

Sign Gifts: Valid Today?

For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1.22-24).

Introduction

Some denominations and churches place great emphasis on the importance of sign gifts, i.e., gifts of healing, prophecy, knowledge, and speaking in tongues.¹ They maintain that evidence of these gifts confirms the presence of the Holy Spirit and that if a person does not manifest or exercise these gifts he is not a Christian or not a good one. This study will examine sign gifts to determine their history, purpose, and what biblical foundation exists for their presence today.

The Beginning of Signs and Miracles

The history of signs and miracles began with God's dealings with the Jews. In about 2,000 B.C., God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees and promised He would make Abraham a great nation (Genesis 12.1-3). Abraham and Hagar, who was a handmaid to Abraham's wife Sarah, had a son, Ishmael. This began the fulfillment of that work but Ishmael's birth was a work of the flesh and revealed a lack of faith on the part of Abraham and Sarah (Galatians 4.23). But God, true to His promise, performed a miraculous sign to Abraham and Sara with the birth of their son, Isaac. Isaac, therefore, was the child of promise (Genesis 17.1-22, 21.1-7). God's covenant worked through this line, not the line of Ishmael (Genesis 17.15-22). Throughout the lives of Isaac and Jacob God provided His superintending care upon the Jews and manifested His presence.

He performed miraculous signs when the Jews were in bondage in Egypt and demonstrated He was superior to the gods of the Egyptians. After Moses fled Egypt to live in the desert for 40 years, God commissioned him to lead the Jews from slavery into the land He had promised to Abraham and his progeny (Genesis 12.1, 15.18-21). God spoke to Moses:

¹⁹But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion. ²⁰So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that he will let you go (Exodus 3.19-20).

Throughout the record of Exodus we learn how God performed miracles and signs to reveal his power and to bring Israel out of bondage into the promised land. These events took place about 1,500 B.C. Listed below are miracles God performed to Israel during the Exodus period. These miraculous signs demonstrated God's superiority over the gods of the Egypt and His care for Israel.

1. Aaron's rod changed into a serpent (Exodus 7.10-12).
2. The ten plagues of Egypt—a) Waters turned to blood, b) Frogs, c) Lice, d) Flies, e) Murrain, f) Boils, g) Thunder and hail, h) Locusts, i) Darkness, j) Death of the first-born (Exodus 7.20-12:30).
3. Red Sea divided: Israel passed through it while the Egyptian army drowned (Exodus 14.21-31).
4. Waters of Marah sweetened (Exodus 15.23-25).
5. Manna sent daily, except on Sabbath (Exodus 16.14-35).
6. Water from the rock at Rephidim (Massah) (Exodus 17.5-7) and at Kadesh (Meribah) (Numbers 20.1-13).

Thus, God's dealings with the Jews was characterized by miracles. Some periods had more signs or miracles than others but throughout Jewish history miracles occurred.

Until John the Baptist, over 400 years had passed in Israel's history since they had had a prophet. During this time God performed no miracles to the Jews. That was a long time. It may explain why the Sadducees did not believe in the miraculous and supernatural. Then, after 400 years, God restarted signs and miracles. The birth of John the Baptist, Jesus' half-cousin, was miraculous. John's birth was similar to the birth of Isaac for both the parents of Isaac and John were past the child-bearing years (Luke 1.5-25, 39-45 cf. Genesis 18.9-15). The Lord's birth was both miraculous and unique: He was born of a virgin (Luke 1.26-38). Both births were announced by angels.

After John the Baptist found himself in Herod's prison after proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God (Matthew 3.1-3), he began to doubt his message and wondered if Jesus truly was the promised Messiah. He could not reconcile why he was locked in prison if Jesus was the King who would soon set up His promised kingdom. Matthew recorded:

²Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" ⁴Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. ⁶And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me" (Matthew 11.2-6).

Jesus' answer to John was that He was the promised One because He performed the signs of the Messiah according to the Scriptures (Isaiah 35.5; 61.1). These signs authenticated His person and message. We know from the gospels that Jesus performed hundreds if not thousands of miracles. The record of

Jesus' miracles in the gospels are only samples of His many miracles. John recorded:

³⁰Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20.30-31).

and

²⁴ This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. ²⁵And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written (John 21.24-25).

The point of this brief review is to recognize that God performed miraculous signs for Jews and through Jews. When God performed a miracle that involved Gentiles, He used Jews, e.g., Naaman (2 Kings 5.1-14). The purpose of these signs was to authenticate that He was the one true God (cf. Acts 2.22).

The Post-Gospels Period

Mark 16.14-18²

¹⁴ Afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at the table; and He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen. ¹⁵ And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. ¹⁶ He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be

condemned. ¹⁷ These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; ¹⁸ they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” ¹⁹ So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. ²⁰ And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed.

In the passage above, Mark recorded Jesus' words that miraculous signs would continue among those who had believed in Him. And so they did according to Luke's history.

Signs in Acts

The greatest of all the miraculous signs was the Lord's resurrection (Acts 2.22-24, 32, 3.14-15). If you believe in His resurrection, the other miracles and signs are easy. If you don't believe in the Lord's resurrection, you have a much greater problem: you are without Christ, without hope, and without eternal life. To be a Christian, one must believe in Christ's resurrection (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Luke provided a historical record in Acts that the signs and miracles that characterized the Lord's ministry continued. The following signs and miracles occurred. The first set is associated with Peter and the Twelve:

1. Peter and John healed a lame man at the Temple (Acts 3.1-11).
2. The Twelve performed many signs (σημείον) and wonders (τέρας) to the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 5.12-16).
3. Peter healed Eneas of paralysis at Lydda (Acts 9.32-35).
4. Peter raised Tabitha, or Dorcas, to life from the dead at Joppa (Acts 9.36-42).
5. An angel delivered Peter out of prison in Jerusalem

(Acts 12.7-17).

The second set of miracles is associated with Paul.

1. Paul caused Elymas, the sorcerer, to be blinded for a season at Paphos (Acts 13.6-11).
2. Paul healed a cripple Lystra (Acts 14.8-10).
3. Paul cast out a spirit of divination at Philippi (Acts 16.16-18)
4. God caused an earthquake to open Paul and Silas's prison doors (and all the other prisoners) at Philippi (Acts 16.25-26).
5. Paul healed multitudes at Corinth (Acts 19.11-12).
6. Paul raised Eutychus to life from death at Troas (Acts 20.9-12).
7. Paul was unaffected by the venom of a viper on Malta (Acts 28.3-6).
8. Paul healed the father of Publius and others on Malta (Acts 28.7-9).

Gift of Healing

The gift of healing operated in Paul's ministry until about 60 A.D. The last account we have of Paul's ability to heal is in Acts 28.8-9 when he was on Malta. There, he healed Publius' father as well as many others. After he reached Rome, Paul could no longer heal (cf. Philippians 2.27; 1 Timothy 5.23; 2 Timothy 4.20). The gift of healing may have disappeared even earlier from among the Twelve. James probably penned his letter in the late 40s. He wrote:

¹³ *Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.* ¹⁴ *Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;* ¹⁵ *and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he*

has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit (James 5.13-18).

This passage reveals that the gift of healing was apparently no longer active. Instead, James wrote that the elders were to anoint the ill with oil and pray over him for healing.

What is clear from all the accounts of healing is they were not “shows.” No one with the gift of healing gathered a crowd and brought people together to be healed. The “faith-healing” gatherings which occur today are shams and dishonor God. Those who proclaim such are deceivers.

The Gift of Tongues: [γλῶσσα](#) and [διάλεκτος](#)

Two Greek words are used for languages: γλῶσσα and διάλεκτος. The word γλῶσσα may be used for the tongue, the physical organ of speech, and for a language. The word διάλεκτος is used only of a language. The occurrences always refer to known languages.

Usage of γλῶσσα for “speaking in tongues”	
Acts 2.3, 4, 11, 10.46, 19.6	
1 Corinthians 12.10, 28, 30, 13.1, 8, 14.2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 13, 14, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 39.	
Usage of διάλεκτος for “speaking in tongues”	
Acts 1:19, 2:6, 8, 21:40, 22:2, 26:14	

Paul knew a lot about the gift of tongues; he could speak in

more tongues than anyone (1 Corinthians 14.18). Paul loved the Corinthians but this church had more spiritual problems than any other. The problems were chiefly of two kinds: immaturity and carnality. The Corinthians had become so enamored with the gift of tongues that they regarded it as the most important gift. But according to Paul it was the least important gift. To correct the tongue speaking excesses of the Corinthians, Paul laid out specific guidelines:

1. The value of tongues was in their being understood (1 Corinthians 14.6-20).
2. Tongues were a sign for unbelievers not believers (1 Corinthians 14.21-22).
3. Uncontrolled speaking in tongues would lead an unbeliever to conclude madmen comprised the church (1 Corinthians 14.23).
4. No more than two or three were to speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14.27).
5. No one should speak in tongues unless someone was present to interpret what was said (1 Corinthians 14.28).
6. Women were forbidden to speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14.34).

If Paul's guidelines were followed today, how much tongue-speaking would exist? The answer is: none. No tongue-speaking church exists that follows Paul's rules. What conclusion should we draw from the Scriptures? The answer should be obvious: no legitimate tongue-speaking exists in Christendom today.

The Apostle Paul and Sign Gifts

Paul's great doctrinal discourse on sign gifts, 1 Corinthians 13, is popularly known as the "love chapter." Paul's point in this passage was the message that the most important elements of Christianity were faith, hope, and love, with love being superior to all. Paul recognized sign gifts were useful to the

church but that they were temporary. Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 13

¹If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵ does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, ⁶ does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹², For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. ¹³ But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

In the above passage, Paul wrote of the gift of prophecy, the gift of knowledge, the gift of faith, the gift of tongues. Paul declared these sign gifts would cease but that faith,

hope, and love would continue. Paul likened the enumerated sign gifts to things of a “child” which are put aside when one reaches adulthood. The sign gifts were “partial,” that is, they were useful to the church in its “child” stage but would cease when the “perfect” came.

What Did Paul Mean by τέλειος?

Much discussion has taken place as to what Paul meant by “[perfect](#)” in 1 Corinthians 13.10. To better understand his meaning we need to examine how Paul used the word elsewhere. Paul used the word 8 times (10x if we include Hebrews). The translated word is followed by [τέλειος] in the table.

Paul’s Usage of τέλειος	Verse
And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect [τέλειος].	Romans 12.2
Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature [τέλειος]; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away;	1 Corinthians 2.6
but when the perfect [τέλειος] comes, the partial will be done away.	1 Corinthians 13.10
Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature [τέλειος].	1 Corinthians 14.20
until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature [τέλειος] man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.	Ephesians 4.13

Let us therefore, as many as are perfect [τέλειος], have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you;	Philippians 3.15
We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete [τέλειος] in Christ.	Colossians 1.28
Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondslave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect [τέλειος] and fully assured in all the will of God.	Colossians 4.12
But solid food is for the mature [τέλειος], who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.	Hebrews 5.14
But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect [τέλειος] tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation;	Hebrews 9.11

An examination of these passages reveals that Paul's preferred meaning for τέλειος was "mature" rather than "perfect" as in perfection. Paul wanted the Corinthians to grow up and not remain immature in their thinking. The Corinthians had a problem with their attitude and with their use of spiritual gifts which Paul wrote to correct. Paul instructed them that love reigned supreme over the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (verse 8). The sign gifts were "partial," i.e., temporary. They provided insight into God's will but could only provide a limited, i.e., "partial" view, what Paul called "through a glass darkly" (KJV), or as above, "in a mirror dimly." Notice that the sign gifts that Paul enumerated were primarily *communication* gifts, i.e., gifts of prophecy,

knowledge, tongues.

Paul wrote they would cease when the “perfect” came. What did he mean by the “perfect?” Many conclude “the perfect” is Christ Himself. But such an interpretation is at odds with how Paul used the word τέλειος. Paul used the word in the sense of “mature” or “complete.” What became mature or complete? It was the Word of God that became “mature” or “complete” when the last book of the New Testament was written. When the Word of God was completed the need for the communication gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and tongues ceased (1 Corinthians 13.8).

God completed His Word through the apostle Paul. Most of Christendom thinks John wrote the last portion of the Scriptures. This is incorrect. John wrote his gospel and epistles (including Revelation) most likely in the late 40s and early 50s. Paul wrote 2 Timothy around 67-68 A.D. This was the last book written and it completed the canon of Scripture. How do we know this? In Colossians 1.25, Paul wrote:

ἧς ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ διάκονος κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν
δοθεῖσάν μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ

The NASB translation of this verse is poor; the KJV version is much better, which my translation follows closely, which is how the verse was translated by Darby (Colossians 1.25 DARBY):

“of which [Church] I was made a servant according to the dispensation of God that was given to me to you to complete the word of God.”

The word translated “complete” is [πληρώω](#) and means “complete,” “consummate,” “fulfill.” Most interpret this verse to mean Paul meant he was fulfilling God’s will. But given the context, it means much more (cf. Colossians 1.9, 2.10, 4.12, 17 for other uses of the word in this letter). Thus, 2 Timothy completed the Scriptures. It was the last book written in our New Testament.

God chose Paul to reveal “secrets” [μυστήριον](#) He had kept hidden. These “secrets” revealed a whole new program God had not revealed by the prophets, Jesus in His earthly ministry, and the ministry of the Twelve. This new program, the Church, the body of Christ, came as a result of God’s grace due to Israel’s unbelief.³ As such, the revelations God gave Paul completed the Scriptures since the Church, the body of Christ, was wholly unrevealed in the Old Testament. God’s prophetic plan was known. But God’s plan of the creation of the Church was not. It was never known that God would create a program in which Jew and Gentile would be equal in Christ.

Conclusion

Paul taught sign gifts would cease when the “perfect” came. The “perfect” came with Paul’s completion of the Word of God. Sign gifts were helpful and valid during the early days of the church to provide guidance as to God’s will, to authenticate the message and ministry of God’s servants, and as a sign to the Jewish people.

God still heals but not with healers. The gift of healing has ceased. God now communicates through the completed Word of God, not through the sign gifts of prophecy, tongues, or knowledge. Sign gifts disappeared between about 60-68 A.D. When these “gifts” appear today they are the result of fakery, emotionalism, or demonic activity. Christians involved in churches that practice these activities are outside of the will of God and reveal ignorance, immaturity, and carnality. The other miraculous gifts and powers noted above that Paul and the Twelve performed (exorcism of demons, immunity from poison, raising the dead, etc.) also ceased with the completed Word of God.

God has given the Church, the Body of Christ, the completed Word of God. Our practical, Christian-life challenge is either to become mature by living a life of faith based upon the Word of God or remain immature and unstable, living a life of

seeking God's will through signs and experiences (1 Corinthians 1.22-24).

¹ The following two statements are examples of denominations which maintain the importance of speaking in tongues. [United Pentecostal Church International "Our Doctrinal Foundation"](#): "We enter into the New Testament church through faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, repentance from sin, water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the initial sign of tongues (See Acts 2:1-4, 36-39; 11:13-17)." The [Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths](#) states: "The baptism of believers in the Holy Spirit is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit of God gives them utterance."

² Later MSS. contain these verses. Whether they were original or added is debated. This question is largely moot because what is described in these verses occurred according to Luke's history.

³ See the author's study, [Paul's "Mystery"](#) for further elucidation on this subject.

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