# Conditional Sentences

In the Greek New Testament there are many kinds of conditional statements (sentences and clauses).

## *Categories of Conditional Statements*

There are four classes of conditional sentences which are outstanding in usage.[1]

1. **First class** condition affirms the reality of the condition. It is expressed by εἰ with the indicative mood in the *protasis* ("if" clause) and almost any mood or tense in the main clause.

> **εἰ** μαθεταί ἐσμεν τοῦ κυρίου σωθησόμεθα
>
> "If we are disciples of the Lord, we shall be saved." This construction confirms the condition and is sometimes translated "since" rather than "if."

2. **Second class** condition is contrary to fact condition. This is often one of the most baffling constructions in the English language where it is expressed by the subjunctive mood. In Greek, it is expressed by the past tenses of the indicative mood. The correct form is εἰ with the indicative in the protasis and ἄν with the indicative in the *apodosis* (the second part, the main clause, the "then" of the "if…then").

> **εἰ** ἦς ὧδε οὐκ **ἂν** ἀπέθανεν ὁ ἀδελφός μου
>
> "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." The fact is "You were not here and hence my brother died."

Study these English sentences in contrary to fact condition:

> If I were you, I would not go.
>
> If you were older, you would understand.

Study these English sentences which are real conditions:

> If he was sick, he did not show it.
>
> If he was there, I did not see him.

3. **Third class** condition is the probable future condition. It is expressed by ἐάν with the subjunctive in the protasis and any form needed in the apodosis. It expresses that which is not really taking place but which probably will [or could, mw] take place in the future.

> τοῦτο ποιήσομεν **ἐάν** ἐπιτρέπῃ ὁ θεός
>
> "This we will do if God permit." That is, we are not now doing it, but it is probable that we will do it on the condition of God's permitting us.

4. **Fourth class** condition is the possible future condition. It is expressed by εἰ with the optative mood in the protasis and ἄν with the optative mood in the apodosis. No example of the fully written construction is found in the New Testament.

Study the following English sentences in light of the above classification:

| | |
|---|---|
| First class: | If he is studying, he will learn the Greek. |
| Second class: | If he had studied, he would have learned the Greek. |
| Third class: | If he studies, he will learn the Greek. |
| Fourth class: | If he would study, he would learn the Greek. |

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[1] Adapted from Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1950),108,ff.

## Degrees of Uncertainty

Dana and Mantey add more detail to the description of conditional statements.[2]  The primary thing in understanding conditional sentences is to keep in mind what kind of affirmation each mood expresses.  The indicative states a thing as a fact, the subjunctive with a degree of uncertainty, and the optative with a greater degree of uncertainty.  Hence, on the basis of mood, the four kinds of conditional sentences can be conveniently grouped into two types.  First, there are the two that have the indicative mood, which assume that the premise is either true or untrue.  The speaker takes for granted that what he assumes is true, as in the simple condition (first class); or that it is known not to be true as is the case in the contrary to fact condition (second class).  The indicative, being the mood for reality, is regularly used in this type of sentence.  Second, the other two conditional sentences composing the second type do not have the indicative mood, but rather the subjunctive and optative, which are used to express varying degrees of uncertainty or doubt.  Inasmuch as the optative has vanished almost entirely from the New Testament, we see in it but traces of the fourth class of conditional sentences.  But the subjunctive in conditions is very common.

Another thing that lends light toward a thorough understanding of conditional sentences is the particle ἄν that is used in all but the first class condition.  The third class condition begins with εἰ + ἄν = ἐάν, or sometimes ἄν.  In the main clause of sentences in the second and fourth classes, ἄν occurs most of the time, but it is not necessary according to Koine usage.  ἄν is a particle which implies doubt or indefiniteness.  Its very presence in a sentence indicates lack of certainty on the part of the one using it.  It warns us not to take at full face value what the other words may imply.  If we but remember that this word which implies uncertainty is used with the moods for uncertainty, we are far advanced in a proper understanding of it.

Like any "rule" of grammar, "it was inevitable that in actual practice speakers and writers would not confine themselves to fixed forms of hypothetical expression.  Variations are found which cannot be reduced to logical analysis."

## Assumptions and Reality

Robertson (in Dana and Mantey) makes a very pertinent statement, the substance of which needs to be remembered:  The point about all the four classes to note is that the form of the condition has only to do with the statement, *not* with the absolute truth or certainty of the matter.

Of the First Class condition Carson[3] says, "In a first-class condition the protasis is assumed true for the sake of the argument, but the thing actually assumed may or may not be true.  To put it another way, there is stress on the reality of the assumption, but not on the reality of the content that is assumed."  He cites Matthew 12:27 as an illustration:

- If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out?
- καὶ εἰ ἐγὼ ἐν Βεελζεβοὺλ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμόνια, οἱ υἱοὶ ὑμῶν ἐν τίνι ἐκβάλλουσιν;

| CLASS | "IF" CLAUSE (Protasis) | MAIN CLAUSE (Apodosis) | USE |
|-------|------------------------|------------------------|-----|
| I | εἰ with indicative | any | reality |
| II | εἰ with indicative | ἄν with indicative | contrary to fact |
| III | ἐάν with subjunctive | any | probable future |
| IV | εἰ with optative | ἄν with optative | possible future |

[2] Adapted from H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto:  The Macmillan Company, 1955), 286-291.

[3] D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan:  Baker Books, 2000), 77.

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