

THE EPISTLE OF FIRST JOHN:
DETERMINING
“THE CHILDREN OF GOD”
AND
“THE CHILDREN OF THE DEVIL”

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PART I**INTRODUCTION****Evaluation of the Interpretations of First John**

Most people are familiar with some favorite proof texts out of 1 John.

“They went out from us for they were not of us . . .” (2:19)

“No one who is born of God *practices* sin . . .” (3:9)

All these texts, and more, are typically used to demonstrate that John’s purpose is to identify those who are false professors of Christianity. In other words, the verses above are used to claim that if someone does not have a consistent Christian lifestyle (“*practices* sin,” 3:9), then it is questionable whether they are a true Christian. If they then depart from the church, this interpretation claims that their departure shows they were never saved (“were not of us,” 2:19).

But the difficulties and questions with these interpretations are well known and (should be) obvious. For instance, how much of a sinful lifestyle is necessary to question one’s salvation? Or what is the definition of a sinful lifestyle? Is it the “big” sins like adultery, drugs, and murder? Or is it the “small” sins like pride, envy, lack of patience, or even passive sin, such as missing opportunities to evangelize? Even if those are identified, one then asks how long can this go on before one is determined to be truly unsaved? Also, is it about “evil thoughts,” or do they have to be evil actions? Or what church is it that they have to leave to be considered “unsaved?” Is it the Catholics, Methodists, Southern Baptists, etc., since all their lifestyle evaluations would be much different?

The problem with all these nebulous requirements is that it depends on who is doing the judging. In other words, different churches would have different doctrines/lifestyles by which they would judge the “leavers.” And different people would have a different perception of “lifestyle” by which one would be judged as in a “habitually evil lifestyle.” Thus the “judgment” becomes the lifestyle that the “judge” decides, and the judgment is variable based on personal bias, theology, culture, etc.

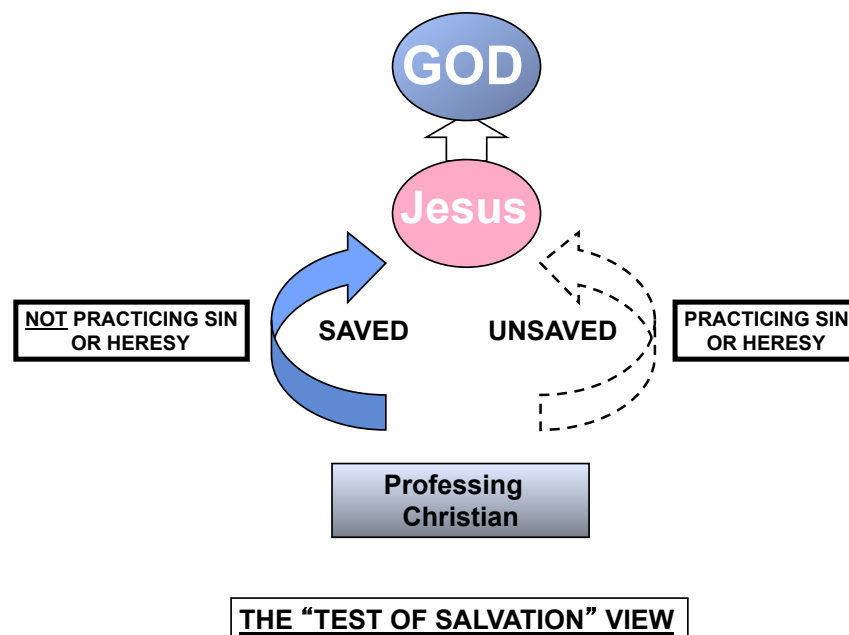
The interesting thing is that if this is the case in John, he never seemingly defines how much, or what kind of sins, one might sin before one’s salvation comes into question. It is interesting, in a book whose object it is to tell the readers how they may “know that they have eternal life” (5:13), that these interpreters only offer a relative answer. So while John’s purpose is that the reader might “know,” the interpretations leave one “not knowing.”

The Present Views of 1 John

At this point, it also is necessary to understand the alternative approaches to 1 John so that these contrasts may be clearly seen since these views are disparate to the exposition presented here.

The “Test of Salvation” View

This view sees the issue as the following:



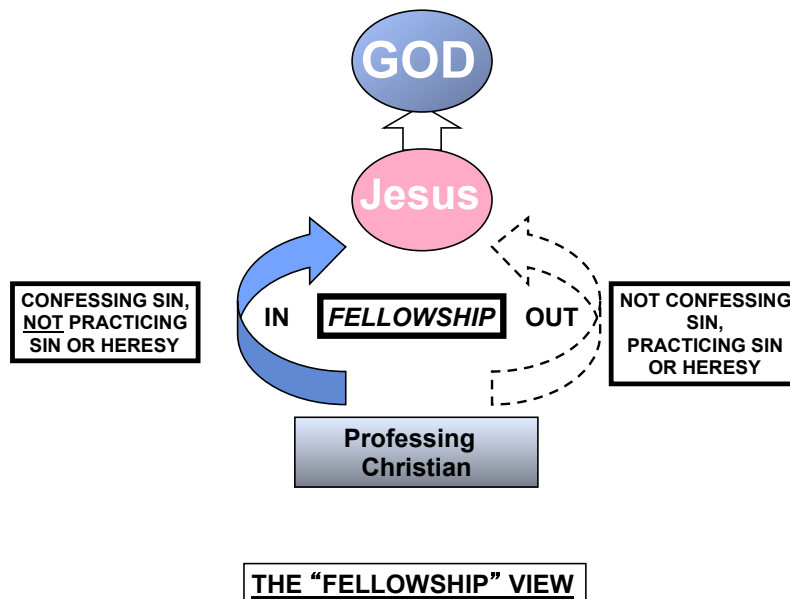
Determining who has true access to Jesus: The issue here is whether all those who claim to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, have one.

Based on their “degree of faith,” or “content of faith.” The criterion for determining who has a relationship with Jesus is one’s degree of faith established when they “became” a Christian. This is demonstrated by their habitual lifestyle. If their lifestyle reflects some perceived Christian good works then they would likely have had enough faith, or “commitment,” at the time of conversion. Contrariwise, if they had a habitual lifestyle of non-Christian behavior then their degree of faith, or lack of “commitment,” would come into question, thus reflecting their false relationship with Jesus Christ (i.e., unsaved?).

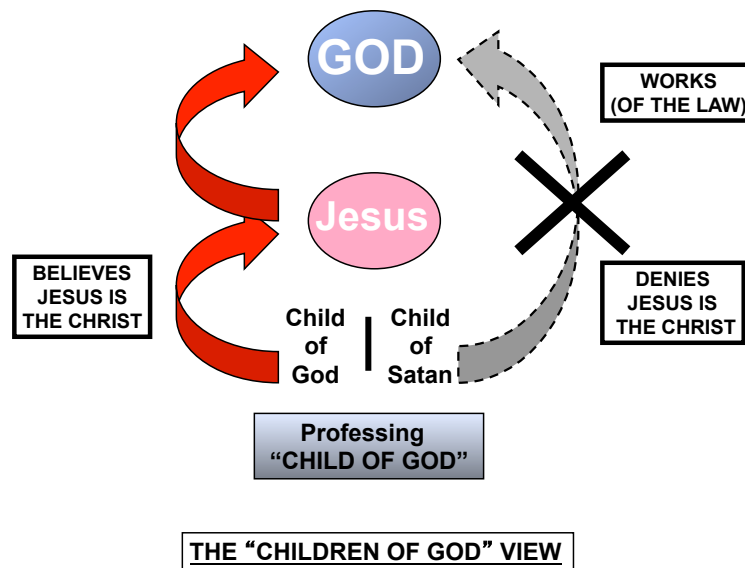
There is also another criteria proposed by these who hold this view, and that is that their content of faith regarding Jesus is faulty, and thus they are also “unsaved.”

These variances in their faith typically are proposed to be, either Gnosticism, Docetism, Cerinthianism, or a blend of these. In their view, any evidence of these would also qualify these professing Christians as actually unsaved.

The “Test of Fellowship” View



This view is only different in that the adherents hold that if one has a correct confession at salvation, then the habitual sinful lifestyle would reflect a lack of one’s salvation or “fellowship” with Christ. Thus the issue is still the relationship with Christ, a Christological problem, but it is not an issue of saved/unsaved, but sanctified/unsanctified.

The “Children of God” View (presented here)

John is not questioning professors of Christianity (access to Jesus) as to whether they are truly Christians or not, but is questioning who has access to God the Father. The answer is that only those who believe Jesus is the Christ. And John is reaffirming to those who have believed that they are correct and should not abandon that trust in Christ for the works of the Law (or other works based means).

Stated another way, these other views think John is addressing a group of professing Christians and giving them a test to see who is saved/unsaved. However, John is not questioning those with a correct profession of Jesus Christ. The group that John is evaluating is the group of all claimants of the title, “Children of God.” In other words, all religions claim to have access to God (the Father), Buddhists, Mormons, Muslims, non-Messianic Jews. But John is stating that only those who trust in Jesus as the Christ are true “Children of God,” while those who try to access God any other way (e.g., “works of the Law”) are “Children of the Devil.” In the case of 1 John, his accusation focuses on Jews who are claiming the “works of the Law” apart from Jesus Christ.

The Hermeneutical Problem

Now when two prominent views are found to be wanting in such a major way, the question has to be asked as to where they went wrong? The problem is that they have erred at the very basic level of interpretation. They have defined their words and phrases from the epistle differently than John did. These interpreters draw their definitions from either their own pre-conceived theology, from their perception of history, or from others’ definitions.

For instance, the phrase, “walking in the darkness,” is almost universally used to indicate one’s “habitually evil lifestyle.” Yet when Johannine usage is allowed to determine its meaning, it is never used that way. “Walking in the darkness,” when used figuratively, is always used regarding someone who had rejected the revelation of God, in Jesus, for some other means of accessing God the Father. “Light” is the revelation of God’s character in Jesus Christ. “Darkness” is the absence of the revelation of God’s character revealed in Jesus.²

Of course, this phrase is only one of many that is misunderstood by interpreters. Phrases such as “does not do sin” (3:7), typically translated, “does not practice sin,” are others that are defined errantly. First, of all, the translation of this word as “practice,” is an interpretation that is not validated by the Greek text. As stated, the word is simply *poieo*, (“do”) in the present tense. Typically translators justify the use of “practice” by claiming it is a “continuous present.” Yet there is no evidence from the context that this is a “continuous present.” So what the translator has done is simply call it a “continuous present.” (This will be discussed later in depth). Thus “practice sin” or “continually sin” in this translation or interpretation is a construct by the interpreter to fit his theology, and his perceived purpose of the book, not an explicit translation of the text.

So, it can be seen, that the typical translations and interpretations of 1 John erred at the foundational level, that of, defining John’s words and phrases. However, the question must be asked, as to what source is John using for his definitions? That source is the plot of the Old Testament.

Words like “the Christ,” “the Son,” come from Psalm 2, and must be defined from there. “Eternal life,” is identified clearly in Daniel 12:2. Light/darkness, Cain/Abel, as well as many more our sourced from the beginning plot of the Old Testament in Genesis 1—4. “Know God,” “forgiveness of sins,” “no need for anyone to teach you,” are from Jeremiah 31:31-34.

John’s purpose was to reaffirm to the believers that Jesus was this Christ (5:13). So to do that he must prove his case, not just say it. In other words, if John’s doctrines were being attacked, for John to just restate them is not a proof. So what John is doing is using the Old Testament plot to show that forgiveness of sins and “eternal life” in the coming Christ was always the means of salvation, the only means of access to God the Father. This is very similar to his Gospel.

² See my article, “The Meaning of ‘Walking in the Darkness’” in Bibliotheca Sacra, 149:594 (April-June 1992): 214-22. It can be accessed at www.TheBiblicalStory.org/baylis/resources/

The antagonists in this book are those who would claim the Old Testament proved the “works of the Law” were the only means to God, and not the Christ. Thus, it can be seen quite quickly, that knowing the Old Testament allusions is absolutely necessary to understand the definitions of John’s words and phrases and the contribution they make to the message of the epistle.

The Simple Purpose of the Epistle

That the epistle is quite plain in its purpose can be noted by some of the major verses. From these simple and clear verses, the two sides can be clearly seen. The liar, the antichrist (the evil antagonists) deny Jesus is the way to the Father. The true “children of God” (the good characters) confess Jesus as the Son as the access to the Father.

The Children of the Devil: Deniers of Jesus Christ as the Access to the Father

²² Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. (1 John 2:22-23)

The Children of God: Believers in Jesus Christ as the Access to the Father

The question of the epistle is who has this “eternal life” (the righteous character of the Father). One side does not have the Son (the evil ones) and thus does not have “eternal life.” The other side has the Son (the good ones), and has “eternal life.” And this coordinates exactly with John’s stated purpose as to the epistle in 5:13.

¹⁰ The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. ¹¹ And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. ¹² He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. ¹³ These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:10-13)

Lack of Identification of the Old Testament Allusions

The whole of 1 John 1—3 is alluding to the Old Testament plot to show that Messiah was always the One who would forgive sins and who would reproduce eternal life in the believer. John uses the Old Testament plot to prove to his audience that those who claim there are other ways God than through Messiah (e.g., the “works of the Law”) are wrong, since this has been the way it was “from the beginning.” Thus, if one does not recognize this use of the Old Testament by John then they must determine definitions from somewhere else. And since that “somewhere else” is not the same as John’s source, it will by necessity be errant.

Summary: Correct Interpretation and Definitions from the Old Testament

The short summary of what this article is pointing out is that John is identifying the true “Children of God.” Those who would come to God any other way than through the Messiah, Jesus, are not “children of God.”

John’s purpose is to show that the Old Testament, which is used by his antagonists to contradict him (i.e., show the works of the Law were the Old Testament means to God), actually demonstrates that access to God was always, and only, through the coming Messiah, and that Messiah was the One John eye-witnessed, Jesus.

So, the exposition of 1 John here (and in the commentary provided separately) will begin by demonstrating the literary argument of the book using John’s intended meaning from the Old Testament allusions. It will only, from time to time, refer to the errors of the alternative views, but only for clarity of interpretation and for the reader to evaluate. But, generally speaking, this article will rely on the exposition of the text based on the use of original languages, both in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, and the plot of the Biblical Story.