1st John – Conditional Clauses

Four Classes –

1. 1st Class – εἰ (ei) with the indicative mood—assumes the condition to be true for the sake of argument. Much of the time can be translated “since” when the protasis is understood as a truth.

2. 2nd Class – εἰ (ei) with an aorist or imperfect tense with the indicative mood—the apodosis will usually have the particle ἀν (an). The particle is normally untranslated and is a marker, known as contrary to fact. The statement is assumed to be untrue. The statement can be assumed untrue for the sake of argument, or is a known fact that the statement is untrue.

3. 3rd Class – ἐὰν (e’an) with the subjunctive—in distinction to a first class conditional, is more tentative and simply projects some action or event for hypothetical consideration. The action sits on an apex and can go either way.

4. 4th Class – εἰ (ei) with the optative mood—remote but desired possibility.

Uses in 1st John –

Beginning with the Second Class Conditional (because there is only one), 1st John 2:19 has the “εἰ εἰ” with the verb being in the Imperfect Active Indicative. The verse begins with “From us they went out, but they were not of us” this is an indicative action and is a statement of fact. If they were of us (but they are not), they would have remained with us.

First Class Conditional statements are used, in full or in part, five times. “εἰ μὴ” is used in 2:22 but is not a condition; the combination of particles indicates “except” or “but.” 1st John 3:13 provides a non-standard conditional clause. The conclusion is prior to the proposal. Notice that this is not a proposal but a command based on the condition. 1st John 5:9 is a standard 1st Class Conditional, “since we accept the witness of men, the witness of God is greater.”

Third Class is by far the most often used condition in 1st John. “ἐὰν (e’an)” is used 22 times in 1st John. Not every time the particle is used does it indicate a Conditional Clause (1st John 2:28 “when”). The most obvious conditional clauses in 1st John are in chapter 1 verses 6-10. Each verse begins with a third class conditional clause: each has an “ἐὰν (e’an)” with a Subjunctive verb. Other significant 3rd Class Conditional clauses are found in the following verses: 1st John 2:1; 2:15; 2:29; 3:20-22; 4:12; 4:20
Nuances of the 3rd Class Conditional Sentence –

1. Typically, “A conditional sentence consists of a subordinate clause which states a supposition, and a principal clause which states a conclusion conditioned on the fulfillment of the supposition stated in the subordinate clause.”

2. Sometimes the conclusion is omitted from the sentence (Luke 13:9)

3. Sometimes the primary condition is not the main point of the sentence (2nd Timothy 2:5)

4. The summary (apodosis) can be true regardless of the truth of the premise (protasis) (Matthew 8:2)

5. There can be a connection, but not a cause effect relationship (John 14:3; 1st John 4:12; 1st Corinthians 7:28; James 2:2-4)

6. It is not expected that everyone will agree with all of these explanations, but certainly it is clear that there is no discernible distinction in form in the NT Greek that will identify the two types of conditional statements within the third class. In fact, there is some future time-reference in all of the examples, even those that are often called present-general. The general-particular may be a valid distinction, but it depends on subject matter and the interpretive exegesis of the commentator, not on the Greek text of the NT. James Boyer – Grace Theological Journal

7. To take one meaning from the third class conditional statement and make it solely cause and effect would be irresponsible and poor Biblical interpretation practice.

Conclusion –

Below is a series of 1st Class Conditional Statements found in 2nd Timothy 2:11. All “if statements” are 1st Class Conditional – assumed to be true for the sake of argument. Italics indicate literal Greek difference.

2 Timothy 2:11-13 (NASB)

11 It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him;
12 If we endure, we will also reign together; If we deny Him, He also will deny us;
13 If we are un-believing, He remains faithful, for He is not able to deny Himself.

The conclusion is that an exegesis of the passage must also include an understanding of the Greek words and syntax, but also must include a solid understanding of intended communication in order to grasp the full meaning of the text.
1 John 1:5-10 This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

Verse 6 begins the conditional clause statements that continue through 2:2. “ean” is used six times in this text—four times with an Aorist Subjunctive verb (6,8,10; 2:1) and three times with the Present Subjunctive verb (6,7,9). The sense of all these statements indicates an unknown hypothetical. All the conditions are possible but they may or may not actually take place.

“We say” is “ἐἶπον eipon (eye'-pahn)” and is sometimes used as a cognate of “legō.” The word consistently has the meaning of to say, to affirm, to recite, to call, to proclaim, to command. The word does not give any sense as to the validity of what is said, simply that it was stated. This does not mean claim, as in to speak falsely. This simply indicates what was said. The word is used 1024 times in the New Testament. The verb is in the Aorist Subjunctive mood and could be translated “If we should say.”

The statement made is “we have fellowship with him.” The statement is not a claim, simply what has been said. Notice also the persons saying this. Both verbs “say” and “have” are in the 1st person plural. This is a question that has been asked and debated. All the verbs and reflexive pronouns in this section (vs. 6-10) are either “we” or “Him.” There are no 1st person singular (I, Me), there are no 2nd person plural or singular (you, you all), nor are there any third person plural (they). The way that this section is written seems to set off from verses 1-4 and now the John includes the reader with himself in the conversation.

“We have” is the verb (ἔχω echō) and it is in the Present Indicative. The word means to have, to have as a condition, to hold. The grammatical form indicates that it is a possession, current and perpetual.

Fellowship is “κοινωνία koinōnía (koin-oh'-nee-ah)” which is found only in this chapter (3,6,7). In this verse the statement is that we have fellowship with Him. In verse 7 the conclusion is that we have fellowship with one another.

The fellowship is “with Him.” This is a preposition with the genitive. The translation is not only accurate but theologically poignant. The same phrase is used in verse 3—“And indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”
The second part of the proposal is that we walk in the darkness, literally “and in the darkness we should walk.” The verb here is “περιπατέω peripateō (peh-ree-pah-teh'-oh)” and can be used either literally or figuratively. Literally it means to walk, to walk around, to stroll. The figurative uses are behavior, manner of life, the way we carry ourselves.

Darkness is “σκότος skotos (skah'-tahs)” and the word is almost always translated dark or darkness. Literally, this is used to describe blindness, the darkness of the sun (the Cross; Acts 2). Figuratively, this is the domain of Satan, the deeds of evil, spiritual darkness (lack of knowledge of God). The term walk in darkness is unique to this verse, so one cannot make this say more than the plain reading. There is one other time walk is used in the same context (Ephesians 5:8). Here, Paul is concluding who they are and then commands them to have a lifestyle that is consistent with their true (new) nature (Ephesians 5:6-11).

If we affirm this fellowship and have a lifestyle that is in conformity with darkness, we lie. The verb is the Present Indicative. The lying is current and perpetual. The affirmation is once, the having fellowship is perpetual and the behavioral lifestyle being in darkness is perpetual; therefore the lying is perpetual. The behavior and what we have are not in alignment.

Is this cause and effect? This is a conclusion based on the evidence, but is not a cause/effect relationship.

The verse is concluded by the phrase we do not practice the truth. Practice is “ποιέω poieō (poy-eh-oh)” and means to accomplish, make, create, do. The verb is also in the Present Indicative. The verb is accompanied by the negative particle “do not do” the truth. This means that the truth we know and we have is not being practiced. It does not say we do not have the truth, nor does it say we are not really in fellowship. The fellowship with God and our true nature is assured.

What then can be determined, by this verse? John is indicating a statement of nature and God wants us to have a lifestyle that matches with our nature.