

Don Stewart :: What Are the Arguments from the New Testament That the Sign Gifts Have Ceased?

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Are All Spiritual Gifts Active Today? – Question 6

Those who argue for the cessation of the sign gifts at the end of the first century appeal to the evidence of the New Testament writers to back up their claim. The reasoning they give is as follows.

God's Word Is Important to Him

First, the Scripture makes it clear that God's Word is important to Him. Indeed, He had harsh words for those who falsely claimed to speak for Him. The Lord did not want anyone to add or subtract from that which He revealed. We read in Deuteronomy.

You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you ([Deuteronomy 4:2 ESV](#)).

Thus, to make certain that the extent of His Word to humanity was clearly marked, the Lord gave miraculous signs to confirm it. As long as God was giving new revelation to His people, He would confirm it with miracles.

The Word Will Be Confirmed through Miracles

We find that the message of Jesus Christ was to be confirmed through miracles. Indeed, when John the Baptist sent two disciples to Jesus to enquire if He truly was the Messiah Jesus answered John's question by performing miracles.

Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see 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 ([Matthew 11:4-5 NKJV](#)).

John would have been aware of the meaning of these signs; they were to confirm that He was indeed the Messiah. After Jesus rose from the dead, we also find that His message was confirmed through miracles. There is the testimony of the disputed passage from Mark's gospel. Jesus said.

Everyone who believes me will be able to do wonderful things. By using my name they will force out demons, and they will speak new languages. They will handle snakes and will drink poison and not be hurt. They will also heal sick people by placing their hands on them. After the Lord Jesus had said these things to the disciples, he was taken back up to heaven where he sat down at the right side of God. Then the disciples left and preached everywhere. The Lord was with them, and the miracles they worked proved that their message was true ([Mark 16:17-20 CEV](#)).

This promises the Word will be confirmed with signs following. This was the specific reason that is given for the existence of these signs.

While there is a dispute as to whether this passage belongs in the Gospel of Mark, what it teaches is consistent with what we know took place in the Book of Acts. Indeed, we find the message of Jesus being preached with miraculous signs confirming it.

The Word Had Already Been Confirmed

The writer to the Hebrews said the word had already been confirmed when he wrote. The issue was stated this way.

What makes us think that we can escape if we are indifferent to this great salvation that was announced by the Lord Jesus himself? It was passed on to us by those who heard him speak, and God verified the message by signs and wonders and various miracles and by giving gifts of the Holy Spirit whenever he chose to do so ([Hebrews 2:3, 4 NLT](#)).

Those who heard the Lord were the apostles. How was someone to know whether or not the message of the apostles was to be trusted? It was by “signs and wonders.” This verse says that God had (past tense) born witness to His Word by means of the sign gifts. This indicates that He was no longer doing it.

From this verse we find that the signs were given for confirmation of God’s Word. That was their purpose. It was for the first generation of Christians that these signs were given. The writer here is a Christian from the second generation. This suggests that the miraculous gifts were dying out when this letter was written.

The passage in Hebrews uses the same Greek word as we find in Mark – bebaioo. The word has the idea of something that is legally guaranteed. This gives further evidence that the main purpose of the signs was to confirm the gospel.

The Old Testament Did Not Need Confirmation

It is clear from the Book of Acts that the Old Testament Scripture did not need such confirmation. We read the following response of the unbelieving Jews to Paul’s teachings.

These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so ([Acts 17:11](#) NRSV).

Notice that it says they welcomed the message and then searched the Scripture to see if what Paul said was consistent with that which had been previously written. The Old Testament Scripture was accepted as God's Word; it certainly needed no further confirmation.

When Paul spoke to Festus, the Bible records him saying the following.

To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles ([Acts 26:22, 23](#) NRSV).

Jews and Christians alike accepted the authority of the Old Testament. This was not an issue which divided them.

The Church Was Built upon the Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets

There is more evidence from the New Testament. The Apostle Paul says the church was built exclusively upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. He wrote the following to the Ephesians.

Now all of us, both Jews and Gentiles, may come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. We are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself ([Ephesians 2:18-20](#) NLT).

The apostles and prophets were the foundation of the church. However, it has been some two thousand years since the time the foundation was laid.

The authority of the apostles is symbolized by the foundation stones found in the New Jerusalem. We read about this in the Book of Revelation.

Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb ([Revelation 21:14](#) NKJV).

They were given the privilege of spreading the message about Jesus.

Jesus said that it was their word that would reach the unbelieving world. He prayed the following to God the Father on the night of His betrayal.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word ([John 17:20 ESV](#)).

These apostles did indeed reach the unbelieving world with the message of Jesus.

Paul also wrote about Jesus Himself being the foundation.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ ([1 Corinthians 3:10-11](#) NRSV).

The foundation has been laid. Indeed, the church was built upon Christ. He, in turn, gave His authority to His hand-picked apostles.

Again it is emphasized that a foundation only has to be laid once. Once the foundation had been built upon, however, there was no need to lay again the foundation. This foundation was laid through the various sign gifts. First, Jesus had them then His apostles were also given these gifts.

The revealed Word of God to humanity is now complete. When their job was finished, there was no further need for the offices of apostle and prophet. If these two offices were mainly responsible for confirming divine revelation, then the need for the offices is non-existent.

Nothing More Is to Be Added to Holy Scripture

In the final book of the Bible, we find the Apostle John testifying that nothing more needed to be added to Scripture.

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book ([Revelation 22:18 ESV](#)).

Once the Bible was completed, there is no more need for the sign gifts, because nothing needs to be added to Scripture. In fact, the strongest of condemnation is given for those who would attempt to add to the completed Scripture.

The Lack of Mention in the New Testament Letters Shows the Sign Gifts Ceased

Another argument for the cessation of the sign gifts concerns their lack of mention in the New Testament letters. Apart from the Book of Acts, the letter to the Corinthian church is the only place sign gifts are mentioned. The list of spiritual gifts in the letter to the Romans ([Romans 12:3-8](#)) and the letter to the Ephesians ([Ephesians 4:11-13](#)) does mention the sign gifts. If they were permanent gifts, then one would assume that the other letters would have mentioned them. But they do not. This is another indication that these gifts were only temporary.

Once the New Testament was completed, and believers began to accept its authority, the need for confirming miracles ceased.

The validity of the gospel has other evidence to support it. For one thing, the Holy Spirit inwardly confirms the Bible as God's Word. He confirms the truth of the Word of God to the hearts of those who hear or read it.

In addition, there is also much objective evidence available to demonstrate its truthfulness. Miraculous signs are no longer necessary.

Therefore, the issue is not one of power but of purpose. God certainly has the power to work miracles whenever and wherever He pleases. However He only does so according to His own purpose – not ours. It seems from Scripture is that the miraculous sign gifts were only to be temporary, not permanent.

Summary To Question 6

What Are the Arguments from the New Testament That the Sign Gifts Have Ceased?

The Lord wants humanity to know the extent of His revealed Word. Consequently, with new revelation He gave certain sign gifts that would testify to the truth of this newly revealed Word.

The New Testament is appealed to as evidence for the cessation of the sign gifts. Jesus' ministry consisted of signs that He was the genuine Messiah.

The ending of Mark's gospel says the Word will be confirmed with signs. The writer to the Hebrews, a second generation Christian, says the word had already been confirmed through signs and wonders. This shows the promise was fulfilled in the first generation of Christians as well as that it was something that had occurred in the past.

The Old Testament did not need such miraculous confirmation. It was already accepted by Jews and Christians alike as having been divinely given.

This removal of the sign gifts fits with what Paul wrote to the Ephesians – the church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. A foundation only needs to be laid once.

In addition, the Book of Revelation condemns those who would add or subtract from Scripture. This gives the indication that Scripture was complete. If so, no more confirming gifts would have been necessary.

We also note that only First Corinthians mentions the sign gifts. Other passages in Romans and Ephesians, which also speak of spiritual gifts, do not mention the sign gifts. This is another reason to believe these gifts were only temporary.

Furthermore, throughout biblical history we do not find godly believers being able to perform miracles at will. They only occurred when God decided they were necessary for His special purposes.

All of this testifies to the lack of need in our day and age for miraculous sign gifts to confirm the Word. The spoken word was confirmed in the first century with the sign gifts. However, no more confirmation is necessary because we have God's written Word. The Holy Spirit confirms the truth of God's Word in the hearts of its listeners and readers. Thus, we should not look for signs and wonders to confirm God's truth.

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