

# Sin ‘Not Unto Death’ and Sin ‘Unto Death’ in 1 John 5:16

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1 John 5:16 is a ‘difficult’ verse, which has given rise to numerous interpretations. Its significance lies not only in its own difficulty, but also in the role it plays in the complex theme of ‘sin’ which runs through 1 John, which is perhaps the main exegetical problem in the epistle. One of the tensions with which readers and commentators wrestle in the epistle is that John assumes that believers will sin (1:8; 2:1), but yet says that they do not and even cannot sin (3:6, 9; 5:18).

The main thesis of this paper is that in 1 John 5:16 sins ‘unto death’ and ‘not unto death’ refer to precisely the same categories of ‘sinning’ and ‘not sinning’ which John has described earlier in the epistle, in 3:6 and 9. Moreover, one of the most common interpretations of these earlier verses – that when John says that Christians do not sin he means that they do not *continue* to sin – while not completely erroneous, tends to miss a vital aspect of John’s view of sin. This misinterpretation of 3:6 and 9 can in turn lead 5:16 to seem rather confusing. We shall therefore begin with a brief study of 3:4-6 in context.<sup>1</sup>

## I ‘Sinning’ and ‘Not Sinning’ in 1 John – 1 John 3:4-6

The translators of the New International Version provide an example of the most common interpretation. Wherever John asserts the sinlessness of believers, the NIV adds ‘*keeps on sinning*’ (3:6), or ‘*continues to sin*’ (3:9;

1 This section concentrates on 3:6 rather than on 3:9, because the sections 3:4-6 and 3:7-9 are parallel and because the same exegetical questions arise in each. It seems that 3:7-9 is in effect a restatement of 3:4-6, cast in terms of the work of the devil. Note should also be made of another common interpretation of this tension in the theme of sin in 1 John, which proposes that where John allows that Christians sin (1:8-2:2), a ‘realistic’ context is in view, and where he asserts the sinlessness of the Christian (3:6 and 9; 5:18), the context is ‘idealistic’. Thus for Marshall 3:6 and 9 ‘express the possibility of a life free from sin . . . It is an eschatological reality’ (I Howard Marshall *The Epistles of John [New International Commentary on the New Testament]* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1978] pp 182-3). In fact, John is said to use these absolute statements of sinlessness as implied imperatives (Marshall p184). This reading should not be dismissed out of hand; nevertheless, it is suggested that the interpretation which will be offered in this paper has two advantages: it does not rely on making such sharp contextual distinctions between chapters 1 and 3, particularly when other evidence for such distinctions is thin, and it does not conclude that imperatival force has to be smuggled into indicative statements of sinlessness.

5:18).<sup>2</sup> Although not necessarily wrong (for the present tense can carry this 'continuous' sense), this translation is rather arbitrary. For example, 1:8a also uses a present tense verb to speak of sinning (more precisely 'having sin') – *ἐάν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν* – however, this present tense is never translated as 'if we say that we do not *continue* to have sin', since the context seems to suggest that John is affirming that every person sins; issues of occasional or continual sin are irrelevant to his point. Indeed, the real distinction in 1:8-2:6 is not between occasional or continual sin at all, but between sinners who confess their sin, looking to Christ for atonement and consequently living in obedience to him, and sinners who recognise neither their sin nor their need for Christ's atoning work and who consequently live in disobedience to him.

The question then arises whether there is any contextual feature present in 3:6-9 and 5:18 which would allow the translation '*continue* to sin', which is missing in 1:8. The following analysis will suggest that there is not, and that therefore the NIV translation of those verses is unwarranted. Instead, the emphasis on Christ's atoning sacrifice, and the clear distinction this draws in humanity between those who accept atonement and those who do not (1:8-2:2), dominates the whole epistle to a greater extent than is often recognised.

In 2:18-3:3 this same distinction is drawn between the 'antichrists', who are precisely those who reject Christ (2:18-23), and believers, who allow the gospel message to remain in them, and who thereby remain in the Son (2:24-3:3). In 3:4-6 John, as it were, stands back to summarise this preceding section, reviewing the ground he has covered up to this point, now describing the distinction he has been drawing in terms of 'sinning' and 'remaining'. This explains why 3:4 seems rather to 'cut across' the assurance which John had been offering to sinning Christians in 2:24-3:3. This summary may be analysed as follows:

3:4 summarises 2:18-23. 'Lawlessness' is not just 'law-breaking', but refers to eschatological rebellion against God (cf 2 Thess 2:3). This verse therefore alludes to the antichrists (2:18-23), whose rejection of Christ is a present 'historicisation' of the future eschatological lawlessness. Indeed, *all* sin has eschatological consequences (4b).

3:5a summarises 2:24-27 and 3:5b summarises 2:28-3:3. Verse 5a recalls the atonement (2:1-2), and the warning to believers to allow its message to remain in them. Verse 5b reminds believers of Christ's sinlessness, which at the parousia will be the basis for their final and

2 3:6 says that everyone who remains in him οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει, 3:9 that everyone born of him ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ ... καὶ οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν, and 5:18 that everyone born of God οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει.

complete purification (3:1-3). Those who remain in Christ do continue to sin, but find both that Christ's death atones for the eschatological consequences of their sin (2:1-2), and that their lives now are marked by increasing purity (3:3).

3:6 describes two groups: 'those who remain'<sup>3</sup> and 'those who sin'. 'Remainers' do indeed commit sins, even continually, yet because of the atonement they do not have to bear the eschatological consequences of their sin. Yet the atonement is no excuse for indulging in sin, for it is precisely by obedience to Christ that a believer demonstrates that he really is a 'remainder'. However, 'sinners' are those who have no fellowship with Christ, and who therefore draw no benefit from Christ's atoning sacrifice for their sins.

In summary, verse 4 describes every human being; verse 5 describes the shift that takes place in someone who 'remains' in Christ, both eschatologically (sins forgiven), and in the present (a life marked by increasing purity). Verse 6 underscores this distinction between 'remainers' and 'sinners'.

## II The Immediate Context of 1 John 5:16

As we approach 5:16, it should be noted that behind the different interpretations of this verse lies a methodological problem, which is not often acknowledged: much discussion focuses first on determining the nature of sin 'unto death', when in fact the mention of such sin occurs in a parenthetical remark, the purpose of which is to qualify a point John is making about confidence in intercessory prayer.<sup>4</sup> The commentators who take this approach tend to define sin 'not unto death' simply as the opposite of sin 'unto death', rather than starting with the sin 'not unto death', which is John's main point in 5:16-17.<sup>5</sup> This study will attempt to avoid this problem by reading the verses with the emphasis which the original writer intended, looking first at the immediate context of the verse, and then at each half of the verse in turn.

The immediate context is concerned with confidence in intercessory prayer (v15), but it is a confidence which contextually is related only to prayer within the believing community: verse 13b stresses the limited extent of the group which John is addressing here – τοῖς

3 The NIV unhelpfully obscures this. 3:6a says πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει ('no one who *remains* in him sins'), which the NIV translates as 'No one who *lives* in him keeps on sinning' (italics mine). This obscures John's linguistic allusion to 2:24.

4 Of the major commentators the only one who makes this point is Stephen Smalley in his *1, 2, 3 John (Word Biblical Commentary vol 51)* (Dallas: Word 1984) *ad loc.*

5 In some ways this approach is sensible, for it starts by trying to determine what John means by 'unto death' – the phrase common to both kinds of sin in 5:16. Yet it still leads to confusion, for it analyses as primary what in 5:16-17 is only parenthetical.

πιστεύουσιν . . . The confidence in prayer is then related to this group: *καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ παρρησία . . .* (v14). This application of a principle to the believing community alone is in line with the theme of separation which runs through the epistle, with exhortations and teaching addressed only to believers: 2:1, 28; 4:1, 7.<sup>6</sup>

### III 1 John 5:16a – Sin 'Not Unto Death'

#### III i Who Commits the Sin 'Not Unto Death'?

This context suggests that the one committing the sin 'not unto death' is a Christian, for it would seem to be stylistically awkward if John, having set up the context in vv13-15, suddenly referred to a different group of people in v16.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, serious consideration ought to be given to John Stott's opinion that the one sinning 'not unto death' is not a Christian.

The basis of Stott's argument is that John says that such a sinner will be given *life* through a Christian's prayer (v16), yet a Christian is someone who already has life (v12), so how can he receive what he already has? Stott notes that John has previously said that a sinning Christian lacks *fellowship* with God, but that John nowhere says that he lacks *life*. Stott realises that the use of ἀδελφός to describe a non-Christian is problematic, but cites 2:9, 11 as precedent for taking 'brother' in the wider sense of 'neighbour' or 'unconverted church-member'.<sup>8</sup>

However, as Howard Marshall points out, there is nothing to suggest that John means 'neighbour' here.<sup>9</sup> 1 John does not deal with Christian concern for the world, but rather asserts that love for those who love and accept Christ is a sign that someone really has accepted Christ himself (2:9-10; 3:11; 4:7). 'Brothers' here are fellow-Christians.

Stott's point that a Christian cannot be given the life which he already has must also be considered.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, John nowhere says that a Christian

6 The relationship between vv 16-17 and vv 13-15 is hard to determine; are vv 16-17 a particular illustration of the principle outlined in vv 13-15, or are they the main point to which John has been leading in this section? Either way, vv 16-17 are fundamentally based on the context of vv 13-15.

7 This point is made in Raymond E Brown *The Epistles of John (Anchor Bible)* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1982) pp 617-8.

8 John R W Stott *The Letters of John (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)* (Leicester: IVP 1988) *ad loc*

9 I Howard Marshall *The Epistles of John (New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1978) *ad loc*

10 There is some debate over the grammatical subject of δώσει; the grammatical flow of the verse suggests that it is the fellow believer (ie the same as the subject of the immediately preceding verb, αἰτήσει), and James 5:20 provides some warrant for ascribing life-giving activity to Christians rather than to God. This is not a vital issue, however, for even if a human being is said to 'give life', God remains the ultimate source of life.

lacks life. However, the New Testament can also speak of Christians 'receiving' what they already have: the Spirit in Eph 5:18 is a possible analogy. This suggests that Rudolf Schnackenburg is right to understand 5:16a as referring to life *rekindled* in a Christian.<sup>11</sup>

Yet on what basis can a Christian be said to be given the life which he already has? Marshall understands a Christian receiving life against the background of unconscious and deliberate sins.<sup>12</sup> Stephen Smalley agrees that this is John's conceptual background, quoting Lev 4:2 and Deut 17:12 in support.<sup>13</sup> David M Scholer, however, points out that John never makes a distinction between deliberate and non-deliberate sins, and that to identify (Old Testament) deliberate sins with sins 'unto death' (the Old Testament background is more important for Smalley than for Marshall), is to say that believers commit sins 'unto death', which cannot be the case (as we will conclude below).<sup>14</sup>

Instead, a better explanation can be found by relating the terms 'life' (and therefore 'death') to John's overall concept of 'sinning' and 'not sinning', which was outlined above. Those without life are those who do not have the Son (5:12), and deny the Son (2:23). They are sinners in this sense and for this reason: they reject their own need for atonement (1:8 is a polemic against them), and reject that Christ is the only atoning sacrifice for sin. Unethical behaviour, such as hating one's brothers, follows directly from such a rejection of Christ's atoning work.

By contrast, John says that those who have life do not and cannot sin (3:6, 9; 5:18), in that they do not reject the need for the atonement of their sins and accept Christ as the only atoning sacrifice for sins. Ethical behaviour must and indeed does naturally follow in a Christian's life (2:3, 9). Therefore when a believer sins he does so while continuing to look to Christ for atonement.

There is then a close link between 5:16 and 2:1-2, which is rarely noted, for in both places the same issue arises: what happens when Christians sin. 5:16a alludes to 2:1a, which suggests that the issue of atonement is vital to a correct understanding of 5:16. This is further suggested by the fact that the notion of the 'sinless believer', which in 3:4-10 was summarised and explained as dependent on the atonement, occurs again in 5:18,

11 Rudolf Schnackenburg *The Johannine Epistles* trans Reginald and Ilse Fuller (Wellwood, Kent: Burns & Oates 1992) *ad loc*

12 I Howard Marshall *The Epistles of John (New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1978) *ad loc*

13 Stephen Smalley *1, 2, 3 John (Word Biblical Commentary vol 51)* (Dallas: Word 1984) *ad loc*

14 David M Scholer 'Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17' *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* Gerald F Hawthorne ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1975) p 234

immediately after 5:16. Thus the concepts of 'having life'/'not having life' and 'sinning'/'not sinning' are closely related in 1 John. The same conceptual background allows John to make two apparently contradictory claims: that Christians both do not sin but yet can and do sin, and that Christians both have life but yet can be given life afresh through the prayer of another believer.

### III ii What Is the Sin 'Not Unto Death'?

Some commentators conclude that something quite precise can be said about the *nature* of this sin. They take one of two (contradictory) options: either they stress the seriousness of the sin in comparison to other sins, or they play down the seriousness of the sin.

B F Westcott tends towards the former. He thinks that the use of ἴδῃ to describe the fellow believer's apprehension of the sin shows that the character of the sin is clear, even outwardly.<sup>15</sup> This is of course true in the obvious sense that a believer cannot pray concerning a sin of which he is not aware. However, it should not be concluded from this (as Westcott seems to imply) that John is thinking only of a kind of gross public sin, as opposed to sins unseen by others, committed in private or in thought. Most likely εἴαν τις ἴδῃ is a natural idiom, expressing the thought 'if anyone *becomes aware of* . . .'. This fits with the epistle as a whole, in which John makes no distinction between different categories of believers' sins.

Schnackenburg is among those who play down the seriousness of the sin. He says that it is 'not unto death' in that it does not lead intrinsically to eternal death;<sup>16</sup> on verse 17 he says that sins 'not unto death' are sins of infirmity and 'hard-to-avoid peccadilloes'.<sup>17</sup> This reading, however, fits badly with John's emphasis on atonement (1:8-2:2). Here, believers' sin is treated with great seriousness: John assumes that a Christian must look to Christ for atonement for *every* sin, and is aware of no distinction in the seriousness of sins committed. The same point is made in the summary verse 5:17: *all* unrighteousness is (undifferentiated) sin.

The failure of both these readings suggests that sin 'not unto death' cannot be adequately defined by describing the sin intrinsically. A different approach is needed, and the work of Calvin and Scholer is helpful here.

15 B F Westcott *The Epistles of St John* (London: Macmillan 1883) p 182

16 Rudolf Schnackenburg *The Johannine Epistles* trans Reginald and Ilse Fuller (Wellwood, Kent: Burns & Oates 1992) *ad loc*

17 Schnackenburg *ad loc*

Calvin states (*contra* Schnackenburg) the principle that all sin is by nature mortal, and that where there is transgression of the Law there is sin and death.<sup>18</sup> Scholer makes the same point, asserting that 1 John assumes that every sin breaks the believer's relationship with God and needs intercession, confession and forgiveness.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we can make no *intrinsic* distinctions between sins.

This, however, raises our basic question all the more sharply: what can John possibly mean by sin *not* 'unto death'? John does not describe the sin as simply 'deadly' or 'mortal', but as *πρὸς θάνατον*: 'tending to death' or 'leading to death'. A Christian's sin is *μὴ πρὸς θάνατον* because, as we noted above, it is a sin committed by someone who is neither denying the fact of his sin (1:8), nor failing to accept Christ and his atoning sacrifice (2:1-2). Because of Christ's atonement, a Christian, even one who sins, is not heading to eternal punishment. In 5:16 John does not suddenly introduce a different topic; he is talking about precisely the same kind of sinning and atonement to which he referred in 1:8-2:2. Calvin sums this up in a typically vivid (although perhaps overstated) way, saying that when John speaks of sin 'not unto death' he is not considering sins in themselves, but rather from the viewpoint of God's fatherly goodness: God does not give over to death those whom he has restored to life<sup>20</sup> – that is, those who look to Christ for atonement.<sup>21</sup>

Scholer is therefore right when he defines sins 'not unto death' not by their intrinsic nature but by the identity of the one who commits them: he says that they are sins which Christians can and do commit.<sup>22</sup> In light of the above discussion on atonement, it should be added that a 'Christian'

18 John Calvin *Calvin's Commentaries – The Gospel According to St John 11-21 and the First Epistle of John* trans T H L Parker, David W Torrance and Thomas F Torrance edd (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press 1961) *ad loc*

19 David M Scholer 'Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17' *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* Gerald F Hawthorne ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1975) p 239 n 46

20 John Calvin *Calvin's Commentaries – The Gospel According to St John 11-21 and the First Epistle of John* trans T H L Parker, David W Torrance and Thomas F Torrance edd (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press 1961) *ad loc*

21 It might also be thought that 'death' in 5:16 means physical death, for there is NT warrant for seeing physical death as the direct punishment for sin (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 11:27-32), and because the phrase *πρὸς θάνατον* is used of physical death in John 11:4. However, Stott notes that the life contrasted with 'death' in 1 John is always spiritual/eternal (Stott *The Letters of John [Tyndale New Testament Commentary]* [Leicester: IVP 1988] *ad loc*), and Smalley says that the OT notion of 'sins leading to (physical) death' is not in view in 1 John (Smalley *1, 2, 3 John [Word Biblical Commentary vol 51]* [Dallas: Word 1984] *ad loc*).

22 David M Scholer 'Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17' *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* Gerald F Hawthorne ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1975) p 232

here is someone who, even while sinning, continues to accept Christ's atoning sacrifice.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV 1 John 5:16b – Sin 'Unto Death'

Once the main theme of the immediate context has been identified as believers' confidence in intercessory prayer concerning each others' sins, it can then be seen that verse 16b is a parenthetical qualification which John adds to his main point. He wants to remind his audience that, notwithstanding verse 16a, there is indeed such a thing as 'sin unto death', and that the confidence in prayer which is the privilege of the believing community does not apply to that kind of 'mortal' sin.

First, attention should be given to two commentators who think that it is not really possible to determine to what John is referring. C H Dodd is not certain whether John means an overt specific sin or a general course of sinful action.<sup>24</sup> Dodd suspects that John is dealing with some particular controversy in his Community, and in the heat of the moment over-rigorously applies Jesus' words about the unpardonable sin (Mark 3:28-29). In the light of this, Dodd assumes that we can safely ignore John's qualification, and, by virtue of Mark 10:27, can apply John's principle of confidence in prayer to every situation.<sup>25</sup> Schnackenburg, however, points out the danger of seeing Mark 3:29 as the background to John's qualification here: the description of sin as 'unto death' implies nothing about the future possibility or impossibility of repentance.<sup>26</sup> We have already noted John's choice of preposition in the adjectival phrase *πρὸς θάνατον*, and the sense of 'tending towards death' which this gives

23 Some commentators also distinguish between the two kinds of sin on the basis of the prayer that may or may not be offered for each. Such readings see as significant that John uses *αἰτεῖν* for prayer for sin 'not unto death', but *ἔρωτᾶν* for the prayer which he does not recommend for sin 'unto death'. There is, however, little agreement over how these verbs should be distinguished. Trudinger suggests that *ἔρωτᾶν* usually means 'to ask a question', and so verse 16c should be translated 'I am not speaking about that in order that one should question or debate it' (Paul Trudinger 'Concerning Sins, Mortal and Otherwise' *Biblica* 52.4 [1971] pp 541-2). This reading has been adopted by no major commentator, for nowhere else in the NT is *ἔρωτᾶν* used intransitively; instead, it is used transitively of asking a person. Both Brooke and Westcott understand *ἔρωτᾶν* to have the sense of 'making a request based on fellowship'. The latter thinks that this change of verb from *αἰτεῖν* is significant, but does not spell out that significance (Westcott *The Epistles of St John* [London: Macmillan 1883] p 183), whereas the former thinks that any distinction between the two verbs is 'very doubtful' (A E Brooke *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* [International Critical Commentary] Driver, Plummer and Briggs edd [Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1912] *ad loc.*).

24 C H Dodd *The Johannine Epistles* (Moffatt New Testament Commentary) (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1946) pp 135-6

25 Dodd pp 136-7

26 Rudolf Schnackenburg *The Johannine Epistles* trans Reginald and Ilse Fuller (Wellwood, Kent: Burns & Oates 1992) p 251



to his phrase: it is unlikely that John intended his phrase to be equivalent to 'unforgivable'.

Similarly, Rudolf Bultmann thinks that sin 'unto death' is either the holding of heretical doctrine or the 'wanton transgression of the divine commandments', but that it is not possible to decide between them. These alternatives arise out of Bultmann's view that 5:13-21 is an appendix added by a later redactor; if the redactor followed the general thrust of 1 John, then verse 16 refers to heresy; if not, then he may be referring to 'transgression'.<sup>27</sup> However, it is not the case that heresy rather than 'transgression' is the thrust of (even a hypothetical pre-redactional) 1 John. Injunctions to obedience and ethical behaviour are very central to John's general thrust (eg 2:3-17). Moreover, most commentators discern in the epistle a structure which adequately explains the role of 5:13-21, without resorting to tracing the hand of a redactor.

#### IV i Specific Acts

What Scholer calls the 'classic' reading of this verse is found first in Tertullian, who identified sins 'unto death' as sins for which there is no pardon: specifically murder, idolatry, injustice, apostasy, adultery and fornication; (in contrast to sins 'not unto death', which are daily sins).<sup>28</sup> This is the interpretation which came to be codified in Roman Catholic theology as distinguishing between sins mortal ('unto death') and venial ('not unto death'). It might be objected that it is anachronistic to read this later construct back into 1 John. However, a more serious problem is that John gives no indication that the kind of sin to which he is referring can be identified as precisely as Tertullian imagined. The objections to seeing the 'unforgivable sin' as the conceptual background to these verses were noted above; any reading which identifies certain specific sins as the 'deadly' ones is likely to make the error of suggesting that certain particular sinful actions are unforgivable.<sup>29</sup>

27 Rudolf Bultmann *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles (Hermeneia)* trans O'Hara, McGaughy and Funk, Robert W Funk ed (Philadelphia: Fortress 1973) p 87

28 David M Scholer 'Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17' *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* Gerald F Hawthorne ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1975) pp 236-7

29 Trudinger points out that recent Roman Catholic expositors tend to include what Roman Catholic theology calls 'mortal' sins under John's category of sins 'not unto death' (Trudinger 'Concerning Sins, Mortal and Otherwise' *Biblica* 52.4 [1971] p 541). They take this line presumably because later Roman Catholic theology declared mortal sins to be forgivable as long as the sinner confessed to a priest and performed the prescribed penance. This declaration, which breaks with Tertullian's assertion of the unforgivable nature of such sins, is tacit admission of the untenability of holding sins as specific as adultery to be unforgivable: Jesus' internalisation of OT law (eg Matt 5:27-28 on adultery), makes virtually every Christian guilty of that sin. Assuming that John agreed with Jesus' explanation of OT law in the Sermon on the Mount, our reading of 1 John, and particularly of 5:16, must take into account this radical internalisation of the 'test' of sinfulness, and acknowledge, as indeed John does (2:1), that every believer can and does sin.

#### IV ii Rejection of Christ

Most modern commentators propose something definite about the sort of sins to which John may be referring, but usually link that sinful action with a fundamental rejection of Christ. Distinctions can be drawn between these views in terms of the kind of relationship which is described between the sinful acts and the actual rejection of Christ, and in precisely what is meant by 'rejection of Christ'.

Raymond E Brown suggests that John is referring here to former Johannine brothers who had left the Johannine Community but still considered themselves Christians. They had abandoned the Community because they refused to believe that Jesus was the Christ come in the flesh,<sup>30</sup> they also rejected that believers' moral behaviour had any salvific importance.<sup>31</sup> Brown is right to identify the sin 'unto death' with a rejection of Christ come in the flesh, for that is the sin of the lying antichrists described in 2:18-23. However, Brown's confidence in his knowledge of the 'Johannine Community' is ill-founded. Much of his reconstruction of the Community is speculative: he admits that after the Johannine epistles no trace can be found of a distinct Johannine Community,<sup>32</sup> and so he must base his reconstruction entirely on what he can glean from the Johannine gospel and epistles. Nevertheless, he is confident enough of his reconstruction to say that the kind of secession which he discerns in 1 John came about because the Community (unlike, for example, Pauline groups) had no authoritative teaching structures, since it thought that only the Spirit was needed to teach; problems arose when the 'Spirit' told different people different things.<sup>33</sup> However, the Johannine texts provide little evidence for such a reconstruction, particularly when the Johannine Community is held to be in sharp contrast to a 'Pauline Community'.<sup>34</sup> Thus, there is little warrant for linking a rejection of Christ and sin 'unto death' to secession from a putative Johannine Community.

The majority of commentators (unlike Brown) do not reconstruct a Johannine Community to understand these verses, but (like Brown) hold together rejection of Christ and non-ethical behaviour in their definition of sin 'unto death'.

Some of these definitions express only a vague relationship between rejection of Christ and unethical behaviour. Thus, Westcott says that the sin 'unto death' is any sin which by its very nature excludes from

30 Raymond E Brown *The Epistles of John (Anchor Bible)* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1982) pp 617-8

31 Brown p 80

32 Brown p 103

33 Brown p 96

34 If the 'Johannine Community' is to be distinguished from Pauline communities in that the former (among other things) lacked authoritative teaching structures, it might be asked how it is that John writes a letter to his Community which begins with words which sound very like an appeal on the basis of apostolic authority (1:1-4).

Christian fellowship,<sup>35</sup> and Schnackenburg quotes with approval Herkenrath's definition that such sin is behaviour which 'denies a complete living fellowship with God, Christ, and one's fellow believer'.<sup>36</sup>

However, these readings, which try to define sin 'unto death' as sin which by nature rejects Christ, offer little help, for they do not fundamentally distinguish that sin from sin 'not unto death'. In a broad attempt to say a great deal, they end up saying very little. For, as was noted above, *all* sin – whether 'unto death' or not – is at heart Christ-rejecting (3:4). Westcott's and Schnackenburg's definitions lead logically to the conclusion that in fact a Christian is able to sin 'unto death' – but this is a conclusion to which neither actually holds.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, the distinction between the two sins must be found in the fact that sin 'unto death' is the Christ-rejecting behaviour evidenced by those who *also* deny their own sinfulness, their need for atonement, and Christ's ability to provide that atonement. Their sin is deadly because in the context of their current fundamental attitude towards Christ they have no hope of atonement. The sin 'unto death' is then a sin which a Christian cannot commit, for, even when he sins, his attitude to Christ is fundamentally different from that of those who do not have life.<sup>38</sup>

The most helpful definitions of the sin 'unto death' are therefore those which distinguish the sin of rejecting Christ's atonement itself, which a Christian cannot commit and yet remain a Christian, from sins of Christ-

35 B F Westcott *The Epistles of St John* (London: Macmillan 1883) p 200

36 Rudolf Schnackenburg *The Johannine Epistles* trans Reginald and Ilse Fuller (Wellwood, Kent: Burns & Oates 1992) p 251 n 161

37 At this point several commentators discuss the issue of whether the sin 'unto death' could be apostasy, and therefore whether it is possible for (someone who has been) a Christian to commit sin 'unto death' – see eg Stott *The Letters of John (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)* (Leicester: IVP 1988) *ad loc.* This, however, is something of a 'red herring'. We have already identified those who sin 'unto death' with the antichrists, of whom John says ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξῆλθαν ἀλλ' οὐκ ἦσαν ἐξ ἡμῶν (2:19). This simply does not make clear whether these people really were once Christians and are now not, or whether they were never believers, but either were masquerading as such or deceived themselves about their spiritual state. For the purposes of understanding 5:16 it is sufficient to know that they are not (now) Christians; whether it is possible that they once were depends on our reading of other NT passages (eg Heb 6:4ff; 10:26ff).

38 This fundamental distinction between those whose sins are atoned for and those whose sins are not is the conceptual background to John's qualification about not praying for some. Whether we think John is forbidding his audience to pray for certain kinds of people (eg Brown *The Epistles of John [Anchor Bible]* [London: Geoffrey Chapman 1982] p 613), or only mildly dissuading such prayer by noting that confidence in answered prayer does not extend to every kind of sinner prayed for (eg Smalley *J, 2, 3 John [Word Biblical Commentary vol 51]* [Dallas: Word 1984] *ad loc.*, and Marshall *The Epistles of John [New International Commentary on the New Testament]* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1978] *ad loc.*), John's point is that those who do not look to Christ for atonement need something much more radical than 'life renewed', for the context of confidence in prayer for sinners applies only to the believing community.

rejecting behaviour (and all sin is intrinsically Christ-rejecting), which a Christian can and does commit. The following emphasise this distinction to different extents, but all make this same basic point.

A E Brooke defines sin 'unto death' as any sin which deliberately rejects the *claims* of Christ, which, if persisted in, will lead to final separation from 'the Divine life';<sup>39</sup> (by Christ's 'claims' Brooke presumably means his offer of atonement). Calvin says the sin is that of the reprobate who reject all fear of God;<sup>40</sup> similarly, Bengel defines it as the state of a soul who rejects grace.<sup>41</sup> Marshall says sins 'unto death' in John are those which are incompatible with being a child of God: denial that Jesus is the Son of God, refusal to obey God's commands, love of the world and hatred of one's brothers;<sup>42</sup> (presumably Marshall's order here – belief, then behaviour – is intentional). Two final definitions make a similar point: Stott's, that it is the sin of the false teachers who forfeit the Son,<sup>43</sup> and Scholer's, that it is sin which signifies the complete absence of any fellowship with God.<sup>44</sup>

## V Conclusion

It is clear that John is talking in 5:16b about sin committed by non-Christians. If the definition of sin 'not unto death' suggested above is correct, then it must follow that the basic characteristic of sin 'unto death' is that it is sin committed by those who do not think that their actions are sinful, and thus do not look to Christ for atonement for their sins. Of the above definitions, those of Calvin, Bengel, Marshall, Stott and Scholer come nearest to this. However, to these must be emphatically added that in 1 John at the heart of rejection of the Son lies a rejection of his atoning sacrifice.

Sin 'unto death' is therefore that of the antichrists and the liars – the 'sinners' of 3:6 – who deliberately reject the Father and the Son *doctrinally* (2:22), and whose rejection of Christ leads directly to and is clearly evidenced by their *ethical* failure (2:3-4, 9-10, 15). By very definition, a Christian – who, in the language of 3:6, is a 'remainder' – cannot commit this sin and remain a Christian.

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- 39 A E Brooke *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles (International Critical Commentary)* Driver, Plummer and Briggs edd (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1912) p 146
- 40 John Calvin *Calvin's Commentaries – The Gospel According to St John 11-21 and the First Epistle of John* trans T H L Parker, David W Torrance and Thomas F Torrance edd (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press 1961) *ad loc*
- 41 Quoted in A H Dammers 'Hard Sayings – II' *Theology* 66 (1963) p 371
- 42 I Howard Marshall *The Epistles of John (New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1978) *ad loc*
- 43 John R W Stott *The Letters of John (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)* (Leicester: IVP 1988) *ad loc*
- 44 David M Scholer 'Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17' *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* Gerald F Hawthorne ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1975) p 241