

τέλειος (*teleios*): Maturity, Perfection or Complete? A Survey of a Pauline Concept

By

Amurtiya Jibril¹

Abstract

This paper investigates whether it is the idea of maturity, perfection, complete or something else that is inherent in Paul's understanding of τέλειος (*teleios*). The survey starts with a brief identification of the historical Paul and his letters to provide a backdrop for the study. Then the concept of τέλειος (*teleios*) is explored using a book by book format in the order of their appearance in the New Testament. The survey is limited to τέλειος (*teleios*) since its cognate forms abound in the New Testament and the scope of this paper cannot sustain an exhaustive survey of all. It argues further that both maturity and perfection are inherent in Paul's conceptualization of τέλειος (*teleios*) as well as a present reality and a future reality that shall be fully attained at the consummation of the *parousia*. However, the particular context of the usage of τέλειος (*teleios*) is central to deciphering its precise meaning in a pericope and could limit the inherent meaning to only a particular sense, the Greek Bible and twenty-eight popular English versions provide the basis for this survey in addition to

¹ Amurtiya Jibril is of the Department of Christian Religious Studies, School of Arts and Sciences, Adamawa State College of Education, Hong, Nigeria. He could be reached at jamurtiya@gmail.com

the studies of other scholars. The article contributes to the solving of current challenge of the meaning and translation of the word τέλειος (*teleios*), using Pauline conceptualization of the word. It also established that both maturity, complete and perfection are inherent in Paul's conceptualization of *teleios* as a present reality and a future reality that shall be fully attained in the consummation of the *parousia*.

Keywords: τέλειος (*teleios*); maturity; perfection; complete; *parousia*.

Introduction

Paul (Παυλος) the apostle is generally known as the most documented, prolific writer and notable missionary in the history of the early Church. His letters (both disputed and undisputed) as well as the book of Acts serve as the primary sources for his study. Other New Testament letters (James and 2 Peter) offer additional glimpses into his life and work. Also known as Saul, Paul was a Benjamite (Phil. 3:5; Rom 11:1) with a Roman citizenship from Tarsus, a city in Cilicia (Acts 9:11; 16:37-38; 21:39; 22:3; 22:25-29; 26:4, 32 etc). He had an ideal Jewish education and probably Hellenistic educational training too. He considered himself an orthodox Jew who zealously fought against dissents to the extent of persecuting the Church. However, since his encounter with Christ on his way to Damascus and his subsequent commissioning for ministry (Acts 9:3-5; 13:2-3), he persistently strived and toiled as enabled by God and through diverse methods, to reach all especially the Gentiles with the gospel, desiring that they too may know Christ

and grow in him to maturity². With this brief background of the historical Paul, a survey of his letters will be appropriate.

The Letters of Paul

Out of the twenty-seven (27) books in the New Testament, thirteen (13) letters or epistles are attributed to Paul. “In these letters, Paul used the epistolary structure of Greco-Roman letters with much adaptability and creativity. Paul’s letters also contain what may be identified as hymnic materials and rhetoric”³. Six out of the thirteen letters that are attributed to Paul are disputable in the New Testament scholarship (Ephesians, Colossians, II Thessalonians, I Timothy II Timothy and Titus) while seven (Romans, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians and Philemon) are undisputable. Arguments for or against their Pauline authorship revolves around language and style to the theology of the letters. However, some scholars admit that though there are many difficulties with attributing the disputable letters to Paul, the arguments are inclusive. The issues of dates, place(s) of writing, and occasions for the letters are also debatable. “These debates have little significance to our endeavor but a total avoidance can unnecessarily cut off any exegesis or in-depth survey from its historical foundation”⁴.

The author humbly submits to the Pauline authorship in agreement with the traditional Christian position that upholds the Pauline authorship of the thirteen letters as canonized and as attested to by other internal evidences in the letters. At this

² Bruce, F.F *Philippians*. GNC. San Francisco 1983. P. 679-686

³ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* 2nd Ed, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011. P. 47-50

⁴ Thompson, Marianne Meyer. *Colossians and Philemon*. The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. P. 14

juncture, it is worthwhile to highlight some considerations to bear in mind while interpreting Paul.

Toward Interpreting Pauline Concepts

The study of Pauline letters still has many grey areas. From the exact number of the letters that should be designated as Pauline and what that designation will imply, to the content of the letters, there are many issues that New Testament scholarship is not conclusive about. Interpreters of Pauline letters should consider this especially when digging deeper into concepts and their nuances. Key to note also is the occasional nature of Paul's letters and the contexts within which such letters were written as well as the different implications that are deducible from these understandings. "Furthermore, being epistolary writings, analysis of Pauline letters and concepts must not be treated on purely epistolary basis but as noted above, must be supplemented by Rhetorical and Liturgical analysis"⁵. In addition, it should be noted that Pauline adaptability and creative usage of resources available to him may not be limited to forms and practices in Greco-Roman epistolary, his Jewish orientations and Rhetorical forms alone but are probably present in his conceptualizations.

τέλειος (*teleios*) in Antiquity

The concept of *teleios* did not originate from Paul rather its origins are traceable to antiquity. In classical and Hellenistic-Greek, it meant "perfect, without defect (of sacrificial animals),

⁵ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* 2nd Ed, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011. P.11-38

complete, fully developed, adult”⁶. Notable Greek philosophers and writers used the concept. “In Plato, a person who through the recollection of his being, successfully moved from bodily existence to the world of ideas was said to be *teleios*”⁷. In Aristotle, perfection was connected to ethical choice whereby η τέλεια ἀρετή, perfect virtue, is realized in choice and a natural tendency to good through practical reason”⁸. For the Stoics, the perfect or complete man is one who realizes all virtues and all virtues cooperate in a perfect deed. However, Philo saw ‘*to teleion*’⁹. In this regard, we ask: to what extent did these understanding of *teleios* influenced Paul? In addition, could Paul have had other influences beside these? A review of the Old Testament (LXX) usages of *teleios* is apt at this point.

τέλειος (*teleios*) in the Old Testament

The Septuagint (LXX) translates two Hebrew words, ‘*tamim*’ and ‘*salem*’ with the Greek word *teleios*. Out of about 91 occurrences of ‘*tamim*’ the Septuagint translates about seven instances with *teleios*. For instance, Noah was *teleios* in Gen. 6:9, the Passover lambs had to be *teleion* in Exodus 12:5, and God declares as perfect, the one who is *teleiou* in 2 Samuel 22:26. In these translations, *teleios* imports the Old Testament meaning of

⁶ Hubner, H. “τέλειος” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol 3 eds, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans 1993. P. 343

⁷ Delling, G. “τέλειος” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Eds, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Abridged in one volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans, 1993. P. 1164

⁸ Hubner, H. “τέλειος” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol 3 eds, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans 1993. P.

⁹ Delling, G. “τέλειος” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Eds, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Abridged in one volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans, 1993

‘*tamim*’ which could mean “whole, perfect, intact, free of blemish, blameless, honest, and sincere”¹⁰. Similarly, out of about twenty eight occurrences of ‘*saalem*’ in the Old Testament, the Septuagint translated about seven with *teleios* (I Kings 8:61; 11:4; 15:3 and 15:14). In these instances, *teleios* carried the Old Testament meaning of ‘saalem’ thus implying “being fully devoted or committed, complete or whole”¹¹. Schippers submits that the stress in all these translations of Hebrew words by *teleios* lies on “being whole, perfect and intact”¹². In which ways do these understandings of *teleios* influenced the Pauline conceptualization of *teleios*? What about other New Testament writer? It is pertinent to survey their understandings.

τέλειος (*teleios*) in the New Testament

Teleios (an adjective) and its cognate forms are extensively used in the New Testament, it should be noted that its noun form is *telos*, end conclusion, close or goal’¹³. *Teleios* occurred about seventeen times in the New Testament, twice in Matthew, when God the father is revealed as *teleios*, perfect, and Jesus’ disciples are to reflect his character (Matt. 5:48; cf 19:21), twice in Hebrews (5:14; 9:11) where the *teleon*, ‘adults or mature’ are able to have solid food because their powers of discernment have been trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (5:14); four times in James (1:4; 1:17; 1:25; 3:2); whereby *teleios* basically

¹⁰ Olivier J. P. J New international Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis Vol.4 Willen A. VanGemeren Gen. ed, Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1997. P. 306

¹¹ Hubner, H. “τέλειος” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol 3 eds, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. Grand Rapid: Williams B. Eerdmans 1993. P. 344

¹² Schippers R. ”τέλειος” New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis Vol 2. Collin Brown. Gen. ed, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. P. 60.

¹³ Ibid. P. 61.

means ‘whole’. Once in I John which speaks of η τέλεια ἀγάπη, ‘the perfect love’ (4:18). But did the Pauline conceptualization of *teleios* correlate with that of other New Testament writer? There are eight occurrences of *teleios* in the Pauline corpus (Romans 12:2; I Corinthians 2:6; 13:10; 14:20; Philippians 3:15; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:28, 4:12).

τέλειος (*teleios*) in Romans

There is only one occurrence of *teleios* in Roman. Located in Romans 12:1-2, a pericope that forms part of the final five chapters of Romans (12: 1-16:27) in which Paul seems to explain in great detail the practical applications of the rich theological truths presented in the first eleven chapters. In Romans 12:2, *teleios* is used in conjunction with other adjectives to describe God’s will. However, the phrase “τό θέλημα τού θεού, τό αγαθόν καί εὐαρέστον καί τέλειον” seems to fit two alternative translations. While some scholars prefer to translate it as “the good, acceptable and perfect will of God”, others like Murray noted the possibility for the first translation but preferred the understanding of *teleion* alongside the other adjectives as substantival and so translate as “the will of God is the good, the acceptable, and the perfect”¹⁴. It should be noted that both translations are possible in the passage and whichever view is preferred, there will exist no basic material difference in the meaning of *teleion* in the passage. More so, since the debate does not hamper our survey of the meaning of the concept of *teleios*,

¹⁴ Murray, John. The Epistle to the Romans, The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes. 2 vols. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1965. P. 115-116

the question we still need to answer is: what is the meaning of *teleios* as used in the pericope?

Out of the twenty eight popular English translations surveyed, twenty three translated *teleion* as perfect. The exceptions are BBE which translated it as “complete” and a few others: CEV, “everything that is good and pleasing to him” TLB: “His ways will really satisfy you” and CJB which translates it as “able to succeed”. However, one is constrained to ask, does the preference of “perfect” with its sense of absoluteness by most versions to translate *teleion* suggests that the absolute sense is inherent in the concept as used in the passage? The affirmative is that other options exist from which translators could make a choice if they intended to give it a restricted sense. Schippers asserts that *teleion* in Romans 12:2 as in Colossians 4:12, refers to that which is completely in agreement with God’s will. In consonance with this assertion, O’Brien submits that *teleion* describes that which is in accordance with God’s will in Roman 12:2 as in Colossians 4:12,”¹⁵. However he did not stress the degree of the agreement as Schippers. But Moo, opined that the sense of the absoluteness in “perfect” is probably inherent in *teleion* as used in Romans 12:2”¹⁶.

In view of the foregoing, the author submits that *teleios* as used in the context of this pericope, has the sense of being ‘completely perfect’. So, the will of God as presented by Paul is complete and sufficient. By transformation of their minds, believers can know the will of God which is completely perfect

¹⁵ O’Brien, Peter T. The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text. Grand Rapids William B. Eerdmans, 1991. P. 434.

¹⁶ Schippers R. “τέλειος” New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis Vol 2. Collin Brown. Gen. ed, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. P. 161.

and so sufficient to undergird their offering of themselves as living sacrifices to God without conforming to the world.

τέλειος (*teleios*) in I Corinthians

In I Corinthians, three occurrences of *teleios* can be discerned (2:6; 13:10; 14:20). But due to the limitation of space, two instances are hereby presented in this section.

τέλειος (*teleios*) in I Corinthians 2:6

The specific passage where Paul used *teleiois*, but the clause “σοφίαν δὲ λέλουμέν ἐν τοῖς τέλειοις”, “but we speak wisdom among the mature” (2:6a ESV), provides a restrictive sense to the understanding of wisdom in I Corinthians 2:1-5. Witherington, in agreement with light foot, opines that Paul’s words in I Corinthians 2:6a suggest that the wisdom he imparts, although potentially obtainable for every believer, can only be accepted completely and comprehended by the *teleiois*. He added, “Paul admits that he has some advanced sapiental teaching, but the Corinthian were by and large not mature enough to receive it”¹⁷. The survey of the twenty eight English translations shows that nineteen translations translated it as “mature” but five preferred “perfect” and two versions “full grown” but BBE used complete. In view of the foregoing, does the majority’s preference for mature as the translation of *teleiois* suggest that it is the meaning that is inherent in the Pauline conceptualization in this pericope? O’Brien submits that *teleiois* in this context refers to those who are ‘mature’ or ‘adult’ as in (I Corinthians 14:20; Ephesians 4:13; and Colossians 1:28). In consonance with O’Brien, Schippers opined

¹⁷ Witherington III, Ben. “Christ” in Dictionary of Paul and His letters. Eds, Gerald F. Hawthorne et al. Downers Grove: InterVarsity press, 1993. P.127

that it means ‘mature’ or ‘adult’ as in I Corinthians 14:20 and Philippians 3:15”¹⁸.

In view of the foregoing, *teleiois* in this pericope refers to the believers’ existence in Christ. It may be translated as ‘mature or ‘adult’. Whereby, this being in Christ involves having the Spirit who reveals wisdom that is not of this age (I Cor 2:6, 10). Thus, Paul says ...”we have received not the Spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual... (I Cor 2:12-14 ESV). So, one becomes *teleiois* when he or she is converted and the spirit indwells him or her, enabling an existence in Christ –a formula that encapsulates the condition and position of Christians¹⁹. It should however be noted that the imagery of children and adults in chapter 3:1-4, in relation to this periscope, provides for growth in the mature state of being in Christ.

τέλειος (*teleios*) in I Corinthians 13:10

I Corinthians 12-14, the chapters within which the second occurrence of τέλειος is located, may be considered as dealing with spirituality. In the thirteen chapters, Paul seems to submit that the truly spiritual person is marked by love. Paul asserts in I Corinthians 13:10 that, “οταν δέ έλθη το τέλειον, το έκ μέρους καταργηθήςται” “but when the perfect comes, the partial will

¹⁸ O’Brien, Peter T. The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text. Grand Rapids William B. Eerdmans, 1991. P. 62

¹⁹ Witherington III, Ben. “Christ” in Dictionary of Paul and His letters. Eds, Gerald F. Hawthorne et al. Downers Grove: InterVarsity press, 1993. P.127

pass away” (13:10 ESV). And so we ask, what is ‘to *teleion*’ in this passage?

The popular English version surveyed showed that twenty one translated *teleion* as “perfect”; while five translated it as “complete”. However, TLB translated it as both ‘perfect and complete’ and the NLT rendered it “full understanding”. Even though most of the translations surveyed seem to have a consensus in translating the concept as ‘perfect’ or ‘complete’, the sense such translations convey is not easy to comprehend. Rather, it seems to be one of the most controversial and debatable understandings of *teleios* in the Pauline corpus due to probably the arguments for and against the cessation of speaking in tongues and prophecy alongside other spiritual gifts in the context of the alleged abuses and extremism in charismatic circle²⁰.

Three major possible interpretations, which have been variously held through the years, still occupy the center stage of this debate. In view of our scope, our survey basically highlights only their key features. First, the Canon view which sees to *teleion* as the full revelation of the New Testament which is said to have brought to an end the hitherto partial charismatic revelations. This view has several advocates²¹. Unger asserts that it “means the New Testament Scriptures; the neuter in the Greek denotes neither Christ nor his second advent, both of which thoughts are foreign to the context”²². But how can this view be exegetically proven in the passage especially if verse 12 is understood in the light of verse 10? More so, even though the completion of the New Testament

²⁰ Decker, Rodney J. A History of Interpretation of “that which is perfect” (I Cor. 13:10) with Special Attention to the origin of the “Canon view” Minneapolis: Decker, 1994. P. 67.

²¹ Ibid. P.40-46

²² Ibid. P. 95

canon, in a sense, has provided what might be identified as the complete revelation of God to the Christian, can it be said that Christians now see perfectly and have full knowledge just as they are known by God?

The ‘maturity view’ is variously hinged on diverse perspectives of lack of maturity of the church whereby to *teleion* is interpreted as its maturity. Its advocates argue that the best meaning of *teleion* in this periscope is ‘mature’ rather than ‘complete’ or ‘perfect’ McRay interpreted it as the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church through the ministry of Paul²³. But in what ways do the gifts of the Spirit which seem to be the emphasis of the passage translate into or correlate with Pauline apostleship? And when did this actualization of Paul’s ministry occur? Be it as it may, another perspective of the maturity view that may be termed a ‘hybrid’ of the Canon view and the eschatological view, if such categorization can be accepted. Thomas asserts that the church is “growing up as one body, beginning with its birth, progressing through different stages of development during the present and reaching complete maturity at the *parousia*”²⁴.

The third perspective is the eschatological consummation when the church’s final destination in Christ has been reached. This view seems to be the most preferred among scholars although with variations as a reference to the rapture²⁵, our state in God’s presence at the *eschaton*. Fee argued that the contrast in the passage is neither between the believers nor the church rather the gifts and so *teleion* cannot be translated as ‘mature’. As a reference

²³ McRay, John R. “το τέλειον in I *Corinthians* 13:10” *Restoration Quarterly* 14 (1971) 168-183

²⁴ Thomas, Robert. “Tongues will cease” *JETS* 17(1974) 81-89

²⁵ Toussaint, Stanley D. “First *Corinthians* Thirteen and the Tongues Question” *Biblia Sacra* 120 (1963) 311-316

to the *eschaton*, it cannot refer to any form of perfection before the *parousia*. Even though as he submits, *teleion* is not necessarily the end but what happens at the end, the reaching of the final purpose of God's salvation in Christ at his coming²⁶.

In view of the foregoing, the author submits that 'the perfect' or 'the complete' translate the concept of 'to *teleion*' better in I Corinthians 13:10 and that it refers to the eschatological end when the church shall be perfected in Christ at the *parousia*. This understanding fits better the context of the pericope, the semantic overview of the passage, and agrees wholly with the purpose of spiritual gifts in Paul without prejudice to modern preferences within theological traditions.

τέλειος (*teleios*) in Ephesians

In Ephesians, *teleios* occurs only once. Ephesians 4:11-16, the passage of this occurrence, is one long sentence in Greek. This long sentence deals with the gifts for ministry and the resultant maturity this ministry ought to produce, in the context of unity. *Teleion* in Ephesians 4:13 appeared thus".. εἰς ἀνδρα τέλειον, εἰς μέτρον ᠠἡλικίας τοῦ πληρωματος τοῦ χριστοῦ"...to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (ESV) what does τέλειον (*teleion*) mean in this context?

The survey of popular English versions show that fifteen translated *teleion* as "mature" five as "perfect" while another five preferred "full grown" BBE used "full growth" NLT "complete" and CJB as "the standard of maturity set by the Messiah's perfection". Again, this survey revealed the diversity and possible perplexity that exist among translators in translating *teleios*.

²⁶ Fee, Gordon D. *The first Epistle to the Corinthians, in The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987. P.644-646

However, it should be noted that most translators preferred words that relate to maturity and growth. But, what does that suggest? Should the majority of opinion be interpreted as being the best? Nevertheless, it certainly reveals the inconclusiveness that surrounds the task of defining *teleios* in the Pauline corpus. This perplexity is also obvious in the analysis of scholarly opinions. Hodge argues that *teleion* “means adult, in reference to age, rather than stature”²⁷. But O’Brien strongly asserts that stature, rather than age, should be the preferred sense in view of the imagery of fullness in the context, since fullness is supposedly better in relation to spatial categories²⁸. How should one make sense of these opposing opinions?

The author submits that even though both age and stature may be deduced from this pericope, stature fits the context better. More so, the usage refers to both Christian maturity that is attainable and realizable in the now and ultimate perfection at the *parousia*. This then, as a goal for the church, Paul has in mind Christian growth to maturity, the attainment of the fullness of Christ. Paul’s conceptualization of *teleion* in this context seems to be progressive. In this regard, absolute attainment of the standard of maturity set by the Messiah’s perfection (CJB) may not be fully realized completely in the present, yet that does not in any way limit it from being the goal of Christian ministry. Since believers shall “no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (4:14), after the *parousia*, the

²⁷ Hodge, C. A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians. London: Barner of Truth, 1964. P.234

²⁸ O’Brien, Peter T. The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text. Grand Rapids William B. Eerdmans, 1991. P. 308

present dimension seems obvious. Hence, the author conclude that *teleion* in this pericope should be translated as ‘mature’ ‘full grown’ or ‘perfect’. It serves as a case for both relative perfection in this life and ultimate perfection at the *parousia*.

τέλειος (*teleios*) in Philippians

Philippians has only one occurrence of *teleios*. This single occurrence is in Philippians 3:12-16, a pericope in which Paul portrayed himself as pressing on towards the goal. Using his personal life as a model, he encouraged those who are *teleioi* to pursue the same goal with him, “ὅσοί οὖν τέλειοί, τούν τουτο φρονωμέν” “Let those of us who are mature think this way” (verse 15 ESV). Who are the *teleioi*? How Paul could include himself among the *teleioi* when in verse 12, he categorically said, using a cognate form of *teleios*, “οὐχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον ἢ ἤδη τέτέλειώμαί” not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect’ (ESV). Admittedly, this mix looks like a paradox: that one could be mature and yet may be immature. Escaping this quagmire will certainly require a correct understanding of Paul’s conceptualization of *teleioi* in verse 15 especially as it relates to its cognate form ‘teteleiomai’ in verse 12. O’Brien called this problem the major exegetical difficulty of the verse²⁹. So, what does Paul mean?

From the basic survey of popular English translations, the survey shows that sixteen version, translated ‘*teleioi*’ as ‘mature’ while eleven translated it as “perfect, with the only exception being BBE which translated it as “full grown”. These translations reveal the perplexity in defining ‘*teleioi*’ in the pericope, with

²⁹ Ibid. P.433

sixteen translations preferring ‘mature’ against the eleven that preferred ‘perfect’. What do these choices of translations imply?

Different scholars have variously suggested diverse solutions. Many view this as a Pauline irony in which he aligned himself with the persons who claim to be *teleioi* and then redirected them to have his perspective (Martin, Moule; Plummer; Lightfoot, and Schmithal). But the premise of this position which some built on an analogous meaning of *teleioi* (verse 15) with its cognate form *teteleiomai* (verse 12), could be misleading. The meaning of *teleioi* does not have to be exactly the same with *teteleiomai* even though they are cognate. As Bruce and observed, one must not hastily subscribe to irony as the means to avoid this seeming contradiction especially since it was a common literary device to use a word twice or its derivative to convey different nuances in the same context³⁰. In this regards, since *teteleiomai* is better understood as a reference to the perfection of believers at the eschatological consummation, *teleioi* in verse 15 should be interpreted as a reference to spiritual maturity that is attainable in this age. Furthermore, since an ironical understanding of *teleioi* has not been established anywhere convincingly in Paul nor the rest of the New Testament³¹, one should not hastily accept it as the case here without a very clear basis. Albeit, it may still remain a probable option since some scholars argue for same in Colossians 1:28.

³⁰ Bruce F. F. The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1984. P.99

³¹ O’Brien, Peter T. The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text. Grand Rapids William B. Eerdmans, 1991. P. 436

In view of the foregoing, the author submits that *teleioi* as used in Philippians 3:15, refers to those who are mature. Some have argued that the spiritually mature in this context refers to all the believers in Philippi as the case is with the Pauline usage of ‘*hagios*’ ‘saint’³², but the author choose in cognizance of the expression “let those of us who are mature think this way” (ESV), and interpret it as a limited reference to some people at Philippi. It should however be noted that Paul left the specific identity of the *teleioi* open ended. But since the Pauline conceptualization of *teleiois* provides for growth and a distinction between the character of a mature believer and an immature believer (I Cor. 14:20 and I Cor 3:14), the author submits that *teleioi* in this text refers to the spiritually mature believer in this age as oppose to the perfect believer at the consummation of the *parousia*.

τέλειος (*teleios*) in Colossians

Teleios occurred twice in Colossians: Colossians 1:28 and 4:12. However due to the limitation of space, the concept of *teleios* is hereby presented as surveyed in Colossians 1:28. In 1:24-29, the pericope of the first occurrence of τέλειος (*teleios*) in Colossians, Paul revealed the nature of his ministry and that of his co-workers as well as the goal of their divinely entrusted ministry. He asserts in Colossians 1:28 that, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature (*teleion*) in Christ” (ESV). According to Paul, their ministry aimed at presenting everyone “τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ (*teleion en Christo*). Consequently, in continuation of our probe, we ask; what does Paul mean by *teleion* in this pericope?

³² Du Plessis, P.J τέλειος. *The idea of perfection in the New Testament*. Kampen 1959. P. 196.

As revealed by the survey of popular English translations, twelve versions, translated *teleion* as ‘mature’ while eleven translated it as ‘perfect’ however, three versions preferred ‘complete’ while CJB translated it in a phrase as ‘having reached the goal’. First, it should be noted that these translations made plain the challenge of translating *teleion* in this pericope. Next, the survey shows that most translators make their choice from either ‘mature’ or ‘perfect’ in translating *teleion* in this passage. But are these two words; ‘mature’ and ‘perfect’ the same? Do both convey the same meaning? Are they synonymous? Be it as it may, this survey still requires a deciphering of the Pauline conceptualization of *teleion* in this pericope. But even New Testament scholars that have wrestled with this verse have not reached a consensus.

In view of the foregoing, the author submit that *teleion* in this pericope, should be interpreted as both ‘mature’ and ‘perfect’. In agreement with Moo, “neither quite captures the sense of the word”³³, in view of the absoluteness perfection connotes and the subtle shade of relativity in maturity. So, the author submits that both views are mutually inclusive in the conceptualization of *teleion* in this passage since there is no limitation to a twofold meaning in the context. Consequently, *teleion* has a sense of maturity everyone should have in the now as well as another sense of absolute perfection which is better conveyed in the word perfect, and that will find full fulfillment at the *parousia*. In this regard, the former does not negate the fulfillment of the latter nor do the latter negate the fulfillment of the former. Rather, both mutually co-exist and work to facilitate the possibility and

³³Moo, Douglas. J. *The Letter to the Colossians and to Philemon*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids: Erdmann, 2008. P.161.

attainment of each. Maturity in this age in Christ and perfection at the consummation of the *parousia* in Christ.

Paul understands of τέλειος (*teleios*)

This section categorized the different aspects of the Pauline conceptualization of *teleios* as revealed in the survey thus far. About four aspects are deducible thus:

τέλειος (*teleios*) as having attained the Goal

Part of the conceptualization of *teleios* in Paul can be categorized as an attainment of a goal³⁴. In this regard, the author observe that opinions may differ as to what constitute a goal in Paul since believers' existence in Christ, the inherent growth toward maturity or adulthood, the relative perfection in this age and the ultimate eschatological perfection, can be seen as goals. Be that as it may, in I Corinthians 14:20, *teleioi* referred to those who have reached the stage of maturity or adulthood. Similarly, *teleioi* as used in Philippians 3:15-16, refers to perfection in terms of the attainment of a goal. As surveyed, the author submits that part of the conceptualization of *teleios* in Paul is the attainment of a goal whereby those who attained are identified as *teleios*.

τέλειος (*teleios*) as Existence in Christ

Besides the sense of reaching the goal Paul encapsulates in *teleios*, being in Christ which commence when one becomes a Christian, results in being mature or perfect³⁵. For instance, in I Corinthians 2:6 "*teleiois*" refers to believers' existence in Christ.

³⁴ Klein, W.W "Perfect, Mature" in Dictionary of Paul and His Letter. Eds Gerald F. Hawthorne et al. Downers Grove: Intervarsity press, 1993. P.700

³⁵ Ibid. P.700.

Whereby, this being in Christ involves having the Spirit who reveals wisdom that is not of this age (I Cor. 2:6, 10). So, one becomes *teleios* when such a person is converted and the Spirit indwells in him or her, enabling an existence in Christ, albeit, Paul also provides for growth in the mature state of being in Christ (I Cor. 3:1-3).

τέλειος (*teleios*) as Relative perfection in this life

As revealed in this survey, Paul holds out the prospect for both individual and corporate maturity and relative perfection for believers and the church in this age³⁶. In this regard, *teleios* in Romans 12:2 although used in connection to the will of God with its sense of being ‘completely perfect’ has the potential of enabling the perfection of lives in this life. In addition, a dimension of Ephesians 4:13 refer to maturity that is attainable and realizable for and an eschatological reality. In this regard the author concludes that Paul’s conceptualization of *teleios* includes relative perfection in this life.

τέλειος (*teleios*) as ultimate perfection in the age to come

Another dimension of the Pauline conceptualization of *teleios* is ultimately attainable only at the consummation of the *parousia*. For instance, ‘the perfect’ or ‘the complete’ in I Corinthians 13:10, refers to the eschatological end when the church shall be perfected in Christ at the *parousia*. Likewise, in Philippians 3:12, the conceptualization of *teleioi* in verse 15 in the light of its cognate form ‘*teteleiomai*’ in verse 12, reveal that ultimate perfection at the *parousia* is part of the Pauline

³⁶ Ibid. P. 700.

conceptualization of *teleiois*. In addition, Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:28 and 4:12 have dimensions of perfection that are attainable only in the context of the consummation at the *parousia*. Therefore, ultimate perfection in the age to come is inherent in the conceptualization of *teleios* by Paul.

Relevance of τέλειος (*teleios*) for today

Paul and his writings have been and must continually be interpreted as relevant for today, although the Pauline conceptualization of *teleios* has been variously interpreted with apparent perplexity, as surveyed and categorized, we hereby present its key relevance for today.

First, since Paul's conceptualization of *teleios* encompass a present reality and an eschatological reality, whereby the *teleios* is one who is mature in Christ while still alive on earth but who also strives to be perfected in Christ in the consummation of all things at the *parousia*, the church must conceptualized their understanding of *teleios* in this light. Maturity must not be seen as just a futuristic target or as just being in Christ. Paul may not have envisioned that believers can attain a state of absolute perfection in this life yet he revealed that God expect believers to be rooted in Christ and grow to the full measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

In addition, Paul's conceptualization of *teleios* demanded from everyone including himself a character that can be identified as *teleios* in the present and at the *parousia*. No one is exempted, Paul saw himself as one who had to be matured in his lifetime but who also had to continue to press on toward the eschatological consummation of perfection. In this regard, there must be no dichotomy in the demand for *teleios* in the church today. Christian

leaders just like other must strive to attain the state of *teleios*. Like Paul, they must become models of Christian maturity. No man must rate himself as having attained the absolute state of perfection in the now nor excuse himself from the demand of a life that is *teleios* in the now.

Furthermore, Paul portrayed *teleios* as a remedy to the potential of false teaching to ensnare his audience. To this end, Paul toiled to ensure that his audience is *teleios* and no longer tossed to and fro with every form of doctrine. He described the will of God as *teleios* and so completely perfect and sufficient to undergird the transformation required of the Christians in Christ. In this regard, the church needs to work toward ensuring that all becomes *teleios* so as to be rooted in Christ in our world that is plagued by false teachings. When Christians becomes *teleios*, curbing the erroneous trends and false teaching in prosperity theology and liberal theology that are rampant in the world today would become a reality. Believers must be disciple to maturity. The survey clearly reveals the necessity of correct Theology in the African church and theological institutions. Theology must be rooted in sound biblical understanding of concepts as intended by their original writers especially when ambiguous or used in different context. Biblical theologians must rise to the challenge of correcting some of the apparent misrepresentations of biblical passages today through a deliberate and careful reassessment of the usages of concepts and interpretations of scriptures.

Conclusion

This paper investigated *teleios* as conceptualized by Paul. It established that there is a dilemma and perplexity in translating *teleios* in Paul. The survey revealed that some aspects of the

meaning of *teleios* in Antiquity, Old and New Testament with what is obtainable in its Pauline usages. In addition, it revealed that although there is an ongoing debate on other possible ideas that may be inherent in *teleios*, the Pauline conceptualization means mature, complete or perfect. It also established that both maturity and perfection are inherent in Paul's conceptualization of *teleios* as a present reality and a future reality that shall be fully attained in the consummation of the *parousia*. However, as surveyed, a particular context of the usage of '*teleios*' is central to deciphering its precise meaning in a pericope and could limit the inherent meaning to only a particular sense. As a whole, the survey revealed that the concept of *teleios* defines the ultimate goal of Paul's efforts in ministry and undergirded his stewardship within the attainment of maturity and perfection as a goal and a key impetus of Christian ministry.

APPENDIX

Table showing the frequency and choice of translations of *teleios* in Romans 12:2

Preferred choice of translation	Name of translation or version	frequency
Mature	Message	1
Perfect	ESV, NIV, NCV, NASU, NLT, NKJV, NET, KJV, GWT, RSV, NASB, ASV, YLT, GNT, WEB, HCSB, NRSV, TEV, ERV,	23

	Darby, Douay-Rheims, Weymouth, Webster	
Complete	BBE	1
Others	TLB, CJB, CEV	3

Table showing the frequency and choice of translations of *teleios* in 1 Corinthians 2:6

Preferred choice of translation	Name of translation or version	frequency
Mature	ESV, NIV, TLB, NCV, NASU, NLT, NKJV, CJB, NRRSV, TEV, ERV, Weymouth	19
Perfect	KJV, YLY, Darby, -Rheims, webster	5
Complete	BBE	1
Others	ASV, WEB---Full grown	2

Table showing the frequency and choice of translations of *teleios* in Ephesians 4:13

Preferred choice of translation	Name of translation or version	frequency
Mature	ESV, NIV, NCV, NASU, NET, GWT, RSV, NASB, CEV, GNT, HCSB, NRSV, TEV, Message, Weymouth	19
Perfect	NKJV, KJV, YLY, Darby, Rheims, webster	5
Complete	NLT	1
Others	BBE---Full growth (1) TLB, ASV, WEB, ERV, Darby —Full growth (5) ASV, CJB ---Full manhood	2