

The Temporary Sign Gifts

“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.” (Mark 16:15–20)

What Gifts Are Sign Gifts?

Before Jesus ascended to Heaven, He commissioned His disciples, giving to them commands to preach the gospel in all of the world. As He did so, Jesus also promised the church both His presence (Matthew 28:18-20) and His power (Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-8). As Jesus promised His presence and His power, Mark tells us that He also explained to them that there were signs that would follow or accompany them. These signs were as follows:

1. Casting out devils
2. Speaking with new tongues
3. Taking up serpents
4. Drinking deadly poison with no harmful effect
5. Laying hands on the sick for healing.

We also can read First Corinthians chapter thirteen and find that there were also the gifts of prophecy, understanding, and miracle working faith (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

What Was The Purpose Of The Sign Gifts?

What was the purpose of sign gifts? To answer this accurately, we should first determine what a sign is. The word translated sign is, in the Greek, “σημεῖον (*sēmeion*), meaning a sign, mark, token, miracle with a spiritual end and purpose.”¹ It is used “of signs, wonders, miracles which God did through someone, joined with *térata* (5059), things out of the ordinary, wonders (Acts 2:22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; 14:3; 15:12).”² These signs are by definition both extraordinary and uncommon. This means that they were not things that would be seen or experienced on a regular basis. Considering that the book of Acts covers thirty years or possibly a bit more than that, the occurrences of these gifts (There are thirteen appearances of semeion/signs in thirteen verses in the book.) that are listed are actually very few. The occurrence of tongues is found in chapters two, four, ten, and nineteen. Prophecy occurs only in chapters two, nineteen, and twenty-one. Healings are few There are two instances of dead people being raised. We should also notice that the instances of these signs and/or miracles decrease as history progresses through the book of Acts. Thus we can see that, out of thirty years or so of history recorded in the book of Acts, signs are of uncommon or extraordinary occurrence.

If these gifts are for signs, then we must understand what the signs point toward. Jesus’ commandment to His disciples was to preach the gospel. In Matthew, His words were, “*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:*” (Matthew 28:18–19) That is, they were to proclaim the Word of God. What does the Scripture say about these gifts? It says that they were signs that confirmed the Word of God. “*So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.*”

1 Spiros Zodhiates, [The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament](#) (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

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And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.” (Mark 16:19–20) And again we read, “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?” (Hebrews 2:1–4) When the apostles prayed for signs to be performed by the Lord’s power, they did so because they knew they needed God’s help in preaching the Word (Acts 4:29-33), and afterward they preached the Word with boldness and gave witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Also in Iconium the Lord gave testimony to His Word and granted that signs and wonders would be performed by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14;1-3).

When Scripture speaks of the Word being confirmed, it simply means that it is being established or validated. While we know that the Word is able to stand on its own, we also know that during the times of the Apostles folks did not have a complete Bible. Christianity was also a new thing for the whole world. It stands to reason that the Word preached would need an initial introduction and confirmation so that folks would recognize its veracity, and what better way to do so than by helpful demonstrations of the power of God? In fact, remember that Jesus said that there was only one sign that would be given to Israel and that was His being raised from the dead. *“Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12:38–40)* Notice that it is to the resurrection that Peter refers when he speaks of the signs that appeared on the day of Pentecost: *“This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.” (Acts 2:32–33)* In other words, the signs of tongues, etc were not signs that were separate from the resurrection of Christ; but they testified to the resurrection of Christ, being the result thereof. The sign gifts specifically related to the resurrection of Christ and the testimony thereof, and we are unable to separate them from either the reality of the resurrection or the testimony/word/preaching of the resurrection. Notice Acts chapter four once again: *“And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4:29–33)* These texts quite obviously demonstrate that the Word of God preached was the apostles’ testimony of the resurrection of Christ and the signs were a result of the resurrection of Christ in order to validate their words. These signs were not separate from the sign of the resurrection, but are actually part of that one sign which is the resurrection.

For Whom Were The Gifts A Sign?

For whom were the gifts a sign? While there were Gentiles who exercised and profited from the sign gifts, they were primarily given for the Jewish people. Paul said, *“In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe.”* (1 Corinthians 14:21–22) Paul quotes from Isaiah 28:9-13 to establish that tongues were given to Israel and not to Israel in general, but to unbelievers who would refuse the evidence for the resurrection of Christ and not believe! Far from being evidence of salvation that every believer must have, tongues were given to convict unbelieving Jews and to leave them without excuse!

We do see, however, that the gift of prophecy was given to believers as a ministry. We read, *“he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church.”* (1 Corinthians 14:3–4) Prophecy was given to the church to build up, encourage, strengthen, and comfort. This particular sign gift often confuses people, and many think that it refers to preaching. Prophecy and prophesying, however dealt with two things: foretelling or telling the future and forth-telling, which “denotes the one who speaks in the name of a god, declaring the divine will and counsel in the oracle³.” This foretelling is seen in the many prophecies of the future that are found in the Bible. Forth-telling is found in all of the inspired Scriptures, when God’s men spoke and wrote what they knew were the words given them by God. This differs from preaching, which is the declaration of the Word already written (2 Timothy 4:1-2). This gift of prophecy was probably the same as the gift of knowledge and understanding (1 Corinthians 13:1-3) and was a temporary gift which we were told would cease (1 Corinthians 13:8-9). To have a word of knowledge and understanding from God for the edification of the church was a sign that Spirit of the risen Christ was filling and guiding the person speaking, and was thus a confirmation of the validity of what the person said. We should note that it this gift has most definitely ceased, since the final word of prophecy gives this warning: *“I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”* (Revelation 22:18–19) Once the prophetic Word of God was completed, there has been no need for any other prophetic word.

Why The Sign Gifts Were Temporary

Why were the sign gifts temporary? We can give several reasons why the sign gifts were temporary.

First of all, the very nature of a sign is to point to something greater than the sign. Considering the fact that the sign gifts were given to confirm the Word, then they must do as John the Baptist did and decrease while the Word of God increased (See John 3:30). In fact, that is what we see in the Scriptures: as the Word of God grew and multiplied in the book of Acts, there came a time that we see fewer and fewer instances of the exercise of the sign gifts. We also see that Paul, as great of a man of God as he was, did not always exercise these sign gifts, but seemingly they began playing out. Epaphroditus, we read in Philippians chapter four, had become so sick that he had almost died. As Paul spoke of him, he stated that he sent Epaphroditus carefully to the Philippians, as though he was still

3 Gerhard Friedrich, “[Προφήτης, Προφήτις, Προφητεύω, Προφητεία, Προφητικός, Ψευδοπροφήτης.](#)” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 795.

somewhat fragile in health. He also later told Timothy, *“Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.”* (2 Timothy 4:20) These things show us that the sign gifts were fading, because they otherwise would have been exercised at will and used to heal these two brothers.

We must also remember that the sign gifts, while effective in helping some Gentiles, were primarily to the Jews. Paul quoted from Isaiah 28:10-12, saying, *“In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe.”* (1 Corinthians 14:21–22) This prophecy was primarily for the Jewish people who refused to believe despite hearing the Word of God and seeing the confirmation thereof. Tongues specifically were a sign for unbelieving people, we see, and not for the purpose of giving a person the assurance that he was saved. As we near the end of the book of Acts, we find not only that the occurrences of these sign gifts were decreasing but also that God was turning away from the Jewish people because they refused to believe the gospel. With the Jewish people not heeding the gospel despite the confirmation, this gift that was given specifically to help point them to faith in Christ faded away as the apostles turned their preaching toward the Gentiles. *“And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not. And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves.”* (Acts 28:23–29)

Let us also notice that Mark’s testimony shows Jesus specifically giving these gifts to the eleven apostles (Mark 16:11), and they are later called “signs of an apostle.” (2 Corinthians 12:12) The importance of this is great, because it was the apostles who were given the duty of testifying to the resurrection of Christ, being eyewitnesses (Acts 1:15-22), and these apostles had very specific qualifications, which were: being baptized by John, having followed Jesus throughout His earthly ministry, and having been an eyewitness to the fact that Jesus had risen and that He had ascended into Heaven. Obviously, the times of the apostles are passed, because there is no one alive today who could ever fit these qualifications. The apostles, bearing witness of the resurrection, had the resurrection signs given them to confirm the Word of the resurrection as the spoke and preached. With the passing of the apostles and their eyewitness testimony, these sign gifts passed.

Scripture also specifically testifies to the temporary nature of these gifts in two places:

“Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.” (1 Corinthians 13:8–10)

“Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?” (Hebrews 2:1–4)

These two passages hardly need any comments added, since one specifies that the gifts were temporary and would pass, while the other very plainly states that they were already in the past. By this we know assuredly that the sign gifts are no longer with us.

As time passed, the message of the resurrected Christ would also need no miraculous confirmation because there was no greater confirmation than that of the souls saved and lives changed by Jesus. Paul said, *“For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.”* (1 Thessalonians 1:5–10) Having trusted Jesus, the Thessalonians began to carry the gospel, and their changed lives gave adequate witness to the reality of the message of Christ. Jesus also stated that the very love of the saints one to another would testify of the reality of our conversion: *“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”* (John 13:35) There is no need miraculous of proof when we have living, walking proof of the miracle of of the resurrection and the reality of folks’ conversion before us.

The Primacy Of The Word

As has been previously stated, the sign gifts were given to confirm the Word of the apostles concerning the resurrection. It would not be fitting to retain the signs once a person had the fulness of the Word of God, which is self-attesting. Today we have the completed Bible, which testifies that it is the way people are saved: *“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* (Romans 10:17) *“Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.”* (1 Peter 1:22–25) It is also sufficient for the teaching of the church. Paul said, *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”* (2 Timothy 3:16–17) The Scriptures are proclaimed as being all that we need to teach us, correct us, and direct us as the saints of God.

Someone may protest that we need the Holy Spirit also; and the Scriptures definitely attest to that, while also showing that the Spirit would guide through the apostolic age so that we would be given the Scriptures: *“I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you.”* (John 16:12–14) Far from promoting the continuation of signs and wonders, Jesus told us that that Spirit would guide so that we would have all truth, and He would show us things to come. It is by no means a coincidence that the last book that God gave us is a book that tells us of things to come (Revelation 1:19), and it ends with this admonition: *“For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”* (Revelation 22:18–19) Why do we no longer need sign gifts? Because Scripture is sufficient. Why do we no longer

need special gifts and words of knowledge? Because the Bible is enough. Why do we not need prophecies? Because, if a prophecy does not agree with the Word of God it is false, and if it does agree with the Word of God it is unnecessary. We have a book filled with books, a true library of sacred writings, all sixty-six books being the Word of God; He speaks to us in these books, and we no longer have need of anything to confirm them because the very soul saving and life changing power of God is manifest in their message when it is preached and when it is believed.

Paul testified of this even while the sign gifts were still in use, saying, *“And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.”* (1 Corinthians 2:1–5) Paul knew that the most important thing was the people hear the Word of God and believe it, and He sought to bring Scripture to bear on every situation so that people would hear and believe God above things that they saw and heard outside of Scripture.

What Of The Signs And Wonders That We See Today?

First of all, we must remember that it is not what we see that is the standard of what is right or wrong, nor is it our feelings or the sincerity of others that is the standard. Only the Scripture is the standard. Isaiah said, *“To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.”* (Isaiah 8:20) Jesus took the disciples to the Scripture when He appeared to them on the Emmaus Road: *“Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”* (Luke 24:25–27) *“And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things.”* (Luke 24:44–48) We can also refer to the fact that Paul stated that the inspired Scriptures are God’s sufficient guide for the life, teaching, and correction of the church of God (2 Timothy 3:14–4:5). Remember also that the Revelation ends by establishing the sufficiency of Scripture, declaring that there should be nothing added to or taken away from it (Revelation 22:18–19). No matter what we see, who we like, or what may appear to be real, we must yield to the authority of the Scripture and what is said therein.

The alleged signs and wonders that we see today are nothing more than end times deception. Jesus promised that these things would happen: *“Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.”* (Matthew 24:23–24) This is not simply something that is in the future, because John said that it had already begun in his day: *“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.”* (1 John 4:1–3)

Some will say, “But these folks are sincere!” Or, “But I saw these things with my own eyes!” First of all, we just saw above that deceitfulness will be very strong, so we cannot always believe the testimony of our eyes and ears; and we definitely must not believe that above the Word of God! Jesus

said, *“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”* (Matthew 7:21–23) Folks can be sincere and yet unbelieving. Folks can do wonderful works and seemingly cast out devil and yet be unbelieving. Folks, I did not say that; Jesus said it!

Today there is a surge in meetings that are claimed to be revivals. We are told that they are great works and movements of God, and they are filled with babbling that folks call tongues-speaking, have what appears to be wonders of healings and deliverance, and people declare that they have prophecies or a word from God. Many people flock to these things, propelled by the excitement, moved by the idea that they might be part of a revival that will be written in the history books. Often the leaders of these movements declare that any and all who examine these things in light of Scripture are putting God “in a box,” or are Pharisees seeking to find fault. In reality, God continues to speak to us in the Bible and He warns us of these end times deceptions and their increasing frequency: *“But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.”* (2 Timothy 3:13) Instead of our putting God into a box, it is the deceivers and the deceived who put God into a box, because they seek to confine Him in a movement of which He is no part; they try to bind God to a spiritual event that He has not instigated; and they long to have God endorse what His Word explicitly denies.

I am not saying that we should despise these people. Far from despising them, we should feel for them. Our hearts should go out to them, because they are misled. Jude said, *“And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.”* (Jude 22–23) With great compassion we must warn against these heresies, cry out against them, and call our friends and loved ones out from among them. Pastors must speak out against them and give solemn warnings to the deceivers and the deceived, praying that God would give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth (2 Timothy 2:24–26). While deceivers are enemies of the truth, we must be friends to their souls and tell them the truth concerning the gospel and the sufficiency of the Word of God seeking to be a blessing to them.

the supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture/signs point to something and are not the end, but the thing to which they point is the end-goal; *contrast with mt 7:21-23* and signs done by unbelieving professors and 24:24 and deceitful signs- what is the antidote? Scripture
the sin of sign seeking
Paul’s preaching 1 Cor 2:1-5 (context 1:17-31)