

Christians Don't Sin

Many Christians readers have choked on the severe words of 1 John 3:6a—“No one who abides in Him sins.” In a panic, astute readers will quickly turn back to 1:8-10 for comfort; there, John writes that those who say they “have no sin” are liars, and reminds believers that when “we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins” (1:9). But how can both 3:6a and 1:8-10 be true? Do Christians have sin, or do they not? 1 John 1:8-9 teaches that a Christian must admit he has sin, or else be condemned for not having “the truth” (1:8) and making God “a liar” (1:10) Yet 1 John 3:6b seems to teach that if one does sin at all, he does not know Christ!

Scholars have attempted to resolve this tension in various ways.^{1,2} But, as one concludes, “no solution is entirely satisfactory.”³ While each of the various views has their merits—and their faults—instead of analyzing the standard views, this paper will propose that 1 John 3:6a can be paraphrased as, “Christians don't sin.” This takes the verse as a mitigated exhortation, not a description, made in light of a believer's ontology and eschatology. This will be shown in three steps: by (1) discerning the textual unit containing 3:6a (3:2-6), (2) noting the ontological and eschatological themes in the context of 3:2-6, and (3) analyzing the structure of 3:2-6.

Discerning the Textual Unit Containing 1 John 3:6a

Discerning the textual unit is pertinent to understanding the meaning. But 1 John is notoriously difficult to outline, as evidenced by the wide divergence of proposed outlines.⁴ However, John's usage of syntactical features provides clues to dividing the letter into logical sections. In 1 John, the most important syntactical markers are vocatives and imperatival verbs.⁵

The syntactically relevant verses around 1 John 3:6a are 2:28, 3:2, and 3:7. 1 John 2:28 begins, “Καὶ νῦν, τέκνιά, μένετε ἐν αὐτῷ.” Three components critical components here signify that John may be starting a new section: (1) νῦν, (2) the vocative τέκνιά, and (3) the imperative μένετε. In addition, given that the dominant content of 2:28 (the return of Jesus Christ), has no

¹ Various options include: (1) the present tense ἁμαρτάνει indicates that this means Christians cannot *habitually* sin, (2) the verb ποιᾷ denotes that 3:6 means Christians cannot sin habitually, (3) 3:6 must be accepted absolutely and actually the profession to be sinless in 1:8-10 actually can be made by believers (4) the tension is caused by eschatological tension of the already/not-yet dynamic, (5) there is an inherent contradiction between 1:8-10 and 3:6 that must be accepted, (6) 3:6 is quotation a heretical slogan that John is debunking, (7) 3:6 is not descriptive but a rule for Christians to follow. Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 129–132.

² The most popular opinion is the interpretation that 3:6 is referring to habitual, constant sinning, as evidenced by three study Bibles. (1) “John is not asserting sinless perfection (see 1:8-10; 2:1) but explaining that the believer's life is characterized not by sin but by doing what is right.” Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 1910. (2) “The present tense of the Greek suggests behavior that is characteristic or usual, i.e. persistent, impenitent sin. In this way, John acknowledges, but does not excuse, the possibility of occasional sin in the life of the believer.” R. C. Sproul, *The Reformation Study Bible* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2271. (3) “...the sense conveyed here is the idea of habitual, constant sinning.” John MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible: New American Standard Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 1 Jn 3:6.

³ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 131.

⁴ Stott groups 3:6a with 3:4-10. (John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 124.) Culy groups it with 3:1-6 (Martin M. Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2004), 66.) And Yarbrough groups it with 3:1-8. (Robert W. Yarbrough, *I, 2, 3, John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 173.

⁵ For an brief discussion of discerning the structure of 1 John according to syntactical markers, see Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, xxi–xxiii.

precedent in the letter, it makes sense to denote 2:28 as the beginning of a new section. The next noteworthy syntactical feature is “Ἀγαπητοὶ νῦν” (3:2). This νῦν calls back to 2:28, and the vocative Ἀγαπητοὶ calls back to 2:7. Yet, 3:2 has no command and its content (“children of God”) is tied to 3:1. Thus, it seems best to treat 3:2 as the beginning of a dependent subunit rather than a new section. Several verses later says, “Παιδιά, μηδεὶς πλανάτω ὑμᾶς” (3:7). This has the vocative Παιδιά and the imperative πλανάτω, strongly suggesting the beginning of a new section. While the “ὁ ποιῶν” in 3:7 parallels 3:4, because 3:7 has the same vocative as 2:28 and an imperative verb, it seems best to treat 3:7 as the beginning of a new section.⁶

Therefore, it is reasonable to treat 3:6a as part of the subunit 3:2-6, which itself is part of the larger section of 2:28 to 3:6.

The Ontological and Eschatological Themes Surrounding 1 John 3:2-6⁷

Both ontological and eschatological themes surround 3:2-6. Ontologically, John connects the acts of a person to his nature. If he is of God, he will do the things of God; if he is not of God, he will do the things of Satan. Concerning believers, John says that those who do righteousness “γεγέννηται (have been born) of Him” (2:29). They are “τέκνα θεοῦ (children of God)” (3:1, 2) and “τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ (the children of God)” (3:10). Everyone “ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ (who has been born from God) does not sin... and is not able to sin” (3:9). In contrast, concerning unbelievers, “he who does the sin is ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου (from the devil)” (3:8). They are “τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου (the children of the devil)” (3:10). They “οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ (are not from God)” (3:10). Thus, deeds not only *reveal* one’s fundamental nature, but are *determined* by that nature.

But ontology is only half of the thematic backdrop of 3:6a; the other half is eschatology. John describes this primarily with the verb φανερώω, which occurs five times in 2:28-3:12.⁸ In the active voice, φανερώω means “to make visible what is invisible”; in the passive, it means “to become visible” or “to be revealed.”⁹ In 2:28, Christ’s future appearing (φανερῶθη) sets the eschatological tone for the rest of the passage. In 3:2, Christ’s appearing (φανερῶθη) is connected with the revealing (ἐφανερῶθη) of the children of God, particularly when “we will see Him just as He is” at the eschaton.

However, in 3:5, John switches from describing Christ’s *future* appearing to describing His past appearing—namely, the incarnation. Christ “was revealed (ἐφανερῶθη) in order to take away sins” (3:5). The same usage is demonstrated in 3:8—“the Son of God was revealed (ἐφανερῶθη) ...to destroy the works of the devil” (3:8). Yet in both cases, John uses the incarnation to point toward an eschatological reality: in 3:5, the final removal of sin¹⁰ and in 3:8

⁶ The inherent subjectivity in discerning clear breaks illustrates the difficulty of outlining 1 John.

⁷ Even though the subunit has been identified as 3:2-6, the themes surrounding 3:6a permeate the verses beyond 2:28-3:6. Thus section will contain references to verses beyond 3:6.

⁸ The word occurs 9 times total in 1 John: 1:2 (2x), 2:19, 2:28, 3:2 (2x), 3:5, 3:8, 4:9. Furthermore, John speaks of Christ’s coming παρουσία in 2:28, which has significant eschatological significance in the rest of the NT (c.f. Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19, 3:13, 4:15, 5:24; 2 Thess 2:1, 8, 9; Jas 5:7, 8; 2 Pet 3:4, 12).

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann and Dieter Lührmann, “Φαίνω, Φανερός, Φανερώω, Φανέρωσις, Φαντάζω, Φάντασμα, Ἐμφανίζω, Ἐπιφαίνω, Ἐπιφανής, Ἐπιφάνεια,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 3–4.

¹⁰ 1 John 3:5 says “ἐκεῖνος ἐφανερῶθη, ἵνα τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἄρῃ”—He was revealed in order that he might take away sins. This is the only usage of ἄρῃ (αἴρω) in the Johannine epistles. Of the uses in all Johannine literature, the only parallel sense is John 1:29—“Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἀμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου. (Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!)” This deserves further study, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

the final destruction of the works of the devil.

These ontological and eschatological themes will be integrated into the final comprehension of 1 John 3:6a in the next section.

A Structural Analysis of 1 John 3:2-6

Considering various grammatical features, 3:2-6 can be diagrammed in Greek as below.

3:2

VOCATIVE ADDRESS

Ἀγαπητοί νῦν | Beloved, now

TRUTH

τέκνα θεοῦ ἐσμεν, | we are children of God
καὶ οὐπω ἐφανέρωθη τί ἐσόμεθα. | and *it is* not yet revealed what we will be.

THEOLOGICAL FACT 1

οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἐὰν φανερωθῆ, | We know that if [when] He is revealed
ὅμοιοι αὐτῷ ἐσόμεθα, | like Him we will be
ὅτι ὀψόμεθα αὐτὸν, καθὼς ἐστίν. | because we will see Him, even as He is.

3:3 ETHICAL IMPLICATION 1A (regarding believers)

καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἔχων τὴν ἐλπίδα ταύτην ἐπ’ αὐτῷ | And everyone who has this hope in Him
ἀγνίζει ἑαυτὸν, ἐκεῖνος ἀγνός ἐστίν. | purifies himself, as He Himself is pure.

3:4 ETHICAL IMPLICATION 1B (regarding unbelievers)

Πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν | Everyone who does sin
καὶ τὴν ἀνομίαν ποιεῖ, | even does lawlessness
καὶ ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐστὶν ἡ ἀνομία. | and sin is lawlessness.

THEOLOGICAL FACT 2

3:5 καὶ οἶδατε ὅτι ἐκεῖνος ἐφανέρωθη, | and y’all know that He was revealed
ἵνα τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἄρῃ, | so that He might take away sins
καὶ ἁμαρτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν. | and there is not sin in Him.

3:6 ETHICAL IMPLICATION 2A (regarding believers)

πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων | Everyone who remains in Him
οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει· | does not sin.

ETHICAL IMPLICATION 2B (regarding unbelievers)

πᾶς ὁ ἁμαρτάνων | Everyone who sins
οὐχ ἑώρακεν αὐτὸν | has neither seen Him
οὐδὲ ἔγνωκεν αὐτόν. | nor has known Him.

John begins this subunit with a Vocative Address, and then states the Truth he intends to discuss: the believer’s sonship in Christ and his yet-future eschatological reality. He then lists two Theological Facts about that Truth, as indicated by the verbal forms for οἶδα (οἶδαμεν, 3:2b and οἶδατε, 3:5a). Each Theological Fact has two Ethical Implications, as denoted by the formula “πᾶς ὁ...” —the first one (A) regarding believers and the second one (B) regarding unbelievers. The structure of this subunit is nicely parallel in multiple ways.¹¹

¹¹ Unfortunately, the modern division of the verses obscures this structure. In addition, the NASB and

This structure shines great light upon 3:6a, where John says, “Everyone who remains in Him [Christ] does not sin.” According to the structure, 3:6a is Ethical Implication 2A, derived from Theological Fact 2. However, before explaining Ethical Implication 2A, it is profitable to examine the first half of the parallel structure from Theological Fact 1.

Theological Fact 1 states when Christ is revealed, all believers will become like Him because they will see Him as He is. Ethical Implication 1A is that everyone who has this eschatological hope fixed upon Him purifies himself, even as He is pure. The eschatological reality of freedom from stain motivates ethical living in the present. In light of the Truth, John is saying that those who have the ontological reality of being from God (“we are children of God”) are necessarily headed towards their eschatological reality (“we will be like Him”), both of which inform their present ethical reality (a Christian “purifies himself”).

Ethical Implication 1A then functions as a mitigated exhortation.¹² A paraphrase of 3:2-3 with a heightened sense of exhortation might sound like this: “You are children of God, and therefore you will be like Christ when He appears. Because Christ will appear and make us like Him, therefore you, Christian, ought to purify yourself, just as He is pure.” This makes better sense of 3:3 than a simply a descriptive fact.¹³ This is John’s way of encouraging his readers to greater holiness while still maintaining emphasis on the ontological and eschatological realities that demand this ethical behavior.

This same logic applies to Ethical Implication 2A. Theological Fact 2 is that Christ appeared to take away sins; in Christ there is no sin. Ethical Implication 2A is that everyone who abides in this One who came to take away sin, this One who has no sin, therefore does not sin. Again, the ontological reality (“we are children of God”) connects to the eschatological reality (“He was revealed to take away sins”) and both influence the present ethical reality (a Christian “does not sin”). A paraphrase of 3:5-6a with a heightened sense of exhortation might sound like this: “You are children of God, and therefore abide in Christ, who was revealed to take away sins—and there is no sin in Him. Therefore, you who remain in Him, Christian, ought not to sin.”

Within this structure, the meaning of 3:6a falls from a right understanding of the structural context. As is always true in biblical exegesis, context is king.

Conclusion

This interpretation of 3:6a resolves the tension with 1:8-10 while making sense out of the ontological and eschatological language in the context and simultaneously bowing to the structure in the inspired Word. As mentioned above, a simple paraphrase of 3:6a might be, “Christians don’t sin.” This usage is similar to how a father might say to his young son who has just stolen a toy from his sister, “Fongs don’t steal.” As a description, it is nonsensical, and evidently false. But as an exhortation, it is an effective reprimand of the son’s thievery, and a reminder of the expected ethical behavior. To achieve the desired end of present ethical behavior, both the father, and John the apostle, effectively tell their audience, “Become what you are.”¹⁴

ESV’s translation of 3:6 as “No one who abides...” instead of a more literal “Everyone who abides in Him does not sin” unnecessarily obscures the parallelism. HCSB is better: “Everyone who remains in Him does not sin.”

¹² For an explanation of how John uses “mitigated exhortations”—non-imperative verbs that are designed by the author to be softened exhortations towards, or against, particular behavior—see Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, xxv–xxvii.

¹³ This logic, of course, can be extended to Ethical Implication 1B and 2B, but I have omitted them both for the sake of space.

¹⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 183.

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