

1 COR 13:11 REVISITED AN EXEGETICAL UPDATE

Robert L. Thomas
Professor of New Testament

About twenty years have passed since this author advanced the interpretation that τῆλειον (to teleion, "the complete," "the mature") in 1 Cor 13:10 referred to the mature body of Christ and that a stage of maturity in the growth of that body marked the termination of revelatory and sign gifts in the ancient church. With a fresh focus on 1 Cor 13:11, he now updates the discussion in light of various responses that have questioned the validity of that position. He elaborates on why the substantive cannot mean "the perfect," why it must mean "complete" or "mature," why the context requires such, and answers objections to the view.

* * * * *

A number of years ago I proposed an interpretation of 1 Cor 13:10 which assigned τῆλειον (*to teleion*) the meaning of "complete" or "mature" instead of the more frequently rendering of "perfect."¹ At least three developments show the subject needs a renewed look: (1) a misconstruing or confused statement of my view by others;² (2) a continuing claim that biblical exegesis yields no explicit indication of the termination of some spiritual gifts;³ and (3) a growing personal

¹Robert L. Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease," *JETS* 17/2 (Spring 1974):85-89; idem, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts* (Chicago: Moody, 1978) 106-13, 199-204.

²E.g., see note 30.

³Wayne A. Grudem ("The New Testament Gift of Prophecy: A Response to My Friends" [unpublished paper presented to the Forty-fourth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Francisco, Nov. 21, 1992] 18) has called 1 Cor 13:10 an "immovable stumbling block" for the view that the gift of prophecy has ceased.

realization that explanations of the passage have overlooked the important contribution of 1 Cor 13:11 to the meaning of *to teleion*. A renewed discussion of the issue can probably do little to remedy whatever it is that causes (1) above, but perhaps a focused treatment of the exegetical nuances related to 1 Cor 13:11 and their impact on the meaning of *to teleion* in 13:10 will contribute to a recognition that (2) is wrong in light of the oversight named in (3).

Farnell has conveniently summarized the five main viewpoints regarding the meaning of *to teleion* in 1 Cor 13:10: (1) the death of a believer when ushered into Christ's presence, (2) the eternal state, (3) the completed NT canon, (4) Christ's second advent, and (5) the maturing of Christ's body through the course of the church age.⁴ Positions (2) and (4) assign the meaning "the perfect" to *to teleion* largely because of the neglect of important factors in 1 Cor 13:11. With respect for those who interpret differently, I offer the following as some of these factors.

Reasons Why to teleion Cannot Mean "the Perfect" in 13:10

The most common definitions of the English word "perfect" applied to 1 Cor 13:10 would probably include:

- (a) being entirely without fault or defect⁵
- (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.⁶

Either of these three or a combination of them is the usual notion the average person attaches to the word. All three are qualitative in nature, a characteristic that renders them unsatisfactory renderings of *to teleion*. Four reasons demonstrate this:

- (1) No other use of *teleios* in Paul can possibly mean "perfection"

⁴F. David Farnell, "When Will the Gift of Prophecy Cease?" *BSac* 150 (April-June 1993):191-93. In his defense of view (5), Farnell agrees with the position advocated in the present discussion.

⁵Grudem ("Response" 15) continually injects the qualitative notion as the meaning of *k mroyw* (13:10): "This . . . [is a statement] about the imperfect nature of our activity of prophesying" ("Response" 17) and "He states quite clearly that these imperfect gifts will last until the time of Christ's return" ("Response" 18). On the contrary, *k mroyw* speaks of the gifts' partial nature, not their imperfection in quality. Grudem is in conflict with himself at this point. In 1982 he wrote that the phrase refers to quantitative rather than qualitative imperfection (Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* [Washington: University Press, 1982] 148-49 n. 59). Now in speaking of the same phrase as referring to "the imperfect *nature*" [italics added] ("Response" 17; cf. also 17 n. 24), he unfortunately appears to have switched to a qualitative sense for the same phrase.

⁶*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* 872.

in the sense of the absence of all imperfection. In fact, the meaning of "perfection" in Greek philosophers that of a "perfect" man is absent from the NT.⁷ Utopian perfection was a philosophical notion, not a NT idea, for this word.⁸ Elsewhere in Paul the adjective is figurative and refers almost exclusively to a grown man (cf. 1 Cor 2:6; 14:20; Phil 3:15; Eph 4:13; Col 1:28; cf. also Heb 5:14).⁹ One other time, in Col 4:12, it means "mature" in the OT sense of wholeness and obedience to God's will, and picks up on his ambition for every man as stated in Col 1:28.¹⁰ So six out of the other seven times Paul uses the word, it means "mature." The remaining use is in Rom 12:1 where its meaning is "complete."¹¹

This pattern of usage establishes a strong probability that the word includes the sense of maturity in 1 Cor 13:10, especially since its other two uses in 1 Corinthians have that sense.

(2) In the immediate context of 1 Cor 13:8-13, a qualitative word is unsuitable in light of the apodosis of the sentence in 13:10. "Perfect" is not a suitable opposite to $\kappa \mu \rho \omicron \upsilon \omega$ [*ek merous*], "partial"). A better meaning would be "whole" or "complete" as antithetical to *ek merous*.¹²

(3) The terminology of 13:11 is most conclusive, however, because it is an analogy with the stages of human life (i.e., $\eta \rho \iota \omega \nu$ [*npios*, "child"] and $\eta \rho$ [*anr*, "child"]).

(a) This analogy directly impacts the meaning of *to teleion* in 13:10, because it sets up a *teleios/npios* antithesis in vv. 10-11 that is relative, not absolute, and therefore incompatible with the concept of perfection. The difference between childhood and adulthood is a matter of degree, not one of mutually exclusive differentiation.

(b) The *npios/anr* antithesis in v. 11 has the same

⁷Gerhard Dellling, "tlow, telv, k. t. l.," *TDNT* 8:77.

⁸Ibid., 8:69-72.

⁹R. Schippers, "tlow," *NIDNTT* 2:62.

¹⁰In Col 4:12 *teleioi* is "a term evidently chosen to counteract the gnostic aspiration to 'perfection' by their regimen and cult" (Ralph Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* [NCB; Grand Rapids, 1973] 134).

¹¹Grudem erroneously uses Matt 5:48 and Rom 12:2 to illustrate the meaning of "perfect" for *tleiow* ("Response" 14-15). "Complete" is a better English word for these two passages because the concept behind *tleiow* is the Hebrew \lessdot{y} or $\lessdot{<}$, "wholeness," not the philosophical connotation of perfection in a qualitative or ultimate sense as the word "perfect" implies (Dellling, "tlow" 8:74, 76-77).

¹²Dellling, "tlow" 8:75.

contextual effect of ruling out the notion of an ideal state as denoted by the translation "perfect."

(4) The terminology of 13:12 requires an allusion to degrees of revelatory understanding, not perfection or freedom from imperfection. The verbs *blpomen* (*blepomen*, "I see") and *ginsk* (*ginsk*, "I know") correlate with the gifts of prophecy and knowledge and their limited insights compared with the complete understanding that will prevail in the future. This is quantitative, not qualitative, so *to teleion* must have the same quantitative connotation.

Hence both etymological and contextual considerations argue emphatically *against* the meaning "perfect" for *to teleion*.

Reasons Why to teleion Must Mean "Complete" or "Mature"

Corresponding to the reasons for not translating "the perfect" in 1 Cor 13:10 are four considerations that point toward the meaning "complete" or "mature."

(1) The idea of totality, wholeness, or completion controls the NT usage of *teleios*. In the present connection, totality took on an added dimension: "Yet in the main the feeling of antiquity . . . was that only an 'adult' can be a 'full' man; hence these senses can overlap in Paul."¹³ The thought behind the overlap of "complete" and "mature" in this word's usage is that in the minds of the ancients adulthood represented a degree of completeness that was not, relatively speaking, present during childhood. If ever a clear case for this "overlap" in meaning existed, 1 Cor 13:10 is that case. The background of *teleios* not only allows for the overlap; in the circumstances of the context, it also requires the dual concept of "complete-mature."¹⁴

¹³Delling, "tlow" 8:76. Oepke notes the concept behind childhood in ancient times: "Antiquity primarily sees in the child the element of immaturity or childishness" (Albrecht Oepke, "paw, paidon, k. t. l.," *TDNT* 5:642). The opposite of this state is maturity. *Npiow* was used for small children between the ages of 1 and 10 (Georg Bertram, "npiow, nhpizv," *TDNT* 4:912). The goal of human development was *tleiow nr*. As the adult sets aside the nature of a child, so the Christian with the coming of *t teleion* sets aside the *gnsiw* that is essential during the stage of the *npiow* (*ibid.*, 919). *1Anr* indicates an adult man as distinct from a boy (Albrecht Oepke, "nr, ndrjomai," *TDNT* 1:361, 363).

¹⁴Robert L. Reymond, *What about Continuing Revelations and Miracles in the Presbyterian Church Today* (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977) 31-36, and Walter J. Chantry, *Signs of the Apostles, Observations on Pentecostalism Old and New* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976) 50-54, capture the overlapping meaning of *teleios*, but weaken their

(2) Another reason for this meaning is the consistent sense of the *teleios/nepios* antithesis in Paul, the NT, and all Greek literature. Whenever in the proximity of *nepios*, as it is in 1 Cor 13:10-11, *teleios* always carries the connotation of adulthood versus childhood (1 Cor 2:6 and 3:1; 14:20; Eph 3:13-14; cf. Heb. 5:13-14).¹⁵ In 1 Cor 2:6 Paul speaks of imparting wisdom to *tois teleiois* (*tois teleiois*, "the mature"), but he encounters an obstacle because, according to 1 Cor 3:1, his readers are *nepiois* ("infants"). In 1 Cor 14:20 his command to the Corinthians is to be children (*nepizete* [*nepiazete*]) in malice, but adults (*teleioi* [*teleioi*]) in understanding. In Eph 4:13-14, his goal is for all members of Christ's body to attain to the unity of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, i.e., to a *teleios anr* (*teleios anr*, "mature man"), so that they be no longer *nepioi* (*nepioi*, "children"). The writer of Hebrews echoes this antithesis in 5:13-14 when he compares elementary teaching to milk that is suitable for a *nepios* ("child" or "infant") with solid food that is suitable for *teleion* ("the mature").

(3) First Corinthians 12-14 has many parallels with Eph 4:1-16, a passage that teaches the gradual maturing of the church through the present age. This correspondence is all the more instructive in light of Paul's presence in Ephesus while writing 1 Corinthians. He was probably teaching the Ephesian church the same principles he penned in the Corinthian letter. Then about five years later, as he wrote back to the Ephesian church, he found it necessary to re-emphasize and develop further the same truths about growth in the body of Christ that he had instructed them about while present. The similarities between the two contexts include the following:

- (a) All seven unifying influences listed in Eph 4:4-6 are present in 1 Cor 12-14 (1 Cor. 12:4-6, 13; 13:13; 14:22). Particularly noticeable are one body, one Spirit, one Lord,

position by a refusal to apply 13:12 to the situation following the parousia. John R. McRay, "To *Teleion* in I Corinthians 13:10" *RestQ* 14 (1971) 172-174, also notes the twin meanings of the term, but concludes that 1 Corinthians 12-14 must be explained on the basis of the entire argument of Ephesians, particularly the Jewish-Gentile issue that is prominent in that book (174-83). Raymond and Chantry refer v. 12 to the completion of the NT canon, but McRay refers it to the final stages of Paul's work among the Gentiles (183). Both positions are different from that defended in the present study.

¹⁵Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914) 297-98; Thomas Charles Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1885) 349.

- one baptism, and one God and Father of all.
- (b) Emphasis on unity in the body (1 Cor 12:4-6, 11-13, 24-26; Eph 4:3, 13) along with the diversity of the body's members (1 Cor 12:14-26; Eph 4:11, 16) pervades each passage.
 - (c) The noun *mrow* (*meros*, "part") in both passages depicts individual members of Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph 4:16).
 - (d) Corporateness of the body (1 Cor. 12:27a; Eph 4:15-16) combines with an individualistic focus (1 Cor. 12:27b; Eph 4:4, 7, 16) as a ruling consideration in both places.
 - (e) The general subject under discussion in Ephesians (Eph 4:7, 11) is spiritual gifts as it is in 1 Corinthians 12-14.
 - (f) The figure representing the church in both passages is the human body, as it is always when Paul talks about spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 4:4, 15-16; cf. Rom 12:3-8).
 - (g) Edification of the body of Christ is the stated objective in both sections (1 Cor 14:12, 26; Eph 4:12, 16).
 - (h) Growth from childhood to adulthood is portrayed in Eph 4:13-14 as it is in 1 Cor 13:11.
 - (i) The *npiow*/*teleios anr* antithesis is found in Ephesians as it is in 1 Cor 13:10-11 (Eph 4:13-14).¹⁶
 - (j) Love is the overarching quality in the growth process in both passages (1 Cor 13:1-13; Eph 4:15-16).

Since Eph 4:1-16 offers a distinct picture of a gradually developing and maturing body of Christ,¹⁷ the probability is strong that Paul intends to convey the same in 1 Cor 13:11. Though he may not say explicitly "the complete or mature body" (i.e., the complete body with reference to revelatory activity) in 1 Cor 13:10, he had doubtless some

¹⁶"In Eph. 4:13 . . . the *nr tliow* is the adult . . . in contrast to the *npiow* of v. 14" (Gerhard Dellling, "plrhw, plhrv k. t. l.," *TDNT*6:302).

¹⁷Du Plessis notes that *tleiow* in Ephesians 4:13 is characterized in three ways: (1) Growth is involved. A body-building process or a dynamic development transpires throughout the period of the church's existence. (2) The dynamic is corporate in nature. Though composed of many members, the body of Christ grows as a unit. (3) Since the image of *tleiow* is in the character of an exhortation, it is maturity progressively realized in the present state of the church's existence (Paul Johannes Du Plessis, *TELEIOS, the Idea of Perfection in the N. T.* [Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1956] 188-93).

time during his extended 18-month residence in Corinth taught them verbally (as he did the Ephesian church) regarding this analogy so that it was perfectly clear to them what he was talking about. It remains for the interpreter to clarify what he meant by resorting to another of his writings that is quite relevant to 1 Corinthians.

(4) The illustration of 13:11 is hardly suitable to refer to the difference between the present and a period after the parousia.¹⁸ So the analogy of v. 11 must be supplying data supplemental to what is in v. 12.

- (a) To say that the parousia is in view in v. 11 is to see Paul as using his own adult status to illustrate a perfection that follows the parousia. Yet in Phil 3:12, he views himself as incomplete in his current state as an adult (*tetelevmai* [*teteleimai*, "I am brought to completeness"] a pf. tense; cf. *ggonā* [*gegona*], 1 Cor 13:11, which has a present force: "now that I am a man"¹⁹). In fact, in the very next verse, 1 Cor 13:12, he disclaims such a completed state by noting that currently he is among those whose present state is that of conspicuous limitations.²⁰ This state of incompleteness in Paul as an adult negates any possibility that his adulthood of v. 11 is intended to correspond to the state of completion in v. 12. It is also contrary to Pauline Christian humility as reflected elsewhere in the apostle's writings that he would choose such an illustration (e.g., 1 Cor 15:9; Eph 3:8; 1 Tim 1:15).
- (b) The nature of the transition from childhood to adulthood is not sudden as will be the change at the parousia. It is a gradual process.²¹ Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood.
- (c) By nature the process described by *katrghka* (*katrgka*, "I render inoperative") in 13:11 indicates an altered condition that continues. It is a dramatic perfect.²² It indicates "a change of state which still continues; the emancipation

¹⁸Robertson & Plummer, *1 Corinthians* 297.

¹⁹A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 900, 971.

²⁰Thomas, "Tongues . . . Will Cease" 85. In fact, in v. 12 he refers to himself personally (i.e., in the singular) as currently having only partial knowledge (*ginskv*).

²¹Farnell, "When . . . Cease?" 193.

²²Cf. Robertson, *Grammar* 896.

from childish things took place as a matter of course, . . . and it continues."²³ If Christ did not return before a permanent body of NT revelation was finished, a degree of completion would arrive that would render unnecessary a continuation of the revelatory process involving the revelatory gifts.

- (d) The difference between childhood and manhood is a very feeble illustration of the vast difference between the Christian's present state and that which will exist after the parousia.²⁴

Reasons Why 13:8-13 Requires the "Completion" "Maturity" Concept

(1) The purpose of the paragraph of 1 Cor 13:8-13 is to establish the eternity of love. This is proven by the beginning ("love never fails," v. 8) and end ("the greatest of these is love," v. 13) of the paragraph.

(2) Between these two points the writer shows the eternity of love by two sets of contrasts: (a) one between the duration of revelatory gifts that may or may not extend until Christ's return (13:10-11) and the triad of faith, hope, and love that will definitely extend to the time of Christ's return (13:13a) and (b) one between the triad of faith, hope, and love that continue until Christ's return (13:13a) and love alone that will remain after Christ's return (13:13b).

(3) These two sets of contrasts emphasize the secondary character of the revelatory and confirmatory gifts from a temporal standpoint, and the supreme importance and lasting character of love because of its eternity. Love lasts longer than these gifts; it even lasts longer than faith and hope with which it is so closely associated until Christ's second advent.

Objections to the Completion-Maturity Explanation

The objections to this position seem to be about six in number, though no extensive response to the view has yet appeared:²⁵

²³Robertson & Plummer, *1 Corinthians* 298; cf. Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians* (2 vols., Rev. A. Cusin, trans.; 1957 rpt., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1886) 252.

²⁴Robertson & Plummer, *1 Corinthians* 297.

²⁵The relevant quotations of Wayne Grudem and Gordon Fee from which these objections are lifted include the following: (1) "This view fails to recognize that vs. 11, which speaks of Paul in the first person and in the past, is merely an illustration, and our understanding of what

(1) *Objection:* V. 11 is merely an illustration or an analogy and its meaning must be explained in light of the meaning of v. 12, which refers to Christ's second coming.²⁶

Response: If v. 11 says something different from v. 12, it must be allowed to have its distinctive contribution. Paul was not just padding his discussion when he inserted v. 11. To interpret v. 11 in light of the meaning of v. 12, is to rob this verse of its distinctive contribution, thereby robbing Scripture of an aspect of its meaning.

(2) *Objection:* V. 12 has *te* (*tote*, "then") to link it with *tan* (*hotan*, "when") of v. 10.²⁷ V. 11 has no such temporal indicator.

Response: V. 11 *does* have temporal indicators, i.e., the two occurrences of *te* (*hote*, "when"). Such a temporal indicator picks up the *hotan* of v. 10 even more specifically than the *tote* of v. 12, which does not limit the temporal reference of the *hotan* in v. 10, but is antithetic to the two occurrences of *arti* in v. 12.

(3) *Objection:* The idea of the maturity of the body of Christ is

it illustrates must conform to vs. 12, which speaks of believers generally ('we') and in the future ('shall know'). And only vs. 12 has *tote* which links it clearly to the *hotan* in vs. 10. Vs. 11 illustrates not the maturity of the church (an idea which is nowhere discussed in this context) but the fact that something complete or perfect replaces something incomplete or imperfect" (Grudem, *1 Corinthians* 215 n. 60). "Whereas Christ's return is mentioned clearly in 1 Corinthians 13:12, no verse in this section mentions anything about the completion of Scripture . . . or the 'maturity' of the church (whatever that means 'is the church really mature even today?'). All of these suggestions [including the one about 'maturity'] bring in new elements not found in the context to replace one element 'Christ's return' which clearly is right there in the context already" (Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* [Weschester, IL: Crossway, 1988] 238-39).

(2) "The precise reference of the word [*teleios*] must be determined by the individual context, and there, as we have seen, the context indicates that 'when the perfect comes' refers to the time of Christ's return" (Grudem, *New Testament* 236).

(3) "Such views [i.e., those that see 'when the perfect comes' as 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'" (Grudem, *New Testament* 238).

(4) "This view has nothing to commend it except the analogy of v. 11, which is a misguided emphasis at best" (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 645 n. 23).

(5) "Even though Paul says 'we know in part,' the emphasis is not on the immaturity of the Corinthians, but on the relative nature of the gifts" (Fee, *1 Corinthians* 645 n. 24).

²⁶Grudem, *1 Corinthians* 215 n. 60; Fee, *1 Corinthians* 654 nn. 23, 25.

²⁷Ibid.; cf. also Grudem, "Response" 15.

nowhere present in the context.²⁸

Response: Maturity *is* in the context, in 13:11. See also 14:20 where individual maturity is in view. In 1 Cor 2:6 and 3:1 individual maturity is also in focus. It is not a matter of maturity's not being in the context; it is rather a question of the maturity of what, individuals or the corporate body? V. 11 most naturally refers to corporate maturity because of the singular number used in the analogy of v. 11 compared to the plurals in vv. 9, 12. Paul has a proclivity for going back and forth between talking about the corporate aspect of the body of Christ and the individual members of that body. He does the same in the broader context here (12:12, 27; cf. Eph 4:13-14).²⁹ The presence of maturity in the context forces a choice between individual and corporate maturity. The nature of the discussion and the added input from Eph 4:1-16 tips the scale in favor of corporate maturity.

The criticism of this maturity-view, which notes that the context does not speak about the immaturity of individual believers,³⁰ rests on a misunderstanding of the view. The view looks at the immaturity of the total body during its earlier years, not explicitly that of individuals. It was the temporary nature of these gifts that marked the infancy of the body of Christ, not of single members of that body.

Maturity is also implied in the emphasis on edification of the body in 1 Cor 14:12, 26 (cf. 12:7). Edification equates with building up, which is equivalent to growth the same as maturing according to Eph 4:13-16. So maturity shows itself contextually in yet another way: through the emphasis on edification that is found in 1 Corinthians 12-14. It *is* a factor in the passage under study.

(4) *Objection:* The context says nothing about the completion of

²⁸Grudem, *New Testament* 238-39; Fee, *1 Corinthians* 645; cf. also Grudem, "Response" 14.

²⁹1 Cor 12:12: "For just as the body is *one* and has *many members*, and *all the members* of the body though they are *many* are *one* body, so also is Christ." 1 Cor 12:27: "Now you are [such a thing as the] *body* [an anarthrous collective term] of Christ and *members individually*." Eph. 4:13-14: "until *we all* attain to the unity of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature *man*, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that *we* may be no longer children, tossed about and carried around by every wind of doctrine through the trickery of men in craftiness to the deceit of error. . . ." [italics added]

³⁰Fee, *1 Corinthians* 644-55, whose criticism of the mature-body view is off-target when he says that the contrast between immaturity and maturity "will not do since the contrast has to do with the *gifts*' being 'partial,' not with the believers themselves."

Scripture.³¹

Response: Here is another superficial objection. Completion *is* in the context. Note the four occurrences of *ek merous* that require an opposite "completion": 13:9 (twice), 13:10, and 13:12. It is not a matter of completion's not being in the context; it is rather a question of the completion of what. The completion spoken of in v. 12 is unobscured cognitive sight to replace the limited prophetic revelations and unlimited knowledge to replace revelations through the gift of knowledge. V. 12 does not speak of seeing God face to face,³² which would be more of a qualitative condition that is inappropriate to this context. This would break the continuity of the earlier part of the paragraph where revelatory gifts are in view. V. 12 must refer to unlimited prophetic sight and knowledge. What is *not* in this context is a contrast between perfection and imperfection. It is not talking about a qualitative set of conditions.

(5) *Objection:* The idea of completion or maturity replaces the reference to Christ's return that is clearly in the context.³³

Response: The maturity concept does not "replace" Christ's return; it supplements it. It adds to it another possible eventuality. Uncertain as he was about the time of Christ's return, Paul left open the possibility that before Christ's return the body might reach the requisite stage of maturity where the revelatory and sign gifts were unnecessary (13:11). But he also indicated the possibility of Christ's advent before the church reached that stage (13:12).

(6) *Objection:* It is a misguided emphasis to focus on v. 11 to explain the meaning of *to teleion*. It is like letting the tail wag the dog to allow an analogy to dictate the meaning of the argument as a whole and the plain statement of v. 12b.³⁴

Response: The completion-maturity explanation does not focus on v. 11 alone, but it does give the verse its deserved place as part of the explanation.

An unwillingness to let 13:11 have its natural sense leads inevitably to viewing the analogy to human development as ambiguous.³⁵ It is obviously going to appear ambiguous if it does not say

³¹Grudem, *New Testament* 238-39.

³²Contra Grudem, *New Testament* 238.

³³Grudem, *New Testament* 236, 238.

³⁴Ibid.; Fee, *1 Corinthians* 645 nn. 23, 25.

³⁵E.g., "the ambiguity of the first analogy [childhood and adulthood]," Fee, *1 Corinthians*

what the interpreter wants it to say. By allowing v. 11 to inject the element of maturity into the discussion, one has not allowed the analogy to have precedence over the argument as a whole. He has rather taken into account an indispensable ingredient of the argument. Just as it would be wrong to let the analogy of 13:11 exclude the reference to the second coming in 13:12, it is also wrong to let the reference to the second coming exclude the graphic analogy that expresses another possibility regarding the cessation of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. The verse cannot be treated as excess baggage that gets in the way of a preconceived interpretation.

So far, the maturity-completion view stands without one unanswerable objection because the proposed weaknesses of the view rest on misunderstanding or have adequate responses.

Paul and the Future of Prophecy, Tongues, and Knowledge

Paul knew of an earlier period when God spoke directly to His prophets, a period that had come to an end with the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, being followed by the 400 silent years (cf. Matt 23:35, 37; Heb 1:1-2). He also knew that the close of the OT canon coincided with the cessation of OT prophecy (e.g., Luke 24:44) long before the first advent of Christ.³⁶ He was conscious that he was now in the midst of a new period during which God was speaking directly to His apostles and prophets, resulting in inspired utterances that in part were taking their place alongside the OT canon as inspired Scripture (cf. 1 Cor 14:37; 1 Thess 5:26; 2 Pet 3:15-16). One possibility he foresaw was that this period of prophecy could come to its conclusion before the second advent of Christ just as OT prophecy had come to its conclusion 400 years before the first advent of Christ. Such a cessation would be like the gradual development from childhood to manhood. When the church reached an appointed stage, it would no longer need revelatory and sign gifts. It would expectedly come to a close with the completion of a new canon of an unknown number of writings that resulted from NT prophecy, to serve as a companion to the OT canon. Because of Paul's strong anticipation of Christ's imminent coming, this was a secondary expectation, however, and was added in v. 11 according to the mode of customary Pauline digression.

Paul also knew the possibility that Christ's second coming could be very soon, even within his own lifetime (1 Cor 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:15-17). Had this happened, the period of NT prophecy would have halted abruptly as the members of the body of Christ were transformed immediately into the image of Christ (cf. 1 John 3:2). This would automatically culminate a new completed body of Scripture to serve future generations, because the body of Christ would no longer be on earth to receive more revelation. This principal expectation is reflected by the *gar* that connects 13:12 with 13:10.³⁷

The apostle did not know which of these would occur first, a stage of relative completeness marking adulthood in comparison to childhood or a stage of absolute completeness that will characterize

³⁶Cf. Robert L. Thomas, "The Spiritual Gift of Prophecy in Rev 22:18," *JETS* 32/2 (June 1989):215.

³⁷C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 306.

those in the immediate presence of Christ. So through inspiration of the Spirit he portrayed his uncertainty by choosing terminology and illustrative material that were compatible with either possibility. He knew that the partial would be replaced by either the mature or the complete, and perhaps by first one and then the other.

The best he could do to emphasize the eternity of love was a double contrast:³⁸ (1) a contrast between revelatory and sign gifts that may or may not characterize the entire church age on the one hand, and on the other, the qualities of faith, hope, and love that would definitely characterize the entire period; and (2) a contrast between the triad faith, hope, and love that continue to the parousia on the one hand, and on the other, love alone that will survive and continue following the parousia.

It is interesting to compare the ways Paul states the disappearance of faith and hope at the parousia. In 2 Cor 5:6-8, faith is juxtaposed with sight, and one is associated with being absent from the Lord and the other with being present with the Lord. Faith will be replaced by sight when Christ returns. According to Rom 8:24-25 the Christian awaits what he hopes for, but once it arrives, hope has no further place. When Christ the believer's hope appears, hope will have no further function.

The disappearance of the revelatory gifts is described in terms that are very different. "They will be rendered inoperative" (*Katagh-usetai* [*Katērgthsetai*], vv. 8 [twice], 10) in the same way as adult maturation has rendered inoperative and keeps on rendering inoperative (perfect tense, *katrghka* [*katrgka*]) the characteristics of childhood (v. 11). This is hardly an exclusive reference to the parousia as is the case with faith and hope. Prophetic sight and knowledge will be infinitely increased at that time so that they are no longer partial. This will be the prevailing state. If the revelatory gifts were unquestionably to extend to the parousia, no rendering inoperative of those gifts is appropriate; they would simply be replaced by universal knowledge for all.

Regardless of what the future might hold, Paul was confident of one thing: "love never fails . . . and is the greatest of these." It will stand the test of time and eternity.

This overarching "fruit of the Spirit" is the supreme quality, for which sensible Christians are very thankful. They may differ in their

³⁸Grudem's proposed single contrast—"when Christ returns, prophesy will cease" ("Response" 18) is too simplistic to account for all the exegetical data of the passage.

interpretations of this or that passage, but they have the privilege of continuing to love one another, no matter what. I am grateful for this opportunity of once again voicing in love what I deem to be the truth about a very important text of the NT: *to teleion* in 1 Cor 13:10 refers to maturity in the body of Christ, and consequently furnishes a very good exegetical basis for concluding that revelatory and sign gifts granted to the body of Christ ceased functioning in early church history.