

SIGNS & WONDERS TODAY?

Should we expect signs and wonders in the church today? The answer to this question is largely found in an understanding of why these things were given to the church in the first place. In order to understand why signs and wonders were given, we must comprehend the transition that took place in the first generation of church history. The book of Acts is a historical record of the first thirty years of the church, from Pentecost (c. 33 A.D.) to Paul's first Roman imprisonment (c. 60 A.D.). It is primarily a **description** of what took place in the early church, not a **prescription** (or rule) for the whole church era. In other words, there are many things that took place in Acts which are not to be expected today. Tongues of fire do not appear above our heads when we receive the Spirit (2:3); we do not speak in tongues when we receive the Spirit (2:4; 19:6); we do not receive the Spirit through laying on of hands (8:17; 19:6); we are not healed by receiving handkerchiefs (19:12); and people are not raised from the dead (9:40). These signs, wonders, revelations, and special gifts were given to the church during the Apostolic era for two main reasons: to confirm the Apostolic gospel (Heb. 2:3-4) and to establish the infant church (1 Cor. 13:8-12).

The arrival of the New Covenant was arguably the greatest transition in the history of God's kingdom program to date, rivaling the giving of the Old Covenant at the time of the exodus and the giving of the Law. Being two millennia removed from the 1st century A.D., we have a difficult time appreciating the momentous changes that took place in those early decades of the church. Although this transition was anticipated in many ways in the Old Testament, the unbelieving Jews still could not understand it or receive it (2 Cor. 3:14-15). It is in the monumental nature of these changes that we discover the purpose of tongues, prophets, signs, wonders, miracles, and special gifts of the Spirit, in the Apostolic era. Five major transitions occurred.

(1) Coming of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:8) – the indwelling of the Holy Spirit was a new thing that began at Pentecost (Matt. 3:11; Jn. 14:16-21; Acts 2:4; Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 12:13). Miraculous signs and gifts, particularly tongues, served as immediate evidence that the Spirit did indeed come. This was especially important in relation to the Gentiles. How did Peter know the Gentiles had received the Spirit? They spoke in tongues just like the Jews did at Pentecost (Acts 10:44-47; 11:15-18; cf. 8:14-18; 19:1-6).

(2) Inclusion of Non-Jews (see Acts 1:8) – the Jews were the exclusive people of God for over two thousand years, all the way back to the time of Abraham. They were not even allowed to eat with Gentiles (Acts 10:28). Wherever they went in the diasporaⁱ, they formed their own isolated communities, refusing to participate in the cultural and social life of the locals. But now the Gentiles and Jews were part of the same body in the church (Eph. 3:3-6). God gave Peter a vision to affirm this radical change (Acts 10). Tongues also pointed to this truth. The gift of languagesⁱⁱ was not for evangelizing, but for a sign to unbelieving Jews (1 Cor. 14:21-22)ⁱⁱⁱ. It was a sign that Israel was under judgment (context of Isaiah 28:11) and that the gospel was for all nations (Rev. 5:9). After the church was established and the temple at Jerusalem was destroyed (70 A.D.), tongues were superfluous and therefore ceased (1 Cor. 13:8).

(3) End of the Mosaic Law – the whole life of a Jew was regulated by the Mosaic Law. Circumcision, the sacrificial system, worship at the temple, tithes, laws of clean and unclean, the weekly Sabbath, and a whole calendar of annual feasts and holy days gave daily structure to their entire community. They were students of the Law from birth to the grave. All of this was done away with in the New Covenant, since those who are in Christ are no longer under the Law. But the regulations of the Law did not

disappear immediately for the believing Jew. Indeed many, if not all, Jewish Christians in the early church continued to observe the Mosaic code. As the Gentiles were brought into the church, the great question was “Must the Gentiles keep the Law?” Answering this question was the purpose of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Even though the Apostles answered this question with a resounding “no”, many Jewish converts tried to enforce the Law in the church. These were called Judaizers and were a perennial problem in the churches that Paul addressed in his letters. This was also the context of Paul’s instructions regarding liberty (1 Cor. 8; Rom. 14). The transition from the Law to the Gospel took place over a generation and necessitated the unique giftedness and wisdom of the Apostle Paul (e.g. Rom. 14:1-7; 1 Cor. 9:20-23; Gal. 2:3; Acts 16:1-3; 21:26). The signs and miracles were given, in part, to facilitate this difficult shift.

(4) Introduction of the Local Church – the basic organization among the Jews for the previous four hundred years (probably from the time of Ezra) was the synagogue, around which the daily life of the local Jewish community took place (cf. Luke 4:16-30). But what was the church (ecclesia)? What was its purpose? How was it to be organized? Who were its local leaders? What were its regulations? Since there was no New Testament to answer these questions, God provided temporary offices like apostle and prophet (the foundation in Eph. 2:20), and unique temporary revelatory gifts, like prophecy, words of wisdom, words of knowledge, and discernment^{iv}. When the church was established and reached a certain level of maturity, and the New Testament was completed and began to circulate, these gifts were gradually done away with (1 Cor. 13:8-12). Like a child who puts away childish things when he grows up, so the church put away these temporary revelatory gifts once it matured (1 Cor. 13:11).

(5) Development of the New Testament – The early church had only the Old Testament. This is what Christ used to show that He was the Messiah (Lk. 24:44-45). This is what Paul used to show the Jews that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 17:2). And this is what Timothy was taught as a child, which made him wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 3:14-15). But they had no New Testament Scriptures to explain the depths of the Gospel (e.g. Romans), the organization of the church (e.g. 1 Timothy), the ministry of the Holy Spirit, how to live the Christian life, how to deal with sin in the church, how to recognize and answer heresy in the church, the events surrounding the Second Coming of Christ, and countless other things. So God gave the church gifts like prophecy and words of wisdom to enable the church to grow and mature until the completion and circulation of the New Testament canon. The writing of the Scriptures itself necessitated the gift of prophecy (2 Pet. 1:20-21). The last book written (Revelation) was not completed until around 96 A.D., over 60 years after Pentecost. Only gradually, under God’s providential oversight, did all the books come together and form a unified whole. Very early the Synoptic Gospels were circulated together, then the epistles of Paul, then all four Gospels, and eventually all twenty seven books of the New Testament were brought together into one volume. Revelatory gifts, like prophecy, gradually dropped off throughout the Apostolic era and ceased with the completion of the New Testament, as 1 Cor. 13:8-12 teaches. Paul compares this transition to seeing *in a mirror dimly* (i.e. imperfectly through incomplete prophecies) versus seeing *face to face* (i.e. clearly in the written Scriptures). The image of a mirror is used only two other times in the New Testament (2 Cor. 3:18; James 1:23-25). In both of these passages, the mirror is an illustration of the written Word of God. Partial prophecy would be done away with when the perfect mirror of the written Word was complete.

All the sign and revelatory gifts of the Spirit, mighty signs and wonders, healings and resurrections, casting out of demons, visions and dreams, and unique events of the early church, especially as recorded in the book of Acts, were not meant to be normative for all of church history. Having served

their God-ordained purposes, these things passed off the scene. But we are now called to read, believe, trust, obey, desire, study carefully, preach, and teach thoroughly, the written Word of God (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16-4:2; Ja. 1:22; 1 Pet. 2:2). The Scriptures are living and powerful (Heb. 4:12), accomplishing the new birth (Ja. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23), and sanctifying the believer (Jn. 8:31-32; 17:17; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 5:26; 1 Thes. 2:13). Through the written Word we are perfectly equipped (2 Tim. 3:17) and have all we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4). By them we know the will of God (Rom. 12:2), recognize and refute false teaching (1 Jn. 4:1; 2 Cor. 10:4-6), and put on the armor of God (Eph. 6:11-17). We know all of this, of course, through the Scriptures.

But many today are seeking to reintroduce these signs and gifts into the church. Although there have been groups scattered throughout church history who have sought to do this, the modern Pentecostal Movement (1901) and the Charismatic Movement (1960) have been largely successful. Yet the signs and gifts they are practicing are not the same signs and gifts present in the early church. The supposed gift of tongues (incoherent babbling) practiced by many today is not equivalent to the foreign languages spoken at Pentecost. The fallible and often silly “prophecies” of today are a far cry from the infallible prophecies of the Apostolic era. The supposed healings and resurrections of today are a desperately pale and anemic imitation of the works of Christ and His Apostles.

There is an irony in the fact that as false teachers introduce Satanic counterfeits of the sign and revelatory gifts into the church, the process of 1 Cor. 13:8-12 is reversed. The Scriptures become muddled and begin to take second place to revelations, dreams, visions and experiences, and eventually disappear altogether from the hearts and minds of professing Christians. They go from seeing clearly to seeing dimly, from maturity to immaturity, from truth to error, from clarity to confusion, from holiness to worldliness, and from light to darkness. Let us put away childish things and walk in the light of God’s perfect, living, and eternal Word.

ⁱ **Diaspora** – or dispersion - a reference to the scattering of the Jews outside of Palestine

ⁱⁱ **Gift of tongues** – tongues was a supernatural ability to speak foreign languages spontaneously (Acts 2:6-11)

ⁱⁱⁱ **Purpose of tongues** – tongues was not for evangelism. When Peter preached in Acts 2, he probably preached in Greek, and everyone would have understood him. There is one clear purpose statement for the gift of tongues in the Scripture, 1 Cor. 14:21-22. Paul quotes Is. 28:11, which is a statement of the fact that when the Jews would be taken into captivity by Babylon they would hear foreign languages - a sign that they were under God’s judgment. The gift of tongues was fundamentally a sign to unbelieving Jews that God’s judgment was upon them, and that He was reaching out to the nations with the gospel.

^{iv} **Gift of discernment** – It is probably best to understand this gift as a counterpart to prophecy in the same sense that the gift of interpreting tongues was a counterpart to tongues. This gift was a check against false prophecy entering into the church.