

When That Which Is Perfect Has Come

An Answer to the “Orthodox” Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:10

Introduction

1. A survey of the New Testament church shows that miraculous spiritual gifts played a prominent role in the life of the church observed in the scripture.
 2. For this reason, many are uncomfortable with the notion that these miraculous spiritual gifts are no longer available to the church today. (Cessationism – often with stigma)
 3. While the discussions concerning spiritual gifts are had in a range of contexts, not all are entirely coming from the same place.
 4. The Eastern Orthodox Church is one such group that does not subscribe to the notion that miraculous spiritual gifts have ceased. Their reason and argumentation differ from that of others.
 5. **1 Corinthians 13** is a central text for discussing this issue, especially when considering **verse 10** – does **“that which is perfect”** have reference to the completed revelation of the New Testament, or does it reference the person of Jesus Christ in His second coming? The Orthodox church subscribes to the latter view.
- I. A Summary of Paul’s Thought Flow – The Text in Context
- A. The Epistle is Divided Between Answering Reports and Questions
 - a. Paul had received problematic reports which he addresses:
 - i. From Chloe’s household about contentions – **1:11** – **Chapters 1-4**
 - ii. A report concerning the sexually immoral man still among them – **5:1** – **Chapter 5**
 - b. Paul had received a letter from the church with questions which he answers:
 - i. **“Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me:” (7:1)**
 - ii. Questions regarding marriage – **chapter 7**
 - iii. Questions regarding liberties, namely, eating of meats offered to idols – **8:1** – **Chapters 8-10**
 - iv. Questions pertaining to spiritual gifts – **12:1** – **Chapters 12-14**
 1. **“that which is perfect” (13:10)** – in the middle of the section on spiritual gifts, their purpose, and their proper use.
 - B. Concerning Spiritual Gifts – Their Purpose and Practice
 - a. The heart of the context is love – **Chapter 13**
 - i. **Chapter 12** says nothing directly of love.
 - ii. **Chapter 13** uses the word 9x.
 - iii. **Chapter 14** begins with love but only uses the word once.

- b. **Chapter 12** – Admonition of lack of love in selfish estimation of gift possession.
 - i. The belittled – (v. 15)
 - ii. The conceited – (v. 21)
 - iii. The reality – (vv. 4-11) – cf. 1 Corinthians 4:7 – any gift they have was given by the Spirit, not for self-aggrandizement, but for profit of all.
 - iv. The exhortation – (v. 31) – desire gifts as they are God’s intention for everyone’s profit, but there is a more excellent way – love.
- c. **Chapter 14** – Exhortation to pursue love through the profit of the church via edification, and admonition concerning lack of love through unedifying activity.
 - i. The encouragement – (v. 1) – pursuit of love in relation to the church and spiritual gifts.
 - ii. The emphasis – (vv. 12, 26) – the spiritual gifts are for the edification of the church.
 - 1. For the profit of all – 12:7 (“common good,” NASB, ESV)
 - 2. No edification, no profit – 14:6, 9, 12 – no understanding, no edification.
 - 3. The exercise of these gifts, not for self-aggrandizement, but for the benefit of others is an activity of love – cf. Ephesians 4:16 – edification in love.
- d. **Chapter 13** – The “more excellent way” is explained to be love. This is directly applied to the use of spiritual gifts.
 - i. Using gifts for the benefit of others rather than with selfish ambition is pursuing the “more excellent way” of love – 14:1
 - ii. “love does not parade itself...does not seek its own” (vv. 4-5).
 - 1. It lowers itself to the service of the well-being of others.
 - 2. This is how the gifts are to be used.
- e. The discussion of the coming of “that which is perfect” is in the heart of a discussion of spiritual gifts. **Ultimately, Paul’s message is to love others by edifying them with the knowledge of God’s will through the exercise of spiritual gifts.**
 - i. A key practice of love is building others up with God’s will.
 - ii. In context, the way to know God’s will was through miraculous revelation via spiritual gifts.
 - iii. The context involves the theme of revelation and knowledge of God’s will leading to the edification of the church in love.

- iv. Love will not cease, but the spiritual gifts will – (v. 8)
 - 1. Knowledge puffs up, love edifies – **1 Corinthians 8:1**
 - 2. Spiritual gifts will edify only through love – **1 Corinthians 13:2** – no “profit” – **12:7; 14:6** – no edification.
 - a. The emphasis is love, and harnessing the blessing of spiritual gifts with love to edify.
 - b. When the spiritual gifts cease, love will remain to be utilized for edification through what remains which is related to the “in part.”
 - 3. When the spiritual gifts cease, edification will continue through love directed by God’s will.

C. Question: IN CONTEXT, what is “that which is perfect,” when will it come, and what is “in part” which is being done away with?

II. The Main Question and the Eastern Orthodox Position

- A. What is the final and infallible authority for doctrine and practice?
 - a. A major claim of the Eastern Orthodox church which plays a role in considering what “that which is perfect” refers to is that of authority.
 - b. Where the scripture shows that the word of God is the final and infallible authority for doctrine and practice, the Eastern Orthodox church claims it is the church itself as the primary authority, and then scripture as a product of this primary authority.
- B. The Church via Apostolic Succession?
 - a. Basic argumentation against scripture as the final authority:
 - i. If the scripture is the final and infallible authority for doctrine and practice, then the church cannot function properly without it.
 - ii. The church has existed and functioned according to God’s will since Jesus built it in the 1st century.
 - iii. There was not an agreed upon canon of scripture until the 4th century.
 - iv. Therefore, the scripture is not the final and infallible authority for doctrine and practice.
 - b. **Apostolic succession** – the apostles revealed the will of God, but when the apostles died, and prior to the agreed upon canon of scripture, the will of God was known through the apostles’ successors.
 - i. Church as pillar and ground of truth – **1 Timothy 3:15**
 - ii. “Apostolic deposit” of truth propagated through the laying on of hands, and appointment of apostolic successors – **2 Timothy 1:6,**

13; 2:2 – Paul gave Timothy the deposit, Timothy was to uphold it and lay his hands on others.

- iii. The claim is that there is an unbroken line in this fashion from the 1st century until now.
- iv. Therefore, before the complete canon of scripture was agreed upon the church functioned without it via this model.

c. The very model itself which allegedly led to the agreed upon canon and is an alleged product of God's original intention observed in scripture contradicts the scripture itself.

- i. The apostles held the office of the episcopate – **Acts 1:20** – **"office"** – *episkopē* – oversight, office of oversight – bishopric.
- ii. Those who hold that office must be qualified – **1 Timothy 3:1-2, 4** – *episkopē* – husband, children.
- iii. **Eastern Orthodox Bishops must be unmarried** – "Bishops are traditionally taken from the monks, and by a regulation dating from the 6th century, must be unmarried. A widowed priest or any unmarried man can be elected to the office of bishop." (oca.org – Orthodox Church in America)
- iv. Scripturally, Paul was the exception as an unmarried apostle – **1 Corinthians 9:1, 5**
- v. **Therefore, the truth claimed to be upheld by the Orthodox Church via apostolic succession is contradicted by it.**

C. The Inspired Scripture?

- a. The foundation the church is built upon is the apostles and prophets – **Ephesians 2:20-21**
- b. Ultimately, it is the product of the apostles and prophets, the Spirit inspired revelation – **Ephesians 3:3-5**
- c. Just like with the Old Testament (**cf. 2 Timothy 3:15-16**), their teaching was vocal and written, but what is written is preserved for all time by God's will and providence – **2 Thessalonians 2:15; 2 Peter 3:15-16; Jude 3**

D. If **"that which is perfect" refers to the completed revelation of God's will via scripture, the **"in part"** as the progressing revelation of God's will through spiritual gifts would be done away with, and with it the idea of the need for apostolic succession through laying on of hands.**

- a. **NOTE: The Eastern Orthodox Church claims that the scripture is not the "complete" revelation of God's will, but tradition via apostolic succession is also a part of divine revelation. Therefore, things which are not present in scripture are claimed to be God's will.**

III. What is “that which is perfect?”

A. The Eastern Orthodox Position – Christ Himself

- a. **“that which is perfect” (v. 10)** has reference to Jesus at His second coming.
 - i. Typically, without dealing with much in the context at all apart from **verses 9-13**.
- b. **(v. 11)** – the present time prior to coming of Christ is compared to childhood, where when He comes again all things will be brought to completion, or maturity as in adulthood.
 - i. I.e. the gifts are temporary, but in looking to the appearance of Jesus.
- c. Most emphasis – **(v. 12)** – the knowledge is of God in the person of Jesus Christ.
 - i. **“face to face”** – i.e. with Jesus – often citing **1 John 3:2**
 - 1. **“face to face”** – used of Theophanies in the Old Testament – must be used of the Divine appearance of Jesus.
 - ii. **“I know in part”** – same as **verse 9** – claimed problem if it is talking about the Divine revelation of scripture.
 - 1. Was Paul’s knowledge of God’s will as an apostle limited?
 - 2. His knowing **“in part”** is in reference to knowing Jesus personally, and what is lacking in being separate from Him before He comes again.
 - iii. **“I shall know just as I also am known”** – I will know Jesus as well as He knows me – known by a person, not by a book. (fails to see Paul’s analogy)
- d. Paul emphasizes love – **(vv. 8, 13)** – love is an attribute of a person, therefore **“that which is perfect”** is the Person of Jesus.

B. **“That which is perfect”** in Context – Christ’s Complete Revelation of Truth

- a. **John 16:13** – Jesus promised to reveal all truth through the Spirit.
- b. Context – love through edification in revealed truth by use of the spiritual gifts.
 - i. For profit of all – **12:7**
 - ii. Profit with understanding leading to edification – **14:6, 12**
 - iii. Pursuit of love through desiring gifts with primary emphasis on edification – **12:31; 14:1, 3-4**
- c. **“that which is perfect,”** NOT “He Who is perfect”
 - i. **“the perfect” (NASB, ESV)**

- ii. *To* (the) *teleion* (perfect) – both in NEUTER form – if in reference to a person it would be in masculine form.
 - 1. **“to a perfect man” (Ephesians 4:13)** – *andra* (man) *teleion* (perfect) – both masculine.
- d. **“that which is perfect”** – in reference to a thing, namely what it corresponds to in context, **“that which is in part” (v. 10)**
 - i. The thing – revelation of truth.
 - ii. **“in part” – (vv. 8-9)** – prophecies, tongues, knowledge, know, prophesy – all in reference to truth being revealed through miraculous spiritual gifts – **14:9, 12** – understanding what is spoken leading to edification – but in part.
 - iii. **“that which is perfect” – (v. 10)** – is the same thing as that which is in part, but the difference is quantitative (in part vs. complete).
(EX: *pieces of a pie, the whole pie*)
 - 1. **“part”** – *meros* – “one of the constituent parts of a whole” (THAYER)
 - a. A revelation which does not contain ALL of truth, but only the PART which it reveals – **14:31** – one by one – why multiple if one says all there is to be said.
 - 2. **“perfect”** – *teleios* – “wanting nothing necessary to completeness” (THAYER)
 - a. A revelation which contains ALL of the truth – **Psalm 119:160** – sum, entirety.
- e. Paul uses two analogies to demonstrate the temporary nature of the gifts in the process of revealing God’s will **(vv. 11-12)**:
 - i. **(v. 11)** – in the infancy of the church, before all scripture was written, spiritual gifts played a vital role in revealing God’s will.
 - ii. **(v. 12)** – prior to completed scripture, revelation came in bits and pieces at a time – Paul likens this to looking at oneself in an ancient mirror.
 - 1. He has not left the analogy to talk about seeing Christ, and Christ seeing him.
 - 2. **“face to face”** – not in reference to theophany, seeing God, but in keeping with the analogy of looking in a mirror (*therefore at yourself, not someone else*). **(“now...then”)**
 - 3. **“I shall know just as I also am known”** – I can only see myself in a mirror, but others see me more clearly because

they can look straight at me – likened to the complete revelation.

- f. Ultimately, **“that which is perfect”** cannot be separated from **“that which is in part”** in the context.
 - i. Both grammatically and contextually, **“that which is in part”** is not in reference to a person, but to partial revelation of truth via spiritual gifts.
 - ii. Both grammatically and contextually, **“that which is perfect”** is not in reference to a person, but to completed revelation of truth.

Conclusion

1. No verse can be isolated from its context, and each context requires intellectual honesty for an accurate interpretation.
2. The Eastern Orthodox Church view that **1 Corinthians 13:10** pertains to Christ at His second coming is influenced, not by the context of the verse, but by presuppositions which are unwarranted, and unscriptural.
3. Spiritual gifts were a vital part of God’s plan to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of Christ, but they had a purpose, and with that purpose being fulfilled, the miraculous gifts are not being used by God in His church anymore.