

Do Christians Sin? A response to pseudo Christianity

The Problem

At first glance when you study 1 John 3, you come across some perplexing passages.

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him (1 John 3:6)

No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. (1 John 3:9)

Does this mean that a Christian who sins isn't really a Christian? If you sin after your conversion or baptism, does this mean that you really aren't saved? How much can a Christian sin and still stay a Christian?

Fortunately, the John did not write this letter to condemn Christians who may have sinned, because in the prior chapters of his same letter he writes:

If we say that we have not sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

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. (1 John 2:1-2)

So what was the John writing about? What did he mean? How can the John say that Christians don't sin?

Possible Explanations

Many brilliant theologians, Bible scholars, and Greek linguists have been grappling this problem for centuries. There appears to be four major schools of thought, which are all possible and defended by each group.

1) Mortal Sin View

Some interpreters view 1 John 3:6, 9 within the context of 1 John 5:16-17.

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness of sin, and there is a sin not leading to death. (1 John 5:16-17)

Because the John is referring to two types of sin, "a sin that leads to death" and "a sin that does not lead to death," these commentators believe that 1 John 3:6, 9 is saying that the true Christian does not commit the "sin that leads to death", but may commit other types of sin.

This viewpoint goes further to debate distinctions about sin: voluntary verses involuntary, mortal (sins that cost a person's soul) verses venial, etc., which are Roman Catholic distinctions.

However, there are two problems with this view:

- 1) 1 John 3:6, 9 and 1 John 5:16-17 are far apart making it difficult to understand how these verses provide context for each other.

Do Christians Sin?
A response to pseudo Christianity (page 2)

2) 1 John 3:6, 9 speaks of sin in a more absolute sense than about different types of sin.

2) New Nature View

Other commentators see 1 John 3:6, 9 as a statement of the old and new nature of Christians. Christians do not sin as an expression of their new nature, which is sinless and incapable of sinning. John is exhorting Christians to abide in Christ and their new nature. When Christians fail to abide in Christ, their old nature sins as the Apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 7:17.

So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. (Rom 7:17)

This tension is seen in Ephesians 4:22-24.

that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Eph 4:22-24)

But there are two concerns with this view:

1) 1 John 3 does not explicitly refer to or elaborate on old and new natures, so this distinction may not have been intended.

2) This view does not fit the force of the argument that John is taking here.

3) Habitual Sin View

Another interpretation is centered on the *present* tense of the term “sin” in 1 John 3:6, 9, which in Greek gives a verb a continuous tense. These commentators see the verses translated as:

*No one who lives in Him **keeps on sinning**. No one who **continues to sin** has either seen Him or known Him (NIV 1 John 3:6)*

*No one who is born of God **will continue to sin**, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. (NIV 1 John 3:9)*

From this perspective, John is making the statement that while non-Christians sin habitually, true Christians, who are characterized by holiness, do not. Christians may sin occasionally but not in a repeated and habitual manner.

However, there are disagreements with this view:

1) When the Greek grammatical present tense is used to refer to a continuous sense, there would be other terms to reinforce the context as seen in similar uses in the New Testament. For example, 1 John 3:6 would need to say something like: “Christians do not sin *repeatedly* or *daily*.” Without the assistance of additional terms, the grammatical present tense of a verb is not strong enough to mean a continuous sense.

Do Christians Sin?
A response to pseudo Christianity (page 3)

This point is still open to debate. Some scholars have shown that there are clear examples of present tenses in the NT that did convey the habitual sense without clarifying words.

2) This exact present tense form of “sin” is found in 1 John 5:16; but, translators did not translate the verb in a continuous sense.

*If anyone sees his brother **commit a sin** that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that.* (NIV 1 John 5:16).

Scholars have noted that John may alternate between present and aorist tenses for purely stylistic purposes. For this reason, relying on the distinction of tenses alone is not considered a strong method of making the argument of habitual sin.

4) **Absolute Sin View**

This view takes into account the purpose and context of the entire letter of 1 John. Instead of making a theological statement, 1 John 3:6, 9 is part of an argument against two types of false teachers within the church. This view will be elaborated in the discussion in The Context of 1 John.

The problem with this view is that John does not distinguish what type of group of false teachers he is addressing.

The Context of 1 John

While the author does not identify himself, the author of 1 John is believed to be the Apostle John. Some have argued that this was authored by John the Elder who was a disciple and friend of John the Apostle, and who relied on the Apostle's direct testimony. In any case, the letter's vocabulary and writing style is similar to the book of John and is believed to be of the Apostle John whether directly or indirectly from him. 1 John is believed to be addressed to the churches of Asia.

During the first century, a new teaching was formulating in Asia Minor that blended Eastern Mysticism (the knowledge of god was achieved through some form of enlightenment than ordinary perception) with Greek dualism (the spirit was good and physical matter was evil). In the second century this would develop into a theological system called Gnosticism.

Gnosticism addressed the matter of sin in two ways:

1) The existence of sin was irrelevant.

This group understood that the human body was evil and nothing could be done to change it; so they allowed the flesh to fulfill its lusts. But the human soul was separate and independent, and its spirit communed with God. Because the soul was detached from the flesh, it never suffers the consequences of sin; thus, this group of people believed that a person can participate in all kinds of sinful behavior.

2) The existence of sin was denied.

This group chose asceticism while in the pursuit of inner enlightenment. In separating themselves from the contamination of the physical world, these people believed that sin did not exist in their setting, they were beyond sin.

Do Christians Sin?
A response to pseudo Christianity (page 4)

1 John 3:3-10 is addressed to both of these groups of pre-Gnostic pseudo Christians, and by following his logic, John's strong statement against moral indifference can be seen.

Verse 3: *And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*

The verb "purifies" occurs only once in the New Testament in John 11:55, where the verb is used within the context of ritual purification for the Passover. In the Greek Old Testament (LXX), this same Greek verb is used in Exodus 19:10 and Numbers 8:21 where the Israelites purified themselves before coming in the presence of the Lord. Thus within the context of 1 John 3:2, John is reminding Christians that for those who hope to come in the presence of the Lord, they need to live a purified lifestyle as Jesus did when he was on earth. This was a stark contrast to what pre-Gnostics were promoting; John was saying how you live your present life matters.

Verse 4: *Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.*

In the LXX, the Greek term "lawlessness" was in reference to the breaking of the Mosaic Law. In the New Testament, John was likely referring to the violation of Jesus' command to "love one another" (John 13:34-35). The prominent theme in the whole letter of 1 John was love for the Christian brethren, and the one charge that John makes of the "antichrists" (1 John 2:18) is their sin of withdrawing from the community and refusing to love (1 John 3:17). In associating sin with a violation of God's commandments, Paul establishes the seriousness of sin. This too was in contrast to pre-Gnostics who taught that the existence of sin was denied or irrelevant and perfectly fine to practice.

Verse 5: *You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.*

The Greek text and context make a clear reference to Jesus, and John sees Jesus as the Lamb of God whose purpose was to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). This reflects the seriousness of sin; it could only be atoned for through divine intervention. The pre-Gnostic teachings on sin denied the necessity and very purpose that brought Jesus Christ to earth.

Verse 6a: *No one who abides in Him sins;*

Verse 6b: *no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.*

While this verse has prompted a variety of interpretive solutions because of its suggestion of a sinless state of perfection for the Christian, when taken as absolute terms, verse 6 forms an argument that is analogous to a disjunctive syllogism. From this perspective, it would be imperative to have the two premises in stark contrast to each other, and these distinctions were intentionally made by John.

Premise 1: Everyone who abides in Christ don't sin

Premise 2: Everyone who sins, doesn't know Christ

The deductive logic is clear to the church that John is writing to: either they are abiding in Christ or they are clearly not. The contrasts are intended to sharpen the distinctions between Christians from pre-Gnostic pseudo Christians.

Do Christians Sin?
A response to pseudo Christianity (page 5)

Verse 7: *Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous;*

Verse 8: *the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.*

It seems that pre-Gnostic pseudo-Christian teachers, who promoted the freedom to sin, denied their guilt and yet claimed righteousness. Verse 7 and 8 form another argument that is similar to a disjunctive syllogism. Again stark contrasts are used to increase the force of John's words and further distinguish Christians from pre-Gnostic pseudo Christians.

Premise 1: Everyone who practices righteousness is righteous just as Christ is righteous.

Premise 2: Everyone who practices sin is of the devil.

The deductive logic: if you do not live a righteous life like Christ, you are of the devil and deceitful. Pre-Gnostics were the very opposite of what they represented themselves to be, and Christ came to destroy their work.

Verse 9:

*No one who is born of God
practices sin,
because His seed abides in him; and
he cannot sin
because he is born of God.*

Verse 9 is a chiasm and like verse 6, it has been the subject of many interpretive debates. The term "born," which is mentioned twice, is in the perfect, passive, indicative form. In using the perfect grammatical form of "born," John indicates that this is a single act that has a continuous presence.

In his arguments against the pre-Gnostic pseudo Christians, John makes his point at the inflection point of the chiasm: *His seed abides in the Christian*. While it is not clear what the "seed" is, various commentators have thought it to be the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, Scripture or new nature. In any case, John's statement places an importance on the human body. This is in stark opposition to pre-Gnostics who taught that the human body was evil and nothing could be done to change it.

John is saying: because His seed abides in the Christian (his body), he does not or cannot practice sin!

Verse 10: *By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.*

Paul concludes his theme of contrast between the children of God and the children of the devil and transitions into the next subject of his letter:

The children of the devil do not practice righteousness nor love the bretheren.

This statement sums up what Paul's condemnation of the pre-Gnostic pseudo Christian who advocate a life without license or by asceticism.

Do Christians Sin?
A response to pseudo Christianity (page 6)

John never says that Christians cannot sin; Christians do sin. And various commentators have harmonized this by way of the New Nature or Habitual Sin View. However, it is possible that John was not speaking in a strict theological sense but rather in a rhetorical sense to sharpen the contrast of his opponents while both rebuking them and reasserting basic theology about the nature and purpose of Jesus Christ.

References:

1. Youngblood RF, Bruce FF, and Harrison RK eds., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers (1995).
2. Kaiser WC, Davids PH, Bruce FF, Brauch MT, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Chicago, IL: Inter-Varsity Press (1996).
3. Stott JR, *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing (1996).
4. Walvoord JF and Zuck RB, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, Wheaton, IL: Victor Books (1985).
5. Bible.org, *NETBible*, Dallas, TX: Biblical Studies Press (1996-2007).