

## The Perfect Tense-Form in Application:

### 1 Corinthians 7:14 as a Test-Case in Light of Verbal Aspect

David I. Yoon\*

#### 1. Introduction

The debate on the meaning of the perfect tense-form in New Testament studies has ensued for several decades, within the wider scope of the study of Greek verbal aspect. To highlight some recent interest in the perfect tense-form, in 2013 at the annual Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, a session in the Greek Language and Linguistics group was devoted to discussing the three current major views on the meaning of the perfect tense-form, with panelists Stanley Porter, Buist Fanning, and Constantine Campbell. The session was called “The Perfect Storm”, and the papers presented in that session, along with each contributor’s subsequent responses, have been arranged to be published in an edited volume in the (near) future in the Studies in Biblical Greek series with Peter Lang.<sup>1)</sup>

---

\* Ph.D. in New Testament at McMaster Divinity College. Lecturer in Greek at McMaster Divinity College and Lead Pastor of Renforth Church in Toronto. [yoond2@mcmaster.ca](mailto:yoond2@mcmaster.ca).

\*\* I thank the participants who provided valuable feedback for an initial draft of this paper at two meetings: the New Testament Greek Language and Exegesis section at the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting in Providence, Rhode Island (November 16, 2017) and the McMaster Divinity College Linguistics Circle in Hamilton, Ontario (November 30, 2017).

1) D. A. Carson, ed., *The Perfect Volume: Critical Discussion of the Semantics of the Greek Perfect under Aspect Theory*, SBG (New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming). See the citation of

In the following year, Madison Pierce and Benjamin Reynolds published an article taking an aspectual view of the perfect and applying it to interpreting John 3:13.<sup>2)</sup> They argue primarily against the long-held *Aktionsart* view of the perfect as “past action with present results” and argue that viewing the perfect as aspectual solves the problem of the ascent-descent timing of the Son of Man in that verse.<sup>3)</sup> There are, however, two major shortcomings of this article as related to the meaning of the perfect tense-form. First, they do not actually define the meaning of the perfect tense-form, except to state that it conveys some type of aspect (they do not establish any particular view of verbal aspect) and that it does not grammaticalize temporality. But whether it conveys a stative, perfective, or imperfective aspect is crucial to the interpretation of this (or any) verse. A second shortcoming of the article is that there is no discussion on how temporal deixis is indicated in the Greek grammar; they simply argue that the present time is possible for the perfect tense-form (in Joh 3:13). Stanley Porter and Andrew Pitts, in their response article, note some of these shortcomings in Pierce and Reynolds’s approach.<sup>4)</sup> Porter and Pitts argue that the perfect tense-form grammaticalizes stative aspect and that temporality should be viewed not only at the word-level but at the clause and clause-complex levels as well.

This interaction between Pierce & Reynolds and Porter & Pitts reflects the current state of affairs (pun intended) of New Testament scholarship regarding the perfect tense-form and even verbal aspect. While many seem to be open to and even accepting of aspect as a viable framework of the Greek verb over *Aktionsart*, not too many New Testament scholars seem to be able to articulate and/or defend any particular view and to apply it successfully and consistently to

---

this expected work in Buist M. Fanning, “Greek Tenses in John’s Apocalypse: Issues in Verbal Aspect, Discourse Analysis, and Diachronic Change”, Lois K. Fuller Dow, Craig A. Evans, and Andrew W. Pitts, eds., *The Language and Literature of the New Testament: Essays in Honor of Stanley E. Porter’s 60th Birthday*, BIS 150 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 328-350.

2) Madison N. Pierce and Benjamin E. Reynolds, “The Perfect Tense-Form and the Son of Man in John 3:13: Developments in Greek Grammar as a Viable Solution to the Timing of the Ascent and Descent”, *NTS* 60 (2014), 149-155.

3) See Madison N. Pierce and Benjamin E. Reynolds, “Perfect Tense-Form”, for a brief overview of the major interpretations of that verse.

4) Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, “The Perfect Tense-Form, the Son of Man, and John 3:13, Once More”, *BAGL* 6 (2017), 127-136.

New Testament texts.<sup>5)</sup>

While the confines of an article-length discussion cannot bring the final word on the semantics of the perfect tense-form — let alone the theory of verbal aspect — I aim for a more modest goal here: to outline the various major views of the meaning of the perfect tense-form and to apply them to a difficult passage as a test-case, to determine which view generates the best interpretation of the word in that passage. A theory or approach, after all, is viable when it succeeds in application, even if it may be internally consistent as a theory. A theory may be consistent and coherent, but if it fails in application, it proves to be invalid. In that vein, Buist Fanning writes: “If you are inclined to approach Greek verbs using an abstract network of oppositions, feel free to do so, but my appeal to you is to do your best to bring it down to a level of explanation that provides help for construing the meaning of examples in specific texts.”<sup>6)</sup> While I think that having an “abstract network of oppositions”, or more precisely a robust linguistic theory, is vital for interpretation, Fanning has an important point to consider in that theory must be applied, and a good theory must be applied successfully. Considering this, Pierce and Reynolds are to be commended in their attempt to apply verbal aspect to an actual text. The aim of this paper, then, follows suit by applying the major views of the perfect tense-form to a difficult passage of the New Testament.

## 2. The Debate on the Meaning of the Perfect Tense-Form

The traditional, or long-accepted, view of the meaning of the perfect tense-form has been identified by Pierce and Reynolds as “past action with present [or continuing] results.”<sup>7)</sup> This understanding is the *Aktionsart* view of

---

5) See, however, the following monograph-length applications of verbal aspect theory: Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect*, SBG 10 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); David J. Mathewson, *Verbal Aspect in the Book of Revelation: The Function of Greek Verb Tenses in John’s Apocalypse*, LBS 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Wally V. Cirafesi, *Verbal Aspect in Synoptic Parallels: On the Method and Meaning of Divergent Tense-Form Usage in the Synoptic Passion Narratives*, LBS 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

6) Buist Fanning, “Porter and Fanning on New Testament Greek Verbal Aspect: Retrospect and Prospect”, Steven E. Runge and Christopher J. Fresch, eds., *The Greek Verb Revisited: A Fresh Approach for Biblical Exegesis* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2016), 10.

7) Madison N. Pierce and Benjamin E. Reynolds, “Perfect Tense-Form”, 153. See also Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (Rome: Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 96.

the Greek verb, now largely displaced by (some version of) verbal aspect. Most New Testament scholars have now realized that verbal aspect better describes the semantics of the Greek verb than *Aktionsart* does, even if they are divided on the precise description of verbal aspect. The current state of discussion surrounds which view of verbal aspect best defines the Greek verb. And one of the main issues surrounds the semantics of the perfect tense-form.<sup>8)</sup>

There are two general frameworks of verbal aspect: a bipartite view and a tripartite view. The former identifies two aspects: perfective and imperfective; the latter identifies three: perfective, imperfective, and stative (although some who hold to a tripartite view may label these differently). Within these views, there are agreements: the aorist tense-form encodes perfective aspect, and the present and imperfect tense-forms encode imperfective aspect, although some nuances exist.<sup>9)</sup> Regarding the perfect tense-form, however, there are disagreements, and this is probably one reason why the perfect tense-form has garnered the most attention of the tense-forms; the perfect has been identified as depicting either a stative aspect, perfective aspect, or imperfective aspect. The rest of this section briefly describes these three views of the perfect tense-form.

## 2.1. Stative Aspect

The most well-known proponent for arguing that the perfect tense-form grammaticalizes the stative aspect is Stanley Porter.<sup>10)</sup> The stative aspect is defined thusly: “the action is conceived of by the language user as reflecting a given (often complex) state of affairs. This is regardless of whether this state of affairs has come about as the result of some antecedent action or whether any

8) There is much agreement on the semantics of the aorist, present, and imperfect tense-forms; cf. Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative: Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament*, SBG 13 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 244.

9) Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*, SBG 1 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989, 1993), 239; Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, OTM (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 124-125, 240-241; Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*, 35-37, 77-79, 103-105.

10) Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 245-290; Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament: Studies in Tools, Methods, and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 195-215. See also John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 314-315, who notes that (classical) Greek is described by three aspects (although he uses the labels aorist, imperfective, and perfective).

continued duration is implied.”<sup>11</sup>) In other words, the writer (or speaker) uses the stative aspect to depict a state of affairs as described by the subject, regardless of the temporality of the action. Kenneth McKay is another proponent of the stative aspect, although he labels it as the perfect aspect: “The perfect aspect expresses the state or condition of the subject of the verb, as a result of an action (logically a prior action), but most often with comparatively little reference to the action itself.”<sup>12</sup>) Although McKay’s labels are different from Porter’s, his is essentially a similar conception of the stative aspect as reflecting a state or condition of the process reflected by the verb, without reference to its completion or process.<sup>13</sup>)

Porter’s view of the semantics of the perfect tense-form is in a sense a result of his overall framework of linguistics, (Formal) Systemic Functional Linguistics,<sup>14</sup>) which includes his system network of the Greek verb, namely the sets of binary oppositions between perfective/non-perfective, and within non-perfective, imperfective/stative.<sup>15</sup>) In fact, Porter himself notes that the semantics of the perfect should not be viewed independently in and of itself but should be viewed in relation, or more precisely in oppositional relation, to the other aspects within a systemic network of the Greek verb.<sup>16</sup>) He writes:

This framework [Formal Systemic Functional Linguistics] can be expressed by means of semantic system networks that capture the meaning potential of the language and graphically display the meaning choices. Such system networks recognize that meaning implies choice, and that choice indicates meaning, especially as captured within series of binary oppositions. Complex choices can be understood, and are profitably defined, as series of broader to more delicate binary choices. The Greek verbal edifice comprises a series of such binary choices, displayed in systems and networks.<sup>17</sup>)

---

11) Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., BLG 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 21-22. See also Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 257.

12) Kenneth L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach*, SBG 5 (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 31-34.

13) He notes three main aspects, imperfective, aorist, and perfect, and a fourth aspect of intention, the future. Kenneth L. McKay, *New Syntax*, 27.

14) Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 209-210.

15) See Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 109.

16) Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 209.

17) *Ibid.*, 210.

Thus, the primary set of choices in Hellenistic or Koine Greek (whether conscious or subconscious as a native language user) are between perfective and non-perfective aspects, and if non-perfective aspect is chosen, the choice between imperfective and stative aspects.

Related to the importance of system networks in arriving at a framework for verbal aspect is the role of markedness. In viewing the markedness of the various tense-forms, Porter finds that the stative aspect is the most heavily marked aspect overall, reflected in the four categories of markedness: distributional, material, implicational, and semantic.<sup>18)</sup> His system network reflects the cline of markedness of the various tense-forms in Greek, and thus he finds that the perfect tense-form is markedly unrelated to the other tense-forms (the pluperfect form excepted).

A major critique against Porter's view of verbal aspect has been its purported theoretical abstractness. Most interpreters of the New Testament are not trained linguistically and want not only to understand the theory but find exegetical and interpretive value in that theory.

One example Porter provides, illustrating the meaning of the stative aspect of a word, is ἐλπίζω. In John 5:45, for example, Jesus tells his opponents that Moses is the one who accuses them; he is one whom they have set their hope on (ὕμεις ἠλπίκατε).<sup>19)</sup> Porter concludes that a stative aspect understanding of this word would be rendered in English as “I have set my hope on”, or “I hope”, or “I am in a hopeful state.”<sup>20)</sup> The stative aspect refers to the state of hope of the subject.

## 2.2. Perfective Aspect

Buist Fanning is widely known as Porter's longtime conversation partner in

---

18) He later includes positional as a fifth category, and substitutes the term cognitive for semantic, but prefers semantic now. Stanley E. Porter, “Prominence: A Theoretical Overview”, Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell, eds., *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, NTM 11 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 56. But positional markedness would be markedness at the clause and clause-complex level, and thus does not relate to this study, since only word level markedness applies here.

19) Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 253.

20) Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 213.

the verbal aspect debate, as he worked on his doctoral dissertation at the same time Porter was working on his — both not knowing (initially) that the other was working on the same topic.<sup>21)</sup> He considers temporal meaning to be a secondary function of aspect and thus in this vein disagrees with Porter, who does not consider temporality as a semantic feature of Greek verbal aspect. Fanning takes a bipartite view of aspect: external viewpoint (i.e., perfective) and internal viewpoint (i.e., imperfective), largely based on the work of Bernard Comrie and others.<sup>22)</sup> He writes:

Comrie suggests that it is the feature of ‘viewpoint,’ or whether the action is viewed from from [*sic*] *within* or from *outside*. But the further point which must be developed is that this viewpoint feature implicitly involves the relationship between the *action described* and a *reference-point* or *vantage-point* from which the action is viewed. The crucial distinction, then, is whether the reference-point is *internal* or *external* to the action.<sup>23)</sup>

While Fanning does not view the perfect tense-form as grammaticalizing strictly aspect — he states that the meaning of the perfect reflects all three categories of tense, aspect, and *Aktionsart* — in terms of aspect, it falls under the perfective category, since it relates to the aorist tense-form.<sup>24)</sup> The perfect, according to Fanning, “combines three elements within its invariant meaning: the *Aktionsart*-feature of stative situation, the tense-feature of anteriority, and the aspect of summary viewpoint concerning the occurrence.”<sup>25)</sup> Regarding the aspectual feature of the perfect, he states: “It views the occurrence as a whole indicating its beginning and end-point but without regard to its internal make-up of the situation itself.”<sup>26)</sup> In terms of tense, the perfect reflects what he calls *anteriority*, in line with the present tense, where the temporality of the process

---

21) Cf. Buist M. Fanning, “Approaches to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek: Issues in Definition and Method”, Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, JSNTSup 80 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 46; Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 203.

22) Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 26-27.

23) *Ibid.* (italics original).

24) *Ibid.*, 112-119.

25) *Ibid.*, 119-120.

26) *Ibid.*, 118.

reflects a present time-value. As for its *Aktionsart* feature, it reflects stativity of the action; he writes: “the perfect consistently denotes an *existing condition* as the result of a previous occurrence, while the aorist portrays just the occurrence without implying the stative idea.”<sup>27)</sup> Being that in Fanning’s view the perfect tense-form does not fit into his aspect paradigm of external/internal viewpoint, although it most relates to external viewpoint, he places it in a separate category. For purposes of this paper, however, the implicature of the perfective aspect (external viewpoint) of the perfect will be tested.

In contrast to Porter, Fanning’s objective in understanding Greek verbal aspect was not necessarily to identify an overall linguistic framework of the Greek verb, but for practical exegetical purposes. He writes, “The goal of providing insight for the New Testament interpreter has molded my work in many ways (others will have to judge whether for good or for ill).”<sup>28)</sup> This does not mean that he does not draw upon any linguistic work, but it does mean that he is not reliant upon a particular framework.<sup>29)</sup> Fanning’s lack of a particular linguistic theory (whether robust or not) may be a shortcoming of his view of verbal aspect. His combining the categories of tense, aspect, and *Aktionsart* for the perfect tense-form has also been critiqued.<sup>30)</sup>

A major critique against Fanning’s view of the semantics of the perfect tense-form is its (in)decision in settling on all three categories of aspect, tense, or *Aktionsart* for its meaning, and thus he conflates all of the meanings into this form.<sup>31)</sup> Is there any evidence of any other language, modern or ancient, that have forms that combine all three of these elements? In the end, Porter notes that Fanning’s description of the perfect tense-form aligns more with stative aspect than any other category, but due to Fanning’s restriction of the Greek verb to two aspects, he is forced to settle on the perfect as perfective aspect (external viewpoint).<sup>32)</sup>

Fanning provides several examples for the meaning of the perfect tense-form,

---

27) Ibid., 115.

28) Buist M. Fanning, “Approaches to Verbal Aspect”, 47.

29) See Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*, 19.

30) Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 203-205.

31) See the critique by Stanley E. Porter, “In Defense of Verbal Aspect”, Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics*, 38. Porter notes that Fanning’s definition of *Aktionsart* contradicts his definition of aspect.

32) Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 204-205.



but his explanations are brief, and the examples are separated into three types of verbs: stative verbs (these verbs reflect lexical stativity), verbs denoting unbounded action (atelic), and verbs that denote bounded action (telic).<sup>33)</sup> One example he provides, however, from stative verbs is from John 8:52, where he provides the translation “we have *come to know* and now know” for  $\nu\tilde{\upsilon}\nu$   $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\nu\acute{\omega}\kappa\alpha\mu\epsilon\nu$ .<sup>34)</sup> This translation seems to depict (at least in his English rendition) a progressive action with a resultant state, which is consistent with his view of the perfect encoding anterior temporality and stative *Aktionsart*. But the meaning of the perfective aspect of this word would mean that the action of knowing is depicted as a whole and complete.

### 2.3. Imperfective Aspect

Nearly two decades after Porter and Fanning published their works on aspect, Constantine Campbell published a two-volume work on the subject.<sup>35)</sup> He follows a bipartite view of aspect, composed of perfective (or external viewpoint) and imperfective (internal viewpoint) aspects, but he differs from Fanning on which tense-forms encode which aspect.<sup>36)</sup>

Campbell argues, from an inductive approach (see below), that the perfect tense-form encodes imperfective aspect with the spatial feature of *heightened proximity* (other spatial features he identifies are *proximity* and *remoteness*).<sup>37)</sup> He argues that the perfect tense-form, being a discourse tense-form,<sup>38)</sup> depicts an action or a process that is portrayed by the writer/speaker as ongoing or continuous, as do the present and imperfect tense-forms. The difference between

---

33) Fanning at this point seems to confuse telicity and perfective aspect. Cf. Francis G. H. Pang, *Revisiting Aspect and Aktionsart: A Corpus Approach to Koine Greek Event Typology*, LBS 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

34) Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 118.

35) Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*; Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect and Non-Indicative Verbs: Further Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament Studies in Biblical Greek*, SBG 15 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

36) Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*, 242-243.

37) *Ibid.*, 210-211.

38) His label discourse tense-form, as well as his identification of the perfect tense-form as such, is misleading. It seems that too much may be made of using this label, as if particular tense-forms are limited to “discourse”, when all tense-forms are found in a variety of texts. In addition, Campbell’s understanding of the meaning of the word discourse needs clarification, as discourse can describe almost any type of text.

the present and imperfect tense-forms within the imperfective aspect is that the former depicts proximity and the latter remoteness. The perfect tense-form, then, in relation to the other tense-forms that depict imperfective aspect, depicts heightened proximity, especially in relation to the present tense-form. Heightened proximity, according to Campbell, is visualized as a further zooming in on a process, in comparison with the present tense-form.

Campbell's view of aspect is based on his overall functional approach to linguistics.<sup>39)</sup> His method in determining his framework of verbal aspect is inductive, as he writes: "an inductive approach is preferable, from which the aspect of the perfect may be recognized from the patterns evident within text rather than imposed upon it deductively."<sup>40)</sup> This is in consideration of not only uses of individual verbs but also discourse functions. One critique of this approach among others,<sup>41)</sup> however, is that while an inductive approach appears to be objective and commendable, it is impossible, especially for study of an ancient language, to start from the bottom-up without any sort of framework or lens by which to analysis the data. In this case, I would offer that some sort of combination of an inductive and deductive approach — analyzing the data bottom-up but also working within an actual linguistic framework — is more profitable and realistic. Another critique is that while Campbell seems to advocate this inductive approach, he begins with a set of assumptions which require top-down, one of which is in rejecting the stative aspect because of Vendler and Comrie's statements that stativity reflects a lexical property.<sup>42)</sup> It seems, however, that Campbell also misappropriates stativity here; stativity as a lexical property does not preclude stativity as an aspectual feature.<sup>43)</sup>

Campbell provides a few examples of his view of the perfect tense-form denoting imperfective aspect. One is from 2 Timothy 4:7, where Paul reflects on his ministry thus far and concludes τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα ἠγωνίσμαι, τὸν δρόμον τετέλεκα, τῆν πίστιν τετήρηκα ("I have fought the good fight, I have finished the

---

39) Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*, 19. See, however, the critique by Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 205, on his functional approach seeming to be simply a comparison of English translations.

40) Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*, 30.

41) E.g., Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 205-209.

42) Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*, 173.

43) See Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 207, for a more detailed explanation of this: also Francis G. H. Pang, *Revisiting Aspekt*.

race, I have kept the faith” [NIV 2011]). He states that the preferable translation, however, is “I am fighting the good fight, I am finishing the race, I am keeping the faith,” arguing that there are indications within the letter that Paul does not view his ministry as yet complete.<sup>44)</sup> The imperfective view of these string of verbs in the perfect tense-form is that these actions of fighting, finishing, and keeping are depicted as ongoing and continuous (but adding the spatial feature of heightened proximity, in distinction from the present tense-form).

## 2.4. Conclusion

The three views of the perfect tense-form result from different approaches to linguistic method. Porter provides a theory of the Greek verb by means of (Formal) Systemic Functional Linguistics, providing a system network of the verb. Fanning approaches his study of verbal aspect with a practical objective, and thus does not identify with any particular theory of linguistics. And Campbell adheres to a functional and inductive approach to determine the meaning of Greek verbal aspect. As a result, Porter claims that the perfect tense-form depicts stative aspect, Fanning claims it depicts perfective aspect with other semantic features of tense and *Aktionsart*, and Campbell claims it depicts imperfective aspect with the spatial feature of heightened proximity.

My objective in this paper is not to critically assess the three major views of the semantics of the perfect tense-form, as they have been provided in other places, although I have provided some brief critiques for each view.<sup>45)</sup> My objective, given my understanding of these three views, is to test each of them with their potential for making the best sense of a difficult passage.

## 3. Interpreting 1 Corinthians 7:14 in Light of Verbal Aspect

When it is all said and done, a coherent and consistent theory is successful in application. In other words, an interpretive theory is only viable when it makes sense of the interpretation of texts. This paper seeks to test the aforementioned

---

44) Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*, 194-195.

45) For a more detailed critique against Buist M. Fanning and Constantine R. Campbell’s views, see Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 198-209. Cf. also the forthcoming volume D. A. Carson, *The Perfect Volume*.

views with their respective interpretations of 1 Corinthians 7:14, a notoriously difficult passage to interpret.<sup>46)</sup> The verse reads:

ἡγίασται γὰρ ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ ἄπιστος ἐν τῇ γυναικὶ καὶ ἡγίασται ἡ γυνὴ ἡ ἄπιστος ἐν τῷ ἀδελφῷ· ἐπεὶ ἄρα τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν ἀκάθαρτά ἐστιν, νῦν δὲ ἅγια ἐστιν.

For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy (NIV 2011).

The context of this verse relates to Paul’s (and Jesus’s) teaching on marriage, divorce, and singlehood. The particular situation addressed for the verse in question is when a believer is married to an unbeliever, whether or not they should leave their unbelieving spouse. Paul commands the believing spouse not to leave their unbelieving spouse, should the unbelieving spouse want to remain in the marriage. The reason for this instruction is in verse 14, that the unbelieving husband “has been sanctified” (ἡγίασται) in the believing wife, and the unbelieving wife in the believing husband. Depending on one’s understanding of the meaning of ἡγίασται, its aspectual meaning having great significance to its interpretation, this verse could be understood in a number of ways. Each of the three views of the semantics of the perfect tense-form, then, will be applied to determine the meaning of ἡγίασται in 1 Corinthians 7:14.

### 3.1. Imperfective Aspect Interpretation

Viewing the perfect tense-form as imperfective aspect means that the action or process is depicted by the writer as ongoing or continued. In this case, Paul would be saying that by the believing spouse remaining married to the unbelieving spouse, the process of sanctification is viewed as ongoing (with heightened proximity). Paul wants to state that the unbelieving spouse is being sanctified by remaining married to the believer. Perhaps the best English translation representing this view is: ‘the unbelieving husband is being sanctified in the wife.’ According to Campbell, the perfect tense-form is not only

46) For example, one commentator writes: “It is not possible to give a precise explanation of what this [perfect tense-form] means” (Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, rev. ed., TNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 107).

imperfective but with heightened proximity, illustrated by a zoom in on the process in comparison with the present form. What this apparently means is that the believer’s act of remaining with the unbelieving spouse is being depicted as having efficacy for sanctification for the unbeliever, with greater focus on this process of sanctification.

This interpretation, however, does not seem to cohere with the greater teaching of Scripture regarding individual sanctification, especially considering what Paul states elsewhere regarding sanctification. While there are instructions by Paul to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2), and thereby commanding believers to take some responsibility for one another, Paul is clear that each person is judged by God according to their own works. For example, Romans 2:6 states: ὃς ἀποδώσει ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ (“God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done’” [NIV 2011]), quoting from Psalms 62:12. Here, it is clear that each person’s works is in view of God’s “repayment.” In 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul states that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, ἵνα κομίσῃται ἕκαστος τὰ διὰ τοῦ σώματος πρὸς ἃ ἔπραξεν, εἴτε ἀγαθὸν εἴτε φαῦλον (“that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” [NIV 2011]). Again, Paul uses the word ἕκαστος to identify each person’s responsibility in their behavior. And as a final example, in Galatians 6:7-8, Paul describes the principle of sowing and reaping, that whatever one sows, that they reap. In light of this, it seems unlikely that Paul is depicting the process of sanctification as ongoing, with or without heightened proximity. Even if the meaning of aspect is not that it reflects the process as objectively occurring (*Aktionsart*) but that it reflects the perspective that the writer chooses to depict, it would seem strange that Paul would depict sanctification for an unbeliever to be occurring by the fact that a believer remains with him/her. It is never mentioned elsewhere in Paul, nor in Scripture, that anyone else sanctifies someone else.

### 3.2. Perfective Aspect Interpretation

Viewing the perfect tense-form as perfective aspect means that the action or process is depicted by the writer as a whole or complete. It is not that the action is objectively complete (i.e., punctiliar), but that it is depicted in this way. In this case, Paul would be saying that by the believing spouse remaining married to the

unbelieving spouse, the process of sanctification is viewed in its entirety, without comment as to its progress or completion. At this point, there is no interpretive difficulty. But according to Fanning's view of the perfect tense-form, not only does it reflect perfective aspect (similar to the aorist form), but it also incorporates anterior tense (similar to the present) and the stativity of Aktionsart. Thus, Fanning's paradigm would mean that the act of sanctification as depicted by Paul in this verse is temporally ongoing, with results from previous sanctification affecting the present, and viewed as a complete process. Paul then wants to state that the unbelieving spouse is being sanctified by remaining married to the believer. Perhaps the best English translation to capture this view is: 'the unbelieving husband has been being sanctified by the wife.'

The difficulty with this interpretation, however, is twofold. First is that it wants to incorporate all of the views in its meaning, and the meaning of aspect is essentially semantically void here. The problem is with the conflation of semantic categories for one form.<sup>47)</sup> But second is its theological implication. The perfective aspect interpretation of ἡγιάσται would mean that the process of sanctification is depicted not only as a whole for the unbelieving spouse, but also viewing its temporality (tense) as ongoing, and its kind of action as stative. Paul is saying, then, according to Fanning's framework, that the reason why the believer should remain with the unbelieving spouse is that their sanctification is depicted as complete, in its entirety, but also temporally ongoing, with results continuing to the present. The theological implication, as with the above interpretation, is that sanctification is not only individual, but one can experience sanctification (or holiness) by virtue of one's marriage to a believer. This seems to significantly contrast Paul's teachings in other places and his other letters. While a perfective aspect by itself might be a viable interpretation, the perfect according to Fanning includes the tense meaning of anteriority, which reflects a similar problem as the imperfective aspect.

### 3.3. Stative Aspect Interpretation

As stated above, the stative aspect depicts the action or process as a (complex)

---

47) This has been argued against at length in various places; see Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics*; D. A. Carson, *Perfect Volume*; among other places.

state or condition. In this case, Paul would be saying that by the believer remaining married to the unbelieving spouse, the process of sanctification is viewed as a state or condition. Using the stative aspect, then, Paul says that the unbelieving spouse is in a state of sanctification by remaining in marriage to their believing spouse, without any reference to its temporality or objective process.<sup>48)</sup> Perhaps the best English translation to capture this idea is: ‘the unbelieving husband is in a state of being sanctified in the wife.’

This interpretation seems to make the best sense of Paul’s statement here. Paul commands that the believer should remain married to the unbeliever (if it were the case that the unbeliever wishes to remain married) because remaining in marriage puts the unbelieving spouse in a state of sanctification, regardless of any antecedent process of sanctification or the ongoing process of sanctification or the effects of sanctification to the present time. Perhaps sanctification is never actualized for the unbelieving spouse. The meaning of the perfect tense-form does not require this; it only depicts the process as a state. The unbeliever is in a state, perhaps situation, of sanctification because of the influence and impact of the believing spouse’s Christian lifestyle (the meaning of the prepositional word-group ἐν τῇ γυναικὶ and ἐν τῷ ἀδελφῷ). This is why Paul makes further mention of the children: if divorced, the opportunity for the believer to have influence upon the believing spouse and their children would not be as readily impactful as compared to remaining in the marriage.

### 3.4. Summary

There are other factors that are important in interpreting Paul’s statement here, including the reference to the children and the collocation of ἀκάθαρτα with ἁγία.<sup>49)</sup> But the main question this paper seeks to address is which view of verbal aspect best makes sense of the statement ἡγίασται γὰρ ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ ἄπιστος ἐν τῇ γυναικὶ καὶ ἡγίασται ἡ γυνὴ ἢ ἄπιστος ἐν τῷ ἀδελφῷ. The imperfective aspect interpretation requires that Paul depict the process of sanctification as ongoing, with heightened proximity. The perfective aspect interpretation

48) See Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 267-268. He identifies the perfect tense-form as omnitemporal for this verse, the so-called gnomic use.

49) There is some sort of an oppositional relationship between these two lexemes, as the two resulting situations of separation and remaining together are compared for the children. But this investigation is beyond the scope of this article.

requires that Paul depict the process of sanctification for the unbeliever as a whole, with elements of anterior tense and stative Aktionsart attached to its meaning. The stative aspect interpretation requires that Paul depict the process of sanctification for the unbeliever as a state or condition, without reference to its duration, inception, or antecedence. The stative aspect, in this case, makes the best sense of Paul's reason for the believer to remain married to the unbelieving spouse. It is because they are in some sort of state of sanctification. It is not that the process of sanctification is depicted as ongoing for the unbeliever, nor that the process of sanctification is depicted as complete, nor that it is past action with present results, but that by remaining in that marriage, the state of sanctification is attributed to the unbeliever through the influence of the believing spouse's Christian lifestyle. Paul does not state that the unbelieving spouse is in the process of sanctification, nor attributes the act of sanctification to him/her, but that he/she is in a state or condition of sanctification.<sup>50)</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

A robust theory, if it does not work in application, is not an accurate theory. While providing only a brief overview and interaction of the three views of the perfect tense-form, I have applied each of these views to a difficult passage. My conclusion is that a stative aspect meaning of ἡγιάσται best explains Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 7:14, and more test-cases like this will help strengthen the stative aspect view of the perfect tense-form.

#### <Keywords>

verbal aspect, perfect tense-form, 1 Corinthians 7:14, sanctified, stative aspect.

(투고 일자: 2020년 1월 31일, 심사 일자: 2020년 2월 21일, 게재 확정 일자: 2020년 4월 22일)

50) Thiselton's interpretation of this verse is similar to mine, but the means by which he arrives at this conclusion is suspect. He does not discuss the aspectual value of the word ἡγιάσται, but instead refers to it in terms of Aktionsart. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 528-530.



## &lt;References&gt;

- Campbell, Constantine R. *Verbal Aspect and Non-Indicative Verbs: Further Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament Studies in Biblical Greek*, SBG 15, New York: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Campbell, Constantine R., *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative: Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament*, SBG 13, New York: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Carson, D. A., ed., *The Perfect Volume: Critical Discussion of the Semantics of the Greek Perfect under Aspect Theory*, SBG, New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming.
- Cirafesi, Wally V., *Verbal Aspect in Synoptic Parallels: On the Method and Meaning of Divergent Tense-Form Usage in the Synoptic Passion Narratives*, LBS 7, Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Decker, Rodney J., *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect*, SBG 10, New York: Peter Lang, 2001.
- Fanning, Buist M., “Approaches to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek: Issues in Definition and Method”, Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, JSNTSup 80, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993, 46-62.
- Fanning, Buist M., “Porter and Fanning on New Testament Greek Verbal Aspect: Retrospect and Prospect”, Steven E. Runge and Christopher J. Fresch, ed., *The Greek Verb Revisited: A Fresh Approach for Biblical Exegesis*, Bellingham: Lexham, 2016, 7-12.
- Fanning, Buist M., “Greek Tenses in John’s Apocalypse: Issues in Verbal Aspect, Discourse Analysis, and Diachronic Change”, Lois K. Fuller Dow, Craig A. Evans, and Andrew W. Pitts, eds., *The Language and Literature of the New Testament: Essays in Honor of Stanley E. Porter’s 60th Birthday*, BIS 150, Leiden: Brill, 2016, 328-353.
- Fanning, Buist M., *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, OTM, Oxford: Clarendon, 1990.
- Lyons, John, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.
- Mathewson, David J., *Verbal Aspect in the Book of Revelation: The Function of Greek Verb Tenses in John’s Apocalypse*, LBS 4, Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- McKay, Kenneth L., *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An*

- Aspectual Approach*, SBG 5, New York: Peter Lang, 1994.
- Morris, Leon, *1 Corinthians*, rev. ed., TNTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.
- Pang, Francis G. H., *Revisiting Aspect and Aktionsart: A Corpus Approach to Koine Greek Event Typology*, LBS 14, Leiden: Brill, 2016.
- Pierce, Madison N. and Reynolds, Benjamin E., “The Perfect Tense-Form and the Son of Man in John 3.13: Developments in Greek Grammar as a Viable Solution to the Timing of the Ascent and Descent”, *NTS* 60 (2014), 149-155.
- Porter, Stanley E., *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., BLG 2, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994.
- Porter, Stanley E., “In Defense of Verbal Aspect”, Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, JSNTSup 80, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993, 26-45.
- Porter, Stanley E., *Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament: Studies in Tools, Methods, and Practice*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015.
- Porter, Stanley E., “Prominence: A Theoretical Overview”, Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O’Donnell, eds., *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, NTM 11, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009, 45-74.
- Porter, Stanley E., *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*, SBG 1, New York: Peter Lang, 1989, 1993.
- Porter, Stanley E. and Carson, D. A., eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, JSNTSup 80, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993.
- Porter, Stanley E. and Pitts, Andrew W., “The Perfect Tense-Form, the Son of Man, and John 3:13, Once More”, *BAGL* 6 (2017), 127-136.
- Thiselton, Anthony C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Zerwick, Maximilian, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples*, Rome: Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963.

&lt;Abstract&gt;

**The Perfect Tense-Form in Application:  
1 Corinthians 7:14 as a Test-Case in Light of Verbal Aspect**

David I. Yoon  
(McMaster Divinity College)

Paul’s advice regarding marriage in his first letter to the Corinthians has been well discussed, but his statements are not without interpretive difficulties. One of these difficulties is his advice for a married believing spouse to remain with an unbelieving spouse, giving the reason that “the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife” (NIV 2011) and the wife through the husband. Some interpreters take this to refer to the continued influence of the believing spouse upon the unbelieving spouse. Others take this to refer to a future hope of the unbelieving spouse to convert through the influence of the believing spouse. However there should be greater focus on the discussion about the impact of the meaning of the perfect tense-form (ἡγίασται). The verbal aspect framework is crucial for interpreting this statement; in particular, how one views the semantics of the perfect tense-form. This essay begins with a brief survey of the three major views on the perfect (Porter, Fanning, and Campbell), with brief, critical evaluations. Porter represents the stative aspect view, that the perfect tense-form grammaticalizes a (complex) state of affairs, without regard to tense or kind of action. Fanning represents the perfective aspect view, that the perfect tense-form grammaticalizes the perfective aspect (external viewpoint) but also encodes *Aktionsart* and tense. Campbell represents the imperfective aspect view that the perfect tense-form grammaticalizes ongoing action with heightened proximity in relation to the present tense-form. In the final section of this essay, I apply the reading of ἡγίασται according to each viewpoint to see which view best explains the meaning of ἡγίασται in this verse. I conclude that the stative aspect reading makes the best sense of this verse, where Paul instructs believing spouses to remain with their unbelieving spouses since they are in a (complex) state of sanctification by being with their spouse. This interpretation is preferable to the other two; the perfective aspect reading would mean that the sanctification process of the unbelieving spouse is depicted as complete by Paul, which raises

many more questions than what it answers, and the imperfective reading would mean that the sanctification process of the unbelieving spouse is depicted as ongoing by Paul, which seems to contradict the experiences of many individuals in this situation. Thus, the semantics of the stative aspect view makes the best sense in this passage.