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GRACE UPON GRACE: 1 JOHN 1:8–9 AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

by Steven Parks

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Christians today are often tempted to shy away from the topic of sin. After all, nobody enjoys hearing that they are disobedient rebels who have offended a holy God in thought, word, and deed. It is no secret that speaking about the reality of sin does not fill arenas or land books on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List. There is, however, an often overlooked but nevertheless spiritually disastrous result in avoiding the topic of sin: missing the reality that only sinners need a savior. Without the bad news that sinners are condemned to hell, there can be no good news, no gospel, which declares that, in Christ, sinners are forgiven saints destined for heaven. If Christians avoid speaking about the malady of sin, we must inevitably avoid proclaiming the miracle of salvation and the very gospel itself.

Yet, in the Christian faith, there is no more important teaching than the gospel of Jesus Christ. Concerning this message, the apostle Paul wrote, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4).¹ Here, Paul noted that he delivered the gospel to his hearers as of “first importance.”² This gospel is not just one teaching among many others; rather, the gospel is the most important teaching in all of Christianity, the very heartbeat of the Christian faith standing at its core and center.

Sadly, despite the primacy of the gospel revealed in Scripture and the clarity with which the Bible speaks of the forgiveness of sins won by Christ, Christians have

been unable to reach a consensus on this, the chief teaching of the faith. Even among evangelical Christians, who have many other issues in common, there is regrettable disagreement about the core question of the forgiveness of sins.

Perhaps no other text in the New Testament brings out such differences more clearly than 1 John 1:8–9: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” At face value, the text appears straightforward. As Christians, we are not without sin. We sin daily and therefore stand in daily need of forgiveness. Here, John records the comforting promise that because of Jesus, we have a gracious God who receives, forgives, and cleanses repentant, confessing sinners of their transgressions.

NO NEED TO CONFESS SINS?

Yet, it is precisely here where disagreements arise. A growing number of evangelical Christians deny that John’s words are to be taken as traditionally³ understood in the sense noted above. Instead, some have maintained that sinners are forgiven once and for all time at the cross and that this forgiveness extends over all sins (past, present, and future) to the degree that there is no need to ask for forgiveness since it has already been given at the cross. The problem of sin, it is suggested, has been definitively dealt with at the cross, such that, beyond confession at conversion, Christians need not seek forgiveness for sins committed on a day-to-day basis.⁴

Bob George

The most vocal proponent of this view is Bob George, host of Classic Christianity Radio and president of Bob George Ministries. George explains his objection to the traditional understanding of 1 John 1:8–9 as follows: “If we believe we must continually confess our sins in order to be loved and forgiven by God, we are actually mocking God and telling Him that Christ’s work on our behalf was not sufficient. The damage caused by this belief is extensive. There are many who are in bondage to this ‘law’ that was created and perpetuated by man.”⁵

Here, George argues that the traditional interpretation of 1 John 1:8–9 puts Christians under bondage to works. He believes that if Christians are directed to confess their sins (i.e., perform a work) in order to enjoy forgiveness, then believers are essentially placed under a yoke of slavery. George understands the traditional view as “mocking God” by asserting that a Christian *must* confess if he or she is to be forgiven.

George sees this condition as placing an unbearable burden on Christians: the necessity of confessing every single sin.⁶

Is 1 John Written to Believers or Unbelievers?

How, then, is 1 John 1:8–9 to be understood according to those who reject the traditional view? While the views vary depending on the individual teacher, a common thread is that the text refers to unbelievers and not to believers. George, for example, argues that the entire context of 1 John was written against a heretical movement infiltrating the church, and the text in question must therefore be interpreted as an invitation to unbelievers to turn from their error and embrace Jesus: “The purpose of the first chapter of 1 John was to compare the truth of God to the error of Gnosticism. John was addressing the Gnostics, who were deceived by their own teaching. He wanted the Gnostics to understand that what they believed conflicted with what God said. He was not, however, addressing believers.”⁷

It is true that 1 John speaks against the false teachings of Gnosticism (i.e., the belief that, among other things, Jesus was not a real human being but instead an entity of pure spirit).⁸ John counters such claims at the outset of his letter by insisting that he not only saw and heard Jesus but also touched Him (1 John 1:1). He repeatedly warns his audience about this heresy throughout the remainder of the letter.

However, this does not mean that readers should take the epistle as being written to Gnostics or unbelievers. On the contrary, John repeatedly tells us who his audience is by referring to them as “dear children” (1 John 2:1, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21), “dear friends” (2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1; 7; 11), and “brothers and sisters” (3:13). The apostle asserted that his intended recipients had an anointing from the Holy One (2:20), were children of God (3:1; 5:19), and had received the Holy Spirit (3:24; 4:4, 13). His audience was from God (4:6), had received eternal life (5:11–13), believed (5:13), had been enlightened by the Son of God (5:20), and were in Him who is true (5:20). Thus, while the letter does address the errors of Gnosticism, 1 John is clearly an epistle written *to* Christians warning them *about* false teachings.

GRACE OF CONTINUAL CONFESSION

The text lays out two decidedly different paths: a way of darkness and a way of light (1 John 1:5, 7)—a way of isolation and a way of fellowship (1:6). How are these two distinguished? “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1:8). This is, manifestly, the path of darkness and isolation. “If we confess our sins,

he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). This is, quite clearly, the path of light and fellowship on which believers walk.

That John uses the third person plural of “we” in both statements indicates (1) if John or his Christian readers were to say they had no sin, they would be walking in darkness and bereft of truth. (2) John, and his Christian readers, walking in light and truth, continually confess their sins and receive cleansing. The Greek makes the continual nature of this confession abundantly clear. The English verb translated “confess” in 1 John 1:9 is in the present iterative subjunctive in the Greek,⁹ indicating continual action. The term “references a characteristic or common action of an enduring and defining kind by which one concedes ever and always that a matter is factual or true, with a focus on the admission of wrongdoing.”¹⁰ Thus, commentators have translated the verb as “keep confessing our sins.”¹¹

Yet John does not present confession as a cruel taskmaster demanding an exacting enumeration of all sins. As the Psalmist reminds us, “If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand” (Ps. 130:3)? Instead, John encourages us to recognize and confess the ongoing present reality of our sin *and* the ongoing present reality of our forgiveness in Christ. In this, he simply echoes his Lord, who taught His apostles to pray, “Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us” (Luke 11:4). He confirms the teaching of his brother in ministry who wrote, “Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord...If they have sinned, they will be forgiven” (James 5:14, 15).

The apostle presents no peculiar teaching in 1 John 1:9, least of all a manmade law perpetuated to enslave Christians to works of law. Confession of sin is presented not as a tyrannical assault on the conscience but rather as an opportunity for afflicted Christians who feel the weight of their sin to unload feelings of guilt while rejoicing in the forgiveness that Christ so richly lavishes on His people. Thus, John grounds the purification of believers not in the confession of sin itself, since no confession could possibly make satisfaction for sin or merit anything from God, but instead in the blood of Christ (1 John 1:7) and the faithfulness of God: “He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1:9).

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, beautifully summed up the attitude all Christians should have toward the confession of sins:

In short, unless God constantly forgives, we are lost. Thus this petition really means that God does not wish to regard our sins and punish us as we daily deserve but to deal graciously with us, to forgive as he has promised, and thus to grant us a joyful and cheerful conscience so that we

may stand before him in prayer. For where the heart is not right with God and cannot generate such confidence, it will never dare to pray. But such a confident and joyful heart can never come except when one knows that his or her sins are forgiven.¹²

Inasmuch as confession of sin becomes an opportunity to receive God's gracious forgiveness, it likewise acts as the impetus for us to cling to Him in faith, trusting that eternal life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins are surely our present possession because of the shed blood of the Son of God.

Steven Parks is an ordained pastor in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and a PhD candidate in theology at the University of Bristol in Bristol, England. He currently serves as assistant professor of theology at Concordia University in Irvine, California.

NOTES

- 1 All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.
- 2 Lest we be tempted to think that the gospel was just the first thing Paul preached before he delivered a number of other equally important teachings, Paul utilized the Greek word *proōtois*, which literally means “foremost, most important, most prominent” (Fredrick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000], 893).
- 3 Hereafter I will describe this view as the “traditional” understanding of 1 John 1:8–9 because this is how the text was interpreted by the church fathers and the Protestant Reformers (see Thomas C. Oden and Gerald Bray, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament XI: James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], 171–73; Martin Luther, “Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John,” as found in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann [Philadelphia: Fortress Press and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986], 30:229–32; and John Calvin, “Commentaries on the First Epistle of John,” as found in *Calvin's Commentaries* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999], XXII: 167–69).
- 4 This view should be distinguished from the Lutheran doctrine of objective justification, which, although it shares terminology in common with such perspectives, nevertheless differs markedly. See, e.g., Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 347–51.
- 5 Bob George Ministries, “What about 1 John 1:9?” (Frisco, TX: 2014), accessed November 14, 2014, at <http://bobgeorge.net/1-john-1-9/>.
- 6 This view suggests a radical distinction between the old and new covenants as developed at length in Bob George, *Classic Christianity: Life's Too Short to Miss the Real Thing* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1989), 73–94.
- 7 Bob George Ministries, “What About 1 John 1:9?” accessed November 14, 2014, at <http://bobgeorge.net/1-john-1-9/>.
- 8 For a detailed treatment on the various forms of Gnosticism in history, see Justo L. González, *A*

History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon, 2nd ed., vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 126–37.

- 9 R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of The Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), 392.
- 10 Bruce G. Schuchard, *Concordia Commentary: 1–3 John* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 114.
- 11 Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 392.
- 12 Martin Luther, Large Catechism, III.91–92, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 452–53.