

LIFE OR DEATH: THE OUTCOME OF SIN

I JOHN 5:16-17

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by

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In the midst of these two verses, meant primarily as illustrations of the assurance of answered prayer, are the doctrinal statements, "There is sin to death" (v. 16) and "there is sin not to death" (v. 17). The writer of the epistle does not define these two types of sins in the immediate context, but he seems to assume that his original readers understood these phrases well. To determine the true natures of these sins, and the distinction between them, the natures of the death suffered and the life given for them must be found.

All other commentators hold that the life and death are "correlative opposites," i.e., while they are opposites they are of the same nature, either physical or spiritual. They must then choose from which one of two starting points to begin. To agree with the context, some start with the life as spiritual, and then make the death agree. Others start with the death as physical, and make the life to be physical. The former leaves insurmountable theological problems, while the latter leaves contextual problems. To see these as correlative opposites is based upon a faulty assumption, that the life and death are said to be applied only to the sinner. Their failure is not asking the simple exegetical question, "Who is it that suffers this death?"

The phrase *πρός θάνατον* tells that the result of the sin is death. *Πρός* in this use speaks of the result of an action rather than the direction of an action. This thesis shows that the result of a sin to death is not the consequences (i.e. death) applied back to the sinner (as held by all other views), but that the sin causes and results in the death of another. The writer posits that the "life given" and the "death suffered" are not of the same nature, but that this life is the renewed spiritual life of the sinner coming from intercession for a sin not to death, while the death is the physical death of one other than the sinner causing the sin to death. This view is shown to best fit the natural readings of the context, and solves the theological problems left by other interpretations.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, <u>Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament</u>
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner and R. W. Funk, <u>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</u>
BSac	<u>Bibliotheca Sacra</u>
EGT	<u>The Expositor's Greek Testament</u> , W. Robertson Nicol (ed.)
LSJ	Liddell-Scott-Jones, <u>Greek-English Lexicon</u>
MNTC	<u>Moffatt New Testament Commentary</u>
NIDNTT	<u>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</u>
R	Robertson, <u>A Grammar of the Greek New Testa- ment in Light of Historical Research</u>
RevExp	<u>Review and Expositor</u>
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <u>Theologi- cal Dictionary of the New Testament</u>

## INTRODUCTION

Within the lifetime of every believer there are occasions in which that believer will fall to temptations and lusts, and then sin. For the believer who has sinned, yet desires to remain in close fellowship with his Savior, certain natural fears may arise in his heart: Will my fellowship with the Lord be restored? Is God going to judge me harshly now? Will I die physically? Will I lose my reward? Have I lost my salvation? And the ultimate question: Was I ever really saved, if I have been able to sin again?

These natural, common fears are not wrong for the believer to have, but are combatted by a proper knowledge of Scripture. The teachings of Scripture, especially those written by Paul in the New Testament, have been used of the Holy Spirit to assail and calm most of these fears of believers, and to comfort them concerning the security of their salvation. The Apostle John, in his gospel and in his first epistle especially, endeavors to assure his readers that their salvation and eternal life is truly based upon their faith in the Son of God (John 20:31; I John 5:11-12,13).

But there are two verses in I John which, through a general lack of understanding, have led some believers to

allow these fears to grow to such an extent that these dominate their lives and stop their growth in spiritual maturity. These fears are then not easily dismissed by the believers who suffer with them. I John 5:16 and 17, while in the context of one believer offering intercession for his sinning brother, make the strong doctrinal statements of "There is a sin to death" (vs. 16) and "there is a sin not to death" (vs. 17). The possibility of a distinction between the two types of sins has caused many Christians to question whether the sin they sinned may be the type which is "unto death," and if so, have they then lost their eternal life and salvation?

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate and determine the proper interpretation and meaning of the "sin to death" and its distinction from the "sin not to death." A thorough and original exegesis of these verses must be made in order to insure that the possibly poor arguments of past commentators are not just mimicked but are truly examined for their validity.

The usual method of interpreting these verses has been through their correlation with other verses, but this is insufficient. This is not an entirely bad method, especially since an understanding of the verses must be corroborated with other Scripture. Unfortunately, the writer found most commentators have come to these verses with correlative verses based on established presuppositions, or with little of their own original exegesis. In the

absence of honest, original exegetical study of the verses themselves, it is dangerous to establish an opinion of their meaning.

The understanding of these verses, and the subsequent lack of acceptance of the previous interpretations of the same, has been a matter of true personal perplexity to this writer. His original thesis to the solution was the belief that the key to determining what the sin to death is would be in discovering what "life" was being given. The "life given" would determine the death suffered, its "correlative opposite," and the death then would determine the sin which caused it. He noted that few commentators, and none of the previous theses presented to this school on this subject, took this route of exegesis within the verses. But much study upon that thesis truly did not lead him any closer to a satisfactory solution.

This writer became convinced that an honest exegesis of these verses could not depend upon the "life" and "death" mentioned to be correlative opposites. This occurred because of insurmountable contextual and theological problems which must be faced if the life and death are said to be of the same nature: i.e., they are either both physical or spiritual in nature. If these are both physical, why then is life given to one who has not sinned to death; and more importantly, how can a shift to a discussion of physical life being given be justified when the immediate context, if not the entire book, concerns itself with the

giving of spiritual and eternal life? On the other hand, if these are both spiritual life and death, and the one who sins is a Christian brother, a theological problem surfaces, since it seems then that a saved person may lose his salvation, which is untenable. This appears to be an exegetical paradox. To this writer most commentators seem to have tackled one problem often at the expense of ignoring the other.

During this study the writer has come to an interpretation which is unique and totally original. He did this while asking a simple question which has been previously ignored by other exegetes. Their failure is based upon the simple, understandable assumption that the death suffered must be that of the sinner because life is also offered to that sinner. But that is not necessarily the true association to be made here, which becomes apparent if one asks the question "Who truly suffers the death here?" If it can be shown that an honest exegesis of the verse may allow for this death to be to another, other than the sinner, as a result of the sin, then the death may be physical while the life can be spiritual in nature. This view then can eliminate and harmonize the contextual and theological problems described above.

The first chapter will handle the issues and questions of the theological and exegetical limitations from the immediate context. This process should give the basic direction and thrust to the final proper answer.

The second chapter will be concerned with various views held by commentators. These views will be detailed, analyzed, and answered as to their contribution to the proper interpretation.

The final chapter will be the writer's own suggested solution. Questions about these verses which are commonly forgotten will be answered, and an understanding of how the problems can be harmonized will be presented.

A wise rule for exegesis which should be remembered while reading this thesis is: The interpretation of a verse which offers the least number of problems, and which leaves the least number of problems is the most acceptable, at least until better exegesis may shed more light. It is the opinion of this writer that his view does leave the fewest problems, and is therefore the most acceptable view of these verses.

While many may not agree with this writer's final conclusion, they will have been challenged to honestly re-examine many of the arguments previously used by commentators, and to ask again for original and fully honest exegetical answers. This writer acknowledges that his interpretation is somewhat novel, but he also accepts the challenge of standing alone with it. His hopes are that his view may help others to come to a similar view, or else to anchor their own view more solidly.



## CHAPTER I

### THEOLOGICAL AND EXEGETICAL LIMITATIONS FROM THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

Ἐάν τις ἴδῃ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτάνοντα ἁμαρτίαν  
μὴ πρὸς θάνατον, αἰτήσῃ, καὶ δώσει αὐτῷ ζωὴν, τοῖς  
ἁμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον. ἔστιν ἁμαρτία πρὸς  
θάνατον οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ. πᾶσα  
ἀδικία ἁμαρτία ἐστίν, καὶ ἔστιν ἁμαρτία οὐ πρὸς  
θάνατον (1 John 5:16-17).

#### The Immediate Context

The statements about the two types of sin, one to death and the other not to death, are made in the context of a verse (vs. 16) which is an illustration of the confidence which a believer can have in answered prayer (vss. 14-15). These sentences are conditional sentences, which are in turn based upon the protasis of verse thirteen that the believer knows he has eternal life. Within these two conditional sentences (vss. 14-15) there are two truths put forth concerning the prayers of the believer. The first is that if we ask according to God's will, He hears our prayers. The second enlarges and completes the first, noting that if He hears us, we have the requests we have made to Him. These two truths set up the grounds for the requirements of the one praying in verse sixteen. This

verse (1 John 5:13), which begins the passage in which these verses in question (16-17) are set, is considered by most to be the key verse to the message of 1 John. It tells that the Apostle wrote in order for believers to have confidence that they have eternal life because they believe in the name of the Son of God. This verse can also be seen as a summary to the first twelve verses of chapter five, in that these verses speak about the one who believes as an overcomer of the world.

The context which follows verses 16-17 again leads the reader back to the discussion of the nature of the saved individual and what his confidence is toward God. It tends to reinforce the teaching of the first thirteen verses of this chapter, thus making the whole context in which these verses are contained to speak of the spiritual life and destiny of the believer. It would seem imperative that the ultimate interpretation of verses 16-17 must in some way be in harmony with its immediate context.

### The Brother

Among the first considerations is a determination of who is capable of this sin. It is usually considered to be a Christian because he is described as the brother of the person praying. Some commentators, like Cook,<sup>1</sup> have used

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<sup>1</sup>Robert W. Cook, "Harmartiological Problems in First John," BSac 123:491 (July-September, 1966):258. See also Jerry L. Bell, "A Critical Examination of 1 John 5:16" (M.Div. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1972), p. 24; and Ruth Snyder, "A Critical Monograph of 1 John 5:16" (Th.B. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1940), p. 17.

this point as the prima facia argument for their interpretations. But some, like Ebhard,<sup>1</sup> have questioned whether this one really is specifically a born-again Christian or merely anyone that the person praying feels some relationship toward.

The word for "brother" is ἀδελφόν, supposedly from the combination of the copulative prefix α and δελφος or "from the same womb."<sup>2</sup> This would mean that the brother is to have come from a common beginning, either by ancestry or by heritage. Lenski has referred to verses 1-4 of the same chapter speaking of believers as the children born of the Father for proof that the brother can only be taken as a fellow believer.<sup>3</sup> Some of these same commentators<sup>4</sup> have had the temerity to state quite absolutely, but without verifiable support, that every usage of ἀδελφός by John, or even including the whole New Testament, is to be taken as signifying a Christian brother. But this is not entirely true.

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<sup>1</sup>John H. A. Ebhard, Biblical Commentary on the Epistles of St. John in Clark's Foreign Theological Library, third series (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1860), 8:337-38.

<sup>2</sup>Robert L. Thomas, Ed., New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Nashville, TN: Holman, 1981), p. 1628.

<sup>3</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), p. 535.

<sup>4</sup>See Henry Alford, Hebrews-Revelation, The Greek Testament, with revision by Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 4:509; Raymond E. Gingrich, An Outline and Analysis of the First Epistle of John (Grand Rapids:

The words ἀδελφός and ἀδελφή are used 366 times in the NT.<sup>1</sup> Of these, Von Soden says, "In the NT ἀδελφός and ἀδελφή denote either 'physical brotherhood' in the strict sense or more generally the 'spiritual brotherhood' of Israelites or Christians."<sup>2</sup> The usage of this word for any co-religionist or compatriot is originally from Jewish religious custom, and from the translation by the Septuagint of נָחַם usually as ἀδελφός.<sup>3</sup> This usage was later taken over by Christians.

Rather than being an exclusive Christian usage, Jewish usage is also attested to in the NT as well as in the OT quotations (note Acts 3:22; 7:37; Heb 2:12; 7:5). In fact, the Apostles also address other Jews as ἀδελφοί (Acts 2:29; 3:17; 7:2; 13:15,26,38; 22:1; 23:1ff.; 28:17; Rom 9:3), and are themselves addressed by the Jews as such (Acts 2:37).

Besides these physical and spiritual meanings, ἀδελφός has the meanings of a "fellow countryman," and as a form of address used by a king to one of very high position, and without reference to a common nationality or faith as "neighbor" (specifically in sense of "neighbor" as in LXX:

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Zondervan, 1943), p. 187; Snyder, "A Critical Monograph of I John 5:16," p. 18.

<sup>1</sup>W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, A Concordance to the Greek Testament, 4th ed. revised by H. K. Moulton (reprint; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1974), pp. 17-21.

<sup>2</sup>TDNT, s.v. "ἀδελφός," by H. F. Von Soden, 1:144.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Gen 9:5; Lev 19:17ff.; plus NT: Matt 5:22ff.; 7:3ff.; 18:15, 21,35; Luke 6:41ff.; 17:3).<sup>1</sup> This last sense is particularly damaging to the assertions of those holding that ἀδελφός only signifies a Christian brother in the NT. Pressing this "wide" meaning of ἀδελφός, Ephard states that it must include the unregenerate, saying "To restrict the idea of ἀδελφός to the regenerate is altogether untenable . . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Granted that in the NT ἀδελφός has a variety of uses, can it be determined whether John uses it exclusively for the Christian or not? Perhaps the best proof that even John does use it to denote those other than Christians is 1 John 4:20. This verse, which is written not long before the context of the verses in question (5:16-17), speaks of the true state of the heart of the professing Christian toward his brother, which is hatred. Also, this professing Christian is said to be a liar, and to not know God, which means that he is unsaved. Since the one he hates is called a "brother" it is most likely that the brother is in the same state as the falsely professing Christian, i.e. unsaved. Therefore, it is possible that John does not use ἀδελφός to refer exclusively to true born-again believers.

Therefore, the word ἀδελφός by itself does not necessarily signify only a Christian brother in the NT or

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<sup>1</sup>BAGD, pp. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup>Ebhard, Biblical Commentary on the Epistles of St. John, 8:338.

in John's writings. The meaning of ἀδελφός cannot be pinned down except by the context. The context here is certain about one thing--the identity of the one who sees another and claims him as a brother. As the one who does pray and who does have his request answered, it is without doubt that he is a true believer. It is only by this fact and that of the contextual truths in verses 1-4 that it would seem positive to conclude that this "brother" truly is a fellow Christian.

It is important to note that this fact may only apply to the "sin not to death" in the first half of verse 16. The second half of the verse dealing with the sin to death does not state that it is done by a brother, and can be taken as something possibly done by a non-Christian. The importance of this will be seen in a later chapter. Yet it must be pointed out that the determination of the ἀδελφός is really not the final determinate as to what the sin is anyway.

#### While He Sins a Sin

To emphasize the impact of these sins the Apostle uses the construction of a cognate accusative with its verb of the same root--ἀμαρτάνουντα ἀμαρτίαν. There is a similar cognate construction in Exodus 32:30-31. The Hebrew reads פָּחַד פָּחַד, or "to sin a sin."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is spoken by Moses to the people after they had worshipped the golden calf. He called it a "great sin." But this OT correlation is difficult to use in

At first glance it might seem that the sin, at least the one not to death, is to be taken as a continual activity or way of life of sin. Lenski and Epp point to the participle being a present tense as proof that the sin is a durative or continuous action.<sup>1</sup> But this places the emphasis or focus only upon the participle and ignores that the main verb in this sentence is ἔδῃ, which governs the sense of the participle.

Rather than using this participle to denote a durative sense, it is better, since there is a main verb, to see ἁμαρτάνουντα in its temporal sense as signifying the time at which the sin is seen by the one praying. This places the emphasis back on the control of the main verb, ἔδῃ, which is an aorist subjunctive. Being an aorist stresses the punctiliar action of this verb, which means that the Aktionsart (kind of action) of the verb expresses the action occurring as "momentary or punctiliar when the action is regarded as a whole."<sup>2</sup> This punctiliar action in turn governs the true duration of the participle. The participle in turn uses its present tense temporally, that is, to

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clarifying this NT similar construction or the type of its sin. This is because it can be taken to be a "sin not to death" because Moses did intercede for the people, or possibly as a "sin to death" because he did order the Levites to kill some of the people for this sin.

<sup>1</sup> Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude, p. 534; Theodore H. Epp, Studies in the General Epistles of John (Lincoln, NB: Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1957, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup>R, p. 823.

speak of the time at which the action of sin is being viewed. It should be understood as "while he sins a sin" rather than as just "sinning a sin."

The object of this participle is its cognate accusative ἁμαρτίαν. Since this noun is anarthrous it has been questioned often whether this is to be considered as a single sin, a particular type of sin, any sin, some sins, or some special sin ("the" sin), or even as a state or life of sin.<sup>1</sup> It should be pointed out that both the sin to death and the sin not to death are anarthrous, and so should be sharing the similar characteristics which are contrasted in the Apostle's mind.

Some have pointed out the supposed mistake made in the Authorized Version and the American Standard Version, of placing the article "a" before "sin" which is anarthrous in the Greek.<sup>2</sup> Cook says that "this is grammatically misleading," and is meant by the translators to make this "some identifiable sin" from a sin which is not meant to be identifiable.<sup>3</sup> But in saying this, Cook (and those others who have made this point) confuses the use of the Greek definite article with the English usage of the indefinite

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<sup>1</sup>The particular views which are engendered by these various stances will be more fully discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>2</sup>Cook, "Harmartiological Problems in First John," p. 257. See also Bell, "A Critical Examination of 1 John 5:16," p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>Cook, "Harmartiological Problems in First John," p. 257.



article, which does not exist in the Greek language. He forgets that in Greek the indefinite article "a" or "an" is often implied in the use of an anarthrous noun. The anarthrous noun does not solely place emphasis upon the character of the noun (for which case Cook argues),<sup>1</sup> but also may speak of the fact of the existence of such a sin, which in English would be translated by the use of the indefinite article.

Since this noun is anarthrous it is not likely that it can be described as some special sin, "the" sin, such as the unpardonable sin (i.e., the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit). This would be an incorrect inclusion of the definite article where it does not belong. Then can it be viewed as a state of sin, a condition of the heart of the believer who by his impenitence continues in a life of sin?

Cook agrees with Barclay's statement, "The mortal sin is the state of the man who has listened to sin and refused to listen to God so often that he loves his sin and regards it as the most profitable thing in the world."<sup>2</sup> But this view is unacceptable for two reasons. First, as

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<sup>1</sup> While making this point of the anarthrous use to show the character of the noun, Cook does make the good point that the renderings of the RSV, "a mortal sin," and the NEB, "a deadly sin," may be theologically misleading. But what is odd is that he fails to notice that in truth these are attempts to point to the character of the sin rather than to its identity, which is his whole argument. Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude, in Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 120-21; Cook, "Harmartiological Problems in First John," p. 258.

seen above, the participle does not show a durative or continuous action, lifestyle or state of sin while it is governed by the aorist main verb, ἔδην. Second, theologically, it is impossible for a believer to remain in a state of sin (cf. 1 John 3:9).<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the probable way to consider this "sin" is as a single sin, emphasizing the action of the sin, and/or as a particular type of kind of sin. These two points can be harmonized within the usage of this word here.<sup>2</sup> The primary sense of the word,<sup>3</sup> plus its use in a cognate construction, and the influence of the main verb tend to show the sin as an action, a single event. Yet, since it is also modified by a prepositional phrase, πρὸς θάνατον, it does seem to be a type or class of sin, especially since this class of sin is contrasted to another type or class of sin, μὴ πρὸς θάνατον.

#### To Death or Not to Death

It is implied that the praying brother can know the difference between the two types of sin, and can tell if his brother's sin is one or the other. The question is how does he know what this sin is and when it is that his

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<sup>1</sup>Cook himself uses 1 John 3:9 to prove that a believer cannot persist in the sin of apostasy (i.e., a state of sin), yet in the very paragraph agrees with Barclay, to his own contradiction, that it is a state of sin. Cook, "Harmartiological Problems in First John," p. 258.

<sup>2</sup>This will be made even more clear in Chapter Three.

<sup>3</sup>BAGD, p. 42.

brother commits it? How can he be sure if his brother is "only" sinning a "sin not to death?"

The implication that one can know the difference between the sin to death and the sin not to death comes from the fact that the praying brother is said to be able to "see" the sin. This word ἴδῃ is the aorist subjunctive of εἶδον (used for βλέπω or ὁράω in the present tense).

Bauer lists six basic types of sight perception within the meaning and use of εἶδον. First is literally of perception by sight, which would mean the brother could actually see the sin happen. Second is "to feel, become aware of," a sense perception of any kind. Third, generally is to notice or take note of it as related to one, which could be by being informed of it through gossip. Fourth is to consider something as true (cf. 1 John 3:1), which can mean this seeing is mostly a matter of conscience to the praying one. Fifth, to see something is to "experience something," and in this situation might mean he is the recipient of the action of this sin. And sixth is "to visit someone, to come or learn to know someone" as with an in-depth understanding of that person.<sup>1</sup> All of these meanings for εἶδον include that with the perception of sight of something is the knowledge and understanding of it. This would, of course, include the types of sin mentioned in these verses.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 219-20.

But some contend that the praying brother is really not able to know, or should try to know, whether his brother has sinned the sin to death. Bell says it is an "unidentifiable" sin because the noun is anarthrous, using the argument of Cook.<sup>1</sup> But as was shown above, that argument is based on Cook's confusion of the Greek definite article and the English indefinite article, and so does not limit the brother's ability to perceive and know the sin. Many others simply say that this sin is unrecognizable, perhaps adding some justification for their statements by saying men are not to judge or evaluate the sins of others, but are to simply pray for their brother's restoration, leaving the judgment to God. But this thinking is usually based upon presupposition of their theological views here, usually seeing the sin as a state of sin, rather than an action or type of sin. This is in order that the "death" from the sin can be taken then as spiritual death.

It must be admitted that the verse does not explicitly say that one can see a sin to death. But very clearly it does say that one can see his brother sin a sin not to death, and in that ability to see, ἵδῃ, is included the understanding and knowledge of a sin "not to death" as actually being such. It has been said that apparently the early church understood exactly what the Apostle John meant by these phrases which were probably idiomatic sayings then,

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<sup>1</sup>Bell, "A Critical Examination of 1 John 5:16," p. 28.

but their true meanings have been lost to the later church. The natural logic, seen by some,<sup>1</sup> and ignored by others,<sup>2</sup> is that if one can see and know whether a certain sin is not to death, and if his brother is sinning it, then he should also be able, by implication, to see and know the sin to death and whether it is being committed.

The preposition which modifies the θάνατον here is πρὸς. The only other place which uses πρὸς with θάνατος is in John 11:4. The most common preposition used with θάνατος in the NT is εἰς. Πρὸς was not even used to modify θάνατος in classical use, but θάνατος was most often found with the use of ἐπὶ to modify it.<sup>3</sup> So it would seem that John had some special idea to convey by the unusual sense of πρὸς here.

Πρὸς is used with three cases, the genitive, the dative, and the accusative, and very predominantly with the accusative.<sup>4</sup> Robertson says that the root idea of πρὸς is "near" rather than "towards."<sup>5</sup> This "seems to explain the

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<sup>1</sup>As per Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude, p. 535.

<sup>2</sup>As per Alexander Ross, The Epistles of James and John (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), p. 221.

<sup>3</sup>LSJ, p. 784.

<sup>4</sup>James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1930), p. 544. Πρὸς "is almost entirely confined in the NT to the acc. (679 times), as against one instance in c. gen. (Ac 27:34) and 7 c. dat."

<sup>5</sup>R, pp. 622-23.

resultant meanings more satisfactorily . . . . The idea seems to be 'facing'" (and he says cf. πρόσωπον, and John 1:1--"face to face with God" = a relationship),<sup>1</sup> and "it is not necessary to say that πρός with the accusative means 'towards.'"<sup>2</sup>

Bauer lists that πρός with the accusative can speak of place; of motion; of time, duration; of goal aimed; of the result that follows a set of circumstances; of purpose, destiny; and indicates a connection, or denotes company.<sup>3</sup> Πρός in these verses, plus John 11:4 is listed under "the results that follow a set of circumstances." Blass-Debrunner gives these same verses as examples of "purpose, result, or destiny."<sup>4</sup> Reicke further elaborates, giving John 11:4 as a use which is "Final: of the aim of a given action" (that is, as a planned goal of action), as in 1 John 5:16-17 as a use which is "consecutive: 'up to' a certain result . . . !so serious that it leads to death'" (notice the emphasis on result).<sup>5</sup> Atkinson notes that 2 Peter 3:16 and 1 John 5:16-17 are the only two examples of the consecutive use of πρός in the NT.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 623.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 624.

<sup>3</sup> BAGD, pp. 716-18.

<sup>4</sup> BDF, pp. 124-25.

<sup>5</sup> TDNT, s.v. "πρός," by Bo Reicke, 6:724-25.

<sup>6</sup> Basil Ferris Campbell Atkinson, The Theology of Prepositions (London: Tyndale Press, 1944), p. 19.

But how does the use of *πρός* differ from the more regular use of *εἰς* with *θάνατος*? *Εἰς* generally looks only for simple "direction and final end . . . indicating motion into a thing or into its immediate vicinity."<sup>1</sup> But *πρός* also shows direction, but in a sense that *εἰς* does not have. *Πρός* can show the end as a result of a process or set of circumstances or occurrences from one object to another; it shows a causal relationship of two items. Thus, *θάνατος* is the result of the actions of sin.<sup>2</sup>

The fact of there being a distinction of types of sins is made evident simply by the application of the negatives *μή* (vs. 16) and *οὐ* (vs. 17) to the prepositional phrase *πρός θάνατον*. It has long been questioned as to why the Apostle used *μή* to modify this phrase in verse 16 and then changed to use *οὐ* in verse 17. Many have quoted or used the hardline rule of Blass, "essentially everything can be subsumed under one rule for the Koine of the NT: *οὐ* negates the indicative, *μή* the remaining moods including the infinitive and participle."<sup>3</sup>

This hardline rule, while true for the most part, may not be entirely true, and has been disputed by other grammarians. Robertson retorts, "Jannaris compares *οὐ* to *ὅτι* and *μή* to *ἵνα*, while Blass compares *οὐ* to the indicative

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<sup>1</sup>BAGD, p. 227.

<sup>2</sup>NIDNTT, s.v. "Appendix Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," by Murray J. Harris, 3:1206.

<sup>3</sup>BDF, p. 220.

mode and μή to the other modes. But these analogies are not wholly true."<sup>1</sup> Their points of objection and correction may also have some effect upon the use of the several negatives within these verses.

Robertson shows how the historical use of οὐ and μή changed from the Classical to the Koine, and even Blass admits, just before stating his hardline rule, that "the distinction between the two negatives . . . is in part fairly complicated in classical Greek."<sup>2</sup> But it seems that the rule for these negatives in the Koine is still more complicated than Blass realizes, for as Robertson says, "The case is not so simple as that."<sup>3</sup> Dana and Mantey add, "But Blass has overstated the facts in attempting to bring the differences between οὐ and μή under a single rule . . . there are numerous exceptions."<sup>4</sup> "Οὐ is the particle used in summary negation. It is the stronger of the two negatives,"<sup>5</sup> while μή is "the weaker, milder, negative, denying subjectively and with hesitancy . . . then μή is the particle of qualified negation."<sup>6</sup> "Οὐ denies the reality of an alleged fact. It is the clear-cut, point-blank

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<sup>1</sup>R, p. 1156.

<sup>2</sup>BDF, p. 220.

<sup>3</sup>R, p. 1168.

<sup>4</sup>H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927), p. 264.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 265.



negative, objective, final . . ."<sup>1</sup> while μή

. . . is an "unsteady" particle, a hesitating negative, an indirect or subjective denial, an effort to prevent (prohibit) what has not yet happened. It is the negative of will, wish, doubt. If οὐ denies the fact, μή denies the idea . . . . In a word, μή is just the negative to use when one does not want to be too positive. Μή leaves the question open for further remark or entreaty. Οὐ closes the door abruptly.<sup>2</sup>

Dana goes on to state and show that the reason of the more common use of οὐ with the indicative and μή with the other moods is not based on a hardline rule, but on the common sense rule that since both οὐ and the indicative are the objective expressions of statements of fact or denial they naturally will occur together, and since μή and the other moods are expressions of uncertainty, doubt, or contingency these also will most naturally align their usage.

But what effect may this proper distinction make concerning the sin not to death? Many commentators, simply thinking in the line of Blass' rule, say the use of different negatives in verses 16 and 17 are only reflections of the verbs which precede them. Turner differs, stating that the usage lies in the "author's own way of looking at things," continues, "There can be no difference between ἁμαρτίαν μή πρὸς θάνατον and ἁμαρτία οὐ πρὸς θάνατον (1 John 5:16)."<sup>3</sup> Neither of these views are correct or acceptable

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<sup>1</sup> R, p. 1156.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 1167.

<sup>3</sup> Nigel Turner, Syntax in A Grammar of New Testament Greek by James Hope Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 3:281.

when compared to the proper view of these negatives as shared by Robertson and Dana.

But if the force of this distinction concerning the degree of certainty or objectiveness of each negative is applied to the prepositional phrase *πρὸς θάνατον* which they modify, then it might be that the Apostle is trying to communicate to his readers the relative certainty or reality of the death from sin. In the two uses in verse 16 of *μὴ πρὸς θάνατον* it may be that John is trying to convey the contingency or uncertainty felt by the brother who observes the sin that it really is only a sin not to death, so that he is driven to prayer for his brother. On the other hand, in verse 17 the use of *οὐ πρὸς θάνατον* would seem to be the proper wording for the Apostle to convey the certainty of a doctrinal statement, which it is, that there is sin not to death.

#### He Shall Ask

The debate over the meanings of *αἰτέω* and *ἐρωτάω*, and how they contrast, has often been the key used by many to attempt to discover the truth of the sin to death. On the other hand, some have used the difference they have found in order to say that it is truly unrecognizable and thus men are not even to be presumptuous enough to pester God about it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alford, *Hebrews-Revelation*, p. 510; Cook, "Harmartiological Problems in First John," p. 259.

Trench's Synonyms has been the authority to which many commentators have referred on the use of these two words. Within his basic definition, as well as his specific discussion of John 16:23 (the only other place in the NT where both of these words occur together), Trench makes the proper distinction of αἰτέω as "to seek as a request" and ἐρωτάω as "to interrogate, to inquire, to question." But he includes in his definition of these two that αἰτέω is "the more submissive and suppliant, indeed the constant word for the seeking of the inferior from the superior,"<sup>1</sup> while ἐρωτάω "implies that he who asks stands on a certain footing of equality with him from whom the boon is asked."<sup>2</sup> Alford, Bell and Vincent, among many others, either directly quote or closely mimic the arguments of Trench; especially how he applies the use of ἐρωτάω to Christ, saying that since He only uses ἐρωτάω to emphasize His co-equality with the Father but would not use αἰτέω because He was not an inferior to God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Chenevix Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), p. 144.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, Hebrews-Revelation, 4:510; Bell, "A Critical Examination of 1 John 5:16," pp. 30-31; Marvin R. Vincent, The Writings of John in Word Studies in the New Testament (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1946), 2:372; Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament, p. 144.

But Abbot and Anderson disagree with Trench's unsupported implications for these words.<sup>1</sup> Abbot asserts that the difference is not the "relative dignity between the asking and the one asked . . ." but that αἰτέω equals "to ask for something to be given, not done, giving prominence to the thing asked for rather than to the person . . ." whereas ἐρωτάω equals "to request a person to do (rarely to give) something."<sup>2</sup> Anderson, listing John's uses of ἐρωτάω says,

It can be seen that there is not one usage listed as being a pure request where the sense of inquiry is totally lost. The only time it even comes near to losing the idea of "inquire" is when there is no uncertainty involved in what is asked.<sup>3</sup>

Abbot lists Matthew 15:23, Mark 17:26, Luke 7:6 and 14:32 as proof that ἐρωτάω does not imply the requests of those on equal standing.<sup>4</sup>

Stahlin shares three suggestions as to why Jesus does not use αἰτέω when referring to His own prayers. These

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<sup>1</sup>This writer will not detail the full arguments against Trench's implications, because to do so would entail a whole thesis for that purpose alone. The writer would enjoin the reader to refer to the thesis of Darrel Anderson which was prepared for this very purpose. The full arguments and texts can be found there, of which only a few are shared here. Darrell Anderson, "Ἐρωτάω in 1 John 5:16" (M.Div. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1974).

<sup>2</sup>Ezra Abbot, "Trench's Synonyms of the New Testament," North American Review (January-October, 1872):182.

<sup>3</sup>Anderson, "Ἐρωτάω in 1 John 5:16," pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup>Abbot, "Trench's Synonyms of the New Testament," 182.

suggestions do not include or support the idea that αἰτέω implies an inferior seeking from a superior. He lists:

1. Perhaps αἰτέω is to want something, for oneself, but when Jesus prays there is no question of His wanting things for Himself, but only for others. 2. may suggest a far from humble demanding, whereas Jesus never demands. 3. αἰτέω seems to presuppose a lesser degree of intimacy than ἐρωτάω, hence αἰτέω is used of disciples' requests to God, but ἐρωτάω is required of disciples to Jesus, or those of Jesus to God.<sup>1</sup>

Also of importance to understanding and exegesis of these words are the differences between the tenses and moods used here. In verse 16 it says the brother will ask, αἰτήσει, which is a future indicative. The use of the future indicative seems to emphasize the prayer as a certainty of fact while even yet future: "he shall ask." Alford and Vincent stress the imperatival force of the future indicative: "he must ask."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in verse 17 the aorist subjunctive, ἐρωτήσει, leaves open the door of uncertainty or contingency to the praying brother, so that while he is able to, and allowed to, he is not required to, or automatically going to pray: "I do not say he must ask about that." This means that when one sees his brother sin a sin not to death he shall automatically ask, pray, seek, request life for his brother, but if it seems to be the sin to death then he is not required or encouraged to even question God about what will happen.

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<sup>1</sup>TDNT, s.v. "αἰτέω," by Gustav Stahlin, 1:192.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, Hebrews-Revelation, p. 509; Vincent, The Writings of John, 2:370.

Along with this controversy of the proper distinction between αἰτέω and ἐρωτάω is how to properly translate and understand the statement οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ, which the Apostle says concerning the sin to death. The problem is how to use the negative οὐ and to determine which word or words it should be used to modify. Alford and Trudinger<sup>1</sup> argue that it does not modify ἐρωτήσῃ because of the separation between them by a ἵνα purposive conjunction and the mood disagreement between them.<sup>2</sup> Since a negative usually modifies the nearest verb, and it is the negative which normally affects the indicative, then the nearest indicative must be what is modified. That is the verb λέγω, giving the sense of "I do not say that he should, may, or shall pray about that." But the proper rule concerning the use and position of the negative is that of Blass, "The negative stands as a rule before that which is to be negated."<sup>3</sup> Thus it is the prepositional phrase περὶ ἐκείνης which is modified, ἐκείνης by its case and gender has as its antecedent the ἁμαρτίαν πρὸς θάνατον. This gives the possible sense of "I say that he may pray (or more properly 'inquire'), but not concerning that," or "I speak not concerning that, that he must (or should) inquire (or

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<sup>1</sup>Alford, Hebrews-Revelation, p. 510; Paul Trudinger, "Concerning Sins, Mortal and Otherwise: A Note on 1 John 5, 16-17," 52:4 Biblica (1971):542.

<sup>2</sup>This is an occurrence where Blass' rule is true for the general rule.

<sup>3</sup>BDF, p. 224; James L. Boyer, Syllabus from the class "Johannine Epistles" (Grace Theological Seminary), 1975.

pray)." The latter is the one to be preferred and is so by this writer.

### The Giver of Life

To the readers of the English text, especially many of the newer translations, this next problem may not appear in their Bibles. In the Greek the verb "he shall give," δώσει, directly follows, being linked by a καί, after the verb "he shall pray," αἰτήσεται. The two of these verbs agree in tense, voice, mood and person, both being future active indicatives, third person, so that it seems to be speaking of the actions of the same person, that is, the one praying. In the original language neither the name of God nor the pronoun "he" is there, as is supplied in most English versions. Because of the message of the context concerning God answering prayer, some object to this referring at all to the one praying. So who is the one who gives life to the sinning brother?

Those who stress the agreement of the two verbs as the same person carefully try to avoid controversy by saying that δώσει does refer to both God and the one praying. Steele gives the thinking of "the pronoun 'he' naturally refers to him who prays. There is nothing unscriptural in the thought that the believer does that which God does through him, as in James 5:20."<sup>1</sup> A comparison could be made with when a parent or teacher helps a child do a

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel Steele, Half Hours with St. John's Epistles (Chicago: Christian Witness Company, 1908), p. 143.

painting, and then praises the child for all the credit as if he did it alone.

Findlay, while seeming to be among those who stress the agreement of the verbs, gives the caution in the thinking of those who see only God referred to in δώσει. He says, "Grammatically, it is easier to understand the same subject with the two verbs 'ask' and 'give' . . . yet God is the great Life Giver."<sup>1</sup> Lenski presses the issue further by adding "the idea that you and I give life to anyone is not scriptural."<sup>2</sup>

This writer tends to agree with Findlay that the great Life Giver is God, although He is not explicitly referred to in the verse. As to the grammatical point that because the verbs agree the subjects must also, a question is raised. How else could the Apostle properly express the future situation of the certainty of prayer and answer, needing indicatives for both verbs, but by using two third person verbs? The baseline of all discussion here has to include the fact that the context tells that God is the One who answers prayer, which is the Apostle's topic here.

Akin to this last problem is the determination of who is the recipient of the life given. If the giver is

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<sup>1</sup>George G. Findlay, Fellowship in the Life Eternal (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), p. 404.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude, p. 534. Yet it must be noted that Lenski takes this view based on the fact that he sees the recipient of the life as the one who prays.



God, not the intercessor, then is the recipient of the life, αὐτῷ, possibly the intercessor rather than the erring brother, seeing that verse 15 says the requests asked are received by the petitioners? This is usually taken as a reference to the sinning brother, but there are some who prefer to see αὐτῷ as the petitioner.<sup>1</sup>

To Lenski the determination of the subject of δώσει as God is based upon his view that αὐτῷ is him who does the asking.<sup>2</sup> His objection is that to make τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσιν appositional to αὐτῷ "to say the least, is strange."<sup>3</sup> His problem of the seeming lack of concord in number between these two words is solved if τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσιν is seen as a collective substantive use of a participle.<sup>4</sup> How else can he then figure the mention of τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσιν, if these are not in reality appositional to αὐτῷ? It is their inclusion in the verse at this point which confirms without a doubt that these sinners and the singular sinning brother are who John is speaking of as αὐτῷ, the recipients of life. It is used to teach the extent that life will be given, that is, to all who sin not unto death. It seems that Lenski thinks these others mentioned are simply an inclusion of the fact "that there will be others that sin from time to

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. R, p. 404.

time," and does not mean much more.<sup>1</sup> What is amazing is that Lenski contradicts himself in this section by first saying that the life is given "for this brother," "for those sinning"; . . . stressing the sinner as the recipient and as being appositional to the plural substantive participle, but then he turns in the next paragraph to deny both these points.<sup>2</sup>

### Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine the exegetical arguments used by some concerning these verses. It has been made apparent that there have been many erroneous approaches and viewpoints concerning the exegesis of the verses. It seemed to this writer, as he studied the various commentators, that hardly one of them did not fall prey to some of these faulty exegetical points. But the problems to understanding these verses are so manifold, that the writer does not want to slight any of these previous commentators with the notion that they did not attempt to be careful with the Word of God. The next chapter will show, however, the many possible viewpoints taken because of manifold problems here to solve. This again emphasizes the need for care, and prayer, in studying God's Word.

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude, p. 534.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORICAL AND POSSIBLE VIEWS

The phrases "sin to death" and "sin not to death" were not unknown or unused before John penned them in these verses. Apparently these terms were used for some time by Rabbinical writers who based their distinctions of sins in these categories from the use of the phrase "a sin worthy of death" in Numbers 18:22. The Jews, from this OT passage, made a distinction between intentional sins "of the high hand" and those unintentional sins done in ignorance, or from man's imperfection or sudden passion, or by accident.<sup>1</sup> Huther is careful to point out that this may be the origin of the phrases, but that they may not be used still with the same meaning in the NT.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>John Huther, ed., Critical and Exegetical Handbook of James, Peter, John and Jude, in Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 10, trans. by Patan J. Gloag, D. B. Croom, Clarke H. Irwin (Reprint; Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1980), p. 616; see also Robert Law, The Tests of Life (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 138. However, Dodd and Boice definitely say this is not the meaning here. See C. H. Dodd, The Johannine Epistles, in MNTC, ed. by James Moffatt (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), p. 136; and James Montgomery Boice, The Epistles of John (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 173.

Boice and Candlish are right to point out that the basic thrust of John's message in these verses is not the sin to death, but is a Christian's prayer life, especially the prayer of love, that is, intercession.<sup>1</sup> Intercession is to be so definitely expected from a Christian (αἰτήσῃ--"he shall pray") that it almost becomes another test of whether one is truly born again. Yet, in spite of the main thrust being intercession, John did definitely intend to teach a doctrinal statement, in that it does say "There is sin to death . . . There is sin not to death."

The views of the death which results from this sin fall basically into two camps--physical death or spiritual death of some kind. Most of these views have existed in one form or another throughout the history of the church. Some basic questions have to be asked of each view to understand fully how it differs from the others. First, is it physical death or spiritual death? Second, is it the sin of a true Christian or a non-Christian? Third, what is the nature of the sin? Fourth, is it a definite act of sin, some type or kind of sin, or a state of sin? Fifth, can it be recognized and known as the sin to death by another? And sixth, are there some specified sins to be seen, or are they left unspecified?

The views which see this as physical death include removal from the Body as divine judgment, chastisement for

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<sup>1</sup>Boice, The Epistles of John, p. 171; Robert S. Candlish, The First Epistle of John, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1869), p. 521.

restoration (towards, but not fully to death), civil death sentences, natural death which results from involvement in violence, and suicide (depression). Views which see this as spiritual death include the growing inability to live godly due to impenitence, apostasy from the faith by a believer, the state of spiritual death and unbelief of one yet unsaved (versus the sin not to death being the sin of a believer), the denials of the Incarnation by antichrists, the loss of spiritual life or salvation of a believer (usually by post-baptismal sin), the loss of the soul (cf. the Roman Catholic view of the mortal sin versus the venial sin), excommunication from fellowship, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, or figuratively of depression.

#### Physical Death Views

##### Removal from the Body as Divine Judgment

This view says that death comes because of gross, deliberate sin or sin dishonoring to God. This sin of a Christian is so serious that God brings death to the person because of some violation of moral conduct (1 Cor 5:5) or misobservance at the Lord's Table of communion (1 Cor 10: 29-32). The reason that God brings death to the person, it is said, is so that the person will not lose any more reward than is necessary, and so that his corruption within the church body will be removed in order to keep the purity of the Body of Christ. This view, as do most of the physical death views, holds that the death referred to here must need

be physical death because the ἀδελφός is a Christian, and as such has eternal life and is eternally secure in it (cf. John 10:28-29; 1 John 5:18). Also, since the death is physical, the life given is physical (among those who hold this view are Bell, Boice, Boyer and W. R. Cook). Boyer says this is a state of sin because the participle ἀμαρτάνουντα is in the present tense, signifying a continuing state.<sup>1</sup> Boice, on the other hand, believes it to be a deliberate act, based on the example of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5: 1-11), and the "sleeping" Corinthian Christians (1 Cor 11: 30).<sup>2</sup> W. R. Cook says that believers are not to even question God whether this is a sin to death or not,<sup>3</sup> but Boyer says that God will make His will known about it by "inner conviction."<sup>4</sup> There is no specified or particular sin to death, but whatever sin God decides is to death may become such. This view is often held while mixed in (often better "confused") with one or more of the other views of physical death.

Wuest, using Alford's three canons here,<sup>5</sup> objects to this view of physical death because since he starts with the

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<sup>1</sup>Boyer, "Johannine Epistles," p. 87.

<sup>2</sup>Boice, The Epistles of John, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup>Cook, "Harmartiological Problems in First John," p. 258.

<sup>4</sup>Boyer, "Johannine Epistles," p. 87.

<sup>5</sup>For the sake of convenience, in the coming views this argument will be noted as "Alford's Canons." Even though this argument is held by many others than Alford,

life given being spiritual life, he states that the death must also be spiritual, not physical.<sup>1</sup> This is the usual basic argument used against this being physical death in all of the various physical death views.

This writer has two objections to this view. First, as do all views other than the writer's, it makes an assumed correlation between the life given and the death suffered.<sup>2</sup> Second, the key verse of the several used as examples and correlation (1 Cor 11:30) shows that it is not necessarily speaking of the "sin to death" because even as some "sleep" or are dead by judgment, others are said only to be sick. Thus, not all die because of that sin; therefore, it cannot be considered to even be part of what is this "sin to death." These two objections when taken together eliminate the possibility of this sin in 1 John being an extreme type of sin as found in 1 Corinthians 11:30.

#### Chastisement for Restoration

This view is akin to the previous one, and often the two are blended together. The difference is that this view states that the emphasis in the verse is not so much on the final death, as it is on the process to its end. The focus

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and it was not original with him, many have referred to his canons as the statement of the argument. Alford, Hebrews-Revelation, p. 511.

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, In These Last Days (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> The writer will discuss more thoroughly the fallacy of this assumed correlation in Chapter Three.

is on the preposition *πρός*, stressing its meaning in the sense of motion rather than result, translating it as "leading to, or towards" death, but not necessarily arriving at it. Gingrich says, "Since sin tends toward death, unless its course is stemmed, and its virus killed, it leads to death."<sup>1</sup> This chastisement, usually by sickness, is brought into the life to bring the person to the consciousness of God's displeasure with the sin, and the person will then repent, call for the elders, and be restored and healed (Jas 5:20).<sup>2</sup> The sin which would bring this chastisement is not an act but a condition or state of sin. Exell calls it "a state of opposition to and hatred of good as good, and God as God. The sin unto death is unbelief of heart and mind."<sup>3</sup> This sin itself of a Christian that brings the chastisement cannot be known as the sin to death,<sup>4</sup> but it can be known by the disease or sickness that follows it.<sup>5</sup> Exell, Gingrich and Westcott<sup>6</sup> are among those who hold this view.

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<sup>1</sup>Gingrich, An Outline and Analysis of the First Epistle of John, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph S. Exell, James, I & II Peter, I John, in The Biblical Illustrator (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), 22:455.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Gingrich, An Outline and Analysis of the First Epistle of John, p. 187.

<sup>6</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, The Epistles of St. John (London: MacMillan and Co., 1883), pp. 180-82.



The chief objection to this view as given by Law,<sup>1</sup> and shared by this writer, is that this is an improper translation of the preposition *πρός*. Instead of being rendered as "leading to or towards" death, which emphasizes the motion, it is more correctly rendered in this situation as "resulting in" or simply "to" death, since the idea of the phrase is a cause and effect relationship between sin and death.<sup>2</sup> Alford's Canons are also cited in opposition.

#### Civil Death Sentence

This view looks at those sins which are violations of the laws of the state, and which are punishable by the state by capital punishment, as the sin to death. The death, of course, comes by the penalty of capital punishment, and would possibly include such things as the acts of murder, rape and kidnapping (which used to be capital offenses). These sins are more likely to be those of non-Christians (since a Christian would not likely do these things, cf. 1 John 3:9,15). This view, if *ἀδελφός* is made to refer to the doer of the sin to death, usually takes *ἀδελφός* in the broader sense of "neighbor." OT verses used as correlation to support this view are Numbers 35:29-34; Deuteronomy 22:26; 1 Kings 2:28-35.

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<sup>1</sup> Law, The Tests of Life, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> The reader should note this distinction in the use of *πρός* has been discussed previously (see Chapter I, pages 18-20).

Barclay's objection to this view is given as follows: "It is quite clear that more is meant than that. This passage is not thinking of sins which are a breach of man-made laws, however serious."<sup>1</sup> His objection is correct in that the passage does not give any hint of being about capital offenses, but he should be corrected about the true seriousness of these crimes against "man-made" laws because those laws are such that they are based on God's laws concerning these crimes (cf. Gen 9:5-6).

#### Religious Death Sentences

This view differs only slightly from the previous view, in that it is related to civil crimes and this relates to crimes of religious practice. These are sins which are identifiable acts of willful disobedience before God, a violation of holy things. These are the deliberate sins of the "high hand" instead of sins which were inadvertant or done in ignorance. These were usually the sins of idolatry or heresy. This view of the sin to death is mostly a reference back to the OT economy, and does not have a valid counterpart in the NT. Verses of correlation include Exodus 32:30; Leviticus 18:29; 20:6-8; Numbers 15:30-31; 18:22; Deuteronomy 17:2-7 (v. 6, KJV--"worthy of death"). This was the view of the Rabbinical writers (in regards to

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude, p. 118.

Numbers 18:22) previous to the NT era. A. B. Davidson held this view.<sup>1</sup>

Findlay objects, noting that when the Apostle writes "All unrighteousness is sin,"

. . . he guards his readers against narrowing the idea of "sin" to what may be called religious offenses, to transgressions overtly committed against God . . . . Hence, it is observed by the way, and to guard against misconception, that "every unrighteousness"--every social injustice and unkindness, . . . every moral offense, "is sin."<sup>2</sup>

But Findlay forgets that the Apostle speaks of the sin not to death, a classification of sin which may cover the areas of his objection, leaving the sin to death yet open for only these religious crimes. It is better to take note of the objection that it seems odd for the Apostle to speak of something that was valid in the OT Israelite economy as still valid, although it is not in the present Church Age. This view does not theologically correspond to the NT situation in John's epistle, and so does not give answer to the nature of this sin.

#### Death by Involvement in Violence

This is a possible view that this writer, in the course of researching this paper, offered as a possible answer to fit this sin. But it has been discarded. It apparently never has been held by any commentators.

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<sup>1</sup>A. B. Davidson, Theology of the Old Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1904), pp. 315-17.

<sup>2</sup>Findlay, Fellowship in the Life Eternal, pp. 407-8.

This would be the possible view that this refers to a sin, such as committing violence, or involvement in an unlawful riot, which in turn led to, and ended in that person's own extinction. This act of sin could then be one which was seen and known by his "brother." But this possible view does not adequately answer why the same sin of violence would be more sinful in one case than when it is done at another time (especially since it seems implied that the "sin to death" is more sinful than the "sin not to death").

#### Suicide

This is another possible view examined by the writer, but which is not currently held. This death by suicide could come because of depression or guilt. Possible correlation would be Judges 5:18, "Zebulun was a people who despised their lives even to death"; and Judges 16:16, "his soul was annoyed to death." The problem is that the time of seeing another's depression would be a time of great intercession, as for the sin not to death, instead of not praying or being concerned for the sin to death.

#### Spiritual Death Views

##### A Growing Inability to Live Godly

This view of spiritual death is a loss or breaking of fellowship with the Lord which jeopardizes the spiritual life of the soul. This loss of fellowship is due to one's unwillingness to confess or forsake a sin or a life of sin,

characterized by a state of sin which has a disposition alien to God. Barclay's statement of this view, quoted by others, says, "The mortal sin is the state of the man who has listened to sin and refused to listen to God so often, that he loves his sin and regards it as the most profitable thing in the world."<sup>1</sup> These are not sins of actions from imperfection, infirmity, accident or ignorance, but of disposition to a state of heart where one is unable to pray for restoration for oneself and thus needs intercession by a brother. Steele even sees restoration of the sinner as being not likely to happen saying, "It is . . . a course of willful sin in defiance of the known law of God persisted in so obstinately against the influences of the Holy Spirit, that repentance becomes a moral impossibility."<sup>2</sup> This view is held by Alexander, Barclay, Steele, Vincent and, apparently also Strong.<sup>3</sup>

This sin of a Christian's growing inability to live godly as the sin to death must not be confused with the next

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude, pp. 120-21.

<sup>2</sup> Steele, Half Hours with St. John's Epistles, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> See William Alexander, The Epistles of St. John in The Expositor's Bible, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1903), p. 255; Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude, pp. 120-21; Steele, Half Hours with St. John's Epistles, p. 144; Vincent, The Writings of John, 2: 371; and Augustus H. Strong, Systematic Theology (Reprint; Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1976), pp. 650-51. Although Strong confusingly calls it the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," what he describes in essence is the growing inability to live a godly life.

view, apostasy.<sup>1</sup> The view of this sin as apostasy focuses upon the sinner's problem of disbelief, whereas this view sees the sin as a failure to obey.

This view takes this death to be a spiritual one rather than a physical one because most commentators who hold it recognize that the context is speaking about spiritual and eternal life. They add that for the Apostle to change in the middle of this discussion to speak of life given to a sinner as being physical in nature does not make sense to them contextually or theologically. Therefore, using the life as their exegetical starting point, they see its corresponding opposite as spiritual death. This is the same logic behind the other spiritual death views which will be examined. Most who hold this view see this spiritual death as meaning eternal death also (i.e., once a believer has lost his salvation, and he can do so, he is then lost again but without opportunity to again be saved, cf. Heb 6:4-6). But William Alexander disagrees by stating that this spiritual death "is not necessarily eternal" death, seeming to imply that a person can gain and lose his salvation several times.<sup>2</sup>

The primary objection to this view is the theological truth that one who is a truly saved Christian brother will persevere being eternally secure, and therefore cannot

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<sup>1</sup>As does Bell, "A Critical Examination of 1 John 5:16," pp. 19-20.

<sup>2</sup>W. Alexander, The Epistles of St. John, p. 255.

fall from grace to loss of his salvation. This view has as its fault that it ignores that grace is grace, unmerited favor which God will not rescind no matter the crime. It also ignores the power of salvation of an omnipotent God; it ignores His sovereignty and His power to draw sinners back to Him (contrary to Steele's point above).

#### Apostasy--Renunciation and Denial of the Faith

This is the state of a former believer who lives a life of open disbelief with a loss of ability to think rightly about God. Bell (who does not hold this view, while describing it well) defines apostasy as "a permanent and deliberate rejection of the true faith in favor of a heretical teaching."<sup>1</sup> It is disbelief, not just disobedience, it is an inability to know God's truth rather than an inability to live godly, and as such is distinguished from the view described just above.

This view of apostasy means many things to various commentators. To N. Alexander it is a denial of the incarnate Christ by former believers (cf. 1 John 4:1-3).<sup>2</sup> To

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<sup>1</sup>Bell, "A Critical Exegesis of 1 John 5:16," p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Neil Alexander, The Epistles of John: Introduction and Commentary in Torch Bible Commentaries, ed. John Marsh and Alan Richardson (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 128; also John Albert Bengel, Romans-Revelation, New Testament Word Studies, vol. 2, trans. by Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing Co., 1971), p. 813.

Huther it is renunciation of Christ as Savior.<sup>1</sup> To Lenski it includes making God out to be a liar.<sup>2</sup> To Calvin these have brought reprobation upon themselves.<sup>3</sup> To Fausset it is the state of soul in which faith, love and hope, in short the new life, is extinguished, and a rejection of grace.<sup>4</sup> Those who do hold to this view are N. Alexander, Bengel, Calvin, Cameron, Dodd, Fausset, Huther, Lenski and Smith; This seems to be the most ascribed to view of this sin.<sup>5</sup>

Stott's objection to this view is that the epistle teaches clearly that a true Christian born of God cannot live a life of sin (3:9), nor lose his salvation and eternal life being eternally secure (5:18), therefore he could not

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<sup>1</sup>Huther, Critical and Exegetical Handbook, p. 618.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude, p. 536.

<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, Hebrews-Jude, in Calvin's Commentaries vol. 22, ed. by John Owen (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 269.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 537.

<sup>5</sup>N. Alexander, The Epistles of John: Introduction and Commentary, p. 128; Bengel, Romans-Revelation, p. 813; Calvin, Hebrews-Jude, p. 269; Robert Cameron, The First Epistle of John (Philadelphia: A. J. Rowland, 1899), p. 243; Dodd, The Johannine Epistles, p. 136; Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments, p. 537; Huther, Critical and Exegetical Handbook, p. 618; Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude, p. 536; David Smith, The Epistles of John, EGT, vol. 5, ed. by W. Robertson Nicholl (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 198.



apostasize or fall away all the way to spiritual death.<sup>1</sup> Boice adds that the gnostics or antichrists (4:3), as those denying Christ and who left the fellowship in apostasy (2:19) were not true born again Christians to begin with.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, Cameron, who holds this view of apostasy, agrees that these are not Christians, noting, "Of course, one who in the fullest sense is the child of God cannot sin in this way."<sup>3</sup> The objection used against the spiritual death view above also applies here.

#### Failure to Accept Jesus Christ as Savior

This interpretation of the sin to death makes it the failure of an unbeliever to believe the gospel and be saved. Ebhard defends the view, "If any petition might be supposed to be 'according to the will of God,' it would certainly be petition for the conversion and salvation of our neighbor."<sup>4</sup> To make it fit the sin to death, he adds "in this domain there is a point at which the human will may have so hardened itself against the converting influences of the grace of God, as that God cannot and will not any more save. When this point has been reached,

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<sup>1</sup>John R. Stott, The Epistle of John in Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 188.

<sup>2</sup>Boice, The Epistles of John, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup>Cameron, The First Epistle of John, p. 243.

<sup>4</sup>Ebhard, Biblical Commentary on the Epistles of St. John, p. 337.

intercession has no assurance of being heard."<sup>1</sup> The one who sins the sin to death is a non-Christian, and is thought to be so by the use of the broad sense of ἀδελφός as 'neighbor.'<sup>2</sup> Verses used as correlation are John 3:18-19; 8:24; and 9:39.

A variation of this view often sees this sin not only as the failure to be saved but also that whenever an unbeliever sins any sin it is a sin to death because he is already spiritually dead. On the other hand, the sin not to death is the sin of a believer, because he is spiritually alive.

The objection to this view is that it assumes that a person's response to the gospel depends upon his own desire to know God and be saved. This assumption is contrary to what Scripture says, "There is none who seeks for God" (Rom 3:11). It is because of this that God is the One who grants or leads to repentance, so a man can believe (Acts 11:18; Rom 2:4). This view ignores God's power of salvation, of His power of drawing sinners, and that the whole problem of the unsaved is that none want to be saved. If, as this view holds, a person's conversion depends upon his desire to be saved, then since all are hardened beyond seeking God, none are able to be saved. That is totally unscriptural and so is this view of the sin to death.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 337-38.

### Denial by Antichrists

The sin to death in this interpretation is that denial of the truth of the incarnation of Jesus Christ by antichrists. It is the "abnegation of Christ"<sup>1</sup> by unsaved antichrists who for a time passed themselves off as true believers among the church, but who later attacked the faith. (It is this attack of the faith that makes this differ from simple apostasy, which is the turning from the faith to some heresy). These antichrists are non-Christians who were never really saved (1 John 2:19,22; 4:3,5; 2 John 9-11). This view is held by Alford, Burdick, D. Cook, Findlay and Wuest.<sup>2</sup>

Since the confession of Christ as the Incarnate and Savior is from the heart (a state) and spoken from the mouth (an act) some who hold this view see the spiritual death of antichrists as also being the result of a state of sin in the heart and an act of sin with the mouth (cf. Rom 10:9).<sup>3</sup> D. Cook, on the other hand, prefers to emphasize this sin as "that condition of darkness, lying, hatred, unrighteousness, and death against which he has devoted his best pastoral energies," rather than as an "individual sin"

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<sup>1</sup>Wuest, In These Last Days, p. 181.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, Hebrews-Revelation, p. 511; Donald W. Burdick, The Epistles of John (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), p. 94; D. Cook, "Interpretation of 1 John 1-5," RevExp 67:4 (Fall, 1970):459; Findlay, Fellowship in the Life Eternal, p. 406; Wuest, In These Last Days, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, Hebrews-Revelation, p. 511.

or act, but as still the sin of the "schismatics," his synonym for the antichrists of 2:18-27 and 4:1-6.<sup>1</sup>

This view may seem possible in the context of chapter five, focusing on the witness of God to the Son. But the real problem of this view is that nothing is said of the correlative verses (2:18-23 and 4:1-6) that state that the antichrists are put beyond the power of salvation and life. Those who hold this view merely make this assumption but do not offer support for the antichrists being unpardonable. In fact, contrary to the antichrists being unpardonable, are the words of Jesus, "And whoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him" (Matt 12:32; Luke 12:10). If these antichrists then were unpardonable then all the theological liberals of today are beyond the power of salvation, but what unholy presumption it would be to judge that as true.

#### Post-Baptismal Sin

This was a commonly held view by early Christians, but is not held today but by a very, very few within Christendom. It was held that baptism had a sacramental or efficacious power to impart cleansing from sin, but it cleansed from all previous sins only. If one sinned after baptism there was no forgiveness for post-baptismal sins, and thus one lost his salvation; therefore, all post-baptismal sins are mortal. This doctrine was based on

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<sup>1</sup>Cook, "Interpretation of 1 John 1-5," 459.

Hebrews 6:4-6 and The Shepherd of Hermas, Vision 1,1,9.

Barclay explains the use of the Hebrews passage, "in early Christian terminology to be enlightened was often a technical term for to be baptized."<sup>1</sup>

Barclay objects to this view, "But the real essence of that statement in Hebrews is that restoration becomes impossible when penitence has become impossible; the connection is not so much with baptism as with penitence."<sup>2</sup>

Barclay is only half right; Hebrews 6 is not dealing with baptism, but its emphasis really is not on penitence either. It is not about the loss of salvation, but it is part of the context telling the Jews not to look back but to go forward in Christ, to grow in maturity (cf. Heb 5:11-6:3). Bell's objection is the best, noting that the view is "based on the false premise of the saving efficacy of baptism" whereas baptism is truly only symbolic.<sup>3</sup>

#### Mortal and Venial Sins

This view is that of the Roman Catholic Church. It makes a distinction between two types of sins; one type is not so dangerous, and can be absolved or pardoned easily--"venial" sins. But the other type are the sins which kill the soul, whether the person is a Christian or not; these are the "mortal" sins which cannot be forgiven easily and

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Bell, "A Critical Examination of 1 John 5:16," p. 24.

which can lead one to eternal punishment. Among these mortal sins are the "seven deadly sins" or casuistical classifications: Pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, hatred, sloth.

Plummer objects that the Apostle gave no hint as to what is mortal or venial.<sup>1</sup> Calvin objects that all sins are truly mortal.<sup>2</sup> Law says that the Catholic view started being based on the two types of sins in Rabbinic writings, but that the Rabbinical definitions are not synonymous to NT usage of the distinction of sins.<sup>3</sup> Bell says the Scriptures do not teach such a distinction of sins, and that the view is contrary to the teaching of the eternal security of the believer.<sup>4</sup> Trudinger, apparently a Roman Catholic himself, questions how Roman Catholic expositors can prove the mortal sins to be the sin to death if mortal sins are "assuredly pardonable and a fitting object for our prayers." He also says that the real difficulty then for Roman Catholic commentators is to prove that a mortal sin is not a sin to death.<sup>5</sup> This writer sees the best objection being that this view denies the power and extent of the propitiation of Jesus Christ's death.

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<sup>1</sup>A. Plummer and C. Clemance, 1 John in The Pulpit Commentary, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., n.d.), p. 142.

<sup>2</sup>Calvin, Hebrews-Jude, pp. 268-69.

<sup>3</sup>Law, The Tests of Life, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup>Bell, "A Critical Examination of 1 John 5:16," p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>Trudinger, "Concerning Sins, Mortal and Otherwise: A Note on 1 John 5:16-17," 541.

### Excommunication

Sins which are punishable by excommunication from the church equal the sin to death; excommunication or separation from the fellowship of believers being the spiritual death spoken of here. When dealing with a notorious sinner who has not been adequately dealt with then Paul demands for that one to be "delivered unto Satan," a supposed phrase for excommunication (1 Cor 5:1-13). This was meant to save the man's soul in spite of the severe punishment. This view was held by the later church, especially concerning those who had denied the faith when under persecution.

The reason that excommunication was thought to be a way of spiritual death is explained and defended by Westcott,

The power of prayer avails for those who belong to the Body (comp. John 13:10). But for those who are separated from the Body for a time or not yet included in it the ordinary exercise of the energy of spiritual sympathy (i.e., prayer) has, so far as we are taught directly, no promise of salutary influence.<sup>1</sup>

He moderates this statement by saying that even though one sees his brother in the sin to death, that is excommunication, John does not command that he pray, but nor does the Apostle prohibit such a prayer.

Barclay objects to this view of excommunication for denial as the sin to death by noting that even Jesus forgave Peter when he denied Him. "As so often happens, Jesus was gentler and more sympathetic and understanding than His own

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<sup>1</sup>Westcott, The Epistles of St. John, p. 200.

Church was."<sup>1</sup> This writer objects that this view speaks of death in a figurative sense, it is not a sin resulting in true death whether spiritual or physical; but in 1 Corinthians 5:5, the key verse in this view, the sin and delivery over to Satan, resulted in real physical death ("for the destruction of his flesh").

### Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

This view usually applies the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to the sin to death, which is considered the "unpardonable" sin because Jesus said it would not be forgiven now or ever, making it eternal sin (Matt 12:31,32; Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:10). Those who take this view seem to confuse this blasphemy with a state or life of unrepentance, rather than as an act of sin by a work spoken (cf. Matt 12:36-37). Law is an example of this confusion, seeing that the original blasphemy of the Holy Spirit was done by adversaries of Christ, he changes the blasphemy to an inward sin of "deliberately outraging the eternal principle of goodness and truth . . . extinguishing the light in their own souls."<sup>2</sup> He carries this switching of meanings to its full end so that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit can become the sin to death by saying, "Within the Church such sin can be manifested only in one certainly recognizable form--deliberate, open-eyed apostasy from

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup>Law, The Tests of Life, p. 141.



Christ."<sup>1</sup> Epp is another who attempts to make the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit by Christ's adversaries fit to Christians of the Church Age today.<sup>2</sup> Although he identifies the sin to death with the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit he has an unusual way of seeing it as physical death instead of spiritual death.<sup>3</sup>

Exell, sensing this change in meaning from the act of sin, blasphemy, to the state of sin as apostasy, objects by pointing out that the sin of blasphemy was done by the Saducees and Pharisees, who were unbelievers and adversaries of Christ, whereas in this view it is made to apply to a Christian brother.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, there is no parallel between the true blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and the sins of saved Christians, no matter how grievous. The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit was a sin which could only have occurred during the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, by which the power that He was able to perform attesting miracles, that is the Holy Spirit, was blasphemed by one who claimed the miracles were performed by Beelzebul, that is Satan (Mark 3:29-30). Therefore, this sin cannot occur in the church because Christ is not on earth working attesting miracles.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Epp, Studies in the General Epistles of John, pp. 106-7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> Exell, First John, p. 454.

### Depression of the Soul

This is a figurative view of spiritual death, which this writer examined as a possible view. It would be some type of emotional or psychological depression of one's heart that would cause him to come close to committing suicide. Possible correlation could be Judges 5:18 where it speaks of people "who despised their lives even to death," or Judges 16:16, "His soul was annoyed (impatient) to death." This writer discounts this possible view because it would seem ludicrous for the Apostle to discourage prayer for a brother in the "sin to death" which is only a depression of his soul; rather that would seem the very time to surely pray for a brother.

### Other Views

#### An Unknown Sin

An unusual view is that of Candlish who avoids identifying the sin to death. His reasoning is,

There is no occasion to be solicitous in attempting to identify any particular sin, or any particular manner of sinning, as what is here said to be "unto death." The attempt, as all experience shows, is as vain as it is presumptuous. And yet, in spite of all experience, the attempt is ever renewed . . . the real and only object of the Apostle is to put in a caveat and lodge a protest against the intrusion into the sacred province of confidential prayer . . . of a tendency . . . to subordinate the divine claims to considerations of human expediency or human pity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Candlish, The First Epistle of John, pp. 520-21.

"Thus, your prayer for your sinning brother may slide insensibly into an apologetic pleading for indulgence to his sin."<sup>1</sup>

While this is an attempt to warn Christians to be cautious in how they pray, it ignores the fact that the "sin to death" really is some type or class of sin being spoken of. It most assuredly was such in the mind of the Apostle John, who wrote in such a way as to bring this distinction of sins to the minds of his readers, making these doctrinal statements, "There is sin to death" and "there is sin not to death." It also seems that the Apostle knew that his readers, at least those of the very early church, knew what he was speaking about by these phrases.

#### Denial of the Text View

A very neat way to dispose of the whole problem of identifying the sin to death is that of Bultmann. He proposed that originally 1 John was written by the author in three parts ending at 5:13; therefore, he concluded that 5:14-21 was an appended ending added later.<sup>2</sup> Though he made a little effort to identify the meaning of the sin to death, he wrote, "The appearance of this theme in 1 John 5:16 clearly demonstrates the character of the appendix,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 519.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, The Johannine Epistles, in Hermeneia, ed. by Robert W. Funk, trans. R. Philip O'Hara, Lane C. McGaughey, Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 2; see also Peter Rhea Jones, "A Structural Analysis of 1 John," RevExp 67:4 (Fall, 1970):436.

i.e., that it is the work of an ecclesiastical redactor."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the verses speaking of these two types of sin were not those of the original author. This view is unacceptable because it denies the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible, and especially here of the book I John, to which this writer ascribes.

#### Summary

After examining the views delineated, described and defined in this chapter the writer has found that he is unable to accept any of them as the proper interpretation of the "sin to death." This is true of both the spiritual death and physical death views as these are so far defined. The views of spiritual death generally must be rejected on theological grounds that these teach a person can lose his salvation, which is contrary to other Scripture. The view of physical death, as these are defined, must be rejected because it is a violation of the context to make the "life given" to be physical life. The writer's own solution to this problem passage is found in the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup>Bultmann, The Johannine Epistles, p. 86.

## CHAPTER III

### THE INTERPRETATION OF THE WRITER

#### Introduction

In order to determine a proper view of the sin to death and its converse, the sin not to death, it is necessary to briefly examine again the key problems inherent within the views taken by most. These key problems are limited to two basic considerations. First is the problem that the context fairly clearly is speaking of spiritual life; and it seems extremely odd, and without reason, that the Apostle would change his meaning for the word ζωή in the midst of his discussion from spiritual, eternal life to mere physical life. The second is that a normal reading of the text appears to be indicating that the death is physical; and if the erring brother is a Christian but the death is spiritual then arises the theological problem that this brother, or any Christian, can lose his eternal life and salvation, which is contrary to teaching throughout the NT.

#### A Faulty Assumption

Most commentators seem to feel this tension between choosing to start from one starting point or the other. They either start with the context as the prime consideration,

determine the life to be spiritual, and work from there, as in the thinking above; or they start with their theology as the important key, see the death as physical, because theologically a Christian is eternally secure and cannot die spiritually again, and thus work toward the life also being physical. Some commentators seem to sense that the true natural reading of the text must involve the life as spiritual and the death as being physical, that these are truly different in nature.<sup>1</sup> Their mistake though is to deny this obvious possibility by making the assumption that the life and death must be "correlative opposites." Their mistaken assumption is understandable; they make it because the verse does mention both life and death, and since one of these--life--is applied to the sinner, it is assumed that the other must be also. But this assumption, by a careful reading of the text, is not necessarily true; and to this writer it is a wrong assumption.

The problem then for these commentators is which to choose first as their starting point. But by the fact of their tension to not see the life and death as different, and by the fact that they attempt to start either one way or the other, spiritual life or physical death, is added

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<sup>1</sup>Alford, Hebrews-Revelation, p. 511; Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments, p. 537; Wuest, In These Last Days, p. 180; and especially Vincent, The Writings of John, p. 371, who strongly asserts these "must correspond," but by his very denial of these as bodily death and spiritual life seems to recognize that these should and would be the proper and normal reading of this verse.

proof that both are right, because each is very obviously and clearly true (at least to one-half or the other).

### The Unasked Question

The failure that their assumption has led them to commit is that they have not asked sufficient questions of the text before they have begun to formulate their interpretations. And there is one very key, yet simple question that they definitely needed to ask and survey, but did not, that is, "Who is it that dies this death?"

In most of Johannine literature the word ζωή--life-- is more often used to speak of spiritual or eternal life. This word would fit this context easily, where it is described as ζωήν αἰώνιον, "eternal life" (vss. 11,13,20). This eternal and spiritual life is to know God and have fellowship with Him (1:3).

This death is clearly the result of the sin, but of what type of death is it, and to whom does it occur? It is usually taken as the consequence to the sinner of the sin, but with a careful reading of the text, that is not necessarily what is being said, nor can it be.

### The Solution

What if there is a way to harmonize these as being physical death and spiritual life? A possible answer, and better, is to take the death as the death to another as a result of sin by the sinner. This would mean that the "sin to death" would involve someone's sin causing the death of

another person, whether by murder or more likely by some type of unintentional murder or manslaughter.

If this is the meaning then this is a sin which can be seen and known (ἑίδειν) by another by its results. Therefore, the one seeing the sin is able to judge it as "to death" without being presumptuous about that judgment.

It also is a sin which an intercessor would not even need to question (ἑρωτάω) God's will (vs. 14) concerning it (οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης). This is because the intercessor would know that the sinner would have to be tried by the civil authorities, disciplined by the Church (if a Christian), and ultimately judged before God (whether at the Bema Seat or the Great White Throne).

It is a sin which may correspond to the truth of 1 John 3:15, "You know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." The doctrinal statement, "There is sin to death" does not say that it is the sin of a brother, as does the sin not to death.<sup>1</sup> This may be why life (in the sense of restoration and renewed fellowship of one already regenerate) is said to be given to the sin not to death, yet is not to the other sin (which most likely has been done by one who is yet unregenerate).

The accusative noun θάνατον, and the preposition πρὸς which modifies θάνατον, still show the death as the result of a sin. But in this view it is not inflicted upon the sinner but to another.

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<sup>1</sup>cf. Boyer, "Johannine Epistles," p. 87.



Boice, Law and Westcott agree that this was a common phrase understood in John's day.<sup>1</sup> Is it not possible that the phrase "sin to death" was a synonym then for murder or causing the death of another?

#### Life and the Sin Not to Death

Whereas the sin to death is physical death to another by some type of murder or other sin, then the sin not to death would be any sin not causing the death of another. This then would be a very broad category of sins, but as such, could be seen and known by a brother as not being a sin to death for which he automatically would feel free to pray (αἰτῆσαι). It is a sin for which God's will may yet be the forgiveness of the natural consequence.

If the sin not to death is the sin of a Christian brother it is a sin for which spiritual life (knowing God and being in fellowship) may be restored or increased, that is, life is given to the brother. Steele says this is "not life restored (i.e. salvation) but life invigorated."<sup>2</sup> Boice elaborates, "If the brother is a true Christian brother, then he is already alive spiritually; and the prayer would be, not so much that God would give him spiritual life, but that he might have life in abundance, as we

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<sup>1</sup>Boice, The Epistles of John, p. 172; Law, The Tests of Life, p. 138; Westcott, The Epistles of St. John, p. 199.

<sup>2</sup>Steele, Half Hours with St. John's Epistle, p. 143.

might say."<sup>1</sup> Thus, this is a view for which spiritual life still fits the context of chapter five.

If the seeing brother "experiences" (ἐδῆ)<sup>2</sup> the sin against himself, it is a sin not to death (simply because he is not dead), and he is still able to pray for the one who offended or abused him. In this case the one sinned against is yet encouraged by the Lord to pray for his sinning brother (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:28). And in a similar way to the sin to death it still speaks of the result of the sin as occurring to another, i.e., the offended brother, rather than as consequences of the sin back upon the sinner.

#### Questions of Context and Theology

By this interpretation the writer is able to fit both of the seeming needs of the context, for physical death and for spiritual life. He is able also to solve several theological problems which normally occur in other views.

One usual question is how can a brother lose his salvation if the death is a spiritual death? But it is not speaking of the death of the sinner, whether it be spiritual or physical death. Notice that the writer's view of this verse does not say that a murderer, or one causing the death of another by a "sin to death," is not savable. 1 John 3:15 only says that a murderer does not

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<sup>1</sup>Boice, The Epistles of John, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup>See Chapter One, page 16, for the possible meanings of ἐδῶν.

have eternal life abiding in him at that time; it does not say he is unsavable or unpardonable.

Another question usually raised is how can an interceding brother know whether the erring brother committed a sin to death or a sin not to death? The objections raised against anyone having the ability to possess a true final knowledge of the distinction between these types of sin are other questions like, "How can one know if it is horrible or gross enough sin?" and "How can one know if this present illness as divine chastisement will really lead to death or not?" But if the death here is the physical death of another caused by sin, then the intercessor is fully able to determine the sin as a sin to death. In fact, this is the best explanation of all the views as to how the interceding brother can know it is a sin to death.

It also answers the question of "Why the difference in the types of asking?" For the sin not to death the praying brother will naturally "pray, seek or beseech" (αἰτέω) God for the restoration and increase of his brother's spiritual life back to the road of spiritual growth and maturity. But for a sin to death he need not even question (ἐρωτάω) God to find out what God's will is about this brother, knowing that the sinner must face the judgments of the civil authorities, of the church, and finally of God; yet he is not forbidden to pray (αἰτέω) for his brother.

Most of all, this interpretation of the writer fits to the whole context of I John. The book speaks of knowing the truth, of having eternal life, and knowing and having fellowship with God. The book sets these forth as tests of the true Christian life, tests of the one truly born of God. One of these tests is that a Christian will pray (αἰτήσῃ) for his erring brother. Perhaps, in a real sense, it is the greatest test of the Christian life.

## CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this thesis to investigate and determine the proper interpretation and meaning of the phrase "sin to death" and its difference from a "sin not to death." The proper interpretation will have the same calming effect upon the fears of Christians who have sinned that 1 John 5:16 was originally meant to have by the Apostle John. The Apostle meant by this verse to reassure Christians that if they sinned, that when their Christian brother interceded for them the prayers would be answered, resulting in the sinning brother receiving restoration and increase in his spiritual life toward maturity and fellowship with God. This thesis has given that understanding of the verse which achieves that calming of fears; fears which are often heightened, not calmed, by the views held by most commentators.

The writer has shown the usual method of interpreting these verses has been mere correlation with other verses. This has been seen to be an insufficient method by itself, since often a full exegesis of the verses has been ignored.

The writer has shown that the key to many views of the sin to death has been the assumption that the "life given" and the death are "correlative opposites." He has

proven this assumption is wrong, especially since it creates more contextual, exegetical and theological problems than it solves. It has also been shown that previous commentators have failed to do a complete exegesis, especially by failing to ask the simple question, "Who is it that suffers this death?"

It is that simple question which has allowed this writer to posit the view that the life and death in these verses are not of the same nature, the life being the renewed spiritual life of the sinning brother, while the death is the physical death of another caused by the sin of the sinner. It is this point at which this writer's view departs from the exegetical presuppositions of all previous interpretations.

Again it must be pointed out that a wise rule for exegesis is that the interpretation which offers or leaves the least number of problems, and which solves the most number of problems, is the most acceptable view. The writer believes his interpretation does fulfill that principle, because it exegetically cannot be destroyed by the verses themselves, while it makes the best sense of them contextually, theologically and exegetically.

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