

Miracles Part 6

First Corinthians 13

Introduction

Among cessationists, there is a common, though not unanimous, view that according to 1 Corinthians 13:8–10, the supernatural gifts ceased with the completion of the New Testament canon. Central to this position is a particular interpretation of Paul’s statement in verse 10 that “the partial will be done away” when “the perfect comes.” The argument holds that “the partial” refers to the incomplete nature of revelation provided through prophecy, tongues, and supernaturally imparted knowledge, whereas “the perfect” refers to the completed canon of the New Testament. It is typically asserted that since the canon closed around A.D. 100, the supernatural gifts ceased about the same time.

In my view, a strong case can be made for this interpretation, though it is not essential to the broader argument that the gifts have ceased (see Miracles, Parts 1–5). With the rise of the modern Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, this passage (1 Cor 13:8–10) has received enormous attention, and key terms have been discussed and debated extensively. The following remarks touch on only a few of the many issues involved, but it is hoped that these observations will prove helpful.

The Church Fathers

The following quotations from several of the Church Fathers indicate that these early writers did not, at least, subscribe to the view that “the perfect” refers to the completed canon of the New Testament. Instead, they interpreted Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 as pointing to an end-time event.

Irenaeus (c 130–202 AD)

And Paul declares: "Not that I have already attained, or that I am justified, or already have been made perfect. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when that which is perfect has come, the things which are in part shall be done away." As, therefore, when that which is perfect is come, we shall not see another Father, but Him whom we now desire to see...

Against Heresies 4.9.2

<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-book4.html>

Clement of Alexandria (c 150-215 AD)

The divine apostle writes accordingly respecting us: "For now we see as through a glass;" knowing ourselves in it by reflection, and simultaneously contemplating, as we can, the efficient cause, from that which, in us, is divine. For it is said, "Having seen thy brother, thou hast seen thy God:" methinks that now the Saviour God is declared to us. But after the laying aside of the flesh, "face to face," -- then definitely and comprehensively, when the heart becomes pure.

Miscellanies 1.19

<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.html>

Origen (185 to 254 AD)

And therefore, we hope, after the troubles and struggles which we suffer here, to reach the highest heavens ... (and) seeing, as it was expressed by the true disciple of Jesus in these words, "then face to face;" and in these, "When that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part will be done away."

Against Celsus 6.20

<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/origen166.html>

Methodius (Late 3rd to early 4th century AD)

For now we know "in part," and as it were "through a glass," since that which is perfect has not yet come to us; namely, the kingdom of heaven and the resurrection, when "that which is in part shall be done away." For then will all our tabernacles be firmly set up, when again the body shall rise, with bones again joined and compacted with flesh.

The Banquet of the Ten Virgins

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ante-Nicene_Fathers/Volume_VI/Methodius/Banquet_of_the_Ten_Virgins/Tusiane/Part_2

Augustine

Wherefore the apostle uses the words cited a little ago, now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face. This vision is reserved as the reward of our faith, and of it the Apostle John also says, When He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. 1 John 3:2 By the face of God, we are to understand His manifestation, and not a part of the body similar to that which in our bodies we call by that name.

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120122.htm>

I have only limited knowledge of the writings of the Church Fathers on this topic, but as far as I know, the informed consensus of those who have examined the texts is that the Fathers understood “the perfect” (1 Cor 13:10) to refer to a future end-time event rather than to the completion of the canon. While this observation is worth noting, we must remember that Scripture is authoritative, not the fallible interpretations of Christians in the post-apostolic period.

Competing explanations

Modern-day attempts at interpretation are also fallible—a fact attested by the variety of explanations offered for “the perfect” in this text by serious students of Scripture. In a helpful article titled “A Re-examination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13,” Professor Myron J. Houghton notes that The Believer’s Study Bible lists seven interpretations of the term “the perfect.” He provides the following list:

“(1) the completion of the canon, (2) the maturity of the church at the close of the apostolic age, (3) the death of believers and their immediate presence with the Lord (cf. 2 Cor 5:8), (4) the rapture of the church, (5) the return of Christ, (6) the eternal state, or (7) the eschaton (i.e., end time events) as a unified whole.”

Bibliotheca Sacra (Jul 1996)

Houghton also points out that “Even some cessationists reject this passage as supporting their view.” Even so I share the view that a good case can be made for the *completed canon* position. Let’s look at the text.

First Corinthians 13:8-10

James Burton Coffman, an influential figure within the Restoration Movement, begins his commentary on 1 Corinthians 13 by noting that “the chapter falls easily into three divisions: (1) the absolute necessity of love (1 Corinthians 13:1–3), (2) the characteristics of love (1 Corinthians 13:4–7), and (3) the permanence of love (1 Corinthians 13:8–13)” (*Coffman’s Commentaries on the Bible*). The third division contains the following statement by Paul:

1 Cor 13:8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part (*ek merous*) and we prophesy in part (*ek merous*); 10 but when the perfect (*teleion*) comes, the partial (*ek merous*) will be done away.

I share the view that “the partial” refers to the incomplete nature of the revelation supplied by prophecy, tongues, and supernaturally imparted knowledge, while “the perfect” denotes the completed canon of the New Testament.

When we turn to the text and examine the word translated “perfect” (*teleion*), the importance of context becomes apparent. *Teleios*, the adjectival form, “conveys a range of meanings: ‘perfect, mature, complete’” (*Mounce’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*). We are told that “it can refer to something of the highest standard (i.e., ‘perfect’; Jas 1:4a, 17, 25), to a fully ‘mature’ adult (Eph 4:13), or to something fully developed, ‘perfect,’ or ‘complete’ in a moral sense (Mt 5:48; Jas 1:4b; 3:2).” Although the term has a “range of meanings” in Scripture, it is context that helps us determine its most fitting sense in 1 Corinthians 13.

Context

It seems evident that chapters 7–16 of 1 Corinthians contain Paul’s responses to several questions from the brethren at Corinth. The recurring phrase “Now concerning” signals that Paul is addressing specific issues raised by them. Our focus is on 1 Corinthians 12:1–14:4, where the apostle responds to questions about spiritual gifts. It is also likely that Paul was aware these gifts were being misused in the assemblies.

Given the continuity of theme in this section, our understanding of “the perfect” (13:10) will be informed by Paul’s discussion of supernatural endowments in chapter 12. In this chapter we find two lists of miraculous gifts bestowed by the Lord for the common good (1 Cor 12:8–10; 12:28–30; see also Rom 12:6–8; Eph 4:11). The first list (vv. 8–10) enumerates nine miraculous gifts, three of which—Spirit-enabled knowledge, prophecy, and tongues—reappear in 13:8, where we are told they “will be done away” or “cease.”

In 13:9 Paul explains why they will cease: these gifts, while operative, provide revelation that is only partial (*ek merous*) or fragmentary. When will they cease? They will cease when “the partial” (piecemeal revelation) is replaced by “the perfect” (*teleion*), the complete body of truth promised by Jesus to the apostles. Understanding “the partial” is key to understanding “the perfect,” for “in the Pauline corpus the meaning ‘whole’ is suggested at 1 Cor 13:10 by the antithesis to *ek merous*” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*).

Helpful comments

In recent years a number of prominent scholars have written disparagingly about the “canon” view. Disappointingly some have dismissed this position as untenable. However, I have been encouraged to find that many highly qualified Bible scholars have ably defended this position and below I mention a few whose works are easily accessible.

Gary W Workman an influential scholar within the Restoration Movement has pointed out that in 1 Corinthian 13, “verses 9 and 10 go together as one sentence” (*When That Which is Perfect is Come, Studies in 1 Corinthians*, ed Dub McClish). He continues:

They present a contrast between something that is incomplete or “in part” (*ek merous*) now but will be complete (*teleion*) later on...

(Since) *to teleion* (“the perfect”) is the counterpart to *to ek merous* (“that which is in part”) it is absolutely clear that the “perfect” also refers to (the verbs in verse 9) describing the completion of the inspired preaching and consequence cessation of the spiritual gift which enabled and confirmed that preaching...

Finally, “that which is perfect” had come when the apostle John laid down his pen and finished “the words of the prophecy” (Rev 22:18-2).

Many within the Restoration Movement take the same approach, but the “canon” view is not peculiar to our Movement. Some 50 years ago, Baptist theologian Rolland D. McCune wrote *A Biblical Study of Tongues And Miracles* in the Central Bible Quarterly (Fall 1976) in which he stated:

Since “that which is perfect” is in intended contrast with the partial or incomplete revelatory process (cf. 1 Cor. 13:10 with v. 9), and since it is the cause of the doing away of that which is “in part” (1 Cor. 13:10), the “completed thing” most naturally would refer to the completed process of revelation in the first century which is embodied in the New Testament canon.

Another article from the same era, which I found helpful, was authored by Gilbert G. Weaver, at the time Professor of Biblical Studies at John Brown University. In his *Tongues Shall Cease* Weaver writes:

Logically, *to teleion* must refer to completeness or perfection in the same realm as that referred to by *to ek merous*. Since *to ek merous* refers to the transmission of divine truth by revelation, the other term, *to teleion* must refer to God’s complete revelation of truth, the entire New Testament (taken, of course, with its foundational book, the Old Testament). (Grace Journal Winter 1973).

Earlier, we referenced an article by Professor Myron J. Houghton, who was Chairman of the Department of Systematic Theology, Faith Baptist Theological Seminary, in 1996, when he wrote:

The question remains: Is it possible to determine the nature of the partial gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge? Yes. The answer is that they are revelational in quality. Since this is so, then “the perfect” must also be revelational.

Thus, when the complete (revelation) comes, the (gifts communicating) partial (revelation) pass away (they are no longer necessary). Both what is complete and what is partial are revelational. So “the perfect” refers to completed revelation.

A similar viewpoint is expressed by Dr Robert L. Dean in an article titled *Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues*, which appeared in *The Conservative Theological Journal* of March 2005. Dean wrote:

Prophecy and knowledge were partial because knowledge of doctrine, especially that related to the mystery doctrine of the new Church Age, was fragmentary in the pre-canon period of the Church Age...

When Paul penned 1 Corinthians, only four New Testament books had been written. Therefore, revelatory gifts were still required to provide never-before-revealed doctrine to the burgeoning young Church...

Since the immediate context focuses on the partial or incomplete nature of prophecy and knowledge, *teleios* must be understood in the quantitative sense of complete. The “perfect” itself must also be related in kind to what it completes. Therefore, it must be revelational because it completes the *in part* revelatory gifts...

Teleios, therefore, refers to the completion of the canon. Only the *completed* canon of Scripture, all the revelation needed to live the spiritual life, would render the *partial* gifts of prophecy and knowledge unnecessary once the final New Testament book was written (*ca.* AD 96).

I found two articles by Baptist scholar Dr R Bruce Compton particularly helpful. Both were published in the *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, the first in the Fall 2004 issue and the second in 2020 (Vol 25, Issue 1). In the first article titled *1 Corinthians 13:8–13 And The Cessation Of Miraculous Gifts* Dr Compton writes:

Since Paul declares that the gifts mentioned in 13:9 are in some way “in part,” the proper approach to identifying the meaning of the phrase is to ask what these gifts have in common that could be described as “in part.” Based on the definitions given above, the common denominator among the gifts is that they all involve direct revelation from God. As such, the expression “in part” simply refers to the fact that the revelation communicated by these gifts is partial or piecemeal. The corresponding expression “the perfect” as the counterpart to the partial must refer to the full or complete revelation, of which these gifts contribute their portion ... Thus, “the perfect” points to completed revelation God has intended for the church and has preserved in the New Testament.

It is disappointing that some cessationists have abandoned the “canon” position, but although we cannot examine all the relevant points here, it should be clear that the position has merit and is supported by many scholars of Scripture.

Illustrations - 1 Corinthians 13:11, 12

In verses 11, 12 Paul uses three illustrations to describe the transition from partial to complete revelation. The metaphors are not difficult to understand, but Paul's reference to seeing "face to face" (v 12) when *the perfect* comes merits attention. Some argue that Paul is describing the time when believers literally see Jesus directly at the time of His second coming. This seems unlikely. Clearly, in the first part of the analogy, the words "For now we see in a mirror dimly" are to be taken metaphorically rather than literally, and in light of this it is natural to understand the words "face to face" (*prosōpon pros prosōpon*) metaphorically as well.

The Old Testament is helpful at this point. We recall that God told Moses: "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" (Ex 33:20). Yet a few verses earlier the text reads: "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33:11). Admittedly the phraseology here differs from that of Paul. Later, we read: "Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face... (*prosōpon katà prosōpon*)" (Deut 34:10). I realise translations complicate matters, but clearly it would be mistaken to insist Paul describes a future literal encounter with Christ in 1 Corinthians 13:12

Rex

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