

1 John 1:8-10 in the Navajo Bible

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Baahági át'éii nihii' ádin dadii'núigo ádinda'idlo', áko t'áa aaníinii doo nihii' dahólóo da.⁹ Baahági ádeii't'ínígíí bee ádaa dahwiilne'go, hó ha'ahódlíii índa ts'ídá t'áa ákogi áanúííi jílíigo nihibaahági ádaat'éii altso nihá yóo'azhdidoo'áá, áádóo doo t'áa ákogi ádeii't'íidii altso nihaah táázhdoo'gis.¹⁰ Doo baahági ásh't'íí da, dadii'núigo Diyin God biyooch'íidii nilíigo ádeínúilzin. Áádóo bizaadígíí nihii' ádin. (1 John 1:8)¹

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. (1 John 1:8-10)²

Introduction

What does it mean "to be without sin" (vs. 8)? In the present context it means claiming "we have not sinned" (vs. 10). Is this the same as claiming that we have never sinned, or is it just a matter of saying that, in this case, we have not sinned? The second alternative would not be something John could automatically condemn, because there would be a question whether what happened really was wrong or not. One would have to come down to specifics and examine the facts surrounding a given action.

From the fact that John does appear to be issuing a blanket condemnation, I assume that he must be talking about the first alternative, i.e., where a person claims to have lived his or her entire life without sin. Anyone who says things like that is simply wrong. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

So the question is not the present moment. Am I in the wrong right now? The question needs to be mapped onto time. Have I ever done wrong at any time in the past? The Navajo appears to relate both expressions to the present moment, thus: *Baahági át'éii nihii' ádin dadii'núigo* ("If we say there is no sin in us"), *Doo baahági ásh't'íí da, dadii'núigo* ("If we say, 'I'm not sinful'"). In my view both expressions should be allowed to take more than the present into account. They should be broadened to include the past.

Confession

Confession is not simply reporting what happened. If it were on that level, confession would be unnecessary, because nothing happens that God doesn't know about. The main point

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

² English Bible quotations not otherwise marked are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

of confessing our sins to God is that, by doing this, we join Him in seeing our behavior as abhorrent. The part about admitting what we did is that you can't join God in seeing an evil act as evil if the two of you disagree as to whether it was in fact evil or not. Similarly, you can't agree with God that you did wrong if in your heart you don't think you did wrong. There has to be a consensus about the facts of the case. Did you do this? Was it wrong? When you go to God in confession you're not just saying, I did it. You're saying, I agree with You that I did it. And you're not just saying, It was wrong. you're saying, I agree with You that it was wrong. Confession is all about coming into agreement with God. It's about coming together again after a separation brought about by sin.

There's one more aspect to this. Once you agree with God about the facts of the case (I did this and this) and that what you did was wrong, the question is what to do next. I'm not talking about penance. Christ has amply paid the price for our sins. We don't need to buy them back or pay for them again by anything we do. But there is the question of how a forgiven person lives the day after. Once God has forgiven you for something, do you count the hours until you can do it again? Or do you ask God for power to change the way you live? Jesus spoke to this matter in the following story.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:3-11)

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared" (vs.11a). I do not condemn you for what you did in the past. Your sins are forgiven. You need not carry any guilt for what you did in the past. But what about the future? Was Jesus' concept of forgiveness limited to dealing with past events? Does the story end in the middle of vs. 11? No. He went on to say, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11b).

Repentance

What I draw from the above story is that there are two things here. Jesus specifically includes the past in what He says and He specifically includes the future. He tells the woman "neither do I condemn you," and He also tells her, "Go now and leave your life of sin." Leaving a life of sin does precisely nothing to atone for sins already committed. Jesus would take care of any guilt she might have. But guilt is not the whole story. We said that the real issue in confessing sins to God was being reconciled to Him. If guilt separates us from God, then guilt needs to be gone. That's one part of it. If the will to commit the same sin again separates us from God, then that willingness also needs to go. There must be forgiveness. Only God can take care of that. And there must also be repentance. Where does that come from?

Could sinful man repent of his sins in his own strength, there would be no more virtue in that repentance than in the offering made by Cain. Christ is the author and finisher of our faith. If it were possible for man to repent of himself, the virtue of the atoning sacrifice would be in vain. But this is not possible. As Peter bore his testimony before the high priest and the Sadducees, he spoke by the power of God in reference to Christ, and said, "Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins." Repentance comes from Christ just as much as does pardon for transgression.³

We need not fear repentance, as though it were going to add some human works to what Jesus has already done for us. If the above quotation is true, repentance is just as much the work of Christ as is forgiveness. So why should we fear that one work of Christ will compete with another? Let Him do everything He has in mind to do. Let Him care for the whole problem. And in the end He will receive all the glory.

Sinfulness and Sin

We have said that confession is not complete without repentance. And it is certainly true that repentance is not complete without turning away from the wrong things we have done. Thus, confession and repentance both are about making changes, not statements, and both come from Christ, not us. But what sorts of things should we confess and repent of?

It makes no sense to confess that we are sinful, even though we are, because our nature is something we can't change and that God won't change for us – not just yet. If we come to God saying, I'm sinful, forgive me for being sinful, that doesn't make any sense. What we are is something we were born with, and He understands this. But what we do is our own choice. There might be a lot of momentum behind our choices, involving what we have been in the habit of doing and what our parents did, but the fact remains that anything we do involves a choice to do it. We are sinful because our parents were sinful, as were their parents, on back to Adam. That much has to do with sinfulness. That much is history. We only need to confess and repent of what we do, not what we are.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

If we have been purified from all unrighteousness, does this mean we are sinless? In one sense, yes. It means we no longer bear the guilt for any of our past sins. This is what John means in 1 John 1:9 (above). But in another sense, no, it does not mean we are sinless. "For all have sinned [in the past] and fall short of the glory of God [in the present]" (Romans 3:23). We will always need to confess our sins and repent of them, but it doesn't need to be for the same sins each time we pray. Christ changes people.

³ Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, August 11, 1890, "Christ Gives Repentance."

Conclusion

Where the Navajo translation says, If we say *bąąhági át'éii nihii' ádin* ("there is no sin in us"), the Greek has, *hamartian ouk echomen* ("we have no sin"). That's vs. 8. These two statements are very close in intent and substance. In vs. 10, however, where the Navajo translation says, If we say *doo bąąhági ásh't'íi da* ("I'm not sinful"), the Greek has, *ouch hēmartēchamen* ("I have not sinned"). This second pair of clauses come across a bit differently. Even if we interpret the Navajo to mean, "I'm not doing anything wrong," that's different from saying, "I have not sinned."

The missing element in the second case (*doo bąąhági ásh't'íi da*, "I'm not sinful") is time. There needs to be some awareness that this clause is referring to past actions – by which I mean all past actions – and not merely the activity of the present moment.