

The Meaning of "The Perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13¹

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INTRODUCTION

Much controversy persists within evangelicalism regarding the use and existence of the gifts of tongues, knowledge, and prophecy among believers. Charismatics maintain that all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit remain in operation today. These gifts, in their view, include not only those that are edificatory in nature, such as teaching and preaching, but also revelatory or confirmatory ones, such as tongues, interpretation of tongues, healing, word of wisdom, word of knowledge, prophecy, and miracles. On the other hand, cessationists contend that the sign and revelatory gifts have not functioned in the church since the close of the apostolic age, and thus only the edificatory gifts remain.

A key battleground text in this ongoing debate is 1 Corinthians 13:8–10, which teaches that certain gifts will cease when *that which is perfect has come*.² The obvious question is, what does Paul mean? If the coming of the perfect is associated with something that is yet future, then it becomes difficult to argue that the gifts of knowledge and prophecy have ceased. On the other hand, if the coming of the perfect refers to an event that has already taken place, a reasonable conclusion is that the gifts of knowledge and prophecy have ceased. Thus, the interpretation of the *perfect* in 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 plays a monumental role in the cessationist-experientialist conflict.³

Three Views

Three primary positions have emerged. The first interprets the adjective *perfect* (*teleion*) as a reference to something ideal, flawless, or unblemished that is typically associated with something yet to transpire in the eschaton. This position understands the various temporal indicators in 13:8–13 to refer to the “now” on earth and the “then” in the eschatological presence of the Lord.

The second position understands *teleion* as referring to the maturity of the church. The criteria of independence and unity are employed to mark the point at which the church reached maturity.⁴ Independence is said to have occurred with the coming of the complete will of God as expressed in the finished New Testament canon, because it weaned the church away from its dependence upon the confirmatory and revelatory gifts of the apostolic age. Unity is also said to have occurred with the completed canon, which gave the church a single body of truth. Moreover, such unity was enhanced by

¹ This article originally appeared in *CTS Journal*, vol. 10, #2 (Fall 2004).

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version (Nashville: Nelson, 1983).

³ Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata* (Sheffield: Academic, 1993), 131, states, “1 Cor 13:8–13 is perhaps the *locus classicus* in the discussion on the continuation of spiritual gifts.”

⁴ James E. Rothaar, “An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10” (M.Div. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1984), 54–56.

the destruction of Jerusalem, and the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70, which allowed the church to separate completely from Judaism. This position understands the various temporal indicators in 13:8–13 to refer to the “now” of the church in its state of immaturity and to the “then” of the church in its state of maturity following the completion of the canon, the cessation of the revelatory and confirmatory gifts, the death of the apostles, and the events of A.D. 70.

The third position understands *teleion* as referring to something that completed what had already existed in part. This position typically holds that the finished New Testament canon completed the partial revelatory gifts spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13:8–12 and understands the various temporal indicators in vv. 8–13 to refer to the “now” of the apostolic (precanonical) era and the “then” of the post-apostolic (postcanonical) era.

Thus, *ideal*, *maturity*, and *quantitative completeness* are the three primary interpretations of *teleion* in 1 Corinthians 13:8–10. This article seeks to demonstrate that *quantitative completeness* is the best understanding of *teleion* and sees Paul as speaking of the completion of the New Testament canon. First, the arguments for understanding *teleion* as *ideal* and *mature* will be developed, and the weaknesses to these views will be exposed. Second, the case for understanding *teleion* as *quantitative completeness* will be presented. After the key arguments are enumerated, the typical objections against the view will be raised and rebutted.

Hard Times for View Three

An investigation into the legitimacy of the canon view is warranted because it seems to have fallen on hard times in today’s theological climate. In a recent work, Richard Gaffin builds his cessationist argument without finding cessationism taught in this passage.⁵ In another chapter of the same book, Saucy goes so far as to praise Gaffin for doing so.⁶ Elsewhere, Gaffin claims that 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 does not specify the time of the cessation of the sign gifts.⁷ He also says that the view that 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 describes “the point at which the New Testament canon is completed cannot be made credible exegetically.”⁸ Yet, the canon view should not be so quickly dismissed, since this problem is smaller than those faced by other views.

Context of 1 Corinthians 13:8–10

Before explaining the various interpretations of *teleion* in 1 Corinthians 13:8–10, consider briefly the overall context in which these verses are found. Divisions within the Corinthian assembly seem to be

⁵ Richard B. Gaffin, “A Cessationist View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 25–64.

⁶ Robert L. Saucy, “An Open But Cautious View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 65.

⁷ Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 109–10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

The Meaning of "The Perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Paul's dominant concern throughout the letter (1 Corinthians 1–4). This theme continues in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, where we learn that the Corinthians' misuse of gifts was fragmenting the assembly. Paul explains that in spite of the diversity of gifts, they all come from the same Lord (12:4–11) and exist for the purpose of serving within the same body (12:12–31). Because of the Corinthians' preoccupation with the gift of tongues, Paul develops in chapter 14 the thesis that the gifts with a greater capacity to edify, such as prophecy, should be pursued instead of the gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 14:1–22). He also lays down rules for using the revelatory gifts in the local church (1 Corinthians 14:23–31).

Sandwiched between the two chapters detailing the proper perspective on spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12 and 14) is chapter 13. Because of its vivid description of true love that can only be sourced in and generated by God, it has been appropriately labeled "the love chapter." Paul's purpose in including it between the two chapters on spiritual gifts is obvious. He desires that the gifts be exercised in an attitude of love rather than self-serving haughtiness that produced the divisions within the Corinthian assembly (1 Corinthians 4:6, 18). Experts divide 1 Corinthians 13 into the following three parts: verses 1–3 speak of "the necessity of love," verses 4–7 speak of "the nature of love," and verses 8–13 speak of "the endurance of love."⁹

There can be no doubt that love is the dominant theme of the final paragraph (1 Corinthians 13:8–13), since both its very first and very last word is *love* (vv. 8, 13). The chapter's final paragraph seeks to encourage the Corinthians to pursue a permanent fruit of the Spirit—love—rather than the transitory gifts of the Spirit with which they had become preoccupied. Paul shows the eternity of love by developing two sets of contrasts. First, he contrasts the duration of love with the temporality of the revelatory gifts. He explains that, unlike love, the revelatory gifts will cease (vv. 8–10). He then illustrates the point (vv. 11–12) by describing the cessation of the revelatory gifts as a transition from immaturity to maturity (v. 11) and from limited sight to full sight (v. 12). Second, he contrasts the triad of faith, hope, and love that will exist until Christ's return (v. 13a) with love alone remaining afterward (v. 13b). In other words, because faith will be replaced by sight at the coming of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:7) and because hope will also be realized at Christ's coming (Romans 8:24), these virtues will not last beyond Christ's return.¹⁰ However, because love never fails (v. 8a), it will last and thus is the greatest (v. 13b) of the three.¹¹

⁹ Stanley D. Toussaint, "First Corinthians 13 and the Tongues Question," *BibSac* 120 (October–December 1963): 311.

¹⁰ Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 42, states, "This is not to say that after the rapture we will no longer have any faith or hope but rather that faith and hope as we have it today (faith that God will save us and hope that he will take us to himself) will be completed at that time. A different type of faith and hope will characterize us after glorification."

¹¹ Robert L. Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease," *JETS* 17 (Spring 1974): 84.

IDEAL VIEW

Description

The ideal view interprets *teleion* in 1 Corinthians 13:10 as something ideal, unblemished, or flawless. In other words, the ideal view attaches a qualitative meaning to *teleion*. Thomas notes that the most common English dictionary definitions of the word *perfect* also render the word qualitatively. Therefore, such definitions of the word, when applied to 1 Corinthians 13:10, would include the following: "a. being entirely without fault or defect; b. corresponding to an ideal standard or abstract concept; c. the soundness and the excellence of every part, element, or quality of a thing frequently as an unattainable or theoretical state."¹² Adherents of this interpretation argue that *the perfect* refers to some ideal condition following the Parousia, when "partial knowledge conveyed by the word of knowledge will be replaced by perfect knowledge; partial insight into God's wisdom through prophecy will be replaced by a face to face audience with Christ."¹³ Such a removal of present limitations will take place after the church has been taken away to be with the Lord. The list of advocates of this view includes Godet, Robertson and Plummer, Parry, and Bruce.¹⁴

Five Interpretations

Within the rubric of understanding *teleion* as something ideal, flawless, or unblemished, at least five separate interpretations have emerged. Each view interprets *teleion* as referring to some distinct, significant eschatological event.¹⁵ The first view maintains that the perfect arrives when the believer dies and is subsequently ushered into the presence of God.¹⁶ The second identifies the coming of the perfect as the rapture of the church.¹⁷ The third contends that the perfect arrives at Christ's second advent.¹⁸ The fourth uses the general category "eschaton" to define the arrival of the perfect.¹⁹

¹² Robert L. Thomas, "A Revisit: An Exegetical Update," in *The Master's Perspective on Difficult Passages*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 210. Although Thomas is not an advocate of the ideal view, his comments are useful in gaining a better appreciation of what the view teaches.

¹³ Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease," 83.

¹⁴ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1077), 680; Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1911), 297; John Parry, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, CGTSC (Colchester: Spottiswoode & Ballantyne, 1916; reprint, Cambridge: University Press, 1957), 145; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 128.

¹⁵ These views are enumerated in W. A. Criswell, ed., *The Believer's Study Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1991), 1639; F. David Farnell, "When Will the Gift of Prophecy Cease?" *BibSac* 150 (April-June 1993): 191-93.

¹⁶ Thomas R. Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts: Are They for Today?* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1983), 333-44.

¹⁷ Toussaint, "First Corinthians 13 and the Tongues Question," 312-14.

¹⁸ S. Lewis Johnson, "1 Corinthians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 633; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 1744.

The fifth identifies the eternal state as the arrival of the perfect.²⁰ No doubt, the face-to-face motif of 1 Corinthians 13:12, which is also used in Revelation 22:4 to depict the believer's unhindered relationship with God in the eternal state, has contributed to the popularity of this view.²¹ Advocates of the eternal state view attempt to buttress their position by observing that the eternal state concept allows for the neuter form of "the perfect" that is found in 1 Corinthians 13:10. They also argue that the eternal state represents the most ideal time for the believers' limitations to be removed, since then believers will be directly "illuminated by the very glory of God Himself (Revelation 21:23)."²²

Contextual Relationships

How do those holding to the ideal view handle the two illustrations of 1 Corinthians 13:11–12? Lenski's comment on verse 11 is typical: "Paul compares his childhood with our present state and his manhood, which is so different from childhood and such an advance upon it, with our future state of glory."²³ Proponents of the ideal view also note that verse 12 further clarifies the time when the perfect comes. Grudem observes, "The word 'then' (Gk. *tote*) in verse 12 refers to the time 'when the perfect comes' in verse 10."²⁴ The phrase *face to face* of verse 12 coupled with the notion of *knowing fully* furnishes the weightiest evidence favoring the ideal view.²⁵

Grudem contends that this phrase is used numerous times in the Old Testament in reference to seeing God. His examples include Genesis 32:20, Exodus 33:11, Deuteronomy 5:4, 34:10, Judges 6:22, Ezekiel 20:35.²⁶ Grudem concludes, "Such views [i.e., those that see the coming of the perfect at some time before Christ returns] all seem to break down at 1 Corinthians 13:12, where Paul implies that believers will see God 'face to face' 'when the perfect is come.'"²⁷ *Face to face* is commonly taken as a reference to seeing Christ subsequent to His coming.²⁸ It is contended that "'knowing fully' can only be a reference to the state of the believer in heaven after his glorification" because "no one this side of eternity has the capacity to know as God knows."²⁹ Toussaint sums up the sentiments of most

¹⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 645.

²⁰ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 187; John F. MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 231.

²¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1033.

²² John F. MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 366.

²³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 567.

²⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1033.

²⁵ Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 6; Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease," 83.

²⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1033, n. 24.

²⁷ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 202–3.

²⁸ Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

commentators when he says, "Few would controvert the idea that verse twelve is anticipating the return of Christ for His own."³⁰

Strengths

The notion that *teleion* in 1 Corinthians 13:10 conveys something ideal to be manifested in the future has certain strengths. For example, this interpretation of *teleion* finds support in Greek literature. According to Thomas, "This meaning is illustrated in Plato in regard to his world of ideas and in other philosophical thought of the time prior to and simultaneous with the New Testament era."³¹ At first glance, seeing *face to face* and *knowing fully* introduced in verse 12 seem to describe the Parousia. Furthermore, various common translations of the Bible, such as the KJV and NASB, translate *teleion* along idealistic lines through the rendering "perfect." It is probably for reasons such as these that interpreting *teleion* as an ideal condition following the Parousia is the dominant opinion among commentators.³²

Weaknesses

The strengths of the ideal view are outweighed by its numerous weaknesses. First, Paul never uses *teleios* to refer to the type of perfection that is defined as the absence of all imperfection.³³ In fact, Paul usually uses *teleios* in reference to a grown man (1 Corinthians 4:26; 14:20; Philippians 3:15; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:28). In Colossians 4:12, *teleios* means "mature" in the sense of being obedient to God. Another Pauline use of *teleios* is in Romans 12:2, where it carries the meaning "complete."³⁴

Second, although Greek philosophers understood perfection qualitatively, such a meaning is lacking in the New Testament.³⁵ Utopian perfection was a philosophical rather than a New Testament concept.³⁶ In the New Testament, *teleios* simply means "having attained the end or purpose, complete, perfect."³⁷ When used of a person, *teleios* simply means being "full grown, mature, or adult."³⁸ Extra-biblical usage is not as persuasive as the New Testament usage for ascertaining the biblical meaning of a term. The fact that the ideal view must rely on extra-biblical uses of *teleios* demonstrates the scantiness of its supporting biblical evidence. Third, the New Testament never uses *teleios* for the various

³⁰ Toussaint, "First Corinthians 13 and the Tongues Question," 312.

³¹ Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease," 83.

³² Ibid.

³³ Halle Gerhard Delling, "Teleios," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 8:75-77.

³⁴ Thomas, "A Revisit: An Exegetical Update," 210.

³⁵ Delling, 77.

³⁶ Ibid., 8:69-72.

³⁷ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. *teleios*.

³⁸ Ibid.

eschatological events that ideal view advocates typically attach to the word. Gromacki observes that *teleios* never refers to the Second Coming, millennium, or the eternal state.³⁹

Fourth, the ideal view fails to provide a suitable antithesis to the phrase *in part* (*ek merous*) found in 1 Corinthians 13:9–10. In these verses Paul contrasts *ek merous* with *to teleion*. *Ek merous* is a quantitative phrase. It denotes the gifts' partial nature rather than their imperfection in quality. Thus, rendering *teleion* in verse 10 as "ideal," "flawless," or "unblemished" does not provide an appropriate opposite to the quantitative phrase *ek merous*. It is appropriate to contrast two qualitative phrases or two quantitative phrases, but not a quantitative phrase with a qualitative phrase, as the ideal view does. Perhaps a better meaning of *teleion* "would be 'whole' or 'complete' as antithetical to *ek merous*."⁴⁰ In other words, "in part" and "whole" are a superior fit than "in part" and "unblemished."

Fifth, to assert that *to teleion* in verse 10 refers to an ideal state is unnaturally to strain the illustration in verse 11, where Paul uses his own adulthood as a picture of the coming of *to teleion*. Yet Paul's use of his own current maturity hardly suggests flawlessness. Throughout his writings, Paul routinely draws attention to his own imperfections in his adult state.⁴¹ In fact, the very next verse (1 Corinthians 13:12) speaks of his present limitations and partial knowledge. In Philippians 3:12, he admits that he has not yet been perfected. Elsewhere, he calls himself the least of the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:9), the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), and less than the least of the saints (Ephesians 3:8). In Galatians 5:16, he describes a current battle taking place between the flesh and the spirit within him. Paul depicts a similar battle in Romans 7 and concludes the chapter by referring to himself as a wretched man (Romans 7:24).⁴² Acts 23:3 records an example of Paul's immaturity as he threatens with divine retaliation the high priest who struck him. In sum, because Paul saw himself as being caught between the "already" of his initial soteriological benefits and the "not yet" of his future glorification, he recognized his own imperfections in his present adult state. Thus, it is difficult to conclude that Paul analogized his current state to the ideal state in 1 Corinthians 13:11.

Sixth, the ideal view depicts the church's transition from immaturity to maturity as something that takes place instantaneously at some eschatological event such as the rapture. Yet the analogy of 13:11

³⁹ Robert G. Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 123.

⁴⁰ Thomas, "A Revisit: An Exegetical Update," 210. See also Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease," 83; Myron J. Houghton, "A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13," *BibSac* 153 (July-September 1996): 350; Delling, 75.

⁴¹ Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease," 85; idem, "A Revisit: An Exegetical Update," 213.

⁴² Some argue that Paul was referring to himself as an unbeliever when he wrote these words. However, it must be remembered that in this passage he speaks of his inward delight in the law (Rom. 7:22), which can hardly characterize the unregenerate, because the unregenerate do not seek God (Rom. 3:11). Also, it would be unfitting for Paul to take up the subject of the unregenerate again in Rom. 7, since he has left that discussion behind in chapter 3 and moved on to discuss the believer's sanctification in chapters 6–8.

seems to describe this transition as a gradual process.⁴³ At least two reasons can be cited for taking the passing of the partial things as a process extending over a period of time.

First, Paul uses the perfect tense of the word *gegona* rather than the aorist tense. On the one hand, the aorist tense communicates the idea "when I became a man, I put away childish things." On the other hand, the perfect tense communicates the idea of process: "when I have become a man, I put away childish things." This latter sense conveys the idea of a person looking back upon the process of doing away with immature behavior.⁴⁴ Second, everyday experience "tells us that maturity is a gradual process of putting away childish habits."⁴⁵ This notion of a gradual transition from immaturity to maturity is far more compatible with the canon and maturity views, which advocate the church's gradual weaning away from the apostolic revelatory gifts as the apostles died out and the New Testament canon was completed. The ideal view is incompatible with understanding maturity as a gradual process because it teaches an instantaneous transition from immaturity to maturity.

Seventh, defining *teleion* as the rapture or the Second Coming is problematic because *teleion* is a neuter adjective. Thus, it is unlikely to refer to the personal coming of Christ, which would require a masculine adjective.⁴⁶ A better description of Christ's personal coming would be the masculine "he who is perfect" rather than the neuter "that which is perfect." Eighth, defining *teleion* as the eternal state is also problematic. This view holds that the Christian will spend seven years with Christ in heaven following the rapture and a thousand years on the earth during His millennial reign following His second advent. Then, after the creation of the eternal state, the believer's limitations will be removed (Revelation 21–22). Yet, Scripture never implies that the Lord will take away the believer's restrictions to any greater degree in eternity than at their resurrection.⁴⁷ Another problem with the eternal state view is that it fails to consider the overall context of these verses which relates to the theme of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12–14). To have such a sudden transition away from this topic and to the topic of the eternal state is contextually problematic.⁴⁸

Ninth, the ideal view creates an open canon that is normative throughout the church age. Dean explains, "When theologians mistakenly identify *te/leioj* with the Second Coming of Christ, the perfection of heaven, the Rapture, or the Millennium, all the temporary gifts become normative for the entire Church Age."⁴⁹ Allowing the revelatory gifts of knowledge and prophecy described in 1

⁴³ Farnell, "When Will the Gift of Prophecy Cease?" 193.

⁴⁴ Charles R. Smith, "Biblical Conclusions Concerning Tongues" (Ph.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1970), 407.

⁴⁵ Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 36.

⁴⁶ MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, 365; Robert Dean, "Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues" (paper, Conservative Theological Society, Fort Worth, TX, 2002), 8.

⁴⁷ Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on 1 Corinthians," 143,

<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/1corinthians.pdf> (accessed November 24, 2003).

⁴⁸ Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 46.

⁴⁹ Dean, "Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues," 8.

Corinthians 12–14 to operate throughout the church age is doctrinally problematic because of the New Testament teaching that God’s Word is completed (Jude 3; Revelation 22:18–19).⁵⁰ An open canon also has negative ramifications for the life of the church by diluting the authority of the apostles,⁵¹ since it requires that the apostolic doctrine be continually augmented in accordance with the latest prophetic utterances.

An open canon also ushers in false doctrine. MacArthur provides a historical analysis documenting how the concept of additional revelations has given rise to heretical movements within the church.⁵² Furthermore, an open canon negatively impacts the role of Bible exposition within the local church. Verse-by-verse teaching is typically neglected in churches that seek alleged new revelation. After all, why should a congregation devote itself to diligently studying antiquated Scripture when God is providing fresh insights today?

Finally, *knowing fully* and *face to face* in verse 12 can be interpreted as the completion of the New Testament canon. The validity of this interpretation will be developed in the final section of this article.

MATURITY VIEW

Description

This view defines *teleion* in 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 as the maturity of the church. Leading proponents of this position include Thomas,⁵³ Farnell,⁵⁴ Rothaar,⁵⁵ and Dillow.⁵⁶ Independence and unity are the two criteria used to delineate when the church reached maturity.⁵⁷ The completion of the New Testament canon gave the church a body of truth which enabled individual congregations to make decisions independently of the apostolic revelatory gifts. It also created unity by giving the church a central body of truth to rally around. This unity is said to have been enhanced by the church’s final break with Judaism following the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. Unlike the canon view, the maturity view does not hold that the completion of the New Testament canon is the *teleion* of 1 Corinthians 13:10, but rather that the completed New Testament canon was the primary cause of the maturity of the church.⁵⁸

50 Rothaar, “An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10,” 37–38, 45.

51 Dean, “Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues,” 5.

52 MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 86–100.

53 Thomas, “Tongues . . . Will Cease,” 81–89; idem, “A Revisit: An Exegetical Update,” 209–223.

54 Farnell, “When Will the Gift of Prophecy Cease?” 191–95.

55 Rothaar, “An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10,” 51–62.

56 Joseph Dillow, *Speaking in Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 127–33.

57 Rothaar, “An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10,” 54–56.

58 *Ibid.*, 62.

Contextual Relationships

As mentioned earlier, this position understands the various temporal indicators in 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 to refer to the “now” of the church in its state of immaturity and the “then” of the church in its state of maturity following the completion of the canon, the cessation of the revelatory and confirmatory gifts, the death of the apostles, and the events of A.D. 70. Thomas nuances the maturity view through his handling of the two illustrations in 1 Corinthians 13:11–12. He believes that Paul foresaw, on the one hand, the possibility that the sign gifts would cease after the church reached maturity and, on the other, the possibility that Christ could come in his lifetime (1 Corinthians 15:51–52; 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17), ushering the church into the presence of God. Paul did not know which event would transpire first. Thus, he presented the first option in verse 11 and the second in verse 12.⁵⁹

Some maturity view advocates see the church as passing through three distinct stages of maturity. The church was in the first, or infancy, stage when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. During this stage, which lasted until the close of the apostolic era, the church was dependent upon the apostolic revelatory gifts. The second, or relative maturity, stage is conveyed by the illustration of verse 11. During this stage, the church has the completed canon allowing her to enjoy independence (i.e., ability to make decisions without relying on the revelatory gifts) and unity. This stage takes place between the completion of the canon and the rapture. The third, or absolute maturity, stage is reflected in the illustration of 13:12. It takes place following the rapture, when the church is resurrected, glorified, and ushered into the presence of Christ.⁶⁰

Strengths

The maturity position relies upon the following exegetical evidence for support. First, the illustration of 13:11 compares the journey from childhood to adulthood with the early church gradually doing away with the sign gifts.⁶¹ Second, the theme of leaving immaturity and pressing on to maturity is dominant in 1 Corinthians as a whole, and particularly in 1 Corinthians 12–14, which is our immediate context. Third, *teleion* is often used in the New Testament to describe that which is mature.⁶² According to McRay, “It is in this sense in which the word almost always occurs in the New Testament, i.e., with the meaning of maturity.”⁶³ The other uses of *teleion* in 1 Corinthians have the same meaning as well (cf. 2:6; 14:20).

Fourth, in 1 Corinthians 13:10–11, *teleion* and *nēpios* (infant) are used in close proximity to one another. When these words are used in close proximity to one another elsewhere in the New

⁵⁹ Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 108; idem, “Tongues . . . Will Cease,” 87–88; idem, “A Revisit: An Exegetical Update, 217–18.

⁶⁰ Rothaar, “An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10,” 17–18.

⁶¹ Toussaint, “First Corinthians 13 and the Tongues Question,” 312.

⁶² BAGD, s.v. *teleios*.

⁶³ John R. McRay, “To Teleion in 1 Corinthians 13:10,” *ResQ* 14 (August 1971): 172.

The Meaning of "The Perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Testament, *teleion* means “mature” in contrast to infancy. This pattern holds true in 1 Corinthians 2:6; 3:1; 14:20; Ephesians 3:13–14; and Hebrews 5:13–14, as well as in the writings of Philo⁶⁴ and Polybius.⁶⁵ Consistency dictates that the same pattern be also true in 1 Corinthians 13:10–11. Therefore, *teleion* should be rendered “mature” in 1 Corinthians 13:10 as well.⁶⁶

Fifth, another method of discovering the meaning of *teleion* in 1 Corinthians 13:10 is to examine Paul’s use of the same word in similar contexts.⁶⁷ A contextual similarity exists between 1 Corinthians 12–14 and Ephesians 4:1–16. Part of this similarity is due to the fact that Paul was living in Ephesus and working in the Ephesian church when he wrote 1 Corinthians.⁶⁸ Rothaar notes the following eighteen similarities between these two contexts.⁶⁹

Similarity	Eph 4:1–16	1 Cor 12–14
Holy Spirit producing oneness and distributing gifts	4:4	12:3–13
Unity of the Trinity as the basis for unity among believers	4:4–6	12:4–6
God’s sovereignty	4:6	12:6
Individuals’ use of gifts within the body	4:7, 16	12:7–11
Gentiles united with Jews in Christ’s body	2:11; 3:1	12:13
One baptism of the Holy Spirit	4:5	12:13
The Body of Christ compared with human body	4:12–16	12:12–27
Depiction of the individual parts of Christ’s body with the noun <i>meros</i>	4:16	12:27
Gifts and their exercise within the church	4:7–11	12:4–11, 28–31; 13:1–3, 8–13; 14:1–40
God as responsible for appointing gifted men within the church	4:11	12:28
Comparison of <i>nēpios</i> with <i>teleios</i>	4:13–14	13:10–11
Comparison of growth of the church with the human body	4:13–16	13:11
Love and gifts in the growth process	4:15–16	13

⁶⁴ Delling, 68–69.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 76, n. 48.

⁶⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 566; Thomas, “A Revisit: An Exegetical Update,” 212–13; idem, “Tongues . . . Will Cease,” 86.

⁶⁷ McRay, “To Teleion in 1 Corinthians 13:10,” 171.

⁶⁸ Thomas, “Tongues . . . Will Cease,” 86–87.

⁶⁹ Rothaar, “An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10,” 32–34. This chart represents a paraphrased summation of the parallels Rothaar draws between Ephesians 4:1-16 and 1 Corinthians 12–14.

Similarity	Eph 4:1–16	1 Cor 12–14
Growth to maturity in the Body of Christ	4:13–15	13:11
Love accompanied by faith and hope	4:4–5, 15–16	13:13
Gifts for edification	4:12	14
Disunity needing to be remedied	4	12–14
Spiritual gifts described through the body figure	4:11–16	12–14

Proponents of the maturity view contend that because of the obvious contextual similarity between Ephesians 4:1–16 and 1 Corinthians 12–14 and because *teleion* means “mature” in Ephesians 4:13, it must mean “mature” in 1 Corinthians 13:10.⁷⁰

Weaknesses

The exegetical strengths of the maturity view appear to be outweighed by its weaknesses. First, understanding *teleion* as “mature” does not provide a proper antithesis to “in part” (*ek merous*). While “mature” is a qualitative expression, “in part” is a quantitative expression. Maturity advocate Thomas concedes, “Admittedly this understanding of *teleios* is not immune to objection, most notably a disruption of the antithesis with *ek merous*. Pitting a quantitative idea against a qualitative one is quite unsatisfactory.”⁷¹ Fee also observes this weakness:

The use of the substantive, “the perfect/complete,” which sometimes can mean “mature,” plus the ambiguity of the first analogy (childhood and adulthood) has led some to think that the contrast is between “immaturity” and “maturity.” But that is unlikely, since Paul’s contrasts have to do with the partial nature of the gifts, not with the immaturity of believers themselves.⁷²

Because of this deficiency, advocates of the maturity view are forced to build their case by appealing to other contexts outside the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 13:8–10. This helps explain why they go to great lengths to define *teleios* from its other uses in 1 Corinthians, similar contexts such as Ephesians

⁷⁰ Thomas, “A Revisit: An Exegetical Update,” 212–13; idem, “Tongues . . . Will Cease,” 86–87.

⁷¹ Ibid., 87.

⁷² Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 207–8. Maturity advocates attempt to mitigate the damage done to their view by the necessity for contrasting a quantitative idea with a qualitative one. For example, Thomas, “Tongues . . . Will Cease,” 83, contends that if Paul intended absolute symmetry with *ek merous*, he would have used the idiom *ek pantos* rather than *to teleion*. Similarly, Rothaar, “An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10,” 52–53, argues that Greek culture also measured maturity quantitatively. However, the fact that Paul does not use language of complete symmetry does not mean that he intended no symmetry at all. Rothaar admits that the Greeks understood maturity not only quantitatively but also qualitatively (ibid., 53). Thomas, “Tongues . . . Will Cease,” 83, similarly indicates that the Greek culture attached a qualitative meaning to *teleion*.

4:1–16, the New Testament as a whole, and Greek literature. While maturity proponents are willing to appeal to numerous other contexts, they neglect the immediate context, where Paul is contrasting partial and complete revelation⁷³ rather than the maturity and immaturity of believers. Such an approach is exegetically fallacious because the meaning of a word should be determined by its own rather than some remote context.

Grudem, an advocate of the ideal view, highlights this deficiency in his response to Chantry's interpretation of *teleion* in 1 Corinthians 13:10 as *mature*. Grudem says:

*Chantry's argument depends on the fact that elsewhere in 1 Corinthians the word here translated "perfect" (Gk. Teleios) is used to refer to human maturity (1 Cor 14:20, "in thinking be mature") or to maturity in the Christian life (as in 1 Cor. 2:6). Yet here again we must note that a word does not have to be used to refer to the same thing every time it is used in Scripture—in some cases teleios may refer to "mature" or "perfect" manhood, in other cases some other kind of "completeness" or "perfection."*⁷⁴

By assigning to *teleios* exactly the same meaning as it has in other contexts, advocates of the maturity view commit a common hermeneutical error known as illegitimate totality transfer. This error arises when the meaning of a word derived from various contexts is read into the same word in a foreign context.⁷⁵ Thomas responds to this objection by arguing that maturity is in the context of 1 Corinthians 13:8–12 because the illustration of verse 11 pertains to the maturity of the church.⁷⁶ However, Toussaint counters by observing, "the picture in verse 11 is not illustrating the church," but "it portrays the principle stated in verse 10." In other words, verse 11 is simply illustrating that "a better thing supersedes its predecessor."⁷⁷

Second, the maturity proponents' handling of the illustrations in 1 Corinthians 13:11–12 is questionable. As previously stated, Thomas's view allows for understanding *teleios* as a reference to relative maturity in verse 11 and absolute maturity in verse 12. In his opinion, Paul enumerated both options because he did not know which would come first. Either the church would reach relative maturity at the close of the apostolic age (13:11) or Christ would return and usher the church into His presence, thus bringing it to a state of complete maturity (13:12). However, this interpretive scheme implies a harsh and abrupt break between verses 11 and 12. Such a break seems artificial and unnatural.⁷⁸

⁷³ The final section of this article will defend this interpretation.

⁷⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1036.

⁷⁵ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 217–18.

⁷⁶ Thomas, "A Revisit: An Exegetical Update," 215.

⁷⁷ Toussaint, "First Corinthians 13 and the Tongues Question," 313.

⁷⁸ Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 49–50.

Third, the criteria that the maturity proponents use to mark the point at which the church allegedly reached maturity seem subjective. Grudem expresses frustration with the arbitrary nature of what constitutes maturity when he says, "no verse in this section mentions anything about . . . the 'maturity' of the church (whatever that means—is the church really mature today?)."⁷⁹ It appears that the maturity advocates have arbitrarily selected certain criteria in order to argue that the church reached maturity back in the first century but have ignored other criteria.

One criterion used by Rothaar is unity.⁸⁰ He feels this unity was achieved with the completion of the New Testament canon, which gave the church a central body of truth to rally around, and the church's final break with Judaism in A.D. 70. However, Paul also included freedom from factions and partisanship in his definition of unity (1 Corinthians 1:11–13; 3:22). Yet divisions persist in the church today. Paul also included no longer being *tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine* as part of his definition of maturity (Ephesians 4:13–14). Yet such shallowness and gullibility are common in the church today. Thus, as the criteria are broadened to reflect more of a complete Pauline understanding of maturity, it becomes increasingly difficult to argue that the church reached maturity in the first century.

One only has to compare Rothaar's criteria for maturity with Thomas's in order to demonstrate the arbitrary basis for the selection of such criteria. While Thomas's criteria revolve around the closing of the canon,⁸¹ Rothaar includes the events of A.D. 70 in his definition of maturity because they supposedly represent the time when the church became an entity separate from Judaism.⁸² However, it is hardly a foregone conclusion among scholars that the events surrounding A.D. 70 resulted in a permanent rift between Christianity and Judaism. According to Fruchtenbaum, Jewish Christians continued to live among the Jews following the events of A.D. 70. The permanent rift between Judaism and Christianity did not begin until the 90s and did not reach its final form until Bar Cochba's revolt in A.D. 135.⁸³ Thus, Rothaar could have just as easily selected A.D. 135 as the point of maturation. Should the church's point of maturity be considered contemporaneous with the end of the apostolic revelatory gifts and the completed New Testament canon or should it also include the events of A.D. 70? Should A.D. 70 or A.D. 135 be used to mark the point at which the church matured? The subjective and arbitrary standard used to define the church's maturation point is amply illustrated by the different ways that maturity advocates answer these questions.

⁷⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1038.

⁸⁰ Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 54–56.

⁸¹ Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease," 88.

⁸² Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 58–59.

⁸³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History, & Philosophy* (Washington, DC: Canon, 1974), 41–44.

QUANTITATIVE COMPLETENESS VIEW

Description

The quantitative completeness view understands *teleion* as completion of something that already exists in part. Unlike the previous two views, this view attaches a quantitative rather than qualitative meaning to *teleion*. Proponents of this position typically hold that the New Testament canon completes the partial revelation and revelatory gifts that are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13:8–12. This position also understands the various temporal indicators in 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 to refer to the “now” of the apostolic age (precanonical period) and the “then” of the postapostolic age (postcanonical period). A number of modern commentators hold this position, including Unger,⁸⁴ Dean,⁸⁵ Houghton,⁸⁶ Gentry,⁸⁷ and Vine.⁸⁸

Three Vital Points

The following three points are vital to understanding the *quantitative completeness*, or canon, view. The first is that the partial gifts of knowledge, tongues, and prophecy spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13:8–12 are revelatory gifts. During the time when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, the church was without the benefit of the completed New Testament canon, and thus without a body of truth to base its decisions upon. Therefore, divine guidance was provided through the vehicle of the revelatory gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and tongues.

Prophecy’s character is revelatory.⁸⁹ The gift of prophecy is based upon the Old Testament understanding of a prophet as one who received direct revelation from God (Deuteronomy 18:18). Peter surely understood the function of an Old Testament prophet in revelatory terms (2 Peter 1:20–21), and so did Paul. In Ephesians 3:5, he explains that the New Testament prophets revealed the mystery of the church. In 1 Corinthians 14:29–30, he emphasizes the revelatory function of prophecy by indicating that when a prophet is speaking, others are to judge what he says. The revelatory character of prophecy can also be seen in the divine messages revealed by the prophet Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10–11).⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Merrill F. Unger, *New Testament Teaching on Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971), 95.

⁸⁵ Dean, “Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues,” 1–16.

⁸⁶ Houghton, “A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13,” 344–56.

⁸⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem*, 2d ed. (Memphis: Footstool, 1989), 51–60.

⁸⁸ W. E. Vine, *1 Corinthians* (London: Oliphants, 1951), 184.

⁸⁹ Rothaar, “An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10,” 26–28.

⁹⁰ James L. Boyer, “The Office of the Prophet in New Testament Times,” *Grace Journal* 1 (Spring 1960): 18; Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, 59.

The revelatory nature of the gift of knowledge can also be demonstrated by virtue of the fact that it is enumerated in 1 Corinthians 13:8–12 alongside prophecy.⁹¹ Paul places *gnōsis* beside *mysteria* in 1 Corinthians 13:2 and between *apokalypsis* and *profēteia* in 1 Corinthians 14:6, thus investing the term with “the significance of supernatural mystical knowledge.”⁹² Thus, “the gift of knowledge apparently involved unusual spiritual insight, including the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit, in determining the proper solution for the many practical problems which arose in the early church.”⁹³ The revelatory aspect of tongues can be seen in that Paul requires an interpreter, so that the speaker’s message can be shared with the assembly (1 Corinthians 14:26–27). Thus, tongues, like prophecy and knowledge, seemed to entail receiving direct messages from God.⁹⁴

The second point is that revelations provided to the early church by these revelatory gifts were designed to be only partial and were intended to be superseded by something more comprehensive. This explains why Paul consistently uses the phrase *in part* (*ek merous*) when referring to the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and tongues (1 Corinthians 13:9, 10, 12). Gentry properly describes the partial revelations these gifts provided to the early church:

1 Corinthians 13:9 speaks of these revelatory gifts as piecemeal. They are, by the very nature of the case, fragmented and incomplete revelations: “We know in part, (ek merous), and we prophesy in part (ek merous).” The idea expressed here is simply this: During the age between Pentecost and the completion of the canon, God gifted a variety of believers in various churches with these revelatory gifts. But during that age those gifts were sporadic in that they gave a revelation here and one there, an epistle here, a gospel there, but did not weave a total, complete New Testament revelatory picture to any one hearer or church. The various prophetic revelations offered at best partial insight into the will of God for the Church...⁹⁵

As Hodge explains, “the revelations granted to the prophets imparted glimpses of the mysteries of God.”⁹⁶

The following is the third point that must be understood: if what is *in part* (*ek merous*) refers to the partial revelations brought to the early church through these revelatory gifts, then *teleion*, which stands in antithesis to *ek merous*, must refer to the New Testament canon, which completed and superseded the partial revelations. A completed New Testament canon would render piecemeal revelation obsolete by providing a complete picture of the mystery nature of the church and God’s

⁹¹ Rothaar, “An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10,” 28–29.

⁹² BDAG, s.v. *gnōsis*.

⁹³ Smith, “Biblical Conclusions Concerning Tongues,” 406.

⁹⁴ Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, 78.

⁹⁵ Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem*, 53.

⁹⁶ Charles Hodge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 272.

program for the ages and thereby equipping the saints for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17). Gentry explains:

It is difficult to miss the antithetic parallel between the "partial" thing and the "perfect" ("complete, mature, full") thing. Since the partial speaks of prophecy and other modes of revelational insight (v. 8), then it would seem that the "perfect," which would supplant these, represents the perfect and final New Testament Scripture (Jms. 1:22). This is due to the fact that modes of revelation are being purposely contrasted. Thus, it makes the man of God adequately equipped to all the tasks before him (2 Tim 3:16–17). In other words, there is coming a time when will occur the completion of the revelatory process of God.⁹⁷

Houghton similarly notes, "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."⁹⁸ Smith likewise observes, "'That which is complete' should logically be of the same kind as 'that which is partial' and is therefore most naturally understood as a reference to the completion of revelation for the Church Age."⁹⁹

Advantages of the Completed Canon View

Understanding *teleion* as a reference to the completed canon has several advantages. First, the meaning "complete," or "whole," is well attested in Paul's writings.¹⁰⁰ Second, the adjective *teleion* is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe God's Word (James 1:25).¹⁰¹ Third, and most importantly, the canon view does not pit a quantitative concept (*ek merous*) against a qualitative concept, as do the ideal and maturity views. It allows both expressions to be understood quantitatively. In other, words, the concept of "complete" is a natural antithesis to the concept of "in part." Thus, the idea of completed Scripture furnishes the best antithesis to the partial revelations given through the gifts of knowledge, prophecy, and tongues, because both expressions are taken in a quantitative sense.

Contextual Relationships

How then does the quantitative completeness view handle the illustrations of verses 11 and 12? Dean explains the adult-child analogy in verse 11:

⁹⁷ Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem*, 54.

⁹⁸ Houghton, "A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13," 350.

⁹⁹ Charles R. Smith, *Tongues in Biblical Perspective* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1972), 75.

¹⁰⁰ Delling, 75–77.

¹⁰¹ That Paul was aware of this usage of *teleion* seems likely because of the early date typically associated with the composition of the Book of James.

The Meaning of "The Perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

[T]he child represents the incomplete knowledge available to the infant, pre-canon church. Just as a child has inadequate knowledge to live as a mature adult, so the pre-canon church lacked a sufficient canon and doctrine to lead the spiritual life of the new Church Age. An adult reaches maturity when he is complete with the knowledge and skills necessary for life. So, too the post-canon church has the completed canon of Scripture which is sufficient for every need, every problem, every difficulty in life. Through the learning of the doctrines of the Word under the filling of the Holy Spirit the believer is able to pursue spiritual maturity.¹⁰²

Gentry observes the purposeful parallel between the three conditions representative of incompleteness in verse 8 (prophecy, tongues, and knowledge) and the three conditions representative of childhood in verse 11 (speaking, understanding, and thinking as a child). Thus, tongues are the equivalent of speaking as a child, knowledge is the equivalent of understanding as a child, and prophecy is the equivalent of reasoning as a child. Gentry goes on to offer the following explanation of the analogy:

When Paul was in his childhood, he thought as a child was expected to think. But when he became a mature man, he naturally put away childish thought modes. Similarly, when the church was in her infancy, she operated by means of bit by bit piecemeal revelation. But when she grew older, she operated by means of finalized Scripture. Thus, tongues were related to the Church in her infancy stage (cp. 1 Cor. 14:19, 20).¹⁰³

Although some versions translate *esoptrou* in 13:12 as “dark glass,” most translate the word as “mirror.” This translation is preferable because in James 1:23, the only other New Testament passage where *esoptron* is used, the context is clearly referring to a mirror.¹⁰⁴ Thus, Paul compares piecemeal revelation to looking into a dim mirror and the completed canon to looking into a clear mirror. The mirror analogy is something the Corinthians would have understood well. According to Fee, “Corinth was famous as the producer of some of the finest bronze mirrors in antiquity.”¹⁰⁵ “But even the best mirrors reflected images imperfectly.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Dean, “Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues,” 9.

¹⁰³ Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem*, 55.

¹⁰⁴ Houghton, “A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13,” 350–51. Understanding *esoptron* in 1 Corinthians 13:12 on the basis of its use in James 1:23 does not constitute the previously described hermeneutical error known as “illegitimate totality transfer.” This hermeneutical error arises only when the meaning of an identical word as used in a foreign context is transferred into a context that is incapable of supporting the meaning that the word had in its foreign context. Here, however, “mirror” works both in the context of 1 Corinthians 13:12 and James 1:23.

¹⁰⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 647–48.

¹⁰⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), 480.

The Meaning of "The Perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Paul's point was that looking into partial, piecemeal revelation was equivalent to looking into an imperfect mirror in that the viewer got only a partial picture of himself. However, after the completion of the New Testament canon, the viewer could look into a perfect mirror, and thus have the capacity to see himself as God saw him. Thus, *face to face* refers to the believer's capacity to see himself clearly through the vehicle of a perfect mirror or the completed canon. According to Gentry

Paul here seems to be teaching the Corinthians that now (in their situation before the completion of the New Testament canon) they were limited to sporadic, inspired insight into the authoritative will of God. They simply not did know all God was going to reveal yet. They were, as it were, looking in a dim mirror. But when they finally have before them all the New Testament Scriptures, then they shall be able to fully see all they need to know, they will be able to see themselves just as they are in the sight of God.¹⁰⁷

Interpreting the phrases *mirror* and *face to face* in this way is preferable because, as mentioned above, the only other place where *esoptron* ("mirror") is used in the New Testament is in James 1:23. There the context deals with the capacity of God's Word to provide the reader with a standard for honest self-assessment. This interpretation is also preferable because of the Scripture's function of making man aware of his own sinfulness so he will see his need for justification and sanctification (Romans 5:20; 7:7; Galatians 3:24; 2 Timothy 3:16; James 1:23–25).

The completed canon then gives the believer the capacity to *know fully* (1 Corinthians 13:12b). According to Dean:

Paul envisioned a time, yet future when believers would have the entire realm of mystery doctrine to objectively know themselves as never before and be spiritually self-sustaining. Only God has a complete knowledge of the believer and only with a complete canon can the believer have sufficient, objective knowledge of himself. Through learning and applying doctrine from the completed and sufficient Scripture a mirror is constructed in his soul. This mirror of truth enables the believer to accurately and objectively evaluate his own life and circumstances from the divine viewpoint. Prior to the completed canon the believer could only have an incomplete understanding of who he is and what he possesses as a member of the royal family of God, and all the vast assets that God has provided for him. It is the completed Word of God that provides this sufficient, perspicuous understanding of ourselves as we truly are. Prior to the revelation

¹⁰⁷ Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem*, 55–56.

The Meaning of "The Perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

*of the mystery doctrine the believer looked into the mirror of God's Word dimly and saw a riddle, due to incomplete revelation.*¹⁰⁸

Houghton similarly notes:

*Because believers today possess complete revelation, they are able to understand what God's Word teaches about themselves, their potential, their limitations, and the means that God has made available for them to obtain victory over sin in a clear and detailed manner that was not possible before the completion of the canon. The Scriptures equip a believer for every good work by being profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training (2 Tim 3:16–17).*¹⁰⁹

Gentry likewise posits that some of the blindness of the early church may have been attributable to the lack of a completed canon. Lack of the entire realm of mystery doctrine may explain the church's reluctance to separate itself from Judaism, as well as its pride and racism during the apostolic era (Acts 10–11; 15; Galatians).¹¹⁰

The canon view understands the first part of verse 13 as describing the continuation of faith, hope, and love into the postcanon age after the cessation of the revelatory gifts. The "now" (*nuni*) at the beginning of verse 13 is unlike the "now" (*arti*) at the beginning of verse 12.¹¹¹ Although *nuni* and *arti* often overlap, "in passages where both occur together, *arti* has a more immediate sense."¹¹² Such immediacy seems to be the case in verse 12, where Paul contrasts the "now" of the precanon era with the "then" of the postcanon era.¹¹³ However, the *nun* in verse 13 "is broader, indicating the present age, the postcanon Church Age."¹¹⁴ *Nun* is frequently used to depict the period of time between the two comings of Christ.¹¹⁵ The canon view understands the second part of verse 13 as describing the continuation of love despite the cessation of faith (2 Corinthians 5:7–8) and hope (Romans 8:24) following the Second Advent. If the quantitative completeness view is correct, then 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 teaches that the revelatory gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge passed away with the completion of the New Testament canon.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁸ Dean, *Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues*, 11.

¹⁰⁹ Houghton, "A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13," 353.

¹¹⁰ Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem*, 56, n. 5.

¹¹¹ Dean, "Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues," 11.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 10; See also G. Stählin, "Nyn (*arti*)," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:1107, n. 8.

¹¹³ Dean, "Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues," 10.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, n. 19; Stählin, 1111.

¹¹⁶ It is possible that one's interpretation of *teleion* in 1 Cor. 13:8–13 has little bearing on when tongues passed away. See appendix.

Potential Weaknesses

The quantitative completeness, or canon, view is not without its criticisms. However, most of the objections raised against it are answerable. The criticism can be divided into the following two categories: criticisms related to the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 and criticisms of cessationism in general. The criticisms regarding the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 will be handled first.

Face to Face

One criticism is that the phrase *face to face* refers to the events surrounding the *Parousia* because such language must refer to the believer's direct fellowship with God. However, it is interesting to note, "verse 12 does not speak of seeing God face to face."¹¹⁷ Gentry observes, "We should note that Grudem's argument has to read 'God' into the reference: So when Paul says, 'But then [we shall see] face to face,' he clearly means, 'Then we shall see God face to face.'"¹¹⁸ Moreover, although the face-to-face motif is sometimes used in the Old Testament to refer to fellowship with God,¹¹⁹ it is also used of revelation from God.

For example, in Numbers 12:6–8, the face-to-face language does not emphasize God's fellowship with Moses but rather God's revelation to Moses. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 13:12 is emphasizing God's revelation to the believer rather than God's eschatological fellowship with the believer.¹²⁰ Such revelation from God was made available to the church through the completed New Testament canon. Furthermore, the phrase *face to face* in 1 Corinthians 13:12 cannot refer to seeing God without damaging the mirror analogy, since a person looks at the reflection of himself in a mirror rather than at someone else or at God.¹²¹ Thus, *face to face* in 1 Corinthians 13:12 refers to a person seeing his own reflection rather than to fellowship with God. As mentioned earlier, the only other place where *esoptron* ("mirror") is used in the New Testament is in James 1:23, where the context deals with the capacity of God's Word to provide the reader with a standard for honest self-assessment.

Knowing As Known

A second criticism is that it seems presumptuous to interpret the phrase *but then I shall know just as I also am known* in 1 Corinthians 13:12b as believers knowing themselves through God's Word just as God knows them. Such comprehensive knowledge seems unattainable this side of eternity. This dilemma has caused numerous interpreters to shy away from the canon view. For example, Rothaar observes, "It is pointed out that even today with a completed canon of Scripture we do not know fully.

¹¹⁷ Thomas, "A Revisit: An Exegetical Update," 216.

¹¹⁸ Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem*, 57.

¹¹⁹ These were mentioned earlier in discussion of the strengths of the ideal view. See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1033, n. 24.

¹²⁰ Houghton, "A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13," 352.

¹²¹ Dean, *Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues*, 10.

If we did, we would not be faced with the problem of interpreting the Scriptures as we are today."¹²² D. Martyn Lloyd Jones apparently rejects the canon view for the same reason. He observes:

It means that you and I, who have the Scriptures open before us, know much more than the apostle Paul of God's truthIt means that we are altogether superior . . . even to the apostles themselves, including the apostle Paul! It means that we are now in a position which . . . 'we know, even as also we are known' by God . . . indeed, there is only one word to describe such a view, it is nonsense.¹²³

Houghton's response is appropriate:

However, the problem does not go away if these words are interpreted eschatologically. In eternity, will believers really know fully just as they have been full known? The answer to this question seems to be, "Yes, but only in some limited qualified sense." If that answer is acceptable for the eschatological interpretation, then it ought to be acceptable for this writer's "completed canon" view as well.¹²⁴

Those who doubt that the type of knowledge spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13:12b is attainable this side of eternity forget that Paul in the same book also promises believers the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit, who would search and disclose to them all the deep things of God (1 Corinthians 2:9–15).

A Completed Canon in Paul's Mind?

A third criticism is that to discuss the completed canon in light of 1 Corinthians 13 is to force Paul to address a subject that was not in his mind at the time of writing.¹²⁵ However, the notion of a completed New Testament canon would not have been foreign to Paul. Although he expected Christ's imminent return, he also knew of the possibility that Christ's return might be in the distant future and, therefore, church-age believers would need a completed record similar to the one Old Testament believers possessed. Moreover, Paul indicates a sensitivity of a finite collection of New Testament writings when he speaks of guarding what has been committed to Timothy's trust (1 Timothy 6:20; 1 Timothy 1:12, 14) and of his longing for the parchments (2 Timothy 4:13). Peter also indicated a similar awareness of a limited collection of New Testament writings (2 Peter 3:15).¹²⁶

¹²² Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 37.

¹²³ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Prove All Things*, ed. Christopher Catherwood (Eastbourne, England: Kingsway, 1985), 32–33.

¹²⁴ Houghton, "A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13," 353–54, n. 27.

¹²⁵ Rothaar, "An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Corinthians 13:10," 47–48.

¹²⁶ Dean, "Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues," 5.

Alleged Problems with Cessationism

Others have challenged the canon view on the basis of a supposed lack of theological viability of cessationism in general. These criticisms could be leveled at both the canon and maturity views, since the logical corollary of both is the cessation of the confirmatory and revelatory gifts after the coming of *the perfect*. The first criticism is that if the revelatory gifts of prophecy and knowledge have ceased, then why does Joel 2:28–32 and Revelation 11 speak of the future operation of the gift of prophecy? Joel 2:28–32 depicts prophesying in the tribulation and millennium, and Revelation 11 describes the two witnesses prophesying during the tribulation period. Furthermore, the Old Testament speaks of knowledge filling the earth during the kingdom age (Isaiah 11:9).¹²⁷

However, this criticism fails to take into consideration God's separate programs for the church and Israel. The cessation of the revelatory gifts in 1 Corinthians 13 is set in the context of God's program for the church. The operation of knowledge and prophecy in Isaiah 11, Joel 2, and Revelation 11 is set in the context of God's purposes for national Israel. Thus, the cessation of the gifts of prophecy and knowledge pertains explicitly to the church age. According to Miller, there is not a single New Testament instance where *charisma* or *pneumatikos* is used outside of the context of the church age.¹²⁸

The second criticism is that if prophecy and knowledge have already ceased, the church would be "without the benefit of two of the most important gifts for proclaiming, interpreting, and understanding Scripture."¹²⁹ However, those who put forth this objection fail to consider the fact that the gift of teaching continues throughout the church age independently of the cessation of the revelatory gifts of knowledge and prophecy. Thus, the cessation of the revelatory gifts of knowledge and prophecy does not leave the church without the enablement for understanding and proclaiming divine truth throughout the present age because these abilities are presumably associated with the continuing gift of teaching.

The third criticism is that cessationism "puts God in a box" by specifying what He can and cannot do. However, the question is not, Can God still reveal truths through tongues, knowledge, and prophecy? but rather, What has God revealed in Scripture concerning the purpose and limitations of these gifts?¹³⁰ In other words, the issue is not whether God can or cannot do something but rather whether He has revealed that such miraculous activity is to be normative in the current age. By way of comparison, it is possible for God to save people by works. However, salvation is not by works because God has revealed that His plan of salvation is by faith alone (Ephesians 2:8–9). Thus, saying that God cannot save people by works is not "putting God in a box" but rather expressing confidence in God's

¹²⁷ MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, 364–65.

¹²⁸ David F. Miller, "Concerning Spiritual Gifts" (Ph.D. diss, Grace Theological Seminary, 1977), 136.

¹²⁹ MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, 364.

¹³⁰ Dean, "Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues," 1.

willingness to abide by the limitations that He has established and revealed. The real issue is God's revealed will rather than His ability.

The fourth criticism is that cessationists are anti-supernaturalists.¹³¹ However, saying that God does not perform certain miracles today does not make one an anti-supernaturalist. One can be a cessationist and still believe in the divine involvement in human affairs, the reality of biblical miracles, God's ability to direct the course of human history, as well as His ability to heal whom He wishes directly rather than indirectly through those possessing the gift of healing.¹³² Thus, the belief that the confirmatory and revelatory gifts have ceased is not a *carte blanche* denial of all divine miraculous activity.

The fifth criticism is that cessationism is not tenable because church history demonstrates the continuation of the sign gifts. Pentecostal writer Don Stewart furnishes historical evidence of various church fathers such as Irenaeus (A.D. 130–200), Novation (A.D. 257), Tertullian (A.D. 160–200), and Augustine¹³³ testifying to the existence of the sign gifts long after the canon had closed in A.D. 96. However, it should be noted that this is a historical argument rather than an exegetical one. Historical arguments are subject to interpretation, as evidenced by other scholars who have observed that certain gifts ceased not long after the close of the apostolic age.¹³⁴ Furthermore, experiential arguments are never conclusive verification of divine activity, since it is always possible for miracles to emanate from sources other than God. Scripture is replete with examples of satanically energized and non-divinely authored miracles (Exodus 7:10–13; Deuteronomy 13:1–3; 1 Samuel 28:7; Matthew 7:21–23; 24:24; Acts 8:9–12; Galatians 1:6–9; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; Revelation 13:13; 16:12–14).

CONCLUSION

Of the three dominant interpretations of *to teleion* ("the perfect"), the *canon view* best fits the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 13:8–10. Unlike the other views, it does not pit a quantitative concept against a qualitative one but rather allows two quantitative concepts to live in natural harmony and symmetry with one another. The semantic range of *to teleion* includes the notion of scriptural revelation (James 1:25), which provides a suitable antithesis to the incomplete revelation provided by prophecy, knowledge, and tongues. Moreover, the *canon view* fits well with the material that follows in verses 11–13 and the criticisms raised against the *canon view* in particular and cessationism in general are answerable. In comparison with the weaknesses of the *ideal* and *maturity*

¹³¹ Some claim that the cessationist position is limited to dispensationalism. However, in recent church history, some of the most vociferous critics of Pentecostalism were Reformed theologians such as B. B. Warfield. See Dean, "Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues," 2. Interestingly, in a recent work on the subject of cessationism versus continuationism, it is covenant theologian Richard Gaffin who argues the cessationist position (see Gaffin, "A Cessationist View," 25–64). Among other reformed cessationists are Gentry and Robert Reymond.

¹³² Dean, "Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues," 1.

¹³³ Don Stewart, *What Everyone Needs to Know About the Holy Spirit*, Basic Bible Studies (Orange, CA: Dart, n.d.), 174–76.

¹³⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3d ed., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 1:236–37.

views, the canon view offers the most attractive interpretation of *to teleion* in 1 Corinthians 13:8–10. Despite its waning popularity in today's theological climate, evangelicals should take this view more seriously.

APPENDIX

It is possible that one's interpretation of *to teleion* in 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 has little bearing on when tongues passed away. Toussaint cites the following three pieces of evidence indicating that tongues passed away on their own even before the coming of the perfect.¹³⁵ First, Paul uses *katargeō* ("to abolish") when speaking of the termination of knowledge and prophecy, and yet he uses *pauō* ("to cease") when speaking of the termination of tongues. Second, Paul uses the future passive of *katargeō* when discussing the termination of knowledge and prophecy but future middle of *pauō* when discussing the termination of tongues. The reflexive idea associated with the middle voice implies a self-inflicted cessation of tongues. Third, although knowledge and prophecy are mentioned in 13:9 and 12, tongues are not mentioned. Others reject these arguments, contending that the shift in verbs is merely stylistic. Also, it is argued that because the other New Testament uses of *pauō* in the middle voice do not demand the reflexive idea, *pauō* in 13:8 is therefore a deponent verb and must be translated as if it were in the active voice.¹³⁶ However, Paul's desire to avoid repetition cannot fully explain the change in verbs. The repetition of *katargeō* in 13:8, 10, and 11 demonstrates that Paul was not bothered by repetition.¹³⁷ Moreover, even if the deponent argument is correct, the other factors Toussaint raises, such as the change in verbs and the omission of tongues in 13:9 and 12, are sufficient to distinguish the cessation of tongues from the abolition of prophecy and knowledge.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Toussaint, "First Corinthians 13 and the Tongues Question," 314–15.

¹³⁶ See Houghton, "A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13," 348–49.

¹³⁷ See Toussaint, "First Corinthians 13 and the Tongues Question," 314.

¹³⁸ See Dean, "Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues," 7.