

An Examination of I John 2:18-19 as it Relates to

the Doctrine of Eternal Security

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First John 2:18-19 is often used by proponents of the eternal security doctrine as a proof. However, the text can be interpreted in a consistent and logical way using sound exegesis without demanding the interpreter to reach the conclusion of eternal security. Notice that the goal is NOT to prove that the text CAN'T be interpreted as those who believe in eternal security generally interpret it. Rather, the goal is only to show that the text of I John does not demand that conclusion and that other interpretive options are at least as likely for the text. If this text is going to be used as a proof then the burden of proof falls upon the one using it in such a way (i.e. those who teach eternal security). So, I John 2:18-19 does not demand that the interpreter reach a doctrine of eternal security, because the passage is written about a specific set of people - "antichrists", the text does not speak to the condition of these antichrists before their departure, and the wider context of the epistle does not support the that interpretation.

The epistle of John is infamously difficult to outline due to John's tendency to visit and revisit the same topic multiple times throughout the letter. As Daniel Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary says,

The construction of this book is analogous to someone throwing four or five stones into a pond within close proximity of each other: after a short time the ripples from one stone overlap with the ripples from another so that all lines become blurred. As such, it is next to impossible to outline that style of argument in a linear fashion. What is needed is a geometrical design!" (Wallace 2002)

However, the overall theme of the letter seems to be centered on the encouragement and instruction of believers being harassed and seduced by false teachers. John states his own purpose in 5:13 where he writes, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.” I John, then, is written to believers and intends to impart assurance of their salvation to the believers. John feels the need to write such a letter as I John due to the influence false teachers have been asserting upon the church. In chapters 1 and 2 leading up to verse 18 John gives a description of what a true believer looks like. Namely, believers will lead lives that are characterized, not by sin and worldliness, but by holiness, attentiveness to the law of God, love of our fellow humanity, and a deep love of God that forces out love of the world. When we arrive at verse 18, having told us how to recognize true faith, John turns his attention to the recognition of false faith and false doctrine.

Those wishing to teach eternal security, the doctrine that 100% of all truly regenerate persons will remain faithful and continue to abide in Christ for eternity 100% of the time, tend to focus their attention on verse 19, but that verse can only be understood within its immediate context of verses 18-27.¹ The Johnine church had been undergoing a time of internal doctrinal conflict. There was a group of false teachers in the church that had been teaching some form of false doctrine. We are not told how effective they had been in persuading other members of the

¹ It should be understood from the outset that when using the term “eternal security” it is a reference intended to include the classical Calvinistic doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and the more recent popular view often called “once saved, always saved.” There are significant differences between these two views, but proponents of both views generally approach these verses the same way. Therefore, in the present discussion of I John 2:18-19 the two views will not be differentiated.

fellowship into their heresy, but we do know that they eventually withdrew from the congregation. As Stephen Smalley in the *Word Bible Commentary* says, “It is impossible to know the exact nature of the error, but we can know it was based in Christology – they seem to have sacrificed either his divinity or humanity.” (Smalley 1984, 99) Whether the exact nature of the heresy was a denial of Christ’s divine nature or the docetistic denial of his human nature is not relevant to the interpretation of the verse. We can be sure, based on verse 22, that these “antichrists” were denying that Jesus was the Christ and, thereby, denying the Father as well. John makes clear that the doctrine they espoused was a lie and the lie was so serious that believing it made salvation impossible.

The important point concerning the teaching of eternal security and this passage is that John was not speaking about church members in general, but a very specific set of people – the antichrists. What John says about the antichrists may or may not apply to the church in general, but that is not clearly the case based solely on these two verses. As Shank observes, “Let it be observed that, whatever may have been the circumstance of the antichrists in view, John was writing of specific instances, rather than stating a universal principle.” (Shank 1989, 261-262) In any event, John’s purpose here is not to provide the church with a teaching on the doctrine of security, but to point out that these antichrists were not a part of the true church. Often times, when these verses are used by proponents of eternal security the context is not explained at all and what John says about the antichrists is applied to the whole church without any indication about why that conclusion was reached.

Before discussing verse 19 as a whole a brief mention concerning the meaning of *ημων*, “us” in the phrase *εξ ημων εξηλθαν* “They went out from us”. Some commentators have taken the “us” here to refer to teachers of the true gospel. As

Ben Henshaw, in his excellent blog, comments, “John speaks of false teachers (anti-christs) who went out “from us” (the true gospel teachers) and thus proved by their going that they were not “of us.” (Henshaw 2008) Contrarily, Stephen Samlley, in his commentary on the verse, reached the opposite conclusion saying that the “us”, “must refer to the church.” (Smalley 1984, 101) It seems that the “us” would most naturally refer back to *παιδία* “little children” in verse 18 and thus refers to the Christian community of which John is also a member. However, even if we take the “us” as a reference to gospel teachers or to the apostles the interpretation is the same, because if they had been true gospel teachers then they would also have been members of the wider Christian community and leaving the true teaching would be tantamount with leaving the church. In other words, ultimately, they had been a part of the church and then left the church regardless of who the “us” is in reference too.

Now, close attention must be paid to what John does NOT say in these verses, as well as what he does say. John says in verse 19, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.” (ESV). The traditional interpretation of this verse by those wishing to support the doctrine of eternal security usually sounds something like this:

These people who had left the community had shared in its external life, but were never truly a part of its internal existence due to the fact that they had never truly been born from above. (Akin 2001, 116)

Or, similarly, as Barnes teaches in his commentary on I John:

This passage proves that these persons, whatever their pretensions and professions may have been, were never sincere Christians. The same remark may be made of all who apostatize from the faith, and become teachers of error. They never were truly converted; never belonged really to the spiritual church of Christ. (Barnes)

Both of these authors, and others who have said the same, are making a fairly large leap without any justification for assuming that those who had left the

church *had never been* a genuine believer. Barnes actually went as far as to say the passage “proved” that these antichrists had never been real believers. The text itself never makes any statement about the spiritual condition of theses “antichrists” prior to their leaving the church, John simply says that their leaving proved that they were not true Christians *at the point of their leaving*. Daniel Akin, in the New American Commentary, states that, “The decision of the heretics to remove themselves from fellowship with the community gives evidence that they have never really believed the gospel.” (Akin 2001, 116) This is simply not at all what the text actually says. To what evidence is he referring? It is possible that the heretics being discussed had never been true believers, but it is equally possible that they had been true believers at one point and had now apostatized and left the true faith. The text only proves that they were definitely not believers now that they had left the fellowship of the church. If they were still genuine believers they would not have left the church in the first place. Robert Shank takes this position in *Life in the Son* when he explains:

With respect to the antichrists cited by John, there are two possibilities. Their professions of faith may have been false from the beginning; or, they may have been actual apostates who abandoned faith and withdrew from Christ. Either circumstance could be true. John asserts only that, at the time they withdrew from the spiritual fellowship of true believers, “they were not of us;” otherwise they would have continued in fellowship with the faithful. (Shank 1989, 161-162)

In 2007 New York’s Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, left the Republican Party of which he had been previously a member . Does that prove that he was NEVER a real republican? Is it not possible that he once believed in the ideas and principles of the Republican Party, but later adopted ideas or developed beliefs no longer compatible with the Republicans? Obviously, at the time of his leaving Mr. Bloomberg considered himself and the Republicans to be incompatible, but that

fact says nothing about what the situation may have been five or ten or more years before he decided to break with the party. It seems much more reasonable to conclude, as Stephen Smalley, that:

**It is possible, in this instance, that those who later allowed their heretical thought and actions to run away with them (when it could obviously be said *οὐκ ἦσαν ἐξ ἡμῶν*, ‘they were not of us’) were in the first place believers with a genuine, if uninformed, faith in Jesus.
(Smalley 1984, 103)**

Those claiming that John’s words “prove” anything about the antichrists spiritual condition prior to their leaving the church are committing eisegesis based on a set of beliefs they bring to the text prior to interpreting it. The text simply does not say anything about whether or not these teachers were true believers at one time or not. The primary point John appears to be making here is that their breaking away from the community proves beyond any doubt that the heretical ideas they taught were in fact false. If they had been Christians and had they had true doctrine they would not have broken fellowship with the Christian community. John likely intended, by pointing out that their leaving proved they were false, that any remaining doubt or controversy be put to rest.

Furthermore, throughout the rest of I John, as well as his other epistles, John uses conditional language when speaking of the church. Note the following examples from the immediate context of I John chapter two (quotes from the ESV):

1Jn 2:17 And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

1Jn 2:24 Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father.

1Jn 2:27 But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie--just as it has taught you, abide in him.

Each of these verses, which appear both before and after verses 18-19, uses conditional language. The strong implication of these verses is that we who believe must continue to believe in order to remain in fellowship with Christ. Arguing that it is a foregone conclusion that all believers definitely will abide seems to rob the verses of their force. After all, why must believers be encouraged to do that which they will certainly do anyway? Since John has established both before and after verses 18-19 that believers must abide it does not seem at all a stretch that we read verses 18-19 with that idea in mind. Believers must abide and the fact that these antichrists did not abide proves they *are no longer believers*, if they ever were.

However, as Forlines points out, “To warn Christians against apostasy is not intended to make people live in fear.” (Forlines 2006, 299) One of John’s main themes in the epistle is that of assurance for the believer, therefore, the warnings he gives are not intended to cause fear². On the contrary, by staying true to the gospel of Christ and living lives characterized by holiness we can be assured of our salvation. In “The Quest For Truth” Forlines explains the assurance that comes from warning passages with the following example:

Suppose you were traveling down a road after a severe rain storm and you discovered that a bridge was out and you put up a sign to warn people. You would not do that to create fear in people. You would do that to increase their safety. The warning signs on a road give me assurance as I travel. Since I know what the dangers are, I can avoid them. (Forlines 2006, 299)

² There is a sense in which believers do “live in fear” that is both biblical and healthy. Believers do, and should, fear the dire consequences of apostasy. The only condition worse than that of being lost is that of being hopelessly lost. The apostate is such a hopeless person (II Pet. 2:20). In the example given by Forlines we can see that fear of driving off the broken bridge should encourage travelers to obey the warning signs and steer clear of the dangers ahead. In saying that believers do not “live in fear” it is terrorizing, incapacitating, and irrational fear that is being referenced. Rom. 11:20 and Phill. 4:12 both speak of fear in the healthy sense.

Arminians are often accused of living in fear and without any assurance, but this is a straw man argument. Virtually no Arminian authors or teachers profess such a view. Arminians believe that they can have assurance of salvation as long as they remain faithful to Christ.

So, the evidence for interpreting these two verses as proof of the doctrine of eternal security just does not satisfy. The rules of both grammar and logic easily allow for the Arminian understanding of apostasy. The ambiguity of the verses, if any exists, is due to the fact that John was not trying, primarily, to teach us about apostasy. John wanted to show that the false teachers and their doctrine was obviously wrong, as their leaving illustrated, and that those who remain true the gospel and to Christ can be assured of their standing before God.

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