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Prophecy, "the Perfect," and the End of What?

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:8–13

Code: B140320

The final argument John Piper made on his podcast in support of the continuation of fallible prophecy has to do with the identity and timing of “the perfect” in 1 Corinthians 13:8–12.[\[1\]](#) Here’s what he said:

The future in view here, I think, is manifestly when Christ comes. When the perfect comes, in the time of adulthood when he’s not speaking like a child anymore, the time of seeing face to face, not in a mirror anymore, but rather knowing fully even as I have been fully known. That’s not any time in this age. That’s the end of the age, when we will know fully even as we have been fully known.

So that’s when the gift of prophecy stops. So, this text is a pretty clear argument, I think, that the gift of prophecy and tongues will continue until Jesus comes back. And it seems to me that the reason they pass away, it says, is precisely because they’re imperfect. They’re not Scripture-level authority, because verse 9 says, *ek merous prophēteuomen*—that’s the Greek—we prophesy *ek merous*, we prophesy in part, just like a little child, trying to reason, and think, and talk, and when he grows up and becomes a man, in the age to come, he won’t need that kind of help anymore.[\[2\]](#)

That summary reflects what has become a very common interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:8–12. Because of its popularity, many are not aware that it rests upon unfounded assumptions and is entirely at odds with the respected exegetes both of church history and today. But by focusing on what Paul actually said, I believe we can clear away the confusion that continuationists have inserted into this text.

What is “the perfect”?

The word translated “perfect” is from *téleios*, and is used to describe something that is morally perfect, full grown and mature, or complete. The different nuances of *téleios* have given rise to various interpretations of what “the perfect” refers to: F.F. Bruce said “the perfect” is love itself; B.B. Warfield, the completed canon of Scripture; Robert Thomas, the mature church; Richard Gaffin, the return of Christ; and Thomas Edgar, the individual believer’s entrance into heavenly glory.[\[3\]](#)

Significantly, though they disagree on the referent of “the perfect,” each one of those respected New Testament scholars is a committed cessationist. Clearly—and contrary to the assertions of so many continuationists—the cessationist case does not stand or fall with 1 Corinthians 13:8–12. As New Testament scholar Anthony Thistleton says, “Few or none of the serious ‘cessationist’ arguments depends on a specific exegesis of 1 Cor. 13:8–11. . . . These verses should not be used as a polemic for either side in this debate.”[\[4\]](#) Even continuationist scholar D.A. Carson admits that Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13 do not “necessarily mean that a charismatic gift could not have been withdrawn earlier than the parousia.”[\[5\]](#)

That said, I believe the best way to understand the timing of “the perfect” is closer to John Piper’s

view. Here's what I wrote in *Strange Fire*:

Of the possible interpretations, the believer's entrance into the Lord's presence best fits Paul's use of "perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:10. This makes sense of Paul's later statement in verse 12 about believers seeing Christ "face to face" and possessing full knowledge—descriptions that cannot be realized this side of glory.[\[6\]](#)

So just as cessationists can disagree among themselves about *what* "the perfect" is and still be cessationists, John Piper and I can agree on *when* "the perfect" comes and yet still disagree about when the miraculous gifts cease.

This demonstrates that a conscientious student of Scripture—whether cessationist or continuationist—should not look to 1 Corinthians 13:8–12 as a trump card in this discussion, imagining that a simple quotation of the passage should make it obvious that his view is the right one. This text has to be carefully handled to make the author's intention plain (2 Timothy 2:15). In the remainder of this post, I hope to do that by asking two crucial questions of this text.

What (exactly) is lacking in New Testament prophecy?

The contrast in 1 Corinthians 13 is not between the imperfect/fallible and the perfect/infallible, but rather between the partial and complete. Paul clearly said, "For we know *in part* and we prophesy *in part*, but when the *perfect* comes, the *partial* will pass away" (ESV, 1 Corinthians 13:9–10, emphasis added).

But Piper takes "perfect" to mean "infallible" and "in part" to mean "fallible." Here's what he said while quoting verses 9–10 (his comments are noted in italics):

For now we know in part and we prophesy in part—*that's a very crucial statement: 'We prophesy in part';* but when the perfect comes—*as though the prophecies were not that [i.e., not perfect]—*the partial will pass away.[\[7\]](#)

Don't miss the interpretive conclusion Piper has insinuated there (it's especially clear in the audio). He sees the contrast between "we prophesy in part" and "but when the perfect comes" as suggesting a qualitative difference between the gift of prophecy practiced among the Corinthians and whatever is going on at the time of the perfect. To him, that means the New Testament gift of prophecy must not be perfect—that is, it must not be infallible.

But there is absolutely no justification for that. Prophesying "in part" doesn't mean prophesying fallibly or inaccurately; it means that the prophecies do not provide the kind of *exhaustive* knowledge believers will possess when they enter Christ's presence. The same can be said of Old Testament prophecy: It was infallible, but it was also "in part" because it did not provide the complete fulfillment of God's revelation found in the New Testament. Even the two Testaments together do not provide the exhaustive knowledge believers will enjoy in glory, which is precisely Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 13:8–12.

Therefore, we should not understand "in part" to mean "fallible" but rather "partial" or "nonexhaustive." And we should not understand "perfect" to mean "infallible" but rather "complete."

Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 13:9–10 is to be understood this way: We know in part and we prophesy in part; but when *that which is complete* comes, *that which is partial* will be done away. What was lacking in New Testament prophecy was completeness (a *quantitative* issue) not accuracy (a *qualitative* issue). The qualitative perfection of New Testament prophecy was never in question—until the modern challenges of the charismatic movement.

What (exactly) will pass away?

After Piper argues that the timing of “the perfect” is the end of the age when we see Christ (which I agree with), he then draws the conclusion, “So that’s when the gift of prophecy stops.”^[8] And that’s where my agreement stops. Verse 8 does not say the gift of prophecy—singular—will pass away; it says prophecies—*plural*—will pass away. The cessation Paul speaks of does not have to do with the *gift* of prophecy, but *prophecies*, which are the result or the product of the gift of prophecy.

Here’s how Sam Waldron explains it:

The emphasis, therefore, is not on the gift of prophecy *itself*, but on the various revelations or *prophecies* given through the gift. Thus, verse eight emphasizes not the gift of prophecy, but the contents of prophecy—the *prophecies* plural given through the gift of prophecy. The emphasis, then, of the preceding context is not on the gifts of tongues and prophecy. It is clearly on the knowledge—the partial knowledge—associated with those gifts.^[9]

Now, lest you think Waldron is guilty of making too fine a distinction, take a moment to reflect more deeply on verses 9 and 10.

John Piper believes “the partial” in verse 10 is a qualitative statement referring to the gift of fallible prophecy. He would have us read the passage this way: For we know fallibly and we prophesy fallibly; but when the perfect comes, the fallible gifts will be done away. But in order to maintain Paul’s parallel between “the partial” and “the perfect,” Piper’s interpretation would force us to conclude that “the perfect” refers to a *gift*. Here’s how that sounds: For we know fallibly and we prophesy fallibly; but when the perfect, infallible gifts of prophecy and knowledge come, the fallible gifts will be done away.

So, are we to expect to receive perfect, infallible gifts of prophecy and knowledge when we see Christ face to face? No indeed. Piper has already told us “the perfect” is not a gift at all but “is manifestly when Christ comes.” This internal inconsistency should make the error obvious. On the one hand, the parallelism shows the contrast between “the partial,” which is fallible, and “the perfect,” which is infallible. But that parallelism is ignored in the next instance to maintain that “the perfect” is not an infallible gift, but the *completeness of knowledge believers enjoy when face to face with Christ*. You can’t have it both ways.

So Waldron is correct. “The partial” does not refer to the gift of prophecy itself but rather to the partial (and, at the same time, infallible) knowledge that results from the exercise of this gift. This *partial* knowledge is contrasted not with a perfect *gift* of knowledge but with the perfect, comprehensive knowledge believers will enjoy when they come face to face with Christ.^[10] With that in view, you can back away from the details of the text to discover the point. Paul is not trying to teach the Corinthians when *the gifts* will cease but that there will come an end to *the knowledge* conveyed

through those gifts. As I wrote in *Strange Fire*:

It is important to note that Paul's purpose in this chapter was not to identify how long the spiritual gifts would continue into later centuries of church history, as that would have been essentially meaningless to the original readers of this letter. Rather, he was making a point that specifically pertained to his first-century audience: when you Corinthian believers enter the glorified perfection of eternity in heaven, the spiritual gifts you now prize so highly will no longer be necessary (since the partial revelation they provide will be made complete). But love has eternal value, so pursue love because it is superior to any gift (1 Corinthians 13:13).[\[11\]](#)

Thomas Edgar agrees:

If, as seems apparent in the passage, the *teleion* refers to the individual's presence with the Lord, this passage does not refer to some prophetic point in history. These factors mean that this passage does not teach when the gifts will cease or how long they will last. It serves to remind the Corinthians of the abiding nature of love in contrast to the gifts, which by their inherent nature are only temporal, only for this life.[\[12\]](#)

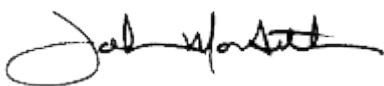
So, although it is often used as a slam-dunk text to support continuationism, 1 Corinthians 13 teaches nothing directly about *when* the gifts cease. Paul is once again correcting the Corinthian believers—the knowledge they so highly prized, which came as a result of prophetic gifts, would one day be outshined by the enduring character of love. Rather than trying to show up one another with ostentatious displays of their giftedness, they should focus their energy on loving one another.

Conclusion

This was the third post dealing with the texts John Piper used to support fallible prophecy (1 Corinthians 11:4–5; 1 Corinthians 13:8–12; 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21). None of the continuationist interpretations of these passages compels us to abandon the doctrine of cessationism. What I've provided doesn't break any new ground. It is nothing more than the historic position of the church, which is faithful to the biblical view of prophecy.

I hope Christians will see that the support for fallible prophecy and the continuation of the miraculous gifts is exegetically suspect and does not hold up to biblical scrutiny. And I hope they will challenge anyone who attempts to diminish and degrade the full power of God's prophetic word by redefining it according to continuationist presuppositions.

There is no virtue in allowing error to continue unabated and unchecked. Confronting and correcting it is often unpleasant for all involved, but it is the loving thing to do. I'll have more to say about the pastoral duty to confront and correct error, as a matter of sincere Christian love, in my next post.



[1] Be sure not to miss the previous posts: [Biblical Prophecy and Modern Confusion](#), [Prophecy](#)

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[Redefined](#), and [Fallibility and Female Prophets](#).

[2] [Ask Pastor John](#), episode 215, 6:04–7:19.

[3] John MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, p. 148.

[4] Anthony Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC), pp. 1063–64.

[5] D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 70.

[6] John MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, pp. 148–49.

[7] [Ask Pastor John](#), episode 215, 5:31–5:46.

[8] [Ask Pastor John](#), episode 215, 6:34–6:38.

[9] Sam Waldron, *To Be Continued?*, pp. 63–64.

[10] See also Thomas Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, p. 245: “The prophecies and knowledge in this passage are not the gifts themselves, as most interpreters seem to assume, but the content associated with the gifts. There are several reasons for understanding the passage in this way. The gifts are not partial, nor will there be a day when the partial gifts will be replaced by complete gifts.”

[11] John MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, p. 149.

[12] Thomas Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, p. 246; cf. Sam Waldron, *To Be Continued?*, p. 64: “The conclusion must be that Paul is teaching the doing away of partial knowledge in favor of perfect knowledge in verse 10. He says nothing about when the gifts of prophecy and tongues pass away. He only refers to the passing of the present and partial knowledge that was conveyed through those gifts. He leaves open the question of the time of the passing of the gifts of prophecy and tongues. This passage is, therefore, not conclusive for the continuation of the gift of prophecy. That issue must be decided on other grounds.”