

- g. Paul regarded love as more than merely the correct framework for Christian ethics and conduct; he saw love as speaking to the very essence of what it means to be a Christian. Christians don't simply *act* in love; they *live lives* of love, and not because it's proper, but because it's *truthful*. When Christians live lives of love – love as it is in the triune God, they live authentically in conformity to the truth of who they are. Paul understood – and insisted that the saints understand – that to be a Christian is to partake in the new creation in Jesus: to have died to one's natural human "self" such that the life now being lived is the life of Christ lived out and perfected in him (ref. again Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:1-4; also Romans 6:1-11; Galatians 6:11-16; Ephesians 1:3-2:7; Philippians 3:1-21; etc.).

God is love at the very core of His being (1 John 4), and thus all who share in His life and nature are equally defined by love. Viewed in this way, love is seen to be inseparable from truth as it is in God and as it is in His creation as He created it to be. Thus Paul could assert that love rejoices together with the truth, which means that it also opposes and withstands the "unrightness" of every form and expression of untruth existing in the created order. And characterizing God and His creation in its authenticity, love abides forever as the very fabric of the universe which binds all things together and joins them in perfect intimacy with the Creator who Himself is love. *Is it any wonder, then, that Paul concluded his treatment of love with a glorious doxology praising love's supremacy?* (13:8-13)

This doxology flows naturally out of Paul's preceding discussion and makes an important contribution to his larger argument.

- Paul just affirmed love's constancy and inexhaustibility: Love never tires of support, it never loses faith or hope and it never grows weary in perseverance. In a word, *love never fails* (literally, love never falls down; 13:8), and that quality is at the heart of its supreme virtue and value.
- The same, however, cannot be said of the Spirit's *charismata*. While love is essential and indispensable to the authentic operation of the Spirit's gifts (12:31-13:3), the reverse is not true: Love has no need of the charismata for its authentic existence and operation. The proof of this is in a critical point of distinction between love and the charismata: The former endures forever; the latter do not.

Whether consciously or not, the Corinthians had fallen into the error of exalting the Spirit's gifts – particularly the ones having the appearance of power and significance. By doing so, they not only denied the supremacy of love, they actually depreciated the gifts themselves by overlooking the very thing which makes the gifts significant, powerful and effectual. The Corinthians were, in effect, prizing the *outer form* while ignoring the *inner substance*. Like the Israelites who continued to venerate the empty and lifeless temple after Yahweh's glory-presence had departed, many at Corinth were devoting themselves to the gifts as such rather than to that which enlivens and authenticates them.

In making his point, Paul turned to the three spiritual gifts most prominent in his discussion (and evidently in the esteem of the Corinthians themselves): *prophecy*, *tongues* and *knowledge* (13:8-10; cf. 13:1-2 and 14:1-40 with 8:1-13). For all their virtue and value in edifying Christ's Church, and however exalted they might appear, the Corinthians needed to understand that they are finite and transient.

This passage is critically important to Paul's contextual discussion of the charismata and the Corinthians' understanding and interaction with them as a body. Too often, however, it is effectively (if not intentionally) divorced from the context because of the new and intriguing elements it introduces. In particular, the passage's emphasis on the imperfection and impermanence of the charismata – especially as Paul treats this topic in terms of a coming future “perfection” – has proven to be a lightning rod in the Christian community. Whether on the part of charismatics or cessationists, preterists or futurists, a priori premises, assumptions and preoccupations have made it easy for Christians to “miss the forest for the trees” and leave Paul seemingly focused on issues other than his actual concern.

But precisely for this reason it's necessary to take a close look at Paul's language and argumentation as they fit into the larger context and the way this passage speaks to the issues and problems occurring in the Corinthian church. The interpreter must approach the passage in an objective, dispassionate way, setting his own assumptions and agenda aside. He must consciously resist the temptation to try to vindicate his own doctrinal convictions and discipline himself to let the text say what it says and mean what it means. Christians may end up differing at some points, but at least they will have done their best to allow Paul to speak for himself rather than put words in his mouth.

Three general issues are most important in treating this passage:

- 1) the meaning of the *perfect*;
- 2) the nature of the *partiality* (imperfection) of spiritual gifts and the range of gifts this partiality applies to;
- 3) the *dynamics* in the relationship between the “perfect” and the passing away of the “imperfect” (the *partial*).

Starting where Paul started (13:8), the first thing to be considered is the spiritual gifts Paul cited and the way he treated their impermanence. Again, Paul mentioned only prophecy, knowledge and tongues in his treatment, and this allows for two possible conclusions:

- The first possibility is that Paul cited these three *specifically* because they alone (perhaps along with other closely related gifts) “pass away” in connection with the coming of the “perfect.”

- The other option is that Paul mentioned these three *representatively*. That is, they represent *all* of the Spirit's gifts, which are all transient and imperfect. Thus Paul was implying that all of the charismata pass away when the "perfect" comes; he mentioned knowledge, prophecy and tongues because these gifts were so important to the Corinthians.

The first option works well with the *cessationist* view which holds that all of the so-called "sign gifts" ended with the completion of the New Testament canon. (Most cessationists believe this completion is the "perfection" Paul was referring to). Sign gifts are said to have passed away because they attested the truth and authority of the apostolic message (2 Corinthians 12:11-12; Hebrews 2:1-4) until that message was recorded in the New Testament scriptures. Once those writings were complete, the apostolic authority passed to the text itself, so that the authenticating charismata are no longer necessary. All of the other gifts of the Spirit, however, continue on through the church age, being vital for the Church's well-being and growth (cf. 12:1-30; Romans 12:3-8, Ephesians 4:11-16).

Conversely, the second option will not allow for the "perfect" to denote the completed New Testament canon unless one also concedes that *all* of the Spirit's gifts passed away with the close of the first century. If prophecy, knowledge and tongues are merely representative, then the partiality and impermanence which Paul ascribed to them applies to all of the charismata. If these three gifts ceased with the completion of the canon, so did all of the Spirit's gifts. Few Christians are willing to make this concession, and this leaves only two options: One can either reject the notion that Paul was speaking of all of the charismata, or find another meaning for his term, the "perfect." (The position embraced here is that Paul was indeed ascribing partiality and impermanence to all of the charismata and meant something other than the completed canon by the term, the "perfect.")

The next thing to consider from verse 13:8 is Paul's *language* in speaking of the cessation of the gifts. This is where many commentators focus in building their arguments. Specifically, in treating the three charismata of prophecy, knowledge and tongues, Paul lumped together the first two, employing the same verb and grammatical form in describing their cessation.

- At the one end of the spectrum, his verb can refer to the mere nullification of a thing's activity, effect, or relevance (note Luke 13:7, where the verb speaks to a fruitless tree nullifying the usefulness of the ground it is planted in; cf. also Romans 3:3, 4:14, 7:6 and 1 Corinthians 1:28).
- At the other end, it can denote a thing's abolition or destruction altogether (ref. Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 2:6, 6:13, 15:24-26; etc.).

Paul employed a different verb and grammatical form in speaking of tongues. This term has the general sense of ceasing, desisting, or departing from an activity or course of action (cf. Luke 5:4, 8:24, 11:1; Acts 5:42, 6:13, 13:10, 20:1, 31).

The critical issue for many is Paul's grammar: Here he employed the middle voice rather than the passive voice of the previous verb. The middle voice in Greek indicates the subject's participation in the action of the verb, whether *directly* in acting upon himself (the "reflexive" middle – Matthew 27:5) or *indirectly* in acting in a self-referencing or self-serving manner (such as when a person acts in his own interest or according to his own design – Hebrews 9:12).

With respect to the present usage, many commentators reason that Paul's change of grammar indicates that the gift of tongues will cease *in and of itself*. The contention is that, whereas prophecy and knowledge will be done away by something (or someone) outside them, tongues will pass away intrinsically and naturally with no such outside entity acting upon them. This interpretation is commonly held by cessationists who put it forward as textual vindication of their contention that the gift of tongues (along with all of the so-called "sign-gifts") died off naturally with the close of the New Testament canon. And they argue that tongues ceased naturally because they had served their purpose in authenticating the apostolic teaching until the written apostolic record was finalized.

This interpretation, however, stands upon an unfounded conclusion. In the case of this particular verb, it occurs in the New Testament in the middle voice *with only one exception* (1 Peter 3:10), and in none of its uses does it connote an intrinsic, natural cessation (ref. the above cited verses along with Acts 21:32; Ephesians 1:16; Colossians 1:9; Hebrews 10:2; 1 Peter 4:1).

The textual evidence indicates that this Greek verb characteristically took the middle voice at the time of the biblical writings, and thus no special significance can be attached to its use here. (Many Greek verbs follow a pattern in which they take middle/passive voice *forms* but are actually active in *meaning*. Such verbs are called *deponents*. Some of these verbs are deponent throughout their conjugation; others are deponent in only some of their forms.)

Thus Paul's grammar doesn't allow for separating tongues and their cessation from knowledge and prophecy. And this being the case, it follows that all three must be regarded in the same way: as passing away by virtue of the coming of the "perfect." This, in turn, means that the "perfect" can only be associated with the completed New Testament canon if one is willing to concede that *knowledge* – and not merely prophecy and tongues – ceased with the close of the first century.

Thus Carson's comments:

*"The outcome of the debate over these positions is very important, because Paul writes that the imperfect disappears when perfection comes. In other words, the gifts of prophecy, knowledge and tongues (and presumably by extrapolation most other charismatic gifts) will pass away at some point future to Paul's writing, designated by him 'perfection.' If this point can be located in the first or second century, then no putative gift of prophecy, knowledge, or tongues is valid today."*

Cessationists note that it is the spiritual gift of “knowledge” (the “word of knowledge”) which passes away along with prophecy and tongues, and so argue that this fits the notion of the “perfect” denoting the completion of the canon. For once the New Testament scriptures were in place, there was no need for “revelation knowledge” as a spiritual endowment; the Spirit had now bound up all revelation in the written word. In itself, however, this argument doesn’t prove (or necessitate) that the “perfect” refers to the completed canon.

Turning, then, to the issue of the “perfect,” Carson notes the three most popular interpretations:

- 1) The first is the one already noted, namely that Paul was speaking about the *canonical completion of the New Testament scriptures*.
- 2) The second is that this perfection refers to the *full maturity of either the Church or individual believers*. In terms of the latter, “perfection” is then a personal reality attained by each Christian at his death (or at the resurrection; ref. Philippians 3:1-21). As for the former, the Church’s perfection must arguably be situated at the end of the age. By the Spirit’s work through His gifts, the Church is moving toward its full maturity in Christ, but this “perfection” yet stands as a future hope for every generation (cf. Ephesians 2:11-22; 4:11-16, 5:25-27). The Church’s refulgent glory as a spotless bride awaits the revealing of the Bridegroom, even as the full glory of the individual members of Christ’s Church – and therefore the full glory of the Church itself – awaits the resurrection.
- 3) The third option is that Paul was speaking of the *Parousia* and the components of “perfection” associated with it, including the resurrection and the new heavens and new earth (cf. Romans 8:16-25; 1 Corinthians 15:1-28; Philippians 3:1-21; 2 Thessalonians 1:9-2:17; 1 John 3:1-3).

While the first view is understandably preferred by cessationists, the third one best conforms to the context and the overall New Testament witness. The first argument in favor of it is a negative one, which is that the notion of “perfection” as referring to the completion of the New Testament canon is entirely foreign to this passage (as it is to all of Paul’s writing and the New Testament). It seems beyond question that the source of this interpretation is not biblical and contextual exegesis, but the *a priori* assumption that the gift of tongues has ceased.

But there is also a compelling positive reason for adopting the third interpretation, and that is drawn from Paul’s elaboration in verse 12 (cf. vv. 9-10). There he noted that the coming of the “perfect” brings the partial and imperfect to an end, which includes the imperfection of present knowledge. But Paul didn’t associate this passing away of the imperfect with a completed canon; rather, he associated it with seeing the Lord face-to-face – with knowing fully even as he was, already at that time, fully known by Christ (cf. 1 John 3:1-3).

The third interpretation of the “perfect” also best fits with Paul’s explanatory statement in verses 13:9-10. After insisting that prophecy, knowledge and tongues will cease, Paul explained that they will do so because they are non-ultimate and transitory. They are part of the present “imperfection” and so will yield to perfection when it comes. The imperfect won’t pass away because of annulment, but because of consummation. Having carried out their role in God’s purposes, they will yield themselves to that consummate reality which they served. This understanding, then, sheds light on what Paul meant by the “partial.”

Linguistically, the term has a broad semantic range and refers to that which is, in some sense, a portion or part in relation to something else. It can thus denote a physical part of a whole (12:27; John 19:23; Ephesians 4:16; Revelation 16:19), a matter of degree, extent or comparison (11:18; Romans 11:25; 2 Corinthians 1:14, 2:5, 3:10; Hebrews 9:5), a particular time, place, instance, or matter of concern within a larger scheme (14:27; Matthew 2:22, 15:21, 16:13; Acts 19:1, 20:2; Romans 15:15, 24; 2 Corinthians 9:3; Colossians 2:16), a share in something (Matthew 24:51; Luke 12:46; John 13:8; Revelation 20:6, 21:8, 22:19), or even a particular entity in distinction from others of the same sort (Acts 23:6, 9).

This noun can also refer to a state, condition or situation which is non-ultimate and/or transitory. In this instance there is “partiality” in the sense of falling short of that which is ultimate, full or final. And framed in terms of the “perfect,” this partiality is seen to constitute *imperfection*, much as the Hebrews writer insisted that the Old Covenant was imperfect – not flawed or corrupt, but non-ultimate and therefore impermanent (8:6-7; cf. also 7:18-19, 9:1-11, 11:40).

These considerations help to narrow in on Paul’s meaning in this context. His insistence that Christians know *in part* and prophesy *in part* (13:9) speaks to the imperfection and incompleteness of the present order on the one hand and, on the other, the perfection and fullness that are to come.

- The partiality of believers’ knowledge (as also the gift of knowledge) speaks to their progress in “christiformity,” not their finiteness. That is, they know “in part,” not because they’re finite, but because the perfect has not yet come. When that happens, Christians won’t be omniscient, but they will know fully as human beings; in Paul’s words, they will know as they are known – in full and perfect conformity to the truth (13:12).
- The partial nature of prophecy is related to the partiality of knowledge. A person can only proclaim what he knows; where knowledge is imperfect and incomplete, so is his proclamation. (As will be seen, prophecy speaks more to *forth-telling* than *foretelling*.) The one who knows “in part” prophesies “in part.” So also the fullness of knowledge implies the perfecting of prophecy. Paul didn’t mention the perfecting of prophecy as he did knowledge, but the implication is that “knowing fully” will mean the capacity to fully and perfectly proclaim that which is known.