

SHOULD WE PRAY FOR STRAYING BRETHREN? JOHN'S CONFIDENCE IN 1 JOHN 5:16–17

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I. INTRODUCTION

The confidence that Christians have in intercessory prayer (1 John 5:16–17) flows from the confidence that they have in prayer to God (vv. 14–15). This much appears to be uncontroversial about the interpretation of 1 John 5:16–17.¹ Most everything else is controversial. Contrary to John's intent, it appears that interpretive difficulties in this passage, especially the identity of "sin that leads to death," have caused much confusion and uncertainty: for whom may Christians intercede and what kind of assurance may we have about the efficacy of our intercession?² This article will attempt to show that the commonly accepted translation of 1 John 5:16c, "I am not saying that he should pray about that," is incorrect and that an alternative interpretation helps resolve most of this confusion and uncertainty.³ Based on

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¹ See e.g. Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* (NAC 38; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001) 207; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 86; Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leicester: Apollos, 2000) 190; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 248; David M. Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16–17," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 232; John Stott, *The Letters of John* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leicester: InterVarsity, 1988) 188; Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 202; Marianne M. Thompson, *1–3 John* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 141; B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974 [1892]) 190. While agreeing with this basic point, some see John leading up to the role of intercession when sin arises as the main topic: see e.g. Gary Burge, *The Letters of John* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 215; Hans-Josef Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief* (EKKNT 23; Zürich: Benzinger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1991) 324–25; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 245–46; and Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC 51; Waco, TX: Word, 1984) 297.

² See esp. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* 208–10; Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without" 233–38; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* 297–99; and Werner Vogler, *Die Briefe des Johannes* (THKNT 17; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1993) 174–76.

³ The rendering of the NIV, "I am not saying that he should pray about that," is representative of all major English translations and commentators. A representative sample should suffice here: "I do not say that he should pray for it" (KJV); "I do not say that one should pray about that" (RSV); "I do not say that he should make request for this" (NASB); "I do not suggest that he should pray for that" (NEB). Even the ASV, which renders it as "not concerning this do I say that he should make request," follows the same understanding of the syntax despite following the Greek word order more closely. These translations and commentators frequently understand John

grammar and context, *περὶ ἐκείνης* should be seen as modifying *λέγω* rather than *ἔρωτήση*, and *ἵνα* introduces a purpose clause, yielding the translation, “I am not speaking concerning that *sin that leads to eternal death* in order that he might supplicate *God for the brother whom he sees sinning*.”⁴ While this proposal shares certain parallels to the earlier suggestions of Scholer and Trudinger, it differs in substance and relies on a more thorough examination of the grammatical and contextual evidence of John’s writings and of 1 John in particular.⁵

II. DELIMITING THE TERMS “DEATH” AND “BROTHER”

First, does John refer to physical death or eternal/eschatological death? The physical death view holds initial plausibility because of other NT texts in which sins caused the death of those committing them (Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor 11:30–32). It is also argued that it is difficult to distinguish between sin that leads to death and sin that does not lead to death except when the actual result of physical death occurs. John would thus be discouraging intercession for members of the community who have died apparently as a result of divine judgment.⁶ Nevertheless, usage of “death” and “life” in 1 John weighs

as not positively forbidding intercession but as abstaining from commanding it. See e.g. A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912) 147; Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief* 329–30; Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John* (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980 [1886]) 123; and Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* 30. For a more negative assessment, see e.g. Kruse, *The Letters of John* 192–93; Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; New York: Doubleday, 1982) 612–18; Marianne M. Thompson, “Intercession in the Johannine Community: 1 John 5:16 in the Context of the Gospel and Epistles of John,” in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (ed. M. J. Wilkins and T. Paige; JSNTSup 87; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 242–45; and Vogler, *Die Briefe des Johannes* 176. A convenient summary of the views of several patristic authors is found in Westcott, *Epistles of John* 211–14.

⁴ The words in italics are supplied to clarify the referent of the demonstrative pronoun “that” and the implied complements to the verb, “make request/supplicate.” While I have used masculine terms to avoid unnecessarily cumbersome language, both male and female Christians are in view.

⁵ This writer formulated the thesis and arguments advanced in this article independently, before coming across Scholer’s and Trudinger’s work. Scholer observed (though without demonstrating the evidence) that the *περὶ ἐκείνης* should be seen as modifying *λέγω* rather than *ἔρωτήση* because of its position between the *οὐ* and *λέγω* and because “one prays for the sinner, not the sin” (“Sins Within and Sins Without” 242 n. 61). Paul Trudinger noted that *ἵνα* does not commonly introduce an object clause and that the usual translation leaves the flow of thought from v. 16 to v. 17 disjointed (“Concerning Sins, Mortal and Otherwise. A Note on 1 John 5:16–17,” *Bib* 52 [1971] 541–42). He did not engage in a comprehensive search of the evidence, however, and his suggestion that *ἔρωτᾶν* means “asking a question” in v. 16 is unlikely (see notes 18, 35, and 39 below). Note that even if the reader disagrees with this writer’s view that the Gospel of John and the Johannine epistles originate from the same author, it would still be justified to compare these writings more closely on the basis of probable influence and imitation (cf. note 16).

⁶ Argued as a possibility by F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995 [1970]) 124–25. Advocated more forcefully by Murray J. Harris, “Appendix: Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament,” in *NIDNTT* 3.1206. Harris also argues that “(i) eternal life could scarcely be said to be given to an erring believer as a result of vicarious intercession, and (ii) John is unlikely to have countenanced the idea of sins that do not ‘tend towards’ or ‘result in’ eternal death” (ibid.).

heavily against this view: (a) the other two occurrences of θάνατος in 1 John (besides the four in 5:16–17) refer to the state of death from which believers have already been delivered, but in which unbelievers remain (3:14);⁷ and (b) “death” is juxtaposed with “life” in 5:16, and everywhere else “life” (ζωή) refers to eternal life (1:1, 2 [2x]; 2:25; 3:14, 15; 5:11 [2x], 12 [2x], 13, 20; note also the verbal form ζῆν in 4:9).⁸ “Death,” therefore, refers to eternal death in 1 John 5:16–17.

Second, who, according to John, is “his brother”? Does he mean (a) only true believers; (b) professing members of the Christian community, whether ultimately revealed to be true or false believers; or (c) “your neighbor,” referring to non-Christians. John Stott supports view (c) because the sinning brother is given life in answer to prayer: “although his sin *does not lead to death*, he is in fact dead, since he needs to be given life. . . . This person is not a Christian, therefore, for Christians have received life and do not fall into death when they fall into sin.”⁹ Two pieces of evidence, however, point towards a reference to members of the Christian community: (a) in 1 John “brother” is first used in 1 John 2:9 in the context of John’s reminder of

⁷ In the Gospel of John, θάνατος likewise signifies eternal death in 5:24; 8:51, 52; and 11:4(?). The other occurrences refer to Lazarus’s physical death (11:13) and Jesus’ death on the cross (11:13; 12:33; 18:32; and 21:19). We must not let the delay of the end of physical life mislead us from the truth that all the sons of Adam are born in the realm of eternal death (i.e. separated from fellowship with God, who is the ultimate Source of life). The time of physical death brings to an irrevocable finality a physically-alive person’s existing state of eternal death. Only those effectually called by the Son of God are transferred out of the realm of the dead to the realm of the living (5:24–25). Another hint of this distinction is likely found in Jesus’ reference to Lazarus’s death (cf. 11:4 with 11:13). On the cross Jesus lost both physical life and was separated from his life-giving Father, so that he experienced both physical and eternal death.

⁸ In the Gospel of John, ζωή likewise refers to eternal life in 3:15, 16, 36 [2x]; 4:14, 36; 5:24 [2x], 26 [2x], 29, 39, 40; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47, 48, 51, 53, 54, 63, 68; 8:12; 10:10, 28; 11:25; 12:25, 50; 14:6; 17:2, 3; and 20:31. 1:4 (2x) refers to the life at creation. On life, see further Akin, *I, 2, 3 John* 64–71.

⁹ Stott, *The Letters of John* 191. Stott argues further: “True, ‘life’ to John means communion with God, and the sinning Christian cannot enjoy fellowship with God (1:5–6), but John would certainly not have said that when the Christian sins he dies and needs to receive eternal life again. The Christian has ‘passed from death to life’ (3:14; cf. Jn. 5:24). Death and judgment are behind him; he ‘has life’ (12) as a present and abiding possession. When he stumbles into sin, . . . [h]e needs to be forgiven and cleansed (1:10), but John never says he needs to be ‘quickened[,]’ ‘made alive’, or ‘given life’ all over again” (191–92). See also Irvin A. Busenitz, “The Sin unto Death,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 1/1 (1990) 26–27, 30–31. Kruse notes, however, that there are three possible explanations for how prayer to God will give repentant believers life: “(a) God will give repentant believers reconfirmation of their transfer from the realm of death to the realm of life; (b) God will grant forgiveness to the repentant believer, and receiving forgiveness means having life with God; [and] (c) God will give the promised resurrection life to sinning believers who repent” (*The Letters of John* 191). Kruse prefers option (c). Insofar as our sin jeopardizes continued fellowship with God (1 John 1:6–7) and requires the confession of our sins for forgiveness and cleansing (1:9), both our present enjoyment of eternal life and our future inheritance of resurrection life are jeopardized whenever we sin and fail to repent (i.e. fail to confess our sins and walk in the light again). The confession of our sins gains its efficacy because Jesus Christ is the intercessor (2:1) and propitiation (2:2) for our sin. Because of the dynamic nature of eternal life as both a present and a future possession through union with Christ (and fellowship with God through Christ) in John’s writings, it seems, then, to this writer that all three options above provide complementary explanations from different perspectives.

Jesus' command in John 13:34: "I am giving you a new commandment, namely that you should love one another, *more specifically* that you also should love one another, just as I have loved you." John 13:35 clarifies the scope of this command: "By this all will know that you are my disciples, namely if you have love among one another" (cf. John 13:12–17);¹⁰ and (b) John addresses his audience as "brethren" (ἀδελφοί) in 1 John 3:13 and sets them apart from "the world" (ὁ κόσμος) who hates them. Then in 3:14 he notes that "we know that we have been transferred out of death into life because we love the brethren."

We are faced with a dilemma, however, if we equate professing members of the Christian community with true believers: we must either (a) say that true believers can sin leading to eternal death;¹¹ or (b) fall back on a physical death interpretation to avoid that connotation.¹² This dilemma is resolved by three additional pieces of evidence, which sharpen the profile to professing members of the Christian community, whether ultimately revealed to be true or false believers: (a) in 1 John 2:9, John implicitly addresses "the one who says that he is in the light and hates his brother" as a brother (i.e. if the one whom you hate is your brother, you are correspondingly the brother of the one whom you hate; note also John's juxtaposing of what one "says" and the reality of the presence of hate—implicitly the claim to be in the light is the claim to be a member of the Christian community, a brother who by definition loves his brothers; cf. 2:11);¹³ (b) the secessionists mentioned at 2:19 were most likely indistinguishable members of the community until they left it and would have been seen and addressed as brethren previously; and (c) the Gospel of John gives evidence of those who were called "disciples" (μαθηταί; John 6:60–71) or who were said to "believe" (πιστεύειν; John 2:23–25), but who ultimately revealed themselves to be false believers.¹⁴ Common experience supports this view: unlike Jesus, we cannot look into the hearts of professing Christians. Thus, we accept as brethren all who make a credible profession of faith. It is only after someone falls away from the faith that we know, after the fact, that his or her profession may have been false (1 John 2:19). Even then we cannot be sure if perhaps he or she is a true be-

¹⁰ On John 13:34–35, see further D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leicester: InterVarsity, 1991) 483–85.

¹¹ See e.g. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* 249–51.

¹² Brown and Scholer propose a third alternative. At 1 John 2:9, Brown argues that "brothers" must be confined to those who believe in Jesus' name (*The Epistles of John* 269–73). At 5:16–17, however, he attempts to parcel out sin not unto death to the fellow Johannine Christian and sin unto death to non-brothers (specifically the secessionists) (617–18; likewise Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without" 238–46). In the end, I agree that the sin unto death is not committed by true believers. However, Brown and Scholer do not provide exegetical support within 1 John 5:16–17 itself for distinguishing between two types of sinners.

¹³ While the grammatical construction itself does not indicate the presence or absence of a "brother" who claims to be in the light and hates his brother, John directed this statement either for a current assessment of existing members of the community or a retrospective assessment of former members of the community.

¹⁴ On these passages in the Gospel of John, see Carson, *The Gospel according to John* 300–304 and 184.

liever who has temporarily stumbled into sin and may yet be restored, since none less than the apostle Peter denied Jesus three times and yet was restored (Luke 22:31–34 [note Jesus' intercession]; par. Matt 26:30–35; Mark 14:26–31; John 13:36–38).

III. ARGUMENTS FROM GRAMMATICAL USAGE FOR THE PROPOSED INTERPRETATION OF 1 JOHN 5:16C

Since we cannot consult either John the writer or a first-century Greek-speaking Christian to whom John originally addressed his letter, my method is to use the evidence of grammatical usage from the NT as the primary basis for establishing normal grammatical usage.¹⁵ Grammatical usage in John's writings as well as in 1 John in particular serves as the basis for John's personal pattern of grammatical usage.¹⁶ In summary, the main arguments are: (a) because the main verb λέγω, "I speak," comes between the prepositional phrase "not concerning that" and the ἵνα-clause, NT usage heavily favors taking the prepositional phrase with "I speak"; and (b) John's normal usage of ὅτι and ἵνα-clauses favors taking the ἵνα-clause here as a purpose clause, "in order that he might supplicate."

Over a hundred years ago, Westcott observed that περί ἐκείνης ("concerning that") may be connected with either λέγω ("say/speak") or ἐρωτήση ("ask/supplicate"). Citing John 16:26; 17:9, and 20, he stated that "perhaps it is best" to connect that prepositional phrase with ἐρωτήση.¹⁷ While these three verses show that John does modify the verb ἐρωτᾶν with prepositional phrases governed by περί, indicating the persons for whom Jesus interceded, the grammatical construction is different at 1 John 5:16c.¹⁸ The pattern of usage of ἵνα-clauses in the NT points towards this difference.

¹⁵ All searches were done using GRAMCORD for Windows. Since ἵνα-clauses are rather common, first-hand examination of the wider extent Greek literature would be too vast an undertaking to contemplate. This survey of the grammatical usage in the NT represents an elementary attempt at corpus-linguistic analysis of a syntactical construction. On corpus linguistics, see Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad, and Randi Reppen, *Corpus Linguistics: Investigating Language Structure and Use* (Cambridge Approaches to Linguistics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 69–76. The results here are necessarily tentative, since a comprehensive examination of clause structure within a book or author, which would reveal common ordering and placement patterns, has yet to be accomplished and lies beyond the functionality of word-based software tools. Future, more definitive studies should be greatly facilitated by the completion of the ongoing annotation work of the OpenText.org project, which aims to extend the kinds and levels of annotation available in computer-readable texts of the NT. For details, see <http://www.opentext.org>.

¹⁶ As observed in note 5 above, authorship disagreements do not undermine the basis and conclusions of this study. A Johannine community or Johannine school would presumably be significantly influenced by both John's language and teachings.

¹⁷ Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* 192.

¹⁸ Moreover, if περί ἐκείνης is taken with ἐρωτήση at 1 John 5:16c, one would be praying concerning that *sin* (the clear antecedent) rather than supplicating for the person as is found at John 16:26; 17:9, and 20. In other words, the use of περί ἐκείνης with a περί prepositional phrase in John 16:26; 17:9 and 20 more properly shows that John uses this construction to convey the sense of supplicating God *on behalf of a person*, but does not demonstrate that he uses this construction to convey the sense of praying to God *concerning a matter* (a sin in the case of 1 John 5:16c).

Besides 1 John 5:16c, there are 662 ἵνα-clauses in the NT. While I found ten cases where a modifying constituent of the ἵνα-clause comes before the conjunction ἵνα (John 13:29; 13:34; Acts 19:4; Rom 11:31; 1 Cor 7:29; 2 Cor 2:4; 2 Cor 12:7?; Gal 2:10; Col 4:16; Rev 18:4),¹⁹ I found only one probable and one doubtful instance where the main verb comes between a modifying constituent of the ἵνα-clause and the conjunction ἵνα. The probable instance is 1 Cor 14:12: οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς, ἐπεὶ ζηλωταὶ ἐστε πνευμάτων, πρὸς τὴν οἰκοδομὴν τῆς ἐκκλησίας ζητεῖτε ἵνα περισσεύητε.²⁰ The ἵνα-clause appears to be functioning like a complementary infinitive to the verb ζητεῖτε.²¹ In 1 John 5:16c, however, the usual translation understands the ἵνα-clause as a substantial ἵνα-clause functioning as the direct object. Since this apparent exception comes in Paul's rather than John's writings and since the grammatical function of the two examples is different,²² it carries little weight in the interpretation of 1 John 5:16c. The doubtful instance is Rev 14:13: Καὶ ἤκουσα φωνῆς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ λεγούσης· γράψον· μακάριοι οἱ νεκροὶ οἱ ἐν κυρίῳ ἀποθνήσκοντες ἀπ' ἄρτι. ναί, λέγει τὸ πνεῦμα, ἵνα ἀναπαήσονται ἐκ τῶν κόπων αὐτῶν, τὰ γὰρ ἔργα αὐτῶν ἀκολουθεῖ μετ' αὐτῶν. The first difficulty with taking ἀπ' ἄρτι with ἀναπαήσονται is that one must read the variant that omits ναί over against the strongly supported ναί.²³ Since elsewhere ναί

¹⁹ BDF §475(1) lists only 1 Cor 9:15; (2 Cor 12:7); Gal 2:10; Col 4:16; and Acts 19:4. 1 Cor 9:15 is dubious. 2 Cor 12:7 is marked with “?” (debatable) in this article as well. BDAG, s.v. “ἵνα” lists John 13:29; Acts 19:4; Rom 11:31; 1 Cor 7:29; 2 Cor 2:4; Gal 2:10; and Col 4:16b.

²⁰ “So you also, since you are zealots of spiritual *gifts*, seek to abound for the edification of the church.”

²¹ So also BDAG s.v. “ζητέω” and apparently C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; reprinted, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996 [1968]) 319. For apparently contrary interpretations (though without argument), see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000) 1081, 1107; and Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 666. Of the 117 occurrences of ζητεῖν, only three are followed by a ἵνα-clause: Matt 26:16; 1 Cor 4:2; and 1 Cor 14:12. In Matt 26:16, the ἵνα-clause explains the noun εὐκαιρία, “a favorable opportunity” (cf. BDAG s.v. “εὐκαιρία”). In 1 Cor 4:2, the ἵνα-clause functions as a subject clause (cf. Robertson, *Grammar* 992; and Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996] 475). Thus 1 Cor 14:12 is the lone probable example of ζητεῖν followed by a ἵνα-clause functioning like a complementary infinitive. Nevertheless, since ζητεῖν usually takes a direct object or a complementary infinitive (the only exceptions are Matt 7:7, 8 [par. Luke 11:9, 10]; Luke 15:8; and John 16:19; all but John 16:19 may be explained as ellipsis while the prepositional phrase περὶ τούτου [the ὅτι clause is in apposition to τούτου] denotes the referred object in John 16:19), it is probable that the ἵνα-clause in 1 Cor 14:12 is functioning like a complementary infinitive.

²² In emphasizing this difference, I am making a functional rather than a formal distinction. I am aware that in both cases the ἵνα-clauses replace an infinitival construction. Nevertheless, the functions are different even when an infinitive is used. On the complementary ἵνα and the substantial ἵνα-clause with its sub-category of direct object clause, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar* 474–76.

²³ The former is attested by P⁴⁷ κ* 336 582 620 628 1918 cop^{bo} eth. The latter is attested by κ^c A C P 051 1006 1611 1854 244 it^{ar}, (sig) vg syr^{ph, h} cop^{sa} arm. The three other variants λέγει ναί (046 and ninety minuscules), καὶ λέγει (205 2018 2019 2053), and λέγει καὶ (218 522) are obviously secondary. Besides stronger external attestation, Metzger argues in favor of ναί as “in the style of the Apocalypse (1:7; 16:7; 22:20)” (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. [New York: United Bible Societies, 1994] 678). BDF§12(3) takes ἀπ' ἄρτι

always comes in first position when giving affirmations that involve more than a simple “yes” (Rev 1:7; 16:7; 22:20; John 11:27; 21:15, 16; Matt 9:28; 11:9, 26; 15:27; Luke 7:26; 10:21; 11:51; 12:5; Acts 5:8; Rom 3:29; Phil 4:2; Phlm 20), the presence of *ναί* puts in doubt the effort to take *ἀπ’ ἄρτι* with *ἀναπαύσονται*. Moreover, whether or not *ναί* is original, two alternative construals of the *ἵνα*-clause are preferable: (a) it explains the content of the blessing (in apposition to “blessed,” *μακάριοι*); or (b) it gives a command (an imperatival *ἵνα*-clause).²⁴ For these reasons, it is tenuous to give Rev 14:13 much weight. It seems, then, that since the main verb *λέγω*, “I speak,” does come between the prepositional phrase “not concerning that” and the *ἵνα*-clause in 1 John 5:16c, NT usage heavily favors taking “not concerning that” with “I speak.”²⁵

Westcott also observed that the construction *λέγειν ἵνα* is uncommon.²⁶ In fact, besides the doubtful possible instance of Rev 14:13, there is only one probable occurrence of *λέγειν* with a direct object *ἵνα*-clause in John’s writings. In this one instance, John 13:29, one may probably assume that *λέγειν* is elided but understood after the disjunctive *ἤ*.²⁷ As elsewhere in the NT, *λέγειν* can take a *ἵνα*-clause as direct object in John 13:29 because it functions as a verb of command.²⁸ Everywhere else in John’s writings *λέγειν* does not function as a verb of command, and a *ὅτι* rather than *ἵνα*-clause is used for its direct object (54 times).²⁹ In 1 John itself, *λέγειν* takes a

as *ἀπαρτί*, “exactly, certainly,” omits *ναί*, and reads *ἀπαρτί* with the following sentence. The NEB reads *ἀπ’ ἄρτι*, omits *ναί*, and reads *ἀπ’ ἄρτι* with the following sentence: “Henceforth, says the Spirit, ‘they may rest from their labours; for they take with them the record of their deeds.’” See further G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999) 768–70. By pointing out the first position of *ναί* above I am registering my dissent from Beale that a translation like the NEB’s is possible even with *ναί* present.

²⁴ For the former, see Beale, *The Book of Revelation* 768; and Robertson, *Grammar* 992. This interpretation sees *ναί* as a simple affirmation and the clause *ναί, λέγει τὸ πνεῦμα*, “Yes, says the Spirit,” as intervening the main sequence. For the latter, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar* 477.

²⁵ In John’s writings, the intransitive use of *λέγειν* with *περί* occurs in John 2:21; 11:13 [2x]; 13:18, 22, and 24. This construction also occurs in Matt 16:11; 17:13; 21:45; Mark 1:30; 8:30; Acts 26:1; and Heb 9:5.

²⁶ Westcott cites Acts 19:4; *εἰπὲ ἵνα* Matt 4:3; and *ἐρρέθη ἵνα* Rev 6:11 (*The Epistles of St. John* 192).

²⁷ Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 448; and Robertson, *Grammar* 442.

²⁸ Besides John 13:29, the command use of *λέγειν* with the *ἵνα* clause as direct object occurs in Matt 4:3; 20:21; Mark 3:9; 9:18; Luke 4:3; 10:40; and Acts 19:4. All but Mark 3:9 and 9:18 (both indicative) and Acts 19:4 (participle) are in the imperative mood.

²⁹ The 54 occurrences of *λέγειν* with a *ὅτι*-clause as direct object in John’s writings are: John 1:32; 1:50 (second *ὅτι*); 3:11; 3:28 (2x; first *ὅτι* is textually suspect); 4:17, 20, 35, 42, 51, 52; 5:24, 25; 6:14, 36, 42; 7:12, 42; 8:24, 33, 34, 48, 54, 55; 9:9 (2x), 11, 17 (second *ὅτι*), 19, 23, 41; 10:7, 36 (first *ὅτι*), 41; 11:40; 12:34; 13:11, 21, 33; 16:15, 20, 26; 18:8, 9, 37; 20:13 (could also be causal here); 21:23; 1 John 1:6, 8, 10; 2:4; 4:20; Rev 3:17; and 18:7 (second *ὅτι*). There are no examples of *λαλεῖν* with a *ὅτι*-clause as direct object in John’s writings (nor NT except Acts 2:31). According to Turner, it was a common phenomenon of the transition from Classical to Hellenistic Greek to have the infinitive replaced by a *ὅτι*-construction for verbs of perception and saying and by a *ἵνα*-construction for verbs of willing and commanding (J. H. Moulton, W. F. Howard, and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol. 3: *Style* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963] 136–38).

ὅτι-clause as direct object five times (1 John 1:6, 8, 10; 2:4; and 4:20). On the other hand, in John's writings a purpose ἵνα-clause is found seven times with the verb λέγειν (John 5:34; 11:42; 13:19; 14:29; 18:32; 19:28, 35) and six times with the close cognate verb λαλεῖν (John 15:11; 16:1, 4, 33; 17:13; and 2 John 12).³⁰ Of these, three occurrences of λέγειν (John 11:42; 13:19; 14:29) and one occurrence of λαλεῖν (2 John 12) are intransitive. In 1 John itself, out of eighteen occurrences of the ἵνα-clause besides 1 John 5:16c, nine function as purpose clauses, seven function as apposition clauses to demonstrative pronouns, and two function as epexegetical clauses. If the common translation is accepted, 1 John 5:16c would be the only ἵνα direct object clause in 1 John.³¹ Therefore, the proposal to read the ἵνα-clause in 1 John 5:16c as a purpose clause, "in order that he might supplicate," is favored by three grammatical usages in John's writings: (a) the scarce use of λέγειν ἵνα as an imperatival construction; (b) the common collocation of λέγειν with a ὅτι-clause as direct object; and (c) the comparatively common collocation of λέγειν (as well as λαλεῖν) with ἵνα purpose clauses—and by one grammatical usage peculiar to 1 John, namely the attested usage of ἵνα-clauses in 1 John.

IV. ARGUMENTS FROM THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF 1 JOHN 5:13–17 FOR THE PROPOSED INTERPRETATION OF 1 JOHN 5:16C

The previous section showed the likelihood of my proposed interpretation from the standpoint of grammatical usage. This section is designed to show the plausibility of this reading in light of the immediate context of 1 John 5:13–17. The basic premise is that this reading has the advantage of conforming to the principle of maximal redundancy, that is, "the best meaning is the least meaning." As Moisés Silva observes, "in cases of doubt, the most likely meaning is not one that adds something new to the context but one that supports—and is in turn supported by—that context."³²

First, if we read 5:16c as "I am not speaking concerning that *sin that leads to eternal death* in order that he might supplicate *God for the brother whom he sees sinning*," 5:17 naturally provides a ground for intercessory prayer, that is, "because while all unrighteousness is sin, there is sin that does not lead to *eternal death*."³³ Conversely, in the usual translation, "I am

³⁰ Cf. 1 Cor 7:35; 14:19 (transitive uses of λέγειν); and Rom 3:19; 1 Thess 2:16 (intransitive uses of λαλεῖν).

³¹ There are only two ἵνα direct object clauses in the Gospel of John—John 13:2 and 13:29—and none in 2 and 3 John.

³² See further Moisés Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 58. While Martin Joos ("Semantic Axiom Number One," *Language* 48 [1972] 257–65) developed this principle more specifically for determining the meaning of *hapax legomena*, Silva notes that this principle is "readily applicable to polysemy" (*Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* [rev. and exp. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 153–56).

³³ More literally, *πάσα ἀδικία ἁμαρτία ἐστίν, καὶ ἔστιν ἁμαρτία οὐ πρὸς θάνατον* is, "All unrighteousness is sin and yet there is sin that does not lead to eternal death." The adversative sense arises from the juxtaposition of "sin" and "sin not leading to death."

not saying that he should pray about that" (NIV), one would expect John to say, "all unrighteousness is sin, yet there is sin leading to death."³⁴

Second, when 5:16–17 is read in the context of 5:13–15, it is clear that John's main purpose in 5:16–17 is to assure Christians of the efficacy of their prayers for fellow members of the Christian community who fall into sin: "These things [i.e. the contents of the letter]³⁵ I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God in order that you might know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence that we have towards him: If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us with regard to whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked from him. If anyone should see his brother practicing a sin that does not lead to *eternal* death, he shall supplicate God³⁶ and he shall give him³⁷ *eternal* life for those who are sinning not unto *eternal* death." It seems that it would undermine his main purpose of assuring his audience of the efficacy of their prayers by suddenly introducing a somewhat cryptic parenthetical qualification on the scope of effective intercession. Of course, one could argue that John's original readers knew exactly what does or does not constitute sin that leads to eternal death. This is by no means clear, however, from John's writings or from the rest of the Scriptures, as is evident by the endless debates and speculations among commentators on the nature of sin that leads to eternal death.³⁸ How likely was it that John's original readers knew exactly when a person has committed a sin that leads to eternal death? Would they have interceded for Peter after he had denied Jesus three times?³⁹ On the other hand, the reading I propose fits in smoothly with the theme of confidence in prayer towards God, does not posit a sudden parenthetical shift of thought, and does not pose problems of application. At the same time, my proposal does not deny

³⁴ A weakly attested variant (33 1243 1852 2464^{*} it^{ar}, l, t vg^{cl}, ww syr^h cop^{sa}, bo^{mss} arm Tertullian) actually omits οὐ, "not." οὐ is attested by κ A B Ψ 81 *rell*.

³⁵ ταῦτα refers to either (a) the contents of the entire letter; or (b) 2:28–5:12.

³⁶ The absolute use of αἰτεῖν here presupposes 5:14 ("if we ask anything according to His will") and 5:15 ("He hears us with regard to whatever we ask" and "we have the requests that we have asked from Him"). Note the same shift to the absolute use of αἰτεῖν in John 16:24b and 26 after the parameters of the requests ("whatever you should ask"), the person to whom the requests are addressed ("the Father"), and the means by which the requests are made ("in Jesus' name") have been laid out in 16:23 and 24a.

³⁷ Given that αὐτῷ is singular and τοῖς ἀμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον is plural, it may be best to take αὐτῷ as referring to the intercessor. On this reading, the intercessor supplicates God for life for the ones sinning not unto death and God grants this requested life to him for them. Westcott noted this possibility though he dismissed it, asserting that it "seems to be artificial" (*The Epistles of St. John* 191–92). Since this issue does not affect my primary thesis, I shall not defend this understanding in greater detail here.

³⁸ Complementary summaries may be found in Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* 208–10; and Brown, *The Epistles of John* 612–18.

³⁹ One could make a strong case that Peter's denial fell under the censure of teachings such as Matt 10:33 and 1 John 2:22–23. On intercession in John's writings, see Thompson's fine treatment in "Intercession in the Johannine Community" 228–37. As for prohibitions of intercession in the OT, my response is that in each specific case God directly communicates the prohibition (see e.g. Jer 7:16–18; 11:14; 14:11; and 15:1). It is a different matter when we have to apply criteria and make judgments.

that there is sin that leads to eternal death and that our intercessions will, therefore, sometimes not avail because it is not according to God's will.

Third, the protasis, "If anyone should see his brother practicing a sin that does not lead to death," need not be interpreted to mean that the perceiver knows the status of the sin perceived, whether it leads to death or not. When the apodosis, "then he shall ask *God* and *he* will give him *eternal* life for those who are sinning not unto *eternal* death," is taken into account, this if/then clause could equally, if not preferably, be interpreted to refer to the objective status or God's omniscient perception of the sin. In other words, if the sin that one sees is sin that does not lead to death, one's intercessory prayer will certainly avail with God. John's qualification here would then be similar to his qualification in verse 14, "If we ask anything according to his will."

V. CONCLUSION

Arguments from grammatical usage and from the flow of John's argument in 1 John point towards an alternative interpretation of 1 John 5:16–17: (a) because the main verb λέγω, "I speak," comes between the prepositional phrase "not concerning that" and the ἵνα-clause, NT usage heavily favors taking the prepositional phrase with "I speak"; (b) John's normal usage of ὅτι and ἵνα-clauses favors taking the ἵνα-clause here as a purpose clause, "in order that he might supplicate"; and (c) the immediate context of 1 John 5:13–17 and the principle of maximal redundancy favor this reading.

The resulting translation is: "If anyone should see his brother practicing a sin that does not lead to *eternal* death, he shall supplicate *God* and he shall give him *eternal* life for those who are sinning not unto *eternal* death. There is sin that leads to *eternal* death. I am not speaking concerning that *sin that leads to eternal death* in order that he might supplicate *God for the brother whom he sees sinning*.⁴⁰ For while all unrighteousness is sin, there is sin that does not lead to *eternal* death."

John's purpose is to assure Christians of the efficacy of their prayers for fellow members of the Christian community who fall into sin: our intercessory prayers will certainly restore them to fellowship with God (tantamount to having eternal/resurrection life in John's writings, since God is the only source of life), with one exception. While John acknowledges that there is this exception, a category of sin that leads to eternal death, he does not wish to focus on it because his purpose is to call believers to intercessory prayer.

Intercession thus appears to be one of the ways in which Christians are to bear one another's burdens (cf. Gal 6:1–2). Ultimately, each individual

⁴⁰ John's interchange of ἐρωτᾶν with αἰτεῖν in John 16:23 and 26 shows that no difference in meaning should be posited between these two verbs. John 16:26 also points the way to the words that I supplied above: one supplicates God for people. John 17:9 shows how the one to whom one supplicates can be omitted after the referent is established in context. Cf. notes 18 and 35. The attempt to distinguish ἐρωτᾶν from αἰτεῖν as indicating a more intimate relationship between the one praying and the one addressed (see e.g. Westcott, *The Epistles of John* 192; G. Stählin, "αἰτέω, κτλ." *TDNT* 1.193; and H. Greeven, "εὔχομαι, κτλ." *TDNT* 2.806) seems ill-founded.

must bear his or her own burden (individual responsibility; Gal 6:5). Each must confess sin, repent, and believe the gospel for himself or herself (cf. 1 John 1:5–2:2).⁴¹ Yet Christians who acknowledge John's authority would do well to heed his call to intercession. We can be confident that it is God's will that we intercede for a brother or sister who falls into sin and that our intercessions will avail. If our intercessions do not ultimately avail, we will know after the fact that this person has committed sin that leads to eternal death (1 John 5:16b) and that he or she was never really part of the true Christian community (1 John 2:19).

Ultimately, only God knows every heart, and we should leave all matters in his hands. At the same time, we should not allow uncertainty over whether a member of the visible Christian community has sinned or strayed in a way that casts doubt on the genuineness of his or her faith keep us from making fervent and persevering intercession for that person. Just as we should humbly seek to instruct and correct, we should intercede with God on behalf of straying brethren, "if perhaps God might grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim 2:25).⁴²

⁴¹ One should not vainly hope that one's conversion or restoration from straying would come through others' intercession apart from humbling oneself in personal confession of sin, repentance, and renewed faith.

⁴² 1 John 5:16–17 represents just one aspect of how the Christian community should deal with straying members of the community. Other equally important aspects are brought out by passages like Matt 18:15–22; Luke 17:3–4; 1 Cor 5:1–6:11; 2 Cor 2:6–11; Gal 6:1–2; 2 Thess 3:14–15; 1 Tim 1:20; and James 5:15, 19–20. A balanced application of biblical teaching would neither neglect intercession nor privilege it to the expense of the other aspects. Furthermore, anyone who is in sin or contemplating sin should not reason perversely that since intercession, repentance, and forgiveness are readily available, one might as well sin with impunity and seek restoration later. For a helpful treatment of perseverance and assurance, see Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity, 2001).