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DOES 1 JOHN 1:9 AFFIRM
THAT *BELIEVERS* SHOULD CONFESS THEIR SINS?

Roger S. Fankhauser, D.Min.

ABSTRACT

The author analyzes 1 John 1:9 to determine whether “confess” addresses the sanctification of believers or the justification of unbelievers. Analysis of the pronouns in 1 John 1 leads to the conclusion that “we” in v. 9 refers to believers. Analysis of the context reinforces this conclusion. The believer confesses (admits to, acknowledges) his or her specific sins, and God forgives that believer. Contrary to the teaching of some, particularly those identified with the so-called “hyper-grace” movement, such forgiveness is not the once-for-all forgiveness coincident with justification, but rather “family” forgiveness for the sins a believer commits which interferes with the intimacy of their day-to-day relationship with his or her Father. This forgiveness allows the believer to restore and enjoy fellowship with God. “Fellowship” is dynamic, that is, growing into or drifting away from fellowship rather than fully “in or out” of fellowship. He challenges his readers' wrong thinking about sin and challenges them to walk in the light (their conduct and thoughts are in accord with God and His character). The confession of sins by the believer as taught by John does not necessitate an unhealthy preoccupation with sin, but rather a healthy awareness that every believer still sins and needs to deal with that sin to fully enjoy his or her fellowship with God.

INTRODUCTION

First John 1:9 makes a very clear statement, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” However, not all agree on who the “we” references. Some understand it as a reference to believers.²⁵ Others take it as a reference to unbelievers.²⁶ Some specifically

²⁵ “The first thing John does as he approaches the subject of sin with his believing readers is stress that believers sin... That God has made a provision for the forgiveness of the believer’s sin is further evidence of the reality of that sin. The believer’s responsibility with regard to his or her sins committed as a child of God is clearly stated in 1:9.” (Robert Lightner, *The Epistles of First, Second & Third John & Jude* [Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2003], 19-21). See also David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: 1 John—Relationship or Fellowship?* (Grace Theology Press, 2013), 53-55; Gary W. Derickson, *First, Second, and Third John: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 107.

²⁶ Akin equates confessing with trusting in Jesus: “Because God has sent his Son as Savior of the world (cf. 4:14), to those who confess their sins by trusting in this Jesus whom God has revealed (taking 1:7 and 1:9 together), God is faithful and righteous to forgive them their sins and cleanse them from all unrighteousness. God is able and righteous in forgiving because these sinners will have confessed their sins and trusted in God’s revelation of eternal life in Jesus his Son, whose death is the basis for forgiveness.” (Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 38, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 75. Kistemaker and Henriksen add, “The statement *we have not sinned* reveals the blatant attitude of the unrepentant, unregenerate infidel. In verse 8 the unbeliever said that he has no sin; now he asserts that he is not a sinner... In the sequence of three verses (6, 8, and 10), the writer works toward a climax: ‘we lie’ (v. 6), ‘we deceive ourselves’ (v. 8), and ‘we make him out to be a liar’ (v. 10)... If we should go so far as to say that we have not sinned, in spite of all the evidence, then the Word of God has no place in our lives. And that means that we are unbelievers who have rejected the gospel of salvation.” (Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of James and the Epistles of John*, vol. 14, *New Testament Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001], 245–248). However, they are not entirely consistent in describing John’s audience as they also write in this same section, “We confess our sins to show repentance and

identify these unbelievers as Gnostics;²⁷ some suggest these unbelievers are Jewish false teachers who deny Jesus is the Christ.²⁸

The former approach understands the passage as a sanctification issue for believers; the latter understands the passage as a justification issue.²⁹ Which view is right? To answer the question, this analysis looks at 1 John 1:9 in its context (1 John 1:1-2:2) and (1) identifies the referent(s) for “we” and “you”; (2) defines “fellowship”; (3) clarifies the meaning of “walking in light and darkness”; (4) determines whether “the blood of Jesus” has any relevance to the post-conversion Christian experience; (5) identifies the referents for “sin/sins” in the passage; clarifies the meaning of both (6) “confess” and (7) “forgive”; and (8) determines the contextual contribution of 2:1-2. This analysis leads to the

renewal of life. We are not told when, where, and how to confess our sins, but daily repentance of sin leads us to continual confession.” These words seem to speak about believers confessing.

²⁷ For example, Hyper-Grace author Andrew Farley writes, “So John opens his letter by attacking two Gnostic heresies: (1) Jesus as nonphysical, and (2) sin as a nonreality... Verse 9 is a remedy for unbelievers who have been influenced by Gnostic peer pressure and are now claiming sinless perfection.” (Andrew Farley, *The Naked Gospel: Truth You May Never Hear in Church*, Kindle Edition [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009], 151-153). See also Bob George, <http://bobgeorge.net/1-john-1-9/>, accessed October 7, 2019, and D. R. Silva, *Hyper-Grace: The Dangerous Doctrine of a Happy God* (Havre, MT: Up-Arrow Publishing, 2014).

²⁸ Brad Robertson, *Forgiven and Cleansed: First John 1:9 in Context* (NP: Gracereach, 2020), 96.

²⁹ In addressing these issues, this article uses the term “justification” to denote initial salvation or deliverance from the penalty of sin. The verb “justify” (δικαίωω, *dikaioō*) does not occur in John’s writing; however, “justification/justified” are common terms used to describe our status the moment we believe. To be justified means to be declared righteous or not guilty by God. It refers to one’s legal standing before God. Thus, even though this is not a Johannine term it serves in this article as a non-technical term for the *position* in Christ of one who has believed in Him.

conclusion that believers should confess their sins; that is, the passage deals with sanctification, not justification.

CHASING THE PRONOUNS

On the surface, “we,” in the phrase “if *we* confess our sins” (1 John 1:9), appears to refer to believers. The progression of the pronouns in 1 John 1:6-2:2 provides contextual evidence to conclude that “we” does refer to believers (emphasis added) :

¹That which was from the beginning, which *we* have heard, which *we* have seen with *our* eyes, which *we* have looked upon, and *our* hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— ² the life was manifested, and *we* have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to *us* — ³ that which *we* have seen and heard *we* declare to *you*, that *you* also may have fellowship with *us*; and truly *our* fellowship *is* with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And these things *we* write to *you* that *your* joy may be full. ⁵ This is the message which *we* have heard from Him and declare to *you*, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If *we* say that *we* have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, *we* lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if *we* walk in the light as He is in the light, *we* have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses *us* from all sin. ⁸ If we say that *we* have no sin, *we* deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in *us*. ⁹ If *we* confess *our* sins, He is faithful and just to forgive *US our* sins and to cleanse *us* from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If *we* say that we have not sinned, *we* make Him a liar, and His word is not in *us*.

^{2:1} My little children, these things *I* write to *you*, so that *you* may not sin. And if anyone sins, *we* have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ^{2:2} And He Himself is the propitiation for *our* sins, and not for *our* only but also for the whole world.

The pronouns in the first five verses are easy to follow. “We” in 1:1-5 clearly speaks of John and the other apostles. Derickson rightfully concludes that

John chooses first person plural verbs throughout this descriptive prologue to describe ... the apostolic band of eyewitnesses, which includes John... Further, John uses the first person singular to refer to himself elsewhere in his epistles [e.g., 1 John 2:1], and so should be seen as fully capable to [sic] doing so here in order to be clear ... [H]is use of “we” is not as an authorial “we” equivalent to “I,” however as the spokesman for a group of eyewitnesses whose experience matches his own. Later this will become significant as he develops his “we” versus “them” distinctions between the apostles and false teachers.³⁰

The “you” in verses two through five represents his readers. So far, no difficulties. The problem arises in verse six where John reverts

³⁰ Derickson, 49–50. He first identified four other interpretations found in the literature for “we” before concluding that this is the best explanation. These four interpretations are: “we” in v. 1-5 refers to John himself as an “authorial plural”; to both John and his readers; to the “Johannine school”; or to “all Christians.” Schreiner affirms that an “apostolic we” is not unique to John: “The ‘we’ here [2 Pet 1:16] stands for the apostles generally... His point was that the churches were founded on apostolic tradition and authority.” (Thomas R. Schreiner *The New American Commentary, Vol. 37, 1, 2 Peter, Jude* [Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003], 312).

to “we.” Is this the same “we” as in 1:1-5; a different composite group defined in context; or a third group entirely? The intended group is clearly defined by the context when John introduces the notion of fellowship, “that you also may have fellowship with us” (1:3). John wants his readers to have fellowship with him and the other apostles, and also with the Father and the Son. We do not have to define the nature of this fellowship to follow the pronouns; whatever it is, John wants his readers to experience it with the apostles. This begins a string of seventeen first-person plural pronouns (“we,” “us,” “our”) in 1:6-10 with no second-person pronouns (“you”). It is thus most logical and consistent with the text to see this second group of first-person plural pronouns representing a group consisting of the initial group (the apostles) plus the second group (“you” = the readers).

John could have accurately written “if we apostles and you” to describe his consolidation of both groups into one “we” in 1:6. Thus, John first speaks of the apostles’ experience and his desire that his readers share the same experience (1:1-4), and he then specifies the truths which must apply to both the apostles (of which he is one, cf. “I” in 2:1) and his readers to satisfy that desire (1:5–2:2).

1 John 2:1 provides another clue that “we” refers to believers and not unbelievers or a mixed group of believers and unbelievers. Here, John addresses his audience as “my little children”—a term of endearment for those whose “sins are forgive.” He then reverts to the second person pronoun “I write to *you* that you may not sin.” This “you” in 2:1 reintroduces his prior distinction between “you” and “we” (1:1-4). His desire for his readers not to sin seems a strange goal for unbelievers whose immediate need is not a change

of lifestyle but a change in position (justification).³¹ John thus distinguishes himself from his readers (“I” [John the Apostle] write to “you” [his readers]), yet he also affiliates with them (“we” have an advocate) as believers in common need of ongoing intercession before the Father (2:1b). This identity is confirmed in 2:1c, where John differentiates “we” from “the whole world” in speaking of Jesus as the propitiation for our sins and also “for the whole world.”³²

³¹ Of course, an unbeliever could read this and realize his or her sinfulness, but that is not John’s purpose.

³² Reformed theologians limit the meaning of “the whole world.” Berkhof writes, “The Reformed position is that Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving the elect, and the elect only. (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938], 393). Grudem agrees:

The fact that God foreknew who would be saved, and that he accepted Christ’s death as payment for their sins only, does not inhibit the free offer of the gospel, for who will respond to it is hidden in the secret counsels of God... this view [‘Particular redemption,’ also called ‘Limited atonement’] also holds that Christ died for particular people (specifically, those who would be saved and whom he came to redeem), that he foreknew each one of them individually (cf. Eph 1:3–5) and had them individually in mind in his atoning work. (Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* [Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004], 595).

By contrast, Anderson summarizes the Unlimited Atonement view (the view held in this article):

That’s why John lets us know in no uncertain terms that the death of Christ not only satisfied God’s anger against my sins and the sins of other believers, but also for the sins of the entire world (verses like John 14:19, 27, 30; 15:18; 16:33; and 17:6–26 should make it apparent that the world includes all unbelievers). That means the work of Christ was so great that it not only was sufficient to satisfy God’s anger against the sins of the believers, but also men like Nero, Hitler, Stalin, and Osama bin Laden. (Anderson, 67).

Carefully following the pronouns in context leads to the conclusion that “we” in 1:6-10 designates a composite group of believers that includes the apostles and is a group distinguished from “the whole world” in 2:2.

THE MEANING OF “FELLOWSHIP”

The meaning of fellowship, and how it is experienced, is central to the understanding of 1 John 1:9. The noun translated as “fellowship” is *κοινωνία* [*koinōnia*]. Of the nineteen occurrences in the New Testament (NT) four are found in 1 John 1:3-7.³³ *Koinōnia* speaks of a shared experience of some kind, a “partnership.”³⁴ Louw and Nida define it as “an association involving close mutual relations and involvement—‘close association, fellowship.’”³⁵ BDAG gives as the primary definition “close association involving mutual interests and sharing, *association, communion, fellowship, close relationship*.”³⁶

How does John use *koinōnia* in First John?

[T]hat which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have *fellowship* with us; and truly our *fellowship* is with the Father and with His Son Jesus

³³ The verbal form *κοινωνέω* [*koinōneō*] appears 8 times in the New Testament, only once in John’s writings (2 John 11).

³⁴ Wendell Johnston, “Fellowship,” in Don Campbell, et al, *The Theological Wordbook* (Nashville: Word, 2000).

³⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 445.

³⁶ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552-53 (hereafter BDAG).

Christ...If we say that we have *fellowship* with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have *fellowship* with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:3, 6, 7)

The first use speaks of John's desire for his readers to have fellowship with "us" (John as a member of the entire apostolic community). The normal sense of *koinōnia* as "close association, fellowship" certainly holds here. John wishes for his readers to enjoy something that he too enjoys, as he defines in the second phrase, "our [the apostles'] fellowship is with the Father and with His Son." While this phrase could conceivably describe their permanent union with God,³⁷ it seems more natural to understand this fellowship as the vitality of their ongoing relationship with God: "We (the apostles) enjoy fellowship with the Father and His Son (experience, not position). We want you to experience fellowship with us at the same level of fellowship we experience with the Father and the Son." In 1:4, John specifies his goal for this fellowship, that "your joy" may be made complete (or "our joy,"

³⁷ Akin sees fellowship in 1 John 1:3 as positional: "This fellowship is dependent on one's reception of life, which is, in turn, dependent on one's believing reception of the Word of life, Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. 'Fellowship' further denotes the 'oneness in community' with other believers, with the Father, and with his Son that results from faith in this Son. Such fellowship for John is, in fact, inseparable from having eternal life: to have eternal life is to have fellowship with the apostolic witnesses who have testified concerning the Word of life." (Akin, 57). Robertson argues that John here "is referring to a common set of beliefs among a group of people that unifies and enables them to enjoy fellowship with each other relationally and with the Father and Son spiritually." (Robertson, 31). However, the New Testament use of *koinōnia* makes either of these understandings highly unlikely.

depending on the textual variant).³⁸ His third use of *koinōnia* occurs in 1:6, contrasting fellowship and walking in darkness: “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” The one who walks in darkness (defined below) and, at the same time claims to have fellowship with Him (God, 1:5) lies and does not practice [present tense] the truth.” Practice (ποιέω, *poieō*) speaks of activity, not of positional truth.³⁹ Doing the truth means to act in accord with the truth, that is, to act in accord with God’s character and will. John’s fourth and final use of *koinōnia* (1:7) connects fellowship and “walking in the light”: “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” In all four instances in 1 John, “fellowship with God” does not refer to one’s justification (position) but rather to the ongoing vitality of a believer’s existing relationship with Him—a conditional intimacy or richer present experience and enjoyment of eternal life.

Some see this fellowship much like an on/off switch. A person is either completely *in* fellowship or completely *out of* fellowship. And if someone is completely *out of* fellowship, the solution is to confess their sins to return to fellowship. However, a

³⁸ In this case, the pronoun does not change the meaning appreciably. Either *John and the apostles* will be filled with joy knowing their readers are experiencing this fellowship, or *the readers’* joy will be fulfilled by sharing the same fellowship with them. In both cases, the emphasis is upon the joy experienced because of this fellowship.

³⁹ “We lie and do not practice [do] the truth” shows that the person’s *words* and *practice* do not align. The combination of “do” (ποιέω, *poieō*) and “truth” (ἀλήθεια, *aletheia*) appears only here and in John 3:21. “The idea of ‘doing truth’ is unique to John among the New Testament writers. Though the verb ποιέω is commonly used throughout the New Testament with a wide range of meanings, when John uses it conceptually he describes a quality of conduct” (Derickson, 97).

better picture sees fellowship more dynamically, more like a “dimmer switch.” Think of “full bright” as perfect intimacy with God (“walking in the light”). Most believers fall between “fully on” and “fully off.” A believer is either growing closer to God (turning up the dimmer switch) or moving away from God (turning down the dimmer switch).⁴⁰

Several New Testament examples support this concept of dynamic fellowship. In Revelation 2–3, John depicts the spiritual state of seven churches. Several of these churches demonstrate movement away from healthy intimacy with God. For example, Jesus tells the church at Ephesus that they have left their first love (Rev 2:4).⁴¹ To leave one’s first love implies that the church *had* a first love. And the text implies that this departure was not sudden but gradual. He commends them for some good they continue to do (2:2-3) but exhorts them to “remember from where they have fallen.” Thus, they have “turned the dimmer down.” The church in Laodicea is told they are neither hot nor cold (both useful conditions), but rather “lukewarm.” Becoming lukewarm easily fits the idea of a gradual change. Cold water warms to a lukewarm temperature; hot water cools to a lukewarm temperature; both

⁴⁰ What follows describes the process as “gradual.” For purposes here, it simply means “over time.” Nothing is implied about how much time is involved. Some believers drift slowly away; others walk away in a way that seems almost instantaneous on the surface. The dimmer switch analogy fits all these cases, as a physical switch can be used to change the lighting slowly or rapidly.

⁴¹ Granted, John addresses the churches in Rev 2–3 corporately. However, the corporate response of the church reflects cumulative individual responses within the church. A church cannot corporately “leave their first love” if individuals within the church do not do so. Although he does not use the word “fellowship” within Revelation, the individual actions and attitudes he describes fit the basic criteria for fellowship or intimacy. Thus, the passages certainly illustrate the “dimmer switch” concept proposed here.

changes happen through a gradual process. Jesus tells this church that “those whom I love I reprove and discipline, therefore be zealous and repent.” This description affirms that this is a genuine church (i.e., they are believers). He then tells them that He stands at the door and knocks and promises that He will dine with any who respond and they will dine with Him (3:19-20). In the Bible, sharing a meal consistently fits the idea of close fellowship (e.g., Acts 2:42, 46).

The idea of a gradual departure from fellowship is also portrayed in Hebrews.⁴² The author tells his readers and himself “For this reason [referencing chapter 1] we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not *drift away from it*” (2:1). The word translated “drift away” (παρρηῶ, *pararreō*) means “to gradually give up one’s belief in the truth.”⁴³ This is not an “on/off” move; it is a dimmer switch, gradually moving away. On the positive side, increasing levels of fellowship are implied when James commands his readers to draw near to God, promising that He will draw near to them (Jas 4:8). Peter also encourages his readers to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). The NT pattern is one of either growing in faith and thereby increasing intimacy (fellowship) with God or drifting away and thereby decreasing intimacy (fellowship) with God.

⁴² Hebrews speaks volumes concerning the danger of drifting away, hardening one’s heart, the need to deal with ongoing sin in the life of a believer, and the potential severity of God’s discipline towards his sinning children. The book demonstrates that God does see and address the sin of his children, who positionally have experienced complete forgiveness of all sin. However, further discussion of this correlation with First John is beyond the scope of this article.

⁴³ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 374.

This view seems to contradict 1 John 1:6-7 (above) where John’s words sound more absolute and thus do not seem to fit the “dimmer switch” analogy. However, John’s use of a literary device explains the apparent, but not real, contradiction:

A characteristic of John’s writing style involves his use of antithesis, or dualistic imagery. His dualism is expressed in the themes of light versus darkness, love versus hatred/murder, and children of God versus children of the devil... John likes to divide the world into two opposite groups or effects with no intermediate options being offered... the reader will find himself or herself unable to fit honestly into either category. Thus the “either-or” world created forces the reader into introspection and evaluation. That John does not see the world from this [“either-or”] perspective is evident in his discussion of sin in the life of the believer... This can be seen in his reassurances for his readers of their relationship with God in 2:12–14, their confidence before God even when they feel they have failed the test of love in 3:20, as well as his purpose of their assurance of salvation in 5:13.⁴⁴

WALKING IN LIGHT / WALKING IN DARKNESS

What does it mean “to walk?” In the NT, “walk” consistently pictures ongoing activity, not a position secured at a point in time. The term “walk” (περιπατέω, *peripateō*) when used non-figuratively means “to go here and there in walking, *go about, walk around*” or

⁴⁴ Gary W. Derickson, *First, Second, and Third John*, ed. H. Wayne House, W. Hall Harris III, and Andrew W. Pitts, *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 34–35.

when used figuratively, “to conduct one’s life, *comport oneself, behave, live.*”⁴⁵

John addresses two spheres in which a person can walk: darkness or light. The metaphorical use of light and dark is common throughout the Bible. John uses the imagery extensively in both his Gospel and his First Epistle. In his Gospel, John identifies Jesus as the light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5); in 1 John, “God is light” and “in Him is no darkness at all” (1:5). Depending on the biblical context, “light” and its functions can refer to absolute purity (1 John 1:5), illumination of the way of righteousness (Psalm 119:105, John 3:21, 8:12), illumination of sin (John 3:19-20), or illumination of one’s spiritual state (John 1:5, 9). Light speaks of life and purity; darkness, by contrast, speaks of death and impurity. The “darkness” of sin is revealed by the purity of the light. In other words, if light speaks of God and His character, darkness speaks of anything contrary to God and His character, including death, sin, and evil. So:

walking in the darkness = conduct/thoughts contrary to God;
 sinning; doing evil; experiencing death; ignoring or
 loving the darkness; becoming less like Jesus
 walking in the light = conduct/thoughts in accord with God;
 doing good; experiencing life; responding when
 “darkness” is revealed; becoming more like Jesus

Is it possible for a believer to “walk in darkness?” Absolutely. While many biblical statements concerning one’s walk state the positive (e.g., “walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called” [Eph 4:1] and “now you are Light [position] in the Lord; walk

⁴⁵ BDAG, 803. See also Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 504.

[practice] as children of Light” [Eph 5:8]), many others sound warnings to avoid practices characterized by darkness. For example, Paul includes admonitions such as “no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind” (Eph 4:17) and do not “participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness” (Eph 5:11).

The point of these passages and others like them is that the believer is fully capable of walking *contrary* to their new, true identity, *contrary* to God’s character. Thus, the believer is fully capable of “walking in darkness.” John, like Paul, desires that the believer not live his life in darkness but in accordance with who God is and his or her identity in Christ (“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,” Eph 5:1).

HOW DOES “THE BLOOD OF CHRIST” APPLY TO AN AUDIENCE OF ALREADY-JUSTIFIED BELIEVERS?

John affirms that the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7), and that “He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). He then describes the extent of this atonement: “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (2:2). Is this terminology regarding Christ’s blood in 1:7-9 necessarily limited to the event of justification, or could it have some relevance to the believer’s walk? The New Testament speaks of believers cleansing themselves. James does not explicitly speak of the blood as the cleansing agent, but he conceptually supports the idea that John is not speaking of justification but rather the believer’s walk in 1 John 1:7-9:

Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. *Cleanse* your hands, you sinners; and *purify* your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. (Jas 4:7-9, emphasis added)⁴⁶

He commands the readers (believers) to purify their hearts. This purification has nothing to do with one's position in Christ, one's acceptance by God, or the positional forgiveness of sin. Rather, it deals with the "dirt" one picks up in the normal walk of life.

The narrative of John 13:3-11 depicts precisely the kind of cleansing of believers John had in view in 1 John 1:7-9. Foot-washing models the servant leadership Jesus expects of His disciples. Jesus warns the disciples that they would not understand what He was doing at the time, but the event establishes the future prerequisite for their servant leadership. He also uses the act to teach a crucial truth about the position vs. the practice of the disciples. He uses three terms in John 13 to make His point, *νίπτω* (*niptō*), meaning "to wash a part of the body,"⁴⁷ *λούω* (*louō*), meaning "to wash the body,"⁴⁸ and *καθαρός* (*katharos*), meaning "pertaining to not being dirty"⁴⁹ or "pertaining to being ritually clean or pure"⁵⁰:

He who has bathed [*λούω*, *louō*]
needs only to wash [*νίπτω*, *niptō*] his feet,

⁴⁶ Some may object to believers here being called "sinners" and thus think this appeal applies to unbelievers. However, the focus here is on the believer's practice, not identity. A sinning believer is, in practice, a sinner!

⁴⁷ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 522.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 522.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 698.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 535.

but is completely clean [καθαρός, *katharos*];
and you are clean [καθαρός, *katharos*], but not all of you
[referencing Judas].

The disciples who are already clean (justified) needed their dusty feet washed as an illustration of dealing with daily sin. “Clean” (καθαρός, *katharos*) pictures positional truth. Every believer is clean (justified) the moment he or she believes and does not need such cleansing again. However, the physical washing of their dusty feet pictures the practical cleansing of sin as the believer lives out his or her daily life. As Ryrie summarizes:

Just as in natural life a man who is bathed needs only to wash the dust off his sandaled feet when he returns home, so in the spiritual life a man who has been cleansed from sin need not think that all is lost when he sins in his walk through life. He need only confess those sins to be entirely clean again (1 John 1:9).⁵¹

What does a forgiven believer do when he or she sins? The blood of Christ covers not just the need for initial (positional) forgiveness contingent with justification, but the practical need of keeping the heart clean in order to live well. Thus, references to the death of Christ in the context of First John do not limit the

⁵¹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Th.D., Ph.D., *The Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Translation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 1626, on John 13:10. Constable agrees: “God cleanses us at conversion in the sense that He will never bring us into [eternal] condemnation for our sins. However, we need continual cleansing from the defilement that daily living brings because it hinders our fellowship with God (cf. John 13:10). The ‘blood of Jesus’ is a metonymy for the death of Jesus” (Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* [Galaxie Software, 2003], on 1 John 1:7).

associated cleansing by Christ's blood to the singular event of one's initial salvation.

IDENTIFY THE INTENDED REFERENTS OF "SIN" AND "SINS" IN 1 JOHN

In 1 John, the author uses the word "sin" 27 times (noun, ἁμαρτάνω [*hamartanō*], verb ἁμαρτία [*hamartia*]), ten of the 27 in the verbal form. Note the references to sin/sins in 1 John 1:7–2:2 (emphasis added):

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all *sin* [noun, singular]. If we say that we have no *sin* [noun, singular], we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our *sins* [noun, plural], He is faithful and just to forgive us our *sins* [noun, plural] and to cleanse us from *all unrighteousness*. If we say that we have not *sinned* [verb], we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not *sin* [verb]. And if anyone *sins* [verb], we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our *sins* [noun, plural], and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

John used both singular and plural forms of the noun (ἁμαρτάνω *hamartanō*). Is John addressing our *capacity* to sin or *specific* sins? The answer is "both," but with emphasis on the specific sins. The singular noun points to our capacity for sin, regardless of how one

defines that capacity.⁵² Every person – including every believer – has this inherent “capacity for sin,” and it is this capacity that generates specific “sins.” Here, the plural form points to individual sins, as it does consistently throughout the NT.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR BELIEVERS TO “CONFESS”?

The key issue in 1 John 1:9 centers on the phrase “if we confess our sins,” εὐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἀμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν (*ean homologōmen tas hamartias*). The verb “confess” (ὁμολογῶ, *homologeō*) means “to say the same thing [as God].”⁵³ When a

⁵² Some argue the believer has no sinful nature. For example, Farley argues that the believer does not have one (equating the sinful nature with the “old man”), but that he or she struggles against the flesh. Farley denies the Greek word for flesh (*sarx*) connotes anything sinful or anything about the believer’s nature. Instead, he sees sin as a “parasite” housed in the Christian’s body, within that person but not that person. (Farley, 110-121). He does acknowledge that “regardless of one’s view on this issue, the point is that there’s a sin principle within the physical body.” (p. 119). For a similar view, see also David C. Needham, *Birthright: Christian, Do You Know Who You Are?* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1999).

Others understand that the believer still possesses a sinful nature. Radmacher rightly notes, “The sin nature, then, was not removed; it was nullified or rendered inoperative. Our ‘old man’ or the other man was ‘crucified with Him.’ The ‘old man’ is what we were in our depraved, unregenerate state without the life of God. That person is gone forever, crucified with Christ. But the ‘body of sin’ was not crucified; it was ‘made of no effect.’ It has lost its power in our lives.” (Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), 67.

⁵³ BDAG (708–709) defines ὁμολογῶ (*homologeō*) with the following range of meaning: (1) to commit oneself to do something for someone, *promise, assure*, (2) to share a common view or be of common mind about a matter, *agree*, (3) to concede that something is factual or true, *grant, admit, confess*, (4) to acknowledge something, ordinarily in public, *acknowledge, claim, profess, praise*.

person “confesses” something, he or she honestly acknowledges that which is confessed. The context defines what is confessed. First John uses “confess” five times (1:9, 2:23, 4:2, 4:3, 4:15). In all but 1 John 1:9, that which is confessed is Jesus and some aspect of His identity. However, that does not necessarily define what is confessed in 1:9. The context must make that definition. Here, the object is clearly stated: our sins (τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν). As noted above, the plural “sins” denotes our *specific sins*; thus, “if we admit/acknowledge/agree with God about these sins, God promises a relational, family forgiveness” (defined below).

The if/then construction, “If we confess our sins, [then] He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” is a third-class conditional, that is, it speaks of a probable future condition. It could be paraphrased, “Perhaps we will confess our sins, perhaps we won’t. But more than likely, we will.” In the context of 1 John 1:9, it seems best to think of the present tense of “confess” as iterative. If, while walking in the light (1:7) a believer sins (1:6, 1:8, 2:1) and then confesses (honestly acknowledges that sin), the apodosis takes effect. The confession is neither “once for all” nor “continual.”⁵⁴ Rather, it is iterative; confessing whenever one realizes he or she sinned or is willing to deal with an ongoing sin issue).

Many of those who disagree that John wrote this verse for believers offer a caricature of the “confession is for believers” view. They claim it relegates the believer to continually scouring his past and present life, searching for unconfessed sins.⁵⁵ However, John’s

⁵⁴ The Greek present tense is often abused by not carefully considering the ten or more options for its use in any given context (see Daniel B. Wallace, *New Testament Greek Syntax* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009]).

⁵⁵ “If you really believe that you need to confess all your sins to be forgiven, do you know what you would be doing? You would be confessing your sins ALL THE TIME! How then can you have courage before God? How can you

primary purpose is not a morbid preoccupation with “sin searching.” Every believer still possesses a sinful nature that can and will generate both known and unknown sins (implied by the phrase “cleanses us from *all* sin,” 1:7). We must know how to deal with such sin to enjoy fellowship with God. Thus, walking in the light will expose that sin and challenge us to “agree” that we indeed sinned so we can continue (or start again) to walk in the light.

Thus, confession is not mere lip service. By acknowledging that one has sinned, the one confessing recognizes the seriousness of that sin. As David confessed, “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight” (Psalm 51:4a).⁵⁶ This fact exposes the disconnect should anyone think, “I am free to sin and then simply confess it. God will forgive me.” The meaning of *homologeō* (ὁμολογέω), as John uses it in 1 John, requires an agreement at the heart level.

enjoy liberty as a child of God? I tried it and it is impossible!” (Joseph Prince, *Destined To Reign*. [Tulsa, OK: Harrison House Publishers, 2007] Kindle Edition, location 1631, emphasis his). “Confessing-to-be-forgiven is like washing with dirty water. No matter how hard you scrub you won’t make yourself clean. Faithless confession puts the focus on you and what you have done, but faith-based confession puts the focus on Christ and what He has done on your behalf.” (Ellis, Paul. *The Hyper-Grace Gospel: A Response to Michael Brown and Those Opposed to the Modern Grace Message*, [NP: KingsPress, 2014], Kindle Edition, location 721).

⁵⁶ The concept of sin against God is timeless: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

WHAT KIND OF FORGIVENESS IS IN VIEW?

Does a forgiven Christian need forgiveness? Some say “no,” arguing that the believer is forgiven once for all and that the Bible only speaks of one dimension of forgiveness for this age.⁵⁷ Others answer “yes,” arguing that forgiveness can relate to position *or* practice—relationship *or* fellowship. The range of meaning for the most commonly used Greek terms for “forgiveness” or “forgive” allows for both of these options. The context defines the intended sense. “In the New Testament two words are used to express the concept of forgiveness: *aphiemi*, ‘to send away, to let go,’ and *charizomai*, ‘to show favor, to pardon or forgive.’”⁵⁸ Of these, ἀφιῆμι (*aphiēmi*) is the most prevalent (49 of the 77 occurrences of “forgive” in its various forms in the NASB; the noun form, ἄφεσις [*aphesis*], accounts for another 15 occurrences). Paul rarely uses the term forgive (fourteen times in nine verses in the NASB, using *aphiēmi* only once, *aphesis* twice, and χαρίζομαι [*charizomai*] eleven times). The vast majority of occurrences of “forgive” in the New Testament occur in the Synoptics (52 of 77 occurrences in the NASB); John uses the word only four times, all four using *aphiēmi* (twice in John 20:23, 1 John 1:9, 1:12).

⁵⁷ Andrew Farley says, “At first glance, this well-known verse [1 John 1:9] appears to muddy the waters concerning once-for-all forgiveness. In many books and articles on the topic of forgiveness, this verse often serves as the foundation on which the author’s belief system is constructed. Either we’ve been forgiven, or there’s a condition for us to be forgiven. Theologians and Christian authors will often agree with John that ‘your sins have been forgiven on account of [Jesus’] name’ (1 John 2:12). But later you find them essentially saying that confession is needed to cause God to forgive you. The problem is that both statements can’t be true at the same time. Either we’ve been forgiven, or there’s a condition for us to be forgiven.” (Farley, 149).

⁵⁸ Wendell Johnston, “Forgiveness,” in *Theological Wordbook*.

The positional forgiveness⁵⁹ of the believer by God is a one-time act coincident with justification. Thus, Paul says we are forgiven (χαρίζομαι, *charizomai*) all trespasses (Col 2:13). If John means *this* aspect of forgiveness in 1 John 1:9, then, of course, he is not referring to post-conversion sins committed by Christians. However, the semantic range of the act of forgiveness in the NT (especially *aphiēmi*) includes meanings other than the believer's positional standing before God.⁶⁰ The context must define the kind of forgiveness in view. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says:

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not

⁵⁹ Various terms are used to describe this forgiveness vs. the type of forgiveness in 1 John 1:9 defended in this article. Anderson uses the terms fellowship vs. relationship; judicial vs. personal (Anderson 54-55). Constable uses forensic forgiveness vs. family forgiveness; conversion (forensic) forgiveness vs. continual (family) forgiveness (Constable, on 1 John 1:9). Derickson uses positional forgiveness (justification reality) vs. daily forgiveness (sanctification reality) (Derickson, 1 John 1:9). Hodges contrasts the perfect position a Christian has in Christ with familial forgiveness in 1 John 1:9 (Zane C. Hodges, “1 John,” in vol. 2, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985], 885-886). This article uses the term “positional forgiveness” for that which happens contingently with justification and family forgiveness or relational forgiveness for the type seen in 1 John 1:9.

⁶⁰ The verb *aphiēmi* appears 143 times in the New Testament. The lexicons give it a wide range of meanings; it is not a technical term referring only to judicial forgiveness. Abbott-Smith breaks the meanings into three broad categories, “to send forth, send away, let go,” (under which he includes forgiveness); “to leave alone, leave, neglect, forsake”; and “to let, suffer, permit” (G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), s.v. ἀφίημι. See also BDAG, 156; Louw and Nida, vol. 2, 40.

forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” (Matt 6:12-14)⁶¹

There is a connection between an individual’s forgiveness of others and the Father’s forgiveness of that individual. In both phrases that speak of the Father’s forgiveness, the verb is in the future tense. Thus, His forgiveness is *subsequent* to the forgiving of others. This immediately creates a problem: if this is speaking of *positional* forgiveness before God, then that forgiveness is conditioned upon an act on the part of the individual; that is, it depends upon some work. Plus, forgiving others implies something that occurs repeatedly in life (see Matt 18:21-22). It is likely a person will encounter multiple people during his or her life that needs forgiveness. Thus, either (1) this forgiveness from God is not the same as the positional forgiveness a person receives from God, *or* (2) the passage does not apply to the church age, and thus has no relevance to the issue of forgiveness in 1 John 1:9.⁶² The former

⁶¹ Each use of “forgive” in this passage translates *aphiēmi*.

⁶² Since the teaching of Matthew 6 took place during the dispensation of the Law, can we apply Jesus’ words to the church age? While it is true that the events of the gospels do occur “under law,” to dismiss them as having no relevance is overly simplistic and denies that we can apply anything from the Old Testament (OT) without putting us back “under law.” Whenever the law is cited in the Gospels, we need to ask *how* the author intended to handle the OT issue. The teaching may be:

- Adopted directly. For example, Paul quotes Exodus 20:12 in Eph 6:2 (“Honor your father and your mother”) in support of the command for children to obey their parents in the Lord.
- Modified for a unique application. For example, in the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus gave His disciples a “new” commandment – to love one another (John 13:34). The Law included the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). The command to love others was not new; the scope and depth was new. Instead of loving others “as yourselves,” they were to love even as Christ loved them.

seems far more likely than the latter. However, the interpretation of 1 John 1:9 does not rise or fall on whether or not one agrees on the applicability of this passage to the church age.

If we are positionally forgiven for every sin the moment we believe in Jesus, then in what sense does a Christian need forgiveness? The believer never again faces the issue of his or her positional forgiveness, which is settled coincident with justification, but he may face the issue of *family* forgiveness. My son is forever my son; nothing can ever change that. Biologically, he is mine, just as we are God's children by adoption as sons (Gal 4:1-7). His position as my son and my position as God's adopted son are independent of behavior. But my son sometimes did things he should not have done ... given me “the look” ... hit his brother ... argued with us ... goofed off in class. He experienced consequences resulting from those choices. While we were not as close during those times (“dimmer switch”), I still loved him; he still loved me. Yet the practical relationship (“family fellowship”) between us changed. Once he admitted to me that he messed up (sinned), I forgave him and we could again grow closer together in our relationship (relational forgiveness). That confession had nothing to do with his position as my son, nor my love for him; it served to

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- Abrogated. For example, the OT dietary restrictions are no longer applicable.

At least three contextual clues imply that this passage *does* apply to us: (1) Teaching within the Sermon on the Mount should not be ascribed solely to the Old Covenant. While commentators differ as to the exact relationship between the Sermon and the church, few limit it entirely to the era of the law and therefore completely irrelevant. (2) The primary audience of the sermon were disciples (Matt 5:1-2). Arguably, the vast majority of His disciples were already believers at this point, given that the events of John 1–5 occur between Matt 4:11 and 4:12. (3) The idea of “forgive others and God will forgive you” does not appear in the OT explicitly. Thus, it is a new concept introduced within the Sermon.

stop our drift away from each other and allowed us to restore our relationship. James 5:14-15 provides an example of a brother who receives forgiveness for his sins:

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven [*aphiēmi*] him.

The verbs “will raise him up” and “will be forgiven” designate future actions, thus they occur *after* the prayer of faith. James 5:12 describes this group as “brethren,” thus the sick person is a believer. As a believer, this person is already positionally forgiven. Yet, this forgiven brother still needs forgiveness in practice.

John uses the word “forgiven” again in 1 John 2:12: “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake.” The question is: If this use of “forgiven” refers to our position (“positional forgiveness”), how can it also mean “family forgiveness” in 1:9? Whereas the first occurrence of a word in the text normally demonstrates the author’s subsequent intent for that word, the context may show evidence of a change in the intended meaning in the logical flow. Such a change *does* exist between 1:9 and 2:12. The verb “forgive” (*aphiēmi*) in 1:9 is in the aorist tense; in 2:12 it is in the perfect. The perfect tense denotes completed action in the past with results that continue to the present. This fits the idea of positional truth: we have been forgiven every trespass at the moment of salvation, and that position is secure. However, the aorist signifies “action expressed by the verb as a simple event or fact, without reference either to its

progress or to the existence of its result... The time of the action, if indicated at all, is shown, not by the tense, but by some fact outside of it.”⁶³

Thus, the perfect tense conveys an ongoing state resulting from a past event; the aorist simply points to an act itself without reference to an ongoing state. The relational forgiveness in 1:9 (aorist) refers to an act that can be repeated in time because of the believer’s position gained by his or her once-for-all positional forgiveness in Christ—a state that continues up through the present into the future, as indicated by the perfect tense in 2:12. We are positionally forgiven (2:12) as a permanent foundation for our confidence to then “abide” in Christ relationally (1 John 2:28–5:21).

THE BROAD SCOPE OF CHRIST’S “ADVOCACY” IN LIGHT OF SIN, 1 JOHN 2:1-2

This relational forgiveness in 1 John 1:5-10 is guaranteed by the assurance of 2:1-2:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

John writes “these things” (looking back to 1:5-10) to “my little children” (believers) so that they would not sin. Yet he also acknowledges that as believers they *will* sin: the probable future

⁶³ Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3rd ed. (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1898), 46–47.

condition “if anyone sins” coupled with 1:10 (“If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar”) points to the inevitability of sin in the believer’s life.⁶⁴

Those who sin have (present tense) an “Advocate with [πρὸς, *pros*] the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” John uses πρὸς (*pros*) four times referencing the unique, intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father.⁶⁵ Jesus fulfills His role effectively as an advocate based on his perfect fellowship *with* the Father. The term “Advocate” (παράκλητος, *paraklētos*) is rare in the NT; it is used only by John, only here of Christ, and only here outside of John’s Gospel. Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as *paraklētos* four times in the Upper Room Discourse (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7), describing him as “another helper” like himself (John 14:16). The term means “one who appears in another’s behalf, mediator, intercessor, helper.”⁶⁶

Jesus’ as *paraklētos* describes His acting as an intercessor rather than as a defense attorney.⁶⁷ The believer’s position is secure as

⁶⁴ This does not mean, however, that the believer has no power over sin nor that he/she should simply give in to it. In fact, just the opposite is true. Paul makes clear in Romans 6-8 and Galatians 5 that we have the ability through the Holy Spirit to be victorious over sin. This victory comes as the believer “walk[s] by the Spirit” (Rom 8:2, Gal 5:16).

⁶⁵ In John 1:1-2, the Word (Jesus) is said to be with (*pros*) God. In 1 John 1:2, John writes that eternal life (Jesus) is with (*pros*) the Father, and in 1 John 2:1, he writes that the Advocate (Jesus) is with (*pros*) the Father. In all of these verses, “[Pros] presents a plane of equality and intimacy, face to face with each other” (Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. V [Nashville, TN, Broadman Press, 1932], 4).

⁶⁶ BDAG 766. Louw and Nida add that “the principal difficulty encountered in rendering παράκλητος is the fact that this term covers potentially such a wide area of meaning” *Greek-English Lexicon*, 141-2.

⁶⁷ Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher note that *paraclete* “literally means ‘one called to the side of another’ with the secondary notion of counseling, supporting, or aiding. Though it was rarely used as a legal term, ‘Paraclete’ means more than a defense lawyer. In fact, such a use of the term is rare in

permanently justified the moment he or she believes (e.g., 1 John 2:12; John 5:24; Rom 5:1; Col 1:13) so Jesus is not pleading to preserve his or her justification in light of subsequent sin. Rather, sin in a believer's life necessitates a High Priest to intercede on his or her behalf, precisely as affirmed in Hebrews 4:12-16 and Romans 8:33-34. The most iconic depiction of Jesus' role as advocate is found in John 17 where Jesus prays that the Father might keep all who believe from the evil one (17:15), sanctify them in the truth (17:16), and perfect them in unity (17:23).

Jesus's finished work on the cross guarantees His post-conversion intercession for the believer: He is the propitiation (ἱλασμός, *hilasmos*) for our sins (1 John 2:2). This term occurs only here and in 4:10.⁶⁸ The author of Hebrews uses the related word ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*) in Hebrews 9:5 to denote the mercy seat within the Holy of Holies. (9:12) and Paul uses this same term in Rom 3:24-25 to describe Jesus: “[B]eing justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation [ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*)] in His blood through faith.” The use of ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*) and related terms in the NT is linked to the Old Testament concept of the Day of Atonement, one specific day per year when the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies (Lev 16:29). The priest sacrificed one goat as a sin offering and, after confessing all the iniquities of the people over it, released a second goat into the wilderness (Lev 16:5, 7-10, 15-19). The release of this second goat

the extra-biblical literature... As a legal term it referred more to the friend who goes to court with the defendant than to a professional advisor or attorney.” (*The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus* [Salem, OR: Charis Press, 2001], 123.)

⁶⁸Two related terms are used two times each as well: ἱλάσκομαι (*hilaskomai*) in Luke 18:13 and Heb 2:17; and ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*) in Rom 3:25 and Heb 9:5.

portrays the removal of sin from the people.⁶⁹ The Day of Atonement covered all the sins⁷⁰ of all the people of Israel.⁷¹ God is thereby dealing with the entire nation *as a redeemed people*.⁷²

However, in addition to the Day of Atonement, which covered the people's sins for one year, the law also provided sacrifices for the people to deal with day-to-day sins. Leviticus 1-7 describes the practices of offerings for both unknown sins (4:1–5:19) and known sins (6:1-7). Since Jesus fulfills every aspect of the OT sacrificial system, His past work on the cross and ongoing work as High Priest sufficiently provide for both positional forgiveness, paralleling the Day of Atonement, and the daily cleansing of family forgiveness, paralleling the burnt, sin, and peace offerings (Heb 2:17-18).

This raises the question of the scope of Christ's propitiatory work. Scripture often links Christ's death with God's justice.⁷³ As Jesus hung on the cross, "darkness fell upon the land" for about three hours followed by Jesus' cry, "My God, my God, why have you

⁶⁹ This is the idea implicit in Psalm 103:10-12, "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us."

⁷⁰ Attested by the phrases "all their sins" (Lev 16:16), "all the iniquities," "all their transgressions," "all their sins" (16:21), and "all your sins" (16:30).

⁷¹ Attested by the phrases "all the assembly of Israel" (Lev16:17) and "all the people of the assembly" (16:33).

⁷² The Law was never the basis for justification (e.g., Gal 2:16, Rom 4:1-8). The Day of Atonement provided "unlimited atonement" for the nation of Israel since all the sin of all the assembly was propitiated. That does not mean every Jew was a believer; Romans 4 makes it clear that before and during the era of the law, justification was only by faith. The sacrifice was sufficient for all, but only those who believed were saved.

⁷³ See, for example, Rom 4:25, 5:8, 8:3, 1 Cor 5:7, 2 Cor 5:21, Gal 1:4, Eph 5:2, 1 Pet 3:18.

forsaken me?” (Matt 27:45-46, Mark 15:33-34, Luke 23:44-45). The Book of Hebrews refers repeatedly to Jesus' sacrifice for sin (7:27, 9:26, 28, 10:10, 12, 14). This is the event described by Paul in 2 Cor 5:21a, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.” Perhaps Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant gives the most graphic picture of God’s justice being poured out on Jesus:

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed ... the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted... By oppression and judgment He was taken away ... But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering... (Isa 53:4-10)

Clearly, *hilasmos* in Rom 3:24-25 and Heb 9:5 includes satisfying God’s justice. But the term *hilasmos* seems to communicate more than just satisfaction. Elsewhere in the Bible, the removal of sin includes the removal of legal guilt (e.g., John 1:29, 1 John 3:5). Both parties—God and man—benefit from Jesus being the *hilasmos*. God’s justice is satisfied; man’s guilt is removed.

This may be another instance of a Johannine *double entendre* in which he intends ἱλασμός to include both senses. Jesus’ ministry in heaven provides both expiation and propitiation. Thus [the] choice of “atonement” allows for the

ambiguity desired by John that communicates the full scope of Jesus' work to be included.⁷⁴

Jesus' death is sufficient to satisfy God's just requirement for any and all people ("the whole world," 2:2). A person who believes is declared righteous (justified), a permanent change in their legal standing before God. Some have erroneously asserted that as a result of this change in position that God will never deal harshly with His children when they sin; they do not see these sins as a family matter to be addressed with a view toward correction and reconciliation.⁷⁵ They then conclude 1 Jn 1:9 cannot be for believers. However, even though God's just demands against sin are permanently satisfied, God still corrects sinning believers as a loving Father, as explained by the writer of Hebrews:

and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES'" (Heb 12:5-6).

⁷⁴ Derickson, *First, Second, and Third John*, on 1 John 2:2.

⁷⁵ Farley writes, "If we miss the message of the gospel, it holds no power to alter natural mind-sets that control us. Partial forgiveness provides partial relief from guilt but breeds an unhealthy fear of judgment. Real forgiveness means that the sin issue is over. Real forgiveness means that there's no present or future punishment for sins. Jesus' death satisfied God forever. And there's nothing about us that will ever anger him again: 'When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit' (John 19:30). (Farley,143).

Notice that this discipline comes from the hand of a loving God.⁷⁶ The response of God toward a sinning son is different than the response that requires legal satisfaction for sin. The latter was satisfied at the cross; the former moves God to act in the life of His child with the intent of producing “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb 12:11).

God desires that His children walk in the light (1 John 1:5-10, cf. John 3:21; 12:36). Thus, when they fail to do so (“walk in darkness”), God is free to train them as a loving Father rather than condemn them as a judge. Jesus’ sacrifice fully satisfies God’s justice; His position with the Father ensures His effective role as an advocate on the children’s behalf. So the believer can have absolute confidence that when he or she confesses their sin—no matter how grievous—Christ’s propitiatory blood cleanses them every time from all contamination by sin and “realigns” them, in their fellowship with Him, with the Father’s righteous character (1 John 1:7, 9; 2:1-2).

CONCLUSION

Whether or not fellowship is John’s primary purpose for the entire book of 1 John does not appreciably change the interpretation of this section which clearly addresses fellowship. John says he desires his readers to have fellowship with him, that

⁷⁶ This is Christ’s admonition to those in Laodicea, that those whom God loves, He reproves and disciplines (Rev 3:14). Similarly, Paul teaches that the Word of God is “profitable... for reproof and correction” (2 Tim 3:16). “Discipline” translates παιδεία (*paideia*), which means “to punish for the purpose of improved behavior—’to punish, punishment” (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 489); “the act of providing guidance for responsible living, upbringing, training, instruction... chiefly as it is attained by discipline, correction” (BDAG, 748).

John's and the other apostles' fellowship is with the Father and with the Son (1:3). Thus, he wants his readers to fully enjoy both horizontal fellowship and vertical fellowship (1:4). This fellowship speaks of something more than entering into a saving relationship with Jesus; it addresses the closeness of one's relationship with God. This closeness is not an "on/off" relationship; instead, it resembles a dimmer switch—the believer either moves closer to or falls farther from God.

John then makes a statement describing God's absolute purity "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1:5). Darkness speaks of death, impurity, and sin. He follows this with three erroneous statements "we" might make and offers a solution for each problem.⁷⁷ As noted in the first section of the article, the use of pronouns identifies "we" as the readers plus John (and presumably the rest of the apostolic community):

Error one: If we say that we have fellowship (closeness, intimacy) with Him and yet walk in the darkness (consciously indulging in conduct and thoughts at odds with God's revealed character, i.e., sin) we lie and do not practice the truth (our claim does not match our conduct; therefore, we are lying), 1:6.

Solution one: But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light (our conduct and thoughts are in accord with His righteous character), we have fellowship (closeness, intimacy) with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (Jesus' blood is sufficient not only for absolute positional forgiveness but also for cleansing the believer from the day-to-day

⁷⁷ This discussion of these three errors and their solutions borrow heavily from, although not exclusively from, Dr. David Anderson's work on 1 John (Anderson, 50-69).

dust which collects on one's feet when he or she does sin as a believer), 1:7.

Error two: If we say that we have no sin (that is, we are free from both the capacity to sin as well as actual sins), we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us (as in 1:6, our claim does not match the truth), 1:8.

Solution two: If we confess (admit/acknowledge) our sins (*specific* sins as we become aware of them), He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins (a relational or family forgiveness, not positional forgiveness) and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (which addresses any unknown sin, thus this temporal cleansing covers both those sins we know about and those we do not), 1:9.

Error three: If we claim we have not sinned (specific sins) we make Him a liar (because as light He has clearly exposed certain deeds as “darkness” or “evil,” John 3:19-20) and His word is not in us (what we say is contrary to His word, so it is not actively in us. In a sense, we put it on the shelf and ignore it), 1:10.

Solution three: if anyone sins (implied, we will), we need not deny we have sinned for we have an Advocate (mediator, intercessor) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, 2:1, who can wipe out all contamination from sin that might tarnish our reflection of the Father's righteous image, 2:2.

ANSWERING SOME CHALLENGES TO THIS VIEW

Q 1: Some dismiss 1 John 1:9 as relevant for believers because, they say, John was addressing Gnostics, not Christians.

A 1: It is not entirely clear who were the false teachers that John addressed.⁷⁸ Some claim they were Gnostics since John begins this epistle affirming the reality of Jesus coming “in the flesh” and the reality of sin in the lives of his readers.⁷⁹ However, Gnosticism did not rise to prominence until the second century. Most of the information we have concerning Gnosticism comes from documents written long after 1 John was written.⁸⁰ So, history does not side with John addressing unbelieving Gnostics as his primary audience.

However, for the sake of argument, assume that, as it appears, some proto-Gnostic teachings crept into the church, and John wrote in part to address those errors.⁸¹ This assumption does not necessitate that his audience be unbelievers. Galatians supports this logic, where Paul

⁷⁸ “It is probably a mistake to attempt to systematize the thought of the heretics whom John opposed in this letter. According to his own statements, he had ‘many’ false teachers in view (2:18; 4:1). There is no reason to think that all of them held exactly the same views. The ancient Greco-Roman world was a babel of religious voices, and it is likely that the readers were confronted by a variety of ideas. Still, the heretics had in common their denials of the person of Christ, though they could have done so in different ways. On the basis of 2:19 it may be suggested that they had originated chiefly in Judea. But beyond this little can be said with certainty about the exact nature of the heresy or heresies that gave rise to John’s epistle.” (Hodges, 880-81.)

⁷⁹ See footnote 3.

⁸⁰ C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 92-119, Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 46-51.

⁸¹ Cerinthus, a contemporary of John and an example of one such proto-Gnostic teacher, “taught that Jesus was only a man and that the divine Christ descended on Jesus at His baptism and left Him before the Crucifixion.” (Hodges, 880-881.)

addresses the problems brought in by Judaizers. He does not assume his audience consists of unbelievers, but rather confused believers. The same is true in 1 Corinthians, where Paul addresses several pagan practices that crept into the church. Descriptions of the Corinthian audience indicate he does not assume his audience consists of unbelievers, but rather confused believers. This same logic fits 1 John: Even if John is addressing Gnostic influence, he does not assume his audience consists of unbelievers, but rather confused believers. Concluding that 1 John 1:9 does not apply because John is addressing unbelieving Gnostics glosses over the text.

Q 2: If “confession” is so important for believers, why did Paul not address it? Didn’t that leave the church in a quandary since 1 John was one of the last books written?

A 2: We must always be careful asking questions like, “Why didn’t Paul say...” Here is what we can clearly say: Paul did not tell his readers, in these exact words, to confess their sins. He nowhere commands believers to confess as the means of receiving family forgiveness nor unbelievers as the means of receiving justification.⁸² However, neither did Paul say anything about abiding in Christ. Nor did John use the term, justification. Each author chose the words he used to convey the message he intended to convey. The early church was not protected primarily by the written word but rather by the apostolic community until the written word was complete. That the church did not have in writing “if you confess your sins”

⁸² Paul does use the verb *homologeō* four times in his writings (Rom 10:9-10, 1 Tim 6:12, Titus 1:6). In none of these verses does he say “confess your sins.” Some use Romans 10:9-10 as a justification verse, but, even if that were true, Paul there says to confess Jesus as Lord, not to confess one’s sins.

until the mid 90's is no less (and no more) problematic than the church not having Romans until the late 50's.⁸³ As the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) demonstrates, the early church dealt with problems as they arose. Seemingly, the problem of denying one's sinful actions (or more fundamentally, one's sinful capacity) had not risen within the church to the point of requiring a written record, and thus Paul had no reason to address it directly. We do not know what the apostles communicated verbally, only what they wrote in the Scriptures. John likely wrote about this problem when he did because it, whether proto-Gnostic thought or some similar error, did not need to be addressed in any earlier inscripturated writing.

Paul implicitly allowed room for confession when he spoke of repentance (2 Cor 7:9-10; 12:21, 2 Tim 2:25).⁸⁴ Repentance means "change of heart, change of mind."⁸⁵ To change one's mind implies an admission of their error. He also allowed room

⁸³ If John wrote this letter prior to AD 70, as some hold, the time-gap issue is even less problematic. (Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John* [Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999], 23).

⁸⁴ "The apostle writes [in 2 Cor 7:10] that godly sorrow produces repentance *leading* to salvation. While many take *salvation* as a reference to regeneration, that does not fit the context. Paul is writing of the repentance of people already born again. *Salvation* here refers to deliverance from the deadly consequences of unrepentant sin, not only in this life, but also before the Judgment Seat of Christ (cf. Luke 15:11-24)." (Dwight L. Hunt, "The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin [Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010], 795.)

⁸⁵ For other interpretations of the meaning of repentance, see "Appendix - Free Grace and Repentance" in Grant Hawley, ed., *Free Grace Theology: 5 Ways It Magnifies the Gospel*, 2nd ed., (Allen, TX: Bold Grace Ministries, 2016), 169-177. This appendix gives a brief overview of the traditional view of repentance plus four views of repentance held by various Free Grace authors.

in his numerous statements that communicate “Do not do these sins, instead, act like this” (e.g., Eph 4:17-24). John more explicitly commands confession, probably in response to the error that some claimed they have no sin and/or have not sinned.

The idea of confession is not unique to 1 John. David says, “I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ And You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah” (Psalm 32:5). Proverbs 28:13 says, “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.” The details surrounding confession may change (e.g., the NT does not require any animal sacrifice), but the concept of confession transcends the Law.

Q 3: Wouldn't confession of sin lead to a preoccupation with sin instead of enjoying freedom in Christ?

A 3: Not necessarily and, when confession in 1 John 1:9 is properly understood, it should not. Throughout the book, John has a strong emphasis on abiding in Christ and loving one another as God loves us. In other words, he wants his readers to maximize the experience of their eternal life here and now. When a believer in the process of walking in the light stumbles and sins, John says, “Confess it—agree, admit, acknowledge it—then move forward.” He wants the reader's preoccupation to be with Jesus, not sin.

Q 4: What if I do not confess everything?

A 4: On the one hand, sin we are unaware of is covered in the phrase, “cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Thus, when we acknowledge our sins, we have a clean slate. On the other

hand, if I knowingly sin and refuse to acknowledge it as sin, I am still walking in darkness, thus moving away from God rather than closer to Him.

