The More Excellent Way That Never Shall End - I Cor. 13:8-13

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Like 7

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Everybody knows "the love chapter" in I Corinthians 13. It gets quoted at weddings, cited in love poems, and is likely hanging on many walls around the world in nice, neat little frames. And surely there are in this chapter some general principles about how love works, and what it looks like, that are applicable to its every expression. When one considers the deep importance of the practice of love in the Christian religion, together with the profound things that are said about love in this chapter, it becomes clear that it is entirely appropriate to hear the message of this chapter in each of those settings, and others like them.

However, if we are committed to the Bible as God's inspired revelation to all men and women in writing, then we must do more than just read this passage apart from its context. We must, indeed, read it to hear what the apostle Paul originally intended to say in it to his readers, and what they would originally have understood in it. The golden rule of Bible exegesis is that *the Bible can never mean to us what it could not have meant to its original hearers*, and this principle is as important here as anywhere else in Scripture.

The most immediate thing to note is that the chapter comes of course as part of a longer section, I Cor. 12-14, where Paul takes up the issue of spiritual gifts, and their ongoing abuse in Corinth. In chapter 12 he raises the issue of gifts more generally, and explains some basic principles about how they are given by God to function in the body, and why. He stresses the unity in diversity that gifts reflect in the body as God's operative work among them. In chapter 14, he "zooms in," so to speak, on tongues and prophecy in particular. More specifically, he contrast throughout the chapter the value for the larger body of uninterpreted tongues in the assembly and democratic prophecy in the assembly, urging the recognition that the one which most edifies others should be the priority when the church gathers corporately for worship.

Stuck right between these two stands our chapter, and this is not by accident.

I Corinthians 13 at a Glance

The problems at Corinth were numerous, including a blind eye to immorality, seriously deficient theology, schism and party divisions, and rampant abuse of Spiritual gifts for the purpose of proud self-exaltation. Probably all of the problems at Corinth can be generally subsumed under the head of "over-realized eschatology." They also seem to have assumed that their giftedness equated to them being more "spiritual," and Paul seems regularly to take up this claim and point out that Spirituality (experience of the Spirit's presence) is not so much related to giftedness (and certainly isn't signaled by giftedness), but is rather signified by Christian character and maturity.

> "Love...is not so much a virtue to be worked at...as the ultimate bridge, in terms of human character, from present Christian living into the future kingdom."
> - N. T. Wright
> (Tweet This)

I highly recommend D. A. Carson's treatment, perhaps the best and most thorough I've seen (links to his book and lectures are in the last post I shared on FB; hear him lecture through the chapter at the link here). For commentaries, Gordon Fee in the NICNT volume is brilliant, while Barrett, Plummer, Thiselton, Hays, Fitzmyer, and the recent works by Garland and Gardener are all helpful. I lean heavily on Fee here, because I think he has the best understanding of the book as a whole (which comes to the fore in this chapter). The text divides basically into 3 paragraphs;

1. 13:1-3 sets out religious activities that carry no value if the one doing them does not also exercise love.
2. 13:4-7 builds a description of love that is likely uniquely tailored to the Corinthian situation and their failures (virtually every clause finds a correspondence in their failures). The way that love should behave is precisely the way that they have not.
3. 13:8-13 takes up a contrast between specific charismata and love, where he emphasizes the temporary nature of one and the permanent nature of the other.

Gordon Fee summarizes the whole of the chapter well;

> [Paul] begins by setting forth several "religious" activities, many of them from the list in 12:8–10, as not benefiting the person doing them if that person's life is not also characterized by love (vv. 1–3). He follows that with a description of love that seems to have been especially adapted to the Corinthian situation and their differences with Paul (vv. 4–7). This in turn leads him to contrast love with selected *charismata*, including tongues, in terms of the absolute, eternal nature of the one and the relative, temporal nature of the other, placed within the context of their "already/not yet" eschatological existence (vv. 8–13). This does not make *charismata* less valuable for life in the present as one awaits the consummation, but it posits against their "overrealized" spirituality that these things have a relative life span (for the "already" only), while love is both for now and forever. Thus vv. 1–3 urge the absolute *necessity* of love; vv. 4–6 describe the *character* of love; and vv. 8–13 illustrate the *permanence* of love—all to the one end that they eagerly desire "the things of the Spirit" (14:1) for the sake of the common good (12:7).
> (NICNT, *I Corinthians,* revised edition, pg. 696)

The Permanence of Love - Zooming in on 13:8-13

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Paul's point is two fold. First, to direct them to seek true spirituality, which has been a sharp contention between them thus far. They think their giftedness means they are more spiritual. Paul instead is adamant to explain that true spirituality is "Godality," and shows itself mature in Christian character rather than giftedness. Second, to put their emphasis on tongues into its proper place, so that they urge love for others above all else, which will curb not tongues itself, but the way they are using it.

Love then, is higher than any gift, and Paul's basic way to make this point is to show its *permanence* over the gifts (and he singles out those they think so important). His greatest argument is that these gifts they have presumed to be a mark of the future are in fact only for the *present*. The longevity of love over against the temporality of the gifts makes clear the priority. Specifically at issue is tongues; they don't represent what it means to be spiritual. And they don't demonstrate that the Corinthians have come to live the life of the eschaton. Quite the opposite, love does, because love persists into the eschaton while the gifts do not.

Fee explains the fact that love is actually rarely mentioned, despite the fact that it lurks in the background, while the gifts, and especially, their temporary nature, take up most of the discussion here. Why?

> The clue to this emphasis lies with the Corinthians' understanding of tongues as evidence of their spirituality. The problem is with an "overspiritualized" eschatology, as if tongues, the language of the angels, meant that they were already partakers of the ultimate state of spiritual existence. Hence the underlying polemical tone of this passage. This is not a condemnation of the gifts; it is a relativizing of them. In 1:7 Paul had already stated his own perspective: "You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed." Now he urges over and again that gifts do not belong to the future, but only to the present. On this they are deluded: The irony is that the gifts, their evidence of their future existence, will pass away (v. 8a); they are "partial" (v. 9); they are as childhood in comparison with adulthood (v. 11); they are like looking into a mirror in comparison with seeing someone in person (v. 12).
> (Fee, *NICNT, I Corinthians*, rev. ed., pg. 711)

Love Never Ends, But the Gifts Will (13:8)

"Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away."

Paul first asserts that love never ends (8a), then lists three charismata that will end (8b). These three (one which Paul exalts here, the other two which are their own favorites) will all come to an end at the eschaton. That doesn't mean we don't seek them in the present (he will urge this). We haven't reached the eschaton yet. But it does mean we *relativize* them in light of their temporary nature.

The Gifts Only Provide Partial Benefit (13:9-10)

"For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away."

He then explains *why* the assertion of verse 8 is so. Our use of the gifts gives us only *partial* experience. Both our prophecy and our knowledge are partial, in contrast to an era (notice the "when," clearly meaning the parousia) when our experience will be full and complete. In fact, the very coming of this full experience renders the partial obsolete by default. He is contrasting the present (where our experience is partial), with the future (where our experience will be full).

Two Illustrations Show that Partial is Inferior to Complete (13:11-12)

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

This truth he illustrates with two pictures. He hasn't changed topic here. He is illustrating what he has just said.

Illustration 1 - Leaving Childhood To Become A Man (13:11)

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways."

The first analogy is about children coming of age (there is discussion about whether a bar mitzvah could be in view, but it matters little). Some rite of passage is in view. Paul's point is that there is nothing wrong with children being children. That's the stage of life they are at. But they will one day move to a later stage of life, and at that point, childhood becomes inherently obsolete. There is nothing wrong with moving the gifts now (he will urge this in 14); but that should be tempered with the realization that we yearn for and live for a future when they will be no more, just as children don't exists as lost boys in never land. Adulthood is to come.

Illustration 2 - Trading The Mirror For A Meeting (13:12a)

"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face."

The second analogy again takes up the "now/then" contrast, speaking of the distortions of looking in a foggy mirror. Looking at someone (or yourself) in a foggy mirror is at best indirect. It is quite different from what it means to stand "face to face." There are a variety of things that could be referred to by the analogy, and in any case the analogy is imperfect. Fee explains;

> The first sentence, which literally reads "For at the present time we look through a looking-glass *en ainigmati*, but then face to face," is particularly relevant to their setting, since Corinth was famous as the producer of some of the finest bronze mirrors in antiquity. This suggests that the puzzling phrase *en ainigmati* is probably not as pejorative as many English translations imply. More likely the emphasis is not on the *quality* of seeing that one experiences in looking into a mirror—that would surely have been an affront to native Corinthians

—but on the *indirect nature* of looking into a mirror as opposed to seeing someone face to face. The analogy, of course, breaks down a bit, since one sees one's own face in a mirror, and Paul's point is that in our present existence one "sees" God (presumably), or understands the "mysteries," only indirectly. It is not a *distorted* image that we have in Christ through the Spirit; but it is as yet *indirect*, not complete. To put all this in another way, but keeping the imagery, "Our present 'vision' of God, as great as it is, is as nothing when compared to the real thing that is yet to be; it is like the difference between seeing a reflected image in a mirror and seeing a person face to face." In our own culture the comparable metaphor would be the difference between seeing a photograph and seeing someone in person. As good as a picture is, it is simply not the real thing.
(*NICNT, I Corinthians*, rev. ed., 718)

"Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

13:12b brings it all into focus. The same "now/then" contrast obtains. Our present experience of the gifts is a "this age" necessity. They don't mean that our knowledge of God is either Childish or distorted (bad readings of the analogies). Paul will *encourage* the gifts after all. The are appropriate to this "not yet" age. But they must always be kept in perspective. This is the age of partial and incomplete experience of God. Only the full arrival of the eschaton brings the full experience for which we long, and thus, the gifts must be relativized to love, which should direct out use of them, and our handling of others who abuse them. Love will outlast the present age. Gifts will not.

The Conclusion - Love is the Greatest of All (13:13)

"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

The conclusion brings some surprises and questions, especially with why Paul raises faith and hope (which have had no place in the whole discussion). There are a variety of views. I'm inclined to think that Paul and writers after him regularly used the triad to speak of the whole of the Christian life (1 Thess 1:3; 5:8; Gal 5:5–6; Col 1:4–5; Eph 4:2–5; 1 Pet 1:3–8; Heb 6:10–12; See also the Epistle of Barnabas 1.4; 11.8, and Polycarp, Phil. 3.2–3) and so he brings them in here to avoid the wrong impression. He doesn't want to say, "the gifts are for the present and love is for the future. So do the gifts thing now and then one day we'll do the love thing." His point is rather, "the gifts are for the present; love is the permanent mark of the Christian life and what it truly means to be Spiritual. It is for the future *and* the present. It thus guides us to relativize the gifts in light of it."

> "[Spiritual gifts] are merely signposts to the future; when you arrive, you no longer need signposts. Love, however, is not just a signpost. It is a foretaste of the ultimate reality."
> - N.T. Wright
> (Tweet This)

That's the chapter and this section in a nutshell. Perhaps NT Wright summed it up best;

> Love is what will hold the church together when various pressures threaten to pull the Messiah's body apart—when those with different gifts, or enthusiasm for a particular teacher, or a sense of their own rights and a disregard for other people's conscience, or a failure to recognize those of different social standing as equal at the lord's table, seem to want to go their own way. This chapter has a claim, alongside chapter 15, to be considered the real heart of the letter. If the church can only grasp this, it will solve at least half the problems Paul has been grappling with. And yet even this exquisite chapter

> looks forward, particularly in the section just quoted, to the final discussion, which will concern the resurrection, the new world that God will make, *and the continuity between the resurrection life and life here and now.* The point of 13:8–13 is that the church must be working *in the present* on the things that will last *into God's future*. Faith, hope and love will do this; prophecy, tongues and knowledge, so highly prized in Corinth, will not. They are merely signposts to the future; when you arrive, you no longer need signposts. Love, however, is not just a signpost. It is a foretaste of the ultimate reality. Love is not merely the Christian duty; it is the Christian destiny.
> (RSG, 296)

"Love is not merely the Christian duty; it is the Christian destiny."
- N.T. Wright
(Tweet This)

The Distinction Between The Ages

Note how, all along, this is an *eschatological* discussion drawing a distinction between the present and the future age. Note all of the *temporal/time/era* language that draws the line between these two ages, and highlights the change that comes with the dividing line between these ages;

- "Love never ends" (8);
- Prophecy will pass away (9);
- Tongues will cease (9);
- Knowledge will pass away (9);
- Currently our experience is partial, but one day the partial "will pass away"(10);
- Childish (incomplete) speaking, thinking, and reasoning will become obsolete when "I put away childish ways" (11);
- "Now" our experience is as indirect as a dim mirror, but "then" will be direct "face to face" (12);
- "Now" our knowledge is partial, but "then" is God's own full knowledge reflected in us (12);
- But we currently still live in this "now," between the ages (13), so let's let the future age shape our present use of the gifts.

One could draw two columns and put all Paul's "this age" stuff on one side, and all his "then/that age" stuff on the other and make his whole point quite nicely in a visual way. In fact, one could do that in *much* of Paul's writing, since his "already/not yet" approach to the eshchaton is thoroughgoing in his writings.

We could also note the repeated use of Paul's normal eschatological language here. For example, Ciampa and Rosner note that;

> Paul's references to things that *cease* or *pass away* in vv. 8 (twice) and 10 (also "put behind" in v. 11) employ a word that regularly has an eschatological connotation in this letter, referring to those things that do not survive the transition from this age into the fullness of the age to come (1:28; 2:6; 6:13; 13:8, 10; 15:24, 26), reflecting the influence of the Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic, especially that of the "day of the Lord" (cf. Isa. 13:6–13; 65:17; 66:22; Joel 1:15–2:11; 3:14–16; Zeph. 1:14–18; Mal. 3:2; 4:1–2). Unlike love, the gift of prophecy will not survive the transition through the resurrection to the fullness of the new creation.
> (PNTC, 654).

The question here is, *What is the dividing line between these two eras?* And the passage is clear. The dividing line that makes the child a man, trades the mirror for a face to face meeting, abandons the partial for the full, and renders the gifts obsolete in the face of the embrace of Jesus is, "when the perfect comes." There aren't three ages here, or four, or five. There are precisely *two*. And the first ends, becoming obsolete, when "the perfect" comes. That leads us to the next question.

Which View of "The Perfect" Makes More Sense?

Several different interpretations (or groups of interpretations) have been proposed for what Paul is referring to when he speaks of the coming of the perfect/mature. The two most well-known are groups which associate the "perfect" in some way with the canon of Scripture, or those which associate it in some way with the eschaton. This is not to say that in these views "the perfect" *is* the canon itself or *is* the eschaton itself (such views are rare on either side). Rather, the perfect usually is taken to refer to the state brought about either by the completion of the canon or the coming of Jesus. What do we make of these two views?

I suggest that you take a moment to read the text in full, taking notice of its full context, with both proposed interpretations in mind.

On the view that “the perfect” is a reference to the full experience of God’s presence at the eschaton, every single piece falls into place, and this sounds simply like Paul, speaking, as he so often does, of the yearning and longing we have for that day.

Now go back and read the passage with the other view in mind (where the completion of the canon is “the perfect coming"). Paul’s language is absurd, his logic doesn’t make sense, and one is left thinking,

> Yeah, but surely it must get better than this! Is there no better age to come? Is there no future Christian hope, which gets me through the hard times, that I might one day know more of God than I can now? Will seeing the face of Jesus one day when he comes really be only boring now that we have a complete Bible, as though when Jesus comes, we could say, "Thank you very much. I don’t need that warm embrace from you Jesus. I’m going to ignore you while I just go back to reading my Bible, which is the far more excellent way."

Surely this would be bibliolatry at its worst.

D. A. Carson points out the importance of this question, since identifying the point when the perfect comes could conceivably contribute to the question of whether the gifts continue.

> If this point can be located in the first or second century, then no putative gift of prophecy, knowledge, or tongues is valid today. Conversely, if this point is located at the parousia, then there is nothing in this passage to preclude a valid gift of tongues or prophecy today. This would not necessarily mean, of course, that each contemporary claim of a particular gift is valid. Nor would it necessarily mean that a charismatic gift or gifts could not have been withdrawn earlier than the parousia. But it does mean that Scripture offers no shelter to those who wish to rule out all claims to charismatic gifts today. In my judgment, this third position has powerful evidence in its defense.

He goes on to list seven reasons why he finds this reading (associating the "perfect" with the eschaton, thought not identical to it) more convincing than the alternative;

> (1) It is difficult to believe that Paul could have expected the Corinthians to think that by “perfection” he was alluding to the cessation of the writing of Scripture.

(2) Perfection entails a state of affairs where my knowledge is in some ways comparable with God's present knowledge of me [13:12b]. This does not mean that Paul expects to be granted omniscience, but "that in the consummation he expects to be freed from the misconceptions and inabilities to understand (especially to understand God and his word) which are part of this present life. His knowledge will resemble God's present knowledge of him because it will contain no false impressions and will not be limited to what is able to be perceived in this age" [Grudem]. Paul's point is not that the charismatic gifts disappear because of their intrinsic weakness or failure. His argument is built rather "on the foundation of what is to come" [Bornkamm]. In Earth's memorable words, "because the sun rises, all lights go out." When that wonderful knowledge of God becomes ours, the purpose of such gifts as prophecy, knowledge, and tongues will have disappeared: what possible service could they still render?

(3) Scarcely less important is verse 12a. Now we see "but a poor reflection": the expression suggests unclear or still indistinct divine revelation; but then, when perfection comes, "we shall see face to face"—almost a formula in the Septuagint for a theophany, and therefore almost certainly a reference to the new state brought about by the parousia. As Turner remarks, the reference to the parousia is "so sure that Calvin was able to say: 'It is stupid of people to make the whole of this discussion apply to the intervening time.' However much we respect the New Testament canon, Paul can only be accused of the wildest exaggeration in verse 12 if that is what he was talking about."

(4) The force of verse 12 similarly rules out the suggestion that "perfection" refers (as in Ephesians) to the joining together of Jews and Gentiles into one new and "perfect" man. That theme is irrelevant in the context of 1 Corinthians 13. Indeed, any preparousia maturity simply trivializes the language of verse 12.

(5) Verse 11 also draws a sharp contrast. Although the infant/adult contrast is a standard rhetorical device in the ancient world, its specific application here demands a considerable leap forward from infancy to manhood. To argue that the spiritual experience and maturity of the early church before the canon's completion are to the experience of maturity of the postcanonical church just what the experience of an infant's talk and understanding is to that of an adult is historical nonsense.

(6) If it is true that the word for "perfection" is nowhere else used for the entire state of affairs brought about by the parousia, it is also true that it almost always occurs as an adjective. Only here is it a neuter, articular substantive, probably created precisely to serve as a contrast, to "the partial" or "the imperfect."

(7) The view that Paul is referring to the closing of the canon depends on understanding New Testament prophecy and related gifts as having the same revelatory and authoritative significance as inscripturated prophecy. If that presupposition can be challenged—and I shall attempt to challenge it in the next chapter—then there is considerably less theological pressure to adopt that stance. (Carson, *Showing The Spirit,* pg. 70)

He concludes that, "In these verses Paul establishes the end of the age as the time when these gifts must finally be abolished." Wayne Grudem (who takes up a variety of views in more detail) points out also the emptiness of Paul's logic if the completion of the canon (or the state of perfect revelation brought about by the completion of the canon) were in view. As we have seen, Paul's entire rhetorically powerful argument is to basically say, "love is better than tongues, because love will never end, while the gifts will cease with the coming of Jesus." This depends on his claim that love will last forever. But, assuming the canon of scripture was completed around AD 90, some 35 years after Paul writes this letter, how could it make his point that love endures forever to compare love to an event that will happen in just a few *decades*? As Grudem asks, would it really be persuasive to argue as follows: "We can be sure that love will never end, for we know that it will last more than thirty-five years"?

The weight of the evidence falls *entirely* on the side of the experience at Jesus' second coming being in view, while the evidence that the completion of the canon is in view makes for, in my opinion, an incredibly strained reading of the passage. I should note also that I came to this view by exegeting the passage, while a convinced cessationist (and remained one after that exegesis for years to come). As David Garland points out;

> "The perfect" refers to the state of affairs brought about by the parousia... Paul uses the verb ἐλθεῖν (*elthein*) in Gal. 4:4 to refer to the coming of the fullness of time. Here, the battery of future tenses, the disappearance of the partial replaced by the complete, and the reference to knowing as God knows us, all point to the end time. He contrasts the present age with the age to come. The "perfect" is shorthand for the consummation of all things, the intended goal of creation; and its arrival will naturally displace the partial that we experience in the present age.
> Human gifts shine gloriously in this world but will fade to nothing in the presence of what is perfect. But they also will have served their purpose of helping to build up the church during the wait and to take it to the threshold of the end. When the anticipated end arrives, they will no longer be necessary. (*1 Corinthians, BECNT*, 622–623)

I find Garland's conclusion eminently reasonable. And whatever one makes of the broader claims of cessationism in general, I think that any attempt to use this passage as a cessationist argument creates what is at best a strained reading, if not blatant special pleading which twists the meaning of the text to its own ends. As Craig Blomberg warns;

> A major theological error that follows from the misinterpretation of verses 8–13 is the belief that any or all of the gifts of the Spirit have already ceased. As we have already seen, this violates every sensible reading of verse 12, and it has to distort the actual record of events throughout church history. Neither tongues nor prophecy nor miracles ceased at the end of the first-century; they continued at least into the third century and have recurred sporadically if not consistently ever since. The relative disappearance of these gifts during the later Patristic period can be attributed largely to their abuse in certain sectarian circles. Worse still, the cessationist view of the gifts is forced to attribute many apparently powerful works of the Spirit during the past century to human manufacture at best and diabolical counterfeit at worst.
> (*1 Corinthians, The NIV Application Commentary*, pg. 262–263)

As he warns more broadly elsewhere, from an eminently balanced perspective;

> Today Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement (the expression sometimes reserved for Pentecostal-like phenomena in contexts other than recognized Pentecostal churches) constitute the fastest growing branch of any religion in the world; in some parts of the Majority World it is the dominant expression of Christianity. One wonders whether Mormonism would ever have come into being if the Azusa Street Revival had occurred eighty-six years earlier and somewhere near Palmyra, New York, where Joseph Smith was living!
>
> Unfortunately, with every religious movement come abuses and quackery. With the advent of television and the proliferation of televised ministries, especially of Pentecostal or charismatic preachers and their congregations, the potential for even more abuse becomes natural, whether in harangues for money, deceptive claims of miracles, or overly authoritarian ministries. But we should never throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Millions of Christians worldwide worship weekly with one or more of the supernatural gifts present, without undue attention drawn to them, and with men and women coming to Christ, growing in Christ, and experiencing spiritual power and healing—and, occasionally, dramatic physical healing as well. To dismiss all of this as of human manufacture, or worse, as diabolical counterfeits, is a presumption of monstrous proportions.
>
> Yet, although their numbers are not nearly as large as they were even just a generation ago, there are still plenty of cessationists, who argue that the supernatural gifts have ceased. This, of course, requires them to distinguish two kinds of gifts where the first Christians would almost certainly have looked at *all* the gifts as supernatural. The cessationist view is based on some fanciful exegesis of passages, introducing distinctions that cannot stand up to close scrutiny. Often cessationism requires its advocates to acknowledge that God can still work miracles today, but that what we see happening just shouldn't be called the spiritual gift of miracles—virtually a distinction without a difference! Most serious of all, it risks putting one on the threshold of committing what Jesus labeled the unforgivable sin—attributing the visibly undeniable power of the Holy Spirit to the devil (Mark 3:29).
>
> We dare not swing the pendulum to the opposite extreme and insist that every church or every believer have one or more of the so-called supernatural gifts. As 1 Corinthians 12:11 makes crystal clear, God through his Spirit distributes his gifts as he desires. The metaphor of the diverse parts of the body makes it equally clear that he does not want all Christians to look alike. The rhetorical questions in verses 29–30, repeating the Greek negative adverb *mē*, prove that the desired answer to Paul's questions is negative: no one gift is given to all believers. Thus any church or ministry insisting that all

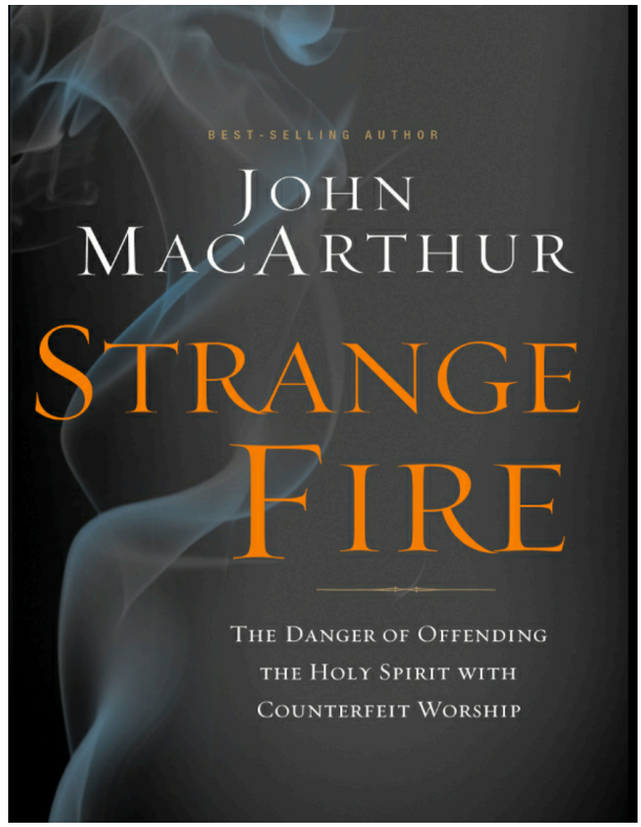
> people exercise any one gift in order to be saved or even in order to be mature believers is simply contradicting Scripture. But the church of Jesus Christ worldwide would take huge steps forward toward unity with the appreciation of diversity if noncharismatics would obey 1 Corinthians 14:39 ("Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues") and charismatics would heed verse 40 ("But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way"). In each culture, "orderly" means what will not lead outsiders who visit a service to conclude that the worshipers are out of their minds (14:23)!
> (*Can We Still Believe the Bible? An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions,* pp. 209-211, Kindle Edition.)

In a separate and more technical post, here, we will take up the specific claim sometimes made that Paul's use of a different verb, with a different voice when referring to tongues is exegetically significant as support for cessationism. That will be a slightly more technical blog than my normal fare, and if you don't enjoy that kind of thing, it may not be for you. And for those who want to keep reading, I include in two appendixes below the voices of two cessationist from the "softest" and "hardest" ends of the spectrum. I think this illustrates what any NT scholar would state plainly - the claim that this passage teaches cessationism is deeply misguided, and may actually be the opposite of the case.

In any case, what this passage urges is a life of love, and that is what we should take from it, as we come to heed its admonition, and walk in the way of love that never ends.

Appendix 1 - John MacArthur on the Meaning of the Perfect

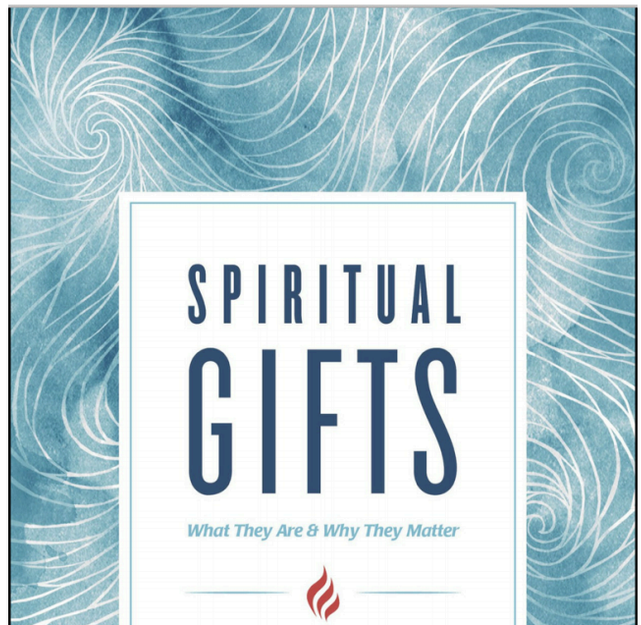
While I highly respect the regular exposition of MacArther as he preaches through biblical books, I typically turn instead to more exegetical commentators in my own studies. But because MacArthur has become known as *the* outspoken voice for so called "hard cessationism" (or at least, harshly held cessationism) today, it is worth noting his own view of this question. He explains;



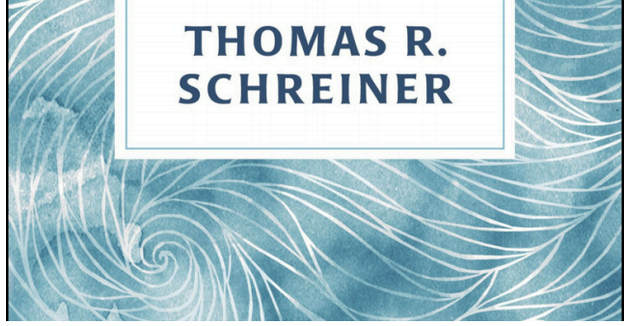
In 1 Corinthians 13:10, Paul noted that partial knowledge and partial prophecy would be done away with "when that which is perfect has come." But what did Paul mean by the perfect? The Greek word (teleion) can mean "perfect," "mature," or "complete," and commentators [of the cessationist persuasion - the only kinds he lists] have widely disagreed as to its precise meaning—offering numerous possible interpretations. For example, F. F. Bruce suggests that the perfect is love itself; B. B. Warfield contends it is the completed canon of Scripture (cf. James 1:25); Robert Thomas argues it is the mature church (cf. Eph. 4:11–13); Richard Gaffin asserts it is the return of Christ; and Thomas Edgar concludes it is the individual believer's entrance into heavenly glory (cf. 2 Cor. 5:8). Significantly, though these scholars disagree on the identification of the "perfect," they all reach the same conclusion—namely, that the miraculous and revelatory gifts have ceased. Nonetheless, 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.
(*Strange Fire*, pg. 149)

Appendix 2 - Tom Schreiner on the Meaning of the Perfect

Tom Schreiner takes up the cessationist use of I Cor. 13 at length in his recent book arguing for cessaationism, in a chapter titled, "Unconvincing Arguments For Cessationism." To cite an excerpt or two from him at length;



A significant problem with seeing "the perfect" as the completed canon is the historical location of Paul when he wrote 1 Corinthians. He certainly believed that his words in 1 Corinthians were authoritative and represented God's word to his readers (1 Cor. 14:37–38). Indeed, Paul's authority permeates all his letters (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 3:14). Reading letters orally in the congregation signified their authority, and Paul enjoins recipients to read his letters (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27). Nevertheless, God didn't reveal to Paul that he was writing letters that would be collected in a New Testament canon. Yes, Paul knew his letters were authoritative, but he had no vision that history would last a long time and that his letters would be collected with other New Testament writings that would function as the authority for churches down through history. Instead, Paul believed Jesus would return soon, and history would come to an end....



Not only is it unlikely that Paul was referring to the canon when he speaks of "the perfect" coming, it is even more unlikely that the Corinthians would have understood the word perfect this way. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that Paul is referring to the New Testament canon. The problem that immediately emerges is that there is no way that the Corinthians would have understood what Paul was talking about! Paul would have had to explain in much more detail than he does here that by "the perfect" he had in mind the completion of the New Testament. Certainly, the Corinthians never imagined or dreamt of a New Testament canon.

...

The phrase "face to face" echoes theophanies in the Old Testament, instances where God appeared to human beings so that they encountered him. When Jacob wrestled with the Angel of the Lord, he saw God "face to face." Gideon feared that he was going to die since he saw the angel of the Lord "face to face" (Judg. 6: 22). Moses was incomparable as a prophet because the Lord knew him "face to face" (Deut. 34: 10; cf. Deut. 5: 4). The idiom "face to face" in 1 Corinthians 13: 12 doesn't suggest something abstract like the New Testament canon or spiritual maturity. Instead, it represents the language of encounter with God, and so naturally refers to the second coming, since we will see Jesus "face to face" when "the perfect comes" (1 Cor. 13: 10).

The notion that "the perfect" refers to the canon or to spiritual maturity is also ruled out by what is said about knowledge. "When the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end" (1 Cor. 13: 10). Now Paul sees imperfectly and knows partially, but when the perfect arrives he will see "face to face" (1 Cor. 13: 12). Partial knowledge will give way to complete knowledge (1 Cor. 13: 12). If the "perfect" refers to the New Testament canon or to spiritual maturity, we no longer have partial knowledge. Those who have the canon or those who are mature know fully. Indeed, they know more than Paul who confesses that he knows only partially! But any notion that our knowledge is perfect or better than Paul's is clearly false. Our knowledge continues to be imperfect. We know truly but not comprehensively and exhaustively. We will only know fully when Jesus returns, when we see him face to face.

_____

(Schreiner, Tom, *Spiritual Gifts,* Kindle locations 1575-1618)

From all this he concludes, (in a book arguing *for* the cessation of the miraculous gifts no less!), that all arguments using I Cor. 13:8-12 as support for his own position fail. The "perfect" refers to the second coming. He admits quite frankly, "If anything, Paul teaches [in this passage] that the spiritual gifts persist and last until the second coming. In fact, I think this is the best argument for the spiritual gifts continuing until today. And I understand why some readers may disagree with me on this very [question of whether the gifts have ceased]. As I said in the introduction, I could be mistaken in arguing for cessationism."

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