

"That which is in part will be done away"

1 Corinthians 13:8 teaches us about miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are represented in the passage by prophecies, speaking in tongues and miraculous knowledge. (See 1 Cor. 12:10.) Those miraculous gifts would all cease, and the passage tells us when! 1 Cor. 13:10: "When that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away."

"That which is perfect": Some people teach that this phrase in 1 Corinthians 13:10 refers to Jesus Himself. After all, He's perfect. They then teach that prophecies, tongues and knowledge will last till He (the "perfect") returns. Because Paul wrote to us (in Corinth about 55 A.D.) in *Greek*, we need to understand the words Paul used. The phrase "that which" does not match Jesus in any way. After all, it says "that which" (neuter gender in Greek), not "He who" (masculine gender). Also, the word "perfect" is "teleios" and simply means complete, finished, of full age or mature (as in 1 Cor. 14:20). So instead of meaning the sinless son of God, "that which is perfect" simply means something complete or mature. Now look back at the context. In 1 Cor. 13:9, *partial* things include *knowledge* and *prophecy*, so "that which is perfect" is "perfect" with regard to knowledge and prophecy.

One way to understand where gifts of the Holy Spirit fit into God's plan for the church is to put ourselves back in time to the first century A.D.. Imagine that you're living in Corinth about 55 A.D.. Jesus has already been raised and ascended to the Father over 20 years ago. The eyewitnesses have been travelling and preaching. Jesus has already sent the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) who has been guiding the apostles into all truth. (John 16:7, 13) The Holy Spirit is working in those people miraculously, and He is inspiring them to write down the will of Jesus. (John 16:14; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:21; Ephesians 3:1-5) The four gospel accounts have been written as well as a few of the epistles, but there aren't many copies around, and you've never actually seen one. Several letters have been written by apostles, including one from the apostle Paul to you in Corinth (1 Cor. 5:9), and now you receive *another* letter from Paul (which will, in years to come, be labelled, "1st Corinthians"). Books such as 2nd Corinthians, Romans, Hebrews, 1st and 2nd Timothy, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John and Revelation haven't even been written yet, so no one owns a written version of the New Testament.

So no wonder Paul writes to you (in Corinth about 55 A.D.) saying, "We know in part and we prophesy in part." (1 Cor. 13:9) And no wonder God is helping people *know* His will in special ways. You've seen (in Corinth about 55 A.D.) that the Holy Spirit has been distributing spiritual gifts such as prophecy, tongues (languages) and the word of knowledge "to each one individually as He wills" (1 Cor. 12:7-11), and you know that these gifts (especially knowledge and prophecy) have helped you understand what God wants. (Remember, you don't have the whole Bible, yet!) Paul explains that the various miraculous gifts have different purposes and can benefit the church as a whole to varying degrees. The gift of prophecy is one of the best (1 Cor. 14:1) because "he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men" and "edifies the church." (1 Cor. 14:3, 4)

Now don't think that the church will *always* have prophets and people who speak in tongues and people blessed with miraculous knowledge. "Whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part." (1 Cor. 13:8, 9) Even with those wonderful miraculous gifts, we (in Corinth about 55 A.D.) are still limited in what we know of God's will. But Paul speaks of an even *better* time in the future when knowledge and understanding of the will of God will be *complete*. "When that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away." (1 Cor. 13:10) We will understand and think as a *man*, not a child (verse 11) and we shall see clearly and know completely. (v. 12) When that happens, there will be no more *need* for miraculous help to understand God's will, so the gifts of the Holy Spirit will cease. In other words, when all 27 books of God's New Testament are written, our knowledge will be *complete* for all practical, spiritual purposes - see 2 Peter 1:3 - so the spoken, *unwritten* prophecy and revelation will no longer be needed. In the meantime, the spiritual gifts are extremely important to us (in Corinth about 55 A.D.), but they are simply filling a temporary gap in our knowledge and understanding.

A second way to gain a proper perspective on spiritual gifts is to compare them to other spiritual fruits. Christians in the first century A.D. had *various* gifts - - some could *not* speak in tongues and some could *not* prophesy. (1 Cor. 12:29, 30) But *all* Christians could have faith, hope and love. Some may have had an "extra helping" of faith as a special gift (1 Cor. 12:9), but it did not require a gift from the Holy Spirit to have faith to begin with! (See Romans 10:17.)

A third way, and perhaps the clearest, to understand *when* spiritual gifts would pass is to focus on a key word in the text, "abide." We learn that, not only are faith, hope and love more widely shared than miraculous gifts ever were, they are *longer lasting*. 1 Cor. 13:8 says that prophecies, tongues and knowledge would *cease*, but verse 13 says that faith, hope and love *abide*. (The Greek word for "abide" [meno] carries the idea of something lasting in time and is also translated "continue, remain, endure, tarry, etc.") In other words, faith, hope and love would *outlast* prophecies, tongues and (gifted) knowledge. Now, let's start with the thing that lasts the longest, love. While faith, hope and love "abide," love *never* fails. (verse 8) Does this mean that faith and hope *will fail* someday? Actually, yes. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) And "hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?" (Romans 8:24) When Jesus returns, both our faith and our hope will be replaced by what we "see," and so will be done away.

So there are actually *two* stopping points that we need to consider in order to understand 1 Corinthians 13.

Faith and hope will cease when the Lord returns.

But first, prophecies, tongues and knowledge (representing *all* spiritual gifts) will cease when "that which is perfect has come."

