

THIRD CLASS CONDITIONS IN FIRST JOHN

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Most of the third class conditions in the First Epistle of John are of the "present general" type, i.e., they express conditions based on present states or realities rather than future probabilities. These conditions share a semantic domain with the articular participle, and John often uses both constructions to express the same idea. The choice of one or the other had to do with stylistic variation rather than difference of meaning.

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SOME time ago, James Boyer published a study of third class conditions in the New Testament. In it, he disputed the semantic distinction between the "future probable" and "present general" uses of **εἴη** with the subjunctive.

If it seems strange to us that such distinct types should be thrown together in one grammatical form it should alert us to the probability that we are not looking at it as the Greek writer did. Apparently he did not see these as diverse types; there must be some common characteristic which in his mind linked them in the same manner of expression. His choice to use the subjunctive points to the common element. They are both undetermined, contingent suppositions, future in time reference. Whether that potentiality was seen as some particular occurrence or one which would produce the result whenever it occurred was not the primary thought in the mind of the speaker. He used a form which in either case expressed a future eventuality.¹

Many grammarians, on the other hand, posit a semantic distinction between future probability vs. present general conditions based on the tenses used in the apodosis of the condition.² Boyer questioned this, as well.

¹ J. Boyer, "Third (and Fourth) Class Conditions," *GTJ* 3:173.

² A. H. Chase and H. Phillips, *A New Introduction to Greek* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U., 1961) 78. cr. J. G. Machen, *New Testament Greek for Beginners* (New York: MacMillan, 1957) 132, as well as M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Scripta

Next, examining the 81 examples of the present indicative in the apodosis of general suppositions, it is probable that even these represent future time. 20 of these seem to be gnomic or atemporal, which includes future time. But specifically in the apodosis of a contingent condition this present must be logically future to the fulfillment of the protasis.³

The trouble is, this logical connection is true of first class conditions, as well. Thus, in the simple statement "If it's raining, you need to come inside," the apodosis (coming inside) is logically future to the protasis (rain falling). But this does not necessarily mean that the whole matter is future *from the writer's point of view*. Expressed with a Greek subjunctive, this sentence could easily mean that any time it rains, the addressee needs to get in out of it, including right now.

This logical relation, therefore, begs the real question: when a writer used **εἴ** with a subjunctive, was he thinking always or primarily of "future eventuality," or is it possible that he sometimes described a present state of things?⁴ This paper will seek to answer this question for the book of First John.

I John contains 28 occurrences of **εἴ** with the subjunctive. They fall into three broad categories.

1) Definitely Future

Two passages fit this category: 2:28, "continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming (NIV)," and 3:2, "We know that when he appears, we shall be like him (NIV)." Both refer to Christ's return, and so are future due to the nature of the event.

2) Either Present or Future (Uncertain)

"If anyone sins" in 2:1 might depict the present situation: "Whenever someone sins, we have an advocate." It might state a future probability: "If anyone sins, we have an advocate (the advocate will still be there to intercede)." The previous statement, "I am writing these things so that you won't sin" slightly favors the futuristic interpretation, but this is not certain. John's opponents may have convinced some people that they had sinned beyond the boundaries of forgive-

Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 109-11, though Zerwick is somewhat more flexible in his understanding of what is allowable in an apodosis.

³ Boyer 174-75.

⁴ J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek. vol. 3: Syntax*, by Nigel Turner (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963) 114 makes no distinction between the two functions, but cites Matt 5:23 as an example of the meaning "As often as you. . ." He says "the most common example of this condition [with the present **εἴ** subjunctive] in the Ptol. pap. is stereotyped phrases in decrees and punishments, having continual validity." He contrasts the aorist subjunctive as "a definite event. . . occurring only once in the future, and conceived as taking place before the time of the action of the main verb. It is expectation, but not fulfillment as yet."

ness. To this John would say that they cannot forfeit God's forgiveness, because the Advocate is there and has been there all along. We cannot be sure which was in John's mind.

2:24 is unclear, as well. The preceding imperative "What you heard from the beginning should remain in you" seems to set up a present general statement that builds on this thought. The apodosis "you also will remain in the Son and in the Father (NIV)" with its future tense appears to contradict this flow of thought. It may be that John had both present state and future probability in mind, so he combined a present imperative (continue in this state) with a future condition (the desired state will continue if the condition is met). We cannot know for sure.

5:14 is another uncertain passage. It is similar to 3:22 except that it reads **ἐὰν τί** instead of **ὁ ἐάν**. John prefaced the condition by saying that what follows (introduced by **οἷ**) is the boldness that we have before God. The expression of this boldness is the knowledge that He hears us when we ask according to His will. By the nature of the act, this could be future from John's perspective; however, since he includes himself in the declaration, it would seem to be a present reality in his mind, as well.

The force of 5:16 depends on its frame of reference. Apart from the mysterious sin unto death and the sin not unto death, the identity of the "brother" is the key to the condition. If it is a general statement about any brother, it is a future condition: "If one of you should see his brother sinning. . ." But if "brother" is a veiled reference to John's opponents,⁵ then John is giving specific instructions to the faithful on how to deal with the present problem. Without more information we cannot be sure which was the case.

3) Present State of Things

The remaining 22 occurrences of this construction in 1 John all seem to focus on present time, or even to include an element of recent past events. Much of this present/future question has to do with the nature of John's polemic against his opponents. The five conditional

⁵ Most commentators do not consider this possibility. For example, R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982) 611 calls the brother a "Johannine Christian" (though he seems to see the condition as a present general, p. 610). However, as K. Braune, *The Epistles General of John*, Lange's Commentary; (New York: Scribners, 1869) 170, pointed out, the term "his brother," while denoting a member of the Church community, does not necessarily indicate "a regenerate person." Cf. 2:19; not all members of the Community were genuine believers. S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1984) 299 vacillates between reference to one within the church and one outside it, and concludes that "the writer is clearly dealing with those who are, in the first place, related to the Christian circle." The question, however, is not whether the "brother" is related to the Christian circle, but the precise nature of that relationship.

statements in chapter 1 illustrate this: "If we say we have fellowship with Him, yet walk in darkness (1:6) . . . If we walk in the light as He is in the light (1:7) . . . If we say that we have no sin (1:8) . . . If we confess our sins (1:9) . . . If we say we have not sinned (1:10) . . ." On the one hand, if John is stating probabilities when he says these things, then he may be stating "future eventuality." If, on the other hand, verses 6, 8 and 10 are quotes of his opponents, then he is dealing with present (and even recent past) realities.⁶ The question is: if John was not quoting those who were already making such claims, why would he bring up such topics at all? It is more likely that he was citing claims that his opponents had already made and were continuing to make.

If this is the case, we must conclude that John understands his words to refer to a present state. Those who claim to have fellowship with God but who live in darkness are liars. Those who claim sinlessness are deceiving themselves and making God a liar. Conversely, those who live in the light do have fellowship with God, and those who confess their sins have forgiveness. All this is happening right now, from John's point of view.

"This is how we know that we know Him" in 2:3 expresses a present reality: we have known God, and keeping His commands is the confirmation of this fact. Logically, if this condition is future the believer of John's time could not have had present reassurance of his relationship to the Lord; he would have had to wait for an undetermined time to see if he "keeps his commandments." But the following context indicates that John was dealing with present conditions.

The prohibition about loving the world in 2:15a sets the tone for the conditional sentence in 2:15b. A futuristic interpretation would read, "If anyone should fall in love with the world, he will not have the love of the Father in him." But a present state makes more sense: "Whoever is intensely attached to the world does not have the love of the Father in him." This condition is an evaluation of anyone who

⁶ J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 72, calls them quotes of the opposers. W. Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 34, seems to agree, as does Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* 21. The view of B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 19, is unclear: "the exact form (~~ἐὰν εἰσῶμεν~~) . . . contemplates a direct assertion of the several statements, and not simply the mental conception of them." Brown, *Epistles* 197 does not address this question, but says, "These are not merely possible contingencies but reflect the language of jurisprudence [following W. Nauck—see pp. 43-44] They are 'exceptional' . . . equivalent to 'whenever.'" D. W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 121, said, "No doubt some of these hypothetical statements (vv. 6, 8, 10) represent claims made by the false teachers." Similarly at 4:20 he claimed that the conditional statement expresses a "hypothetical situation," yet affirmed that John was probably quoting his opponents (p. 339). One wonders how hypothetical a direct quote can be.

displays this love for the world at the time that John is writing, and in fact at any time.

The essence of 2:29 appears to be present: "If you already know that He is righteous then you also know that anyone who practices righteousness has been born of Him." The combination of present and perfect tenses in the apodosis seems to preclude a future sense for this knowledge.

3:20 may be one of Boyer's "gnomic" conditions; it seems to carry both past and present implications, as well as future. Even when the heart stirs self-condemnation, God is greater and knows the reality of things.⁷ This truth covers present condemnations as well as possible future ones, and may even extend to self-condemnations of the past that still affect the believer.

3:21 continues this theme with the same present-reality force. If the heart does not condemn, then boldness before God is enhanced.

3:22 carries on in the same vein. The sense of receiving what we request has future implications, to be sure, but in the context John is covering present states, such as keeping God's commandment of belief in Jesus and loving one another (v. 23).

4:12 also has present general force. It does not say that loving one another means God will abide in us, but that loving one another proves that God does abide in us. It does not mean that God's love will be perfected in us, but that it is in a present state of being perfected, and has been in this process since we believed (v. 7, 8).

The context of 4:15 is a present reality; we abide in Him and He in us. We know this because He has given us His Spirit. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God is in this state. The combination of **εἰ** in this condition may serve to modify the force to a present reality, but this is not a hard rule of grammar. John could have said **εἰ τι οἴμολογῆς**⁷ and the context would still demand a sense of present reality.

4:20 echoes the thought and force of the conditions in chapter 1. Anyone who claims to love God, yet hates his brother, is a liar. This, again appears to be a quote and an evaluation of John's opponents, who were in fact making such false claims.

5:15 builds on the thought begun in 5:14 (see above) using two conditional statements. The first reads, "And if we know that He hears us . . . we know that we have the things we ask for." This is a mixed protasis: **εἰ** with the (semantically) present indicative **οἶδμεν**. Since

⁷ I have followed the punctuation of the KJV at this point, because it seems to make better sense of the phrase **οἶτι εἰ**. Even following the punctuation of UBS3, however, the force of the condition remains a present general: "Whenever our heart condemns us, this is how we know we are of the truth etc."

it grows out of a logical inference from verse 14, its thrust would seem to be the same, i.e. present reality with overtones for future continuance.

The second condition in 5:15 is unusual. It almost appears to be appositional to "Hear hears us." Yet, this yields no sense: "If we know that He hears us whatever we might request." The combination **οἷαν** appears to have a semantic value of "whenever," that is, "We know that He hears us whenever we make a request." This throws a definite sense of present state into the whole chain of conditions in 5:14-15.

This brief examination shows that some third class conditions in 1 John ought to be understood to deal with present general realities and states, not exclusively with future probabilities. This conclusion draws some reinforcement from the fact that 1 John has another construction that deals with many of the same topics in much the same way.

John was fond of the articular participle as an idiom for "whoever" (cf. 2:15 above). Of the 48 occurrences of this construction in the epistle, only 6 depart from this meaning.⁸ The rest share a certain amount of overlap with John's third class conditions, both semantically and in terms of subject matter.⁹

For example, 4:12 (condition) says that if we love each other God abides in us. 4:7 (participle) affirms that he who loves has been born of God and knows God. In both verses the mark of a relationship with God is love for one another. The difference in construction appears to be a stylistic variation without any particular semantic distinction.

Other examples abound. 2:3 "If we keep His commandments we know that we have known Him" and 2:4 "He who says 'I know Him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar" give two sides of a coin, expressed in chiasmatic order. 2:24 and 2:6 share the theme of abiding; 4:15 and 2:23 deal with confessing the Son; 1:7 "If we walk in the light" and 2:9 "He who says he abides in the light" say the same thing with different words. These examples show that John was comfortable using both grammatical constructions to convey similar ideas. He set the stage in chapter 1 with five third class conditions in a row,¹⁰ and proceeded to alternate between the two forms as he pleased from 2:3 on.

The most striking example of this overlap in meaning is in 4:20: "If anyone says 'I love God' but hates his brother, he is a liar. For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God

⁸ These are 2:26; 5:1b; 5:4, 6, 7, 16.

⁹ Braune, *Epistles* 31, noted many of the overlaps in subject matter, calling both constructions "an objective possibility. . . i.e. he assumes that it may be so, and that the event would show whether it will be so (emphasis his)." See also Brown, *Epistles* 43.

¹⁰ Chapter 1 has no articular participles.

whom he has not seen." The first sentence is a third class condition with a dual protasis, similar to the conditions in chapter 1: "If anyone says. . . but hates." The second is a participle: "He who does not love his brother." We could as easily translate the two identically, for both carry the same sense of a present general reality. Again, alternation between the two was a stylistic choice.

Several commentators have tried to find distinctions between the two constructions in 4:20, but there is no agreement as to what the distinctions are. Westcott said that the conditional sentence is a "particular case" while the participle is a "general principle."¹¹ Brooke, on the other hand, said that the claim in the condition is "mentioned quite generally" whereas the participial clause is "more definite."¹² Most other commentators do not treat the two clauses in relation to each other at all.

Many of the conditions examined also seem to share a semantic domain with the "first class" or simple condition.¹³ This becomes clear when we examine the five occurrences of **ei** with the indicative in 1 John. Of these, 2:19 is contrary-to-fact, 4:1 means "whether they are from God" (no apodosis), and 5:9 is concessive, "although we receive man's testimony."¹⁴

The remaining two, 3:13 and 4:11, grow out of logical relationships with the absolute statements that precede them. In 3:12-13, Cain murdered his brother because his own deeds were evil while Abel's were righteous. Believers should not be surprised, therefore, if the world hates them.¹⁵ In 4:9-11, God has poured out His love on us, so we ought to love one another. Each of these sentences states a "how much more" conclusion, phrased in the form of a first class condition. They clearly do not, however, contain the hypothetical elements necessary to be conditions; they express a logical result of what has gone before. We must conclude that 1 John does not contain a true "first

¹¹ Westcott 161; see also Smalley 263.

¹² A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976) 126.

¹³ J. L. Boyer, "First Class Conditions: What do they Mean?" *GTJ* 2:75-114 has shown beyond any doubt that the first class construction in its pure form is a "simple" condition with no hint as to probability of fulfillment, and that the old "assumed as fulfilled" (cf. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* [tr. R. W. Funk; Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1961, hereafter BDF] p. 189) designation should be discarded. For view similar to, but somewhat weaker than Boyer's, see Zerwick, p. 102-7.

¹⁴ For this use of **ei** with the indicative, see A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 1026. Boyer, "First Class" 113, considers 5:9 a true first class condition.

¹⁵ Brown, *Epistles* 445 translates "when" with some hesitation, despite the fact that Koine Greek often used **ei** in place of **oti** (BDF p. 237).

class" condition,¹⁶ and that this condition's semantic field has been at least partially displaced by the third class construction in this epistle.¹⁷

CONCLUSIONS

First, we can conclude that John tended to use **εἴη** with the subjunctive with much the same sense that he used the articular participle, with the meaning "whoever." His overlap of subject matter and his dovetailing of the two constructions in several places confirms this. If he had intended a semantic distinction between the two, it would not make sense to use two different forms to say the same thing. They must, in this epistle, share the same semantic domain. Furthermore, both constructions infringe on the domain of the first class condition. This kind of overlap is consistent with what we know about the blurring of distinctions that were occurring in Koine Greek in the first century.¹⁸

Second, we must conclude that Boyer has overstated the distinction of the third class condition, at least as far as I John is concerned. The so-called "present general" condition is a distinct entity in I John just as it is in Classical Greek. It states a condition based on present realities or situations. That is, in many instances the thought that whenever the protasis is fulfilled, the apodosis results, was in fact the primary thought in John's mind.

¹⁶ The only clear first class condition in the Johannine epistles is 2 John 10. The two occurrences of **εἴη** in 3 John (5, 10) show the same semantic blurring as those in I John. BDF p. 189 mentions the occasional overlapping of **εἴη** and **εἴη**.

¹⁷ Cf. Zerwick, p. 106 on the overlap between the two constructions.

¹⁸ For other examples of this kind of blurring, see Robertson 448-49; D. W. Lightfoot, *Principles of Diachronic Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1979) 26 includes a discussion of the breakdown of sequence-of-tense rules relating to the Greek "historical present" as a further example of blurring. Even E. D. Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976 reprint of 1898 edition) 105, recognized that some overlapping occurs when he classed some instances of **εἴη** with the present indicative as third class conditions. See also the insightful review of *The Discovery Bible, New Testament* by R. L. Thomas in *Master's Seminary Journal* 1:85-87.

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