

Does 1 John 1:9 Apply to Believers Today?

response by Tami Jelinek

The question often arises in discussions of the implications of our completely fulfilled redemption:

"What about 1 John 1:9? It says that *if we confess our sins, He will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. How do we apply this verse today if we have *already* been forgiven and cleansed?"*

Hebrews 10:14 tells us that by one sacrifice we have been "perfected forever."
Colossians 1:22 tells us that we are now "holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in His sight." 2 Corinthians 5: 21 says that we have been "made the righteousness of God."

Yet many of us grew up in church being taught, as Christians, to practice 1 John 1:9 daily:

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

And thereby, we were taught that God's forgiveness was conditional, and must be re-sought, re-applied, and in effect: *re-earned* every day. It is no wonder that many Christians, even among those who espouse a belief in fulfilled or covenant eschatology, have a hard time believing they have been completely forgiven and have entered His eternal, glorious rest.

Since we have come to see redemption as fulfilled, and the cross as completely efficacious and victorious, we must revisit formerly "familiar" passages and examine them within this new, *Biblical* paradigm. So what about 1 John 1:9? Does it apply today? Notice that it reads very much like a gospel message:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Compare it to:

Acts 3:19 Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;

John is telling his readers how to be born again. He is preaching the same message Peter was in Acts. We should also keep in mind that later in John's epistle we read:

1 John 3:9 Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

One who *has not yet been born of God* must confess his sins, and he will be forgiven and cleansed. But one who *has been born of God* cannot sin. There seems to be a clear progression between chapters one and three of John's epistle. Isn't this the

definition of a Christian: one who has been forgiven and cleansed?

1 Corinthians 6:9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, 10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such *were* some of you: but ye are washed, [cleansed from all unrighteousness-1 John 1:9] but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

One might say that John's epistle was written only to those who were already Christians. But look at this wording at the beginning:

1 John 1:3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, *that ye also may have fellowship with us:* and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

Yes, it was written to the church, but it was a church to which many were being added daily, as people believed "that which [the apostles had] seen and heard" *so that* they would enter into fellowship with God and His people. In other words, there were clearly people listening who had not yet entered into that fellowship. Otherwise, why would John have said, "we are telling you this *so that* you may have fellowship with us?"

It is also important to recognize that this particular gospel delivery in 1 John 1 was tailor-made for a Jewish audience. Imagine yourself back there preaching the message of the cross and justification by grace alone through faith to *law-abiding Jews*. It is reasonable that many of them might have trouble admitting they were "sinners." So John starts off by saying:

1 John 1:8 If we [we Jews, who have obeyed the law our whole lives] say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (John understood their mindset, and knew what they needed to hear.)

But

1 John 1: 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Also significant is the plural pronoun *we*, as well as the present continuous tense of the verb *confess*. This passage cannot be properly understood apart from the covenant change going on in the first century, and the corporate body to which that change was being applied:

2 Corinthians 3:16...when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are *being transformed* into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Notice that as *each one* (individually) turned to the Lord (or confessed their sins and were forgiven and cleansed) they individually experienced the liberty of the Spirit; and as that process continued, they *all* (as a body) were *being transformed* from old covenant glory to new covenant glory, into the image of Christ.

So although the transformation *process* to which 1 John 1:9 primarily refers came to complete fruition in the first century when the body of Christ was raised incorruptible; it applies today just as the *gospel* applies today and forever more.