

RICHARD GAFFIN AND WAYNE GRUDEM ON 1 COR 13:10:
A COMPARISON OF CESSATIONIST
AND NONCESSATIONIST ARGUMENTATION

R. FOWLER WHITE*

If Wayne Grudem's recent publications¹ on the gift of prophecy are any indication, the debate over what the NT teaches about the duration of that gift is taking a new turn. Formerly we who follow the debate had only to study the arguments of the charismatic school (which affirms that prophecy continues) and the cessationist school (which denies that prophecy continues). Now, however, we must reckon with a third position based on the proposals of a Biblical scholar who does not place himself in the charismatic school but who nevertheless affirms that prophecy continues. To some this development will signal little more than the need to rename the charismatic school of thought—for example, by replacing "charismatic" with "noncessationist." But this would be to trivialize the work of Grudem, something that should not be done given the scholarly breadth and pastoral sensitivity he brings to his writings. Despite the very admirable traits Grudem displays, however, I am sure I will not be alone in the judgment that problems remain in his discussions, problems that include his adoption of the noncessationist interpretation of 1 Cor 13:10.

In this study I do not propose to argue that the meaning of 1 Cor 13:10 is compatible with cessationist thought. As I see it, Richard Gaffin has already given that position its most satisfying exposition.² What I propose to do instead is to compare Gaffin's and Grudem's interpretations of 1 Cor 13:10, hoping thereby to expose the fundamental oversight of the noncessationist interpretation accepted by Grudem. I begin by considering their interpretations of the coming of "the perfect."³

*Fowler White is lecturer in New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary, P.O. Box 27009, Philadelphia, PA 19118.

¹ W. A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester: Crossway, 1988). The book represents a popularized and expanded edition of Grudem's earlier work, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Lanham: University Press, 1982), which is in turn an expanded edition of his dissertation of the same title (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1978). Grudem's "middle ground" position also appears with minor modifications in D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

² R. B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) 109-112. Gaffin's position on 1 Cor 13:10 is substantially the same as that reached independently by T. R. Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts: Are They For Today?* (Neptune: Loizeaux, 1983) 333-344.

³ For the purposes of this essay I need not debate the translation of *ek merous*, to *ek merous* and to *teleion*. Though I prefer the translation of the NASB, NKJV or NRSV I have chosen to avoid complicating the discussion that follows by translating them respectively "in part," "the imperfect" and "the perfect." See also n. 22.

I. TO WHAT DOES THE COMING OF "THE PERFECT" REFER?

When it comes to the interpretation of 1 Cor 13:10 the dispute between cessationists and noncessationists has for all practical purposes focused on one point of exegesis: the referent of the *hotan* clause that begins v. 10 ("but when the perfect comes"). Cessationists have ordinarily regarded agreement with noncessationists on this point as the kiss of death for the cessationist position, and vice versa.

Given this state of affairs it is truly remarkable to find both Gaffin, a cessationist, and Grudem, a noncessationist, agreeing on this issue. Both men argue—in my view, persuasively—that the coming of "the perfect" refers to the time of Christ's return.⁴ For the evidence favoring this interpretation and critiques of competing interpretations the reader should consult the discussions of Grudem and Gaffin. Suffice it to say here that at bottom both men insist on interpreting the *hotan* clause of v. 10a in the light of the *tote* ("then") clauses of v. 12. They thus agree that the coming of "the perfect" (v. 10a) and the "then" of the believer's full knowledge (v. 12) can only refer to events at our Lord's return. Alternative proposals, they urge, cannot be made exegetically credible. Because of this fact we might expect Gaffin and Grudem to reach the common conclusion that prophecy and other gifts included among "the imperfect" (v. 10b) will continue until Christ returns. But as the reader already knows from the introduction, that is not the case. Hence from the fact that Gaffin and Grudem end up disagreeing on the question of prophecy's duration despite their agreement on when "the perfect" comes we gather that we shall have to look elsewhere to discover the reasons why they differ.

II. HOW ARE THE COMING OF "THE PERFECT" AND THE CESSATION OF PROPHECY RELATED?

Our concern under this heading might be stated more specifically: Does 1 Cor 13:10 teach that the cessation of prophecy will coincide with the coming of "the perfect"? That is, does Paul specify the time of prophecy's cessation here? In the end, does 1 Cor 13:10 mean that "when Christ returns, prophecy (among other gifts)⁵ will cease"? Gaffin and Grudem answer these questions in fundamentally different ways.

1. *Gaffin's answer.* In 1 Cor 13:10 and its context (vv. 8–13)

⁴ Grudem, *Prophecy in the New Testament* 230–243; Gaffin, *Perspectives* 109–110.

⁵ Evidently the gifts under consideration in 1 Cor 13:8–13 are explicitly those involving verbal ministry (e.g. prophecy, tongues, knowledge). I say this because 13:8–14:40 focuses on verbal activity through which believers come to know or make known the things of God. This of course is not to deny that knowledge of divine things is available through nonverbal ministry (e.g. helps, healings, working of miracles). Nor is it to deny that 1 Cor 13:8–13, especially the generalization of v. 10, carries implications for all the gifts. Cf. Gaffin's helpful categorization of spiritual gifts as word-gifts and deed-gifts (*Perspectives* 52–53).

Paul is not intending to specify the time when any particular mode [of revelation, such as prophecy] will cease. What he does affirm is the termination of the believer's present, fragmentary knowledge, based on likewise temporary modes of revelation, when "the perfect" comes. The time of the cessation of prophecy . . . is an open question so far as this passage is concerned and will have to be decided on the basis of other passages and considerations.⁶

It is important to understand how Gaffin reaches his conclusion. As he reads 1 Cor 13:10 and its context, Gaffin sees Paul looking at the entire period until Christ's return, "*without regard to whether or not discontinuities may intervene during the course of the period, in the interests of emphasizing the enduring quality of faith, hope, and especially love (vv 8, 13).*"⁷ Moreover as the apostle discusses the relationship between love and various gifts in vv. 8–13 he places that relationship within the context of the broader contrast "between the believer's present and future knowledge, in which on the one side the primary accent is not on the cessation of particular revelatory gifts but on the temporary and fragmentary character of present knowledge."⁸ Consequently it is gratuitous to find an answer to the question of when prophecy will cease in 1 Cor 13:10, since in the context Paul is addressing an issue other than that one.⁹

2. *Grudem's answer.* But does Gaffin's interpretation see too little in the text?¹⁰ Following the noncessationist school of thought, Grudem insists that it does. Indeed, in his view Gaffin has ignored an important though admittedly secondary point through excessive concern for Paul's "primary accent." As Grudem puts it:

Verse 10 affirms, not just that these imperfect gifts will cease sometime, but that they will cease "*when the perfect comes.*" Paul specifies a certain time: "*When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.*" But Dr Gaffin seems to claim that Paul is not actually saying this.¹¹

In addition Grudem urges that, contrary to Gaffin's proposal,

Paul's argument is that it is specifically the coming of "the perfect" which does away with prophecy, tongues and knowledge, because then there is a new, far superior way of learning and knowing things "even as I have been known." But *until* that time . . . these imperfect gifts are . . . valid and useful.¹²

From his critique of Gaffin it is quite plain that Grudem understands Paul to have specified the time of prophecy's cessation in 1 Cor 13:10. That time is "when the perfect comes," and if that phrase refers to the time of

⁶ Ibid. 111.

⁷ Ibid. 110 (italics mine).

⁸ Ibid. 111.

⁹ Ibid. 109, 111.

¹⁰ This question reflects the criticism registered against Gaffin by one of Grudem's most important supporters (Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 69).

¹¹ Grudem, *Prophecy in the New Testament* 235 (italics his).

¹² Ibid. (italics his).

Christ's return then we shall have to conclude that prophecy will cease at that time, having continued throughout the Church age.¹³

As we did with Gaffin, let us consider how Grudem reaches his conclusion. He begins by noting that 1 Cor 13:10 appears in the context of 13:8–13, where Paul's overall purpose is to show that love is superior to gifts like prophecy because those gifts are only temporary but love is permanent. To clarify this contrast Paul points out that the gifts are "imperfect" activities (or activities done "imperfectly") and as such they will become obsolete when "the perfect" arrives. Thus Paul connects the function of the gifts with the time of their cessation. Moreover, since the "imperfect" activities of vv. 9–10 clearly include prophecy, Paul in effect "connects the function of prophecy with the time of its cessation."¹⁴ In other words, until "the perfect" comes prophecy will contribute—albeit "imperfectly"—to the Church's edification. But when "the perfect" comes, that function will be filled by something else and, having thus become useless, prophecy will cease.¹⁵ For Grudem, then, 1 Cor 13:10 means not only "when the perfect comes, *the imperfect* will cease" but also "when the perfect comes, *prophecy* will cease."¹⁶

How then are the coming of "the perfect" and the cessation of prophecy related according to 1 Cor 13:10? Grudem answers that the text portrays the cessation of prophecy as coincident with the coming of "the perfect." Gaffin, on the other hand, responds that the passage does not tell us how the two are related. Whose answer is the most convincing? In my judgment the evidence is with Gaffin, but I also believe that if we intensify our examination of these scholars' argumentation we will find additional evidence that both discredits Grudem's noncessationist answer and confirms Gaffin's cessationist answer.

III. DO THE TERMS "THE IMPERFECT" AND "THE PERFECT"

DESCRIBE METHODS OF ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE OR STATES OF KNOWLEDGE?

When we analyze the salient features of Gaffin's and Grudem's discussions of 1 Cor 13:10 it becomes transparent that they construe its context in very different terms. Both men see vv. 9–13 as Paul's explanation of the contrast between love and the gifts in v. 8, but they part ways on the point Paul makes to develop that contrast. Their disagreement turns on the meaning they attach to "the imperfect" and "the perfect" in v. 10.

1. *Grudem's answer.* According to Grudem, Paul explains the difference between love and the gifts by underscoring the fact that, as ways of attaining knowledge,¹⁷ the gifts are of "imperfect" quality. Following this

¹³ Ibid. 235.

¹⁴ Ibid. 229; see also *ibid.* 230.

¹⁵ Ibid. 229.

¹⁶ Ibid. 230 (*italics his*).

¹⁷ Throughout this discussion "knowledge" should be understood as "what is known or made known concerning the things of God."

analysis Grudem reads Paul's assertion in v. 10 as a claim about "the imperfect" and "the perfect" methods of acquiring knowledge. That this is in fact the conception that dominates Grudem's thinking¹⁸ is plain when he writes:

This is why prophecy will "pass away" or "be rendered useless" (1 Cor 13:8); it is only a temporary and partial substitute for the full and complete *means of attaining knowledge* which we will have when Christ returns. When that perfect *means of knowing* comes, the imperfect *ways* will pass away (1 Cor 13:10).¹⁹

2. *Gaffin's answer.* According to Gaffin, Paul's argument does not proceed with the focus that Grudem sees. As we noted earlier, Gaffin argues that in 1 Cor 13:8–13 "the relationship between love and the gifts is taken up into the broader contrast between the believer's present and future knowledge, in which on the one side the primary accent is not on the cessation of particular revelatory gifts but on the temporary and fragmentary character of present knowledge."²⁰ From this perspective Gaffin reads Paul's assertion in v. 10 not as a claim about the cessation of certain modes of revelation when "the perfect" comes but as a claim about "the termination of the believer's present, fragmentary knowledge, based on likewise temporary modes of revelation, when 'the perfect' comes."²¹ It seems to me that the exegetical point Gaffin makes here is both crucial and correct.

3. *Gaffin's answer amplified and clarified.* Contrary to the noncessationist position adopted by Grudem, we should follow Gaffin's lead and insist that Paul does not explain the difference between love and the gifts by pointing out the "imperfect" nature of the gifts as ways of attaining knowledge. Rather, he explains the difference by pointing out the "imperfect" state of the knowledge attained through these gifts.²² Accordingly we should read Paul's assertion in v. 10 not as a claim about "the imperfect" and "the perfect" methods of acquiring knowledge but as a claim about "the imperfect" and "the perfect" states of knowledge acquired through those methods. That this is Paul's concern in v. 10 is borne out by the following observations from the context.

¹⁸ I say this conception "dominates" rather than "constitutes" Grudem's thinking about 1 Cor 13:10 because, as we shall see, it is not the only conception to emerge in his discussion.

¹⁹ Grudem, *Prophecy in the New Testament* 123 (italics mine). Consider also his comment that "the perfect" in 1 Cor 13:10 . . . is a method of acquiring knowledge" (ibid. 324 n. 93).

²⁰ Gaffin, *Perspectives* 111.

²¹ Ibid. Gaffin prefers to speak of the gifts under consideration in 1 Cor 13:8–13 as "modes of revelation." Also, in an apparent reference to the gifts he says that Paul's specific point in 13:8 is to stress the temporary and provisional nature of "the *ways* [the believer] comes to know" (ibid. 110 [italics his]). This latter expression makes it clear that for the most part Gaffin's description overlaps with Grudem's "methods/means/ways of acquiring knowledge." For the purposes of this study I treat the two sets of terms as equivalent, but to avoid confusion I have used Grudem's expressions as consistently as possible.

²² Granted that Paul's topic is the state of knowledge as opposed to the nature of gifts, it becomes clear that when it comes to translating to *ek merous* "the partial" or "that which is in part" suits the context better than "the imperfect." See also n. 26 below.

First, in v. 11 Paul expresses by way of analogy the very same point he makes in vv. 9–10. Significantly, the point of the analogy is not to contrast the childish and adult character of the means by which we learn to speak, think and reason. Rather, the point is to contrast the childish and adult kinds of speaking, thinking and reasoning.²³ Given this focus in v. 11, the focus in v. 10 must be on kinds of knowledge, not on the character of the means of attaining knowledge.

Second, as Paul elaborates in v. 12 on what he has been saying in vv. 9–11 he contrasts seeing “in a mirror dimly” with seeing “face to face” and knowing “in part” with knowing “even as I have been (fully) known.” These contrasts confirm that Paul is continuing to describe the state of the believer’s knowledge-perception, with no particular interest in the character of the media by which it is obtained.²⁴ This is not to say that we cannot infer from Paul’s words what those media are or what their character is.²⁵ It is only to say that Paul’s overriding interest is in the state of knowledge obtained through those media.

Finally, and most importantly, since the prepositional phrase *ek merous* describes the present state of knowledge in v. 12 we should interpret its function in vv. 9–10 in a similar fashion.²⁶ Indeed, since the words *ginōskēin ek merous* in v. 9 reappear in v. 12 we have good reason to believe that the words in v. 9 have a meaning comparable to those in v. 12.²⁷ Accordingly we should take *ek merous* in v. 9 as describing the state of knowledge mediated through the gifts of knowledge (“we know in part,”

²³ Apparently Grudem would agree that v. 11 expresses the same point as vv. 9–10, for he says that v. 11 provides “a natural human illustration of what he has said in verse 10” (*Prophecy in the New Testament* 232). Grudem also says that vv. 9–10 are “explained by the analogy of the child who gives up childish thought and speech for the thought and speech of an adult (v. 11)” (*ibid.* 229). He fails to notice, however, that his exegesis of v. 11 is at odds with his exegesis of vv. 9–10.

²⁴ Grudem would evidently have little or no difficulty with this exegesis of v. 12, for he summarizes the verse this way: “Paul . . . elaborates further on verses 9–10 by explaining that our present perception and knowledge are indirect and imperfect, but someday they will be direct and perfect (v. 12)” (*ibid.* 229). Still, he also relates v. 12 to the quality of the methods by which the believer acquires that perception and knowledge (*ibid.* 324 n. 93). We shall have more to say on this problem below.

²⁵ E.g. even though the phrase “face to face” describes the (direct) nature of the believer’s future perception we can infer from those words that Paul has in mind the medium of theophany or, more precisely, Christophany (e.g. Rev 22:4). Cf. *ibid.* 231–232.

²⁶ The NIV partially obscures the verbal parallelism when it employs “the imperfect” in v. 10 but “in part” in vv. 9, 12. The RSV completely obscures the parallelism between vv. 9–10 and v. 12 by translating (to) *ek merous* as “(the) imperfect” in vv. 9–10 and as “in part” in v. 12. The NASB and NRSV are quite adequate with their use of “the partial” in v. 10 and “in part” in vv. 9, 12. The NKJV is the most satisfactory of all when it employs “that which is in part” in v. 10 and “in part” in vv. 9, 12.

²⁷ I say the meanings of v. 9 and v. 12 are “comparable” because the clauses “we know in part” (v. 9) and “I know in part” (v. 12) probably have overlapping, not identical, connotations. In v. 9 knowledge is probably conceived narrowly as “what is known through the gift (and/or word) of knowledge,” whereas in v. 12 knowledge is conceived broadly as “what is known through all the gifts, including the gift of knowledge.”

v. 9a) and prophecy (“we prophesy in part,” v. 9b).²⁸ Likewise we should understand *to ek merous* in v. 10 as describing the state of knowledge conveyed through the gifts.

A consistent analysis of *ek merous* such as the one just given makes it very clear that “the dominant, integrating theme”²⁹ of vv. 9–12 is the knowledge that the gifts convey, not the gifts that convey the knowledge. By comparison a noncessationist analysis like Grudem’s interprets the function of *ek merous* in vv. 9–10 and v. 12 in an inconsistent fashion—as a description of gifts in the former, but as a description of knowledge in the latter—and thereby obscures the unity of Paul’s argument.

The point of the preceding observations is to show that Paul explains what he says about the temporariness of the gifts in v. 8 by calling our attention in vv. 9–13 to the temporariness of the “imperfect” knowledge they convey. In fact Paul’s assertions in vv. 9–13 constitute an indirect corrective to the Corinthians’ triumphalist claims alluded to in v. 2.³⁰ According to those claims, through the revelatory gifts one knows all mysteries and all knowledge. Through the gifts one in effect enters the *to teleion* state. After highlighting the virtues of love in vv. 4–7 Paul turns again to the contrast between love and gifts in vv. 8–13, and in vv. 9–12 in particular he proceeds in none-too-subtle terms (note the emphatic position of *ek merous* in v. 9) to dispute those triumphalist claims about the state of knowledge realized through the gifts of prophecy and knowledge. Thus we might paraphrase Paul’s argument in 13:9–13 as follows: “Let me explain my statement that the gifts are only temporary. Consider the state of knowledge we attain through them: It is only ‘in part.’ As such it will be superseded when the ‘perfect’ state of knowledge comes. The knowledge conveyed through the gifts is therefore only temporary, and from this we should discern that, unlike love, the gifts are themselves only temporary.” This discussion of love, gifts, and knowledge from gifts contributes masterfully to Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 13 in that he emphasizes love’s indispensability while exposing as false the Corinthians’ triumphalist view of gifts and their benefits.

In the light of the preceding considerations it appears that Grudem’s criticism of Gaffin’s exegesis of 1 Cor 13:10 misses its intended target. I say this because, as the reader will recall, Gaffin derives his conclusion from his analysis of “the imperfect” and “the perfect” as states of knowledge. Grudem, however, bases his rebuttal to Gaffin on the (unproven) assumption that they are qualities of the methods of acquiring knowledge.

²⁸ Since we have used “knowledge” to denote “what is known or made known concerning the things of God,” we might paraphrase v. 9 as follows: “What is known to us through the gift of knowledge is ‘in part,’ and what is made known by us through the gift of prophecy is ‘in part.’” On the paraphrase of v. 9b in particular see 1 Cor 13:2; 14:6 (14:30a); cf. Eph 3:3.

²⁹ Gaffin, *Perspectives* 110.

³⁰ On the Corinthians’ “overrealized,” triumphalist eschatology see e.g. G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 12, 630–632 (esp. 630 n. 20), 642.

Since Grudem fails to take account of his difference with Gaffin on this fundamental question, his objection to Gaffin's conclusion is beside the point.

To conclude our discussion of "the imperfect" and "the perfect," let us point out in fairness to Grudem that, though he customarily describes "the imperfect" and "the perfect" as methods of acquiring knowledge, he does speak of them in at least one place as kinds or states of knowledge. We find him expressing this idea when he writes that "only the kind of knowledge Paul expected in the final consummation of all things could be so qualitatively different from present knowledge that it could . . . be called 'the perfect' as opposed to 'the imperfect.'"³¹

The fact, however, that in this one place Grudem describes "the imperfect" and "the perfect" as kinds of knowledge does not rescue him from the criticism voiced above. On the contrary, this description only compounds his problems because he gives it to us right on the heels of describing "the perfect" as "a method of acquiring knowledge."³² In the space of a single paragraph, then, Grudem uses Paul's terms in two different senses.

The implications of this equivocation for Grudem's exegesis of 1 Cor 13:10 are profound. To be specific, he must either give up his description of "the imperfect" and "the perfect" as kinds of knowledge and face the evidence against his other description or else give up his description of "the imperfect" and "the perfect" as methods of acquiring knowledge and concede Gaffin's interpretation of the text. One thing is certain: Grudem cannot have it both ways without jeopardizing the coherence of Paul's argument, much less his own.

IV. CONCLUSION

At the center of the debate over what the NT teaches about the duration of the gift of prophecy stands 1 Cor 13:10. During the history of the debate, a certain aura has developed around this text so that it now appears as "the immovable stumbling block"³³ against the view that the gift of prophecy has ceased. Recently Grudem, a noncessationist, has perpetuated that characterization, contending that in 13:10 we have "a clear biblical statement that Paul expected the gift of prophecy to continue through the entire church age and to function for the benefit of the church until the Lord returns."³⁴ In conjunction with his thorough review of cessationist argumentation, Grudem's contention appears impressive. And in fact when compared with most cessationist argumentation, especially the usual cessationist failure to relate the coming of "the perfect" to Christ's return, 1 Cor 13:10 stands as immovable as ever against the cessationist position.

³¹ Grudem, *Prophecy in the New Testament* 324 n. 93.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Gaffin, *Perspectives* 109.

³⁴ Grudem, *Prophecy in the New Testament* 233.

But, as I have sought to show here, when compared with the cessationist argumentation of Gaffin the conclusion of Grudem fares very poorly. Specifically, our comparison of Gaffin and Grudem on 1 Cor 13:10 has exposed the fundamental oversight of the noncessationist interpretation accepted by Grudem—namely, the failure to perceive with Gaffin that Paul's assertion in the text is a claim about states of knowledge, not qualities of methods by which knowledge is acquired. This finding makes it clear that even if we locate the coming of "the perfect" at the *parousia* this would not "necessarily mean that a charismatic gift or gifts could not have been withdrawn earlier than the parousia."³⁵ Indeed, our study serves to establish more firmly Gaffin's contention that "the time of the cessation of prophecy . . . is an open question so far as [1 Cor 13:10] is concerned and will have to be decided on the basis of other passages and considerations."³⁶

³⁵ Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 70. Though it serves my purpose to quote Carson here, I confess it is not clear to me how he can make this statement immediately after he has criticized Gaffin for arguing that the time of the cessation of prophecy (and tongues) is an open question in 1 Corinthians 13 (see *ibid.* 69 n. 57).

³⁶ Gaffin, *Perspectives* 111. If an appeal to 1 Cor 13:10 cannot settle the question of prophecy's duration, the exegesis of Eph 2:20—the text that is chief among the "other passages" bearing on the question—becomes the decisive, controlling factor in the debate. In a study to appear in *WTJ* I take up the interpretation of this latter text by again comparing the positions of Gaffin and Grudem.