

## “TONGUES . . . WILL CEASE”

ROBERT L. THOMAS  
Talbot Theological Seminary  
La Mirada, California 90639

The thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians is inserted into the midst of Paul's spiritual gift discussion for the sake of showing the futility of gifts apart from love, the indispensibility of love, and its superior qualities. The Corinthian church needed this emphasis.

The final paragraph of chapter 13 (13:8-13) deals with the temporal superiority of love, that is, love's permanence. The temporal emphasis of the paragraph is easily noted. In v. 8 the adverb *oudepote* contrasts with the future tenses of verbs indicating cessation. In vv. 9-10 the future arrival of *to teleion* necessitates a consequent doing away with the partial, which belongs to the present. In v. 11, in the illustration of growth, a replacement of childhood habits by those of the adult transpires as time elapses. In v. 12 there is the dual occurrence of *arti* and *tote*, representing contrasts between the present and future. Time is clearly the uppermost consideration in this closing part of the great love chapter.

The objective in this study pertains to the specific words of v. 8, “Tongues . . . will cease.” Paul strikingly chooses the verb *pauo* rather than *katargeo* when speaking of tongues' cessation. Perhaps no great significance may be attached to this distinction in vocabulary unless *rendering inoperative* (*katargeo*) is more accurate for revelational type gifts (prophecy and knowledge) and *cessation* is a more apt description of what is evidential in nature (tongues). In addition, one might detect significance in the middle voice of *pausontai* as compared to the passive voice of *katargethesontai* and *katargethesetai*. This also might be explained as a distinction between gifts that are primarily revelational in character, depending more directly on an outside input, and a gift for the purpose of verification, not so specifically dependent on the outside source. Hence the latter could “cease on its own” or “cause itself to cease.”

The above matters could go one of several ways, however. The issue as to defining the cessation of tongues along with the rendering inoperative of prophecy and knowledge is best approached in conjunction with the *to teleion* of v. 10. What is the coming of “the perfect”? Many suggestions have been forthcoming in this regard, but perhaps they can be grouped under three headings, the first two picturing *to teleion* in absolute terms and the third picturing it as both relative and absolute.

### I. The Canon View

The first group of viewpoints assigns *to teleion* the meaning “the complete,” “the totality.” This understanding is usually correlated with seeing a reference to the completed canon of the New Testament, though this is not always so. The meaning “whole” or “complete” for the adjective

is well attested in Paul's usage as well as throughout the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> This notion of *teleios* receives even greater impetus in its antithetical expression of I Corinthians 13:10. The idiom *ek merous* is specifically quantitative in character, presenting the concept of "partial." What better opposite to partial is there than "completeness"?

This viewpoint is of further interest when the character of gifts which, along with tongues, are said to reach their terminal point, is noted. Since the present discussion's focus prohibits delving deeply into the nature of prophecy and knowledge, a good bit must be assumed. Along with Ervin and Hodge it is taken that the "word of wisdom" and the "word of knowledge" (12:8) are revelatory gifts.<sup>2</sup> A consensus among a number of commentators that a relationship exists between these two gifts and the gifts of apostleship and prophecy, by which they are replaced in the lists of 12:28-30, is also adopted.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, feeling that these four means were employed in the inspiration of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament seems well justified. However, not all revelation which came through these four channels came to be recorded in Scripture, but rather included in what was given by men using these gifts was what was ultimately incorporated into the written word.

Another subject that deserves extensive treatment is the duration of these revelatory gifts. Though such detailed attention is impossible here, help is gleaned from Ephesians 2:20 where apostles and prophets were instrumental only in foundational stages of the spiritual building, the holy temple, the habitation of God, in other words, the church. Erection of the remainder of the structure belonged to others, presumably allowing for generations to follow. Coupled with this Ephesians comment, Paul's recognition of himself as last in the succession of those commissioned as apostles (I Cor. 15:8) also indicates limited duration. A further word from the Apocalypse (22:18) points specifically to the consummation of prophecy at that early time.

As to I Corinthians 13:10, this brief survey of prophecy and knowledge gives plausibility to assigning the completed New Testament canon as the meaning of *to teleion*. Yet one serious drawback confronts the advocate of this viewpoint, and that is the reference in v. 12 to the condition which so obviously will be realized only at the *parousia*. The attempts of Unger<sup>4</sup> and Smith<sup>5</sup> to explain away v. 12 by referring either to the condition of the church after the completion of the New Testament canon, or to the Christian's condition after physical death, are futile attempts to do away with the

1. Gerhard Delling in Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1972, VIII, 73-76.  
Paul Johannes du Plessis, *TELEIOS, the Idea of Perfection in the N.T.*, 1959, p. 204.
2. Howard M. Ervin, *These Are Not Drunken*, 1968, p. 211.  
Charles Hodge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, sixth edition (reprinted, 1959), pp. 245-46.
3. G. G. Findlay, "St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians," *E. G. T.*, 1956, II, 895.  
Charles Hodge, pp. 245-46.  
H. A. W. Meyer, *Corinthians, Commentary on the N.T.*, 1879, I, 389-90; cf. I Cor. 13:2.
4. Merrill F. Unger, *New Testament Teaching on Tongues*, 1971, p. 97.
5. Charles R. Smith, *Tongues in Biblical Perspective*, 1972, p. 79.

obvious: v. 12 is a reference to conditions following the *parousia*. Johnson is correct on this point: "*That which is perfect* cannot be a reference to the completion of the canon of Scripture."<sup>6</sup> It seems inescapable that a reference to the completed canon alone cannot satisfy the illustration given in v. 12.

Another consideration which weakens the canon interpretation questions how clearly Paul envisioned such a thing as a completed canon of New Covenant books before the *parousia*. In addition, why would he not have used *to ek pantos* instead of *to teleios*, if he had only the concept of completion in view? This idiom would have made the antithesis with *to ek merous* absolutely symmetrical.

## II. The Parousia View

A second viewpoint regarding the meaning of *to teleion* also takes it as an absolute expression, but with the sense of "the perfect" rather than "the complete." This is the perfect or ideal condition that will exist following the *parousia*. Partial knowledge conveyed by the word of knowledge will be replaced by perfect knowledge; partial insight into God's wisdom through prophecy will be replaced by a face to face audience with Christ. Both of these will come in conjunction with the church's being caught away to be with her Lord. The list of advocates favoring this view is impressive: Godet, Robertson and Plummer, Hodge, Meyer, Parry, Bruce, du Plessis and others.

This interpretation is based on a meaning of "perfect" which is well established in Greek literature for *to teleion*. This meaning is abundantly illustrated in Plato in regard to his world of ideas and in other philosophical thought of the time prior to and simultaneous with the New Testament era.

This interpretation portrays a more obvious sense, especially in light of the most natural understanding of v. 12, the face to face relationship and the facility of knowing fully as one has also been known by God. This correlation has impressed the majority to the point that they have assigned *to teleion* as a designation of the ideal condition that will exist following the *parousia*.

A closer perusal of this position reveals some startling weaknesses, however. In the first place, this understanding presents a meaning of *teleios* which is unparalleled in Paul's usage, if not in the New Testament as a whole.<sup>7</sup> The rendering "perfect" apparently portrays a meaning that was more in vogue with the world of Greek philosophy than with the writers of Scripture.<sup>8</sup> The inadequacy of this rendering for *teleios* is further accentuated by the antithesis of which it is a part in I Corinthians 13:10. It is only by unnatural extension that "perfect" can be seen as a suitable opposite to "the partial" (*to ek merous*). The former idea is qualitative, and the latter distinctly quantitative. As such the two are not compatible antitheses.

A further weakness in seeing *to teleion* as the *parousia* is the unnatural

6. S. Lewis Johnson, *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 1962, p. 1252.

7. Delling, pp. 73-77.

8. Delling, pp. 69-72.

interpretation of v. 13 that results. Since the entire paragraph dwells upon the temporal superiority of love, v. 13 in bringing the paragraph to a climax would most naturally maintain this same emphasis. *Nuni* would have a temporal force in such a setting as this, and v. 13a would refer to the abiding character of faith, hope and love during the present and up to the *parousia*. Also v. 13b would explain love's supremacy among these three on the basis of its eternal character. Love alone will survive the *parousia*. This agrees with Paul's concept of faith and hope in two other epistles of this period. In II Corinthians 5:7 he notes that faith will be replaced by sight at the coming of Christ. Similarly Romans 8:24-25 expresses his concept of hope as ceasing at this same moment. Thus because of love's never failing (v. 8a) at the beginning of the paragraph it is "the greatest of these" at the end (v. 13b).

Yet this most natural interpretation of v. 13 has often been avoided by assigning *nuni* a logical rather than a temporal force, a step that creates havoc in the verse. To give the particle a logical force makes v. 13 the logical consequence of the preceding verses, which simply is not the case. In fact, faith and hope have not appeared previously in the paragraph. There is no way for v. 13 to be an inference from earlier statements.

Apart from the temporal explanation of v. 13, a constant search for an adequate understanding has continued. Robertson and Plummer explain it from I Corinthians 13:7 by saying that love lies at the root of faith and hope.<sup>9</sup> Careful examination of 13:7, however, reveals that the faith and hope in view there are toward one's neighbor only, not toward God also as is true with the familiar Christian triad of v. 13. Godet and Barrett have explained love's superiority as its needing no progression, whereas faith and hope, though they survive the *parousia* along with love, are constantly in process of being transformed.<sup>10</sup> But it is difficult to see how this distinction does justice to a context which dwells upon the eternity of love, not its constancy in contrast to something that continually evolves. Hodge suggests that the superiority of love lies in its usefulness for determining the greater spiritual gifts (12:31).<sup>11</sup> Again, however, this bypasses the strong temporal emphasis of the paragraph. This explanation unfortunately takes love which is supreme and absolute and gives it only a secondary position, making it only a means to an end, rather than the end in itself. Martin more recently has presented a somewhat different solution to the dilemma. He suggests that the *he agape* at the conclusion of v. 13 brings the tremendous love chapter to an end on the note of unexpected climax. He identifies this with the love of God, gives *meizon* its regular comparative rather than a superlative force, and understands, "The love of God is greater than these three human virtues."<sup>12</sup> Ingenious as this is, its weakness is found in the very unexpectedness that Martin admits. It is completely foreign to the contextual thought-flow, specifically to the paragraph with its temporal

9. Robertson & Plummer, *I Corinthians in I. C. C.*, 1914 (reprinted, 1963), p. 300.

10. F. Godet, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1886 (reprinted 1957), II, 262. C. K. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1968, p. 311.

11. Hodge, p. 276.

12. R. P. Martin, "Suggested Exegesis of I Cor. 13:13," *Expository Times*, Jan. 1971, p. 119.

emphasis, to inject an attribute of God as a closing note. And so, the question remains open.

The temporal understanding of v. 13 is at least as old as Chrysostom, and has been espoused by some more recently.<sup>13</sup> But for some mysterious reason it has been avoided by the majority.

Why has what appears to be an obvious meaning been so avoided? The motivation in a majority of the cases, if not all, has been a desire not to lose the contrast between prophecy, tongues and knowledge on the one hand, and faith-hope on the other.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the compulsion is to extend faith and hope beyond the *parousia* so as to produce a temporal distinction between these and the three spiritual gifts mentioned earlier.<sup>15</sup> Built into this scheme is the impregnable assumption that prophecy, tongues and knowledge extend up to the time of the *parousia*. Here possibly is the origin of what for many is an insoluble problem in v. 13. Is it not much more direct to notice that prophecy, tongues and knowledge do not necessarily cover the entire period up to the *parousia*, and that herein lies the contrast with faith-hope. In this way the more natural temporal connotation can be assigned to v. 13.

Equating *to teleion* with the *parousia* is beset by yet another difficulty, the illustration in v. 11. As Robertson and Plummer have aptly noted, the difference between childhood and manhood is a very feeble illustration of the vast difference between the Christian's present state and that after the *parousia*.<sup>16</sup> For Paul to compare the present economy in its entirety with the immature condition of a *nepios* is completely out of character for him as he is known in the rest of his writings. Whether in reference to an individual believer or to the body of Christ collectively, Paul's projection was a growth process through which conditions of childhood were left behind. Furthermore, use of his own adult status to picture perfection following Christ's return is at odds with the very next verse, where his present condition is one of limitations: "Now that I am a man (v. 11), I know partially (v. 12)." A further difficulty in understanding v. 11 in harmony with the *parousia* view lies in the nature of transition from childhood to adulthood. It is not a momentary change, as prophetic Scripture anticipates the *parousia* to be, but a gradual one. As Robertson and Plummer put it, "the emancipation from childish things took place as a matter of course and it continues."<sup>17</sup>

These are a few weaknesses to show the inadequacy of referring *to teleion* exclusively to the *parousia*. Yet the illustration of v. 12 reveals at least one commendable element in the view.

### III. The Body View

A third method of understanding *to teleion* in I Corinthians 13:10 is to refer it to maturity in the body of Christ. This approach is broad enough

13. F. V. Moss, "I Cor. 13:13," *Expository Times*, Dec. 1961, p. 93.

Jean Hering, *The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 1962, pp. 143-44.

14. Parry, *I Corinthians*, C. G. T., 1916, p. 197.

15. Hodge, p. 275.

16. Robertson and Plummer, p. 297.

17. Robertson and Plummer, p. 298.

to embrace the relative maturity that is implied in the illustration of v. 11 as well as the absolute maturity that is depicted in v. 12. It pictures the Christian church collectively, growing up as one body, beginning with its birth, progressing through different stages of development during the present and reaching complete maturity at the *parousia*. What can be said of the plausibility of this view?

In its favor, first of all, it falls well within the purview of Paul's usage of *teleios* to assign such a meaning. It is also an accepted meaning for the word in other parts of the New Testament. The approach assumes an even more convincing nature, however, when the use of *teleios* in proximity to *nepios* is noted in I Corinthians 13:10-11. In the two other I Corinthians passages where Paul chooses this combination (I Cor. 2:6 and 3:1; 14:20), the case is convincing for the meaning "mature." This is also true in the one Pauline instance outside Corinthians (Eph. 4:13-14). Outside the Pauline corpus, the same rule holds true for *teleios* and *nepios* (Hebrews 5:13-14).

In the realm of Greek literature as a whole, the alignment of these two words depicts a contrast between immaturity and maturity, as evidenced for example in the writings of Philo<sup>18</sup> and Polybius.<sup>19</sup> That this connotation of *teleios* suggested to Paul the illustration of a *nepios* in v. 11 is difficult to deny.<sup>20</sup> Though *teleios* itself does not occur in v. 11, implicitly its force is present in the *aner* (cf. Eph. 4:13).

Another strong consideration in favor of the meaning "mature" for *teleion* is the striking similarity between I Corinthians 13:10-11 and Ephesians 4:13-14 and more broadly, between I Corinthians 12-14 and Ephesians 4:1-16. In addition to the *nepios-teleios* found in both epistles are the somatic metaphor, the focus upon gifts in the spiritual body, the Trinity as a unifying motive (Eph. 4:4-6 with I Cor. 12:4-6), the primacy of love accompanied by faith and hope (Eph. 4:4, 5, 15, 16; I Cor. 13:13), a reference to the one baptism whereby all are united into this body (Eph. 4:5 with I Cor. 12:13), and the objective of edification (Eph. 4:12 with I Cor. 14). These resemblances could be expanded, but those listed suffice to show from linguistic and conceptual standpoints the close correspondence between the two sections. The two complement each other in conveying a body picture for the church envisioned by Paul.

That there should exist such a strong similarity between these portions is no accident. While Paul was performing his written ministry of I Corinthians 12-14, he was active in a spoken ministry to the Ephesian church. As judged from the contents of Ephesians his spoken ministry in Ephesus also focused upon the body-figure of the church. Further correlation between the two epistles and the two churches is seen in Paul's hurried trip ("painful visit") while based at Ephesus, to and from Corinth to alleviate some Corinthian problems.<sup>21</sup> Since he had simultaneous ministries to these churches, it is no surprise to find similar material incorporated approxi-

18. Delling, pp. 68-69.

19. Delling, p. 76, note 48.

20. Robertson and Plummer, pp. 297-98.

21. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 1970, pp. 427-29.

mately five years after I Corinthians when he penned Ephesians from his Roman house-arrest.<sup>22</sup>

A closer look at the parallel Ephesians passage is therefore advantageous. Du Plessis notes that *teleios* 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 *teleios* is in the character of an exhortation, it is maturity progressively realized in the present state of the church's existence.<sup>23</sup>

Transference of this image back to I Corinthians 13 reveals more clearly Paul's purpose in the illustration of v. 11. He conceived a constant growth process in the body of Christ and a gradual attainment of new degrees of maturity. His own growth experience in v. 11 parallels growth in the body of Christ.

Admittedly this understanding of *teleios* is not immune to objection, most notably a disruption of the antithesis with to *ek merous*. Pitting a quantitative idea against a qualitative one is quite unsatisfactory. Perhaps Delling relieves this dilemma, however, by noticing that in Paul the senses of "full" and "adult" sometimes overlap, in light of the ancient feeling that only an adult person could be a complete person (cf. Col. 1:28).<sup>24</sup> Yet instead of "an overlapping of two senses" in the same word, a proposal might be advanced that two aspects of maturity are in view, one relative and increasing and the other absolute and final or complete. Immediately recognizable in this twofold thrust of the adjective, then, a striking appropriateness in the twofold illustration of I Corinthians 13:11-12 surfaces, v. 11 speaking of dynamic and changing maturity and v. 12 of ultimate and fixed maturity.

#### IV. Implications of Body View

One may ask what could have been in the mind of Paul to prompt him to use such vocabulary and illustrations. A proposed answer is twofold:

(1) One tenet that dominated his thinking was his expectation of Christ's return. He entertained the possibility of this event in his own lifetime. Had this been the case, ultimate maturity of the body of Christ would have been reached in the first century. The condition of v. 12 would have been reached very early. As a number have noted, the *gar* of v. 12 skips over v. 11 so as to explain the replacement of partial prophecy and knowledge (vv. 9-10) by what is complete.<sup>25</sup> If events had turned out thus, the first century church would have gone immediately from its condition of dependence on divine revelation still being unfolded through prophecy and

22. The encyclical character of the Ephesian epistle whereby its scope is broadened to include all the Asian province does not alter this correlation since the city of Ephesus lay within the province as its most important urban center. Cf. Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 1964, p. 311.

23. Du Plessis, pp. 188-193.

24. Delling, pp. 75-76.

25. Meyer, p. 395; Godet, p. 254; Hodge, pp. 272-73; Robertson and Plummer, p. 298.

knowledge, into its condition of ultimate understanding in the presence of Christ.

(2) Another facet of Pauline thought was the continuing growth of the body of Christ, a process characterized in part by increasing revelatory materials which the church was receiving. From Paul's perspective, if the Lord chose to delay His return, the process of revelation might reach its culmination prior to the *parousia*. In this event the maturing process in Christ's body would continue beyond the revelatory period, until such time as the *parousia* did occur. The illustration in v. 11 provides for this combination of events. As the body grew, it conceivably to Paul might reach a point before the *parousia* where continuing revelation was no longer necessary. A refinement to v. 10 appears in almost a parenthetical manner with the insertion of v. 11, providing for such an eventuality and flowing very smoothly from the relative aspect of *teleios*.

To Paul it was not revealed which of the two states would come first. So he under divine inspiration carefully chose vocabulary and illustrations that would allow for either possibility.

The question naturally follows, by what criteria may maturity in the body of Christ be gauged? Several suggestions are possible: numerical growth, geographical growth, theological formulation and clarification. The criterion before Paul in I Corinthians 13, however, centers in knowledge, tongues and prophecy. These three include provisions for special revelation and signs for verification of this revelation (cf. Heb. 2:3-4).

Since Paul was associated with the author of Acts, he must have known that miracles, signs and wonders diminished rapidly as the church grew older. The decrease is quite sharp, whether reckoned from the usage of *dunamis*, *semeion* and *teras* in the book or from more general descriptions of evidential happenings between Acts 1 and 28. If Luke's work is a reliable guide, miraculous works to accredit the message diminished very rapidly during the first thirty years of the church's history.

Along with his awareness of diminishing works of verification, Paul also knew that an objective record of "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" was little by little being put into written form (cf. II Peter 3:15-16). If allowed to continue, this growing canon would some day reach completion, like its Old Testament counterpart, and a new stage of the church's maturity would result. This is comparable to adulthood in the illustration of v. 11.

Returning to Paul's original emphasis in I Corinthians 13:8-13, therefore, it is proposed that Paul allowed for a threefold temporal graduation in this key paragraph:

- (1) the period of direct revelation and special authentication which is the childhood of the body of Christ.
- (2) the entire period of the body's earthly existence corresponding to the duration of the triplet faith-hope-love. Knowledge, prophecy and tongues occupied only a portion of this period, since the canon of New Testament books has been completed before the *parousia*.
- (3) the period following the *parousia* when, insofar as the body of



Christ is concerned, neither the gifts nor faith-hope will continue.

Love alone will survive, and the church's maturity will be perfect.

By comparing phenomena pertaining to these three periods, Paul declares the temporal superiority of *he agape*: "The greatest of these is love, because love never comes to an end."

"Tongues . . . will cease," says Paul, "with whatever comes first: the passing from childhood to adulthood or the return of Christ. No matter which precedes, the greatest is still love."