5. By saying that insofar as the Christian abides in Christ, he does not sin, because this principle is taught in v. 6. Augustine and Bede suggest this view. But v. 9 does not speak of this proportionality—he who is born of God “does not sin,” absolutely. Likewise, v. 9 does not speak of the same conditionality—rather than being the result of actively abiding in Christ, the Christian “cannot sin” because he has been once for all, and even passively, “born of God.” Both γεγεννημένος in v. 9a and γέγνηται in 9b are passive, and in the perfect tense, which indicates this birth has already been brought to full completion in the past. While we may fail to “abide” in Christ (v. 6), God’s seed will not fail to “abide” in us (v. 9).

6. By saying the sin which a Christian “cannot” do is *willful* or *deliberate* sin. Ebrard

promotes this view, and Calvin lends it some support. Lev. 4, Num. 15, and Heb. 10:26 could be used to support this view. But scripture teaches that a Christian *can* sin against their conscience (1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 12), do what they know is wrong (Rom. 7:15-20), and do so deliberately (2 Sam. 11:15; 12:9, 14). There is nothing in 1 John 3:9 or its context to indicate that the sin a Christian “cannot” do is *willful* or *deliberate* rather than involuntary or impulsive.

7. By saying the sin a Christian “does not” and “cannot” do is to live in a pattern of *continual*, *repeated*, and by implication *unrepentant* sin. This view alone has strong support from the grammar of the passage and the flow of thought in the book as a whole.

### III. The correct answer: *Continual sin*

#### A. Support from the grammar of the passage

##### i. The progressive aspect of the present tense

The sin in view in 1 John 3:9 is *continual* or *repeated* sin. This is evident in the the verbs used in v. 9—each is in the present tense: ποιεῖ, δύνανται ἁμαρτάνειν. In Greek the present tense denotes not action occurring at the present *time*, but action *in progress*.<sup>2</sup> With the imperfect tense, the present tense is part of the imperfective aspect in Greek’s system of verbal aspects. The imperfective aspect (present & imperfect tenses) denotes action “in progress,” the perfective aspect (aorist tense) denotes action “as a single, undivided whole,” and the stative aspect (perfect & pluperfect tenses) denotes action “as a condition or state of affairs.” (Young, 106) So we should expect these verbs in v. 9 to have in view some sort of action in progress. The sense the KJV most naturally conveys in English, then—“doth not [ever] commit [any particular unitary act of] sin”—is not what we should initially expect the Greek to mean.

##### ii. The semantic function of the present tense

Daniel Wallace lists 11 uses of the present tense in Greek, given in *Table 1*.<sup>3</sup> Wallace says it is debatable whether the sense of the present in v. 9 is customary or gnomic. He opts for the gnomic

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2 “The most constant characteristic of the Present Indicative is that it denotes action in progress.” Burton, p. 7.

3 Wallace, 513-539. Young, 105-113, presents a shorter list.

use. Young subsumes the customary under the iterative use and takes the present in vv. 6 and 9 to be customary or habitual. As such both rightly rule out the “narrow-band” uses, because John has a long period in view, which is evident from the two grounds he gives for why the Christian does not sin—the one “born of God” was born in the past (γεγεννημένος and γενένηται are in the perfect), and God’s seed

**Table 1: Wallace’s uses of the present tense**

Narrow-band presents (during a short period)

instantaneous (aoristic or punctiliar)  
progressive (descriptive)

Broad-band presents (over a longer period)

extending-from-past (past action still in progress)  
iterative (distributive)  
customary (habitual or general)  
gnomic

Special uses of the present

historical (dramatic)  
perfective  
conative (tendential, voluntative)  
futuristic  
indirect discourse

“remains” from the time of that birth to the present and indefinitely into the future. Since these two grounds “remain” over a long period of time, so their effect of the Christian “not sin[ning]” must remain for the same long period. The sense of the present must not be the simple progressive present, then, since the progressive present only refers to a short period of time.

That a long period of time is in view is confirmed in the context. “The one committing sin” in v. 8 does so because the devil “is sinning from the beginning.” The devil’s sin is in the present tense, yet clearly has continued from the beginning until now!

The iterative present must not be what John intends in v. 9, because the devil’s sin (which is “from the beginning”), the Christian’s state of being “born of God,” and God’s seed (which “remains”) are each described as *continuing* without interruption from their beginning to the present. The expressions do not indicate *repetition*, but *unbroken continuity*.

The devil’s “sinning” qualifies as an extending-from-past use of the present. The seed *cannot* “remain” in the gnomic (atemporal) sense, because it is not merely *always* or *generally true* that the seed remains (once it was not yet “in him”), but of paramount importance is the fact that it is true *now* that the seed remains. It *really* remained in the *real* (not just *ideal*) past, and will *really* remain in the *real* (not just *ideal*) future. The presence of the seed *now* guarantees the Christian’s

not sinning *now*, in *real* time, and so the Christian's "not sinning" in v. 9 cannot be gnomic.

This leaves the extending-from-past or customary uses. In the above we ruled out Wallace's iterative variant of the customary sense, leaving his ongoing state variant. Both remaining senses express an *unbroken, continuing* activity, and are only distinguishable in regard to whether they indicate a starting point in the past, and so for our purposes we need not decide between the two.

### iii. The use of ποιέω

That a *continual* activity of sinning is in view is also evident from John's use of ποιέω in v. 9. He says that everyone who is born of God ἀμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ. ποιέω is "A multivalent term, often without pointed semantic significance," and here simply means "do, commit."<sup>4</sup> The term indicates that a person engages in the *activity* or *practice* described by the noun "sin" (ἀμαρτίαν). V. 4 equates the activity expressed by the indicative ποιεῖ with the activity expressed by the participle ποιῶν, so we should expect that the verbal aspect of both is most likely the same throughout vv. 4-10. ποιεῖ is combined with ἀμαρτίαν in v. 9. This combination in v. 9 alludes to its prior use in vv. 4 and 8 and a related use in v. 7, all of which use ποιέω's present active *participle* form, ποιῶν, as a substantive. A participle commonly expresses a *continuing* activity; substantive participles do not *necessarily*, but *may*, convey the verbal aspect of their tense. Because even the lexical meaning of ποιέω leans in the direction of an action which is in progress rather than complete, and because it would have been quite natural and simpler for John to use ἀμαρτάνω as a substantive participle, it appears John uses ποιῶν to indicate this activity is *continual* rather than relatively *brief* and *punctiliar* in nature.

### B. Support from the flow of thought in the book as a whole

The *continual* nature of the "sin" in v. 9 is also supported by the flow of thought in the book as a whole. The book of 1 John refutes the three false teachings listed above on p. 3 which each

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4 Danker, 839-840.

deny sin's presence and dire consequence for our life, and it teaches the truth about God and Christ so that we might have "fellowship" (1:3), "joy" (1:4), that we "may not sin" (2:1), and may "know that you have eternal life" (5:13). A chief concern throughout the book is that the Christian should absolutely flee from sin—John teaches this is the moral implication of the apostolic message in 1:5-2:2. To this end John exhorts us to examine ourselves and the false teachers according to three tests: if you are a Christian, you will practice *righteousness*, *love your brother*, and *believe that Jesus is the Christ*. He applies all three of these tests in three cycles in 2:3-5:5, as detailed in the outline in *Table 2*.<sup>5</sup> The result he desires to bring

**Table 2: 1 John: An Outline**

- Theme: How can I know I'm a Christian?
- I. Preface 1:1-4
  - II. The apostolic message and its moral implications 1:5-2:2
  - III. First application of the tests 2:3-27
  - IV. Second application of the tests: If you are born of God, you will: 2:28-4:6
    - A. An elaboration of the moral test: practice righteousness in light of: 2:28-3:10
      - i. Christ's future appearing 2:28-3:3
      - ii. **Christ's past appearing 4-10**
    - B. An elaboration of the social test: love your brother 3:11-18
    - C. A digression about assurance and the condemning heart 3:19-24
    - D. An elaboration of the doctrinal test: believe that Jesus is the Christ 4:1-6
  - V. Third application of the tests 4:7-5:5
  - VI. The three witnesses and our consequent assurance 5:6-17
  - VII. Three affirmations and a concluding exhortation 5:18-21

about is that by applying these tests we will be assured of eternal life and that God hears and grants our prayers (5:6-17), and we will know the truth and reject the false (5:18-21).

The "righteousness" test is applied in 2:3-6, 2:28-3:10, and 5:1-5. In 2:3-6 the expressions "Keep his commandments," "abide in Him," "walk as He walked" are similar to 3:9's "doth not commit sin," and each connotes more a consistent pattern of life than a particular, one-time act. Similar expressions are found in 5:1-5.

That vv. 4-10 in ch. 3 are the unit in relation to which which v. 9 must be primarily interpreted is indicated by the thematic parallel Stott (121) outlines between vv. 4-7 and vv. 8-10:

<sup>5</sup> This outline is modified from that found in Stott, 55.

|                                       | <b>vv. 4-7 – Nature of sin: Lawlessness</b> | <b>vv. 8-10 – Origin of sin: Devil</b>                                        |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Introductory phrase:</i>           | Everyone who sins 4                         | He that sins 8                                                                |
| <i>Theme:</i>                         | The nature of sin is lawlessness 4          | The origin of sin is the devil 8                                              |
| <i>Purpose of Christ's appearing:</i> | He was manifested to take away our sins 5   | The Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil 8 |
| <i>Logical conclusion:</i>            | “No one who abides in Him sins” 6           | “No one born of God commits sin” 9                                            |

Stott rightly points out that the exhortation in 2:28-3:3 is in light of Christ's *second* coming, and the exhortation in 3:4-10 is in light of Christ's *first* coming. As such Wallace's reasoning in support of the gnomic sense on p. 525 cannot be sustained, because the immediate context of v. 9 focuses on *continuing* and *present* realities rather than on our *future* hope:

Thus, the author states in an absolute manner truths that are not yet true, because he is speaking within the context of eschatological hope (2:28-3:3) and eschatological judgment (2:18-19).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In conclusion, we ought to translate 1 John 3:9 as the ESV does: “No one born of God *makes a practice* of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot *keep on* sinning because he has been born of God.” The NAS and NIV translate it similarly. John's point is not that every person who commits *just one brief act of sin* has not been born of God, but that every person who engages in an *ongoing, continual, unabated pattern of sin unbroken by true repentance* has not been born of God. The implication is not that a sinning Christian should believe that he is not saved, but that a sinning Christian should repent of his sin, break the ongoing pattern of sin, and thereupon be assured that he has been born of God and that God's seed remains in him. The Christian should also recognize that a person who claims to be a child of God but does not repent of habitual sin, and does not practice righteousness, is not in fact a child of God. John says as much in 3:10 where he summarizes 2:28-3:10: “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God.”

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