

“NO ONE BORN OF GOD SINS?”

A CLOSER LOOK AT 1 JOHN 3:6 and 9

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1 John 3:6 and 9, the apostle John writes, “No one who abides in Him sins; no one who has seen Him or knows Him . . . No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (cf. 5:18).¹ In isolation, these statements seem clear. Upon further consideration, however, they seem incompatible with other statements in John’s writings, which convey the reality of sin in the lives of believers:

“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves” (1 John 1:8).

“If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar” (1:10).

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin” (2:1a).

“If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death” (5:16a).²

Raymond Brown, noting the incongruity between these two sets of verses, states that “. . . no other New Testament author contradicts himself so sharply within such a short span of writing.”³ Scripture⁴ and personal experience demonstrate that believers struggle with sin daily. This forces one to ask how John’s clear statements of a sinless life can be reconciled with his equally clear statements of the believer’s tendency to sin. It also begs questions: “To what extent can a believer experience victory over sin?” “Is a person’s ongoing sinfulness an indication that one is not a believer?”

The purpose of this paper is to critique the most popular views and provide responses to these questions. This paper will argue that John’s statements in 3:6 and 9 are best read in an absolute sense: they describe the incompatibility of sin with a believer’s abiding fellowship with Christ, not a denial that believers actually sin. This reading will be established by examining the epistle’s purpose, the immediate context of 2:29–3:10a, and the meaning of John’s key interpretive terms “abide,” “see,” “know,” and “born of God.”

II. THE VARIETY OF VIEWS

Commentators put forth several interpretations to resolve the above tensions.⁵ This fact certainly suggests that the perfect solution is yet to be found. Colin Kruse suggests that there may not exist a “satisfactory resolution of the tension.”⁶ Yet, the interpreter must not lose heart but rather consider several options and settle on the least problematic or suggest a better alternative.

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² Other statements in this epistle are written in the form of an exhortation not to sin but to practice righteousness (e.g., 2:1, 15, 29; 3:12, 18; 5:21).

³ Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*: Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 413.

⁴ E.g., Rom 8:4; 13:14; Gal 5:16; Jas 4:1; 1 Pet 2:11.

⁵ The various views will be presented in order of their popularity within the commentary tradition.

⁶ Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 132.

1. The Willful Sins View.⁷ This view argues that believers will not commit sins deemed “willful” or “heinous.”⁸ In support of this understanding, it is suggested that in 1 John 5:16–17, John is thinking of two types of sin: a “sin that leads to death” and a “sin that does not lead to death.” The true believer cannot commit a “sin that leads to death” but may commit the other type of sin.⁹ What these sins are is debated; some think they are deliberate sins (as opposed to involuntary sins), and others opt for other distinctions among sins (e.g., mortal versus venial sins in the Roman Catholic tradition).¹⁰ James Boice states that the willful sins view goes back to the early church, making it likely the most ancient.¹¹

The strengths of the “willful sins” view are: First, it attempts to interpret 3:6 and 9 within the overall context of the book (1:8–10; 3:4–9; and 5:16–17). Second, it presents a high view of the believer (i.e., the believer does not commit “willful” sins).¹²

The major weaknesses are: First, if John had willful sins in mind, it is unlikely he would have waited until 5:16 to reveal this distinction. Second, John’s terms appear absolute (e.g., “no one,” “cannot”). Therefore, it is improbable that the reader is expected to differentiate between various degrees of sin. Third, the Scriptures disclose “heinous” failures of several biblical characters and writers, demonstrating the potential for failure.¹³

2. The Ideal View. The proponents of the ideal view suggest that John was not describing the real experience of the believer, but what may be perceived as the ideal goal for the believer. This view argues that John presents what ought to be the character of every Christian. In the ideal view, it was anticipated that sinlessness would be a characteristic of the age to come. Since John believed that the age to come had arrived (2:8), he naturally asserted the sinlessness of Christians.¹⁴ Brown states that a possibility for understanding 3:4–9 is to see 1:5–2:2 as referring to reality, and 3:6 and 9 as describing the “ideal” level.¹⁵ This is similar to the tension that exists between the “already” and the “not yet.”¹⁶

⁷ Most commentators commonly accept the titles of the following views.

⁸ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Sermon 1 (“Salvation by Faith”), §6.

⁹ D. M. Scholer, “Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16–17” in G. F. Hawthorne (ed.), *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 244.

¹⁰ This view is occasionally invoked without citation to a specific proponent. Stott does cite the view of J. H. Ebrard that willful and deliberate sin is in mind. John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1964] 1988), 138.

¹¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 107.

¹² A variation of this view is the sinless perfection view, which teaches that it is possible for a believer to come to the point in life in which he never sins again. See W. E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1943). For more on various perfectionist theories see J. Bogart, *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism in Johannine Community as Evident in the First Epistle of John*, SBLDS 33, (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

¹³ E.g., Lot (Gen 19), David (2 Sam 11), Solomon (1 Kgs 11), and Peter (Matt 26:58–75).

¹⁴ Stott, *The Letters of John*, 136.

¹⁵ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 414. See also C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Harper & Row, 1946), 80–1.

¹⁶ P. P. Kotze, “The Meaning of 1 John with Reference to 1 John 1:8 and 10,” *Neot* 13 (1979): 68–83, esp. 81. Sakae Kubo, “1 John 3:9: Absolute or Habitual?” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 7 (1969): 50.

Many who hold to the “ideal vs. realistic” or “already/not yet” view understand it to be clearly linked to the eschatological reality of the passage (2:29–3:10a).¹⁷ David Rensberger summarizes, “For 1 John, true eschatology, true Christology, and true ethics all go hand in hand.”¹⁸

3. The Imperative View. This view is akin to the ideal view,¹⁹ yet it sees the present tense verbs in 3:6 and 9 functioning as commands or statements of obligation of what Christians ought to be.²⁰ According to the ideal view, the statements of perfection in 3:6 and 9 point to an “ideal” situation that is to come. However, according to the imperative solution, John is providing an imperative about a “possibility to be realized.”²¹ I. Howard Marshall sees this reality as eschatological and “brought about by the coming of Jesus.”²² It is a reality that is both factual because the believer is told he cannot sin, and conditional because his sinlessness will only be a reality if the believer “abides in Him.” Essentially, John wanted his readers to live out the “factual” reality of their lives, namely, sinlessness.²³

The ideal and imperative solutions are attractive. Both views appear true to the immediate context (2:29–3:10a). The problem is they seem too idealistic. John was writing at a time of crisis. He was concerned about the “antichrists” (2:18, 22; 4:3) who were attempting to divide and conquer the church.²⁴ He also uses straightforward indicative mood verbs, declaring that regenerated people do not sin. It is a matter of fact—no imperative is present. Therefore, these views do not seem to fit the overall context and grammar of the letter.

4. The New Nature View. According to this view, believers never sin as an expression of their new natures. In an absolute sense, it is believed that the new nature doesn’t sin at all . . . not even occasionally.²⁵ When a Christian sins, he has deviated from his new nature, ceased to “abide” in Christ and, therefore, has acted in the flesh. Those who hold this view believe that John was challenging believers to abide in Christ at all times so that sin would not be a part of their existence.²⁶

¹⁷ Wallace notes, “Thus the author states in an absolute manner truths that are not true, because he is speaking within the context of eschatological hope (2:28–3:3) and eschatological judgment (2:18–19).” Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 525.

¹⁸ David Rensberger, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*, Abingdon New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 94.

¹⁹ As in the ideal view, one can understand 1:8–10 to be statements of the reader’s present reality, namely that sin does occur. The statement in 2:1, however, which says that John’s purpose for writing was that his readers “may not sin,” can be taken as an exhortation.

²⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 184.

²¹ Rudolph Bultman, *The Johannine Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 51, 53.

²² Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 182.

²³ Ibid., 182, reconciles 3:6 and 9 with the rest of the Epistle because the ideal motif fits with the overall theme: “to become what they are.”

²⁴ Swadling argues that 1 John 3:6 and 9 are slogans from the Gnostic heretics claiming that Christians cannot sin. He argues that John introduced these slogans to immediately refute them by urging his readers to assess the claims involved by using the criterion that those who do right are righteous and those who do evil are of the devil (3:8). Harry C. Swadling, “Sin and Sinlessness in 1 John,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35:35 (1982): 205–11.

²⁵ Several English versions suggest an absolute understanding: “No one who is born of God will continue to sin” (NKJV); “Those who have been born of God do not sin” (NRSV); “No one who is begotten by God commits sin” (NAB); and “Those who have been born into God’s family do not sin” (NLT).

²⁶ See Zane C. Hodges, *The First Epistle of John* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 134.

The strengths of this view are: First, it takes 3:6 and 9 at face value and emphasizes the need to “abide” in Christ. Second, it reflects the absolute contrast between 3:5/3:6 and 3:8/3:9.

The weaknesses are: First, John uses ἀμαρτάνει²⁷ in the iterative sense in 3:8 (“for the devil has sinned from the beginning”).²⁸ Second, there is some question whether we can find biblical warrant for isolating a man’s nature from his person (Rom 7:14; Gal 5:17). John does not write, “. . . His seed abides in him; and it (i.e., the new nature) cannot sin.” He writes, “. . . His seed abides in him; and he (i.e., the person) cannot sin.”²⁹ Third, there are no conditional particles or subjunctive moods to be found in these statements. Lastly, John Stott argues that this reasoning may play into the hands of the heretics John is opposing.³⁰

5. The Obligatory View. A variation of the above view is to understand the word “cannot” as “should not.” The Greek phrase οὐ δύναται (“cannot,” 3:9) does not always mean “incapable.” It can also mean “unwilling.”³¹ For example, in Luke 11:7, the homeowner says to his untimely guest, “I cannot get up.” This does not mean he is incapable of getting out of his bed. Nothing is chaining him down. He can actually get up, but he won’t. In the same way, just as the homeowner is actually refusing to get up, a Christian must refuse a sinful lifestyle.³² He must be unwilling to sin because he is born of God’s nature.

The strengths of this view are: First, it properly emphasizes the need for the believer to “abide” in Christ. Second, it makes a reasonable grammatical deduction based upon the phrase οὐ δύναται. Third, there is no new nature/flesh distinction, which can breed confusion. Fourth, it is true to the experience of believers. The believer sins as a matter of choice.

The weaknesses are: First, John does not use the phrase οὐ δύναται elsewhere in the suggested manner.³³ Second, John uses absolute language (3:5–6) that would not yield to such a flexible understanding of the phrase οὐ δύναται. Third, the above interpretation has not undergone scholarly scrutiny.³⁴

²⁷ All Greek references are from *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994).

²⁸ See Kerry Inman, “Distinctive Johannine Vocabulary and the Interpretation of 1 John 3:9,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (1977–78): 136–44

²⁹ This argument is lacking because “new nature” proponents acknowledge the fact that both the flesh and the divine nature constitute the human psyche. There is agreement that it is a person who sins or does not sin.

³⁰ Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 131.

³¹ E.g., Matt 7:18; Mark 1:45; 2:19; 6:3–5; Luke 11:5–7; 14:20; 1 Cor 10:21.

³² See Michael Eaton, *1, 2, 3 John*, Focus on the Bible (Scotland: Christians Focus, 1996), 96; A. E. Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, [1912] 1976), 86; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (London: Old Tappan, 1970), 90.

³³ John uses the phrase only one other time in his writings. In 1 John 4:20 he writes, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot [οὐ δύναται] love God whom he has not seen.” This context seems to demand a rather absolute interpretation (i.e., the “someone” under consideration “cannot” love God in a biblical sense (cf. John 13:34–35).

³⁴ Schnackenburg states that it is “neither an apodictic statement (‘cannot sin’) nor is it a disguised imperative (‘should not sin’),” and continues, “the categorical present tense is meant to suggest an observation and a rule . . . pointed indirectly against the Gnostics and their disregard of the divine commands.” Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 173.

6. The Habitual Sin View.³⁵ Those who hold this view believe that no genuine Christian will sin over a period of time.³⁶ While believers may sin on occasion (1:7–9), they will not be dominated by sin; rather, they will be characterized by holiness and obedience.³⁷ If a Christian sins as a pattern of life, it is assumed that he or she was never truly saved.³⁸ Alfred Plummer explains:

Although the believer sometimes sins, yet not sin, but opposition to sin, is the ruling principle of his life; for whenever he sins, he confesses it and wins righteousness and perseveres with his self-purification. But the habitual sinner does none of these things: sin is his ruling principle. And this could not be the case if he had ever really known Christ.³⁹

Proponents of the habitual view build their case on John's use of the present-tense words ἁμαρτάνει, ἁμαρτάνων (3:6) and ἁμαρτάνειν οὐ ποιεῖ (3:9). In these cases, the present tense is viewed as describing an “ongoing state” in the life of the believer or an activity of one who sins “regularly.”⁴⁰ One such example is Greek scholar A. T. Robertson, who classifies the present tense verbs as iterative/customary.⁴¹ In reference to the present infinitive (ἁμαρτάνειν) in 3:9, he states that the “linear action” is prominent and that the translation should read “go on sinning,” instead of “to commit a sin.”⁴² He further states in reference to 3:9 that the “child of God does not have the habit of sin” and, thus, “cannot go on sinning.”⁴³

There are three grammatical issues to be considered. First, when the present tense occurs, it can be understood in several ways, one of which is the habitual present.

³⁵ An unusual variation of this view is the regeneration view, which believes that John is teaching that it is impossible for the regenerate to become unregenerate again. See James M. Ghysels, *The Highest Fellowship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1936), 150.

³⁶ Westcott was one of the first to promote this view. He labeled it as describing someone's character, namely “a prevailing habit.” Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 104.

³⁷ Various English versions and paraphrases also favor the habitual view. This is especially evident in 1 John 3:9a: “No one who is born of God practices sin . . .” (NAS95). “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning . . .” (ESV). “No one who is born of God continues to sin” (NIV). “The person who has been born into God's family does not make a practice of sinning” (TLB). “No one born [begotten] of God [deliberately and knowingly] habitually practices sin” (Amplified).

³⁸ See David L. Akins, *1, 2, 3 John*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 143; Donald Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 246–48; Tommie P. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955), 195; Alexander Ross, *The Epistles of James and John*, New International Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 183; David Smith, *The Expositor's Greek New Testament*, ed. Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 5.184.

³⁹ Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 77, labeled 3:6 and 9 as specific examples of “habitual” sin on account of his understanding of the present tense verbs.

⁴⁰ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 521.

⁴¹ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 880–90. See also Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the Greek New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965), 151; Kenneth S. Wuest, “The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament Part II: The Eloquence of Greek Tenses and Moods,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 117:466 (1960): 139–40.

⁴² Robertson and Davis, *A New Short Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 10th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1931), 299–300, 374.

⁴³ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1930–33), 6.222–23.

Maximillian Zerwick writes:

. . . the use of the tenses is determined not so much by the objective reality (which commonly admits all three aspects according to what the speaker wishes to express) as by the speaker's needs: he will use the aorist for an action which objectively lasted a long time or was repeated, if what he wishes to express is simply the fact that action took place; or the present for an action which is of its nature momentary, if what he wishes to express is the nature or kind of action as distinct from its concrete realization.⁴⁴

The present tense is silent about the habitual or non-habitual character of the sinning—only that the writer has chosen to depict the sinning as something in progress, rather than as a completed action.⁴⁵

Moises Silva agrees,

Whatever else may be said for or against this interpretation [the habitual sin view], the simple fact is that the author had no choice. Although a choice between aoristic and 'imperfective' is available in the past indicative, the same is *not* true in the present indicative. The absence of a possible morphological opposition makes the present tense highly predictable and therefore relatively 'meaningless.'⁴⁶

Second, the present tense, unaided by qualifying words, does not always mean what the habitual view suggests.⁴⁷ Typically, the introduction of ideas like "practices" (NAS95)⁴⁸ or "continue to" (NIV) requires more than the Greek present tense to make them intelligible.⁴⁹ For example, in translating 1 John 1:8 and 5:16, where the present tense also occurs, "do not continually have sin" and "continually sinning a sin" respectively, those verses would contradict 3:6. Believers do not continually sin (1:8) since whoever is born of God does not continually sin (3:6). Furthermore, if one born of God does not continually sin (3:6), how could a Christian see his brother continually sinning (5:16)?

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that in an appropriate context the Greek present tense can have a progressive force as in "he is sinning." Buist Fanning points out numerous examples of the present tense being used to denote habitual activity (e.g., John 3:2, 26; 1 John 1:7; 2:27; 3

⁴⁴ Maximillian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 78.

⁴⁵ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 129.

⁴⁶ Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994), 160.

⁴⁷ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 180, writes, "[It] involves translators in stressing the present continuous form of the verb in a way, which they do not do elsewhere in the New Testament."

⁴⁸ "Practices" is a misleading translation. If that were John's point, the Greek πράσσω, which John uses elsewhere, could have been used to express that more clearly. For example, John records Jesus' declaration, "For everyone who does (πράσσει) evil hates the Light and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:20). In John 5:29, speaking of His resurrection, Jesus says, "and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed (πράξαντες) the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment."

⁴⁹ For this purpose, there were Greek words available, which are used in the NT. For example, Luke writes that after Jesus' ascension, the disciples were "continually (διὰ παντός) in the temple praising God" (Luke 24:53; see also Mark 5:5; Acts 10:2; 24:16; Rom 11:10; Heb 9:6; 13:15).

John 3).⁵⁰ Kerry Inman cites 1 John 3:8: “for the devil has been sinning from the beginning” (ὅτι ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος ἀμαρτάνει)⁵¹ and John 8:34, where John refers to “the one committing sin” (ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀμαρτίαν) as two examples demonstrating habitual sin with the use of the present tense.⁵²

C. H. Dodd, while sympathetic to the habitual view’s conclusion, questions whether the grammar alone can bear the weight of the argument:

... it is legitimate to doubt whether the reader could be expected to grasp so subtle a doctrine simply upon the basis of a precise distinction of tenses without further guidance. Moreover, it is not clear that this distinction of tenses is carried right through with the precision, which would be necessary if the whole weight of the argument rested upon it.⁵³

Lastly, Fanning demonstrates that the customary (or habitual) present and the gnomic (or generic) present can be readily distinguished. The gnomic present normally exhibits characteristics of absolute statements or of indefinite or generic statements. They relate multiple occurrences true not only in the present but of all time. The customary present tends to occur with nouns or pronouns referring to particular people or things, and it describes their repeated or continuing actions in the present. It also includes a broad scope of occurrence within its view, but it does have certain limits; the gnomic, however, widens the scope so that there are no limits.⁵⁴

In 1 John 3:4–10, it is clear that the verbs in question are gnomic. They contain the repeated uses of πᾶς with articular principle in the sense of “whoever . . .” rather than pronouns referring to particular people.⁵⁵ Therefore, the verbs in question should not be understood in a customary sense but in an absolute sense.

Fanning explains,

Thus, the sense of a generic utterance is usually an absolute statement of what each one does once, and not a statement of the individual’s customary or habitual activity. This is true particularly when the present verb is a bounded action (an ACCOMPLISHMENT, CLIMAX, or PUNCTUAL), rather than an unbounded STATE or ACTIVITY. In regard to 1 John 3, it is important to analyze the actional character of ἀμαρτάνειν and ποιῶν τὴν ἀμαρτίαν. These verbal expressions seem most likely to be bounded actions (to commit sin), rather than ACTIVITIES or STATES.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Cf. Luke 4:36, 7:5, 11:39, 18:12; Acts 7:51; 19:13; 20:24; 21:21; 23:8. Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (New York: Oxford University, 1990), 215.

⁵¹ The periphrasis of ἀμαρτάνειν with ποιῶν τὴν ἀμαρτίαν in 3:4, 8 and the parallel description in 3:8 of the devil who sinned ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς may be a hint towards the idea of ‘continuance in sin as a rule of life’, but it seems rather weak. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, 216 n. 29.

⁵² Inman, “Distinctive Johannine Vocabulary and the Interpretation of 1 John 3:9,” 136–44, concludes that ἀμαρτάνειν οὐ ποιεῖ (3:9) should be understood in the same way.

⁵³ C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Harper & Row, 1946), 79.

⁵⁴ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, 210–11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

Sakae Kubo summarizes,

To say in this context that the author means only that the Christian does not habitually sin is appreciably to weaken his point . . . The heretic who defines sin as ignorance and not as lawlessness can sin, but the Christian who recognizes sin as lawlessness and that Jesus came to destroy sin and its instigator, the devil, cannot sin. The sharp antithesis is intentional and any qualifications or reservations at this point would undermine the argument.⁵⁷

In addition to the grammatical difficulties, there are some deductive observations, which are also problematic. In answering the question as to why God would preserve believers from being dominated by sin but not from sinning all together. Marshall writes:

If believers do not sin habitually because God's seed remains in Him (3:9b), it is hard to understand why God would preserve believers from some sins, but not from all sins. We must, therefore, wonder whether an important point of interpretation can be made to rest on what has been called a grammatical subtlety.⁵⁸

Significant questions demand responses: Do not all Christians "continue to sin" until the day of their death? Do not all Christians sin daily? Is not daily sin a continuation in doing it? Each of these questions must be answered in the affirmative. Therefore, the view that a Christian does not habitually sin appears to be untenable.

III. PROPOSED COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTION

Six interpretations have been summarized and critiqued. The preferred interpretation will be set forth after examining three crucial areas: (1) the purpose of the letter, (2) the context, and (3) key interpretive words.

1. The Purpose of 1 John

John's first epistle is a book of tests. The key to determining the purpose of this letter is to discern the purpose of its tests. There are two competing views: tests of life and tests of fellowship.⁵⁹ Robert Law put forth the tests of life view,⁶⁰ insisting that the tests determine the genuineness of one's salvation. Guy King, likely the originator of the tests of fellowship view,⁶¹ argues that the tests are not conditions of salvation, but conditions for fellowship with Christ. Both views have weaknesses, but the latter has the strongest support.

⁵⁷ Kubo, "1 John 3:9: Absolute or Habitual?", 50.

⁵⁸ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 180. Smalley concurs when he writes, "If God, whose nature remains in the Christian (3:9) and keeps him safe (5:18) can be said to protect the believer from habitual sin, why can He not preserve him as well from occasional sins?" Stephen S. Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 160.

⁵⁹ A third view splits the book in half and accepts both views (1:1–2:28 refers to fellowship; 2:29–5:21 refers to sonship). See George G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955). See also Gary W. Derickson, "What Is the Message of 1 John?" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 150:597 (Jan 1993): 89–105.

⁶⁰ Robert Law, *The Tests of Life*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1909).

⁶¹ Guy H. King, *The Fellowship* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1954).

The purpose of this epistle is found in 1:3: “what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”⁶² John’s goal was not the conversion of his readers; he was convinced they were already saved. He refers to his readers as “little children,” “fathers,” and “young men” (2:12–14). His readers have received forgiveness (2:12), have known God (2:13–14), are strong in their faith (2:14), abide in God’s Word (2:14), and have overcome the world and Satan (2:13–14; 5:4–5, 18). None of these references could be directed to unbelievers.

Those who argue against this view contend that the purpose statement is found in 5:13: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.” It is argued that the demonstrative pronoun ταῦτα (“these things”) encompasses the contents of the entire book (cf. 1:4). Yet, John did not write every section of his letter to assure his readers of their salvation. Nor did he write every section of his letter to fulfill joy (1:4), to prevent sin (2:1), or to warn of deceivers (2:26). The referent of each purpose statement is the paragraph immediately preceding it.⁶³

Demonstrative Pronoun	Referent
1:4	1:1–3
2:1	1:5–10
2:26	2:18–24
5:13a	5:6–12

The fellowship purpose of 1 John requires interpreting 3:6 and 9 with respect to believers who need to experience ongoing harmony with God.

2. The Context

The pericope of the verses under consideration is 2:29–3:10a.⁶⁴ John begins a new section in 2:29 with the words, “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.” John is stating that a person “born of Him” (ἐξ αὐτοῦ γεγέννηται) has been given God’s nature. This theme of God’s nature flows through 2:29–3:10a and is embraced by an eschatological context introduced in 2:18 by the statement, “It is the last hour.”

⁶² See John Niemela, “Finding True North in 1 John,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 6 (July–Sept 2000): 16, writes, “As an aside, could 1 John 1:1–3 be the book’s (audience-centered) purpose statement, in light of *these things* (verse 4) having a narrow referent? This is not a difficulty. The reason is that verse 3 introduces the idea of fellowship. Verse 4 narrowly refers to those verses. The rest of the book further expands the concept of fellowship and the abundant life.”

⁶³ The only time that Law discusses whether 1 John 5:13 is the book’s purpose statement is in a note hidden in the back of his book. Few find this admission. Law, *Tests of Life*, 405, writes, “Those words [5:13] accurately define the governing aim of the whole Epistle. Contextually, however, they refer to the contents of 5:6–12 and most directly to 5:11, 12. At the same time, they effect the transition to the new subject, confidence in prayer . . .”

⁶⁴ First John 2:28–3:10b has a sort of bookend-effect, in that at one end of the section we find the phrase “born of [God]” (2:29) and also at the other end of the passage we have the phrase “born of God” (3:9). Also, he opens with the positive proclamation: “everyone who does what is right has been born of [God]” (2:29), and he closes with the negative note: “Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God” (3:10b).

This eschatological setting continues in this section, dealing with godly living in the light of Christ's imminent return. The present eschatological character of divine rebirth is clearly stated in 3:1–2, as John writes that believers “should be called children of God and such we are . . . Beloved, now we are children of God . . .” While the future eschatological aspects are present in 3:2b–3, one cannot deny that the present eschatological status of divine rebirth is being stressed. Within the context of the pericope, 3:1–3 serves as a parenthetical exclamation. Beginning with 3:4, John resumes his central argument concerning godly living. The concepts of “abiding,” as seen in the expression *παῖς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων* (3:6), and divine rebirth, as seen in the expression *ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ* (3:9), are filled with present eschatological implications.

John writes, “. . . in Him [Christ] there is no sin” (3:5). He clearly meant that there is no sin in Christ (cf. John 14:9). This statement is clearly absolute and cannot be qualified. Then, in the next sentence, he asserts that those who abide in Christ do not sin (3:6). His position is that sin is never a product of abiding in Christ. When a believer abides in Christ, he does not sin.⁶⁵

The apostle John continues to stress the absolute sense of the behavior in 3:7–8. A literal translation reads: “. . . the one doing righteousness is righteous, just as Christ is righteous; but the one doing sin is of the devil.”⁶⁶ These verses draw an absolute, either/or contrast: the one who practices righteousness reveals that he is of God, while the one who practices sin reveals that he is of the devil. John is not describing gradations of behavior but the settled spiritual paternity a life reveals. Verse 9 is a further development of this same point. No believer ever sins as an expression of his new nature. When the believer expresses his new nature, he will not sin because God's seed (i.e., nature) “abides” in him. John does not teach sinless perfection (1:8–10). But he does teach the sinlessness of our new nature that occurs when we abide in Christ.⁶⁷

3. Key Interpretive Words

A. The Meaning of “Abide.” The Greek word *μένω* is usually translated “to abide” or “to remain” and has a broad range of meaning throughout the NT, both literal and figurative. As a transitive verb, it may mean “to wait for, await,” or it can also be used with the sense of “to expect someone.”⁶⁸ As an intransitive verb, it can mean “to remain in a place, to tarry, to remain, to stay still,” and can be used of either persons or things.⁶⁹ It may also have the sense of living, dwelling, or lodging. Figuratively, it can mean someone “does not leave the realm or sphere in which he finds himself” and can be translated as “remain,” “continue,” or “abide.”⁷⁰ It can also

⁶⁵ Hodges, *The First Epistle of John*, 134, writes, “The failure to recognize the logical connection between verses 5 and 6 is the reason that verse 6 has been so often misunderstood. As a result, this misunderstanding carries over into verse 9.”

⁶⁶ *ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην δίκαιός ἐστιν, καθὼς ἐκεῖνος δίκαιός ἐστιν· ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστίν, ὅτι ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος ἁμαρτάνει.*

⁶⁷ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 152, notes, “3:4–9 is also marked by several striking antitheses the sinfulness of the Christian and the sinlessness of Christ (3:4–5); continuing in sin and remaining in Jesus (3:6); acting righteously and committing sin (3:7–8); belonging to the devil and belonging to God (3:8–9).”

⁶⁸ Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [BDAG] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 503–4.

⁶⁹ BDAG, 504.

⁷⁰ BDAG, 503.

mean “stand against, opposition, to hold out, to stand fast” and “to remain, to last, to remain in legal force.”⁷¹

The word μένω occurs 118 times in the NT, over half of which (sixty-eight) appear in one of John’s writings. It occurs forty times in John’s gospel, twenty-four times in 1 John,⁷² three times in 2 John, and once in Revelation.⁷³ In his gospel, John uses μένω with its literal sense to describe Jesus remaining, tarrying, or living somewhere, and of His body remaining on a cross (19:31). He quotes John the Baptist when he uses it with this same natural sense to describe the Holy Spirit’s remaining on Jesus. Jesus also uses it with the same sense of living somewhere. In John’s gospel, the term is used mostly by Jesus with a wide range of figurative senses. Some are difficult to distinguish whether they are to be understood literally in the sense of living somewhere or figuratively with the sense of remaining “in the sphere.”

John’s usage of μένω in his first and second epistles always reflects one of its figurative senses.⁷⁴ For example, in 1 John 2:10 and 3:14 he uses it to express the concept of remaining in the realm or sphere in which one finds oneself.⁷⁵ In 2 John this same sense carries with it the idea of obeying or living according to the realm in which one finds himself. It also refers to remaining, lasting, enduring, or continuing to live in 1 John 2:14, 24, 27; 3:17. In 1 John 2:17, “lives” (μένει) refers to experiencing eternal life, not possessing it.⁷⁶ It also means to remain in fellowship with other believers in 1 John 2:19. In 2 John 2, the word refers to God’s truth having an influence in our lives. In 1 John 4:12–13, it is used by John to refer to the mutual indwelling of God within the believer and the believer in God.⁷⁷

Abiding in Christ is to be distinguished from being in Christ.⁷⁸ To have a position in Him is not the equivalent of occupying a position in Him, although ideally there should be no practical difference in these two truths. (See 1 John 2:1 for an example of an ideal statement followed by a

⁷¹ Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Volumes 1 through 4* [NIDNTT] (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, [1975] 1986, electronic ed.

⁷² Of these, fourteen refer to the permanence of relationship between God and the believer (2:6, 3:24 [2x], 4:12, 4:13 [2x], 4:15 [2x], 4:16 [2x]), Jesus and the believer (2:27, 2:28, 3:6), or both God and Jesus with the believer (2:24). Of the ten remaining instances, five refer to other realities residing in the believer: the word of God (2:14), the message heard from the beginning (2:24 [2x]), the anointing (2:27), and God’s seed (3:9). Two more refer to realities not residing in the opponents: eternal life (3:15) and the love of God (3:17). The last three instances are more varied: the one who loves his brother resides in light (2:10), the one who does not love resides in death (3:14), and the one who resides in love (4:16) resides in God.

⁷³ John 1:32, 33, 38, 39 (2x); 2:12; 3:36; 4:40 (2x); 5:38; 6:27, 56; 7:9; 8:31, 35 (2x); 9:41; 10:40; 11:6, 54; 12:24, 34, 46; 14:10, 17, 25; 15:4 (3x), 5, 6, 7 (2x), 9, 10 (2x), 16; 19:31; 21:22, 23; 1 John 2:6, 10, 14, 17, 19, 24 (3x), 27 (2x), 28; 3:6 and 9, 14, 15, 17, 24 (2x); 4:12, 13, 15, 16 (3x); 2 John 1:2, 9 (2x); Rev 17:10.

⁷⁴ In John’s first epistle, μένω typically means, “to remain, stay, continue, endure, or abide,” BAGD, 503.

⁷⁵ Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, 83–84; King, *The Fellowship*, 38; J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 89; Charles C. Ryrie, “1 John” in *The Wycliff Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 1470; Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 56.

⁷⁶ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 315, 327; Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, 43; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 88–89; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 106.

⁷⁷ This is the Pauline concept of being “in Christ.” See John 1:38–39; 2:12; 4:40; 7:9; 10:40; 11:6, 54; 12:34; and 19:31. Edwin Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1906), 334.

⁷⁸ Observe the contrast between the “in me” branch and the “abide in me” branch of John 15:2 and 4. A study of John 15:4ff will show that abiding is the condition of fruit bearing, not salvation.

provision of aid when the ideal is not realized.) The difference between the two concepts may be seen in the distinction made in 2:5–6 between knowing we *are* in Him and *abiding* in Him.

The conditional nature of the word μένω is best brought out in 1 John 3:24a: “The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him.” Clearly, abiding is conditioned upon obedience (cf. John 15:10). Thus, abiding in Christ is the maintenance of personal fellowship with Him or the continuous enjoyment of the position that is ours.⁷⁹ Moreover, in 1 John 2:28, John commands his “little children” to “abide” in Christ. The purpose of this abiding is “so that” (ἵνα) when Christ appears his little children “may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His Coming.” If every Christian abides and abiding is synonymous with believing, why would John issue such a command? In light of this, then, we can see that this command is not referring to salvation, but rather to fellowship. Thus, the words “believe” and “abide” are not synonymous. These words are separated chronologically. They are also separated in terms of their essence. They are dealing with two totally separate entities—a future state (belief) and a present experience (abide). One is a free gift,⁸⁰ while the other requires some effort and sacrifice on our part. An overview of 1 John demonstrates that the word “abide” includes numerous conditions:

- We must walk in the same manner that Jesus walked (2:6).
- We must love our brothers and sisters in Christ (2:10; 3:14–16; 4:12).
- We must be strong in the faith (2:14).
- We must do God’s will and persevere in our faith (2:17, 19; 4:16).
- We must hold to the same truth we learned when we first became Christians (2:24, 27).
- We must abide to preserve our confidence and avoid shame at Christ’s return (2:28).
- We must not sin (3:6 and 9).⁸¹
- We must share our material possessions with those in need (3:17).
- We must keep His commandments (3:24).
- We must publicly confess Christ (4:15).

There is a natural distinction between “believe” and “abide.” If salvation is conditioned upon abiding, salvation is not by faith alone. To insist that salvation is maintained or validated by good works (or not sinning) is to take the daily burden of our salvation upon ourselves. Even stating that God’s grace enables believers to maintain good works is not accurate because they are still the ones responsible for appropriating His grace. Abiding is the result of Christian maturity. “Abiding in Christ” as an expression of sanctification is assumed; but if μένω is interpreted in a salvific sense, confusion will abound regarding the believer’s security.

Marvin Vincent states, “To *abide* in Christ is more than to *be* in Him, since it represents a condition maintained by communion with God and by the habitual doing of His will”⁸² (author’s

⁷⁹ The apostle Paul speaks of this same truth when he points out the need for the control of the Holy Spirit in the life, Eph 5:18 and Gal 5:16.

⁸⁰ The apostle Paul called eternal salvation a “gift” or a “free gift” no less than nine times (Rom 3:24; 5:15 [2x], 16 [2x], 17; 6:23; 2 Cor 9:15; Eph 2:8; cf. Heb 6:4; Jas 1:17).

⁸¹ Verse 6 says that a Christian does not sin while 3:9 says that a Christian cannot sin. 3:6 is conditioned upon “abiding” while 3:9 is conditioned upon “born of God.”

⁸² Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies of the New Testament* vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 347–48.

italics). Brooke Westcott writes, “St. John speaks of ‘abiding’ in Christ and not simply of ‘being’ in Christ, because his arguments rest on the efficacy of continuous human effort.”⁸³ If abiding in Christ is synonymous with being a Christian, 3:6 appears to contradict what John wrote in 1:8 and 10. There he states that believers do sin (cf. 2:1a, 15, 29; 3:12, 18; 5:16, 21). It also contradicts the believer’s experience because Christians do indeed sin. John is thus saying, “everyone who abides in Him (Jesus) does not sin”; and by this he means that an intimate and ongoing relationship with Christ (ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων, “the one who abides in him,” using the present tense) precludes the practice of sin.

Again, if believers were able to abide in Christ without interruption, they would never sin. The sinless nature of Christ controls the abiding Christian, whereas the flesh controls the non-abiding Christian. Sin is never the product of an abiding experience or the regenerate self.

B. The Meaning of “See” and “Know.” The key to understanding 1 John 3:6 lies in the terms “has seen” (ἑώρακεν) and “knows” (ἐγνώκεν). It is important to note both words are in the perfect tense. This Greek tense is often very difficult to render into English. In its normal function, the tense suggests a present state or situation resulting from a past action or event.⁸⁴ Louw states, “The perfect tense in Greek signifies a state of affairs. It is not concerned with the past occurrence of the event but with its reality; its existence.”⁸⁵ Therefore, John’s use of the perfect tense is not intended to categorize a person as either saved or unsaved, since even believers sin (1:8). Instead, the statement is intended to stigmatize all sin as the product not only of not abiding, but also of blindness and ignorance in one’s fellowship with Christ.

John uses these words throughout this epistle to refer to the believer who is walking in intimate fellowship with God (1:7; 2:3, 10). When the believer sins, his fellowship with God suffers. He no longer “sees” God because he has moved out of the light into darkness.⁸⁶ He no longer “knows” God in that intimate sense. At the moment the believer sins, he has not seen or known God. John does not say, “has never seen Him and has never known Him.” Seeing God refers to fellowship. Moses was able to do amazing things for God because his life was characterized by “seeing Him who is unseen” (Heb 11:27). He was so aware of God and walked in such fellowship with God, that he was able to love God despite great sufferings. Hebrews 12:14 states, “Pursue peace with all men and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.” In this context, to “see the Lord” is experiential not judicial.⁸⁷

⁸³ Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 104.

⁸⁴ The perfect would indicate to see and to experience the continual results of having seen. Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 790.

⁸⁵ J. P. Louw, “Verbal Aspect in the First Letter of John,” *Neot* 9 (1975): 101.

⁸⁶ E.g., Job 21:14; Ps 82:5; Prov 4:19; 14:12; 30:20; Isa 6:9–10; 44:18–20; Jer 9:3–6; Ezek 12:2; Dan 12:10; Amos 9:10; Mic 4:12; Zeph 3:5; Matt 13:22; John 1:5, 10; 8:12; Acts 26:17–18; Rom 1:21–32; 2 Cor 3:14–15; Eph 4:18–19; 2 Thess 2:9–10; 1 Tim 4:2; 2 Tim 3:13; Titus 1:15; Heb 11:25; 2 Pet 1:5, 8–9; 2:19; 1 John 1:6, 8; 2:11; and 3:6–7.

⁸⁷ Many great men and women of God have failed to fulfill this verse, yet no one would question their salvation.

The word “know” (ἐγνώκεν from γινώσκω; 3:6b) occurs twenty-five times in this epistle.⁸⁸ Many scholars presume it is synonymous with “born of God” (cf. 3:9). Yet, there is a difference between being born again and knowing God. Being born again is a one-time event, while knowing God is a matter of maturity.⁸⁹ Knowing God is conditional and requires effort on the part of the believer.

In his first epistle, John uses γινώσκω in a conditional sense in two defining passages:

And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The man who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him. The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked (1 John 2:3–6).

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (1 John 4:8).

In this epistle, John equates “knowing God” with “abiding in Him.” He is not discussing justification; he is discussing “fellowship” (i.e., an ongoing experience with God). This is illustrated in his gospel where he recorded Jesus’ words: “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him and have seen Him. Have I been so long with you and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip?” (John 14:7, 9) Philip had believed and followed Christ (John 1:43); therefore, Jesus was not referring to his salvific state. Jesus pointed out that Philip did not know Him in some other sense. He did not seem to know how fully Jesus revealed the Father. This knowledge comes only as disciples obey Him (John 14:21).

John is concerned for his readers. His concern is not for their salvation, but their forward progress in the Christian life. John never implies that his readers are unregenerate, just that they may not experience and possess God’s power and fellowship in their daily experience. There is no exegetical evidence that this writer is aware that “knowing God” means “be saved” in Johannine literature. It is roughly equivalent to our saying, “He has [a walk with] God” or “He has God with him in this.” It is functionally the same as having “eternal life remain in him,” which, for John, means, “having Jesus Christ remain in fellowship with him” (1 John 3:15).⁹⁰ The words that John chose to use are terms referring to one’s enjoyment of God.

Kruse sums John’s style up well:

John’s interest is more practical than theological. He is interested in the behavior of those born of God: they do right (2:29), do not sin (3:9; 5:18), love one another (4:7), believe that Jesus is the Christ (5:1) and overcome the world (5:18).⁹¹

⁸⁸ See 1 John 2:3 (2x’s), 4, 5, 13, 14 (2x’s), 18, 29; 3:1 (2x’s), 6, 16, 19, 20, 24; 4:2, 6 (2x’s), 7, 8, 13, 16; 5:2, 20.

⁸⁹ The word “know” has the same latitude in Greek as it does in English. For example, a father may say, “I don’t know my kids.” By this, he does not mean he does not have a relationship with them. He means he does not know them on an intimate level.

⁹⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 408.

⁹¹ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 124.

C. The Meaning of “Born of God.” Some commentators would not take issue with the above analysis. The real problem arises with the controversial 3:9. John moves from “seeing” and “knowing” God (3:6) to being “born of God” (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται).⁹² Yet, this writer does not see any difficulty with this absolute language.⁹³ In case his readers did not understand his point in 3:6, John drives it home with the phrase “Whoever has been born of God does not sin” (NKJV).

John is including an additional word regarding sin in the life of a believer: All sin is “of the devil” (3:8). When a believer sins, he is participating in the work of the devil. He is forsaking his identity of God’s sonship at the moment of sinning. Although his behavior is contradictory to his identity, the identity itself cannot be changed. Therefore, anyone “born of God” does not and cannot sin as a result of the new nature.⁹⁴

A. E. Brooke said it well,

The fact that he has been begotten of God excludes the possibility of his committing sin as an expression of his true character, though actual sins may and do occur so far as he fails from weakness to realize his true character (cf. John 8:33, 39) . . . Every *teknon* must reproduce the works of his father. In so far as any man is a *teknon theo* he ‘cannot’ do the works of the Devil. The writer, speaks, however, here as elsewhere, in the absolute language of a prophet rather than with the circumspection of the casuist.⁹⁵

Rudolph Schnackenburg agrees, “No one who possesses eternal life by virtue of regeneration sins. This is because God’s Spirit abides in him. Therefore, he cannot sin, because he reflects the sinless Parent who begot him.”⁹⁶

While John has already acknowledged that Christians do sin (1:7–9), such sin does not arise from the new nature. John appears to draw upon the Old Testament promise of God placing a new “heart” within His people: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes” (Ezek 36:27). This concept was later reflected in intertestamental literature, as seen in 1 Enoch 5:8: “Then wisdom shall be given to the elect, and they shall live and never again sin.”

⁹² The Greek word γεγέννηται (“born”) is a perfect participle: ongoing effects of being born of God. For other uses of the phrase “born of God,” see 1 John 2:29; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18 (2x’s); cf. John 1:13; 3:6, 8.

⁹³ Cook writes, “Robert Shank in *Life in the Son*, pp. 94–99, in his discussion of 1 John 3:6 and 9 says: ‘What John attributes in verse 6 to ‘abiding in him’ he attributes in verse 9 to being ‘born of God.’ John thus implies that ‘abiding in Him’ and being ‘born of God’ are equivalent.’ Such a conclusion is unwarranted for several reasons. In the first place, his statement that one of the major theses of 1 John is ‘the Apostle’s insistence that there are specific conditions under which the new birth *can* exist, and other specific conditions under which it *cannot* exist’ is not demonstrable, as will be shown in the later discussion of verse nine. Secondly, his discussion of the word *meno* fails to consider its other usage by John. Thirdly, he overlooks the fact that the argument of 3:6 has to do with the believer’s relationship to the sinless Savior (3:5), while the argument of 3:9 is based upon the presence of the divine seed in the believer. What John is saying is that the reason why the begotten of God does not sin is because he has become a partaker of the divine nature.” See W. Robert Cook, “Hamartiological Problems in First John,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123:491 (July 1966): 254.

⁹⁴ Everett F. Harrison, “A Key to the Understanding of First John,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 111:441 (Jan 1954): 44.

⁹⁵ Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles*, 89–90.

⁹⁶ Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 163.

John is clear: through the new birth, the believer becomes a partaker of God's divine, sinless nature. He describes this nature as "His seed" (3:9).⁹⁷ God's divine nature is imparted to the believer through His divine seed. Just as a man's physical seed cannot produce something outside its genetic code, so God's seed cannot produce anything contrary to His nature—namely, sin. Because God's nature abides in the believer, it cannot produce sin. Thus, by means of this absolute statement, John emphasizes that there is no middle ground between abiding in Christ and sinning.

IV. CONCLUSION

This conclusion is supported by (1) the cumulative weaknesses of the other five views surveyed above, particularly the habitual view's inability to account for John's absolute, gnomic grammar; (2) the fellowship purpose of the epistle (1:3); (3) the immediate context of 2:29–3:10a; and (4) the proper interpretation of John's key interpretive words—"abide," "see," "know," and "born of God." Taken together, these considerations demonstrate that John is describing the incompatibility of sin with the believer's abiding fellowship in Christ, not denying the possibility that believers may commit acts of sin.

Regardless of which interpretation one ultimately adopts, all can agree that sin and the Christian are fundamentally incompatible. John's burden throughout this passage is not to unsettle believers concerning their eternal salvation but to exhort them to abide in Christ. To the extent that believers remain in intimate fellowship with Him, they experience the transforming power of His divine life. As Augustine wisely observed, "To the extent that the Christian remains ("abides") in Christ, to that extent he does not sin."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ It is not within the scope of this paper to labor over the identity of "His seed" (σπέρμα αὐτοῦ). Suffice to say, it could be any of the following: life, the Word of God, the Gospel, the Holy Spirit, Christ, or the new nature. The position of this writer is that the seed refers to God's nature, which indwells the Christian.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 430.