

CESSATION OF SIGN GIFTS

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Since this is a Chapel message, I would like to challenge us in our ministry as well as to address the subject of cessation of sign gifts.

The subject of the epistle to the *Hebrews* is introduced as “*so great a salvation*” (1:14 and 2:1). The introduction involves the revelation of One named God’s Son (1:5-13) and then salvation available in God’s Son is unfolded in an exposition of other texts about Him (2:5-12:24). This introduction combined what Scripture prophesied about Jesus with what those who were with Jesus “confirmed” to *us*. (2:3, 4). This distinction between *us* and *those* with Him would become central to the ministry presented in *Hebrews*.

What is the point of the distinction?

Who does the author include in *us*?

The distinction means more than separating those who had been with Jesus from those who hadn’t.

Those who had been with Jesus were commissioned to speak about Jesus and God witnessed to the truth of their ministry by miracles. Their ministry was validated by sign gifts.

Those who hadn’t been with Jesus had what they heard about Jesus confirmed. The author to the *Hebrews* went beyond hearing to ministering about Jesus himself. And in his ministry in the epistle he clarifies the *point* of the distinction.

This clarification in the epistle concerns the *means of validation* of the ministry. Since the message about Jesus had been confirmed to be true and this message corresponded with what Scripture prophesied about Jesus, then these Scriptures were validated as true. Thus these Scriptures became the basis for validating as true the message of “so great a salvation”. Does this *means of validation* indicate that *sign gifts* have ceased as a means of validation? Two aspects of validation by signs will be considered in the Gospels and Acts as a basis for answering the question of the cessation of sign gifts.

Initially **Miracles** validated the ministries in the generation of fulfillment.

First, the miracles Jesus performed.

When Jesus was baptized by the prophet John, He was anointed by God the Father as the elect King. The voice from heaven spoke: “This is My Beloved Son, I delight in Him” (Matt. 3:17).

Immediately, led by the Spirit into the wilderness, Jesus was tempted by the Devil. After He fasted 40 days and 40 nights, He was hungry. Then the tempter challenged Him to exercise what the Father had declared was rightfully His: “if you are the Son of God” (Matt.4:3and6). As God’s Son, He had the right to satisfy His hunger with bread. As Son, He had the right to call upon the Father to deliver Him (Ps. 91:11, 12). Yet, in His quotations from Deuteronomy, He emptied Himself of His independent use of His rights as Son and in the position as Man, rejected Satan’s temptations to abandon the Father. As truly Man, He trusted His Father to provide in His time of need, unlike Adam or Israel had. In a final temptation the Devil proposed that Jesus could rule the kingdoms’ of the earth as Adam had, if only Jesus would worship him (Matt. 4:8-10). But as the perfect Man, He refused to go Satan’s way, since He would only worship and rightfully serve God, His Father.

In Jesus decisive rejection of the three temptations as a Man, He established the ground for the Spirit empowered miracles that would follow in His ministry of salvation. So, at the synagogue of Nazareth, He claimed fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1,2a which read “the Spirit of the LORD is upon Me because He anointed me to minister”... (Luke 4:16-21). In this perspective, Jesus’ message was; “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 4:17). Following McClain’s, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, God’s universal reign from heaven would be mediated by Jesus in the power of the Spirit over the control of evil on earth. These miracles, tokens of that reign, were mediated in “the healing of diseases and intense-pains, demon-possession, epileptics, paralytics” (Matt. 4:23-25).

When the imprisoned John the Baptist asked if Jesus was the One who was promised would come, He answered; “report to him, the blind see, the lame walk, those with skin diseases are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news” of salvation (Matt. 11:5). In these miracles, Jesus had surrendered the independent use of His deity as God’s Son, so that in His humanity as God’s Son, according to the Father’s will, the Spirit saved from evil in human life.

When Jesus explained what was happening, He used an analogy: “How can someone enter a strong man’s house and steal his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house” (Matt. 12:29). In the temptations in the wilderness, the Devil was tied up. Now the miracles are tokens of the Father’s reign, robbing the enemy of his destructive reign over individuals in Israel. They witness to the Holy Spirit’s power mediated in mercy through ministry of the Son in that Jewish generation. The ministry of the Son was none other than the Davidic heir (Matt. 1:1, 6). Thus the miracles were token-signs of salvation that would constitute the reign of God when the Davidic kingdom would be received by Israel.

Second, the miracles of those who had been with Jesus.

During the first advent of Jesus, Luke’s Gospel summarized His ministry: “the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (19:10). That work of salvation was described in the Gospel of John: “these things are written (1:19-20:29) that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that believing you might have life through His name” (20:31). In receiving Christ’s gift of eternal life, a believer is saved from the penalty of sin and death.

During the completion of that first generation, to demonstrate continuity with Jesus' earlier ministry, the Lord continued to validate their ministry with sign- miracles. The historical account of the book of *Acts* features the ministry of Peter, apostle to the Jews and the ministry of Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. Rackam compares the miraculous signs performed by each apostle to trace the evidence Luke advances to validate their apostolic ministries. Signs and wonders "were enjoyed by the apostles to an exceptional degree, in so much they became almost credentials of an apostle, the sign of the Spirit within.... Such were the miracle at Lystra and the similar "power" wrought by S. Peter at Jerusalem, the raising of Dorcas and the raising of Eutychus" (223,224).

Finally, **the Supreme Miracle** validates Scripture.

While Jesus robbed the enemy of God working miracles yet, in God's time, He submitted to the power of Satan in death on the cross. In the grave, overcome by death, Jesus as Man had no power to escape death Himself. Yet the Grand Miracle occurred when God's Spirit delivered Him from the grave in resurrection to eternal life. In addition, Scripture had anticipated that the final conflict would be between the final seed of the woman, the Son of God, and the enemy of God, the serpent. As we will propose, God's arch enemy is an angel. So in this context in *Hebrews* (1:5-14), a contrast is presented from Scripture between the name of angels and the name of the Son on earth. Only the Son is Heir.

It is not surprising that the Scofield Reference Bible took an unprecedented interpretation of Genesis 1:2. Rather than following the traditional view that Genesis 1:2 was the first stage of creation, the SRB concluded that the verse described a prior earth that had been judged. As a result, "the *earth* was unformed and empty – darkness covered the face of the deep; the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters" (1:2).

The theological explanation concluded that an original earth, occupied by Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12-14) who had rebelled in pride (Ezek. 28:12-19), had been judged. Yet in Genesis 3:1-5, this angelic enemy, appearing through a serpent, attempted to regain rule over the recently created earth. And he succeeded when Adam followed the serpent's word rather than Creator's warning (2:27). In view of Satan's conquest, the Scripture prophesied that a Promised One would overcome evil. Thus *Hebrews* quotes Scriptures that promised that the Heir would be God's Son rather than contending angels:

Psalm 2:7 --- the Anointed One would be begotten to eternal life when
He rose from the dead;

2 Samuel 7:14 --- this One was born as a son of David to reign on earth forever;

Psalm 89:27 --- angels will worship Him

Psalm 45:6, 7 --- the Anointed Son ultimately would be enthroned as
God on David's throne;

Psalm 104:4 --- The Son's work as Creator, would wear out, while He would be
without end.

Psalm 110; 1 --- the Son is now seated on the universal throne of God, where He
awaits His mediatorial reign on earth over His enemies.

This correspondence between what Scripture prophesied and what had been confirmed by the apostles about the Grand Miracle of the Sons advent, says something about Scripture. Scripture has been validated as a true and authoritative basis for the exposition of so great salvation (1:14 and 2:1).

Conclusion

These two considerations of validation provide support for drawing two conclusions.

First, by implication, sign gifts have ceased.

Sign gifts were given “according to God’s will” to validate the message of salvation in the generation of fulfillment (2:4). The validation is explained. The message of so great salvation was *confirmed* to “us”. (*ebebaiōthē*, guarantee, make firm). God testified through “them” with signs and wonders, with various miracles (*sunepimarturomentos*). Thus seeing the sign we took it that the message was confirmed by God. Bruce summarized the validation: “The witness of their informants however, was confirmed by signs and wonders and mighty works which attended their proclamation of the message; these were *tokens* granted by God to attest to the truth of what was proclaimed”.

When the author of Hebrews distinguishes himself from that generation, he provides the ground which validates his and our reception of the message of salvation. It is either sign-tokens which the apostles performed or the sign about which they spoke, Jesus resurrection from the dead, leaving an empty tomb.

Further, the distinction between the generation of fulfillment and subsequent generations provides the perspective to understand his and our ministry in the dispensation of grace (Heb. 4:16). The argument of Hebrews rests on the foundation he lays (1:5-14):

The Scripture, as validated by the Grand Miracle of the first advent of the Son, provides an authoritative source to validate the word of exhortation concerning salvation. (2:1-12:29)

The authoritative sources are selected Old Testament passages which are then expounded concerning “so great salvation” (Psalm 8:5-7; 22:22; 95:7-11; 110:1,5; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 40:6-8; texts in Exodus – Deuteronomy, etc.). The exhortation contains five warnings concerning the necessary response to the truths of this great salvation. Their response in this dispensation anticipates the Son’s return “a second time for salvation” (9:26-29).

In our ministry, our message is also validated as true when it is an exposition of Scripture. That is the challenge for our ministry. We need to be expositor’s of God’s Word.

Second, cessation of sign gifts is not the final word.

As sign gifts were given according to the will of God, so God’s will could change where His purposes are served again by signs. It is a question of God’s purposes and not any imposed necessity. So when the two Witnesses will prophesy concerning Christ’s appearance a

second time for salvation, their message will be validated by signs and wonders (Revelation 11: 3-6).

While the progress in revelation is determinative in recognizing any change in God's purposes, Scripture is not necessarily explicit declaring all instances of change. There may be circumstances within the dispensation of grace in which God's purposes may change. We suggest such possible circumstances in which a change in purpose appears to be plausible:

- a population which has never heard of the truth of the historical Jesus confirmed --- would God provide sign gifts to validate the Gospel message as true from God? (Muslim ministry, ministry among unreached peoples).
- a post-Christian generation who have rejected the confirmation of truth present in Scripture. --- Would God use with greater prominence a validation provided by acts of kindness and love? (The Samaritan Purse vs. an evangelistic crusade or loving pastoral care at times of crisis and need)