

# The Subjunctive And The Light

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The New Testament contains hundreds of sentences in the subjunctive mood. It makes a precise distinction in the meaning and is not merely a matter of form. They are sentences containing an "if" or a "whatsoever" or other words expressing something of condition or doubt.

Before you close the paper and lay it aside as a dull dead topic, may I remind you that ultimately it will be a study of the much discussed passage about "walking in the light." We have had dissertation upon dissertation about that phrase being in the present tense and signifying something which continues, rather than a one time act. On the other hand, however, so little has been said about the passage being in the subjunctive mood, that one would think that it matters not whether it is subjunctive or indicative — or maybe, just no mood. It does have significance and the purpose of this essay is to show that significance.

Most modern English grammars treat the subjunctive very lightly. They deal with it as merely a matter of form, "if I were you" rather than "If I was you." But in the English precise distinction is actually made to denote differences which really matter. There is a difference to be made in the meaning of the two following sentences: If it is raining it is cloudy; and, If it is cloudy it is raining. Knowing the subject of clouds and rain, we know that the first sentence is correct, but the latter is not. In the first sentence, the subject of doubt is the rain, the rain depends upon the clouds. But in the second, we

know that it can be cloudy but not raining, thus not necessarily a true statement. Our understanding of 1 John 1:7 depends upon our knowledge of the subject in the context and other scripture teaching together with the use of the subjunctive mood.

This essay will perhaps help some. Perhaps it will be utterly rejected by others as nonsense. Those who could care less about the matter will find it boring and not worth reading. Those who think that anything which depends on a knowledge of grammar for being understood is not to be considered. Those who have their minds already set and are determined to stand by their thinking and utterings, no matter what, will discard it. But those who want the truth and appreciate a fresh approach of study will examine it carefully. The Spirit gave us the truth in inspired words (1 Corinthians 2:13); therefore we should be that precise in our handling of them.

## GRAMMATICAL ANALYSES

An older grammar, *The English Sentence*, by Rigdon, considers the use of the subjunctive mood of great importance in expressing precise thought. It is the text I studied some years ago in Freed-Hardeman College. His definition is important: "The Subjunctive is the mode that expresses (a) doubt as to the agreement, or (b) certainty as to the disagreement, between the thought and the reality." His illustration of the first use is: "If the gate is open, the cows are out." Then in explanation he says; "the meaning is that we are uncertain whether the gate is open or not." Now apply that to the sentence we have under study: "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin." According to his definition, example and explanation, the point of "doubt" is whether or not we walk in the light. We determine whether or not we walk in the light by the two circumstances or "realities": fellowship and cleansing by the blood. Nearly everybody you hear talking about this passage wish to say that the latter two circumstances depend upon walking in the light. But according to the explanation of this grammar the walking in the light depends on the latter circumstances.

I thought I understood this matter from my study of English grammar; but since so many just took the popular explanation of the passage for granted, I thought perhaps I had missed something

of the usage of the subjunctive in the original language of the text, the Greek. Had I been teaching error; that in order to be walking in the light men must be in fellowship with God, the apostles and saints, and be cleansed by the blood of Christ? The salvation and hope of souls whom I had taught were in the balance. I needed to be right, or hasten to correct it. On the other hand, however, are all those; who teach that the sincere child of God, that is, the person walking in the light, has as a simultaneous consequence, the cleansing by blood and the fellowship; teaching error; giving the child who sins a false sense of security? As A. Campbell searched the original text to find what the truth is on the subject of baptism, so I turned there to see what the truth is on this subject.

I dusted off (actually I use it frequently) Winer's New Testament Grammar and began reading. "The Indicative denotes what is actual, the Subjunctive and Optative what is possible merely: — the Subjunctive, what is objectively possible (the realization of which depends on circumstances)" (Thayer edition, p. 281). Then I began to apply his definition to some particular passages. First, however, let me assure you that his definition precisely agrees with the one given in Rigdon's English grammar, and is illustrated with the sentence already given. Notice: "what is objectively possible" — "if it is raining"; "The realization of which depends on circumstances" — "it is cloudy." The possibility is rain, depending on the circumstance of being cloudy.

It would be possible to multiply illustrations in our common speech. I could correctly say, "If I am healthy I eat properly." That does not mean that my health causes me to eat properly. The meaning is that proper eating is a contributing factor to my health. There may be many other contributing factors to my health; such as exercise, environment, inheritance; but proper diet is one. So in the passage under direct scrutiny. We are not to conclude that walking in light causes me to have fellowship and cleansing. Instead, these last two circumstances determine whether or not I am in the light. There may be and are other contributing factors to my being in the light. It is contingent upon my confessing my sins (v. 9). It is contingent upon the advocacy of Christ (1 John 2:1); and many others. But it is certain that my walking in the light is contingent upon the circumstances of blood cleansing and fellowship.

## ANALYSIS APPLIED IN OTHER PASSAGES

Let us examine some other statements in the subjunctive mood found in this same letter of John's. "Because if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things." (1 John 3:20). We surely are aware that our heart's condemning us does not cause God to be greater than our heart and does not cause God to know all things. The statement is made to warn us that God, who is greater than our heart and who knows all things, knows what is in our heart and is not to be deceived by our action or appearance. Thus, according to Winer's thesis: the circumstances which are certain are God's greatness and knowledge; that, therefore, which is possible is his knowing our heart that condemns us.

Another instance: "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (1 John 2:15). It is because he does not have the love of the Father in him that he continues to love the world. It is another case of the circumstance of the love of the Father determining the possibility of loving not the world.

Come closer to the particular case in study: "And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the whole world." (1 John 2:1,2). A man's sins do not cause Jesus to be our Advocate and propitiation. That is not the purpose of this statement in the subjunctive. He is our Advocate and propitiation. We can take advantage of this advocacy and propitiation when we sin, in order to be cleansed and forgiven. Once again; the possibility, or forgiveness when we sin, depends upon the circumstances, or advocacy and propitiation of Christ.

Take another look; "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9). God is faithful and righteous before and after we sin or confess our sin. He is faithful and righteous whether we confess our sins or not. Our confession does not produce his faithfulness and righteousness. It is because of these circumstances that we have the privilege of confessing our sins, and be forgiven and cleansed. This is what is involved in the statement, "... the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Romans 2:4).

Consider yet another; "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8). The saying that we have no sin does not cause us to be deceived and does not cause

us to have not the truth in us. Instead, our being deceived and our not having the truth in us are the circumstances which allow us to say we have no sin. The man who can say he has no sin is one who is self deceived and who does not love and live the truth.

The theses of Rigdon for the English subjunctive and Winer for the Greek subjunctive can be seen in all these instances. So, back to our main point of study; we see that our walking in the light is the possibility or thing in doubt, which depends for verification upon the circumstances of fellowship and cleansing. This is what we have been saying all along in the course of this controversy. We have just not been saying specifically that this is to be known by the mood of the verb in the sentence. We could show by the thought of the context and by all other scripture teaching that this is the meaning of the passage; and have been insisting that this is the only explanation which harmonizes with the context and other teaching of the Scriptures. Others, who have been careless, or who could care less, in their use of the passage and of the significance of the subjunctive mood, have given it an interpretation which fits their unscriptural theory that God forgives the sincere Christian as he sins, before and without repentance of that sin and confession of it. Their ungrammatical exegesis does not agree with the other statements of the context and goes beyond any other statement or teaching of scripture. Particularly they have no harmony between verse 7 and verse 9. They make confession of a sin unnecessary for forgiveness until that sin has been brought to the sinner's attention.

### HARMONY OF THE TEXT

Observe how this application of the subjunctive mood fits into the entire theme of the context. The truth which the apostle John taught is the grounds of fellowship with him, with God and Christ, and the hearers (1 John 1:1-4). In God there is no darkness at all, but he is light (v. 5). The fact that sin is discussed in the remainder of the chapter shows that sin is equated with darkness, which is according to other passages of scripture (cf. Romans 13:12; Colossians 1:12-14). The man who says he is in fellowship with God while he is in darkness is a liar. He cannot be doing the truth while in darkness for the two are incompatible (v. 6).

Move on to the verses following the particular focal point. We are not to suppose from these facts that any one of us can and does live

without sinning. That man who would so think or say is deceived and he does not understand or appreciate the truth. Instead of such a perfect or sinless life, he must find the cleansing by Jesus Christ and fellowship or sharing with God, Christ and his apostles through the truth in order to be in the light where there is no darkness.

The next verse (9) tells us how this cleansing and forgiveness takes place; it is through confession of those sins. This is not the only requirement to be found in the Scriptures, but is a climactic requirement. Peter commanded one who sinned to "repent and pray" to be forgiven (Acts 8:22). Confession would be included in that prayer. Such prayer reaches God who forgives through Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:17) as our high priest and Advocate (2 John 2:1). This is made possible through his being the satisfaction or propitiation for sins (v. 2). This is for the whole world, but we must avail ourselves of this propitiation and advocacy, forgiveness and cleansing, by complying with the terms and conditions, such as previously stated.

Now see that every piece fits into place. Jesus Christ is our Advocate and God's satisfaction for sins. The word of truth is given to keep us from sinning, to tell us what to do when we sin that we might be forgiven, to bring us into fellowship with God who is total light, in order that we, too, might be in the light. We are to confess our sins to be forgiven and cleansed. When thus cleansed we share in the fellowship of God, Christ, the apostles and other saints of like circumstances. These are the conditions of light and walking in the light of verse 7. How beautiful and harmonious are the words of our Lord when not wrested and perverted to make them conform to some fanciful theory that men have devised to give a sense of security to disobedient people who have not yet turned from their sins.

### RECOGNIZED BY SCHOLARS

Scholarly commentators have not been so careless with the subjunctive mood of this passage, as to go along with the popular theory, but have considered its significance. Bengel, in his Gnomon, has this terse statement: "We have fellowship — That is, Then we truly say, that we have fellowship; for walking in the light certainly and immediately follows this." Johnson, in his People's New Testament With Notes, says; "Cleansed by the blood of

Christ, and thus made holy, we are fitted for the heavenly communion." Robertson, in his Word Studies, mixes the circumstances. He makes the fellowship the result of walking in the light, but cleansing as necessary to walking in the light: "Walking in the light with God makes possible fellowship with one another and is made possible also by the blood of Jesus." He is about as careless with this passage as with Ephesians 2:8, where he states a true principle of grammar that the pronoun "that" cannot have as its subject "faith" or "grace" because they are feminine gender and the pronoun is neuter gender; but then he asserts that the pronoun modifies salvation, yet that principle is also not neuter gender.

### LIMITED TO A "THUS SAITH THE LORD"

Neither this passage, nor any other, tells us that God will forgive the sins of a child of God before those sins are confessed. This passage tells us how to be in the light with God, and that is by confessing our sins that we might be forgiven and cleansed by the blood of Christ. No man has the right and prerogative of law and judgment, to take into his own hands the making of conditions of forgiveness and cleansing which God has not made. I need, as constantly as I sin, constantly to make confession of my sins that I commit in order to be cleansed of them that I may, in turn, be in the light with God. That might be said to be constant cleansing. But that is definitely not what some of my brethren refer to as "constant cleansing." They are referring to a cleansing even as the person sins because he is sincerely trying to live right and before he has confessed those sins. Let us be sure that we are teaching what God has said and no more than he has said, on this matter and all others, leaving the judgment with him.

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