

## Is the “We” in 1 John 1:9 a Reference to Believers or Unbelievers?

Is the “we” in 1 John 1:9 a reference to believers or unbelievers? The context would indicate it refers to believers exclusively. The apostle John calls his readers “my little children” in 1 John 2:1, which is still connected to John’s thought in 1 John 1:5-10 because like 1 John 1:5-10, 1 John 2:1 is discussing sin. There is no chapter break in the original. 1 John 2:2 is also still connected to John’s thought in 1 John 1:5-2:1. John says “and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.” In this passage, John is distinguishing he and his readers from the rest of the world, and the world in this passage is an obvious reference to unbelievers. So because he is discussing sin in relation to fellowship throughout 1 John 1:5-2:2, “my little children” in 1 John 2:1 and John’s statement in 1 John 2:2 would indicate the “we” in 1 John 1:7-10 is a reference to believers.

The issues John discusses throughout 1 John also make clear that entire epistle is written to believers and not unbelievers. In this epistle, he was attempting to protect the church in Ephesus from false teachers teaching false doctrines. One of the issues was that some were denying that our Lord was a human being (early form of Gnosticism). Thus the reason for John’s statements in the prologue of the epistle in 1 John 1:1-4. John is saying if you deny the incarnation like the false teachers, then you can’t have fellowship with God because fellowship is made possible because of the God-Man Jesus Christ and His death on the cross. Another false teaching John was addressing was that you don’t have to confess your sins to be restored to fellowship which is indicated by his statements in 1 John 1:5-10.

In 1 John 2:7, John calls his readers “beloved” and “little children” (1 John 2:12), “children” (1 John 2:13, 18), he tells them they have an “anointing” in 1 John 2:20 and in 1 John 2:26 he mentions these false teachers, trying to deceive his readers. In 1 John 2:15-17 he warns them to not love the world. Then, in 1 John chapter 3, he is talking to his readers about loving one another as Christ loves which is something an unbeliever cannot do because they don’t have the Spirit. In 1 John chapter 4:1-6, he tells his readers to test the spirits since they have the capacity to discern error in teaching because they have the Spirit who is called the “anointing” in 1 John 2:20. Then, in 1 John 4:7-21, he is talking to them about love again. In 1 John 5 John talks to his readers about overcoming the “world” i.e. the cosmic system of Satan. These are all things he would never discuss with unbelievers since he would simply command them to believe on the Lord Jesus to be saved if he were talking to unbelievers.

All of this makes it highly unlikely that in 1 John 1:7-10 John is addressing unbelievers and then the rest of the book he addresses believers because he gives no indication he is transitioning from addressing unbelievers to believers. In fact,

as mentioned above, in 1 John 2:1 he calls his readers “my little children” and that verse is clearly connected to 1 John 1:5-10 because he is still speaking on the subject of sin. So when he addresses his readers as “my little children” he is addressing believers with regards to the subject of sin. This would make clear that the "we" in 1 John 1:9 is a reference to believers and not unbelievers. To say he is addressing unbelievers with the “we” is not supported by the context, both the immediate context and in the context of the entire book.

The obvious problem with interpreting the "we" in 1 John 1:9 as a reference to unbelievers, is that one would be telling the unbeliever that they have to confess their sins to have fellowship with God. There is only one command the unbeliever needs to concern himself with, namely "believe on the Lord Jesus and be saved" (John 3:16-18; Acts 16:30-31).