

No. 11, Cessationism -- part 2

Cessationism is the teaching that the *charismata* – the supernatural gifts exercised in the apostolic era – ceased with the close of that era, specifically with the close of the canon of Scripture. The cessationist position was the one adopted by the various Protestant churches at the time of the Reformation, a position based upon this passage, 1 Cor 13: 8-13. Throughout Church history since Reformation times, there were a few who denied the cessationist position. But in more modern times, with the rise of Pentecostalism & Charismatism, there has been a wider acceptance of the non-cessationist position & a rejection of the cessationist understanding of the 1 Cor 13 passage.

In looking at this passage it was noted that Paul clearly refers to the cessation of the *charismata*, v.v.8, 9; and he sets the time for this in v.10 – “*when that which is perfect is come.*” Non-cessationists have to admit that Paul teaches here the end of the *charismata*, but they insist that the reference to the *perfect* signifies the perfect glorification of God’s people, a view that at first appears to be acceptable but upon closer examination is found wanting, for the passage is actually referring to the close of the canon of Scripture. Consequently, this passage deserves careful & candid examination in order to determine the meaning of the term “*that which is perfect.*”

Last week I set before you a few basic points. First, we noted that the word *perfect* means “mature”. Second, by means of contrast the Spirit of God is actually revealing here that the *charismata* belong to the realm of the immature and thus cease with the arrival of the perfect or the mature. Third, Paul’s reference to the immature is essentially a reference to immature divine revelation. Note that Paul is specifically dealing with revelatory gifts – *prophecies, tongues, & knowledge*. These gifts have to do with the delivery of divine revelation, as has been noted repeatedly from Scripture. Consequently, the clear inference is that the *perfect* of which he proceeds to speak must also belong to the realm of revelation – this is the logical conclusion that we draw.

This latter point is vital to any true understanding of this passage. The Apostle is dealing here with the issue of “revelation” and is showing that something better *in the realm of divine revelation* was coming, a mature & permanent revelation. Thus, in these verses Paul certainly points to a contrast, a contrast between lesser and greater revelation. The early Apostolic Church had miraculous gifts through which only a partial revelation was possessed. However, Paul’s point is that at a later time the Church would have the perfect revelation and then there would be the cessation of the miraculous gifts.

The Cessationist position is that the perfect or mature revelation that came to the Church was the entire special revelation comprised of the completed canon of Scripture at the close of the apostolic age. To adopt the position that the reference to the *perfect* in this passage is to the state of glory is essentially to teach that never in her whole earthly pilgrimage does the Church possess a mature revelation of truth, which is a contradiction of the promises given by Christ to the Apostles, see John 16: 13 – “*Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth.*” If Paul is teaching that the “perfect” is heaven, then he is teaching that the church has to make do with an imperfect & immature revelation right throughout its entire history. Moreover, it is during her earthly pilgrimage that the Church needs the “perfect” or the mature revelation in order to fit her for the great work that Christ commissioned her to do – take the Gospel to every nation and make & teach disciples all things that He commanded, Matt 28: 19, 20. Thank God, she has had and still possesses that full, mature & perfect revelation – the complete canon of Scripture.

However, let us come to these words again “that which is perfect” and look at them along with v.12, which are used to give support to the understanding that Paul is speaking of the perfect state of glory in this passage. Let us note a number of further points that prove that Paul is not speaking of the perfect state of glory.

1. If these words refer to the glorified state then Paul is teaching that when glorified he would know things as God knows him – which would be a kind of omniscience.

See his words at the end of v.12 -- “*Then shall I know even as also I am known.*” Some Bible teachers insist that these concluding words of v.12 refer to the glorified state, thus so also do the words in v.8 – “that which is perfect.” But if, as noted, the words at the end of v.12 are construed as to refer to heaven then Paul is teaching the acquirement of a brand of omniscience in glory – he would then know things as God knows him. Scripture nowhere teaches or even implies that God’s people, when they reach the perfect state, will have a kind of omniscience. Such would be impossible, because, glorification is not deification. Therefore, the interpretation of these verses that leads to such a conclusion is wrong, thus they cannot refer to heaven.

2. The statement in v.13 proves that Paul places that which is perfect in this present age.

The word “abideth” in v.13 means *to remain*, the word obviously being used in contrast with the terms *fail, cease, vanish away, done away* – all of which are used with reference to these miraculous gifts in v.v. 8-10. Therefore, Paul’s point in v.13 is that these spiritual graces remain *after* the miracles mentioned have passed away.

However, Paul cannot be referring to the glorified state in speaking of the graces in v.13 remaining for in the glorified state spiritual graces like *faith & hope* will not be required but will give way to the full sight of Christ & the experience of glory. The spiritual graces of *faith* and *hope* are only necessary in this world, only abide or remain in the Church in this present age. Therefore the miraculous gifts mentioned must also pass away in this present age, not the future age. Consequently, since *that which is perfect* comes after the miraculous gifts that do not remain when these spiritual gifts of faith & hope do, then *that which is perfect* is placed in this present age not some future age.

3. To teach that the words “that which is perfect” refer to the perfect state of glory involves a contradiction right within this passage.

The non-cessationist teaches that the miraculous gifts continue to the day of glory, which is to teach that supernatural revelation continues to be given until that day and only then does it cease. However, since the non-cessationist uses v.12 to support this teaching, he has created a huge contradiction. V.12 teaches that when the perfect is come God’s people will gain knowledge far more superior and full than anything they have known before, which contradicts the non-cessationist teaching that when the glorified state comes revelation ceases.

4. To teach that the words “that which is perfect” refer to the perfect state of glory contradicts the teaching of Scripture on the spiritual enlightenment of the child of God in this world.

The words in v.12 “*now we see through a glass darkly...*” mean *to see as a riddle*. The sense of the words is that until that which is perfect is come the believer does not possess a clear explanation of spiritual things, having a partial revelation only, v.9. Thus, throughout the entire age until the perfect state of glory arrives, God’s people at best have a very inferior revelation. But surely if this is the correct interpretation of this passage it is a contradiction of other Scriptures such as 1 Cor 2: 9, 10, and 2 Pet 1: 19 – neither of these passages teaches that the believer sees everything darkly or in a riddle.

The point is that until the canon of Scripture was closed with the writing of the N.T., the Church did not have the perfect revelation that she acquired when Scripture was completed. Note the words “*Then shall I know even as also I am known.*” The words *am known* signify that the Lord knows the believer completely without any need for additional sources of information. In that sense, when the N.T. was written, the Church had a complete source of spiritual knowledge, needing no further revelation and no longer seeing through a glass darkly.

The conclusion, therefore, is that the miraculous gifts were fragmentary, v.9, and were replaced by the mature or the full revelation in the form of the N.T. Scriptures, v.10. The N.T. has replaced the temporary gifts listed in this epistle, gifts that belonged to the early and immature stage of the Church’s history, v.11. The Church is more mature being in possession of the full & mature Word of God and being no longer dependent on the fragmentary revelation of the miraculous gifts.

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