

‘SIN UNTO DEATH’ IN 1 JOHN 5:16:  
AN INVESTIGATION AND APPRAISAL OF THE PROBLEM WITH A MIND TO THE  
SOLUTION

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Hebrews-Revelation

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Spring, 2016

It is commonly recognized in scholarship that 1 John 5:14-17 is one of the most contested passages in the Johannine corpus, and, as such, a variety of positions have been produced in order to ascertain the exact import of it. Most unclear is v. 16 of this passage, which seems to suggest that believers should not pray for certain people, namely, those who commit the “sin that leads to death” (ESV). Thus, it is the purpose of this paper to provide an exegetical analysis of 1 John 5:16, giving attention to its immediate context, the broader theological and literary structure of the First Epistle of John, and, other NT passages which shed light on this difficult verse.

## **I. Overview of Competing Understandings of the ‘Sin unto Death’**

In this section, we will look at competing understandings of the ‘sin unto death’ in 1 Jn 5:16, noting strengths and weaknesses along the way. This overview will be noticeably brief since the exegetical analysis which follows will more clearly substantiate the best understanding of the verse. Helpful for our purposes, Brown sets forth the competing understandings of the ‘sin unto death’ under four main headings:<sup>1</sup> (1) different types of *petitions*; (2) different types of *punishments*; (3) different types of *sins*; and (4) different types of *people*.

### **A. Different Types of Petitions**

In essence, this view argues that John’s teaching in 5:16 is a command to pray for brothers who are “committing a sin not leading to death” (ESV) whereas he is not commanding or is ambivalent<sup>2</sup> about praying for those committing ‘sin unto death.<sup>3</sup> The strengths of this view is that it rightly recognize that prayer is at the forefront of the passage and that *αἰτήσει* in v. 16b has an imperatival sense,<sup>4</sup> yet, the assertions that *αἰτέω* (v. 16b) and *ἐρωτάω* (v. 16d) are not

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John: Translated with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (AB 30; Garden City, N.Y.: 1982), 612-618. Subsequent italics added. These headings subsume under them a variety of positions which share the same basic approach to the question, so, while we will use the singular ‘view’ it is recognized that this is, at times, a synthesis of various nuances of interpretation under a particular heading.

<sup>2</sup> Judith M. Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Know Press, 2008), 226.

<sup>3</sup> Randall K. J. Tan, “Should We Pray for Straying Brethren?: John’s Confidence in 1 John 5:16-17” *JETS* 45 (2002): 599-609 (608-609).

<sup>4</sup> Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 202.

synonymous<sup>5</sup> and that *ἴνα* (v. 16d) is purposive<sup>6</sup> fail on exegetical grounds. Moreover, as Brown rightly notes, this view, generally, is attempting to mitigate the uncomfortable prospect that John is commanding believers not to intercede for some,<sup>7</sup> which has implications for how one understands the ‘sin unto death.’ But, against this, Thompson persuasively demonstrates that, at times, intercession was prohibited or restricted (1 Sam 7:3-9; Jer 7:16-18; cf. Jn 17).<sup>8</sup>

### B. Different Types of Penalties

Here, an emphasis is placed on the penalty for the sin, namely, death. Some take this penalty to denote physical death, drawing from numerous passages where physical death is a penalty (e.g., Num 18:22; Deut 22:25-26; Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 11:27-32).<sup>9</sup> Others understand the penalty as referring to spiritual death.<sup>10</sup> The strength of this view is that it recognizes that sin does have a penalty; yet, especially the physical death understanding is misplaced for there is no indication in the Johannine corpus that physical death was in view as a penalty for sin.<sup>11</sup> The spiritual death understanding is more persuasive since it rightly recognizes that *θάνατος* in the Johannine corpus primarily denotes spiritual death, which is the penalty for sin, but, it fails to give an adequate explanation of problems surrounding 1 Jn 5:16.

### C. Different Types of Sins

Under this heading, it is argued that the crucial difference between *sin μὴ πρὸς θάνατον* and *πρὸς θάνατον* is the gravity of the latter. This takes a variety of forms which we will note briefly. First, some see this as a clear case of the Roman Catholic moral/venial distinction, but

<sup>5</sup> Paul Trudinger, “Concerning Sins, Mortal and Otherwise. A Note on 1 John 5:16-17,” *Biblica* 52 (1971): 541-542 (542).

<sup>6</sup> Tan, “Pray for Straying Brethren?,” 606. Unless otherwise stated, English Scripture citations will be taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (ESV) and Greek NT Scripture citations from NA<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 614.

<sup>8</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, “Intercession in the Johannine Community: 1 John 5.16 in the Context of the Gospel of John and Epistles of John,” in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin* (ed. Michael J. Wilkins and Terence Paige; JSNTSup 87; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 237-242.

<sup>9</sup> Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God’s Love* (Irving, Tex.: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 233. Cf. also W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 139-140.

<sup>10</sup> The majority of scholars see ‘death’ as spiritual here. Cf. e.g., Irvin A. Busenitz, “The Sin unto Death,” *MSJ* 1(1990): 17-31 (29-30); Karen Jobes, *1, 2 and 3 John* (ZECNT 19; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2014), 234; and David M. Scholer, “Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by his Former Students* (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), 235.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Epistles of John*, 614; Scholer, “Sins Within and Sins Without,” 235.

there is no indication that such a distinction was present in the early church.<sup>12</sup> Second, some argue that ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον denotes the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit,<sup>13</sup> the so-called unforgivable sin (Matt 12:32; Mk 3:29), yet, the lack of explicit connection to this in 1 Jn 5:16 militates against such a view.<sup>14</sup> Third, some argue that this refers back to the deliberate/unintentional sin distinction in the OT (Lev 4:1-3; Num 15:22-31),<sup>15</sup> yet, like the prior option, there is no indication of this in the passage under view.<sup>16</sup> Fourth, some argue that ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον denotes sins so grave that they are unable to be forgiven which can include murder, idolatry, apostasy and others.<sup>17</sup> Fifth, some argue that it refers to persistence in sin leading to death.<sup>18</sup> This fifth articulation is the most persuasive argument under this heading, especially when it is noted that the lack of a definite article in the phrase ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον points to a state of sin rather than a specific kind;<sup>19</sup> therefore, we will look at this argument in more detail below.

#### **D. Different Types of People**

This view suggests that there are two types of people in mind in 1 Jn 5:16, namely, those who commit a sin “not leading to death” (v. 16a) and those who commit a sin “that leads to death” (v. 16d). In other words, the “brother” (v. 16a) is the person committing the former, whereas a non-brother, likely the secessionists (2:19), have committed the latter.<sup>20</sup> The strength of this view lies in the fact that it best explains the connection of the ‘sin unto death’ to the rest of 1 John and indeed the Johannine corpus. This is the position we will be arguing for in this paper as we move forward, interacting with the three above noted headings but giving more

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Epistles of John*, 615

<sup>13</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (rev. ed.; TNTC 19; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 191.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher D. Bass, *That You May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John* (NAC Studies in Bible and Theology 5; Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2008), 171; Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 308.

<sup>15</sup> A. E. Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (ICC; Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1994), 146.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, *Epistles of John*, 617; Scholer, “Sins Within and Sins Without,” 233-234.

<sup>17</sup> Tertullian, *Pud.* 2.14-16; 19.26-28, cited in Brown, *Epistles of John*, 616.

<sup>18</sup> Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 310-311; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC 51; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1984), 297-298; and, Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 141.

<sup>19</sup> Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 297; Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 307.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Epistles of John*, 618; Bass, *That You May Know*, 173; John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John* (SP 18; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002), 317; Paul A. Rainbow, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles, and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014), 343-344.

specific attention to distinguishing this view from that which identifies ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον with a persistent state of sin leading to death.

## II. Exegetical Analysis

### A. Lexical-Syntactical Analysis of 1 Jn 5:14-17

The initial καὶ in v. 14 connects it back to v. 13 where John states his purpose for writing this letter, i.e., the attainment of eternal life by believing in the son of God. The first clause of v. 14 references ἡ παρρησία that believers have before God (πρὸς αὐτὸν), with the second clause, marked by ὅτι,<sup>21</sup> forming a conditional sentence which provides the ground of ἡ παρρησία of the believer; therefore, this conditional sentence does not denote uncertainty but rather a logical connection.<sup>22</sup> If (ἐάν) the believer prays for (αἰτώμεθα) anything κατὰ τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ, with αὐτοῦ referring to God, then ἀκούει ἡμῶν. Καὶ (v. 15) continues the line of thought with a second conditional sentence, which supports, or amplifies, the conditional in v. 14.<sup>23</sup> The appearance of a chiastic structure<sup>24</sup> strengthens the reinforcing relationship of v. 15 to v. 14:

**A** ἐάν τι αἰτώμεθα (5:14b)  
**B** ἀκούει ἡμῶν (5:14c)  
**B'** ἀκούει ἡμῶν (5:15a)  
**A'** ὁ ἐὰν αἰτώμεθα (5:15b)

The presence of the middle voice αἰτώμεθα with indicatives does not seem to suggest a change in nuance,<sup>25</sup> but rather, the middle voice serves to mark off the chiasmus.<sup>26</sup> If we believers know

<sup>21</sup> What Bruce G. Schuchard (*1-3 John* [Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, Miss.: Concordia Publishing House, 2012], 554) considers a clause of indirect discourse.

<sup>22</sup> Because this conditional is ἐάν + subjunctive, it is a third class conditional. Yet, because of the lack of uncertainty, given John's purposes, it best fits a logical connection or "present general condition" with the subjunctive being present because of the uncertainty of τι (cf. Jn 11:9). Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 696, 698.

<sup>23</sup> The combination of ἐὰν with the indicative οἴδαμεν has occasioned some discussion, especially given the relative rarity of the construction. There are two possible explanations. First, some suggest that ἐὰν is replacing εἰ, thus forming an "indicative of reality ... 'if ... really'" (BDF, §372.1a; cf. H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957), 245). Second, the presence of the indicative οἴδαμεν in the apodosis may mean that John used the same form to highlight the connection between 5:15a and 5:15b (Martin M. Culy, *1,2, 3 John: A Handbook on the Greek Text* [Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2004], 134; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 610) This seems more likely when one considers the chiastic structure mentioned above, but not to the point of ruling out the first option.

<sup>24</sup> Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 555; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 609.

<sup>25</sup> Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 554; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 295.

<sup>26</sup> Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 555, n. 59.

that he ἀκούει ἡμῶν, then we know that we ἔχομεν τὰ αἰτήματα ἀ ἡτήκαμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ (lit: the requests which we have requested from him). In sum, believers have (ἔχομεν) confidence before God because he answers their prayers.

When we come to v. 16, a noticeable shift occurs with a move from a discussion about prayer in general to a more specific situation, namely, prayer for a brother (or, more personally, τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ) ἀμαρτάνοντα ἀμαρτίαν, a cognate accusative and Semitism.<sup>27</sup> V. 16a-b marks the third occurrence of a conditional sentence in this passage, which, like the previous ones, does not denote uncertainty but rather a logical connection.<sup>28</sup> In the apodosis, John give a mild imperative (αἰτήσει) for brothers to pray for fellow-brothers which they see (ἴδῃ) sinning, and, by doing so, the one sinning will be given (δώσει) life (ζωήν). The subject of δώσει ('he will give') has been debated, with some seeing it as having the same subject as αἰτήσει, whereas others see the subject as God.<sup>29</sup> Given that God has been the implied subject in vv. 14-15, it seems reasonable to think that he is here as well. The plural dative ἀμαρτάνουσιν is in apposition to αὐτῷ in v. 16b, the placement of which may serve a rhetorical function.<sup>30</sup>

It is worthy of note that αἰτήσει and δώσει are joined together, applying the basic principle of assured answers to prayer in vv. 14-15 to intercession on behalf of a sinning brother. Yet, there seems to be some qualifications to the effectiveness of this intercessory prayer. The conditional sentence of v. 16a-b is framed by μὴ πρὸς θάνατον; and, in v. 16c-e, John seems to be making a parenthetical digression from the main topic. Here, mention is made of ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον, which contrast with ἀμαρτάνοντα ... μὴ πρὸς θάνατον (v. 16a). ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον is not definite, which suggests that it is not referring to a specific sin (e.g., murder) but a state of sin.<sup>31</sup> After mention of the sin πρὸς θάνατον, he adds a qualifying statement in v. 16d-e: ἐκείνης refers back to ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον, and οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης modifies λέγω,<sup>32</sup> with the clause ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ expressing the content of the verb λέγω rather than having a purposive

<sup>27</sup> Painter, *1, 2 and 3 John*, 315; Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 306.

<sup>28</sup> Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 233. There may be a slightly different nuance here though as opposed to the other conditional sentences in this passage since John uses the mild imperative αἰτήσει; that is, there is a hortatory element to his teaching in this passage.

<sup>29</sup> The majority of commentators see God as the subject. Cf. e.g., Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 300; Jobes, *1, 2, and 3*, 234; Painter, *1, 2 and 3 John*, 315.

<sup>30</sup> Culy, *1,2, 3 John*, 135; cf. Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 559.

<sup>31</sup> Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 307; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 297.

<sup>32</sup> Tan, "Pray for Straying Brethren?," 603; Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 236.

function.<sup>33</sup> Therefore v. 16d-e it can be rendered: “I am not speaking concerning that [that is, sin unto death] that he should ask.” V. 17 concludes this passage with John’s assertion that πᾶσα … ἄμαρτία ἔστιν … ἀδικία but (καὶ) not all sin is πρὸς θάνατον.

Taking this all together, some further observations can be made. It is clear that the main thrust of this passage is to give additional confidence to believers by way of answered prayers. This then brings John to the specific application of praying for sinning brethren, that is, those whose sin is μὴ πρὸς θάνατον (v. 16a). Conversely, there is no reason to think that ἄμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον (v. 16c) is that of a brother; rather, John uses the impersonal ἔστιν<sup>34</sup> to introduce this. Before we make further observations about this particular subject, it is important to recognize where John is going with this passage. In v. 17, he reminds the reader that all ἀδικία is sin yet there is sin οὐ πρὸς θάνατον. John’s point here is that sin is serious; which explains his injunction for intercession on behalf of the sinning brother, whose sin can be observed (ἴδῃ, v. 16a). What is accomplished by this intercession is the perseverance of the brother; the attainment of a future, eternal life with God.<sup>35</sup>

John takes pains to distinguish this brotherly sin from that unto death, which is indicated by his emphasis on the sin μὴ (οὐ) πρὸς θάνατον (vv. 16a-b, 17b). Moreover, he urges prayer for a sinning brother but does not urge such prayer for ἄμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον, with the synonym ἐρωτάω (v. 16d) being used in place of αἰτέω (v. 16b). This further weakens the case for a connection between τὸν ἀδελφὸν (v. 16a) and the ‘sin unto death.’

At this point, we recall the various understandings of the sin unto death. That which emphasizes prayer does not interpret properly the ἵνα clause in v. 16d nor does it sufficiently explain the passage. Although there is a digressional nature to the ‘sin unto death’ discussion, to suggest that it is merely subordinate to the broader teaching on prayer does not do justice to John’s teaching in the passage. The penalty view of ‘sin unto death’ also falls short, although clearly penalty is at least partially in view by way of spiritual death (θάνατος). The view that ‘sin unto death’ is referring to a state of persistent sin has not yet been ruled out. Clearly, John is concerned with sin and with making the above noted distinction; which is thus far consistent

<sup>33</sup> Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*; Wallace (*Greek Grammar*, 475) calls it the “Direct Object Clause.” Contra Tan, “Pray for Straying Brethren?,” 606. Cf. Painter (*1, 2, and 3 John*, 316) who considers it to have an epexegetical function.

<sup>34</sup> Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 559.

<sup>35</sup> Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 234. She writes, “... it expresses the reassurance that sin that does not lead to death will not disqualify a sinning believer from eternal life when they pass from this life” (234).

with the ‘persistent sin’ view discussed above. So, in order to make a case for our view that ‘sin unto death’ refers to a particular kind of sinner—the secessionists—will require a look at 1 Jn 5:14-17 in its broader contexts, and it is to this that we now turn.

### B. 1 Jn 5:14-16 in the Context of 1 John

1 Jn 5:16-17 belongs to the broader concluding section of the epistle. This is indicated by the purpose statement of v. 13 (cf. 1:4; 2:1). The concluding section of the epistle is split into two sections: vv. 13-17 and vv. 18-21. Some see v. 21 as disjoined from this section,<sup>36</sup> but we will offer some brief reasons to include it.

Turning then to the content of the concluding section, we see thematic continuity with the rest of the epistle. Already, in v. 13, this is the case. The theme of “eternal life” (sometime “life” [5:16]) is prolific in 1 John (5:13b; cf. 1:2; 2:25; 3:14-15; 5:11). Moreover, belief in the Son of God, in Christ, is a common theme (5:13a; cf. 3:23; 5:1; 5:5; 5:10). 5:14-21 also picks up on themes in the epistle such as assurance (vv. 14-15; cf. e.g., 2:3-5, 13-14, 21, 29; 3:2; 3:18-19); and sin (vv. 16-17, 18; cf. e.g., 1:7-10; 2:1-2, 12; 3:5-6, 8-9). Therefore, we would suggest this concluding section summarizes and recapitulates, and, in turn, reemphasizes John’s teaching in the rest of the epistle.

The horizontal dimension to John’s teaching (cf. e.g., 2:10; 3:10-11, 14, 16, 18, 23) in 1 John is again reiterated in 1 Jn 5:16. Believers are urged to pray for a brother they see sinning. Praying for the brethren is an aspect of brotherly love and an application of the general principle to loving others (cf. 3:17), which explains the occurrence of the imperative future *aitήσει* (v. 16b).

John’s teaching on sin in vv. 16-18 echoes that of the rest of the book. Since we are not willing to posit a direct contradiction between v. 18 and v. 16a, with the latter describing a sinning brother and the former stating that those born of God do not “keep on sinning,” we would instead suggest that this apparent tension reflects an occurrence of the same in the rest of the epistle. On the one hand, John teaches that believers do sin (1:8-10; 2:1-2), yet, on the other,

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<sup>36</sup> Grace E. Sherman and John C. Tuggy, *A Semantic and Structural Analysis of the Johannine Epistles* (Dallas, Tex.: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994), 101-102; although they see v. 21 as arising from the ‘supporting base’ of v. 20 (102). Cf. also, Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 231.

they do not continue in sin (3:6, 8-9). Moreover, the believer who does sin is comforted by John, who reminds them that Christ is the propitiation for sin and their advocate (2:1-2; cf. 4:10), therefore they have forgiveness of sins (1:7, 9; 2:12); and it is this same comfort he offers the sinning believer in v. 16, namely, God “will give [them] life.” In contrast, the one who continues in sin is not offered this kind of comfort and assurance of forgiveness. Rather, they are “of the devil” (3:8), are not regenerate (3:9), and, we will argue below, are cut off from the prayers of the saints (5:16d).<sup>37</sup>

More can be said about this, but, first, we will make a few additional comments about the concluding section. Vv. 18-20 each start with *οἴδαμεν* (cf. vv. 13, 15), a common verb in 1 John, and one connected with the prominent theme of assurance in the epistle. Therefore, John is assuring them that being born of God, they will not continue in sin, because “God protects [them]” (vv. 18a-b; cf. v. 19a). Turning to v. 20, we see another chiastic structure:

<b>A</b>	“the Son of God”	(v. 20a)
<b>B</b>	“him who is true”	(v. 20b)
<b>B'</b>	“him who is true”	(v. 20c)
<b>A'</b>	“his Son Jesus Christ”	(v. 20d)

Following this is v. 20e, which, in connection with v. 20a-d, recalls the purpose statement in v. 13 thus forming an *inclusio*.<sup>38</sup> Some suggest then that v. 21 is an addition outside of the concluding section, but additional observations suggest otherwise. John concludes v. 18 by writing, “the evil one does not touch [the believer]”; similarly, in v. 19, it is the whole world that “lies in the power of the evil one,” not those “from God.” This, then, brings us to v. 21. In v. 20, John emphasizes that God is true (*ἀληθινός* occurs three times); which stands in contrast to idols, which are, implicitly here, false. In sum, those who are under the power of the evil one follow idols (v. 21).

All this is significant for understanding the import of sin unto death in v. 16. It does not stand in isolation, but is a part of John’s reemphasis of his teaching in the remainder of the epistle. Put differently, it is unreasonable to think that in the very section where John is stressing that which he has taught throughout the epistle that he is adding an *ad hoc* teaching about ‘sin

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Harry C. Swadling (“Sin and Sinlessness in 1 John” *SJT* 35 [1982]: 205-211) for similar argumentation.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Sherman and Tuggy, *A Semantic and Structural Analysis*, 101.

unto death.' Rather, John is expecting the reader to fit his teaching in v. 16 within the overall teaching of his epistle.

This then brings us to John's purpose in writing this letter. Already, he discussed 5:13, which states his purpose in positive terms, but other places suggest more dire reasons for John's purpose in writing: "that you may not sin" (2:1); "because no lie is of the truth" (2:21); and to warn "about those who are trying to deceive you" (2:26); that is to say, John's purpose is not merely to give encouragement toward the knowledge of Christ, but to do so over against false teaching to the contrary.<sup>39</sup>

While it is not the purpose of this paper to look in detail at the teachings of the secessionists (1 Jn 2:18-19), those who "went out from us" for "they were not of us" (2:19), some things can be ascertained from within the epistle. Watson suggests that John addresses the teachings of these secessionists with "counterpropositions."<sup>40</sup> They claimed "fellowship with [God] while walking in the darkness" (1:6a); but believers are to "walk in the light" (1:7). They claimed to be sinless (1:8a), yet, they are deceived (1:8b); rather, sin is to be acknowledged and confessed (1:9). They profess knowledge of God while not keeping "his commandments" (2:4); but believers are to "keep [God's] word" (2:5). Beyond this, they denied that Jesus is the Christ, and as such are ἀντίχριστος (2:18-22; cf. 4:1) and apart from God (2:23). Moreover, they denied the humanity of Jesus (4:2). And, it seems they claimed possession of a knowledge which the true believers did not possess (2:20; cf. 2:4), which is further substantiated by the numerous references to "know" (e.g., 2:3-5) and "truth" (e.g., 3:18; 4:6). Given this special knowledge, they were exclusionary, which is implied by the references to hating one's brother (e.g., 3:15; 4:20).

In sum, the error of the secessionists was with regard to both orthopraxy (exclusiveness, claims of sinlessness) and orthodoxy (rejection of Christ's humanity). This, in turn, accounts for the emphases of John, which we've already noted briefly above. His horizontal focus addresses the exclusionary attitude of the false teachers. The various ways in which they can have

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<sup>39</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 678. *Contra* Terry Griffith ("A Non-Polemical Reading of 1 John: Sin, Christology and the Limits of Johannine Christianity" *TynBul* 49 [1998]: 253-276) who argues that the epistle is primarily pastoral in nature.

<sup>40</sup> Duane F. Watson, "Amplification Techniques in 1 John: The Interaction of Rhetorical Style and Invention," *JSNT* 51 (1993) 99-123 (115). Cf. Ben Witherington III's positive appraisal of rhetorical criticism in 1 John (*Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians I, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* [Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006], 431-436).

assurance of their faith (belief in Christ, walking with Christ, loving their brothers) stand in contrast to the false claims of special knowledge and, presumably, special access to God made by the false teachers. Moreover, the possession of eternal life and fellowship with God and fellow believers (1:3, 7; 2:25; 3:14) sets them in contrast to the secessionists who are dead, of the devil, and in fellowship with the world (2:15-17; 3:1, 10, 14; 4:1, 3-5).

This then brings us to John's teaching on sin in his epistle. Already, we summarized the basic distinction he made, that between believers who sin and are forgiven and others who continue in sin and are of the devil. Now, John's purpose in writing 1 John brings further light to this distinction. By making this distinction, he is not referring to those who have never believed, those who have always been 'out there,' but those who were once among God's people and now have departed. This becomes clear when we remember the two-fold purpose of John, namely, to encourage believers and give them assurance *and* to distinguish them from the false brethren who are, it seems, attempting to lead them astray. John would not need to do this with the same force if merely non-believers were in view. There is no reason that a believer would question whether or not they really know Christ if they were merely facing non-believers. Rather, something more dangerous has occurred in the life of the church(es) John is addressing. False brethren, who were once, visibly, belonging to the church, have now departed (2:19), and, given John's attack on their teaching, are twisting Christian teaching, creating heresies.

At this point, it would be helpful to return to the conclusion of John's epistle. We recall that in 5:13, John expresses his purpose for writing the letter: that they may possess eternal life by belief in the Son of God. He then gives them reason for assurance of salvation in v. 14, which he resumes again in vv. 18-20. Most notably, in v. 18, he teaches that, in fact, it is impossible for true believers to keep on sinning for they are "born of God," and, as such, "God protects [them]." Strong reasons for assurance block in the discussion of prayers offered for sinning brothers, and, conversely, not offered for ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον; and, in fact, where the latter occurs (v. 16c-d) is further blocked in by further assurances in vv. 16a-b and 17b. Those sinning μὴ πρὸς θάνατον will receive life from God (v. 16b), a future attainment of eternal life, for they are "born of God" and as such cannot be spiritually dead. Only those who are of the "evil one," under his "power," only those who fail to worship the true God who "is ... eternal life," are spiritually dead (vv. 18c, 19b, 20e, 21b).

Now, turning to the ‘persistent sin leading to death’ (or, ‘persistent sin’) view, at first glance it does not seem that we have ruled out this option.<sup>41</sup> Are not generic unbelievers under the power and influence of the evil one? Are they not spiritually dead? Yes, clearly they are, and we recognize that there is significant overlap between this view and the one we are advocating, but there are a few additional observations which further strengthen the identification of the ‘sin unto death’ with the secessionists.

First, if the generic unbeliever was in view, it seems strange that John would make a point to qualify the efficacy of intercessory prayer. Nowhere else in the epistle is it suggested to his audience that God will assuredly give life to a non-believer if they intercede for them. But, conversely, the existence of false, formerly visible, brethren would cause confusion thus warranting such a qualification. Furthermore, there seems to be reason to think that John’s prohibition of prayer for ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον actually strengthens our identification, which we will see below.

Second, if ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον reflects a state of sin rather than a specific occurrence thereof, how can it be observed, as is implied by ἵδη (v. 16a)? It seems that the view under question cannot explain this since a nonbeliever would be, *de facto*, in a state of sin; so it would be superfluous for John to make this qualification. But a secessionist would be in a state of sin which would be observable for he would depart from the true church of God.

Third, the ‘persistent sin’ view makes too much of the phrase πρὸς θάνατον. Admittedly, many English translations do not help in this regard: cf. “leads to death” (ESV, NIV, NLT) and “leading to death” (NASB), which implies sin progressing to the point of death. Yet, there are numerous problems with this understanding.

It is a given, in Scripture, that all unregenerate are spiritually dead because of their sin (e.g., Jn 3; Rom 5); and, conversely, only those who are born again are not spiritually dead *despite* the appearance of sin in their lives. Thus, while πρὸς denotes result, it is of an immediate

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<sup>41</sup> There seems to be two logical outcomes that can be deduced from this position: (1) that the sin is that of a generic non-believer; and (2) that it is persistent sin of what appears to be a believer, leading to some form of apostasy (e.g., Scholer, “Sins Within and Sins Without,” 238-245; A. Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John: With Notes, Introduction and Appendices* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890], 167). Although, we could not find a proponent of (1), we have included it in our discussion since it seems to be logically deducible from the ‘persistent sin’ view; and, in fact, is more persuasive than (2) for those espousing (2) do not always make clear certain important distinctions, which we will look at below.

kind here.<sup>42</sup> To suggest that one can persist in sin to the point of death fails to distinguish between what Bass calls “theological apostasy,” i.e., true believers can fall away; and, “phenomenological apostasy,” i.e., if someone departs from the church, they were never believers in the first place.<sup>43</sup> The first option is ruled out by 1 John as we have already seen with the many assurances given to believers (cf. esp. 5:18).<sup>44</sup> Therefore, when John describes those who practice or continue to sin as “from the devil,” he is not saying that they became this way, but that they always were this way (e.g., Eph 2:1-2). Their actions indicate their true spiritual allegiance with the “evil one.” Thus, interpreting πρὸς θάνατον as persistence in sin resulting in spiritual death fails to account for the emphasis on assurance for believers in John, the theological/phenomenological apostasy distinction, and as we will now argue, the entire thrust of 1 John.

Finally, the persistent sin view fails to account of the purpose and larger context of 1 John. John is not concerned with the generic unbeliever or the true believer become unbeliever, with the latter being expressly ruled out by him, but rather he is concerned with false teachers who were once among believers and had subsequently departed, following false teachings and becoming propagators of the same. He is concerned with the apostate, the secessionist, and his stress on sin, assurance, and love toward God and brother serve the purpose of distinguishing the false from the true brother so that the true believers may have eternal life in Christ. If the ‘persistent sin’ view takes ‘sin unto death’ as referring to the generic unbeliever, then it ignores the larger context within which this oft-contested phrase is situated. If the ‘persistent sin’ view takes it as referring to theological apostasy, then they have rendered 1 John utterly incoherent since the comfort and assurance John gives would directly contradict such a notion.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Law, *The Tests of Life*, 139. The KJV has “sin unto death,” which avoids the implications of other translations.

<sup>43</sup> Bass, *That You May Know*, 172, n. 179.

<sup>44</sup> Although, remarkably, I. Howard Marshall (*The Epistles of John* [NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981], 249-250) asserts this view.

<sup>45</sup> Now, this does not exclude a secondary purpose to warn believers to persevere, although that is not immediately obvious. Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday (*The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001]) for a helpful treatment of the topic of perseverance in the NT.

### C. Conclusion

Having looked at the lexical-syntactical features of 1 Jn 5:14-17, its relationship to the epistle, and competing understandings of ‘sin unto death,’ especially the more persuasive ‘persistent sin’ view, it is reasonable to suggest that ‘sin unto death’ in 1 Jn 5:16 refers to a particular type of person rather than a particular kind of sin,<sup>46</sup> namely, the secessionist, or, apostate. Moreover, John tells them not to pray for such a person. Already, we have alluded to the idea that this prohibition strengthens our contention. We will turn now to data outside of 1 John which connects prohibitions or the like to dealings with apostates.

### III. NT Data on Apostasy

Above, we noted that one of the strongest cases against the view which saw the sin distinction in 1 Jn 5:16 as mainly dealing with prayer is 1 Sam 7:3-9 and Jer 7:16-18. In the former text, Samuel commands Israel to put away their idols (1 Sam 7:3-4), and, after having done so, he prays for them; in the latter text, God explicitly tells Jeremiah not to “pray for them [or] intercede with me” (Jer 7:16). Remarkably, both of these texts refer to an apostate Israel who has apostatized, serving idols instead of God, and, because of this, God’s prophets withhold their intercessory prayers for them. Jer 7 is most remarkable in this regard since it suggests that this is the case because of God’s wrath against them (7:18c).

This seems to strongly parallel John’s instruction in 1 Jn 5:16, but, is there something similar to this in the NT to corroborate such an understanding of the verse? In 2 Jn 10-11, dealing with a similar issue of antichrist teachers, John tells his audience not to offer hospitality or greet them, with the former possibly referring to house church gatherings and the latter describing “mutual acceptance and affection.”<sup>47</sup> In Mk 4:10-11, Jesus responds to the disciples’ questions about his parables with a quotation from Isa 6:9-10, followed by his statement, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.” Remarkably, both Isaiah and Jesus are facing similar situations, i.e., speaking the word of God to an apostate and hardened Israel. In Isaiah’s context, this was a sign of judgment

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<sup>46</sup> It is worthy of mention that the ‘persistent sin’ view could bring up one further objection to our position. It could be said that because ‘sin unto death’ is impersonal, the sin rather than the sinner is in view. But there are some problems with this: (1) sin cannot be easily abstracted from the sinner; and (2) the same construction is used of the sin ‘not unto death’ (v. 17b), yet it is clearly referring to a person (v. 16a).

<sup>47</sup> Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 352.

against Israel (6:11-13); which has a similar function in Mk 4:14-19. On another occasion, Jesus is rejected, signaling apostasy, in his hometown of Nazareth, and, because of this, we are told that “he did not do many mighty works there” (Matt 13:54-58). Regarding the book of Revelation, Beale writes:

the appearance of parables in redemptive history signals judgment on the majority of the covenant community ... John’s repeated use of the hearing formula, “the one having ears to hear, let him hear” ... intends ... *to blind the counterfeit members* of the covenant community [i.e., apostates].<sup>48</sup>

And, lastly, Jesus commands the disciples to go out only to “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” saying, “[a]nd if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town” (Matt 10:5-6, 14; cf. Mk 6:7-11; 9:1-5; Acts 13:50-51). This act of shaking the dust of one’s feet was a sign of judgment against those who reject the message-bearers (Matt 6:15).

Now, while there is much more that could be said about apostasy in general in the NT, these examples share a commonality, namely, they connect a loss of privilege or heightened judgment against those who turned away from Christ. In 2 Jn, apostates are not allowed to be in congregational worship nor enjoy fellowship with believers. In Mk 6, the hardened in Israel are not given a clear word from Jesus, but parables to further harden them; we see the same function with the hearing formulas in Rev 1-3 and 13 regarding apostates. Indeed, Jesus’ miraculous power did not find expression when he was rejected, which served a sign against their unbelief (Matt 13). Moreover, those bringing the good news of the gospel of peace depart from apostate Israel when they are rejected (Matt 10; cf. Acts 13).

This then brings us to 1 Sam 7, Jer 7, and, 1 Jn 5:16. These two OT passages resemble the above noted passages with immediate signs of judgment connected to apostasy, which are, in this case, intercessory prayer. It seems likely, given John’s strong condemnation of the secessionists as from the devil, in darkness, and lovers of the world, that he would not encourage prayer for them as a sign of judgment against them. His readers could infer then that it is indeed contrary to the will of God to pray for such men (cf. 1 Jn 5:14, κατὰ τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ).

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<sup>48</sup> Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 176-177. Italics added.

#### IV. Conclusion

1 Jn 5:16 is a difficult passage but an important one, especially as one understands it in light of John's teaching in 1 John. The themes of John's letter find beautiful expression in this verse. Brotherly love is expressed in powerful fashion when one brother prays for another whom he sees sinning. In fact, there is great assurance that God will hear this prayer for the sinning brother because God hears and answers the prayers of those who know him (vv. 14-15); moreover, the sinning brother has assurance that he will have life eternal because he is secured by God through belief in his Son (vv. 13, 18), and, therefore, intercession will be used as means toward that end (v. 16b).

Furthermore, the sinning brother and the interceding brother can know that they are born of God and not under the power or influence of the evil one (vv. 18-20); for God the Son, whom they believe in, is ἐστιν ὁ ἀληθινὸς θεὸς καὶ ζωὴ αἰώνιος (v. 20d-e). This is in stark contrast to the one characterized by ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον, i.e., the secessionist who opposes Christ (2:18-19). They are not of God, nor are they in the light; rather, the very privilege of receiving intercessory prayer is taken from them as a sign of judgment against them (v. 16d). Yet, the believer can be comforted and assured that they are forgiven their sins because Christ has made propitiation for them (1 Jn 2:2; 4:10); they have passed from “death into life” (1 Jn 3:14).

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