

Has “That Which Is Perfect” Come?

Bible Answers About Miracles

The New Testament states very clearly that many Christians possessed and used spiritual gifts during the Biblical period which began with the establishment of the church as recorded in Acts 2. Jesus prophesied that these gifts would be used by His people (Mk. 16:17-18, 20). They are mentioned as fact (Mk. 16:20; Acts 2:1-4, 16-18; Heb. 2:3-4; I Cor. 12; 13; 14).

Paul listed nine such gifts (I Cor. 12:4-11) and then explained how those gifts functioned in the church at that time (I Cor. 12:28). Then Paul penned the following passage: “Love never fails; but if {there are gifts of} prophecy, they will be done away; if {there are} tongues, they will cease; if {there is} knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away” (1 Cor 13:8-10). This passage is found in the middle of the section dealing with spiritual gifts. It began in 12:1 and ended at 14:40. With the following words Paul points out, “And I show you a still more excellent way” (1 Cor 12:31). With those words Paul introduces the quality of love in chapter 13 as a contrast to spiritual gifts. Paul was emphasizing that love in a Christian’s life is more important than the miraculous spiritual gifts such as tongues, prophecy, knowledge and faith. After listing the qualities of love in verses 4-7, Paul then explains that such love is superior to spiritual gifts because “love never fails” (vs. 8) whereas the gifts were to “cease” or “be done away.” As long as earthly life shall last, faith, hope and love will abide (vs. 13), whereas spiritual gifts were going to “cease” or “be done away.” The termination of the miraculous gifts would be “when the perfect comes” (vs. 10 NASV).

There are those who have argued that Jesus is “the perfect” who will “come” at the end of time. However, the Greek construction denies this possibility. The Greek word for “perfect” (teleios) is neuter and means: “brought to its end, finished; wanting nothing necessary to completeness” (Thayer’s Lexicon). When referring to people, the word means “full-grown, adult, mature” (Arndt-Gingrich, Thayer). Jesus is masculine and was always referred to in masculine terms and never was spoken of as a thing but as a person. Jesus is a “he who,” not a “that which.” So “that which is perfect” cannot be Jesus or any other person.

Others have thought Paul refers to a “perfect” state of existence which will “come” to Christians in heaven. Their argument is that things in this world and in this life are not perfect and therefore it cannot refer to anything this side of the judgment. This reasoning is false because a number of things are said to be “teleios” in this life (Matt. 5:44-48; Matt. 19:21; I Cor. 2:6; I Cor. 14:20; Phil. 3:15; Col. 4:12; Heb. 5:14; James 1:25). All of those examples refer to the here and now. Therefore, we do not have to wait until we get to heaven to be “perfect” (teleios), that is complete or mature in the Biblical sense of this word. However, neither heaven nor eternity is mentioned anywhere in this context. Neither here nor anywhere else in the New Testament does the Greek word for “perfect” refer to the sinless, flawless state of heaven.

Some have even argued that Christian maturity, or love as its chief element, is “that which is perfect.” However, this view ignores the immediate context of verses 8-13, which is a contrast in duration rather than value, and they ignore the definitive statement of verses 9 and 10, which is a contrast in quantity.

As we look at verses 9 and 10 notice that they comprise one sentence and one thought. “For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away” (1 Cor 13:9-10 NAS). Since the word “perfect” in verse 10 means “complete” we would do well to change it to the actual meaning. Notice that verse 9 mentions something that is partial and verse 10 something that is complete.” “That which is perfect” (complete) is the completion of that which is “in part.” But what was in part? The context is crystal clear as Paul defines his subject-matter in this very sentence. Notice that Paul said, “We know in part, and we prophesy in part.” Paul was writing about the spiritual gifts of knowing and prophesying God’s will—the proclamation of the gospel by divine inspiration!

When Paul penned this letter to the Corinthian church the gospel had not been fully proclaimed. The knowing and prophesying were only “in part.” But divine inspiration looked forward to a completion. There would be a time in the near future when no more knowledge of God’s mysteries would be revealed and no prophecies uttered because all of God’s intended revelation to man would be complete. Therefore, “when that which is perfect is come,” those spiritual gifts of prophecies, tongues and knowledge would be done away and cease forever. This was to be accomplished within the lifetime of the apostles because Jesus had promised that the Holy Spirit would guide them into “all truth” (Jno. 16:13). Jude wrote, “that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3 NAS). All the truth that God intended to reveal to man had been delivered by the time the last apostle died. God did not intend to continue to reveal divine truth down through the centuries. That is why John wrote, “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (Rev 22:18-19 NAS).

Paul then used an analogy to emphasize the contrast between infancy and maturity (1 Cor. 13:11). Just as he left behind childish ways when he grew from infancy to manhood, so also the infant church would no longer have spiritual gifts when revelation was complete. Jesus “gave gifts unto men” so that the word might be correctly set forth through the apostles and other divinely aided teachers to build up the body until it arrived at the unity of the faith (the New Testament). Study very carefully the passage found in Ephesians 4:11-15. Then in verse 12 Paul explains that the reason why spiritual gifts were then existent but would later be put away was because at that time they could only “see in a mirror darkly.” Later they would be able to see “face to face.” This was just another way of stating the difference between knowing “in part” and knowing “fully” as in the second part of verse 12. The change would take place at the time “when that which is perfect is come.”

In concluding his remarks Paul said, “But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13 NAS). Here Paul draws a contrast between the temporary and the permanent as far as this life is concerned. Whereas the temporary spiritual gifts such as prophecies, tongues and knowledge would come to an end (vs. 8), permanent Christian qualities such as faith, hope and love would “abide” (vs. 13). This statement has only to do with earthly life. Faith looks

forward to fulfillment. It is “the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Likewise, hope is limited to earthly existence because “hope that is seen is not hope” (Rom. 8:24). Finally, love alone of these three qualities goes on into eternity, for “God is love” (I Jno. 4:16) and nothing, including death, “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).

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