

THE SIN UNTO DEATH

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The "sin unto death" in 1 John 5:16 has provoked widespread discussion. The correct meaning revolves around the nature of the sin and the nature of the death referred to. The context and word selection point to the conclusion that the individual "committing a sin not unto death" is an unsaved man who professes to be a believer, but who is, in actuality, in need of salvation. On the one hand, John refers to one who is sinning but is not doing so to the point of the impossibility of being granted eternal life. The apostle encourages intercessory prayer for such an individual, that God may grant to him eternal life. On the other hand, he asserts that if a man does sin to such an extent that repentance and forgiveness are impossible, it would be "unto death," spiritual death in the sense that his condition is irrevocable (cf. Matt 12:31-32).

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Diversity of opinion has abounded concerning the interpretation of the problematic portion found in 1 John 5:16 where the apostle John writes,

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.¹

The OT frequently mentions specific sins which merit punishment by death. Num 15:30-31 indicates that the one who willfully and defiantly sins "shall be cut off from among his people." The sin of coming near to the tent of meeting was punishable by death (Num 18:22). Ps 19:13 suggests the same penalty for presumptuous

¹Scripture quotations in this essay are taken from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted. "Sin unto death" in the essay title and used frequently throughout the essay is phraseology derived from 1 John 5:16 in the King James Version.

sins.²

The NT has similar examples, the most prominent being that of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). Other examples include that of Herod (Acts 12) and those who had taken the Lord's Supper unworthily (1 Cor 11).

There are two notable differences between the other passages and this one, however. First of all, in the above cases, the sin which led to the punishment is more or less evident; in this instance, it is not revealed. Secondly, the exact nature of the death penalty is ambiguous here, while elsewhere it is not. So the problem encountered here is unique.

Two basic questions call for a response in this passage: (1) What is the nature of the sin? And (2) What is the nature of the death? The answers to these will essentially answer a third, namely, can the sin be committed today by Christians?

THE CONTEXT

²Also cf. Lev 4:2; 5:15; Num 14:2-4; 20:12; and 1 Sam 2:25. This same philosophy was continued in the Qumran Community, as the Manual of Discipline gives evidence (1QS 8:21-9:2). During the first centuries A.D., this concept was taken even further: "Tertullian went a stage further and listed the grosser sins (including murder, adultery, blasphemy and idolatry) as beyond pardon" (John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Tyndale's New Testament Commentaries, ed. by R. V. G. Tasker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 187).

The entirety of 1 John deals with tests of life, tests designed to give assurance of salvation to believers (cp. 5:13 with 1:4; 2:12-14) and to expose those who are not really believers: "We shall know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him" (1 John 3:19).³ The fact that one is or is not a believer is not always obvious; rather, continuation in the truth is a test which will ultimately reflect the validity of the profession.⁴

In the preceding verses (5:14-15), John speaks about prayer and the confidence a believer may have concerning the acceptance of that prayer before God and the granting of the request. In verses 16-17, he gives a specific illustration and limitation within which the prayer of a Christian may be benevolently and effectually employed, namely, in rescuing a brother from death.

It is not now a case of petition, but of intercession. The assurance of eternal life which the Christian should enjoy (13) ought not to lead him into preoccupation with himself to the neglect of others. On the contrary, he will recognize his duty in love to care for his brother in need. . . . The future tense *he shall ask* expresses not the writer's command but the Christian's inevitable and spontaneous reaction.⁵

Thus it is that when one comes to the throne of God in prayer, the standing of his brother is immediately brought into focus. This connection has led Cameron to remark, "Our holiest hours of prayer and worship should be marked by benevolence toward our brethren."⁶

THE NATURE OF THE SIN

Various attempts in satisfactorily resolving the difficulties regarding the character of the sin have been made. Some of the many interpretations include: (1) the sin against the Holy Spirit, (2) any great

³See Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914).

⁴Cf. 1 John 2:19 where some who professed Christ and were a part of the local body of believers were ultimately exposed by their departure.

⁵Stott, *Epistles* 186.

⁶Robert Cameron, *The First Epistle of John* (Philadelphia: A. J. Rowland, 1899) 242.

sin, such as murder or adultery, (3) rejection of Christ as Messiah, (4) deliberate and willful sins, (5) apostasy, and (6) post-baptismal sins.⁷ The most significant of these will be examined.

Mortal sins

The Church of Rome has consistently maintained that the "sin unto death" is a grave, post-baptismal sin.⁸ This sin is commonly referred to as "mortal" sin, as compared with the less significant sin which is called "venial." Although the designations are not specifically named in Scripture, it is asserted that the distinction between the two types of sin is clearly affirmed. In general, mortal sins are said to be those which exclude the offender from the kingdom (e.g., Eph 5:5; Gal 5:19-21) and venial sins are those which do not (e.g., James 3:2; 1 John 1:8; Eccl 7:21).⁹ Additional proof for such distinctions is given by Dens, as quoted by M'Clintock and Strong:

"It is, moreover, certain," says Dens, "not only from the divine compassion, but from the nature of the thing, that there are venial sins, or such light ones, as in just men may consist with a state of grace and friendship with God; implying that there is a certain kind of sin of which a man may be guilty without offending God."¹⁰

A more specific basis for these definitions is provided by Aquinas. Describing the distinctiveness of the two types, he explains, The difference between venial and mortal sin follows upon a diversity of

⁷A list of additional interpretations is given by Barnes, "The First Epistle General of John," *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament Testament*, X (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975[rpt.]) 348-49, and Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (vol. 30 of *The Anchor Bible*; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982) 611-620.

⁸Deadly sins committed prior to the time of baptism are said to be cleansed at the time of that sacrament (James Gibbons, *Faith of Our Fathers* [Baltimore: John Murphy, 1905] 303 ff.). For this reason many have waited until their deathbed to be baptized.

⁹I. McGuiness, "Sin (Theology of)," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, XIII (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967) 245.

¹⁰John M'Clintock and James Strong, "Sin," *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theo-logical, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, IX (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969[rpt.]) 767.

disorder inherent in the concept of sin itself. This disorder is twofold: the one involves the abandonment of the very source of order, the other only involves departure from secondary elements in that order. . . . Hence, when the soul is so disordered by sin that it turns away from its ultimate goal, God, to whom it is united by charity, then we speak of mortal sin. However, when this disorder stops short of turning away from God, then the sin is venial.¹¹

Venial sins, therefore, do not make one the offender of God; they do not cause a diminution of sanctifying grace. Though they constitute a violation of God's law, they are too small and insignificant to divert one from his ultimate goal, God. Mortal sin, on the other hand, constitutes an act in which the offender deliberately chooses "some created good as a final end in preference to the Supreme Good, with a consequent loss of sanctifying grace."¹²

The NT does teach that sins differ in magnitude (cf. Matt 10:15; 11:22, 24; Luke 10:12, 14; 12:47, 48). Nevertheless, holding such an interpretation as set forth by the Roman Church entails several difficulties. First, the definition of venial and mortal is imprecise, essentially destroying any real distinction between the two. Because their general definition of sin specifically states that "sin is a deliberate and voluntary act, . . . an act marked by a want of conformity with the law of God,"¹³ they are forced to make some fine differentiations and to conclude that venial sin is "imperfectly deliberate" while mortal sin is "fully deliberate."¹⁴ Such terminology makes a distinction virtually imper-ceptible. Furthermore, the definition is untenable in light of certain scriptural examples. Paul persecuted the first century Christians in ignorance (1 Tim 1:13), yet he designates himself as the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Eve was deceived by Satan (1 Tim 2:14) but bore the consequences of mortal sin.

Secondly, Scripture teaches that every offense is deadly and

¹¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (XXV, trans. by Timothy McDermott; New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969) 43.

¹²McGuiness, "Sin" 241.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

subject to the claims of divine justice. Thus Ezek 18:20 declares, "The person who sins will die." Likewise Rom 6:23 asserts, "The wages of sin is death." The malicious motivation behind the sin, or the lack of it, makes no difference, as James 2:10 indicates: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." On the other hand, the Bible explicitly and implicitly declares that no sin is too great to be beyond the scope of God's forgiveness (cf. 1 Tim 1:15).

Thirdly, that the kind of sin does not determine whether its punishment is temporal or eternal but merely results in greater or lesser punishments is illustrated by the appointed sacrifices of the OT. Different sins demanded different sacrifices; nevertheless, "without the shedding of blood there was no remission" (cf. Heb 9:22). Though sins differ in degree, the essential character of sin does not vary.

The classification of sins as adumbrated by the Roman Catholic Church has no basis in Scripture, neither in 1 John nor elsewhere. The NT gives no precedent for such a practice nor does it warrant such an arbitrary conclusion.

Apostasy

Some authors have suggested that the "sin unto death" refers to total apostasy, exemplified by the renunciation of the faith. Brooke, a proponent of the view, maintains that the sin is a deliberate rejection of Christ and His claims, for such "was probably the most prominent in the writer's thought."¹⁵ That this is so, it is contended, is evident from 1 John 2:18-19 where the false teachers are reported to have left the fellowship of believers.¹⁶

Brooke further explains that since apostasy exhibits itself apart from any specific act of sin, this conclusion dovetails with the fact that no specific sins are mentioned here. He concludes that "in the author's view any sin which involves a deliberate rejection of the claims of Christ may be described as 'unto death.'"¹⁷ Lenski concurs with this assessment:

Since ZV (z) "life eternal" (v. 13), which, as we now "have" it, is spiritual, "death" must be its opposite, namely the loss of spiritual life, which is spiritual death. Once having been born from God (2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:4, 18) into the new life, "death" means that this life has been lost.¹⁸

The major difficulty with this conclusion, however, is the fact that Scripture nowhere teaches that the genuinely regenerated person can apostatize. This same writer in his Gospel contends that the believer is secure (John 10:28, 29). Elsewhere in this Epistle, he

¹⁵A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (in the International Critical Commentary, ed. by C. A. Briggs, et. al.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1971) 147. Marvin Vincent appears to embrace this view also, for he states that "whatever breaks fellowship between the soul and Christ . . . is unto death for there is no life apart from Christ" (*Word Studies* [Vol. II; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911] 371).

¹⁶Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-29 are usually associated with this view and are frequently employed as proof of its veracity.

¹⁷Brooke, pp. 146-47. Lenski agrees, stating that this sin results in "the loss of spiritual life, which is spiritual death" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961] 535-36).

¹⁸Lenski, *St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* 535-36.

reiterates that the one who is born of God does not habitually sin (1 John 3:9; 5:18). Scholer elaborates,

There is no reference to apostasy. This is made very clear in 1 John 2:19. . . . After stating that many antichrists, already present and active (2:18; cf. 4:1-5), have come from the Christian community (2:19), the statement is modified in such a way as to negate it. In actuality the antichrists were not from the Christian community, for if they had been they would not have left it. The fact that antichrists left the community was a good thing; it showed conclusively that they were never real members of it in the first place; they had been pretenders only.¹⁹

The fact that they were never regenerated is also indicated by John's use of the imperfect verb *san* (*san*, "they were") in 2:19:

The imperfect tense, used twice, indicates that those who depart were not real Christians in the *past*. This agrees with the use of the perfect tense in the epistle to indicate that a man's life reflects evidence whether he has or has not been born of God in the past.²⁰

Furthermore, the preposition *ew* (*eis*, "in, into") is usually employed by John when referring to entrance into the new life in Christ (John 5:24; 1 John 3:14). The same preposition could be expected if he had in mind a reversal of that act. Rather, *prw* (*pros*, "toward, unto") is used here, indicating motion toward. Brooke explains that *prw unaton* (*pros thanaton*, "toward, unto death") must, of course, denote a tendency in the direction of death, and not an attained result.²¹

Passages within the Johannine corpus, as well as many references outside it (cf. Rom 8:29; Phil 1:6; Jude 1), lend strong evidence that the Christian will not apostatize, but will persevere in the faith.

¹⁹David M. Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17," *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 242.

²⁰James E. Rosscup, "Paul's Teaching on the Christian's Future Reward With Special Reference to 1 Corinthians 3:10-17" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, 1976) 448.

²¹Brooke, *Johannine Epistles* 147.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

A third view suggests that John is referring to the "unpardonable sin" spoken of in Matt 12. Sawtelle explains,

It is a sin that John has terribly marked again and again in our Epistle, that of willfully rejecting the testimony of the Holy Spirit as to the true nature and Messiahship of Jesus, the denying of Christ in his true nature. That it is a sin which connects itself with one's treatment of Christ is a fair inference from the doctrine of ver. 12.²²

Stott embraces this view also, contending that the one who is depicted in Matt 12:31-32 as deliberately and willfully rejecting known truth is also referred to here. "In John's own language he has 'loved darkness rather than light' (Jn. iii.18-21), and in consequence he will 'die in his sins' (Jn. viii. 24). His sin is, in fact, *unto death*."²³

Support for this conclusion is obtained primarily from the polemic of John which is evident throughout the Epistle and especially in the context of the fifth chapter. The apostle frequently expresses the necessity of recognizing and believing that Jesus is God in the flesh (1:1-3; 2:22-24; 4:2-3, 15; 5:1). In chapter five, he specifically notes how the Holy Spirit bears witness to this very fact (5:6-10).²⁴ Consequently, the argument proceeds, John's comments regarding the witness of the Spirit may have been intended to recall the warning against

²²Henry A. Sawtelle, *Commentary on the Epistles of John* (in *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. by Alvah Hovey; Valley Forge: Judson, 1888) 61.

²³Stott, *Epistles* 189. Also cf. George G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.) 406-07, and Baird Tipson, "A Dark Side of 17th Century English Protestantism: the Sin against the Holy Spirit," *HTR* 77/3-4 (July-Oct 1984) 301-330.

²⁴Stott (*Epistles* 188 ff.) contends that both parties in 5:16 are unbelievers while John Murray maintains that only the one who commits a sin unto death is not a believer, citing John 9:41; 15:22; 1 John 4:2-3; 5:1 as proof. Nevertheless, they both agree as to the nature of the sin unto death, namely, "the denial of Jesus as come in the flesh" (John Murray, "Definitive Sanctification," *Calvin Theological Journal* 2:1 [April, 1967] 11).

blaspheming the Holy Spirit recorded in the Synoptics.

This interpretation has much to commend it and is certainly a possible solution. However, the view has some problems. First, the passage really does not connect itself with the "unpardonable sin" of Matt 12. It contains no concrete evidence that such a connection was intended by the writer.²⁵

Second, the one who had committed the "unpardonable sin" would not be considered a "brother" in the local fellowship. Willful and deliberate rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit, as described in the gospels, would be difficult to disguise. One guilty of such would hardly be accepted as a brother. Such open antagonism could not be masked and go unnoticed by the others in the fellowship.

Habitual sinning

A fourth possibility is that the "sin unto death" refers to one who persists in committing sin. He habitually practices sin to the extent that his character and lifestyle ultimately show others within the local body of believers that he is not a believer.

The main thematic thread of the Epistle supports this contention, for the true believer does not practice sin (2:1; 3:4, 6, 8, 9). The immediate context supports this conclusion also, for the following verse reiterates the same fact. This teaching is not limited to the Johannine corpus, for such a teaching is also found in Gal 5:21; 6:8; and Rom 6:21-23. Although there may be occasional sins, the believer's life will not be characterized by sin as a lifestyle.

The NT elsewhere teaches that those who are immoral, covetous, idolatrous, revilers, drunkards, and swindlers shall not inherit the kingdom (1 Cor 5:9-13; 6:9-11; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:5), for their works are the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19; so also 1 Pet 4:3-5; 1 John 3:15; Rev 21:7-8; 22:14-15). Continuation in and habitual pursuit of such activity is inconsistent with a believer's life in Christ. An isolated act does not necessarily deny one an inheritance in the kingdom of

²⁵Brooke, *Johannine Epistles* 147.

God, but the constant practice of such things does.

The major difficulty which this view faces is the fact that 1 John 5:16 refers to a sinning "brother." Scholer, for example, asserts that the above argument "breaks down completely because of the use of the present tense of *hamartanein* in 5:16 with reference to the sinning of a believer as well as the use of the present tense in 1:8."²⁶

However, neither 1:8 nor 5:16 furnish conclusive evidence that the one sinning is definitely a saved man. In fact, the designation of "brother" may also include one who has only professed but does not actually possess eternal life. This kind of brother is inferred in 2:9, 11, and 3:15, for "the one who hates his brother is in the darkness until now" (cf. 4:20). It is not uncommon for the Scriptures to speak to professing believers when addressing the church, such as in 1 Cor 5:11; 2 Cor 11:26; and Gal 2:4. Even the unregenerate of 1 John 2:19 were most probably called brothers.²⁷

Furthermore, the use of the present active participle *martnonta* (*hamartanonta*, "sinning"), suggests that John has an unsaved man in view, for he consistently employs the present tense to refer to the sins which characterize the unsaved (3:4, 6, 8; 5:18).²⁸ Other evidences of an unregenerate heart in 1 John are spoken of in the present tense, such as loving the world (2:15), not keeping the commandments (2:4), hating a brother (2:9, 11; 3:10, 14 ff.; 4:8, 20), walking in darkness (1:6; 2:12),

²⁶Scholer, "Sins Within" 231. Scholer, with Murray ("Definitive Sanctification" 11), contends that when John speaks of the believer as not sinning, he is *not* speaking of habitual sinning; rather, such references refer to the fact that the believer does not sin sin unto death, i.e. he does not and cannot deny Jesus as come in the flesh. The believer may, however, sin sin not unto death (246). Also cf. Henry W. Holloman, "The Meaning of 'Sin unto Death' in 1 John 5:16-17" (paper read at Far West Section of the Evangelical Theological Society, Apr 23, 1982) 1-6.

²⁷Cf. Stott, *Epistles* 189-90, for a helpful discussion.

²⁸Scholer ("Sins Within" 246) and Murray ("Definitive Sanctification" 11) seek to answer the Johannine use of the present tense by suggesting that the believer does sin (present tense) not unto death but does not sin (present tense) *unto death*. But 5:18 says nothing of the believer not sinning unto death; it merely says that the believer does not sin (present tense).

lying (1:6), and denying that Jesus is the Christ (2:22 ff.).²⁹

Those who hold to the "believer" view attempt to circumvent this clear indication by attributing a "one time occurrence" to the punctiliar action of the aorist subjunctive δ (*id*, "sees"). But the punctiliar action of the aorist does not rule out the idea of continual, ongoing occurrence; it cannot be restricted to a "one time occurrence/once for all" idea. To hide behind the screen of a "particular occasion of practicing sin" greatly obscures and even negates the obvious Johannine practice of employing the present tense to denote continuing, ongoing, characteristic-of-life issues. Furthermore, even if the "seeing" were conceded to be point action, the "sinning" is still clearly habitual and ongoing, a fact demonstrated by John's repeated use of the present active participle to denote durative action. At best, the aorist subjunctive only indicates that the ongoing practice of sin was not actually *observed* on a continual basis.

In light of the above evidence, the most plausible explanation for the sin which leads to death is that it refers to habitual and continual sinning of a professing brother. The apostle probably has no particular sin in mind, for the present participle, *hamartanonta*, denotes not an act of sin but a continuing state.

THE NATURE OF THE DEATH

The second issue which confronts the interpreter in 1 John 5:16 is the nature of the death which results from the sinning described by John. The apostle states that the sin either is not prw unaton or is prw unaton (*pros thanaton*, "toward, unto death"). Virtually all grammarians and commentators maintain that the prw (*pros*, "toward, unto") does not denote "until," for it nowhere has this meaning in the NT. Rather, it designates that which *eventuates in or tends toward* death.

The Greek (*marta prw unaton*, [*hamartia pros thanaton*, "sin unto death"]) would mean properly a sin which *tends* to death; which would *terminate* in death; of which death was the penalty or would be the result, unless it were

²⁹Rosscup, "Paul's Teaching" 447-48.

arrested; a sin which, if it had its own course, would terminate thus.³⁰

Although many different views have been propounded,³¹ there are basically two views held by present-day scholars regarding the nature of this death.

Physical death

Probably the most common interpretation is that the death refers to the physical death of a believer. It is a physical punishment or chastisement which God executes as a result of sin in the believer's life.

The sin unto death means a case of transgression, particularly of grievous backsliding from the life and power of godliness, which God determines to punish with *temporal death*, while at the same time he extends mercy to the penitent soul. . . . The *sin not unto death* is any sin which God does not choose thus to punish.³²

The major support for this position is the interpretation of "brother." "The text is explicit. It refers to a 'brother,' which term is never used of the unregenerate, and declares definitely that a Christian may sin in such a way that the chastisement of death may fall upon him."³³ Thus it is concluded that since a believer cannot apostatize, John must be speaking of physical death and not spiritual death. However, as was noted earlier, the term "brother" cannot be so restricted; rather, it may be used sometimes to refer to one who is only

³⁰Barnes, *Barnes' Notes* 249. Lenski concurs: "John says twice that in these cases the sinning is 'not unto death'; πῦρ is used as it was in v. 14 with the meaning not facing death as the inevitable result" (*St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* 535).

³¹Cf. Barnes, *Barnes' Notes* 348-49, for a list of additional interpretations.

³²Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments With a Commentary and Critical Notes* (New York: Abingdon, n.d.) VI, 925.

³³Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947) III, 310. Cook similarly contends, "The implication is, however, that 'sin unto death' will sometimes lead to untimely physical death despite our prayers because God knows that chastisement, not forgiveness in this life, is the best thing" (W. Robert Cook, "Hamartiological Problems in First John," *BSac* 123:491 [July-September, 1966] 259).

professing to be a believer, for John does employ the term at times in a more universal sense.

Another proof used for this view is the fact that other passages suggest that sin does sometimes result in the believer's physical death. The most prominent incident is noted in 1 Cor 11:30, where Paul indicates that the partaking of the Lord's Supper unworthily (11:27) has been the reason that "many among you sleep."³⁴

It is granted that the physical death of a believer may be in view in 1 Cor 11. However, this does not prove that physical death of a believer is in view in 1 John 5:16. In addition to the fact that "nothing in this part of 1 John indicates that 'sin leading to death' must be understood as sin punished by fatal bodily illness,"³⁵ there is significant evidence that suggests otherwise.

Spiritual death

A second view maintains that the death referred to in 1 John 5:16 is spiritual death. This interpretation hinges primarily upon John's use of *zōn* (*zn*, "life") and, by comparison, *unaton* (*thanaton*, "death"), for these two are natural opposites and must correspond when in antithesis to each other. If *physical* death is being referred to, then the life must be *physical* life; conversely, if *spiritual* death is in view, then the life must be *spiritual* life. One cannot "mix-n-match" and still maintain a natural understanding of the death-life antithesis in the passage. If correspondence is maintained, then proponents of the physical death view are faced with the difficulty of explaining why one should pray that God will give the sinning one in 5:16a extended physical life when in fact he is committing sin not leading to

³⁴A number of other biblical examples have been cited, such as Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10), Korah and his sons (Num 16), Achan (Josh 7), the disobedient prophet (1 Kgs 13), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). However, these accounts are somewhat ambiguous concerning the actual spiritual standing of the individuals before God.

³⁵Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (vol. 51 of *Word Biblical Commentary*; Waco, TX: Word, 1984) 297.

premature physical death.

First of all, it should be noted that the apostle significantly employs *βίω* (*bios*, "life") (2:16) and *ψυχ* (*psuch*, "life, breath") (3:16 twice) to refer to physical life, but reserves *ζ* to refer to spiritual life elsewhere in the Epistle. The nominal form is used eleven times elsewhere (1:1, 2 [twice]; 2:25; 3:14, 15; 5:11, 12 [twice], 13, 20), *always* meaning eternal or spiritual life. The verbal form, *ζῶ* (*za*, "I live"), is used only once (4:9), also with the same meaning. This fact strongly suggests that John has spiritual life in view in 5:16 also. Furthermore, this trend characterizes John's Gospel, for *ζ*, the term used in 5:16, always refers to eternal life, and the verb *ζα* designates eternal life in all but three (John 4:50, 51, 53) instances. While John does use these terms to refer to physical life in Revelation, the predominant usage is in reference to spiritual life.

Second, John's use of *thanatos* in the Epistle lends additional support. Apart from its use in the phrases under discussion in 5:16-17, the term occurs only in 3:14. In this passage, John employs the term twice to denote spiritual death: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death."

Consequently, if physical life had been meant by John in 5:16, it is most likely that he would have used one of the other two terms he employed earlier to refer to physical life. And, since it is likely that *ζ* refers to spiritual life, then *thanatos*, following its usage in 3:14, must have reference to spiritual death. It is conceded that while all persons are born spiritually dead, they certainly are not confirmed in that state. However, following the apostle's teaching here, there may come a time prior to their physical death when their condition becomes irreversible, when divine forgiveness is no longer available to them (cf. Matt 12:31-32).³⁶

³⁶The difference between the case described in Matt 12 and the one found in 1 John 5 appears to be that those in the former instance are guilty of open, blatant opposition and rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit, while in the latter instance, the action appears to be more covert and disguised, occurring among those who profess to believe but in reality do not (cf. 1 John 2:19). In both cases, however, the result is

Third, the immediate context offers important credence to this conclusion, for both before and after the sixteenth verse, α is used to refer to eternal, spiritual life (vv. 11, 12, 13, 20). Says Cameron, "If a different kind of life were meant, it would be natural to expect him to indicate it by the use of a different word, elsewhere used for natural life."³⁷

CONCLUSION

The apostle John appears to have in view an unsaved man who professes to be a believer, but who is in actuality in need of salvation. On the one hand, John refers to a man who is sinning but is not doing so to the point of the impossibility of being granted eternal life; he has not yet come to the place where the possibility of divine forgiveness has been revoked. In such cases, as a result of the intercessory prayer of a "brother," God would grant spiritual life. On the other hand, the apostle asserts that if a man does sin to such an extent that repentance and forgiveness is impossible, it would be "unto death"—spiritual death, spiritual death in the sense that his condition is irrevocable (cf. Matt 12:31-32). Thus the sin *can* be committed by a Christian when "Christian" is used in the broader sense to include *those whose Christianity is merely a matter of profession*, but it cannot if "Christian" means one who has actually been regenerated.

It is clear that "brother" in Scripture normally refers to a saved individual, but John's usage of the term implies that in some cases there will be a difference between what is professed and what is actually true.

Furthermore, experience has vividly illustrated the power of God to regenerate the most reprobate of sinners, and therefore the believer should be careful not to judge the status of another too quickly. Nevertheless, John asserts that the habitual practice of sin

the same, an irreversible, confirmed condition in which divine forgiveness is no longer available.

³⁷Cameron, *First Epistle* 243.

does indicate the spiritual state of a man (cf. Gal 5:21). Consequently, while the believer is to pray for this sinning brother until God reveals otherwise, John reminds him that the efficacy of his prayer may not extend to that person and that the believer's confidence should not be diminished thereby.

This is not an adumbration of the Roman Catholic doctrine regarding mortal sin, for which the consequence is spiritual death (unless it is reversed during this lifetime through confession and penance or after this lifetime while in purgatory through the efforts of relatives still alive). On the contrary, it only maintains that, in keeping with the Johannine theme, persistent sin in the life of anyone who professes to be saved indicates that he is not saved, and that the ultimate end of such is spiritual death. Although acts of sin do not cause one to die spiritually (man is born spiritually dead), the habitual practice of sin may lead to an irreversible state, a condition in which forgiveness will be no longer available. The limitation has only to do with the unbeliever, however, for the believer's full forgiveness was procured by the death of Christ at Calvary.