

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UNPARDONABLE SIN  
AND THE SIN UNTO DEATH

by

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The "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" and the "sin unto death" are similar judgments of woe. Wherever they are mentioned in Scripture, the air is gloomy and fearful.

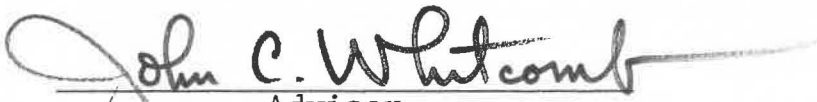
In chapter one the meaning of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" has been examined. From this, it is seen that the initial concepts of blasphemy (as seen in 1. Hebrew words and their meaning; 2. The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; 3. Classical Greek literature; and 4. New Testament words) all basically point to some form of dishonoring or reviling of the name, being, or work of God by word or action. Also from this investigation, the major alternative interpretations (i.e., 1. Apocryphal statement view; 2. Jesus' use of hyperbole view; 3. Jesus was mistaken view; 4. A dispensational sin view; 5. The unpardonable sin equals the "sin unto death" view; and 6. Attributing God's work to Satan view) of the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" are examined and set forth as incorrect or inferior views.

After this, consideration is then given to the most logical and consistent understanding of this perplexing issue. It is seen that the nature of this sin carries an eternal consequence of damnation, specifically to the reprobate who so hardens himself against the goodness and gracious mercy of God that he reaches a state where he is incapable of ever repenting. It was concluded, then, from this, that this grave error ought to be an enormous impetus which stirs every Christian to unceasingly and repeatedly plead with the lost, to repent of their sinful state of rebellion before it is forever too late.

In the second and final chapter, John's reference to "sin unto death" is specifically examined and is found to be a stern admonition to believers only, who continue in (this continuance is seen to be an exception, the only exception, to John's entire thrust throughout his epistle, that is, that Christians cannot habitually sin) a state of conscious overt sin. This admonition warned these people against sinning to the point of no return, to the point where physical death would be God's way of dealing with them. It is also seen, that this stern judgment of woe ought to be a spiritual impetus to obedience for every Christian who commits what he knows to be against the revealed will of God.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ANF	The Ante-Nicene Fathers
APOT	R. H. Charles (ed.), <u>Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament</u>
BAG	Bauer, W.; Arndt, W. F.; and Gingrich, F. W. <u>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</u>
BDB	Brown, F.; Driver, S. R.; and Briggs, C. A. <u>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</u>
BJRL	Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester
BSac	Bibliotheca Sacra
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CBTEL	<u>Cyclopaedia of Biblical Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature</u> . 12 vols. Edited by John McClintock and James Strong.
CGTC	Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary
CIBPI	<u>Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation</u> . Edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975.
CW	Turner, Nigel. <u>Christian Words</u> . Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980.
DNTT	<u>Dictionary of New Testament Theology</u> . Edited by Colin Brown.
DSBS	<u>Daily Study Bible Series</u> . Edited by William Barclay.
EncJud	Encyclopaedia Judaica
ExpTim	Expository Times

HDB	Hastings, James, editor. <u>Dictionary of the Bible</u> . 5 vols. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1909.
HERE	Hastings, James, editor. <u>Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics</u> . 12 vols. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1926.
HNTC	Harper's NT Commentaries
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
IB	Interpreter's Bible
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	Buttrick, G. A., editor. <u>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</u> .
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
KB	L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, <u>Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros</u>
LPGL	G. W. H. Lampe, <u>Patristic Greek Lexicon</u>
LSJ	Liddell-Scott-Jones, <u>Greek English Lexicon</u>
LXX	Septuagint
MNTC	Moffatt NT Commentary
NASV	New American Standard Bible. (All Scripture citations taken from this version unless otherwise so indicated.)
NCE	M. R. P. Fuller, <u>et al.</u> (eds.), <u>New Catholic Encyclopedia</u> .
NCB	New Century Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NovT	Novum Testamentum
NTS	New Testament Studies
PCB	M. Black and H. H. Rowley (eds.). <u>Peake's Commentary on the Bible</u> .

<u>Re-ISBE</u>	<u>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.</u> Revised edition. Edited by G. W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979.
ReformRe	Reformation Review
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SHERK	Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <u>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.</u>
TDOT	G. J. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds.), <u>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.</u>
TNTC	<u>Tyndale New Testament Commentary.</u> Edited by R. V. G. Tasker.
TWOT	<u>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament.</u> Edited by Laird Harris. Chicago: Moody Press, 1981.
UBSGNT	United Bible Societies Greek New Testament
ZPEB	<u>Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible.</u> 5 vols. Edited by Merrill C. Tenney. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975.

## INTRODUCTION

Because of the serious deficiency in the realm of theological scholarship relating to "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28, 29; Luke 12:10) and John's use of "sin unto death" (1 John 5:16, 17), man in general finds himself insufficiently informed of these crucial concepts because of: 1) their important emergence in Scripture, 2) the scope and severity of their meaning, and 3) the quality of life they are intended to enhance in the lives of unregenerates, as well as Christians.

Because of this sore insufficiency by various men, arising undoubtedly because of the sheer difficulty of these two issues,<sup>1</sup> this writer has chosen to confront them through a literal-historical-grammatical hermeneutic, as his presuppositional basis. It is the belief of this writer also, that it is precisely for this reason (i.e., their careless treatment and importance) that experts of sound exegetical

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene W. Daily senses a little of this difficulty in, "A Study of Blasphemy in the Gospels" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1947), p. 3; when he states that, "There are many reasons why scholars have not dealt with this topic. . . . The pertinent material in primary sources is scarce. The passages in which the word occurs reveal little of its true meaning, and several of the texts present unsolved problems with reference to the true situation. The word does not occur at all in the Greek papyri which has shed so much light on many other disputed messages in the New Testament."



and expository persuasions need to delve into them to examine and evaluate their sorely mishandled and spiritually needed implications.

The aim of this work will be to approach both topics as different and separate pronouncements of woe; at the same time however, it will be evident that similarities do exist between them. Attention is first turned in Chapter One to the ". . . troublesome section in the Synoptic Gospels . . ." (i.e. Matthew 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:10) where both "laymen and scholars . . ." have long occasioned difficulty<sup>1</sup> ". . . dealing with the unforgivable sin."<sup>2</sup> From this examination it will be evident that, were it not for the confusion occasioned by the various opinions of men, a few words might have sufficiently explained the nature of this awful sin.<sup>3</sup>

The various theories of major importance will be set forth and shown to be exegetically and theologically lacking,

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<sup>1</sup>This difficulty has so often aroused serious attention, that Alexander states: "This passage (i.e. Matt 12:31, 32), and its parallels in Luke and Mark, has been always and unanimously reckoned one of the most shocking and alarming in the word of God. . . ." But then he carefully adds, ". . . it acquires a new solemnity and terror when considered in its true connection with what goes before, and not as a mere insulated and detached expression of a mysterious and fearful truth." Joseph Addison Alexander, The Gospel According To Matthew, reprint ed. (Lynchburg: James Family Christian Publishers, n.d.), p. 340.

<sup>2</sup>James G. Williams, "A Note On The 'Unforgivable Sin' Logion," NTS 12:1 (1965):75.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Franklin, "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost: An Inquiry into the Scriptural Teaching Regarding the Unpardonable Sin," BSac 93:370 (April, 1936):219.

in consistency with good hermeneutical methodology. These views will be seen to be inferior to the view championed by this writer. This writer believes that "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" is a sin which carries an eternal consequence of damnation to the unregenerate who so hardens himself against God's salvific grace, that he eventually reaches a state where he is incapable of repentance. It will be concluded from this study, that this grave error ought to be a forceful impetus to every Christian to unceasingly plead with the lost to repent of their hardened state before their opportunity no longer remains.

Attention will then be given in Chapter Two to the "sin unto death" referred to in 1 John 5:16, 17 (in distinction from similar incidents in Scripture, such as Lev 10:1-7; Num 16; Jos 7:1-26; 2 Sam 6:7; Acts 5:1-11, 12:23; 1 Cor 5:1-5, 11:30; 2 Cor 2:6-8; etc.). This sin will be seen to be a stern admonition to believers only, who continue in a state of conscious overt sin to the point where physical death is God's way of dealing with them.<sup>1</sup> It will finally be seen, that this stern pronouncement ought to be a great spiritual impetus to obedience, for every Christian who practices what he knows to be against the revealed will of God.

This writer would like to express his warmest thanks of appreciation and gratitude to all those who took the time

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<sup>1</sup>The reader must keep in mind that the Scriptures do address unbelievers who have committed this sin. In distinction from this though, John is strictly addressing Christians in his brief epistle. See the below discussion under the title, "Born Again Believer," for adequate support.

out of their demanding schedules to answer questions through correspondence to help instruct him on various paths throughout this study. In alphabetical order many thanks go to C. K. Barrett, Fredrick F. Bruce, Charles E. B. Cranfield, Oscar Cullmann, Mitchell Dahood, James D. G. Dunn, Walter Harrelson, William Hendriksen, Ernst Kasemann, I. Howard Marshall, Leon Morris, C. F. D. Moule, Rudolf Schnackenburg, Hans Joachim Stoebe, Merrill C. Tenney, Thomas F. Torrance, Nigel Turner, and Yigael Yadin. Thanks are also due to Dr. James L. Boyer, Dr. Charles R. Smith and Dr. John C. Whitcomb for their personal advice and leadership towards this endeavor. But above all, I want to express my love and appreciation to my mother and father for their help, support, and encouragement, and even more so I want to praise and thank my Lord and God, for His bountiful and overflowing patience and loving-kindness. May He in some way be pleased with this project.

## CHAPTER I

### BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT

#### Initial Concepts of Blasphemy

Blasphemy as a sin and an ecclesiastical offense is peculiar to the Jewish and the Christian religion and to various monotheistic cults.<sup>1</sup> In English the term is an Anglicized form of the Greek word βλασφημία<sup>2</sup> and is specifically applied to the "dishonoring and reviling of the name, being, or work of God by word or action."<sup>3</sup> "The conception that such an act is a crime may be traced back to Judaism, whose code imposed death by stoning as a punishment (Lev. xxxiv, 15-16; Matt. xxvi, 65; John x, 33)."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>HERE, s.v. "Blasphemy," by W. F. Cobb, Vol. II, p. 669.

<sup>2</sup>CBTEL, s.v. "Blasphemy," by John McClintock and James Strong, Vol. I, p. 830.

<sup>3</sup>IDB, s.v. "Blasphemy," by S. J. DeVries, Vol. I, p. 445. Beyer is correct when he writes that: "βλασφημία is always the act committed in βλασφημεῖν, βλάσφημος the quality either of the doer or his attitude." TDNT, s.v. "βλασφημέω, βλασφημία, βλάσφημος," by H. W. Beyer, Vol. I, p. 621. In its broadest sense blasphemy could be defined as "irreverence in speaking of sacred matters," whether with reference to God or to an object. See Webster's Dictionary, American Edition. Edited by John Gage Allee (Ottenheimer Pub., Inc., 1977), p. 44.

<sup>4</sup>SHERK, s.v. "Blasphemy," by Paul Hinschius, p. 197. Adeney adds that blasphemy ". . . is derived as to its second element from φῆμη, speech, but the etymology of the first element is still quite uncertain, opinions being divided

## Hebrew Words and Their Meaning

In the Old Testament<sup>1</sup> "blasphemy" is a translation for basically five biblical words which set forth the connotation of demeaning the sovereignty of God Almighty.<sup>2</sup> The most common of these words is הָלַל, meaning "to revile," and/or "hurl insults."<sup>3</sup> The next most common term is יָסַל which means "to despise," and/or "show disrespect toward"

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among βλάπτω 'I injure' (the form would then, properly, be βλαψιφημία), βλάξ 'slack' . . . , βάλλω 'I hit in throwing . . . , and φαῦλος 'worthless.'" HDB, s.v. "Blasphemy," by W. F. Adeney, p. 305.

<sup>1</sup>Though the concept of blasphemy is not unique to the Hebrew milieu, an extensive study of parallel cognates and usages is unnecessary to this writer's purpose. It may be simply stated that "the Egyptian Book of the Dead uses the root ṣḏt, which likewise means "to defile," for the reviling of a deity (125:38 [?], 42). Akk. tapālu D (e.g., in Gila. Vi.159) has a similar meaning." TDOT, s.v. "הָלַל," by Gerhard Wallis, Vol. II, p. 418. Concerning a Ugaritic parallel, Dahood states "that Ugaritic thus far has not furnished a similar phrase that would shed light on the biblical expression." Mitchell Dahood, Personal Correspondence from Rome, Italy, Sept. 24, 1981.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Rees adds that "in the OT the penalty for blasphemy against God is death by stoning (Lev. 24:16; cf. Jn. 10:33; Acts 6f. . . )." Re-ISBE, s.v. "Blasphemy," by Thomas Rees, p. 521. For an excellent discussion concerning the rules for the penalty of a blasphemer in the OT, consult C. K. Barrett, The New Testament Background: Selected Documents (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), pp. 169-72.

<sup>3</sup>ZPEB, s.v. "Blasphemy," by W. White, p. 624. See also BDB, p. 154; and KB, p. 172. Elmer B. Smick adds that "The classic illustration of this is in the parallel passages in II Kgs. 19:22 and Isa. 37:23. There the servants of the king of Assyria stood outside the walls of Jerusalem and preached a whole sermon of blasphemy in the Hebrew language against the God of Israel." TWOT, s.v. "Blasphemy," by Elmer B. Smick, p. 152; see also, Marcus Jastrow, comp., A Dictionary of the Targumin, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature, Vol. I (New York: Pardes Publishing House, Inc., 1950), p. 214.

someone.<sup>1</sup> A set of three lesser terms is also found, 1) חרף which literally means "to taunt" or "reproach,"<sup>2</sup> 2) קרב means "to despise," and is frequently employed in the context, "to curse,"<sup>3</sup> 3) ברכ is a common Hebrew word for "bless" which is used euphemistically for "cursing" when the mere usage of a term to curse would constitute blasphemy<sup>4</sup> (1 Kgs 21:10, 13; Job 1:5, 11).<sup>5</sup>

### The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

The non-canonical Jewish literature between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. reveals that the meaning of blasphemy carried essentially the identical connotation as the Old Testament words. In the Apocrypha, there are thirteen usages: eight in 2 Maccabees, and one each in 2 Esdras, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Bel and the Dragon, and 1 Maccabees.<sup>6</sup> And in the Pseudepigrapha, Charles only cites six references: two in

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<sup>1</sup>BDB, pp. 610, 11; and KB, pp. 585, 86.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 357, 58; and Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 866; and Ibid., p. 819.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 138; and Ibid., pp. 153, 54. See also Sheldon H. Blank, "The Curse, Blasphemy, The Spell and The Oath." HUCA, XXIII:1 (1950-51), pp. 83, 84.

<sup>5</sup>White, ZPBE, p. 629. White gives an excellent discussion of each of the five terms employed.

<sup>6</sup>Edwin Hatch and Henry Redpath, A Concordance to the Septuagint and other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books). Vol. I (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1897), p. 221. They cite the following references: 2 Macc 8:4; 9:28; 10:4, 34, 36; 12:14; 15:24; 2 Esdras 1:23; Wisdom of Sol 1:6; Sirach 3:16; Bel and the Dragon 9; 1 Macc 2:6.

Fragments of a Zadokite Work, and four in 1 Enoch; Section V.<sup>1</sup> It is safe to say then, that all of these non-canonical works present blasphemy as evil speaking against God, or as an approach against God or sacred things, which can be committed either by speech or deed.

### Classical Greek Literature

In classical Greek, βλασφημία appears in a weaker sense as "mockery," "reviling" or "slander" and is usually directed against a human person.<sup>2</sup> It is also presented as "profane speech of sacred things," "rashly offered prayers," "ill speech," "impious speech," and "speech of evil omens."<sup>3</sup> "One might, for instance, chance to pray for something disastrous, instead of a good, and that was 'blasphemy.'<sup>4</sup>"

Nevertheless, the words for blasphemy cover evil speaking generally for all of the orators of classical Greece, and "Lucian refers to 'whole cart-loads of abuses' under the word blasphem̄ia."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> APOT, Vol. II, 14:8 and 1 Enoch 91:7, 11; 94:9; 96:7.

<sup>2</sup> IBD, s.v. "Blasphemy," by S. J. DeVries, p. 445.

<sup>3</sup> LSJ, p. 317. See also Re-ISBE, p. 521.

<sup>4</sup> Nigel Turner, CW, p. 46. Turner cites in fn. 48 the works of Plato and Demosthenes as prime examples. They are: Republic 381E, Laws 800C; Alcibiades II 149C. Demosthenes XXV:26. For further study consult TDNT, s.v. "βλασφημέω," by H. W. Beyer.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## New Testament Words

"In the New Testament the concept of blasphemy is controlled throughout by the thought of violation of the power and majesty of God."<sup>1</sup> In its less heinous aspect, blasphemy is still, as in secular Greek, malice, clamour, railing, slander, rudeness and abuse, "speech injurious to another's good name,"<sup>2</sup> but the three words used in the New Testament (i.e., βλασφημία, βλασφημέω, and βλάσφημος) now indicate a different kind of impiety--the reviling of Jesus while upon the Cross and today in the Church Age, ". . . the very sin which the unregenerate Saul had urged Christians to, and for which they are rightly handed over to Satan, the sin which their own persecutors commit, blaspheming at Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Blasphemy may be directed immediately against God (Acts 6:11; Rev 13:6; 16:11, 21), against God's name (Rom 2:24, quoting Isa 52:5 LXX; 1 Tim 6:1; Rev 16:9), against Christ (Matt 9:3; Luke 5:21; John 10:33),<sup>4</sup> against the Holy

<sup>1</sup>TDNT, s.v. "βλασφημία," by H. W. Beyer. J. A. Fallon adds that "βλασφημία (also in verbal and adjectival form) means 'revilement,' 'slander,' or 'railing' with men as object . . . ," NCE, s.v. "Blasphemy," by J. A. Fallon, p. 607.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Chicago: American Book Company, 1886), p. 102. See also LSJ, pp. 317, 18.

<sup>3</sup>Turner, CW, p. 47. See also BAG, pp. 142-43.

<sup>4</sup>LPGL, p. 299. Lampe sees blasphemy against Christ as essentially "blasphemy against the whole Trinity. . . ." R. L. Harris adds that "Christ was repeatedly charged with blasphemy by those who rejected his claims to deity, and this was the final point in his trial before the Sanhedrin (Mark 16:64)." "Blasphemy," Baker's Dictionary of Theology. Edited by Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 98.



Spirit (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28f.; Luke 12:10), "against the Word of God (Tit 2:5), against Moses and God and therefore against the bearer of revelation in the Law (Acts 6:11)."<sup>1</sup> From these passages it appears that any expression was considered blasphemous which was wrathfully, despitefully, or contemptuously aimed against God Himself, ". . . His being, or goodness, which arrogated His attributes for a creature which opposed a truth revealed by Him or opposed an institution<sup>2</sup> of which He was the author."<sup>3</sup>

#### Incorrect Interpretations<sup>4</sup>

The synoptic gospels all record the occasion when the Lord Jesus was accused of casting out demons by the

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<sup>1</sup>TDNT, s.v. "βλασφημία," by H. W. Beyer. See LPGL, p. 299, for many more similar examples.

<sup>2</sup>"When directed against spiritual authorities . . . , it approximates blasphemy against God (Acts 13:34; 18:6; 2 Pet 2:10-12; Jude 8-10)." IBD, s.v. "Blasphemy," by S. J. DeVries.

<sup>3</sup>HERE, s.v. "Blasphemy," by W. F. Cobb.

<sup>4</sup>An erroneous view that will not be dealt with in the main body of this paper, because of its theological absurdity and infrequency, is the typical Patristic Interpretational view. "Patristic interpretation saw in blasphemy against the Son of man the pre-baptismal sin of the heathen committed in ignorance, whereas blasphemy against the Spirit was a witting act of apostasy by the baptised and as such incapable of forgiveness." Marshall, Commentary on Luke, IGTC, p. 517. See: Lampe, LPGL, p. 299, for references to such works. Two contemporary writers who are sympathetic to this view (and there are very few), are C. K. Barrett, The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 105-17; and A. J. B. Higgins, Jesus and the Son of Man (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), p. 130f. See also: TDNT, s.v. "πνεῦμα, πνευματικός," by Eduard Schweizer, VI:397, 405.

prince of demons (Matt 12:22-32; Mark 3:22-30; Luke 14-23). The charge led to a statement by Jesus that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was unforgivable, a statement which has led to much misunderstanding throughout Church history.<sup>1</sup> It seems that many well-meaning men have honestly attempted to unravel the difficulty but have tended to major on a portion or one aspect of the issue instead of the whole. The following views are examples of this very fact.

#### Apocryphal Statement

As Bundy writes, "This pronouncement (i.e., Jesus' stern words to the Pharisees) on the unpardonable sin cannot be accepted as an authentic utterance of Jesus, because it limits the divine forgiveness in a purely dogmatic fashion, the only such instance in Jesus' extensive teaching on this theme in the Synoptic tradition."<sup>2</sup> Robin Scroggs likewise agrees with Bundy as he writes that, "Whatever the original saying may have been, it can hardly be an authentic utterance of Jesus." He adds that, "Apart from textual

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Guthrie, New Testament Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), p. 521. See also Barnard Franklin, "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost: An Inquiry into the Scriptural Teaching Regarding the Unpardonable Sin," pp. 219-23.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Bundy, Jesus and the First Three Gospels (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 212. One may also add M. Eugene Boring's article, "The Unforgivable Sin Logion Mark III:28-29/Matt. XII:31-32/Luke XII:10: Formal Analysis and History of the Tradition," in NovT XVII:4 (1976), pp. 358-79, to this same understanding. Even though Boring does not boldly come right out and admit to this view, his "ifs" and weak position speak for themselves. Consult also: James G. Williams, "A Note On the 'Unforgivable Sin' Logion," pp. 75-77.

considerations, the saying against blasphemy of the Spirit does not fit Jesus' view of forgiveness."<sup>1</sup>

Because of the strong textual support<sup>2</sup> behind each appearance of the "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit" motif in the synoptics, an extensive refutation of this particular view is unnecessary. That all three appearances (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28, 29; Luke 12:10) are indeed authentic is beyond doubt in any fair court of appeal.

### Jesus' Use of a Hyperbole

It is a startling thing to find warnings about an unforgivable sin on the lips of Jesus, the Saviour of men. So shocking is this that there have been some who wished to take away the sharp definiteness of the meaning. There are some who argue that this is only another example of that expressive Eastern way of saying things, as, for example, when the Lord Jesus said that a man must hate father and mother truly to be His disciple, and that this is not to be

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Scroggs, "The Exaltation of the Spirit by Some Early Christians," JBL LXXXIV:4 (1965), p. 361. Scroggs is incorrect when he makes reference to Eduard Schweizer as a supporter of his view; see TDNT, s.v. "πνεῦμα, πνευματικός," by Eduard Schweizer. Others who are sympathetic to Scroggs' interpretation are, B. Harvie Branscomb, The Gospel of Mark, MNTC (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937), p. 74; and John Knox, "The Gospel According to Luke," in vol. 8 of IB, p. 224. Knox states that, "It seems unlike Jesus to think of any sin as unforgivable. . . ." For a convincing argument as to why the synoptic sections dealing with the unpardonable sin should remain as part of genuine canon, see: T. W. Manson, The Sayings of Jesus (London: SCM Press LTD, 1950), pp. 109-10.

<sup>2</sup> See the textual apparatus in UBSGNT, 3rd edition, pp. 44, 132, 263.

understood in all its terrible literalness, but simply means that 'sin against the Holy Spirit' is a supremely terrible sin.<sup>1</sup>

In support of this view, Alan Hugh McNeile states, "If the Lord spoke as a Jew to Jews, and used a type of expression current in His day, and derived from the O.T., He meant, and would be understood to mean, no more than that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, by whose power He worked, was a terrible sin,--more terrible than blasphemy against man."<sup>2</sup> McNeile is blatantly saying that Jesus purposely stretched the blasphemy issue for greater effect.<sup>3</sup> Owen E. Evans is perceptive when he writes that "this interpretation is based upon the view that Jesus' language reflects Jewish 'custom of securing emphasis by means of some form of over-statement or hyperbole.'"<sup>4</sup> McNeile's appeal to Rabbinical oratorical techniques, and to the Old Testament scriptures in particular, is a precarious move; the fact that "In Jewish

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<sup>1</sup>William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew Vol. II, DSBS (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>Alan Hugh McNeile, The Gospel According to St. Matthew (London: MacMillan and Co., 1915), p. 179.

<sup>3</sup>Though it is well attested that Jesus did use hyperboles in many instances (e.g. Matt 7:3-5; Mark 8:36; Luke 14:26, etc.), the greater consensus of interpreters do not agree with McNeile in this instance.

<sup>4</sup>Owen E. Evans, "The Unforgivable Sin," ExpTim 68 (1957), p. 242. Evans in fn. 6, cites C. J. Cadoux's work, The Historic Mission of Jesus, p. 202, as a supporter of McNeile's peculiar view.

phraseology serious sin was often spoken of as unpardonable"<sup>1</sup> does not substantially support or prove that sin was never, in any circumstances, "actually regarded as being unpardonable--and it is possible that some at least of the passages cited by McNeile mean literally what they say."<sup>2</sup> Attempts of this sort to whittle down the severity of these solemn warnings by suggesting that they are simply hyperboles, "are not wise: the note of solemn warning in the teaching of Jesus is too persistent"<sup>3</sup> (e.g. Matt 15:41-46, Mark 9:42-48).

### Jesus Was Mistaken

Relying heavily upon the kenotic theory limitation, Thomas Rees wrestles with apparent discrepancies in Jesus' harsh pronouncement upon the Pharisees. Rees believes that "the only alternative seems to be to call the kenotic theory into service, and to put this idea (i.e., that this particular sin of the Pharisees could not be forgiven) among the human limitations which Christ assumed when He became

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<sup>1</sup>McNeile, The Gospel According to St. Matthew, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup>Evans, "The Unpardonable Sin," p. 243. Evans continues his correct denunciation of McNeile's precarious view: "Moreover, this treatment of 'will not be forgiven' as a mere hyperbolic expression hardly does justice to the sharp contrast implied between the two members of the parallelism. It is difficult to avoid the impression that this whittling down of the force of the saying is a rather desperate expedient, to be approached with caution, and adopted only if the plain meaning of Jesus' words proves quite incapable of reasonable exegesis in the light of His teaching as a whole," p. 243.

<sup>3</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, The Gospel According to St. Mark, CGTC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 142.

flesh."<sup>1</sup> Rees prefers this view because, "It is less difficult to ascribe a limit to Jesus Christ's knowledge than to God's saving grace (Mark 13:32; cf. John 16:12, 13)."<sup>2</sup>

Like the other above views, this view meddles too far into the hypothetical. This type of manipulation is reminiscent of the Alexandrian mentality and even reveals overtones of Bultmannian heresy.<sup>3</sup> To say that Jesus revealed His kenotic limitations here, is in essence saying that He was mistaken in His assessment of this sin.

#### The Unpardonable Sin is Sin Unto Death

The unpardonable sin is commonly related to or equated with the "sin unto death" spoken of by the Apostle John (1 John 5:16, 17). Hendriksen writes that "The 'sin unto death' is the unpardonable sin. . . . The sin is unpardonable because those who commit it refuse to tread the path that leads to pardon, namely, the path of genuine PENITENCE. In ONE WORD, THE SIN UNTO DEATH (or UNPARDONABLE SIN) IS IMPENITENCE."<sup>4</sup> Cole is a little more hesitant to equate the

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<sup>1</sup>ISBE, s.v. "Blasphemy," by Thomas Rees, 1:486.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>I.e., Demythologizing God's Holy Word.

<sup>4</sup>William Hendriksen, Personal Correspondence from Boynton Beach, Florida, April 2, 1981. See also F. F. Bruce, The Epistles of John (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1970), pp. 125, 132, n. 21. Another advocate of this view is Francisco Turretino. He states that John's reference to "sin unto death" ". . . can be no other than a sin against the Holy Spirit." Francisco Turretino, Theological Institutes, reprint ed. (Michigan: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1980), p. 253.

two, but he writes that, "There is forgiveness with God for every sin and blasphemy except one, which seems to be the deadly sin of which John speaks so cautiously in I John v. 16."<sup>1</sup> Nigel Turner also equates these two heinous sins. He writes that, "The Sin unto Death, which I have assumed to be the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost which shall not be forgiven (Mt 12), Mark's eternal sin (2), cutting one off from repentance and forgiveness, wilfully rejecting Christ. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Turner goes on to state that he sees some resemblance between the Synoptic phenomenon of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the "sin unto death" mentioned in 1 John 5:16-17, and the Hebrews 6:4-6 passage here. He writes that

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<sup>1</sup> R. A. Cole, "The Gospel According to Mark," TNTC, vol. 2, p. 85. (Emphasis mine.) Law is not so sure about his position either when he writes concerning these two issues. He states that, "In the New Testament there is allusion to two sins (i.e., sin unto death and the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit), if they are two, by which this dreadful condition is fulfilled." Robert Law, The Tests of Life: A Study of The First Epistle of St. John (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 140. (Emphasis mine.) See also C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), p. 393, he writes: "Concerning this sin (i.e., blasphemy of the Holy Spirit) we have three parallel passages in the synoptic gospels, a passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and one in the First Epistle of St. John. These passages are the real seat of doctrine for the sin against the Holy Ghost."

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Turner, Personal Correspondence from Cambridge, England, August 30, 1981. One may also place Lenski in this same category, for he writes that, ". . . the sin against the Holy Ghost may be committed, not only by former believers (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31; I John 5:16), . . ." R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel (Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), p. 483. (Emphasis mine.) For a like discussion, see: Augustus Hopkins Strong, Systematic Theology (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976), pp. 650-52.



the unpardonable sin ". . . recalls very strongly to mind the sin of those who were once enlightened and fell away, whom it is impossible to renew again to repentance (Heb 6)."<sup>1</sup> Though many men, like Turner,<sup>2</sup> associate the unpardonable sin passages and the "sin unto death" passage with Hebrews 6:4-6, the inherent qualities of each context reveal their differences. For instance, Hebrews 6:4-6 does not provide a solution for understanding the "sin unto death" in 1 John 5:16, for nowhere in 1 John are the specific concepts of this Hebrews passage discussed in any detail.<sup>3</sup> Also, the language of John does not afford pertinent data for pronouncing these similar woes one and the same.<sup>4</sup> In like manner, the same could be said of the Synoptic passages which deal with the unpardonable sin issue. The contexts and the occasions are against this view in both instances.

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<sup>1</sup>Turner, *Ibid.* Vincent Taylor in Forgiveness And Reconciliation (London: MacMillan and Co., LTD, 1956), p. 164, is hesitant to go as far as Turner when he writes: "What the 'sin unto death' may be is uncertain. Possibly it is apostasy (cf. Heb. vi.4-6), possibly against the Holy Spirit; but we do not know."

<sup>2</sup>Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospels, p. 393; Alan Richardson, An Introduction To The Theology of the New Testament (New York: Harper and Brothers Pub., 1958), pp. 107-09; C. H. Dodd, "The Johannine Epistles," in MNTC (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), p. 136; and Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Company, 1950), pp. 571-72.

<sup>3</sup>David M. Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of I John 5:16-17." In Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation. Edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 235. (Hereafter cited as Current Issues).

<sup>4</sup>CBTEL, s.v. "Blasphemy," by John McClintock and James Strong, p. 831.



### Attributing God's Power to Satan

"The particular offense, which is called bláspheming against the Spirit in the gospels, is attributing Jesus' power of exorcism to Beelzebul, the prince of the demons, as though Jesus Himself were possessed of an unclean spirit."<sup>1</sup>

"It is this and nothing else, that our Lord calls the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Scripture leaves no doubt about it."<sup>2</sup> "The occasion on which Christ introduced his mention of it . . . , the subsequent context, and, above all, the words of Mark 3:30 ('because they said, He hath an unclean spirit'), clearly indicate that the sin in question consisted in attributing the miracles wrought by Christ, or His apostles in His name, to the agency of Satan."<sup>3</sup>

It is evident, that the men of this persuasion believe that a "distinction is made between Christ's other acts and those which manifestly reveal the Holy Spirit in

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<sup>1</sup>ZPEB, s.v. "The Holy Spirit," by Paul K. Jewett. It is wise to state here that it is possible to attribute God's power to Satan today, because the work of the Holy Spirit is just as real and just as powerful as it was in the days of Christ's earthly reign. It is because of this very fact that the writer of this thesis has deemed it important to deal with the headings "Attributing God's Power to Satan" and "A Dispensational Sin" separately. Though these topics have much in common, in the long-run, there are potential variations which ought to be dealt with separately.

<sup>2</sup>Bernard Franklin, "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost: An Inquiry into the Scriptural Teaching Regarding the Unpardonable Sin," p. 227.

<sup>3</sup>Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopaedia, s.v. "Blasphemy," by S. Davidson, 1:292.

Him, and between slander directed against Him personally as He appears in His ordinary acts, and that which is aimed at those acts in which the Spirit is manifested."<sup>1</sup>

Though this view, as it stands, is incorrect, it is in this writer's opinion incorrect because it is incomplete with revealed data. Surely attributing God's power in this instance to Beelzebul is a grave sin, but it is not "The Unpardonable Sin." It is only a reflection of an attitude which reveals a mind set that is leading one closer to a position of hardened unrepentance. Attributing God's power then to Beelzebul could be considered a possible aspect of, or form of, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, but it cannot be limited to this, and to this alone. "It is possible to persist in such an attitude to the point where one is incapable of repentance, and that is a desperate position to be in . . . ,"<sup>2</sup> but this is only one possible form of (at best) committing sin which is eternally unforgivable. This same individual could by the grace of God repent at last and end his sinful accusations and be forgiven.<sup>3</sup>

Another objection to this view lies in the fact that one must first ask himself which of Christ's miraculous acts were not acts of the Holy Spirit, and secondly, how can a

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Palmer Gould, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1955), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce. Personal Correspondence from Derbyshire, England, May 16, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

word be spoken against Christ not also be blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?<sup>1</sup>

### A Dispensational Sin

Can 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' be committed today? Many good scholars, especially from the premillennial persuasion, would say no! These men prefer to classify the case of 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' according to a specific time, that is, during Jesus' earthly ministry. Broadus advocates this, when he writes that

There is here no allusion to the peculiar gracious office and work of the Spirit in calling, renewing, and sanctifying the soul. . . . These Pharisees ascribe to the influence and aid of Satan what was manifestly and unmistakably wrought by divine power. . . . The conditions then, under which this unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Spirit of God is committed, are (1) that there shall be a work manifestly supernatural, unmistakably the work of God and not of man, and (2) that one shall, in determined and malignant opposition, insultingly ascribe to Satan this which he knows to be the work of God. Now, are these conditions ever fulfilled, except in an age of miracles? Can any other divine work, as, for instance, the conversion of a friend, or a general revival of spirituality, be so unquestionably and unmistakably the work of God, that a person ascribing it to Satan is guilty, not merely of sin, but of that flagrant and deeply malignant blasphemy against God which is unpardonable? This is the question to be decided; and it can hardly be decided in the affirmative.<sup>2</sup>

Chafer champions this same view, and adds that "it should be noted that this sin against the Holy Spirit consisted in asserting that Christ's works, which were wrought by the

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<sup>1</sup>Re-ISBE, s.v. "Blasphemy," by Thomas Rees, p. 486.

<sup>2</sup>John Albert Broadus, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), p. 271.

Holy Spirit, were accomplished on the contrary by Satan." He adds that "Such a setting could not be found now since Christ is not in the world as He was then, nor is He undertaking in the same way to do the works by the Holy Spirit. It is therefore impossible for this particular sin to be committed today."<sup>1</sup> Ironside agrees with Chafer's view but is careful to say, and rightly so, that the unpardonable sin can still be committed today, but in a quite different way. He writes that "This was a dispensational sin, and we may say definitely cannot be committed, at least exactly in the same way, by individuals today."<sup>2</sup>

This particular view, a dispensational sin view, is not completely contrary to the facts of revealed Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup>Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, Vol. VII (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1978), p. 48. J. Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1981), p. 207; who essentially agrees with Chafer, states: "It is evident that this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit could only be committed while Christ was personally present on earth. The sin could only be committed when the nation was being given evidences as to the person of Christ through the miracles when He performed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The necessary circumstances do not exist today and, consequently, this same sin cannot be committed today." See also A. C. Gaebelien, The Holy Spirit (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), p. 18; and Samuel Ridout, The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, n.d.), pp. 34-35, for their argument of this same reasoning.

<sup>2</sup>Harry A. Ironside, Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948), p. 149. See also for a like discussion: W. Robert Cook, "Hamartiology Problems in First John," BSac 123:491 (July 1966), p. 258. Cook is not as perceptive as Ironside though, when he writes that: "This was a sin related to our Lord's earthly ministry, and the circumstances which made it possible are not reproducible today."

Ironside is correct when he states that this sin ". . . cannot be committed, at least exactly in the same way, by individuals today."<sup>1</sup> An important truth to be brought out is that this is a form of the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit (and not the sin itself, necessarily). Though Jesus Christ is not here in bodily form at present, the fact of possibly committing the unpardonable sin is not erased. What is erased is the possibility of committing it in the exact way as the Pharisees had done. They saw God working (i.e., Jesus Christ, in Person) and attributed it to Beelzebul. This exact form of this sin is, of course, impossible to commit today.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Most Logical Understanding

The saying of Jesus concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, reported in all three Synoptic Gospels,<sup>3</sup> regards this sin as the most heinous of all sins (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:10). All three agree that this is the most serious of all sins, and Matthew and Luke specifically

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<sup>1</sup>Ironside, Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Nesbitt believes that there is an additional reason for rejecting this view. He writes: ". . . this writer rejects the dispensational interpretation because it confuses the issues on the working of the Holy Spirit in time, as if men were saved or sinned differently in different ages, or as if they believe or refuse to believe in a different manner at different points of history." James H. Nesbitt, "The Unpardonable Sin." Unpublished Postgraduate Seminar Paper, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN, 1976, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>See Appendix I.

say that it is even worse than blasphemy against the Son of Man (i.e., Jesus Himself).<sup>1</sup>

Because there has been so much discussion surrounding this particular sin, one may justifiably hesitate to enter a field where well-meaning scholars (i.e., for the most part) have widely disagreed. "However, . . . it can be affirmed that there is described in Scripture a sin for which, by its very nature, there is no divine remedy."<sup>2</sup>

This saying has caused a great deal of anxiety and difficulty to many people.<sup>3</sup> Samuel Cox describes the feelings of many when he writes:

I shall never forget the chill that struck into my childish heart so often as I heard of this mysterious sin which carried men, and for ought I knew might have carried even me, beyond all reach of pardon; or the wonder and perplexity with which I used to ask myself why, if this sin were possible,--if, as the words of our Lord seem to imply, it was probable even and by no means infrequent,--it was not clearly defined, so that we might at least know, and know beyond all doubt, whether it had been committed or had not. And, since then, I have again and again met with men and women of tender conscience and devout spirit who, by long brooding over these terrible words, had convinced themselves that they had fallen, inadvertently for the most part, into this fatal sin, and whose reason had been disbalanced and unhinged by a fearful anticipation of the doom they held themselves to have provoked. The religious monomaniac is to be found in well nigh every madhouse in the Kingdom; and in the large majority of cases, as there is only

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<sup>1</sup>Leon Morris, Spirit Of The Living God (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>Alva J. McClain, "Is There Such a Thing as an Unpardonable Sin?", Unpublished Class Notes, "Salvation and the Christian Life" (Grace Theological Seminary, 1979), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, Spirit Of The Living God, p. 48.

too much ground to believe, he has been driven mad by the fear that he has committed the unpardonable sin. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Cranfield rightly adds a pastoral note here, when he states that: "It is a matter of great importance pastorally that we can say with absolute confidence to anyone who is overwhelmed by the fear that he has committed this sin, that the fact that he is so troubled is itself a sure proof that he has not committed it."<sup>2</sup>

### The Nature of the Sin

Most scholars believe that the unpardonable sin is definitely a sin with eternal consequences, but a few men rightly view it as a deliberate and conscious hardening of oneself against repentance and the possibility of forgiveness.<sup>3</sup> This awful sin "is best understood to be willful and persistent resistance to the influences and warnings of God, which renders the subject incapable of repentance and

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Cox, "The Sin Against The Holy Spirit," Exp Tim 2:3, Second Series (1882):321.

<sup>2</sup>Cranfield, CGTC, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup>IDB, s.v. "Blasphemy," by S. J. DeVries, p. 445; William L. Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, NICNT. Edited by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 145-46; Walter Harrelson, Personal Correspondence from Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, October 2, 1981; Leon Morris, Personal Correspondence from Doncaster, Australia, May 26, 1981; TDNT, s.v. "ἀμαρτάνω," by Walter Grundmann, I:304; Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary On The Gospel Of Luke, NICNT. Edited by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), pp. 351-52; F. F. Bruce, Personal Correspondence from Derbyshire, England, May 16, 1981; and H. C. G. Moule, Veni Creator (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), p. 20.



pardon."<sup>1</sup> It is quite obvious, then, that Jesus "envisaged the possibility of a sinner reaching a state of incapacity to repent, and so to receive the forgiveness of God."<sup>2</sup> This sin is unpardonable, then, because it is the final rejection of the saving knowledge of Christ Himself.<sup>3</sup>

Though this sin is not closely defined by any of the Synoptic writers, it is plain that Jesus does not refer simply to the uttering of a few idle or slanderous words only. Taylor adds to this interpretation when he states:

The saying is one of the most challenging of the words of Jesus, and misapprehensions of its nature have caused untold degrees of suffering. The truth of the saying must not be weakened or explained away, but it must always be estimated in the light of the major truth of the Gospel, namely, that where there is true repentance, or even the possibility of repentance, sin can be and is forgiven by God. The sin is not any sin against the Holy Spirit, not even a railing judgment uttered in anger or ignorance; nor is it simply the deliberate rejection of better light, with full knowledge that it is light. It is a perversion of spirit which,

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<sup>1</sup> SHERK, s.v. "Blasphemy," by Paul Hinschius, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, "The Unpardonable Sin," p. 343. See also: A. E. Harvey, The New English Bible Companion to the New Testament (Great Britain: Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, 1970), p. 129. He states: "... nothing further could happen which would lead them to repentance, and therefore there was no chance that they would adopt the attitude necessary to obtain forgiveness"; and, Henry Barclay Swete, The Holy Spirit in the New Testament: A Study of Primitive Christian Teaching (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1910), p. 117, who writes: "The man who was capable of calling good evil, of painting the Source of holiness in the colours of Hell, was beyond repentance and therefore beyond forgiveness."

<sup>3</sup> SHERK, s.v. "Holy Spirit," by D. S. Schaff, p. 332.



in defiance of moral values, elects to call light darkness.<sup>1</sup>

Blasphemy may be in action, as well as in word.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is referring to a whole attitude of life.<sup>3</sup> This sin against the Holy Spirit may begin as a single act of resistance to the voice and leading of the Spirit, on the part of some sinner in rejecting Christ as the place of salvation; and then by continual repetition<sup>4</sup> the sin may become a settled state of hostility or indifference toward Christ as Lord and Savior.<sup>5</sup> In agreement with this, Bruce cogently writes

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<sup>1</sup>Vincent Taylor, The Gospel According To St. Mark (London: MacMillan and Company, LTD, 1955), p. 244. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>2</sup>"Blasphemy, like lying, may be acted as well as uttered: and it cannot safely be argued that 'blasphemy' against the Spirit must be a sin of speech." Alfred Plummer, The Gospel According To S. Luke, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), p. 321. See also: Milton S. Terry, Biblical Dogmatics (London: Robert Culley, n.d.), p. 92. He writes: "This absurd charge was not itself the unpardonable blasphemy, but the occasion of Jesus' warning."

<sup>3</sup>Morris, Spirit of the Living God, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup>Calvin is careful when he adds this theological note: "I say, therefore, that they sin against the Holy Spirit who, with evil intention, resist God's Truth, although by its brightness they are so touched that they cannot claim ignorance." He further adds that these people "... blaspheme against the Spirit, since they strive against the illumination that is the work of the Holy Spirit." John Calvin, Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. XX, Part I. In The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 617-18.

<sup>5</sup>McClain, "Salvation and the Christian Life," p. 41. McClain perceptively refers to John 19:15 and Acts 7:51-52 at this point. See also Barclay, "The Gospel of Matthew," DSBS, p. 48; he correctly states, "A man can lose any faculty if he refuses to use it." He further adds, "... a man can lose the ability to recognize goodness and truth when he sees them. ... He comes to a stage when his own evil seems to him good, and when God's good seems to him evil." A. F. Hort essentially says the same in, Expository and Exegetical

The unpardonable sin--the "eternal sin" of Mark 3:29 --seems to me to be the deliberate and persistent closing of one's eyes to the light, which renders one incapable of receiving the blessing which divine illumination brings. It is very difficult for me to say when this sin has been committed. Some who for a long time close their eyes to the light of God do repent of their impenitence and, of course, receive forgiveness. But it is possible to persist in such an attitude to the point where one is incapable of repentance, and that is a desperate condition to be in, although we may not be able to say when this condition has been reached. It is indeed identical with rejection of the Spirit and implacable resistance to His influence. Many who resist the Spirit for a time do at last end their resistance and submit to His gracious work, but some persevere in their resistance to their dying day--this sin, by its very nature, is unpardonable.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective, then, "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" is unpardonable, not because the blood or work of Christ is unable to cleanse an individual from such a sin, nor because there is anything inherent in its own nature which separates it from other sins and places it beyond forgiveness, but, because, as long as a man continues to disbelieve, he voluntarily shuts himself out from the forgiving mercy of God.<sup>2</sup> Thus, by not receiving the Gospel, he refuses

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Studies: A Compendium of Works Formerly Published Separately. Reprint ed. (Minnesota: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1980), p. 83; as does Ray Summers, in Commentary on Luke (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publishers, 1972), p. 154.

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, Personal Correspondence from Derbyshire, England, May 16, 1981. Cranfield is of like persuasion: Personal Correspondence from Durham City, England, May 15, 1981, and The Gospel According to Mark, CGTC, p. 142; Moule leans this direction, but then sheepishly states: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" C. F. D. Moule, Personal Correspondence from East Sussex, England, May 21, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Pieper agrees with this thinking when he carefully adds: "The sin against the Holy Ghost is committed when, after the Holy Ghost has convinced a person in his heart of the divine truth, that person nevertheless not only rejects

pardon.<sup>1</sup> This type of resisting denotes a conscious and wicked rejection of the saving power and grace of God towards this individual. It could justifiably be stated, then, that "Only the man who sets himself against forgiveness is excluded from it."<sup>2</sup>

### The Holy Spirit is not Greater or Holier than Christ

By declaring that blasphemy against the Son of Man may be forgiven (Matt 12:32 and Luke 12:10) but not blasphemy

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the truth he is convinced of, but also blasphemes it." Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, p. 573. Mueller essentially agrees with this, when he writes: "The sin against the Holy Ghost consists in the perverse, persistent denial and rejection of the divine truth after the latter has been sufficiently acknowledged and accepted as such, joined with voluntary and atrocious blasphemy. In other words, it is the malicious and blasphemous rejection of the Gospel by a hardened sinner, who through the gracious illumination of the Holy Ghost has been fully convinced of its divine truth. . . . The reason why the sin against the Holy Ghost is unpardonable is because it is malicious and persistent resistance against the converting and sanctifying work of the Holy Ghost, through which alone sinners are saved." John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 233. See also: A. E. Breen, A Harmonized Exposition of the Four Gospels, Vol. III (New York: John P. Smith Printing Company, 1908), pp. 267-85; and Hugh Anderson, The Gospel of Mark, NCB. Edited by Ronald E. Clements and Matthew Black (Greenwood, SC: The Attic Press, 1976), p. 124.

<sup>1</sup> Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopaedia, s.v. "Blasphemy," by S. Davidson, I:291. Without much thought, Davidson adds: "In the same manner, every sin might be styled the unpardonable, as long as an individual continues to indulge in it."

<sup>2</sup> TDNT, s.v. "βλασφημία," by Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, 1:624. Going beyond revealed Scripture, Beyer adds: "In such cases the only remedy is to deliver up to Satan that he may learn not to blaspheme. . . ."

against the Holy Spirit, Christ is not conceding that the Holy Spirit was in any way qualitatively greater than Himself. Obviously, Christ being veiled in the flesh, in His earthly body, had temporarily limited Himself of the independent use of many of His attributes. Therefore, in a sense, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit were in some way "greater" than He in position (cf. John 14:28).<sup>1</sup> It is not, though, as some have carelessly supposed, that the Person of the Spirit is somehow more sacred than that of the Son, "or that sin against the Spirit is more damnable than sin against the Father and the Son; but rather that the Spirit's peculiar work is to bring sinners to Christ, the only place where God can forgive."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nesbitt, "The Unpardonable Sin," p. 12. Morris succinctly adds: "This does not mean that such a word is a trifle. The preceding verse has shown something of the dignity of the Son of man: He is not to be taken lightly. Yet even sin against this august personage may be forgiven." Leon Morris, The Gospel According to St. Luke, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 210. Warfield disagrees with Morris when he writes: "The reason of this (i.e., why Jesus singles out blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and not blasphemy against Himself) seems to reside in the fact that the holiness of God is especially manifested in the Holy Spirit. His designation here is accordingly so phrased as to throw His holiness particularly into prominence." Benjamin B. Warfield, Biblical and Theological Studies (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), p. 219. See also, Henry Barclay Swete, Commentary on Mark, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregal Publications, 1977), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> McClain, "Salvation and the Christian Life," p. 41. Chafer is incorrect in thinking that there is "a peculiar sanctity belonging to the Holy Spirit." Chafer, Systematic Theology, 7:48. See Cranfield's comments pertaining to this phenomenon in CGTC, p. 142. See also Robin Scroggs, "The Exaltation of the Spirit by Some Early Christians," pp. 359-73.

If Confessed, Can it be Forgiven?

Because this heinous sin is the most severe of all sins, it is often asked if "this sin cannot be forgiven," even when people "repent of it? . . ."<sup>1</sup> From the human perspective, "we must remember that this sinning against the testimony of the Spirit is not unpardonable because of some arbitrary decree of God, . . . But it is simply a moral impossibility for even [sic] God of grace to forgive sin outside of Christ. . . ."<sup>2</sup> There is forgiveness for all sins where there is true repentance. But the issue involved here is not one of salvific repentance.<sup>3</sup> As Calvin rightly states, "'blasphemy against the Spirit' is a token of reprobation," and "we must believe that those who have fallen into it never rise again;<sup>4</sup> nay, that in this manner God punishes contempt of his grace, by hardening the hearts of the reprobate, so that they never have any desire towards repentance."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cox, "The Sin Against the Holy Ghost," p. 334.

<sup>2</sup>McClain, "Salvation and the Christian Life," p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>Theological Word Book of the Bible, s.v. "Blasphemy," by A. G. Herbert.

<sup>4</sup>Milton S. Terry agrees with this, when he writes: "The most aggravated manner and degree of sin mentioned in Scriptures is a settled and unchangeable obduracy of spirit which blasphemously rejects the witness of superior light and truth." Biblical Dogmatics, p. 92. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>5</sup>John Calvin, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Vol. II. Trans. by William Pringle (reprint edition; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 76-77.

Though there can be a point of 'no return' in this severe matter, it must be remembered, that only an omniscient God can know certainly when any reprobate has reached the point where he can no longer hear the voice of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> No man is able to judge with infallible precision in these matters,<sup>2</sup> and therefore no man has any right to point either to himself or to any other man as one who has definitely sinned beyond recovery.<sup>3</sup>

#### An Evangelistic Impetus

Because this sin against the Holy Spirit may begin as a single act of resistance to the leading and ministry of the Holy Spirit of God; and then by constant repetition the sin may even become a settled state of hostility or indifference toward the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, it is of utmost urgency that genuine believers proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ with undying fervency to every lost child of

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<sup>1</sup> Though it is a hypothetical impossibility, Burton is correct when he states: "The sin itself is eternal. There can be no forgiveness except as the offender repents and abandons his sin." Ernest D. Burton, "Constructive Studies in the Life of Christ." The Biblical Word, Vol. 15 (1900):368. See also Burton's article entitled, "Spirit, Soul, and Flesh IV. ΠΝΕΥΜΑ, ΨΥΧΗ, and ΣΑΡΞ in Greek Writers of the Early Christian Period and in Jewish-Greek Literature," The American Journal of Theology, Vol. XX (1916):390-413.

<sup>2</sup> First Corinthians 4:5 reads: "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts. . . ." NASB.

<sup>3</sup> McClain, "Salvation and the Christian Life," p. 42. See also: Cox, "The Sin Against the Holy Spirit," pp. 334-37.

this present world. Also, because no Christian can infallibly judge in these matters, it still remains each believer's solemn duty to warn men of the awful possibility of journeying into this damnable position. The severe consequence of this sin ought to stir every Christian to strive with every unregenerate to bring them into Christ, their only place of pardon.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>McClain, *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 42. McClain cites Heb 6:4-6 and 10:29 here for support. For further discussion, see James Oliver Buswell, A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), pp. 109-10.



## CHAPTER II

### JOHN'S REFERENCE TO SIN UNTO DEATH

Difficult texts of Scripture have, by their very nature, always been intriguing to serious students of the Bible. One such problematic passage is 1 John 5:16-17. Here, a distinction is made between "sin not unto death" (ἁμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον) and "sin unto death" (ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον).<sup>1</sup> The precise meaning of these statements concerning sin has given Christians, including the greatest theologians, much difficulty. To many, they are major unresolved perplexities.<sup>2</sup>

The passage of 1 John 5:16-17 reads as follows:

If any one sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death. (NASB)

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<sup>1</sup>Scholer, Current Issues, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup>See for example the comments of Eugene J. Cooper, "The Consciousness of Sin in I John," Laval Théologique et Philosophique, Vol. 28 (1972):246, he states, "The exact nature of this sin remains a disputed question among the exegetes." He further states (p. 247) that ". . . the exact nature of this sin, which appears in the Bible only in this text of the First Epistle of John, remains unknown (emphasis mine). See also, Rudolf Bultmann, "The Johannine Epistles," Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 87. He states that, ". . . a decision can scarcely be taken, as the diverse efforts of exegetes indicate."



The Greek text certainly discloses details which are difficult for a translation to reflect:<sup>1</sup>

16. Ἐάν τις ἴδῃ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτάνοντα ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον, αἰτήσῃ, καὶ δώσῃ αὐτῷ ζωὴν, τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον. ἔστιν ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον· οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ. 17. πᾶσα ἀδικία ἁμαρτία ἐστίν, καὶ ἔστιν ἁμαρτία οὐ πρὸς θάνατον.

"Quite apart from any misinterpretation or misapplication of it, . . . the passage is in itself very difficult to interpret."<sup>2</sup> John's readers were no doubt familiar with this expression, but scholars since the subapostolic Fathers have debated its meaning.<sup>3</sup> "Apparently, in John's day and with his readers the phrase was a common one and was well understood, for John does not bother to explain it. But today the key has been lost, and opinion is widely divided in regard to John's meaning."<sup>4</sup> Most of the meanings which have been suggested leave the reader in a tension-packed quandary.<sup>5</sup> What is the yardstick? How can one exegete this

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<sup>1</sup>M. Miguens, "Sin, Prayer, Life in I Jn. 5:16." *Studia Hierosolymitana II. Studi Esegnetici* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1975), p. 64, goes too far, when he dogmatically states that, "The Greek text certainly discloses details which no translation can reflect" (emphasis mine).

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Cox, "The Sin Unto Death," *The Expositor* 2:1 (Second Series) (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1881), p. 416.

<sup>3</sup>John R. W. Stott, "The Epistles of John." *TNTC*, Vol. 19. Edited by R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 187.

<sup>4</sup>James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), pp. 172-73.

<sup>5</sup>S. M. Reynolds, "The Sin unto Death and Prayers for the Dead," *The Reformation Review*, Vol. 20:3 (1972-73), p. 130.

this text with certainty?<sup>1</sup> Does the solution lie in Old Testament parallels?

### Old Testament Considerations

Some have sought the solution to this Johannine problem, by saying that the phrase "sin unto death" was understood by the readers of John's Epistle because it was a part of their everyday milieu and language. Westcott champions this view when he writes, "The phrase 'sin unto death' is introduced as one which was familiar to the readers of the Epistle and is evidently borrowed from current language." He further adds that ". . . the distinction of 'sins unto death' and 'sins not unto death' is common among Rabbinic writers . . . and represents, it cannot be doubted, an old traditional view."<sup>2</sup> I. H. Marshall is sympathetic to this reasoning also, and is quick to add that ". . . in the Old Testament and Judaism there was a well-recognized difference between two kinds of sin, the unconscious or unwitting sins, for which forgiveness was provided by the annual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, and deliberate or witting sins, for which the sacrificial ritual provided no forgiveness."<sup>3</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, "Sin." Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 333.

<sup>2</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, The Epistles of St. John (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 209.

<sup>3</sup>I. Howard Marshall, "The Epistles of John." In NICNT. Edited by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 247.

further adds that "this distinction between sins which could be forgiven and those which led to the death of the sinner may well be part of the key to the problem."<sup>1</sup> Findlay is quite dogmatic when he states that "the expression comes from the Old Testament. . . . The case of Jeremiah and apostate Judah supplies a distinct analogy to the situation before us; not improbably it was in the Apostle's mind. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Those who hold this view, then, believe that the phrase "sin unto death," is suggested from the Old Testament conception of sins  $\text{בְּיָד גְּבוּרָה}$  ("with a high hand," Num 15:30).<sup>3</sup> To them, the Numbers 15:30 passage draws a line between sins committed inadvertently, which could be forgiven by a priest's atonement, and sins done deliberately (with a high hand), which brought excommunication from God's people.<sup>4</sup>

Under the Old Covenant, deliberate sin was knowing the Lord's will and purposely flouting and reviling His

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid. In fn. 23, Marshall makes reference to Lev 4:2, 13, 22, 27; 5:15, 17f.; Num 15:27-31; Deut 17:12; Psalm 19:13, for his support. Marshall covers this same matter in Kept by the Power of God (London: Epworth Press, 1969), pp. 34-38.

<sup>2</sup>George G. Findlay, Fellowship In The Life Eternal: An Exposition Of The Epistles Of St. John. Reprint ed. (Minnesota: James and Klock Christian Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 408-09.

<sup>3</sup>A. E. Brooke, "The First Epistle General of John." In Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Vol. 12. Edited by John Peter Lange. Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), p. 171.

<sup>4</sup>Scholer, Current Issues, p. 233. He adds in fn. 20, that "Another type of distinction between sins is in view in I Samuel 2:25 in which a sin against man is forgivable, but one against the Lord is not."

instruction.<sup>1</sup> A clear example of this is found in Numbers 18:22, where it is said that after the Levites were set apart for the service of the Tabernacle, any of the people who came near to the Tabernacle of the Congregation would be guilty of deliberate sin and must die.<sup>2</sup>

While it may possibly indicate the origin of the phrase, seeing a distinct Old Testament analogy here is going one step too far because it ". . . does not materially help towards an understanding of what it signifies in the atmosphere of New Testament thought."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Old Testament passages largely have in mind the omission of ritual duties, whereas the concern of I John is presumably with moral lapse.<sup>4</sup> Hence it is wrong to transfer to this passage the Old Testament idea of חַטֹּאת מוֹתָוֶהֶ (ἁμαρτία θανατηφόρος),<sup>5</sup> and to refer to capital crimes (e.g., idolatry, murder, adultery, etc.) which were punishable with death under the Mosaic law.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>R. W. Orr, "The Letters of John." In The New Layman's Bible Commentary. Edited by G. C. D. Howley, F. F. Bruce and H. L. Ellison (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 1666. (Hereafter cited as NLBC.)

<sup>2</sup>Brooke, ICC, p. 146.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Law, The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John. Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 138.

<sup>4</sup>J. L. Houlden, "A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles." In HNTC. Edited by Henry Chadwick (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), p. 134.

<sup>5</sup>See Num 18:22.

<sup>6</sup>Karl Braune, "The First Epistle General of John." In Commentary on the Holy Scriptures. Vol. 12. Edited by

It is quite evident that there are many parallels which seem to exist between Numbers 15:30; 18:22 and 1 John 5:17, but this solution should be rejected because nowhere in 1 John, in distinction to the Numbers passage (and other similar Old Testament passages), is it expressed or implied that the two types of sin in 5:16, 17 are to be understood<sup>1</sup> as inadvertent or presumptuous.

### Incorrect Interpretations

To say the least, much confusion has arisen concerning a proper understanding of John's "sin unto death" motif. This is a sensitive topic to many people and ". . . is a topic that has been debated vigorously for a long time."<sup>2</sup>

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John Peter Lange. Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), p. 171.

<sup>1</sup>Scholer, Current Issues, p. 234. Scholer continues his study and sets forth many other similar parallels. He cites intertestamental literature, the LXX and T Issa 7:1 as examples and believes that "These texts, because they provide only formal parallels to the expression of the 'sin unto death' in 1 John 5:16, do not give any insight into the meaning of significance of the expression in the Johannine context." For an interesting discussion and understanding of the Patristic view, see: ANF. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), Vol. II:362 and Vol. IV:76, 96-97. Huther, who is not quick to admit to a dichotomy between the Old Testament and New Testament understanding of "sin unto death," adds this enhancing note: ". . . but even if that Old-Testament definition is the basis of John's expression, yet it does not follow that he used the idea in the same sense. . . ." Joh. Ed. Huther, "Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the General Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude." In Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament. Trans. by P. J. Gloag, D. B. Croom, and C. H. Irwin. Reprint ed. (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1979), p. 616.

<sup>2</sup>Merrill C. Tenney, Personal Correspondence from Wheaton Graduate School, August 31, 1981.

In attempts to reconcile this issue, some men (like C. H. Dodd) have even come to the point of blatantly stating that it ". . . may be that our author was misled by a too rigorous exegesis of the sayings of Jesus; it may be that he has misapplied them under the tension of a situation of extreme peril to the Church."<sup>1</sup> With this tension in mind, the following explanations of this sin may be safely rejected.<sup>2</sup>

### The Traditional Catholic View

The traditionally accepted Catholic interpretation of the "sin unto death"<sup>3</sup> is a view which has gone far beyond the revealed biblical data. Confusion has resulted from

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<sup>1</sup>C. H. Dodd, MNTC, p. 137. Bultmann's view is also to be rejected. He does not really even attempt to explain "sin unto death," but argues that 1 John 5:14-21 is an appendix written from a different point of view; he tries to make reconciliation of the parts of 1 John unnecessary. To those who have a high doctrinal view of Scripture, believing in the consent of all the parts, Bultmann's treatment of 1 John is anything but acceptable.

<sup>2</sup>J. C. Ryle seems to be correct when he states, "It is not difficult to show from Scripture what the sin is not; it is difficult to show clearly what it is. We must not be surprised. The Bible would not be the book of God, if it had not deep places here and there, which man has no line to fathom. Let us rather thank God that there are lessons of wisdom to be gathered, even out of these verses, which the unlearned may easily understand." In "St. Matthew." Expository Thoughts On The Gospels (Great Britain: James Clarke & Co., LTD., 1954), p. 128f.

<sup>3</sup>A. R. C. Leaney, in his work, "A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke." HNTC (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), p. 198, is one of the few non-Catholics who champions this particular view.

their making a distinction between "mortal" (deadly)<sup>1</sup> and "venial" (pardonable) sins and then categorizing certain blatant sins as mortal. Traditionally, they list seven: 'superbia' (pride), 'avaritia' (covetousness), 'luxuria' (lust), 'ira' (anger), 'gula' (gluttony), 'invidia' (envy), 'acedia' (sloth),<sup>2</sup> and then they have devised a penitential system<sup>3</sup> that is to be applied to the church, in which the priests proportion out the 'satisfactio operis' in their sacrament of penance.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The RSV has probably been the largest stimulus of this erroneous view in recent times, because its translators saw fit to translate "πρὸς θάνατον" as "mortal." Their translation reads, "16. If anyone sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. 17. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal." Paul Trudinger, "Concerning Sins, Mortal and Otherwise. A Note on I John 5:16-17." *Biblica* 52:4 (1971):541 (emphasis mine), is very close to being correct when he writes concerning the RSV translation, that it is "the almost universally accepted translation. . . ."

<sup>2</sup>HERE, s.v. "Seven Deadly Sins," by A. B. D. Alexander, 11:427. Consult this article further for indepth study.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce Vawter, "The Epistles of John." In The Jerome Bible Commentary. Vol. II. Edited by R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 412.

<sup>4</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistle of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude (MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), pp. 536ff. For a peculiar "protestant" take-off of this system, see: William Alexander, "The Epistles of John." In The Expositor's Bible. Vol. VI. Edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1940), pp. 816ff.; he writes, "The number seven is not merely a mystic fancy. But the seven "deadly sins" are seven attributes of the whole character; seven master-ideas; seven general conditions of the human soul alienated from God; seven forms of aversion from true life, and of reversion to true death."



Though this view may be acceptable to those of the Catholic persuasion,<sup>1</sup> it is a falsified penitential system to this writer, because ". . . there is no warrant in this text for the doctrine which Rome seeks to draw from it as to the distinction, in themselves,--in their own nature or in their accompanying aggravations,--between venial and mortal sins."<sup>2</sup> "For altogether foolish is that distinction which prevails under the Papacy."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that A. E. Breen, a leading Catholic Greek scholar in his own time, rejected this view as spurious. He wrote: "From the writings of St. Augustine, commentators have drawn that there be six [sic] sins against the Holy Ghost, viz.: despair, presumption, resisting the known truth, envy of another's spiritual good, obstinacy in evil, and final impenitence. This classification does not seem to be very accurate." Breen, A Harmonized Exposition of the Four Gospels, Vol. III, p. 278. Two other prominent Catholic scholars who reject this view are John E. Steinmueller and Kathryn Sullivan, in Catholic Biblical Encyclopedia: Old and New Testaments (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, Inc., 1956), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Candlish, First Epistle of John. Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979), p. 519. Candlish perceptably adds: "A Romanist, in his anxious prayer for his sinning brother, may be tempted to put his sin into the wrong category, and to speak of it to God as venial, whereas it is really mortal. It is a temptation of the same sort that besets me; I admit it to be so." For a like discussion see: John Calvin, Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles. Reprint ed. Trans. by John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *ibid.* It must be stated here, that this view will be dealt with in greater detail under the heading entitled, "No Particular Sin." For an extended discussion and refutation of this incorrect view, see: Hendrich Heppe, Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources. Trans. by G. T. Thomson. Edited by Ernest Bizer. Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 349ff.



## Apostasy

"The general tone of the Johannine epistles would suggest that 'sin unto death' is apostasy . . . ;"<sup>1</sup> so say many good scholars when commenting on 1 John 5:16 and 17. Those who hold this view usually connect 1 John 5:16, 17 with such passages as Hebrews 6:4-6, 10:26ff. and 12:16, 17, and apply them to false teachers who had so clearly repudiated the truth as to withdraw from the True Church.<sup>2</sup>

Turner sets forth the feelings of these men when he writes that "During the present period of Grace the sin of which St. John speaks cannot really be laid at the door of a non-Christian who makes no profession, but will necessarily only be committed by the professing adelphos who apparently denies Christ."<sup>3</sup> He then makes his point even clearer by adding, "I hope that I do not seem to be wrong in affirming that adelphos is a 'Christian' in I John 5:16. But adelphos has that meaning everywhere else."<sup>4</sup> In agreement

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<sup>1</sup>Alan Richardson, An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Stott, TNTC, p. 188. See also, David Smith, "The Epistles of John." In The Expositor's Greek Testament. Vol. V. Edited by W. Robertson Nicoll. Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 198. He states that this is "a decisive apostacy, a deliberate rejection."

<sup>3</sup>Nigel Turner, Personal Correspondence from Cambridge, England, October 14, 1981. Turner further adds that "Apostacy is only possible for the so called brother." Turner is also clear to say that John's little epistle ". . . is written to professing Christians" (emphasis mine), and not strictly Christians alone.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. As a logical conclusion to his position, Turner adds that "the awful terms of the warnings are intended with great mercy to bring the empty professor to

with Turner, Dodd states that "It would seem likely that our author . . . is thinking of apostasy or denial of Christ as the sin that places a man beyond the pale."<sup>1</sup> C. K.

Barrett is much more extensive than Dodd, but essentially says the same thing. He writes

It is natural to begin within the epistle itself. There are those who "have gone out from us" (2:19), and those who commit the "sin unto death." Their false doctrine is accompanied by and revealed in their moral failure; indeed J. H. Houlden says well that those who commit sin unto death are those who do not observe the double commandment of 3:23; that is, they do not believe in the name of God's Son, and they do not share in the mutual love that Christians ought to show. That these people put themselves outside the scope of prayer represents, I think, the hardening of dogmatic and institutional lives that can be seen in the later parts of the New Testament; see especially Hebrews 5:4-8; 10:26-31. But see also Mark 8:38 and parallels.<sup>2</sup>

This position, then, could be quickly summarized by stating that 'sin unto death' is neither a specific sin, nor even a

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his senses, to see our hopeless position without Him." Concerning this same issue, F. F. Bruce was a little hesitant to pick between 'sin unto death' as a sin which ". . . actually resulted in the death of the sinner . . ." and "apostasy such as that manifested . . . in Heb. 6:4-6." But Bruce finally added, "On further reflection I think the latter of these alternatives is the more probable." F. F. Bruce, Personal Correspondence from Derbyshire, England, September 2, 1981.

<sup>1</sup>Dodd, MNTC, p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>C. K. Barrett, Personal Correspondence from University of Durham, England, April 7, 1981. See also, Law, The Tests of Life, pp. 302, 303; Brooke, ICC, pp. 146, 147; G. Johnson, "I, II, III John." In Peake's Commentary on the Bible. Edited by Matthew Black (Australia: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1962), p. 1038. Johnson is hesitant to make up his mind, but states that "in the context, this sin is either the denial of the Incarnation or the act of apostasy. . . ." See also SHERK, s.v. "Sin," by Otto Kaiser, 10:435; and Cox, "The Sin Unto Death," p. 422.

'back-sliding,' but a total apostasy, the denial of Christ and the renunciation of the faith.<sup>1</sup>

But can a Christian,<sup>2</sup> who has been born of God, ever apostatize? Surely John has clearly taught in His Epistle that the genuine Christian cannot sin, that is, habitually persist in sin (3:9), let alone fall away altogether. He is about to repeat it: "We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him" (5:18). Moreover, John has just written of having life (5:12) and knowing it (5:13). Can someone who has received a life which is eternal lose it?<sup>3</sup> Certainly not!

#### Extreme Sins

The view that "sin unto death" refers to "heavier" or "extreme sins" was predominantly propounded by the patristic fathers.<sup>4</sup> These men were usually quick to contend "that

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<sup>1</sup> Stott, TNTC, p. 188. See also Houlden, HNTC, p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> At this point it will simply be stated that the writer of this thesis believes that the Apostle John has a genuine believer in mind concerning this sin. See below for the discussion under the proper heading for support of this view.

<sup>3</sup> Stott, TNTC, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> For a contemporary proponent, see: Cooper, "The Consciousness of Sin in I John," p. 247. Cooper quotes as an advocate of this view, N. Lazure, Les Valeurs morales de la theologia johannine (Paris, 1965), p. 276, in fn. 53. Vincent Taylor seems to be facing this direction also when he states: "In the light of these words we must conclude that, in the strongly worded passages quoted above (i.e. I John 5:16-17), St. John is thinking of deliberate and

it involved wickedness of a gross and extreme nature, such as blasphemy, murder, adultery. . . ." <sup>1</sup> "In his 'De pudicitia' Tertullian twice cites 1 John 5:16-17 for its distinction between a 'sin not unto death' and a 'sin unto death' for the development of his own argument." <sup>2</sup> From this viewpoint then, Tertullian would see the "sin not unto death" as a type of sin that daily besets the believer, and the "sin unto death" as a graver and deadlier sin, such as murder, idolatry, apostacy, etc., for which there is no pardon. <sup>3</sup>

This "extreme sins" view, though, suffers from a weakness common to many incorrect interpretations. Tertullian (like the others who champion this view) defines the "sin unto death" in terms of specific sins, most of which are not mentioned or even implied in 1 John. Scholer is correct, then, when he states that "There is no contextual evidence that the author of 1 John understood the "sin unto death" in the way which Tertullian describes it." <sup>4</sup>

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voluntary transgressions, not of sin in its finer and more subtle forms." Forgiveness and Reconciliation, p. 164.

<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Gingrich, An Outline and Analysis of the First Epistle of John (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1943), p. 186. See also: Frederick Denison Maurice, The Epistles of St. John (London: MacMillan and Co., 1893), pp. 292-98.

<sup>2</sup> Scholer, Current Issues, pp. 236, 237.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 237. See also Westcott, The Epistles of John, pp. 211, 212, for an extended coverage of the patristic fathers.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Houlden's statement, "Clearly, not all sins are of the same weight . . .," HTNC, p. 133, may be true, but this is skirting the crux of St. John's entire learning about this issue. John does not have in mind any particular

## Sin Until Death

Another incorrect view, though not as widely held as many of the others, is the view that sees "sin unto death" as sin which is "until death." Proponents of this view see this particular sin as obstinate and persistent sin which continues in an individual's life until physical death is the logical result of such action.<sup>1</sup> These men would then prefer to translate "πρὸς θάνατον" as simply meaning "until death" and not as "toward death." To them, the person in view here is in a permanent state of sin wherein it is a moral impossibility to ever repent.<sup>2</sup>

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sin, but a rebellious act of habit as will be demonstrated later on in this thesis. To temporarily suffice the reader, see: Alfred Plummer, "The Epistles of John." CBSC. Edited by F. H. Chase and A. F. Kirkpatrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), p. 168.

<sup>1</sup>James L. Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles" (Unpublished Class Notes, Grace Theological Seminary, 1975), p. 87. See also: Rudolf Schnackenburg, "Die Johannesbriefe." In Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, Vol. 12:3 (Freiburg-Basel: Herder Publications, 1979), p. 278. Dr. Schnackenburg was kind enough to xerox pertinent pages in his German edition and mail them to this writer. Without his assistance this data would not have been obtained in time for this thesis. Personal Correspondence from Wurzburg, Germany, June 6, 1981.

<sup>2</sup>See Gingrich's refutation of this forced interpretation: An Outline And Analysis of the First Epistle of John, pp. 187-88. See also: William Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), p. 120. It is also significant to note, that none of the following grammarians or lexicographers have seen fit to translate "πρὸς" as "until"; H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (Canada: The MacMillan Company, 1927), p. 110; G. Abbott-Smith, A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), pp. 382, 383; LSJ, 1496-99; James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Limited, 1930), pp. 544, 545; and TDNT, s.v. "πρὸς," by Bo Reicke, VI:720-25.

Though this view may seem legitimate at first glance to many, its logical conclusion undermines John's prior statements concerning a Christian<sup>1</sup> and sin. It is obvious then to the reader, that these men view this sinful individual as an unbeliever who has rejected the grace of God so long, that his heart is calloused beyond approach.<sup>2</sup> Boyer perceptably sums this up, when he says, that these men are ". . . obviously wrong if it is a sin of a believer."<sup>3</sup>

#### Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit<sup>4</sup>

Because of the severity of this pronouncement of woe, many good scholars have concluded that this ". . . passage (i.e., 1 John 5:16 and 17) corresponds to the teaching in the Synoptic Gospels concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit . . . , the sense being the same in both places."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The writer of this thesis does not believe that only Christians can commit "sin unto death." The case of Herod (Acts 12:23) is obviously against this. The writer does believe though that this reference of John's (i.e., 1 John 5:16-17), is strictly speaking of genuine believers. See the below discussion, "Born Again Believer."

<sup>2</sup>Plummer, CBSC, p. 167. An extensive refutation of this invalid conclusion will be dealt with in the section below entitled, "Born Again Believer."

<sup>3</sup>Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles," p. 87. Boyer does indeed see this to be a genuine believer. See Brooke's comments also: "The Epistles of John," pp. 146ff.

<sup>4</sup>Though this topic was previously covered in Chapter I of this thesis, an additional brief word with specific Johannine implications is in order.

<sup>5</sup>Burton Scott Easton, "The Epistles of John." In The Abington Bible Commentary. Edited by F. C. Eiselen, Edwin Lewis and David G. Downey (Nashville: Abington Press, 1929), p. 1358.

Oscar Cullmann, in response to a letter concerning this issue, agrees with this avenue of thought when he writes, "I think (grosso modo) that the unpardonable sin, sin unto death, is a sin directed in a special manner against the wholly (sic) Spirit. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Gordon H. Clark also views these two sins the same when he boldly states, "this sin (i.e., 'the sin unto death') is unpardonable." <sup>2</sup> A. H. Strong is probably the most dogmatic of all of these proponents when he states, ". . . the only sin unto death which is described in Scripture is the sin against the Holy Spirit. . . ." <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Oscar Cullmann, Personal Correspondence from Chamonix, France, October 30, 1981. Nigel Turner is of the same persuasion when he writes: "The Sin unto Death, which I have assumed to be the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost . . . would be that involved in the loss of ζωὴ αἰώνιος, deprivation of Life in the Age to come." Turner, Personal Correspondence from Cambridge, England, August 30, 1981. James D. G. Dunn, Personal Correspondence from the University of Nottingham, England, September 17, 1981; essentially holds this same position.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon H. Clark, First John, a Commentary (NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 164. See also, John Albert Bengel, New Testament Word Studies, Vol. II. Trans. by Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent. Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971), pp. 813ff.; Henry Alford, The Greek Testament, Vol. IV (London: Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1884), p. 512; John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 232; and David Smith, "The Epistles of John," p. 198.

<sup>3</sup>Augustus Hopkins Strong, p. 550. A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. VI (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), p. 244; is much more cautious when he states, "Jesus spoke of the unpardonable sin (Mark 3:29; Matt. 12:32; Luke 12:10), which was attributing to the devil the manifest work of the Holy Spirit. It is possible that John has this idea in mind. . . ."



"Surely a distinction is drawn here between this sin (i.e., 'sin unto death') and other sins."<sup>1</sup> The Apostle John simply cannot have blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in mind here, because he has a believer (i.e., "brother") in view.<sup>2</sup> Boyer is correct in his assessment when he states that ". . . in the Scripture generally, and in John's writings especially, . . ." τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ". . . is to be understood in the narrow sense of a brother Christian . . . one who is our brother because he also has been begotten of God."<sup>3</sup> Merrill C. Tenney perceptively adds

My understanding of the phrase adelphon autou is that it probably refers to a Christian brother who is a member of the same church as the one concerned. The concern of the Epistle seems to be chiefly internal; the relationships expressed in it apply primarily to those within the same congregation, as in 1:9-11; 3:10; 14-17; 4:20. This does not say that the text cannot have a wider application, but my impression is that in all three epistles John is dealing with internal affairs of the church.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Berkouwer, Studies in Dogmatics: Sin, p. 333.

<sup>2</sup>He has a believer in view despite the strong scholarly opposition of men like Thomas F. Torrance, Personal Correspondence from Edinburgh, Scotland, September 22, 1981; who says, ". . . 'his brother' would not seem to be restricted to believers"; and John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied. Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 81, 142. W. Robert Cook, "Hamar-tiological Problems in First John," p. 258, has correct conclusions concerning this issue but is incorrect when he writes that the unpardonable sin ". . . was a sin related to our Lord's earthly ministry and the circumstances which made it possible are not reproducible today."

<sup>3</sup>Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles," p. 86. For a like discussion, see: S. Lewis Johnson, A Taped Sermon Message on 1 John 5:1-13 at Bible Believer's Chapel, n.d.

<sup>4</sup>Merrill C. Tenney, Personal Correspondence from Wheaton Graduate School, Illinois, August 31, 1981. For support of this view in greater detail, see the below discussion under the appropriate heading.



It is obvious, then, from the above discussions alone, that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was not the specific intent of John's grave coverage of this "sin unto death."

### The Most Consistent Interpretation

There are not many passages in the New Testament which are more difficult and perplexing than 1 John 5:16 and 17; nor are there many which men of delicate or aroused consciences so often wrestle with.<sup>1</sup> The difficulty of the passage lies in the explanation of the phrase "sin unto death" (ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον). This difficulty is of such a nature, that every fair exegete and theologian must honestly and humbly admit that it is impossible to determine the exact meaning of these words with certainty.<sup>2</sup>

The principle previously laid down in verses 14 and 15 of 1 John 5 (i.e., Christians can be confident that God listens and hears prayer and answers those according to His will) is now illustrated from the prayer of intercession for Fellow Christians in sin.<sup>3</sup> In verse 17, John reveals that "the case of erring brethren calls for the intervention of

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<sup>1</sup>Cox, "The Sin Unto Death," p. 416.

<sup>2</sup>Marvin R. Vincent, Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), pp. 370, 371. Though this statement is indeed true, many men, especially preachers, dogmatically contend the opposite.

<sup>3</sup>Dodd, MNTC, p. 135.

Christian prayer,"<sup>1</sup> because 'the prayer of faith' (Jas 5:15) is all-prevailing when it is in accordance with the will of God.<sup>2</sup> However, a limitation is set by the Apostle to the possibilities of intercessory prayer,<sup>3</sup> which he thus refers to as "sin unto death." A careful explanation of this dreadful reality, which the writer of this thesis deems to be most consistent to the revealed facts of Scripture, will now be set forth.

#### Born Again Believer<sup>4</sup>

"The proverbial 'man in the pew' (for whom primarily this note is being written) knows from experience of himself

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<sup>1</sup>Findlay, Fellowship in the Life Eternal: An Exposition of the Epistles of St. John, p. 403.

<sup>2</sup>Plummer, CBSC, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup>Findlay, Fellowship in the Life Eternal: An Exposition of the Epistles of St. John, p. 405.

<sup>4</sup>The Bible mentions people (both saved and unsaved) who died because they had committed "sin unto death." Nadab and Abihu, the two sons of Aaron the priest, died because they deliberately disobeyed God's Word (Lev 10:1-7). Korah and his followers opposed God and died (Num 16). Achan was stoned because he disobeyed Joshua's orders from God at Jericho (Jos 7:1-26). A man named Uzzah touched the ark of God and God killed him (2 Sam 6:7). Ananias and Sapphira lied to God about their financial giving, and they both died (Acts 5:1-11). Herod sinned by taking glory due to God, and God killed him (Acts 12:23). Some believers at Corinth died because of their sinful behavior at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:30). And 1 Cor 5:1-5 suggests that a certain sinner would have died had he not repented and confessed his sin (2 Cor 2:6-8). See: Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Real: I John (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1972), pp. 184-85. [It is instructive at this point to note, that, in all these examples the sin was not the same, by any means. It was simply sin which resulted in God's judgment of physical death. Consult: Ray C. Stedman, Expository Studies in I John (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1980), p. 369.] The writer of this thesis in no way wishes

and others that Christians do sin."<sup>1</sup> With this fact in mind, the phrase τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ is to be considered.

"In the Scripture generally, and in John's writings especially," . . . τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ". . . is to be understood in the narrow sense of a brother Christian . . . one who is our brother because he also has been begotten of God."<sup>2</sup> Ryrie is correct when he adds that ". . . the context is dealing with Christians."<sup>3</sup> John ". . . is not dealing at this moment with the 'sins of the entire world' (1 John 2:2), nor with 'the sin of the world' (John 1:29; cfr 16:8f), nor with 'the sin or sins of the Jews' (John 8:21, 24); but with 'our sins' (1 John 2:2)."<sup>4</sup> Huther adds support to this view when he writes that, "By ἀδελφός we are to understand, according to the usus loguendi of the Epistle, not the

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to convey that only Christians can commit "sin unto death." This is obviously false in the case of Herod (Acts 12:23). The writer does wish to convey though, that in this particular case (i.e., 1 John 5:16, 17), a genuine believer is solely in John's thinking. The below discussion seeks to make this clear.

<sup>1</sup>A. H. Dammers, "Hard Sayings--II." Theology, Vol. LXVI:519 (September 1963):371.

<sup>2</sup>Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles," p. 86. Alford adds, "'his brother' (as throughout the Epistle, is to be taken in the stricter sense: not 'proximus quicumque,' . . . but his Christian brother, one born of God as he is himself) . . .," The Greek Testament, p. 509.

<sup>3</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, "I, II, III John." In The Wycliffe Bible Commentary. Edited by Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 1028.

<sup>4</sup>Miguens, "Sin, Prayer, Life in I Jn. 5:16," p. 65. Miguens adds, "In the first epistle John refers to the sins of Christians almost exclusively (the only exception is 2:2c)."

neighbor in general,<sup>1</sup> but the Christian brother (αὐτοῦ). . . ."<sup>2</sup> It could justifiably be stated, then, that "the word ἀδελφός must signify another member of the church"<sup>3</sup> (i.e., the Universal Church), and ". . . not any one whether Christian or not."<sup>4</sup> This individual is a member of the same spiritual family, ". . . a child of the same Father, . . . a fellow-member of the Fellowship."<sup>5</sup> In conclusion, the sinning brother is one who is a Christian brother who has been begotten of God,<sup>6</sup> whom God's "seed abides in" (1 John 3:9).

#### Visible Sin

John writes, "If any one sees his brother committing a sin . . ." (Εάν τις ἴδῃ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτάνοντα

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the men who see "ἀδελφός" as such are: Stott, "The Epistles of John," p. 190; Candlish, First Epistle of John, p. 517; Torrance, Personal Correspondence, September 22, 1982; Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied, p. 142, and George E. Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> Huther, "The First Epistle of John," p. 615.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall, "The First Epistle of John," p. 246, fn. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Plummer, "The Epistles of John," p. 166.

<sup>5</sup> Guy H. King, The Fellowship: An Exposition and Devotional Study of I John (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1956), p. 118. See also Westcott, The Epistles of St. John, p. 191; and The First Epistles of John, p. 137, and Gingrich, An Outline and Analysis of the First Epistle of John, p. 187, who overstates his correct position when he writes, "The person to whom the statement refers is called 'brother,' which is never used in the Bible in reference to an unsaved person. John would never have made that mistake" (emphasis mine).

<sup>6</sup> Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles," p. 87.

ἁμαρτίαν); the reference is to an act which may be seen, to a fact susceptible of observation by another Christian brother.<sup>1</sup>

It is immediately obvious that ". . . the character of the sin . . . exercised is . . . outwardly. It is not a matter . . . of suspicion or doubt."<sup>2</sup> It is an overt sinful course of action which can be seen,<sup>3</sup> and is not an inward state of mind necessarily. It is something that can be observed by others and known for what it is.<sup>4</sup> All of this means ". . . that the possibility of 'seeing' the brother who sins is very real, it is expected under the existing circumstances, and it is expected from the existing standpoint in the present, which is the prevailing general condition."<sup>5</sup> Robert Law is helpful when he didactically adds

It is a sin which is visible, or, at least, recognisable. It is evident that the term "sin unto death" must have been one well understood by the first readers of the Epistles; and that it denoted a . . . kind of sin the characteristics of which were so definite that they were easy to perceive, and so familiar that they needed no description. On any other supposition the reference to this sin as an exception to the full exercise of brotherly

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<sup>1</sup>Braune, The Epistles General of John, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>Westcott, The Epistles of John, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup>Boyer, Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup>Dodd, MNTC, p. 135. Bengel, New Testament Word Studies, p. 813, writes: "This sin can therefore be known by the regenerate."

<sup>5</sup>Miguens, "Sin, Prayer, Life in I Jn. 5:16," p. 70. Miguens adds an interesting note: "The translation of the protasis, therefore, is: 'Whenever someone happens (as expected) to see the brother who commits sin. . . .'"

intercession is entirely pointless.<sup>1</sup> It seems strange that what was so recognisable then is so unrecognisable now. . . . The singular thing is that even to the earliest Patristic writers who touch the subject the "sin unto death" is already an enigma--its meaning as much a matter of conjecture or inference as to us.<sup>2</sup>

Though one cannot dogmatically and infallibly pin-point the "sin unto death" in the life of a Christian brother today, it seems quite convincing, from the above arguments, that this sinful course of action could indeed be visibly recognized for what it was; whatever that may have been!

### No Particular Sin

It should be obvious, even to the casual reader, that the Apostle John is concerned about sin in the believer's life. Because of this great concern for each believer, it is inevitably clear that if John did have a particular sin in mind, he would have certainly ". . . named it, so that the faithful might avoid it, and also know when it had been committed. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Westcott agrees, "Its character is assumed to be unquestionable, and its presence open and notorious." The Epistles of John, p. 210.

<sup>2</sup>Law, The First Epistle of St. John, p. 138. See also: Lenski, The Interpretation of First John, pp. 534, 535. Plummer holds the contrary, when he writes, "As a help to a right explanation we may get rid of the idea which some commentators assume, that 'sin unto death' is a sin which can be recognised by those among whom the one who commits it lives. St. John's very guarded language points the other way." "The Epistles of St. John," p. 167.

<sup>3</sup>Plummer, The Epistles of St. John, p. 167. It could wisely be stated here, that, ". . . eternal punishment is not a measure of God's resentment against a single sin, which is so enormous that the resentment never abates. It is the result of the effect of any sin, or course of sin in fixing

When John states the fact that a Christian can "sin unto death," he does so by utilizing the participle "ἁμαρτάνοντα" in the present active tense. Boyer correctly sees this to reveal ". . . not an act of sin, but a continuing state."<sup>1</sup> Brooke agrees with this thinking when he writes that the ". . . form of expression would seem to indicate that the author is not thinking of one particular sin, definite though unnamed."<sup>2</sup> The reference then is simply to sinning,<sup>3</sup> with

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the sinful state beyond recovery. This is more accordant with the inwardness of Jesus' ordinary view of things." Ezra P. Gould, The Gospel According to St. Mark, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), p. 66.

<sup>1</sup>Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles," p. 87. See also Vincent, Word Studies in the New Testament, p. 371, where he agrees that ". . . the sin unto death does not refer to a specific act, but to a class or species of sins . . ."; and, Candlish, First Epistle of John, p. 520, who writes, ". . . there is no occasion to be solicitous in attempting to identify any particular sin, or any particular manner of sinning. . . . The attempt, as all experience shows, is as vain as it is presumptuous"; and finally, Huther, "The First Epistle of John," p. 617, who is helpful when he adds, "It is true, every sin can be called a ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον, inasmuch as it tends in the direction of θάνατος, but every sin does not infallibly lead to θάνατος: so long as along with the ἁμαρτία there still exists an ἔχειν τὸν υἱόν (vv. 11 and 12), the sinning Christian is still in fellowship with the αἷμα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ which cleanses him ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας (chap 1:7); and so long as he has a παράκλητος πρὸς τὸν πατέρα, namely, Jesus Christ the righteous (chap 2:1), sin does not deprive him of the ζωὴ αἰώνιος, and is not therefore ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον."

<sup>2</sup>Brooke, "The Epistles of John," p. 146.

<sup>3</sup>Braune, "The First General Epistle of John," p. 171. See also Stott, TNTC, p. 188, for a similar discussion. See also Cook, "Hamartiological Problems in First John," p. 259. He writes, "No specific sin which we may see our brother do is a sin unto death, but any sin may become such. We are to pray for all, despite our suspicions, because 'sin unto



no definite category, no specific description of transgression intended by the phrase "sin unto death"; but the general possibility of such sin being committed is affirmed. St. John does not say, "There is a sin (ἁμαρτία τις) unto death"--a kind of sin, or degree of sin, with this inevitable issue, a sort of sin that lies beyond redemption, from which even the blood of Christ cannot cleanse the soul--did he not write, "The blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin": (1:7). But he says, "There is sin (ἐστὶν ἁμαρτία) unto death"--such a thing exists; sin has, in point of fact, this fatal outcome in certain cases.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion of this issue, it can most assuredly be stated that 'sin unto death,' therefore, is not any specific act of sin, however heinous, but is a state or habit of sin willfully chosen and persisted in.<sup>2</sup>

#### Habitual Practice

As John continues his discussion of "ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον" (sin unto death), he is clear to point out not only the fact that it is not any specific act of sin (as supported above), but he reveals through his grammatical structure,

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death" is pros thanaton, that is tending to death not guaranteeing it," and Wiersbe, Be Real: I John, pp. 185-86, and Donald W. Burdick, The Epistles of John (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), p. 94.

<sup>1</sup> Findlay, Fellowship In The Life Eternal, p. 409.

<sup>2</sup> Plummer, CBSC, p. 168. Plummer does overstate this issue though when he writes, ". . . it is constant and consummate opposition to God" (emphasis mine). Alexander, "The Epistles of John," p. 816, adds an interesting note here when he writes, "Our imagination nearly always assumes some one definite outward act; some single individual sin. This may partly be due to a seemingly slight mistranslation in the text. It should not run 'there is a sin,' but 'there is sin unto' (e.g., in the direction of, towards) 'death.'"

The text means something deeper and further-reaching than any single sin, deadly though it may be justly called."



that this sin is also a continuing state of action.<sup>1</sup> Though this does create tension and is seemingly inconsistent with John's statements elsewhere concerning the Christian and sin (e.g.: 1 John 3:3-10; 5:18), it must be concluded, that John is setting forth genuine exceptions, which only God All Mighty is capable of handling. This has led Barker to conclude that "Perhaps John [sic] (is) facing reality."<sup>2</sup> At the same time though, he correctly adds that ". . . it must be remembered--the one sinning has no assurance of salvation."<sup>3</sup>

This "sin unto death," then, ". . . is not any single and enormous act of wickedness taken by itself,"<sup>4</sup> but is a habitual practice of sin which is continuing in the present, in some fashion, in the life of a genuine believer.<sup>5</sup> One could justifiably conclude, then, by stating that in ". . . the phraseology of this Epistle we might say that . . ." this sin ". . . is the deliberate preference . . . of falsehood to

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

<sup>2</sup>David G. Barker, "Synopsis of the Teaching of I John Concerning Sanctification," Unpublished Class Paper, Theology Seminar: Sanctification, Grace Theological Seminary, Fall, 1981, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Cox, "The Sin Unto Death," p. 424. So, Miguens, "Sin, Prayer, Life in I Jn. 5:16," p. 66; and, Bengal, New Testament Word Studies, p. 813, who writes that ". . . it is not an ordinary or sudden sin, but a state of the soul . . ."; Fred L. Fisher, "I John," The Biblical Expositor, Vol. III. Edited by Carl F. H. Henry (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1960), p. 449, agrees when he writes that John ". . . is speaking of a course of life. . . ."

<sup>5</sup>Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles," p. 86. See also, Ryrie, "The First Epistle of John," p. 1028.

truth, . . ."<sup>1</sup> and is the deliberate choice of practicing sin instead of righteousness. This is the persistent action, which John says leads to physical death in the lives of some believers.

### Physical Death

Because it is the understanding of this writer that John is specifically referring to Christians (see the above discussion) committing the "sin unto death," and because it is the firm conviction of this writer that a believer's eternal security can never ultimately be tampered with, the "death" and "life" issue in this "sin unto death" motif, is definitely physical, rather than spiritual.<sup>2</sup> "The Apostle John writes of a sin resulting in physical death which believers may commit."<sup>3</sup> "The context indicates that . . .

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<sup>1</sup>Plummer, CBSC, p. 168. See also, Stott, TNTC, p. 188; Calvin, The First Epistle of John, pp. 268ff.; and Cook, "Hamartiological Problems in First John," p. 257, who adds, "The present participle hamartanonta is probably temporal and may be translated 'while' or 'as he is sinning.'"

<sup>2</sup>See also Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles," p. 87; Reynolds, "The Sin Unto Death and Prayers for the Dead," pp. 130-39; and Bruce, The Epistles of John, pp. 124-25. Here Bruce gives a good summary of this view, but pedals away from actually endorsing the view of physical death. But in his book Answers to Questions (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 134, which was published three years after (1973) his commentary on John's Epistles, Bruce wrote about this same issue; "I suggest that it is, quite literally, a sin which has death as its consequence. Compare I Cor. 11:30, and possibly I Cor. 5:5. But the only way in which it may be known that a sin is 'unto death' is if death actually ensues."

<sup>3</sup>Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, p. 166.

it is physical death in view in the passage rather than spiritual death."<sup>1</sup>

The solution to the problem, which seems most logical to this writer, lies in understanding πρὸς θάνατον in its most natural sense--"unto physical death." Reynolds has much to contribute when he writes

It is noteworthy that outside of I John the only place in the New Testament where πρὸς θάνατον is used is also Johannine. It is John 11:4 and clearly refers to physical death. Why should John not be referring to physical death here? Another Johannine passage giving support to this interpretation is John 8:24. This refers to persons physically dying . . . ; exactly what we are attempting to prove is the case in the last part of I John 5:16.<sup>2</sup>

It is instructive at this point to remember that, according to John 15:2 and 1 Corinthians 11:30, God reserves all rights to remove from this life a believer who has ceased to be a worthy witness in the world.<sup>3</sup> Guy King illumines the reader here when he writes that

As it appears to me, physical death puts the matter straight, and there is no contradiction. When a Christian falls to sinning, his salvation is not jeopardized, he does not revert to his unregenerate state of spiritual death; but, in certain cases, he may incur the penalty of physical death. The Christians at Corinth were the victims of this sore displeasure of the Lord, because in some flagrant way they had abused the Lord's Supper--

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<sup>1</sup>Franklin, "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost," p. 231.

<sup>2</sup>Reynolds, "The Sin unto Death and Prayers for the Dead," p. 133. Gingrich, An Outline and Analysis of the First Epistle of John, pp. 187ff., agrees with Reynolds when he adds: "Those who interpret the death to be spiritual death do so upon assumption only--not upon the basis of other Scriptural facts."

<sup>3</sup>Chafer, Systematic Theology, p. 166.

"for this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep," I Corinthians 11:30. . . . Spiritual death is never associated with a believer, because, says the Lord, with all the added weight of His doubly emphatic, "Verily, verily," he "is passed from death unto life," John 5:24. It is, then, a physical chastening of the Lord that is . . . spoken of here. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The implication of this entire matter is that "sin unto death" will sometimes lead to an untimely physical death despite earnest prayers of fellow believers, because God knows that this form of drastic chastisement, not forgiveness in this life, is the best thing to the end that such a person may not be condemned with the world (1 Cor 11:31-32),<sup>2</sup> and that this is the best thing for His eternal glory.<sup>3</sup>

#### An Impetus for Believer's Obedience

To those who hold to the inerrant, infallible Word of God as their standard of measure, the fact that there is sin which eventuates in physical death, even for the Christian, is (or should be) a staggering reality to deal with. When the Apostle John writes, "No one who is born of God practices

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<sup>1</sup>King, The Fellowship: An Expository and Devotional Study of I John, p. 119. For the opposite view see: Maurice, The Epistles of St. John, p. 296; the weaknesses are apparent.

<sup>2</sup>Chafer, Systematic Theology, p. 166. For further support of this view, see Gingrich, An Outline and Analysis of the First Epistle of John, pp. 187-89.

<sup>3</sup>Cook, "Hamartiological Problems in First John," p. 259. Lenski adds an encouraging note here when he writes, "Thank God that all sins and all sinning are not unto death, that by confessing and fleeing to the intercession of our Advocate we may have our sins remitted and be cleansed (1:8-2:2)!" in The Interpretation of First John, p. 536.

sin, because His seed abides in him;<sup>1</sup> and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9), he is saying in essence that "a child of God has God's seed in him, and this seed will characterize that individual's life style to the extent that his behavior is in accordance with God's." When John then covers this "sin unto death" issue in 1 John 5:16, 17, he reveals that God, who planted His seed in His Elect, will not let a child of His habitually (or as He sees fit) practice deeds that are not in harmony with His very character. God loves His children and when they need chastening, He does it. Because of this, Christians ought to fear and tremble at the first sight of sin in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that there is this fearful possibility of extension beyond the hope of physical restoration, ought to be, in itself, a spiritual impetus to obedience to every Christian continually practicing what he knows to be wrong. This is primarily what the Apostle John utilized this sore pronouncement for.

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<sup>1</sup>ἐν αὐτῷ is translated by many good scholars as "in Him." These men normally view "His seed" as referring to "his descendents, offspring, children; the children of God." Though this view may exegetically be a conceivable alternative, it seems very un-natural because 1) the immediate context has been using a different expression to say the same thing; and 2) "It makes the subject of the verb μέλει identical with the subject of the preceding clause ποιεῖ; which would more naturally be expressed by the person of the verb itself without the repetition of a synonymous subject." Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles," p. 58.

<sup>2</sup>This has led Boyer to correctly conclude that "If you can sin and get away with it, you are not a child of God." Boyer, "Greek Exegesis: Johannine Epistles," p. 60.

## CONCLUSION

The "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" and the "sin unto death" are similar pronouncements of woe. Wherever they are mentioned in Scripture, the air is gloomy and fearful.

The purpose of this study has been first of all to examine the meaning of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit." From this, it was seen that the initial concepts of blasphemy (as seen in 1. Hebrew words and their meaning; 2. The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; 3. Classical Greek literature; and 4. New Testament words) all basically point to some form of dishonoring or reviling of the name, being, or work of God by word or action. Also from this investigation, the major alternative interpretations (i.e.: 1. Apocryphal statement view; 2. Jesus' use of hyperbole view; 3. Jesus was mistaken view; 4. A dispensational sin view; 5. The unpardonable sin equals the "sin unto death" view; and 6. Attributing God's work to Satan view) of the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" were set forth and shown to be incorrect or inferior views.

After this, the most logical and consistent understanding of this issue was given. It was seen that the nature of the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" carries an eternal consequence of damnation, specifically to the reprobate who so hardens himself against the goodness and

grace of God that he reaches a state where he is incapable of ever repenting. It was concluded, then, from this, that this grave error ought to be an enormous impetus which stirs every Christian to unceasingly and repeatedly plead with the lost, to repent of their state of rebellion before it is too late.

In chapter two, John's reference to "sin unto death" was specifically examined (in distinction from other deadly sin mentioned throughout Scripture--e.g., Lev 10:1-7; Num 16; Josh 7:1-26; Acts 5:1-11, 12:23; 1 Cor 11:30, etc.) and was found to be a stern admonition to believers only, who continue in (this continuance was seen to be an exception, the only exception, to John's entire thrust throughout his little epistle, that is, that Christians do not habitually sin) a state of conscious overt sin. This admonition warned these people against sinning to the point of no return, to the point where physical death would be God's way of dealing with them. It was also seen, that this stern pronouncement of woe ought to be a spiritual impetus to obedience for every Christian who practices what he knows to be against the revealed will of God.



## APPENDIX I

### The Sin Against the Holy Spirit in Synoptic Harmony<sup>1</sup>

Matthew 12:31-32

Mark 3:28-30

Luke 12:10

31. Διὰ τοῦτο λέγω  
ὑμῖν, πᾶσα ἁμαρτία καὶ  
βλασφημία ἀφεθήσεται  
τοῖς ἀνθρώποις,

ἢ δὲ

τοῦ πνεύματος  
βλασφημία οὐκ  
ἀφεθήσεται. 32. καὶ  
ὅς ἐάν εἴπῃ λόγον  
κατὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ  
ἀνθρώπου, ἀφεθήσεται  
αὐτῷ, ὅς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ  
κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ  
ἁγίου, οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται  
αὐτῷ οὔτε, ἐν τούτῳ τῷ  
αἰῶνι οὔτε ἐν τῷ  
μέλλοντι.

28. Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν  
ὅτι πάντα ἀφεθήσεται  
τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων  
τὰ ἁμαρτήματα καὶ αἱ  
βλασφημῖαι ὅσα ἐάν  
βλασφημήσωσιν.

29. ὅς  
δ' ἂν βλασφημήσῃ εἰς  
τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, οὐκ  
ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν  
αἰῶνα, ἀλλὰ ἐνοχός  
ἐστὶν αἰωνίου  
ἁμαρτήματος. 30. ὅτι  
ἔλεγον· πνεῦμα  
ἀκάθαρτον ἔχει.

10. Καὶ πᾶς  
ὃς ἔρεῖ λόγον εἰς  
τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ  
ἀνθρώπου,  
ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ.  
τῷ δὲ εἰς τὸ  
ἅγιον πνεῦμα  
βλασφημήσαντι οὐκ  
ἀφεθήσεται.

<sup>1</sup> Kurt Aland, Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelstiftung Stuttgart, 1976), p. 283.



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