

# Issue of interpretation in 1 john 3:6-10



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## Exegetical Papers on 1 John 3: 6-10

### Introduction

In this exegetical paper, I will examine couple of interpretation issue in 1 John 3: 6-10 regarding the meaning of “ keeps on sinning” in verse 6, “ makes a practice of sinning” and “ cannot keep on sinning” in verse 9. The issue of sinless perfectionism comes up when we are reading these verses. Does John try to tell Christians that they are incapable to keep on sinning literally, or he is trying to increase the awareness that Christians should try their best to turn away from sin and live a God honoring life, or John is trying to say that true Christian will not keep on sinning as Holy Spirit would regenerate their lives after they have accepted Christ? Besides, I will also examine the meaning of “ of the devil” in verse 8 and the meaning of “ born of God” in verse 9. Lastly, I will also examine the meaning of “ God’s seed”. Examining all these questions are important as we can have a better understanding of who we are, and how we should live our Christian lives. Through examining these verses, we can also understand whether it is possible for Christians to live a sinless life and knowing the importance of turning away from sins.

(1)What does John mean by the phrases (from the ESV) “ keeps on sinning” in v. 6 and “ makes a practice of sinning” and “ cannot keep on sinning” in v. 9?

“ The author of 1 John uses the noun, sin, no less than seventeen times. Six of those uses are in the plural and eleven in the singular, which suggests that the author was not careful to distinguish between the state of sinfulness and its expression in specific acts.”[1]In John’s sense, sin is synonymous with a condition alienated from God and unbelief, aligned with the forces of evil, and given to behavior that violates the will of God. In 1 John 3: 4, it said “ everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.”[2]John equates sin with lawlessness. In 1 John 1: 6, it said “ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.”[3]These separatists are labeled as victims of sin who walk in darkness, as allusion to lifestyle disengaged from the creator.

In verse 6, it said “ no one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him”. In verse 9 echo the similar meaning that “ no one born of God makes a practice of sinning”. These verses suggest sinless perfectionism view that those being born of God are unable to sin because God’s seed remain in them.[4]However, it creates the tension with 1 John 1: 8 that “ if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Also, it creates tension with 1 John 1: 10, “ if we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.”

In order to ease the tension from sinless perfectionism views, some scholars argue that 1 John 3: 6-9 claims that those born of God cannot sin habitually, whereas 1 John 1: 8-9 recognizes that they do sin occasionally. However, John in fact says nothing about the habitual or non-habitual character of the

sinning, but John has just chosen to depict the sinning as something in progress that Christian must face in daily basis.[5]

Others have taught that this verse only refers to willful sin. Some people believe that Christian cannot commit sin deliberately. He/she may inadvertently fall into sin, but he/she cannot sin deliberately. However, neither of these explanations applies to this text and such view does not support by Scripture. In Hebrews 10: 26-27, it said “ if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”[6] This verse suggests the possibility that Christians can sin deliberately.

In 1 John 3: 6, John defines more explicitly what abiding in God means is refraining from sin. There is an association between seeing God in Christ and knowing God. The one who has not seen him is still blind and live in the dark. Even those who think they see and know God have not truly seen and known him if they continue to live with sin. If they continue to live in sin, they are actually lacking the vision and knowledge of Jesus regarding whom he is and what he came to do.

Anyone who belongs to Christ, that is, who abides in him, anyone who is born of God is subject to the demand to refrain from sinning. In verse 9, John mentions that Christian cannot keep on sinning as God’s seed abides in him. John is likely to refer the seeds as regenerative impulsion, which is the Holy Spirit who creates the new birth and remains in the believer. This seems to say that the Spirit indwells those who have been regenerated by Him and

therefore they will not sin. “ Being incapable of sin” represents the eschatological reality out of which the community has lived from its beginning. However, it does not eliminate the earthly reality within which sin remains a threatening force that must be repeatedly overcome, until the end of the world.[7]

(2)What does John mean by the description “ of the devil” in v. 8?

In 1 John 3: 8, it said “ whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil”. Some people may take this passage literally and believe those who sin are belonged to the devil. However, if we keep this view, then we are professing Christians are unsaved since we have all sinned against God and no one has exception. In Romans 3: 23, it said “ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

In fact, John points out that our behavior reflects who we are. The one who does sin is “ of the devil”. There is no neutral ground. We can either be the child of God or the child of devil. The practice of sin characterizes the devil who has been at it “ from the beginning”. In Genesis 3: 5, Satan tempted Eve and said “ for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”[8]To sin is to be like the devil because from the beginning, in Eden, the devil encouraged disobedience to God and justified the sinful act as the way of being like God.

People who sin are like the devil, in contrast to those who live righteously and are like Jesus, the Son of God. What we do reveals who we are, regardless of who we say we are. The implicit question confronting the readers is “ Who’s our daddy?” Being like God in the sense of conforming

one's character to his is a good thing, but Satan twisted the idea into the impulse to sin. Adam and Eve, and all human beings after them, grasped at becoming like God through rejecting God's authority over them. Thus, the one is truly like God, Jesus Christ the Son, appeared so that he could destroy that deceitful work that belongs to the devil, which John has mentioned in 1 John 8 that "the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil", and restore people to their eschatological destiny of being like Jesus. In 1 John 3: 2, it said "dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." [9] However, it is only through the rejection of disobedience and rejection of sinning that allows the restoration to come true and resume our family likeness. [10]

(3) What does John mean by "born of God" in v. 9?

In this verse, the author makes it clear not only that those who are born of God have been cleansed from their sins, but also that they can continue to sin no longer as verse 9 said "no one who is born of God will continue to sin".

The Apostle John points out couple proofs and evidence of regeneration in the epistle of 1 John. First, faith in Christ is the evidence for those who have been born of God. In 1 John 5: 1, it said "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him." [11] Second, love one another is the evidence for those who have been born of God. In 1 John 4: 7, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God

and knows God.”[12]Third, they do right. In 1 John 2: 29, “ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.”[13]Fourth, they overcome the world. In 1 John 5: 4, “ For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”[14]

An understanding of the process of being born of God is best sought in the Gospel of John. There being born of God is equivalent to becoming a child of God, something which ultimately can be effected only by the will of God. In John 1: 11-12, “ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”[15]“ Born of God” is also described as being born from above. In John 3: 3, Jesus said “ Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”[16]“ Born of God” is also described as being born of the Spirit. In John 3: 5-8, Jesus said “ Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”[17]Putting these things together and allowing them to inform our understanding of ‘ born of God’, we may say that to be born of God mean being brought to new spiritual life by the will of God and through the Holy Spirit.[18]

John concludes that the true child of God is like the Father himself and they will oppose to sin. Whereas the determined sinner belongs to the devil, but the spiritually reborn believer will become a member of God’s family and they cannot act lawlessly. In other words, we reproduce in our family likeness, depending upon our spiritual parentage, and those who are “ born of God” do not sin. Elsewhere, the conduct of the Christian is regarded as the

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proof, rather than the result of regeneration. John is consistent in his view that being and behavior are closely related and aligned with each other. One does what one is.[19] In 1 John 3: 10 explained this concept very clearly, “ This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.”

For the Johannine idea of “ born of God”, it refers to the spiritual regeneration as the means of becoming children of God. “ Westcott suggests that “ of God” is placed first in the sentence in order to emphasize that the believers do not sin because they have been born of God and not of no other.”[20] The use of the perfect tense “ have been born” later in verse 9 indicates not only the initial act of Christian rebirth, but also its continuing results of pursuing a sinless life. The Bible mentioned those who have been regenerated as a “ new creation” in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5: 17, “ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; The old has gone, the new is here!”[21]

A common interpretation focus on the present tense of verbs as indicating progressive action, thus no one born of God will continue to sin. Other scholar argue that if John wanted to express the idea in present time, he had no option but to use this tense, and that in any case Greek writers would probably not depend heavily on subtle aspectual distinctions to make important points. Even without stressing the grammatical details, however, it may still be possible to understand John’s statement as indicating characteristic behavior.[22]



(3) What is meant by “ God’s seed” in v. 9?

In verse 9, it said “ No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.”[23] There are five different interpretations of “ God’s seed” – (1) Jesus Christ, (2) the proclaimed Word of God (Gospel), (3) the Holy Spirit, (4) God Himself, and (5) the new nature imparted through regeneration.

For the first interpretation, the word ‘ seed’ can have the metaphorical meaning, which refers to male sperm, human children or descendants. Some scholars believe that ‘ God’s seed’ is referring to Jesus and so construe the whole verse as saying that those born of God do not continue in sin because Christ remains in them.[24]

For the second interpretation, some people believe that God’s seed refers to the ‘ word’ of God that is accepted by the hearers. This interpretation is supported by John 1: 10. In John 1: 10, it said “ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” John 1: 10 is parallel to 1 John 3: 9 since it is speaking of the sinlessness of Christians. Besides, ‘ seed’ appears in the parable of the sower in Luke 8: 11. In Luke 8: 11, Jesus explained to the disciples that “ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.”[25] Moreover, in 1 John 2: 24, it said “ Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.”[26] Therefore, it makes sense that people would turn away from sin when the Gospel is abiding in their heart and convicting their sins.

The third interpretation is that the God's seed refers to the Holy Spirit. In 1 John 2: 27, it said " But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him." [27] People cannot keep on sinning because the Holy Spirit is working inside them and regenerate a new life.

The fourth interpretation is God Himself. In 1 John 3: 24, it said " Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us." [28] In 1 John 4: 12, it said " No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." [29]

The fifth interpretation is the new nature imparted through regeneration. In Titus 3: 5-6, it said " he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior." [30]

Of these five options, I think the Holy Spirit and the Word of God are the most satisfactory option, in the light of the fact that God through the Spirit affects the new birth, and it is the Spirit who in Johannine theology remains with and in believers. As the Spirit continue to work in the believers through His Word, the work of sanctification would result in walking a sinless path.

Conclusion

John is teaching us that anyone who belongs to Christ, that is, who abides in him, anyone who is born of God is subject to the demand to refrain from sinning. Even though the reality is that Christian would still sin against God after they have been born again, the Holy Spirit will keep on working and regenerate the believers' lives so that they could eventually turn away from sin and walk a sinless path. John is also reminding the audiences about our identity. As we are called to be the children of God, our being should align with our actions and behaviors that we should practice righteousness and love our brothers and sister in God's family.

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