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**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 condi-*

*tions 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.*

\* \* \*

SOME time ago, James Boyer published a study of third class condi-

tions in the New Testament. In it, he disputed the semantic distinc-

tion between the "future probable" and "present general" uses of ἐάν

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 pri-

mary 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 distinc-

tion 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

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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 condi-

tions, 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 ἐάν 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 ἐάν 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: "When-

ever 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 interpreta-

tion, 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 ἐάν 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."

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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 ἐάν τι instead of }ο ἐάν. John prefaced the condition by saying

that what follows (introduced by ὅτι) 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.

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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 sinless-

ness 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 undeter-

mined 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* (Phila-

delphia: 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 (ἐάν εἴπωμεν) . . . 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.

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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

lin 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 con-

fesses that Jesus is the Son of God is in this state. The combination ὃς

ἐάν 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 ἐάν τις  
ὁμολογήσῃ 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: ἐάν with the (semantically) present indicative οἴδαμεν. Since

7 I have followed the punctuation of the KJV at this point, because it seems to make

better sense of the phrase ὅτι ἐάν. 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."

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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 ὃ ἐάν

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 I 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 chiastic 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.

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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 "par-

ticular 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 εἰ 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 relation-

ships 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 neces-

sary 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 εἰ 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 o!ti (BDF p. 237).

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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 ἐάν with the

subjunctive with much the same sense that he used the articular par-

ticiple, 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 distinc-

tion 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 ἐάν in 3 John (5, 10) show the same semantic blurring as those in I John.

BDF p. 189 mentions the occasional overlapping of εἰ and ἐάν.

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 εἰ 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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