

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

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### ***Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts***

#### **(Acts Special – The Purpose of the Sign Gifts – Part 2)**

##### **Introduction**

In Part 1 of this special study, we noted the presence and purpose of miracles during three major periods of human history:

- the period prior to Jesus' public ministry on earth;
- the period during Jesus' public ministry on earth; and
- the Transition period covered by the book of Acts, i.e. the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. after Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

During the period prior to Jesus' public ministry, we noted that the purpose of the miracles were primarily threefold:

- to provide divine revelation to man;
- to preserve human history in spite of Satan's strategy; and
- to preserve the Messianic lineage.

Also, after the formation of the Jewish race and the founding of the nation of Israel, the miraculous interventions by Yahweh into history were Jew-centric (with tangential benefits to Gentiles of course). Even so, the three basic purposes of these miracles apply.

During Jesus' public ministry on earth, the purpose of miracles documented in Scripture changed somewhat. The Messianic lineage had been preserved and the advent of Jesus was testimony to that. The primary difference between the miracles performed by Jesus and those which were performed at the hands of God's prophets and agents who preceded Jesus is attributable to the fact that Jesus was (and is) the promised Redeemer/Messiah of Israel and the Gentiles. The miracles performed by Jesus accomplished at least three things:

- validated His claim to be the Son of God;
- validated His message; and
- demonstrated the power of God by which His kingdom would be ruled.

After Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, we witness numerous miraculous events surrounding the salvation of unbelievers and the evangelistic efforts of believers during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. These are documented in the book of Acts and referenced in Paul's epistles as well as in non-Pauline epistles. We call this period of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. the "Transition" period since there was a transition between the continued offer of the kingdom to Israel and a completely new dispensation which is commonly called the "Church Age" or the "Age of the Body of Christ. The purpose of the miracles during this "Transition" period were as follows:

- to serve as a sign to unbelieving Jews;
- to validate the witness and testimony of those who presented the gospel;
- to fulfill prophecy.

These points require more explanation since they are fairly general, yet correct. As we noted in Part 1 of this special, Israel's "last days" had been prophesied to be a period during which Israel and the world would witness an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that would attend the presentation of the Gospel and the eventual establishment of the Messianic Kingdom. Peter makes the connection between the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues that surrounded the Jewish festival of Pentecost and these prophecies (Joel 2:28-32 cf. Acts 2:14-43).

It is *critical* to understand that eventually, as the rejection by Israel became full (the major theme of the book of Acts) and the gospel of grace was received with gladness by Gentiles, the transition to the new dispensation was completed and the signs and miracles associated with the kingdom-centric gospel ceased. Paul documents this fact in such passages as 1 Corinthians 13:8. Eventually, during this Transition period, even Gentiles who accepted the grace gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ spoke in tongues (foreign languages) which served as a testimony to Jews that God was going directly to the Gentiles with a message of salvation and hope – a message that a repentant Israel should have been the agents to disseminate.

### Questions and Issues Surrounding the Cessation of the Signs and Miracles

#### ❖ *What are the “Sign” Gifts?*

Of the twenty spiritual gifts named in Scripture, ten were temporary and are no longer functional or valid. These gifts are listed in such passages as Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30; and Ephesians 4:11. They are divided between temporary and permanent as follows:

<u>Temporary</u>	<u>Permanent</u>
Apostle	Pastor-Teacher
Prophet	Evangelist
Word of Wisdom	Teacher
Word of Knowledge	Helps
Discerning of spirits	Mercy
Faith	Giving
Healings	Exhortation
Miracles	Governments
Tongues	Ruling
Interpretation of Tongues	Ministry

When we speak of the “sign” gifts, we are referring to their more specific purpose as regards the nation of Israel and the purpose that God was promoting through them, i.e. a “sign” to unbelieving Israel. As such, the sign gifts were the temporary spiritual gifts of “healings,” “miracles,” “tongues,” and “interpretation of tongues.” It could be argued that the other temporary spiritual gifts could have had a similar affect upon unbelieving Israel and that is certainly true. However, we shall concern ourselves with these four spiritual gifts since they tend to be the most controversial today. In addition, the gift of “Apostle” and “Prophet” continued to a later point in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. than did the other temporary spiritual gifts as we shall see.

#### ❖ *Why Do We Believe and Teach that the “Signs” and “Miracles” of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. are No Longer Valid?*

The answer to this question should be fairly intuitive based upon the information previously presented; however, in the interest of providing more clarity, more elaboration will be provided. There are other ways of stating this question. If signs were given for the sake of the Jews, why should we find them in manifestation in the church which Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, founded? And if they were in Paul's churches, should they not be in our churches today, if we are supposed to follow Paul? There are various angles from which these questions can be answered.

**Answer** – Their purpose was directed toward the Jews and Israel even though Gentiles were involved.

While God continued to witness to the nation of Israel throughout the Transition period, the sign gifts (e.g. speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, miracles and healing)

continued. These sign gifts were performed by Jews and Gentiles alike. The exercise of these gifts by Gentile believers served dual and somewhat simultaneous purposes:

- Initially, it primarily provided evidence of God's acceptance of Gentiles associated with the Messianic Kingdom
- Eventually, as Jewish rejection was becoming final, the sign gifts exercised by Gentiles provided convicting evidence to unbelieving Israel

Eventually, as Paul testifies, these sign gifts began to cease as the "Transition" to a new Gentile-centric dispensation progressed to its conclusion. As Jewish rejection became final during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D., there was no longer any object or ministry for these signs to accomplish. We believe that at that time God withdrew these gifts.

**Answer** – God dealt with Jews in signs.

Paul recognizes this principle and relates it to unbelief. He states in 1 Corinthians 1:22 that "Jews request a sign" and in 1 Corinthians 14:22, he states that "tongues are for a sign." In 1 Corinthians 14:20-21, Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers to be mature in their understanding and know that this pattern of Jewish unbelief in the face of convicting evidence presented by the Gentiles was nothing really new. Paul uses the example of the prophet Isaiah who indicated that Jews would not listen to God even though He would speak to the Jews in the languages of Gentiles – specifically the Assyrians in Isaiah's time (Isa 28:11-12). This pattern was repeating itself in Paul's day and will repeat itself during the future Tribulation when some Jews will refuse to believe the "gospel of the kingdom" that will be preached to them by both Jew and Gentile believers.

Other Scriptures show that God has always dealt with Israel in signs. (See especially Exodus 4:8; Deuteronomy 28:46; Joshua 4:6; Matthew 12:38, 39; 24:3, 30).

The word "sign" occurs seventy-three times in Scripture which is dispensationally Israelitish, and only three times in Paul's epistles, and all of Paul's references clearly refer to Israel (Romans 4:11; 1 Corinthians 1:22; 14:22). Israel was born nationally in a cradle of signs when God delivered them from Egypt by mighty signs and wonders. Christ produced many mighty signs in proof of His Messiahship.<sup>1</sup>

Signs were thus a part of Israel's program. Christ wrought many signs, and He promised that His disciples would do even greater signs or works (John 14:12). In the so-called Great Commission of Mark 16:15-18, Christ promised that these signs would follow them that believe:

- Casting out demons.
- Speaking with new tongues.
- Taking up serpents or drinking poison without hurt.
- Healing of the sick.<sup>2</sup>

We believe the reason signs continued even after the new church, the Body of Christ, began under Paul's ministry is this: God did not in one stroke cut off and cast away His people Israel. That is not His way of doing things. Paul quotes Isaiah to the effect that "all day long" God had stretched forth His hands unto this disobedient and gainsaying people of Israel (Romans 10:21). It was not that God was offering the establishment of the Millennium to Israel after Paul came on the scene, but as Paul says, God was trying to provoke Israel to jealousy by beginning a new dispensation with Paul and by sending salvation to the Gentiles

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<sup>1</sup> Charles F. Baker, *Dispensational Relationships* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, 1989), 82.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

(Romans 10:19; 11:11). Remember that the Body of Christ is a joint body of Jews and Gentiles. Even though God had cast aside the national kingdom promises to Israel for the duration of this dispensation, He still had a purpose in saving some of them before the final blow of judgment would be struck in the desolation of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.<sup>3</sup>

The coming in of this established order awaited the complete judgment of Israel nationally and the completion of the revelation of truth for the Body of Christ.

We are now in a position to answer the question why these signs are not for us today. Not only do we have the fact that they were designed for Israel and that Israel has been cast away (Romans 11:15), but Paul clearly states that these signs are to cease. After speaking about the excellence of love in I Corinthians 13 he says: Whether there be [gifts of] prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be [gifts of] tongues, they shall cease; whether there be [the gift of] 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 (vv. 8-10). To illustrate this further he likens the existing conditions of the dispensation to childhood and the coming mature condition to manhood. The sign gifts belonged to the childhood stage, but Paul says, "When I became a man, I put away childish things" (v. 11). Therefore, it is very evident that these sign gifts were to cease as soon as the dispensation had grown up. And we believe it did grow up to maturity with the final epistles of Paul. Some people suppose these sign gifts continued right up to Acts 28:28 and then suddenly ceased. There is no more a basis for this supposition than for the one that God cast Israel aside with one sudden stroke. One who has studied the book of Acts is aware these signs seem to gradually diminish. W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, states:

There is no record of the continuance of these latter [signs, such as tongues] after the circumstances recorded in Acts 19:1-20.

We do see Paul manifesting the signs of an apostle in Acts 28:5 after the shipwreck. (See also 2 Corinthians 12:12; Romans 15:18, 19.) For a special reason, Paul was not healed of his thorn in the flesh, even during the Acts period. After the Acts period we know of several cases where Paul did not exercise any gift of healing on his most trustworthy co-workers. We may not know exactly when the last divinely wrought sign was manifested, although we do know the final prophecy to be fulfilled upon Israel came as late as 70 A.D.<sup>4</sup>

❖ *What About Those Today Who Claim to Speak in Tongues – Isn't Their Experience Valid?*

The crucial question here is what is the source since all that is "real" is not necessarily from God. If the purpose of tongues and the reasons for their cessation as presented in this study are correct, then the "source" of any tongues speaking today is not of God. There are several possible sources of the tongues experience today:

- Emotionalism or emotion produced jibberish
- Self-induced jibberish
- Demonism (only applicable to the unbeliever)

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

What one may observe in a setting where speaking in tongues is promoted is definitely real; however, all that is “real” is not from God. Ignorant, deceived believers can have a “real” emotional experience that is produced by their sincere desire to do something for the Lord and conform to whatever pseudo-spiritual pattern of behavior may be promoted by misinformed leaders. However, that “real” emotional experience is no more sanctioned by God than is the “real” emotional experience that is associated with sins such as “anger” and “jealousy.” In both cases, the experience is “real,” but not of the Lord.

Modern Pentecostal people put the emphasis upon tongues and even claim that one does not have the Holy Spirit if he has not spoken in tongues. Paul classifies tongues as the least of the gifts, even when it was in God's will, and says that he would rather speak five words in a known tongue than 10,000 words in an unknown one. Modern tongues people tell us that the lack of spirituality is the reason why Christians do not have these miraculous gifts today. Paul tells us that the most carnal church of his day, namely that at Corinth, abounded in the gifts, and further that these gifts were bestowed in a sovereign manner by the Spirit of God.<sup>5</sup>

We recognize that there are a few sincere Christians who are not Pentecostals who agree in general that what we have said is true but who reason that perhaps under certain conditions today God may exercise His sovereign power and give to one here or there one or more of these gifts. Perhaps such gifts would be given to a missionary opening a new field of work. Such people might seek to exercise the gift of tongues in the privacy of their own room, feeling that it might come as an indication that God was putting His approval upon their spirituality. Such people might shy away from all of the emotionalism and confusion of the more rabid type of Pentecostalism, but the same answer must apply to them as it does to the most radical. We grant that God is sovereign and can do anything He wants to do and no one can stop Him. But we question whether God would go against His revealed will and Word. We know that Jesus Christ has the power to come back to earth and appear here in His glorified body at any time on any day, but although He has the sovereign power to do it, we do not believe He will exercise that sovereignty; for He has revealed that He will not come back to this earth again until the end of the great tribulation. We believe likewise that God has revealed that tongues and similar gifts have been done away for this present dispensation, and therefore we do not expect Him to exercise His sovereignty and contradict His Word in so doing.<sup>6</sup>

❖ *What About Those Who Claim to Have the Gift to Heal People?*

Here again, as in the case of any apparent supernatural phenomenon, we must distinguish as to the source of such phenomenon. Modern-day so-called spiritual “healers” are not consistent with Scripture to put it mildly. The source of such modern-day healing phenomenon is one or a combination of the following:

- Fraud
- Psycho-somatic
- Satanically empowered

As in the case of modern-day tongues speaking, all that is “real” is not necessarily from God. Please note that I am not teaching that God does not heal people today, especially at the behest

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<sup>5</sup> Charles F. Baker, *What We Believe and Why We Believe It?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, revised edition 1995), 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

of the petition of his saints. I am decrying those who claim to be a channel of God's healing or possess the God-endowed power to heal like the Apostles of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D.

In the first place, the Scripture reveals that Satan has power to work lying signs (2 Thessalonians 2:9; Revelation 13:14). Since Roman Catholics, Spiritists, Christian Scientists, and others all claim authenticated cases of so-called faith healing, it is evident not all healing miracles are from God. If Satan is energizing in these false cults, may he not also deceive even Christians to get them on the wrong track and away from God's purpose in this dispensation? Then, of course, there is no doubt many supposedly miraculous hearings are of a psychosomatic nature. Finally, the majority of cases of supposed hearings, when investigated, are proven to be exaggerated or even fraudulent.<sup>7</sup>

While the gift of healing has passed away, as Paul said it would, we do have today what we might call elective healing. God is the sustainer and upholder of all life. We have full confidence in the efficacy of prayer, and we are sure God restores people to health when it is His will. Practically all so-called "divine healers" begin with the false premise that sickness is the result of unfaithfulness or sin, and that it is not the will of God that many of His people should be sick. There are many scriptural proofs to the contrary. Paul's thorn in the flesh, which he called an infirmity, apparently plagued his body to the end (2 Corinthians 12:5-10). Timothy was Paul's most faithful co-worker, yet he was often sick (1 Timothy 5:23). Trophimus, another faithful servant, had to be left behind sick (2 Timothy 4:20). Epaphroditus became deathly sick because he labored so fervently for the Lord (Philippians 2:25-27). Healing was just one of the several sign gifts. If one of the gifts is here today, there is no reason why all of them should not be. (Dispensational Relationships, 56)

Generally the only ones we hear about now are healing and tongues. Why can't these people who claim to have such gifts also cleanse lepers and raise the dead to life? The answer is obvious. (Baker, *Disp Relationships*, 56)

We believe in the kind of healing for today that Paul mentions in his prison epistles, but not in the gift of healing. In other words, we believe that God in His sovereign mercy heals His people in answer to prayer when it is His will, but we do not believe in divine healers. Any one who claims to have the gift of healing should read Matt. 10:8: "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give." This command of our Lord makes several points very plain. When the gift of healing was given it enabled the healers to raise the dead just as easily as to heal the dying. The healers were to bestow their blessing upon all of the sick freely, without price. If nothing more was said than this, modern healers would be proved unscriptural. But there is more. The power of the apostles to heal depended not upon the faith of the sick, but upon the gift of healing. When Peter and John healed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate, they did not ask him for a big offering and tell him if he had faith enough he could be healed. Instead, he was asking money from them, and they bestowed the divinely given gift freely upon him and he was immediately made whole. It would be ridiculous to say that a dead person had to exercise enough faith to be raised up, and yet the divine healers try to cover up and excuse their many failures by saying that the unhealed sick just did not have enough faith to be healed. What a travesty upon the Word of God and the work of the blessed Holy Spirit. There are many, and perhaps they are the majority, who believe that if a person can perform seemingly miraculous healings it is a proof in itself that he is truly sent of God. The great shrines of the Roman Catholic church boast as

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<sup>7</sup> Baker, *Dispensational Relationships*, 87.

many as or more authenticated cases of healing as do the Pentecostals. Practically every convert to Christian Science can testify to healing through Mary Baker Eddy's scheme which denies every fundamental of the Christian faith. So-called Spiritualists claim the powers of divine healing. Now if physical healing of the body is a proof of a divine work, then Roman Catholicism and Christian Science are proved to be preeminently divine, and by the same token Protestant Christianity is proved to be spiritually poverty-stricken.<sup>8</sup> (Baker, *What We Believe*, 46)

❖ *If the Gifts of Speaking in Tongues and Healing are No Longer Valid, When Did They Cease?*

While we cannot know the day, nor the hour when these temporary spiritual gifts ceased, it does appear that at least by A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, these two supernatural gifts no longer had a purpose and would have no longer been extant. In addition, there is reason to believe that these gifts had ceased several years prior to A.D. 70.

There are two ways of stating when the sign gifts were to cease. In line with what has been said above, they were to cease when Israel was finally given up to judgment by God. We may say this happened judicially at the end of the Acts period, but actually the sentence was not carried out for another ten years. On the other hand, we may say the sign gifts were to cease when "that which is perfect [mature] is come" (I Corinthians 13:10). The coming of that which is complete or mature does not mean our going to heaven, but the bringing in of the mature course of this dispensation of Grace. (Baker, *Dispensational Relationships*, 53)

It is not necessary to suppose that they were withdrawn all at a certain hour or on a certain day, but rather that they gradually diminished and passed away during that immediate era.) After the complete setting aside of Israel and the cessation of the sign-gifts God brought to maturity or perfection the revelation of truth for this present dispensation and we find that filling up of truth in Paul's prison epistles. Therefore when Paul enumerates the gifts in the prison epistle of Ephesians, he makes no reference to the sign gifts. We believe that this is the plain, Scriptural explanation of what happened to the sign gifts, and we further believe that when one seeks to revive them for the church today he manifests his ignorance of the purpose and will of God for this dispensation of the grace of God. (Baker, *What We Believe*, 44)

❖ *What About the Other Temporary Spiritual Gifts Such As Prophecy Since We Have Scripture Written After A.D. 70?*

The gift of prophecy was also a temporary spiritual gift. The gift of prophecy, like the gifts of healing and tongues, most likely did cease to be dispensed to believers who were not Apostles by at least A.D. 70. However, the office of Apostle continued to function throughout the remainder of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. Prophetic abilities were bestowed upon the Apostle John at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century in his writing of the book of Revelation. These prophetic abilities which were given to the Apostles were not designed to be "sign" gifts, rather they were consistent with the office of Apostle and given for the purpose of finalizing God's revelation to man.

It is to be understood that the offices of apostle and of prophet were also to cease, but for a somewhat different reason. All that the apostles or the prophets had to give to the Body of Christ is now written down in the Scripture. At the time Ephesians was written there was still a ministry for the apostles and prophets to perform. That the gift of healing had ceased is evident from the fact that Paul,

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<sup>8</sup> Baker, *Dispensational Relationships*, 46.

who before had performed every type of healing miracle, now leaves behind sick one of his most faithful workers (2 Tim. 4:20), and for another he prescribes a remedy for his oft sicknesses. Surely if Paul had the gift of healing at that time he would have exercised it upon these most faithful fellow-workers.<sup>9</sup>

❖ *Will There be a Time When Speaking in Tongues and other Such “Signs” and Miracles Ever Be Valid Again?*

Yes. Prophecies regarding Israel’s “last days” (a period that spans the Tribulation, 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent and Millennium) such as Joel 2:28-32 indicate that there will be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit during Israel’s last days. In context, Joel’s prophecy centers around events leading up to and immediately following the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. When we combine this passage with others that relate to the same period, we know that the preaching of the “gospel of the kingdom” during the Tribulation will be attended by some of the same phenomenon that was witnessed during those early days of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. We also know that there will be pseudo-christs and that the dictator of the Revived Roman Empire is called the Anti-christ in Scripture. He and his minions will be capable of performing counterfeit signs and wonders in the power of Satan.

Consideration should be given to the supernatural power of Satan (Rev 13:13-15; cf. Isa 14:12, 16-17). That Satan has power to perform supernatural things is clearly indicated in the Scripture (2 Thess 2:9).<sup>10</sup>

❖ *What is the “Danger” or “Harm” of Believers Today Seeking to Reproduce the Sign Gifts in Their Lives?*

Believers who seek to reproduce the sign gifts of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. are ignorant of God’s purpose in history and the purpose of these gifts. They will be easily manipulated by false teachers and susceptible to deception. They will funnel their money to promote a false understanding of Scripture and what they believe and what they do with their resources will be judged at the Bema Seat – a judgment seat before which all of us shall one day stand as believers. Furthermore, by pursuing and encouraging the pursuit of such invalid phenomenon, they are setting the stage for the deception and confusion of others.

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<sup>9</sup> Baker, *What We Believe*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), Volume VII, 239.