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Hard Questions

Can a Saint be a sinner?

John N. Oswalt
(Wesley Biblical Seminary)

"A Christian cannot live in known sin and remain in a saving relationship with Christ."



3

Three different faces of Christianity



It's about eternal blue.
What Christ does FOR us



It's about personal holiness.
What Christ does IN us



It's about social justice.
What Christ does THROUGH us

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1 John 3

"1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be **called children of God**; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now **we are children of God**, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is."

This is "good news" 🌟😊

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But what follows is confusing.

"3 And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him **purifies himself, just as He is pure**. 4 Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. 5 And you know that **He appeared in order to take away sins**; and **in Him there is no sin**. 6 No one who abides in Him sins; **no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him**. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you; **the one who practices righteousness is righteous**, just as He is righteous; 8 the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 9 **No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God**. 10 By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: **anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God**, nor the one who does not love his brother."

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“Get rid of this bunkum about the
“carnal Christian.” Forget it!
If you’re carnal, you’re not saved.”

Leonard Ravenhill
(British evangelist)

“A Christian cannot live in known sin
and remain in a saving relationship
with Christ.”

John N. Oswalt
(Wesley Biblical Seminary)

“Paul clearly argues that good works
are necessary for eternal life.”

Tom Schreiner
(Southern Baptist Theological Seminary)

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Assumptions

2 Timothy 2:15

“Be diligent to present yourself
approved to God as a workman who
does not need to be ashamed,
accurately handling the word of truth.”



Berean helper

- The Scripture (rightly understood) presents a **consistent message**.
- The Bible is not an encyclopedia of proof texts **but a narrative that reveals God’s Gospel in Christ**.
- A wise reading of the text calls for **CONTEXTUAL sensitivity**.

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Cultural context

1 John 2:26

“These things I have written to
you concerning **those who are
trying to deceive you.**”

1 John seems to address what would
later become central Gnostic
doctrines - denial of sin and a sinless
Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice.



Berean helper

1 John 1

“7 but if we **walk in the light** as He Himself is in the light
we have fellowship with one another, and **the blood of
Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.** 8 If we say that
we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth
is not in us.”

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Textual Hints

“Cannot sin” must only refer to
Christ’s Spirit. 1 Jn. 1:5, 3:9

The part of us that is “born of God”
is the Spirit of Christ in our “new
self.” 1 Jn. 2:1-2

Christians can and do sin. 1 Jn. 1:8, 2:1-2

“Abiding” like “trusting”, is relative and is “in process” for
Christians. 1 Jn. 2:28

“Take away sins” is through the blood of Christ, not
the Spirit of Christ. 1 Jn. 1:7



Berean helper

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Experiential context

Sinless behavior is not observed
to be the experience of any,
let alone every Christian.

Some claim that we “need not” sin
but no one claims that we “cannot” sin.

Others believe that John is talking about persisting
in sin. **But does that really satisfy this text’s claims?**

Paul’s teaching - “In Christ” we are “saints” by faith
**and called to live lives that reflect (though
imperfectly) the life of Christ.**



Berean helper

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✓ The “flesh” is still present. “The flesh sets its desire
against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for
these are in opposition to one another, so that you **may
not do the things that you please.**” Galatians 5:17

✓ Paul was not free from sin. “For the good that I
want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do
not want.” Romans 7:19

✓ Paul did not expect perfection in this life. “And
not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first
fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves **groan within
ourselves, waiting eagerly** for our adoption as sons,
the redemption of our body.” Romans 8:23

“Not that I have already obtained this **or am already
perfect but I press on** to make it my own, .”
Philippians 3:12-14

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Corinthian Saints / Sinners

1 Corinthians 1

"2 to the church of God which is **sanctified in Christ Jesus**, **saints by calling**, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:"

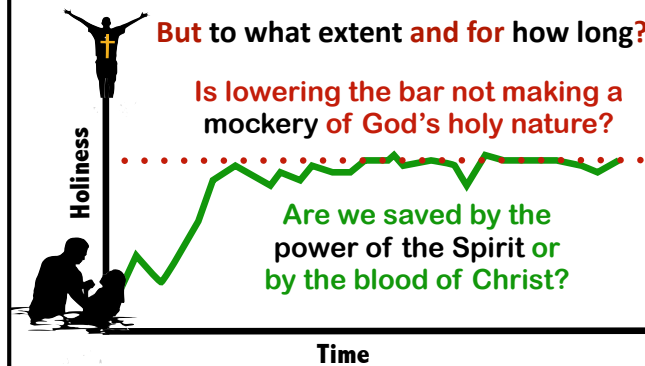
1 Corinthians 3

"1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to **men of flesh**, as to babes in Christ... 3 for you are **still fleshly**. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not **walking like mere men**?"

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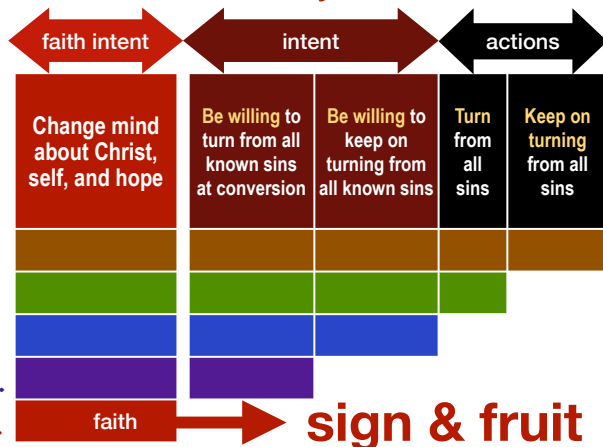
Lowering the holiness bar is one view of 1 Jn.3

The idea is,
believers cannot CONTINUE in sin.
But to what extent and for how long?



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Christian identity and sinlessness



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Our walk is shaped by
our identity & inheritance.



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Perfection in THIS body is unrealistic.
Power by Christ's Spirit is undeniable.
Progress in THIS life is unfinished.



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1 John 1:5-10; 3:2-10 **Paraphrase**

"Don't walk in the "lawless" darkness of the sin of the Gnostic heretics - rejecting the light of the Gospel in Jesus - the Word and Way of the Cross. This begins with confessing that we are sinners that have Christ's holiness imputed to us and his Spirit in us. His Spirit will not and cannot sin. To the extent that we abide in, and walk in His Spirit we will not and cannot sin either. When we fail to abide or walk perfectly, it is not Christ's Spirit but the "flesh" that is showing. We identify ourselves in this world by the way we walk."

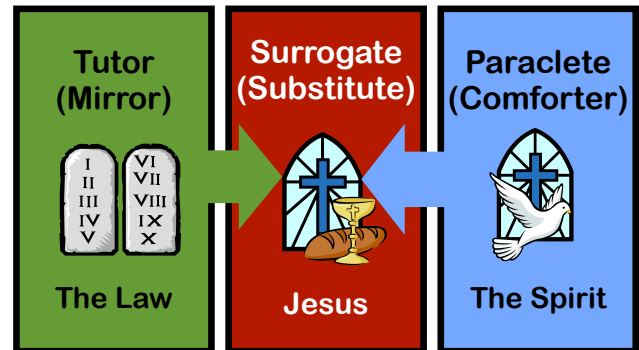
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1 John 3:1-10
is best read in the context
of Paul & Peter in:

1 Corinthians 3:1-15
Romans 8:1-25,
Ephesians 1:1-2:10, 4:17-24,
Philippians 3:1-21
2 Peter 1:1-11

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Don't confuse the ministries
of **the Law**, **the Son**, and **the Spirit**.



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Is this relevant in our day?

New Age Spirituality
displays some Gnostic similarities

- Spirituality that is **self-centered** and **not institutional**.
- Shared themes with **Hinduism, Buddhism, astrology, psychology, and indigenous mystic spirituality**.
- **Sin is not a moral issue**, but ignorance (negative energy).
- Materialism is illusory or a distraction **from higher life**.
- Hidden teachings, esoteric traditions, channeled revelations, astrology, numerology, **meditation and wisdom are viewed as doorways to deeper truth**.

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Is this relevant in our day?

New Age Spirituality
displays some Gnostic similarities

It is the acknowledgment of a

“spirituality”

that is the common base of reality
- the cosmos, and the human soul.

NOTE: It is more like “THE FORCE” of Star Wars
than the domain of the Biblical God.

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**New age spirituality (apart from
the Gospel) is welcomed
in this world.**

“God is the ground of being, the incomprehensible,
infinity of cosmic unity, and life’s essence.”
Paul Tillich (and friends)

“Spirituality for me is recognizing that I am
connected to the energy of all creation, that I am a
part of it and it is always a part of me.”
Oprah Winfrey

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Ephesians 4

“17 This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord,
that you **walk** no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in
the futility of their **mind**, 18 being darkened in their
understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of
the **ignorance** that is in them, because of the **hardness**
of their heart; 19 and they, having become callous, have
given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of
every kind of impurity with greediness. 20 But you did not
learn Christ in this way, 21 if indeed you have heard Him
and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, 22
that, in reference to your former manner of life, you **lay**
aside the old self, which is being corrupted in
accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be
renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and **put on the**
new self, which in the likeness of God has been created
in righteousness and holiness of the truth.”

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Take our baptism seriously.



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Theological points

- The human dilemma is spiritual and ethical **but in a material world.**
- Humans are **defiled by sin** and in need of redemption.
- Jesus came **in the flesh yet was undefiled and sinless.**
- Jesus **shed his blood to redeem sinners.**
- We are saved by grace as we **acknowledge our sin and place our faith in Christ as our Redeemer.**
- While imputed with Christ's holiness we are also indwelt with Christ's Spirit **to live holy lives to the extent that we abide in and walk with him.**

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"Holiness is not the way to Christ;
Christ is the way to holiness.
Better still, Christ is our holiness."

"I believe the holier a man
becomes, **the more he
mourns over the
unholiness which
remains in him.**"



Charles Spurgeon

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Hard Questions



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