

## CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS' PERCEPTION OF THE CONCEPT OF ETERNAL LIFE IN JOHANNINE LITERATURE

By

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### Abstract

This paper examined the view of contemporary Christians on the concept of eternal life in Johannine Literature. The phrase Johannine Literature refers to the New Testament writings of John, the disciple of Jesus, such as the Gospel of John, I, II, III John and the book of Revelation. This study becomes necessary in view of the contradictory opinions amongst scholars and contemporary Christians on the subject matter, especially as presented by John in his literature. The research involved a brief exegetical study of some relevant Johannine passages to ascertain the author's thought on eternal life as a 'realized', or a 'yet to come' reality. In addition, a field study that required series of interviews of selected respondents was also germane to this study so as to ascertain the perception of contemporary Christians in Benin City on the subject matter. The study revealed amongst others, that John's theology on eternal life is a present-continuous possession for Christians. That is, John emphasized that Christians receive eternal life here on earth and it continues with them into the afterlife. Again, the study further revealed, that there appears to be significant level of inconsistencies and sometimes confusion among Christians, Church leaders and denominational heads on the actual meaning of eternal life. In order to address this lapse in knowledge, the study recommended that leaders of various Christian groups should devote quality time to the study and teaching of the doctrine of eternal life because of its relevance to the Christian faith.

### Introduction

God's prerogative to freely give life to man remains undisputed since the beginning of creation. However, this life, as well as other forms of earthly life are transitory and inevitably succumb to death. Therefore, for man to attain immortality, he must partake or possess the immortal life of God known as eternal life. Although it's God's desire and plan for man to partake in eternal life, the actual timing of possessing this life and its underlying concept remains elusive, contentious, and highly debated amongst Christian scholars and faithful. That is, some Christians and biblical scholars understand eternal life as a present possession, while others understand it as an afterlife concern.

A study of the four gospels' presentation of the concept of eternal life showed that there appears a considerable level of inconsistencies between the positions of the Synoptic

Gospels writers and that of the Johannine writings. For instance, the following Synoptic Gospels' passages seem to suggest that eternal life is a futuristic reality: "No one who has left home or wife or brothers, or parents, or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life" (*New International Version Bible*, 1978/2002, Luke 18:29-30; Mark 10:29-30). On the contrary, Johannine writings seem to present it as a present reality available for believers in Christ in the 'here and now' as shown in the following statements: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life..."; John 3:36); "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (I John 5:11). When the above statements are considered literarily, it becomes obvious that the eternal life in the Synoptic Gospels is a futuristic possession while it appears a present possession in Johannine literature.

The inconsistency in these positions is also prevalent amongst biblical scholars and contemporary Christians. Recent scholarships on the concept of eternal life revealed a divergence of opinions on the subject matter. Some scholars align with the synoptic writers' view, others favour the Johannine position, and yet some others posit a different perspective on the subject matter such as a two-fold concept of both present and future realities. Based on this premise, there was therefore a need to go beyond a literary reading of the biblical texts, to a more exegetical and theological approach to discover the original message of the gospels' authors concerning eternal life. More so, the paper also focused on investigating the perceptions of contemporary Christians on the concept of eternal life so as to understand their positions on this all-important doctrine of the Christian faith. In addition, efforts were made to carry-out an exegetical examination of some relevant Johannine passages so as to get as close as possible to the author's intended meaning. The aforementioned two objectives are exactly what this study set out to achieve.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem of this study is on how the Johannine teaching on eternal life can be ascertained through an exegetical study of some of its relevant passages. More so, the study also bothers on how the perceptions of the Johannine concept of eternal life among some contemporary Christians in Benin City can be understood.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to examine some relevant Johannine passages so as to ascertain the author's intended message on the concept of eternal life as a present or future reality. Furthermore, the study sets out to investigate the understanding of some contemporary Nigerian Christians on the subject matter.

## Methodology

This research is mainly literature research that is based upon existing original exegesis on Johannine writings. However, the researcher also carried out fieldwork that required a series of interviews of selected respondents to investigate their perceptions of the Johannine concept of eternal life. Firstly, the exegetical study which made use of the grammatico-historical and grammatical criticism approaches was applied to investigate the meaning of eternal life in the relevant Johannine passages. This approach was very useful in understanding the meaning of the selected passages through a detailed analysis that pays close attention to the language of the original text (Silva, 2007). According to Osborne, the task of a grammatico-historical and grammatical criticism theory of exegesis is a task that must be pursued with proper attention to the principles of hermeneutics. He added that "a proper grammatico-historical approach to the scripture will get us closer and closer to the author's intended meaning" (2006, pp.22-23). Slade (2016) and John (2014) suggested that the human authors' original meaning to the original audience alone is the text's correct interpretation. In addition, biblical scholars believe that grammatico-historical exegetical method will bring the reader into an asymptomatic relationship with the thinking of the biblical authors, and in knowing the meaning that is intended by these authors we can, at least in principle, know the entire meaning of scripture (John, 2014).

Furthermore, it was discovered that John made use of the phrase eternal life about twenty-three (23) times in his writings with only about eleven (11) indicating an idea of possession. These eleven (11) passages are John 3:15, John 3:16, John 3:36, John 5:24, John 5:39, John 6:40, John 6:47, John 6:54, I John 3:15, I John 5:11, I John 5:13. However, due to space, coupled with the focus of this paper, only two of these passage – John 5:24 and John 3:36 – were selected for this study. All the relevant words connecting to eternal life in these selected passages were isolated for analysis and were examined here in order to get closer to the author's intended meaning. Furthermore, according to Ossai-Ugbah, "grammaticohistorical criticism enables a researcher to understand how individual words 'function as carriers of meaning' and how these words are structured into phrases and sentences and subsequently analyzed through their original language to establish the original meaning of the text (Ossai-Ugbah, 2008).

Secondly, the population for the field research was chosen from twenty different denominations of churches within the Benin metropolis. This comprised of top church leaders of these denominations. The twenty selected denominations that were targeted as the population for this study cut across the Mainline Churches, African Indigenous Churches and the Pentecostal Churches. However, only a sample of this population was selected for the study. In selecting the population, emphasis was placed on churches with a large membership base.

The sampling technique used for this study was based on the purposeful sampling of the different church leaders from the twenty selected denominations. This sampling technique was guided by this study's need for quality and appropriate information from the respondents (Hox and Boeije, 2005). That is, in this work, the writer purposely chose a sample that he preconceived will give him the appropriate response the study demands. In line with this, the sample of this study comprised of three clergymen, each from the twenty denominations selected, making a total of sixty respondents. This handful of samples is in line with the qualitative research style of making use of small samples for research work. The reason for the choice of these respondents was based on the premise that, as church leaders, with some of them serving as heads of their denominations, they will be more knowledgeable on such a sensitive topic as the concept of eternal life.

The instrument for collecting the primary data for the study was the semistandardized interview. This enabled the researcher to probe more, far beyond the respondents' answer, so as to grasp his/her perception or ideas (Berg, 2004), which in this case is the concept of eternal life. The data collected from the interview was recorded and transcribed. The data was then classified into series of categories to enable the researcher interpret them easily. More so, significant statements, phrases, and words that expressed the respondents' views on the subject matter were extracted from each transcript; meanings were formulated from these significant statements and organized into themes for better understanding. Through this analysis, this study was able to ascertain the respondents' perception of the Johannine concept of eternal life.

### **Meaning and Definition of Eternal Life**

The term eternal life is a unique kind of life different from the one otherwise known to man. According to Dunn quoting C.H. Dodd, "the term eternal (*αἰώνιος*), is more of a qualitative than the quantitative description and it includes a reference to everlastingness which is a function of its divine quality. That is, the adjective eternal indicates that life has its source in God" (2013, p.39). Furthermore, the biblical meaning also suggests that "eternal life is hoped for as a reward for virtue or feared as a punishment for vice" (Mangalden, n.d, p.27). For Mock (2017, p.68), eternal life is classically believed to be a timeless life, an unending life, or life in its fullest. It is a life that is believed to be closely related to God's life, because "there is an inherent relationship sometimes ontological or logical between the eternity of God and the eternal life of humans" (Mock, 2017, p.68).

Therefore, since God alone has everlasting life, He alone can manifest it in the lives of Christians. However, the principle and concepts of this divine life remain elusive to man. There is, therefore, a need for man to have a rational and theological understanding of the meaning and essence of eternal life to enhance his spiritual and physical growth.

## Exegesis of Johannine Concept of Eternal Life

In this study, the exegetical studies on some selected Johannine passages revealed that eternal life is a present-continuous possession in John's teaching. That is, John teaches that believers in Christ already have eternal life and it's a gift from God which will remain with him or her till eternity, unless such a believer loses his or her faith in Christ. In arriving at this understanding, this researcher examined some selected Johannine texts which depict eternal life, however only of those relevant texts – John 5:24 and John 3:36 – are examined here in order to get closer to the author's intended meaning.

### (i) John 5:24

*Ἀμήν ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ὁ τὸν λόγον μου ἀκούων καὶ πιστεύων τῷ πέμψαντί με ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον καὶ εἰς κρίσιν οὐκ ἔρχεται, ἀλλὰ μεταβέβηκεν ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν*

“Verily verily I say to you that the one hearing the word of me and believing the One having sent me has life eternal and comes not into judgment but has passed out of death into life”.

There are some keywords in the above passage that were analyzed so as to get closer to the intended meaning of the author. The following words were carefully selected for this study:

*Ἀμήν ἀμήν* - verily verily or truly truly

*Ἀκούων* - the one hearing

*ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον*- has eternal life

### (a) *Ἀμήν ἀμήν*

According to the author, Jesus begins by drawing the attention of this audience to a very important subject of eternal life by using the words *Ἀμήν ἀμήν* (truly truly). These introductory words signal the importance of the deeper theological truths he was about to teach his followers. “Verily verily I say unto you”, was followed by a significant truth and assertion that eternal life does not belong only in the future, but is already here for believers to possess. Ellicott (2020, John 5:24) corroborates this view when he suggested that the ‘verily verily, I say unto you’ of verse 24 was emphasized by the writer to renew an important declaration in its strongest terms that the hour has now come for believers to have eternal life.

### (b) *ἀκούων*

*ἀκούων* is from the root word *ἀκούω* meaning to hear (Thayer, 1997). It also means to perceive by the ear what is announced in one's presence to hear immediately (Thayer, 1997). However, its derivative here, *ἀκούων*, is in the participle form and it is parsed as follows: Tense- Present; Voice- Active; Mood- Participle; Case- Nominative; Gender- Masculine; Number-Singular

The verily verily, employed by the author at the beginning of verse 24 points to the participle *ἀκούων*, that whoever hears the words of Jesus and believes God who sent him has

eternal life. Now the main verb in verse 24 is ἔχει and it is important to note the relationship between the participle ἀκούων and the main verb ἔχει, to elicit, at least, to the closest possible way, the author's intended meaning concerning the time of possessing eternal life. According to Preus (2011), the tense of a participle reveals its time concerning the main verb. That is, for one to identify the time of action of the main verb in any given sentence, the tense of the participle would be very apt. in other words, ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον (has eternal life) in the statement above can best be interpreted if one can establish the relationship between the participle ἀκούων and the main verb ἔχει. However, ἀκούων is a present, active participle and Preus (2008, p.188) averred that the "present participle shows that the action of the participle is taking place at the same time as the main verb". Therefore, if the act of hearing (ἀκούων) and believing in Jesus are happening at the present, as suggested by the tense, then the action of the main verb ἔχει (has) also has to correspondingly, take place at the same time. More so, the act of possessing eternal life (ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον) takes place in the present, simultaneously with the time a person hears (ἀκούων) and believes (πιστεύων) the words of Jesus and the one who sent him. Hence one can deduce from the choice of words of the author that eternal life is a reality that a believer lays hold of in the present time, while on earth, and expectedly, it remains with him till eternity except he loses it when he stops believing. Therefore, from the above passage eternal life to John appears to be a presentcontinuous possession for believers.

(ii) John 3:36

ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν Υἱὸν ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον ὁ δὲ ἀπειθῶν τῷ Υἱῷ οὐκ ὄψεται ζωὴν, ἀλλ' ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θεοῦ μένει ἐπ' αὐτόν

"The one believing in the Son has life eternal; the one however not obeying the Son will not see life but the wrath of God abides on him".

The key phrase that was considered in this passage is ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον

(a) ἔχει

ἔχει - (he/she has) The word is a verb which is a derivative of the root word ἔχω meaning to hold, to have or to possess. It is parsed as follows: Tense- Present; Voice- Active; Mood- Indicative; Person -3<sup>rd</sup>; Number- Singular

The verb in its present tense talks much about the phrase ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον (he/she has eternal life). ἔχει which is rendered 'has', and not 'shall have', shows that the author's intended meaning is that the believer already possesses eternal life. More so, "Christians often think of eternal life as something yet to be won, however, it has already been given to them; the question is whether they will lose it again or not (Cambridge, 2022, John 3:36). In other words, the Christian not only has eternal life but will continue to possess it as long as he or she does not lose it. This is simply translated as a present-continuous reality for believers. Bengel (2020, John 3:36) describes ἔχει as "the present with the future being included".

Therefore, based on the brief exegesis above, one can deduce that eternal life is a present-continuous possession in Johannine writings. It is something that the believer possesses here on earth which continues with him till eternity. This understanding was investigated among top clergymen in Benin City and the findings from the empirical investigation are examined in the next section.

### Contemporary Christians Perception of Eternal Life

In order to ascertain the concept of eternal life among contemporary Christians in Benin City, a field study that required series of interviews of selected respondents was carried out. This was expedient so as to understand the current state of the issues that have been examined in the literature-based research and to orientate the respondents on the subject matter.

#### Analysis of Perceptions of the Concept of Eternal Life within Church Denominations

The twenty church denominations and the perceptions of their clergies are shown below. Their perceptions were categorized according to the following parameters:

Future – the belief that eternal life is exclusively possessed in the afterlife

Exclusively Present- the belief that eternal life is a present reality with the respondents consciously or unconsciously omitting its futuristic tendencies

Present and Future – the belief that aspects (partial) of eternal life could be experienced here while the real eternal life is possessed in the afterlife; and

Present-Continuous – the belief that eternal life is fully possessed here in this life and it continues with the believer till eternity.

S/N	Denomination	No. of Clergies Interviewed	Perception on Eternal Life	Remark
1	Anglican Communion	3	future-3	Unified view
2	Methodist Church of Nigeria	3	Present and future- 1 future-2	Contradictory view
3	ECWA	3	present-continuous- 1 future-2	Contradictory view
4	Redeem Christian Church of God	3	Present and future- 3	Unified view
5	Living Faith church Worldwide	3	future-2 Present and future- 1	Contradictory view

6	The Apostolic Church	3	Present and future- 2 future-1	Contradictory view
7	Baptist Convention	3	Present and future- 3	Unified view
8	United Baptist Mission	3	Future- 3	Unified view
9	Assemblies of God	3	Present and future- 2	Contradictory view
10	Cherubim & Seraphim Movement	3	Future- 3	Unified view
11	Celestial Church Worldwide	3	Present and future- 1 future- 2	Contradictory view
12	Deeper Christian Life Ministry	3	Present - 1 future- 1	Contradictory view
13	Lord's Chosen Church	3	Present - 2 future- 1	Contradictory view
14	Christ's Chosen Church of God	3	Future- 2 Present and future- 1	Contradictory view
15	Christ Apostolic Church	3	Present and future- 3	Unified view
16	Church of God Mission	3	Present – 1 Present and future- 1 future- 1	Contradictory view
17	New Covenant Gospel Church	3	Present and future- 3	Unified view
18	Roman Catholic Church	3	Future- 3	Unified view
19	Christ Embassy	3	Present	Unified view
20	Mountain of Fire and Miracles	3	Present and future- 2 future- 1	Contradictory view

### Tabular representation of data

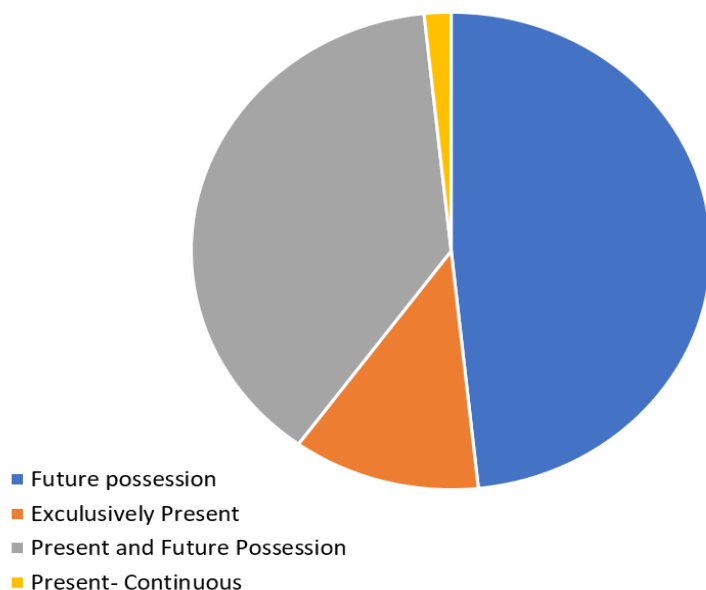
	Number	Percent
Future Possession	29	48.33
Exclusively Present	7	11.67
Present and Future Possession	23	38.33
Present-Continuous	1	1.67
	60	100

### Source: Researcher's Compilation

A brief interpretation of the table is provided here



### Graphical representation of data



Source: Researcher’s Compilation

### A Summary of Issues arising from the Field Study

Below is a summary of some of the divergent views on the concept of eternal life among contemporary Christians, especially as presented in the Johannine writings

#### i. The Problem with the definition of eternal life

One of the conclusions arising from this study is that there were so many inconsistencies on the definition of eternal life given by the various clergymen that were interviewed. The most popular definition put forward by about 50% of the respondents is the perception of eternal life as a place of abode or a specific location where Christians shall transit to in the afterlife. Respondents with this understanding or definition believe that eternal life is strictly a future possession that cannot be attained here on earth.

Another definition that was postulated is the notion that eternal life is an experience or the life of God. The respondents with this opinion averred that eternal life is either a present reality or both present and future. While about 11% of the respondents opined that eternal life is an exclusively present possession, another 38% posited that it is both a present and future possession for believers. Hence, the varying definition of eternal life went a long way in affecting the respondents’ understanding of the true meaning or nature of the subject matter.

#### ii. Insufficient Study or Attention given to Eternal Life

The study also revealed that there appears to be a significant level of insufficient study done on the theme of eternal life, or that less attention is been given to its teaching by the various clergies interviewed in this study. The high degree of contradictions on the concept of

eternal life in the various opinions proposed by respondents showed that not much study had been done in the area and this conscious or unconscious negligence of an allimportant doctrine to the Christian faith cuts across all the denominations that were sampled for this study. The consequence of this negligence was very obvious from most of the respondents' lack of mastery of the subject matter under investigation.

### **iii. Doctrinal Divergences among Christian Groups**

Another significant understanding from the empirical study of this research is that there are clear divergent opinions on the doctrine of eternal life among the various "sampled denominations. There were contradictory perceptions of the concept of eternal life even among clergymen of the same denomination. It was observed during this research that three clergymen of the same denomination with contradictory perceptions of eternal life claim that their positions represent the doctrinal position or belief of their denomination. There were also instances where some clergymen disagreed with their spiritual leaders or denominational heads on their perception of eternal life. More so, data from the field study revealed that out of the twenty church denominations used as the sample for this study, only about eight (8) of them have their pastors agreeing on a common concept of eternal life while the other twelve (12) denominations have differing views.

### **Conclusion**

It is the position of this study that the author of the Johannine writings believes and teaches that upon the belief on Jesus' salvific work on behalf of mankind, eternal life is possessed and becomes a present-continuous possession for believers; something they possess in the 'here and now' which also remains with them until eternity. This was revealed through the exegesis of some key Greek words and phrases from a couple of selected Johannine passages that were analyzed in the study. More so, the field study carried out to ascertain the perception of contemporary Christians on the concept of eternal life revealed a divergence of opinions and understanding on the subject matter. It appears that a channel for discussing doctrinal issues is lacking even among clergy of the same denomination. An issue as sensitive and central to the Christian faith as eternal life ought to enjoy a consensus of position among the clergy of most, if not all Christian groups. The lack of consensus among the clergy of church denominations reveals a cacophony of curriculum of church theological colleges.

### **Recommendations**

Christians, pastors and heads of church denominations should endeavour to adopt and embrace the right attitude geared at devoting quality time to the study and appropriate teaching on the theme of eternal life because it is a very important doctrine to the Christian faith.

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### **Data of Respondents**

1. Very Rev. Igwe Sunday Nwokoha, 40 – 50 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on April 22, 2020)
2. Rt. Revd. Rufus Olarenwaju Babalola, 50 – 60 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on April 22, 2020)
3. Very Rev. Magaret B. Ajitala, 60 – 70 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on April 22, 2020)
4. Ven. Isaiah Owheruo, 50 – 60 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on June 16, 2020)
5. Bishop Peter J.O. Imasuen, (JP), MFR, 50 – 60 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on July 30, 2020)
6. Sup. Evang. Dr. J. Ibhaze, 60 – 70 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on May 10, 2020)
7. Sup. Evang. Augustine Awonusi, 50 – 60 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on May 6, 2021)
8. Rev. C.A. Odudu, 60 – 70 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on June 26, 2020)
9. Rt. Rev. Dr. Osama Usuanlele, 60 – 70 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on June 8, 2020)
10. Rev. Ilaweagbon Dennis Omoruyi, 40 – 50 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on August 4, 2020)
11. Pastor Obaniyi Joseph Ayowole, 40 – 50 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on July 6, 2020)
12. Pastor Stephen Ilori, 50 – 60 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on March 6, 2020)
13. Pastor Henry Omodiagbe, 40 – 50 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on May 28, 2020)
14. Pastor Austin Etiebet, 30 – 40 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on June 23, 2020)
15. Rev. Michael Kadiri, 40 – 50 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on April 13, 2020)
16. Rev. Lawani Joseph, 50 – 60 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on April 11, 2020)
17. Rev. Emmanuel Irabor, 50 – 60 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on April 2, 2020)

18. Pastor Ana Okoffoh, 40 – 50 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on June 30, 2020)
19. Pastor Christopher Osawaru, 40 – 50 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on August 12, 2020)
20. Pastor Festus Idehen, 50 – 60 years, (Personal Communication in Evbomore Quarters, Benin City, Edo State on August 12, 2020)
21. Pastor Henry Aghedo, 50 – 60 years, (Personal Communication in Benin City, Edo State on March 10, 2020)