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A0641 – October 8, 2006 – Rev 2, 3, 21:7 – Re-Analysis Of The Overcomers

Who are the “overcomers” in the Book of Revelation? In Rev 21:7 we read these words,

Revelation 21:7 He who *overcomes* will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.

The word “overcome” is from the Greek verb *nikao*. It means “to win in the face of obstacles”. For example, in the ancient world it referred to winning a battle over a foe or winning an athletic contest over a competitor. The winner was then awarded with a prize for his victory. The name of a famous shoe company is also derived from this Greek word, “Nike”, which, of course, refers to “victory”.

The key to identifying the overcomers in different contexts is discovering what obstacle is overcome. In the Book of Revelation the word is used twelve times (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 5:5; 11:7; 13:7; 17:14; 21:7). Seven times it is used in the letters to the seven churches. In each a reward is promised to the overcomer.

Revelation 2:7 To him who *overcomes*, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.

Revelation 2:11 He who *overcomes* will not be hurt by the second death.

Revelation 2:17 To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some* of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.

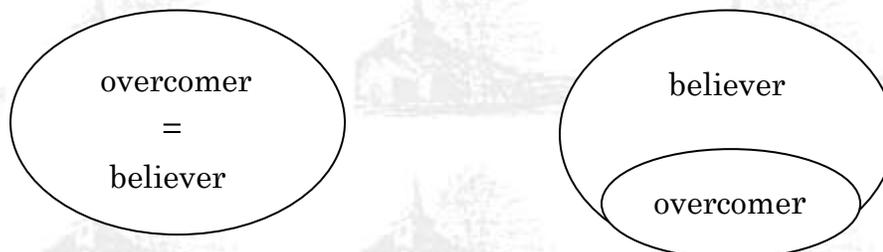
Revelation 2:26-28 He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; ²⁷ AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received *authority* from My Father; ²⁸ and I will give him the morning star.

Revelation 3:5 He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

Revelation 3:12 He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.

Revelation 3:21 He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

When I first taught these letters I argued that all believers are “overcomers” and not that only some believers are “overcomers”.



The basis of my original argument was 1 John 5:4-5. Notice, I left the immediate context and went to some of John’s other writings to define the “overcomers”.

1 John 5:4-5 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith. ⁵ Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

In this passage John identifies the “overcomer” as the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. The obstacle that the believer overcomes is “the world”. The means of overcoming the world is “faith”. Therefore, all who believe Jesus is the Son of God have overcome the world. That is, the all believers are overcomers in this passage. That is the true interpretation of this text. However, earlier I took this idea and transferred it to Rev 2-3 so that every time Jesus said, “He who overcomes” I read it as “He who is a believer” so that all believers were guaranteed the rewards Christ promised. Do you follow that argument? Ok. What I did was commit an exegetical fallacy, a fallacy called “Illegitimate Identity Transfer” (IIT)ⁱ. That is, I illegitimately transferred the identity of the overcomers from 1 John into Rev 2-3. However, does it follow that if John identifies all believers in 1 John as overcomers that he must also identify the overcomers in Rev 2-3 as all believers? No. The immediate context must take precedence.

To support this argument, I referred to the promise made to the overcomer at Smyrna in Rev 2:11.

Revelation 2:11 He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.

I argued that since no believer will be hurt by the second death therefore all believers must be overcomers. I also referred to the promise made to the overcomer at Sardis in Rev 3:5.

Revelation 3:5 He who overcomes...I will not erase his name from the book of life...

I argued that since no believer will have his name erased from the book of life I concluded that all believers must be overcomers. While this interpretation may sound correct at first, it does create six exegetical obstacles that can't be overcome.

First, if every believer will automatically obey Christ's commands in these letters then it is not necessary to issue the command.ⁱⁱ Why would Christ command someone to obey if there was no possibility to do otherwise?

Expositors often forget that Rev 1:3 promises blessing for those who obey the

things written in this book. The primary commands are found in the letters to the seven churches in Rev 2-3. If all believers will obey the things written in these letters then it is useless to promise blessing for those who obey. Every time a command is issued it is assumed that it may be obeyed or disobeyed. The Ephesian church was commanded to remember from where they had fallen and repent and do the deeds they did at first (2:5). The church of Smyrna was commanded do not fear martyrdom but be faithful until death (2:10). The church of Pergamum was commanded to repent concerning the false teaching of Balaam (2:16). The church of Thyatira was commanded to hold fast to what they had until Christ comes (2:25). The church of Sardis was commanded to wake up and strengthen the things that remain and to remember what they had received and heard and keep it and repent (3:2, 3). The church of Philadelphia was commanded to hold fast what they have so that no one would take their crown (3:11). The church of Laodicea was commanded to be zealous and repent (3:19). Obviously each of these churches had obstacles to overcome. In Ephesus the obstacle was loveless orthodoxy. In Smyrna the obstacle was imminent death. In Pergamum the obstacle was compromising. In Thyatira the obstacle was tolerance. In Sardis the obstacle was complacency. In Philadelphia the obstacle was persevering. In Laodicea the obstacle was lukewarmness. If they would inevitably obey these commands then why does Christ give the commands? Further,

Second, why does Christ warn them that if they disobey they will be disciplined if there is no possibility of failure? Further, if the letters are not written to the believers in the church then why would God warn unbelievers that He will discipline them? He only disciplines believers, those who are His legitimate children (Heb 12:5ff).

Third, if every believer will receive a reward for a virtue that every believer has then it is no longer a reward. Rewards are given to those who excel beyond the norm.ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, if everyone receives the reward then it ceases to be a reward. Everyone who is born in the United States receives a Social Security Number. It is not a reward. Each letter closes with a promise of reward to the overcomer. If all believers are overcomers then these can't be rewards because "a reward that everyone receives for a virtue that everyone has is nonsense."^{iv}

Fourth, the overcomer is the one who overcomes the particular obstacle mentioned by Christ in the letter. They means of overcoming is obedience to Christ's command(s) (e.g. be zealous, repent, do not fear, hold fast, remember,

wake up, strengthen, do the deeds you did at first!) Therefore, if all believers are overcomers then salvation is by works of obedience and not by faith alone. It is striking that not once are they told to have faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God! If the overcomer is the one who believes in Jesus why are they never given a gospel invitation? Clearly the letters are written to people who have already believed the gospel and now face various obstacles to overcome in the Christian life (e.g. loveless orthodoxy, compromise, tolerance, persevering, lukewarmness).

Fifth, in one of the promises to the overcomer Christ is said to have overcome and been rewarded.

Revelation 3:21 He who *overcomes*, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

If Christ overcame then we can say with certainty that to overcome does not mean to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Clearly Jesus did not have to become a believer. What then did Jesus overcome? He overcame sin through obedience. Turn to Phil 2:5ff

Philippians 2:5-16 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus Christ overcame every temptation to sin, emptied Himself of the independent use of His divine attributes, and humbled Himself by becoming perfectly obedient to the Father all the way to the point of death on a cross. We always say He did not have to die. If He had to die it would not have been an act of obedience. But since He chose to die for us by an act of His own volition it is an act of obedience to the Father (John 10:30). He obeyed the Father's will. Because of this the Father rewarded Him.

⁹ For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,

We are rewarded for obedience just as Christ was rewarded for obedience. His reward was a name which is above every name. Now, let's assume for a moment that Jesus Christ did not humble himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross. Would He then be rewarded with a name which

is above every name? No, of course not. But He was and as a result the Father rewarded Him. He will also receive the reward of verbal confession by everyone that He is Lord.

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Now, in verse 12 and following, let's read and see what happens when we have the same attitude of Jesus; the attitude of humble obedience.

¹² So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure. ¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing; ¹⁵ so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

“The day of Christ” is the day of the judgment seat of Christ. Paul wants them to be obedient now so that at the judgment seat of Christ his work will be richly rewarded. So, if the believer is obedient like Christ was obedient then he will be rewarded as Christ was rewarded. Phil 2 is calling us to be overcomers as Christ was an overcomer. He overcame by obedience to the Father. His reward mentioned in Rev 3:21 was to sit down with His Father on His throne. If the Laodiceans would be obedient to the command “be zealous and repent” then they were promised the reward of sitting down with the Son on His throne. So, the way Christ overcame in the Laodicean letter indicates how the believer must overcome in the other letters in order to be rewarded.

Sixth, in Rev 21:7 the overcomers are mentioned once again. Obviously it is referring back to those Church believers who overcome the specific obstacles mentioned in Rev 2-3.

Revelation 21:7 He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.

A tip off that all believers are not overcomers is the word “inherit”. This Greek word is *kleronomeo* and means to “obtain a portion” “to possess” “to inherit something”. In this context the overcomer will possess or inherit “these things” clearly refers to having possession/inheritance in the new Jerusalem. Probably it refers to two things. First, the overcomer will possess an eternal dwelling or abode in the new Jerusalem. Not all believers will dwell within the new Jerusalem. Many will live outside the city. Second, the overcomer will inherit a position of rule in the new Jerusalem. You say, “How is that possible?” Who will be ruling in the new Jerusalem and who would be the subjects of their rule? Turn to Rev 22:5. Clearly from this verse some will be reigning. Who will they be reigning over? Presumably “the nations” of verse 2. I will explain more about the final order of things in the new heaven and new earth in the coming weeks. Suffice it to say now that God’s original mandate for mankind was to rule, be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it (Gen 1:26, 28). It appears that God’s original purpose will be fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth and it will be fulfilled by the “overcomers”! That’s what Rev 21:7 is alluding to. So, we wonder, I’ve wondered, “Will reward status carry over from the millennium into the new heavens and new earth?” On the authority of these and other similar verses the answer appears to be, “Yes.” However, it must be remembered that in the new heavens and new earth we will all have a full cup of joy. The only difference will be the size of the cup. “No one will enter eternity with regret or mourning or pain. No one will feel like a second-class citizen of heaven because they were unfaithful now.”^v After all, we worship a God of grace.

Finally, there is one hurdle to overcome with this interpretation. How do we deal with the two promises to Smyrna and Sardis?^{vi}

Revelation 2:11 He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.

Revelation 3:5 He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

The problem I originally had was that I did not recognize that these are figures of speech called “litotes” (pronounced “lie-tuh-tees”). Litotes is a figure of speech where you severely understate something in order to affirm its extreme opposite. We use litotes in everyday speech. For example,

- “Not bad” = “pretty good”
- “That suit is no bargain” = “It’s expensive”
- “The quiz wasn’t a snap” = “It was tough”

- **Acts 19:23** “About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way” = “a great disturbance occurred”
- **Acts 14:28** “And they spent no little time with the disciples” = “they spent a long time with the disciples”
- **Hebrews 6:10** “God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name” = “God is just and will remember your work and the love you have shown...”^{vii}

The believers at Smyrna were warned that they were about to come under severe persecution, imprisonment and martyrdom. They were commanded to “Be faithful to death” and they were promised that, if they were, then Christ would “give them the crown of life”. That is to say they will be richly rewarded (a high quality of eternal life). The extreme opposite of this statement is you will not be hurt by the second death. Thus, this is a common figure of speech called litotes. But what if some believers at Smyrna who were cast into prison were not faithful to death? Would they be hurt by the second death? The answer is “Yes”. If you say “No” then the force of the command “be faithful to death” loses all its force and the promise of reward for faithfulness is meaningless. But how could a genuine believer be hurt by the second death, which is, the lake of fire (Rev 20:14)? Simple, loss of reward. Turn over to Rev 21:8,

Revelation 21:8 But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

The text does not say “they” “the person” will be in the lake of fire but “their part”, their *meros* which is another word for one’s inheritance or reward. A believer in Smyrna who was not faithful to death would lose reward, he would suffer loss. He would be disinherited for his failure to be faithful to death. So, in a real sense one who does not overcome will suffer loss in eternity in the sense that he could have been rewarded had he been faithful but because he wasn’t he loses those rewards. Of course, there will be no tears or mourning or crying (Rev 21:4) but there will be loss. Probably they would have already experienced this loss after the judgment seat of Christ over a thousand years before. That’s why the verse does not really say “their part will be in the lake of fire”. The future tense *will be* is not in the Greek text. It simply says “their part is in the lake of fire”. Probably it was placed there over a thousand years before when they stood at the judgment seat of Christ.

In the Sardian letter it is a severe understatement for Christ to say He will not erase the overcomers name from the book of life. Far from it! Not only will his name be there...it will also be confessed verbally before the Father (Rev 3:5c; Matt 10:32). While all believers names will be written in the book of life only overcomers names will be verbally announced before the Father for they are sons indeed (Rev 21:7)!

In conclusion, there are six major obstacles to identifying all believers as overcomers. First, it is an exegetical fallacy to illegitimately transfer the overcomers of 1 John to Revelation 2-3. Each context must be studied on its own merits. Obviously Christ overcame by acts of obedience to the Father's will and we must overcome by obedience to Christ's will. Second, it is absurd to command believers to obey if they will inevitably obey. Third, it is also absurd to imagine that Christ would threaten discipline for those who disobey if none of them could disobey. Further, if the letters are written to unbelievers or a mixed group it is certainly absurd for God doesn't discipline unbelievers. Fourth, it is nonsense to say that believers will receive rewards if they have certain virtues if they all have those virtues. Rewards are not given to all but only to those who have distinguishable service. The moment everyone receives it it ceases to be a reward. Fifth, there is no gospel invitation in any of the seven letters. Therefore, if every believer in these letters is an overcomer then they overcame by obedience to Christ's commands in the letters and not by faith alone. Sixth, Rev 21:7 says the overcomers will inherit. The meaning of this word means more than enter the new Jerusalem. All believers will enter but not all will inherit. Inheriting the new Jerusalem is a reward for faithful obedience to Christ's commands in the seven letters. Those who inherit will dwell within the city and will co-reign with Christ.

The bottom line is that these letters are written to genuine believers. There may be unbelievers present, but Christ is addressing the commands, warnings, and promised rewards to the genuine believers. If and only if the believers overcome the obstacle(s) Christ's mentions will they receive the rewards Christ promises. Only some believers are overcomers. It is true that all who have believed that Jesus is the Son of God have overcome the world (1 John 5:4-5). However, it is not true that all believers overcome obstacles within the Christian life by obedience. Those who do will be rewarded. Those who don't won't. Salvation is a free gift received by faith alone. Rewards are earned by faithful obedience to Christ's commands.

“In every reference to the overcomer in the Revelation, he is one who is a victor in battle. The central theme of the entire book is to exhort the saints to persevere and to be victorious. If all saints persevere and are victorious, the exhortations and promises of rewards are pointless. An

exhortation to do something everyone does anyway to obtain a reward which all will receive anyway is absurd.”^{viii}

ⁱ Illegitimate Identity Transfer is a fallacy in the category of Illegitimate Totality Transfer.

Illegitimate Totality Transfer is the fallacy of transferring the meaning of a word or phrase in one context into another context. See D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, pp 53, 60-61.

ⁱⁱ J. William Fuller, "I Will Not Erase His Name from the Book of Life' (Revelation 3:5)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (1983): 299ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ J. William Fuller, "I Will Not Erase His Name from the Book of Life' (Revelation 3:5)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (1983): 299ff.

^{iv} J. William Fuller, "I Will Not Erase His Name from the Book of Life' (Revelation 3:5)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (1983): 299ff.

^v Joseph Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*, 600.

^{vi} See the article by Bob Wilkin at <http://www.faithalone.org/news/y1989/89may3.html>

^{vii} See the article by Zane Hodges at <http://www.faithalone.org/news/y1991/91march1.html>

^{viii} Joseph Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*, 559.

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