

An Analytical Commentary On 1 Corinthians 13

To What Does The “Perfect” Of 1 Corinthians 13:10 Refer?

In this exegetical commentary, the question of the “perfect” in 1 Corinthians 13:10 will be considered. In summary: does the perfect refer to the completion of the Canon and the end of the apostolic age or does it refer to the coming of Jesus?

1. If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.ⁱ

Comment: Paul writes that even if I speak in all the tongues known to man and angels, what good does it do if I don’t use it to love others? It is just making noise. The tongues of men are clearly known languages and, while some have used tongues of angels to refer to angelic tongues, every time angels speak in Scripture, whether to men or in visions, they are clearly speaking in decipherable languages and not just gibberish and the language is always understood by the person having the vision or hearing the angel. There is no record of any distinct or unintelligible speech from angels. Paul is using a figure of speech that emphasizes speaking eloquently. The tongues here should be understood in the same reference as Paul’s discussion in chapter 12:10, 30 and his discussion of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 because it fits the context of the Corinthians seeking these gifts to promote self instead of edifying the church. It would be completely random for Paul to talk about tongues in the chapter before and the chapter after and actual languages, but to mean something completely different in the chapter in-between!

2. If I have *the gift of prophecy*, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Comment: Paul continues to emphasize the importance of love by listing other gifts. Interestingly, the word “gift” is not found in the original text but is an assumption on the part of the translators, as indicated by the italics in the text. This is a safe assumption because Paul lists it as a gift in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. Here, mysteries and knowledge are connected in the same phrase under “I know,” the Greek word “*εἶδω*,” showing Paul is using them as a connected experience. But what are these experiences of prophecy and knowledge of mysteries? Though some would say that prophecy is both foretelling (predicting the future or producing new revelation) and forthtelling (proclaiming) of God’ Word, this is simply not true. Both the Old and New Testament only use the term “prophecy” for the communicating of previously unknown revelation. True, sometimes

prophets spoke what was already written by others before them. But that speech itself isn’t called prophecy just because it was a prophet speaking any more than saying that when a heart surgeon is speaking about heart surgery is he actually doing heart surgery. Rather, it was a simply a prophet, who had at other times revealed new communication from God, also speaking previous revelation. Also, prophecy is said to have been done by women in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 11:5), but if prophesying in the New Testament is primarily forthtelling, women were already told to not teach in the church (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:12). Further, prophecy and teaching are clearly separated in Ephesians 4:11. Finally, according to 1 Peter 1:20-21, all prophecy is given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and is not simply the proclaiming of what God says to be true. But what of knowledge? In the previous chapter, Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10 that this knowledge is something specifically given to that person by the Holy Spirit, aka, revelation, and not simply the ability to study and understand something. These gifts are special revelations and abilities from God. Even if I can prophesy, and know all the mysteries of God, and have so much faith that I can remove mountains, but I don’t love, it doesn’t make me anything.

3. And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

4. Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant,

5. does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*,

6. does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;

7. bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Comment: In contrast to the attitude of the Corinthians, using spiritual gifts for their own reputations and egos, love always puts the well-being of the other person first.

8. Love never fails; but if *there are gifts of prophecy*, they will be done away; if *there are tongues*, they will cease; if *there is knowledge*, it will be done away.

Comment: Love is always the goal because it never ends. By contrast, the very gifts that the Corinthians were obsessing over to make themselves the center of

attention and to make them seem more spiritual will come to an end. There will be a time when they will be no more. These abilities will outlive their usefulness, but love never will. Paul writes that both prophecy and knowledge will be done away. The words Paul uses are passive and mean “to abolish.” Something else will cause them to be abolished. It is significant that, once again, the translators insert the word “gifts” when it isn’t in the text. It is significant here because the question is whether or not prophecy will be done away with or simply the gift of prophecy, and these two are not the same. Prophecy may be given to individuals at the will of God out of the ordinary while the gift of prophecy shows that someone is regularly prophesying. This is just like miracles. The gift of doing miracles and God doing a miracle through a person are not the same thing. But given that the context is talking about spiritual gifts, it would seem that the most natural reading would be that Paul is talking about the gift of prophecy. By contrast, when talking about tongues, Paul writes that they will cease but uses a different voice. He uses the future middle voice, which Mounce defines as “the action of a verb in the middle voice in some way affects the subject.”ⁱⁱ In the classic middle sense, rather than the subject affecting the direct object, the subject affects itself. A literal translation would be “tongues will cease themselves.” The arrival of the perfect that Paul will discuss in 1 Corinthians 10:13 will abolish prophecy and knowledge, but tongues will stop themselves. The problem with this translation is that the middle does not always carry this idea. In Luke 8:24, Jesus rebuked the wind and calmed the water, and the text says the waves ceased and uses the same Greek word in the middle voice, albeit in the aorist tense rather than the future. But the waves did not “cease themselves” but were ceased by Jesus. It seems here that Paul is using the middle in a way that is almost synonymous with the active voice. As Mounce goes on to write, “In the majority of cases, the middle has the same meaning as the active.” In other words, it is deponent and not reflexive. So it seems that Paul is simply saying that tongues will cease.

9. For we know in part and we prophesy in part;

Comment: Whatever we know now, or whatever we prophesy about, is only partial. It isn’t the complete picture. The point Paul makes is that these Corinthians were showing off because they had received a special prophecy or knowledge, but he knocks them down a peg by showing them that they still only know part of the whole picture and that others receive knowledge that they did not or prophecy that they did not. No single person has all the knowledge or prophecy. As Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 13:2, it was only hypothetical that

someone would have it all. But why doesn’t Paul mention tongues in this discussion? Simply because tongues are not partial. They are for proclaiming not revealing. Tongues will cease, but not in connection to what will abolish prophecy and knowledge.

10. but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

Comment: Here, Paul introduces the crucial phrase “the perfect.” Whatever this perfect is, it will mean the abolishing of what is partial. Why will knowledge and prophecy be abolished? Paul says that the reason is because they are only partial. The word, “perfect,” comes from the Greek word, “τελειος,” meaning completion. A literal translation could be “when the complete comes, the partial will be abolished.” Further, whatever this perfect is, it must be in the same category of prophecy and knowledge, otherwise it is like talking apples and oranges; the one doesn’t really affect the other. Since prophecy and knowledge, in 1 Corinthians 12-14, are focused on special revelation, the complete must also be special revelation. When this complete revelation comes, prophecy and knowledge will be abolished.

11. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

Comment: This illustration is used to show the difference between immaturity and maturity, between partial knowledge and perfect knowledge. When we were kids, we spoke, acted, and thought like kids. But when we become adults, we know longer act like children. In the same way, when the complete comes, we will not be needing or obsessing over the partial.

12. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

Comment: “For now” refers to the time Paul and the Corinthians found themselves in. Given the situation they were in, with the gifts they have, they were like people looking into a mirror. For us, that doesn’t sound so bad. But for Paul, most mirrors of his day were polished brass or copper. They could see the reflection, but it wasn’t clear. Rather, as Paul states, it was like looking “dimly.” The Greek word for dimly is “ανιγμα,” or “enigma.” In other words, in our present state, we are still not sure what we are looking at. But when the complete comes, it won’t be like looking in a dim mirror anymore. Rather, we will see clearly, like being face to face. Notice, that isn’t saying we will see the perfect face to face literally any more than we are literally looking in a mirror. The contrast is between seeing dimly vs. clearly. When the perfect comes I will know fully just as, or in the same way, I am fully known. But the deciding

question is: know what? The Greek word is “ἐπιγινώσκω” combining the words “all” and “know.” Is it that we will know everything fully? No, only God knows that. Is it that we will know God fully? Again, only God knows that and the text says we will know fully as we are fully known. Will we know God as fully as He knows us? Hardly. Even after Jesus comes back we still won’t know everything fully. That type of guarantee is absent from the Biblical record. So, what are we seeing and what will we know? The key is asking what does prophecy and knowledge reveal in part that they do not reveal the whole? It could be that we will know what God wants us to do fully. Prophecy and knowledge partly reveal what God wants us to do, but then we will know fully just as God fully knows us. That could be the case. Or, it could be that we will know ourselves fully. God already knows us fully and when the complete and perfect thing comes, we will clearly see ourselves the way God sees us. Or, frankly, it could be both. We will know what God wants us to do just as we are already known by God. The first option seems best to me because prophecy and knowledge were given to instruct people. Regardless of which interpretation one chooses, we see these are the specific functions given to the Word of God. God’s word instructs us and lays our hearts bare 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12.

13. But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Comment: In contrast to prophecy and knowledge, which will be abolished, faith, hope and love abide. The word “abide” means to remain. Faith, hope, and love remain after the complete has come. This raises the question of what Paul means by these “remain.” If Paul is saying that these remain after the perfect comes, this helps us greatly understand what the perfect is referring to. After all, faith and hope will not remain after Jesus comes back because we will be in His presence. Romans 8:24 shows that we only hope for what we do not see. Love, however will remain, which is why it is the greatest. If this is what Paul means then the perfect refers to something that comes before Jesus comes back.

Conclusion: I Identify The Perfect As The Completed Canon Of Scripture.

Reasons:

1. Tongues, Prophecy And Knowledge Are Singled Out As Revelational
2. Gifts Of Prophecy And Knowledge Will Be Abolished While Tongues Will Cease
3. Gifts Of Prophecy And Knowledge Will Be Abolished Because They Are Partial

4. Something Perfect (Complete) Will Replace Them

5. That Complete And Perfect Thing Must Be In The Same Category As Prophecy And Knowledge To Replace Them, AKA Revelational.

6. That Complete Thing Will Make Us See Clearly What God Calls Us To Do And Who God Says We Are.

7. Faith, Hope, And Love Are Said To Remain, But Faith And Hope Won’t Remain After The Coming Of Christ.

Objections: John MacArthur Has Raised Three Issues That Can Serve As A Summary Of The Rest Of The Objections In His Commentary On 1 Corinthians.ⁱⁱⁱ

1. Would The Corinthians Have Understood This As Talking About The Completion Of The Canon?: He writes that these believers would have most naturally understood Paul to be referring to “spiritual and moral perfection.”

Comment: I don’t agree that the Corinthians would have most naturally interpreted the perfect in this way because that is a category error. Gifts of prophecy and knowledge are revelational and so the perfect that does away with them must also be revelational. But how would they know to expect a completion of revelation? Paul was telling them right here!

2. Prophecy And Knowledge Are Still In Effect And Refer More To Proclaiming And Knowing God’s Word Intimately: MacArthur goes on to state, “If the perfect refers to the completion of Scripture, then prophecy and knowledge have already been stopped, and all believers since that time would have been without the benefit of two of the most important gifts for proclaiming, interpreting, and understanding scripture. The gift of prophecy was only partly used for revelation. In most cases it was used for proclaiming and interpreting what already had been revealed.”

Comment: Really? Point to a single example, not of a prophet preaching revelation, because that does admittedly happen, but of the act of preaching previously revealed revelation being explicitly called prophecy. The Old and New Testament only call prophecy the revealing of specific, new communication from God.

3. Prophecy Will Be Active In The Kingdom Age: MacArthur references Joel 2:28 and its counterpart in Acts 2:17. Joel predicted that in the kingdom age, people will prophesy and dream dreams. Acts 2, contrary to the opinions of many amillennialists, is not a fulfillment of Joel, so it must be fulfilled literally in the future. MacArthur reasons that since

prophecy is present in the future, it cannot be eliminated yet. And, lest someone argue that the answer is to have a break in the doing away with prophecy, MacArthur points out that the word for doing away in 1 Corinthians 13 was abolish, not simply to set aside.

Comment: By this reasoning, God giving revelation through dreams hasn't ended yet either! Is that something we should be practicing? Of course not. Further, it was the gift of prophecy that ended, not that all prophecy has ended. God can still allow a person, on occasion, to prophecy at His discretion. Further, the tribulation and Millennial Kingdom are similar to Acts dispensationally. There is a transition period that would make certain practices abnormal for the rest of the period.

4. The Ryrie Study Bible Contains And Additional Issue That Is Worth Considering In A Note On 1 Corinthians 13:10: If this is speaking of the completed Canon, which came after Paul's death, We Would Then Know More Than Paul today!

Comment: So? Paul didn't know everything. None of the Apostles knew everything. Even Peter didn't know what Paul was talking about sometimes in 2 Peter 3:15-16! Even Paul knew only what God revealed to Him. If Paul knew everything, why were there other writers of Scripture?

In my final analysis, there seems to be a natural reading of the text to assume that the "perfect" of 1 Corinthians refers to the completion of special revelation, aka, the completion of the written Scripture. Further, there seems to be no good reason to doubt this interpretation.

ⁱ All Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960,1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995. Used by permission.

ⁱⁱ Mounce, William D. Basics Of Biblical Greek Grammar. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003,. Pg. 230-231.

ⁱⁱⁱ MacArthur, John. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians. Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1984. Pg. 364-365.