

The Complete Thing

by R.E. Harlow

R.E. Harlow's sermon emphasizes the completeness of Scripture and the temporary nature of certain spiritual gifts in the church.

Scripture: John 7:38, Acts 2:4, Romans 11:29, 1 Corinthians 13:8, 1 Corinthians 14:22, 2 Corinthians 5:1, Revelation 22:12

Topics: "Biblical Authority", "Holy Spirit"

Description

R.E. Harlow delves into the perfection and balance of the complete Scripture, emphasizing its role in meeting every spiritual need of a person and highlighting Christ as the unifying subject of its 66 books. The completion of the Bible marked a significant event in the Church, with the Holy Spirit inspiring the New Testament writers and bestowing gifts upon the Church. The sermon explores the temporary nature of gifts, the division of dispensations, and the importance of the completion of the New Testament as a turning point in history.

Transcript

Introduction

Bible students never cease to marvel at the perfection and balance of the complete Scripture. It starts at the beginning of creation and ends with the eternity of the future.

The Bible provides for every spiritual need of a human person. By it the man of God may be fitted and furnished for every good work.

Christ is the unifying subject of its 66 books, written by many people over 1,600 years. No one may add to it (for example, the fourteen books of the Apocrypha) and no man may take from it. The Word of God is perfect, complete and eternal.

In this paper, we will show that the completion of the Bible was an important event and had a notable effect on the Church. The Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament writers over a period of years, gave special gifts to the Church during that time, and continues to give some gifts throughout this dispensation.

We will first consider what the Bible says about

Temporary Gifts

The gifts and calling of God are without repentance, Romans 11:29. Eternal life God will never recall or reclaim from any believer but it might be His will to give certain gifts to the Church at one period, then later withhold them. Gifts bestowed at the beginning of the Church dispensation are not necessarily guaranteed throughout. The question is not, Is God able to give His gifts at any time? but, Has He chosen to do so?

There are subdivisions in some dispensations. For example, the dispensation of law was divided when God set aside the monarchy and brought in the times of the Gentiles. The law continued until Christ's first coming. The times of the Gentiles will cease only when He comes again.

The church age may also be divided into apostolic and post-apostolic eras. During the apostolic era, the Scripture was incomplete. John, the last writer of the New Testament, is thought to have been martyred about 100 A.D. God speaks to men in all ages, but the completion of the New Testament was a turning point.

Miracles

The Lord of heaven can act on earth at any time and display His power. He often does so in answer to prayer. This display of divine power may be called a miracle.

There have, however, been periods of time when God gave miraculous gifts for certain purposes.

Moses: miracles proved to both Egypt and Israel that God had sent Moses. These continued though less frequently into the time at Joshua. The Canaanites knew that God was with Israel.

Elijah and Elisha: When the mass of Israel was quite willing to follow their wicked kings (and queens) God gave special powers to Elijah and Elisha, but with only temporary benefit. None of the sixteen writing prophets was granted similar miracles although Jonah, Isaiah and Daniel saw God's hand working.

John the Baptist did no miracle but the Lord Jesus Christ did, in His own power and according to the Father's will, works which no other man had done, John 15:24. These miracles swept over a wide spectrum, much more than healing disease: sight to the blind, raising dead persons, stilling storms, walking on water, feeding 9,000 people.

The Lord Jesus had authority to delegate these powers to His apostles. The only condition was faith in Himself: He that believeth on Me.

On the last day of the feast: out of his heart rivers (plural) of living water will flow, John 7:38.

On the last night in the upper room: greater works even than those Christ did, the believer would do, John 14:12.

Both of these promises were contingent on Christ entering glory and the Holy Spirit coming. After He rose, the Lord Jesus listed five signs His followers would be able to do, Mark 16:17-18.

The Lord ascended and the Spirit came. The apostles, as the Lord had promised,

Threw out demons, Acts 18:18

Spoke with new and different tongues, Acts 2:4

Took up a serpent, Acts 28:3

Laid hands on sick people and healed them, Acts 2:43; 3:7; 5:12; 9:34; 14:3,10; 15:12; 28:8;

(There is no record of a poison cup in Acts.)

In what way were these signs greater than the works Christ did? The apostles never restored sight or fed the masses. Paul did not, or could not, calm the sea or walk on water. Peter restored Dorcas when she had died, Acts 9:37-41. Paul fell on a young man who had just died and said there was life in him, Acts 20:9-10.

Both Peter and Paul did many healing miracles, even without laying on hands: Acts 5:15, Peter's shadow just fell on the sick; and without Paul himself being present, cloths from his body were enough to heal the sick and drive out demons, Acts 19:12.

Far greater than healing men's bodies is giving them the means of eternal life, the gospel. The Lord Jesus told men how to be born again, and at times many people followed Him. But when the Holy Spirit was given, thousands believed and in a short time, every creature heard, Colossians 1:23. There were rivers of living water and greater works.

The miracles were given assigns by the sovereign Spirit. The gift of healing was not primarily to save believers from suffering but to show the Jews that the Messiah had come. In spite of every proof, the mass of the Jews rejected the gospel.

The miracles then ceased. The Lord Jesus had promised His presence until the end of the age, Matthew 28, but not the signs, Mark 16.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul revealed that the Lord declined to remove his thorn in the flesh. In Philippians 2, Epaphroditus was so sick he nearly died. Timothy was urged to use natural not miraculous means to relieve his frequent illnesses. Paul left Trophimus at Miletum sick.

Gifts of miracles and healing were temporary and ceased when the sovereign Spirit so willed. Today many women and men claim to have the gift of healing but most cures turn out to be fakes. (See Divine Healing, A.C. Hill, M.D.)

Prophecy

It is hard to imagine how a church could develop and function without the New Testament. Think of the church of Antioch without 1 or 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, 1 or 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 or 2 Peter or 1, 2 or 3 John! All these letters were written after the second missionary Journey which started from Antioch. How could the assembly in Antioch become that mature with perhaps only the books of Mark and James?

The New Testament epistles were written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the Holy Spirit had been given, for one thing, to inspire the apostles in writing the New Testament.

He shall teach you all things and bring all things to your remembrance, John 14:26.

He will guide you into all truth, John 10:13.

He will show you things to come, John 10:13.

He shall glorify me, John 18:14.

Three of the eight New Testament writers, Matthew, Peter and John, were present when these words were spoken in the upper room and the Holy Spirit used the other five writers equally.

In guiding us into all truth, rather than formulating a creed or doctrinal statement, the Spirit was pleased to give us 21 letters. These letters were written to meet certain specific situations as they occurred in the church over a period of fifty years.

But how could the early churches develop without the teaching of these epistles? The Spirit gave to these churches certain gifted men to teach the believers the truth which we now have in written form.

While the New Testament was incomplete, a special situation existed. This is comparable to the growth of a fetus. Without air, it develops into an air breathing organism. At the moment of birth, it starts to breathe and the umbilical cord is cut and discarded.

Of the twenty gifts mentioned in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, some were specially needed during the transitional apostolic era. They were not bestowed after the New Testament was completed. For example, apostles, 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11. In Acts we read of the apostles, 4:37; apostles and elders, 15:2; and the elders, 21:18. (Professor John Heading, From Now To Eternity, 1978, Everyday Publications.) There are no inspired apostles today (but lots of missionaries who are "sent ones"). No one is gifted or inspired by God to add to the complete Scriptures.

Prophets

Of the 39 books of the Old Testament, all but 18 were written by "prophets." The historical books, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, were called the former prophets, 1 Chronicles 29:29. These six, plus five by the major prophets and twelve by minor prophets, bring the total to 23. In a sense, Moses and David were also prophets, Acts 2:30; 3:22; 7:37,48. They all spoke about Christ, Acts 10:43.

The word prophet was also used of non-writing prophets: for example, Elisha; and in a broader sense, of Abraham, Genesis 20:7; Aaron, Exodus 7:1; etc. Indeed Moses could wish that all the Lord's people were prophets, Numbers 11:29. In the New Testament, the word prophet is used for Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Daniel and Joel.

The Old Testament prophetic line in a special sense, however, started with Samuel and continued to Malachi, Acts 3:24. When the Old Testament was complete, the prophetic gift was no longer granted.

The Lord Jesus Himself was called Prophet, Acts 3:22, and in resurrection, He gave apostles and prophets to His Church, Ephesians 4:11. These were to lay the foundation and reveal the mystery of the Church, Ephesians 2:20; 3:5, and they will rejoice when the false church is judged, Revelation 18:20. The prophets had a special ministry in the early church. They were associated with the teachers at Antioch, Acts 13:1. Their messages were revealed to them, 1 Corinthians 14:29,30.

The prophets' messages, as in the Old Testament, sometimes included prediction. For example, Agabus foretold a great dearth in the earth, and bonds for Paul, Acts 11:28; 21:10,11. Both predictions were fulfilled. The more frequent elements in prophecy, both Old Testament and New Testament, are edification (building up), exhortation and comfort, 1 Corinthians 14:3. For example, Isaiah's ministry, especially in chapter 40 and onward, was to comfort God's people. Jeremiah was told to build and to plant, 1:10.

In the New Testament, the scriptures are for our comfort or exhortation, and the Word of God is able to edify or build us up, Acts 20:32, Romans 15:4. So the ministry of the prophets was similar to that of the Scripture. Silas, a prophet, comforted or exhorted the saints at Antioch, Acts 15:32.

Prophecy, like all gifts, must be for the edification of the church, 1 Corinthians 14:14. Even Christ pleased not Himself, Romans 15:3, and self-edification must not be allowed to divide the church; division is the opposite of edification. A heretical man (one who chooses or divides) is a subverted, self-condemned sinner and should be rejected after two admonitions, Titus 3:10-11.

When the Scripture was complete, there was no more need for this gift of prophecy. "Prophecy" today consists only in explaining the rich, completed Scripture, not in adding to it, or foretelling the future.

Knowledge

The special gift of knowledge is mentioned only in 1 Corinthians 12:8; 13:8; 14:6. We all have some knowledge in a general way, 1 Corinthians 8:1, and it should increase, Romans 15:14; 2 Peter 3:18, but the word of knowledge was a gift to some believers and was for the profit of others, 1 Corinthians 12:8; 14:6. Like prophecy, this gift was to vanish away. The question is when?

There are two answers to this question.

When the Lord comes.

When the New Testament was complete.

The first answer has received support from a popular hymn, one line of which is based on 1 Corinthians 13:12, "We shall know as we are known." This interpretation asserts that the gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge will continue until the end of the church age, until Christ comes.

We have already seen that the special gift of prophecy was needed when the New Testament was still unwritten. The same could be said for the word of knowledge.

Let us look closely at the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. Six things are mentioned: love, prophecies, tongues, knowledge, faith, hope.

Verse 8, love never falls or fails. Most ancient manuscripts have fall, the same as used in Luke 16:17. The Word of God never falls, Romans 9:6.

Prophecies will be cast away or abolished, as partial things, v.10, and childish things, v.11. (This verb abolish is found four times in this chapter, verses 8(twice),10,11; 6:13 and 15:26 will help to show you the meaning.)

Tongues will stop.

Knowledge will be abolished, same word as the one used of prophecies.

Verse 9, prophecy and knowledge were partial.

Verse 10, when the complete thing would come, the partial would be abolished. This phrase "complete thing" is in the neuter gender. The word translated perfect comes from the word end. Complete is an acceptable rendering, Arndt and Gingrich, page 816.

It means complete or mature as In Ephesians 4:13, a complete man; and 1 Corinthians 14:20, in your minds be mature; both in contrast with being Infants as In verse 11.

Verse 11, an illustration of maturity.

Verse 12, an illustration of full knowledge.

Verse 13, abide, continue, as the majority of the witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:6; as Paul, for the blessing of the believers, Philippians 1:25.

So In verse 8 we see that prophecy, tongues and knowledge will cease, and in verse 13, faith, hope and love will abide. If the prophecy, tongues and knowledge last until Christ comes, it must be that faith, hope and love go on beyond that, into eternity. Ceasing and abiding things could not terminate at the same time, at the Rapture.

But faith and hope do not go on into eternity. Hope that is seen Is not hope, Romans 8:24,25. We read of the hope of glory, the hope of eternal life and the hope that is set before us, Colossians 1:27; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18.

We need faith to get to heaven but not when we get there. See Hebrews 11:1. Love is the only one of these three which abides into eternity, love never falls. The greatest of these is love.

Explanation #1 teaches that prophecy, tongues and knowledge cease when Christ comes, so the continuing things, faith, hope and love, must go on beyond that, into eternity. But we know that faith and hope are not necessary after Christ comes.

Explanation #2 shows that prophecy, tongues and knowledge were no longer needed when the New Testament was complete. They ceased at that time, and faith and hope continue, until the second coming. Only love on into eternity.

Two Termination Points

So there are two termination points for the six things in this passage. (See D.B. Long, What the Bible Teaches about the Gift of Tongues, page 27f.) Prophecy, tongues and knowledge will cease. Faith, hope and love abide, but we know that faith and hope abide only until the second coming. Therefore, the other three must cease before the second coming. The logical termination of prophecy, knowledge and tongues is the end of the apostolic age when the complete thing came. Prophecy and the word of knowledge were no longer necessary and the sign gifts were no longer required.

The gift of tongues had some of the features of both miracles and prophecy. It was like miracles, a sign for unbelievers, 1 Corinthians 14:22, but, if used with interpretation, it could edify, like prophecy, 1 Corinthians 14:4,5,12,13.

On either line, it was temporary.

Let us look more closely at verses 11 to 13 to see if the context tends to support our understanding of verse 10. Verse 9 certainly could; it says we know partially (because the Scripture is incomplete).

Verse 11 is a contrast between childhood and manhood. These words are never used to contrast this life from the next (unless it be here) but are used to encourage believers to grow to maturity by the Word of

God. A new infant needs the milk of the Word, but men can use strong meat, 1 Corinthians 3:1,2; Ephesians 4:13; Hebrews 5:12-14; 1 Peter 2:2. (In 1 Corinthians 3:1, the Spirit used the same word for baby as 13:11; and Ephesians 4:13, the same word for man. The other words mean about the same.) In our verse, Paul looked forward not to eternity but to the time when the Scripture would be complete.

In verse 12, seeing through a glass, and seeing face to face, could mean partial or more complete understanding of God's ways. The word glass is found only once otherwise in the New Testament, James 1:23, where it is a metaphor of Scripture. The word darkly, found only here, is literally enigmas and there were many problems in Scripture until, say, the gospel of John and Revelation were written. In the Old Testament the word means something hard to understand and is translated dark speeches or sayings, proverbs, hard questions, Numbers 12:8; 21:27; Deuteronomy 28:37; 2 Kings 10:1; Proverbs 1:6.

The phrase face to face could continue the metaphor of James, seeing oneself in God's mirror face to face. It occurs only here but a similar phrase is in Acts 25:16 and John hoped to speak to the believers "mouth to mouth", 2 John 12; 3 John 14. In the Old Testament, God spoke to Moses and to Israel "face to face", Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 5:24; and He knew Moses intimately, Deuteronomy 34:10. Jacob and Gideon said they had seen God or His angel face to face, Genesis 32:30; Judges 8:22. The servants of the Lamb will continue to serve Him and will see His face, Revelation 22:5. This verse is the only New Testament reference which could associate 1 Corinthians 13:10 with the coming of Christ.

The last part of verse 12 could mean, as in verse 9, knowing God's ways in part at that time and fully later when the complete thing had come. The future verbs are from a more intensive form of the verb know. This thorough knowledge comes through God's Word, here and now, in this life. See Luke 1:4; Romans 3:20; Ephesians 1:17; 4:13; Philippians 1:9; Colossians 1:6,9,10; 3:10; 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 1:2,3,8.

When Christ comes, we will have new bodies, 2 Corinthians 5:1; the joy of His presence, 1 Thessalonians 4:17; the adoption, Romans 8:23. We will see His glory and perhaps receive a reward, John 17:24; Revelation 22:12. We should diligently seek a thorough knowledge of Scripture here and now we have the complete thing. God's wonderful Word.

Questions

Faith and hope continue until Christ's coming, and love forever. But tongues, prophecy and special knowledge ceased at the end of the apostolic age. This seems to be the best explanation but there are questions:

Why did Paul say he spoke in tongues more than any of the Corinthians, and that they should not forbid anyone to speak in tongues?

These verses were appropriate at the time when tongues was a legitimate gift of the Holy Spirit. Neither of them proves that this gift was for the entire church age, or that it would be revived.

Why did the Holy Spirit give us many detailed instructions limiting the use of tongues if this gift is not for us today?

The Bible contains many instructions for God's people at specific periods; for example, Israel in the wilderness, the kings of Israel, bigamous families (Deuteronomy 21:15), etc. These are helpful in teaching us God's holiness or other principles of His dealings but have no direct application today.

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus gave instructions for the tribulation period, for example, Matthew 24:15-20. The apostle by inspiration wrote about offering meats to idols. in Romans 14, the truth for us is, consider others, do not insist on doing what may be perfectly legitimate, if it will stumble a brother or divide God's people.

How are we to explain the phenomenon today when many truly born again Christians claim they speak with tongues?

The majority of tongues speakers may not be born again at all. For the first time in many decades, it is acceptable, if not popular, to be an "evangelical", yet many evangelicals do not really or fully believe in the inspiration of Scripture or the deity of Christ. Evangelicals may well be in error on their teaching about the Holy Spirit.

Demons can produce a tongues-speaking experience and do so in many non-Christian religions and para-Christian cults. A Jesuit priest may be able to speak in tongues but this does not prove that he is a born again believer.

A born again person may hear someone speak in tongues with the power of a demon. He assumes that the person speaking in tongues is a true believer and very spiritual and so tries to imitate him, it might be difficult to tell which is demonic and which is imitating the demonic. Even some who practice tongues cannot be sure if it is the power of the Holy Spirit or of demons, or just an emotional experience. Yet some pastors hold special classes to teach those who covet this inferior, obsolete and possibly dangerous experience!

A true child of God, wrongly taught, might so plead for or demand this experience that God might grant it even though it is not His will. This will result in leanness of soul, Psalm 106:15. in the same way Israel demanded, and got, a king, not really according to God's will, 1 Samuel 10:19.

Could it not be God's will to revive the gift of tongues at the end of this age as a means of uniting true believers who have been divided by unscriptural, sectarian barriers?

There is no promise that this will be so, not even to Philadelphia, and, on the contrary, there is greatly intensified activity of wicked spirits at the end of the dispensation, 1 Timothy 4:1. Satan's plan is to unite all Christendom, then all religions, in anticipation of the False Prophet of the Tribulation period.

What is wrong with using tongues in private devotions?

Some use tongues in private as a means of worshipping God, but man's praise is always intelligent in Scripture. In the Psalms we are often called on to praise the Lord for ..., and reasons are given, for example, 100:5; 117:2; 135:4; 136:1; 147:1.

As believers we can be safe only when we live according to the revealed Word of God, the 66 books of the Holy Bible. It is clear, we deem, that the gift of tongues as a public sign or as a private prayer language is long since out of date. Feelings of euphoria or conformity to mass movements, can never take the place of a sure word of Scripture.

Conclusion

What is the complete thing?

The complete thing is better understood as meaning the Scripture rather than the Lord Jesus Christ.

True, the Son of God is complete and perfect but so also is the Word of God.

The gifts of prophecy and the word of knowledge ceased by the end of the apostolic age when the Scripture was complete.

The complete thing is neither masculine nor feminine in the Greek text. it could not refer to Christ, a living glorified Person. The three words for His coming or appearing are all feminine: parousia, epiphaneia, apokelupsis.

The word biblion (book) is neuter; it is used of individual books of the Bible: Exodus, Isaiah, John, Revelation; of a group of books, the Pentateuch; and of the whole Old Testament, Hebrews 10:7 (W.E. Vine).

This is probably the intent of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 13.10. But the main thrust of the chapter is genuine love for one another. In searching for the truth, let us not lose sight of the fruit of the Spirit, love.

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