

The Signs of an Apostle in 2 Corinthians 12:12— How Apostleship Possibly Affects Cessationism

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Introduction

One of the puzzling verses concerning the sign gifts of the Holy Spirit is 2 Corinthians 12:12. The text says “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.”¹ The immediate impression is that somehow signs and wonders are tied to being an apostle in a unique way. Otherwise, Paul’s statement seems to be devoid of meaning. Yet, there are other believers besides the apostles who actually performed signs and wonders in the New Testament church.² This produces a tension that needs explanation. Therefore, several observations will be given which help to suggest the proper meaning of 2 Corinthians 12:12 and to frame the overall context of Paul’s beliefs about the signs of an apostle. The result will naturally lead to a further discussion of integration of this passage with other biblical statements outside the Pauline context.

Of particular interest for this paper is the thesis that the bestowal of sign gifts to various believers in the first century required apostolic presence. This could be the uniqueness behind Paul’s statement in our selected verse. If such could be proven, then one more argument for cessationism would emerge. The tendency of cessationists to tie the sign gifts to the apostolic age would not only rest upon the need for authentication within the early church (or some other early church argument), but could also be strengthened from a concrete tie to something that only apostles could perform. A similar question is asked directly by Kutilek:

In all this discussion, it seems that one very important question has been entirely ignored: how were the charismata bestowed or conveyed to individuals in the first century? It has been apparently an unchallenged assumption, first, that every Christian has—present tense—at least one spiritual gift, whether a sign-gift as the charismatics would claim, or a service gift as the non-charismatics affirm, and that in all cases the gift was directly and sovereignly bestowed by God on the individual.

¹ All biblical texts will be cited from the NASB unless otherwise noted. The NIV rendering of 2 Corinthians 12:12 is as follows: “The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance.” NA27 reads τὰ μὲν σημεῖα τοῦ ἀποστόλου κατεργάσθη ἐν ὑμῖν ἐν πάσῃ ὑπομονῇ, σημείους τε καὶ τέρασιν καὶ δυνάμεσιν.

² For example, one can note Philip the deacon in Acts 8:6. David E. Garland stated that “Working wonders and miracles does not make one an apostle, however. In the list of gifts in 1 Cor 12:28-30, those who work miracles are distinguished from apostles, whose main task is proclamation” (*2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary, Vol. 29, gen. ed. E. Ray Clendenen [Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1999], 530).

But in fact, is this so? Were the gifts communicated during the Apostolic age to believers directly by God without any human intermediary, or was a human instrument involved?³

Kutilek goes on to attempt a demonstration that only the apostles bestowed gifts of any kind, including non-sign gifts. This present writer is not willing to go that far and will only try to assess the sign gifts in this particular presentation. However, Kutilek is asking one of the overlooked but necessary questions that must be answered in the cessation debate.

On the other end of the spectrum, one finds those who see the sign gifts totally divorced from apostolic presence. G. Campbell Morgan, regarding Acts 8, notes that “God is not, however, dependent upon apostles that stay at Jerusalem. He has Philip the deacon, the evangelist. The Christian Church in her spiritual conception is independent of localities and men. She fulfills her true function by the presence and power of the Spirit in all such as allow Him right of way to administer the affairs of the Christ.”⁴ This approach provides a level of discomfort in light of 2 Corinthians 12:12. As with almost all theological issues, there is a range of varying approaches. The place to begin to sort it all out is the actual passage itself.

The Meaning and Context of 2 Corinthians 12:12

While we cannot address all exegetical issues associated with 2 Corinthians 12:12, several pertinent issues stand out. First, the word *signs* occurs twice in the verse. It is the same Greek word in both cases. The meaning of the second use is clear from the association of “signs and wonders and miracles.” Supernatural manifestations of God’s working power constitute the meaning. Most commentators opt for the view that the three terms constitute three aspects of the one idea of supernatural manifestation.⁵ There is no strong objection to this view.

The first use of the word, however, is another matter. It appears to give a kind of introductory term for the verse. The word *sign* (σημείον) is used in Paul’s writings eight times, including the two occurrences in 2 Corinthians 12:12. In the other six occurrences, the word refers to the “sign of circumcision” which Abraham received (Rom. 4:11), the “signs and wonders” which God worked supernaturally through Paul resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles (Rom. 5:19), the seeking of the Jews for “signs” (1 Cor. 1:22), the declaration that tongues are a “sign” to unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:22), the “signs and false wonders” of Satan during the tribulation period (2 Thess. 2:9), and as the “distinguishing mark” by which Paul signed his letters (2 Thess. 3:17). While Romans 15:19 aligns with the second use of *signs* in the verse, the last mentioned occurrence from 2 Thessalonians 3:17 may best fit this first use of *signs* in 2

³ Doug Kutilek, “How Were the Charismata Transmitted in New Testament Times?” Reprinted from *As I See It*, 7:1. *As I See It* is a cyber-blog of academic quality. I have not yet found how to access it online. However, Rod Decker, who has been in contact with Doug, sent me a copy of this particular paper.

⁴ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostles* (reprint ed., London: Pickering & Inglis Ltd., 1948), 159.

⁵ For example, see Murray J. Harris, *2 Corinthians*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 10 edited by Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 398; *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*; The New International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 875; Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 529; Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament; gen. eds. Ned Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 579.

Corinthians 12:12. Thus, a good way to translate the first part of the verse would be: “The *marks* of a true apostle....”

The second issue to address then becomes the content of the “marks” of an apostle. On the face of things, the verse seems to suggest that supernatural manifestations performed by Paul constitute such marks. The dative of the words – signs, wonders, miracles – can easily be taken as instrumental means by which an apostle can be known in some way.⁶ Similarly, Bultmann argues that the “fact that such miracles prove the apostle’s identity is shown also in 6:6f.... What Paul elsewhere regards as proof – the success of his mission (3:2; 1 Cor. 9:2) is not named here, not even the sight of the resurrected One (1 Cor. 9:1 and Acts 1:21f.)”⁷

Quite a number of exegetes go a different and broader direction when giving the meaning of the marks of an apostle per 2 Corinthians 12:12. Most of the time such analysts appeal to other passages in 2 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians, or elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, although at times one can find a specific thrust gathered from 12:12 itself. For example, while allowing that supernatural miracles were “confirming evidences of apostleship,” Gill argues that patience or endurance is part of the signs or marks of an apostle.⁸ He is joined in this assessment by Harris who notes, “It was this characteristic of fortitude that distinguished him from the false apostles, who also claimed to have worked ‘signs and wonders.’”⁹ There is some justification in the passage for this view since it states that “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you *with all perseverance....*” Belleville emphasizes both the miraculous deeds done by Paul as an apostle and the great perseverance he demonstrated, but elevates the latter: “Paul’s rivals, in all probability, also claimed the working of miraculous signs, wonders and mighty deeds. What distinguished Paul from them is captured in the phrase *with great perseverance....*”¹⁰ The interpretation that endurance is primary in the passage and that the performance of the sign gifts by the apostle is secondary is difficult to accept in the context. This is especially so in light of the fact that endurance is a universally desired trait of all believers in Pauline thought (cp. Rom. 5:4). A better explanation may be that the phrase on endurance simply highlights the conditions and manner in which the apostle exercised the marks (signs and wonders) of an apostle without being itself part of those marks.

⁶ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 579. There is a textual variant that places the Greek preposition ἐν before the second *signs*. This particular variant does not significantly affect the interpretation of the verse.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* translated by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 231. One potential problem with the limiting approach of Bultmann is that the following context of 2 Corinthians 13:1-4 appeals implicitly (although not explicitly) to the power of the Risen Christ working through Paul (the crucifixion is explicitly mentioned). However, although I rarely agree with Bultmann theologically, I agree with his general conclusion here on the meaning of 2 Corinthians 12:12.

⁸ John Gill, “2 Corinthians” in *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, Vol. 8; The Baptist Commentary Series, Vol. 1 (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809; reprint ed., Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989), 844.

⁹ Harris, *2 Corinthians*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 398.

¹⁰ Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, gen. ed., Grant R. Osborne, Volume 8 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 314. See also C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*; Harpers’ New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 320-22.

Among interpreters, Martin shows the most breadth in handling the signs of an apostle in the passage. He comments that

First and foremost in Paul's mind as a mark of a true apostle is that the result of his preaching is changed lives.... Only God can do that (1 Cor 3:5-9). Paul 'founded' the church at Corinth; he came as an ambassador of reconciliation (5:18-21). The Corinthians were the seal of Paul's apostleship (1 Cor 9:2; 2 Cor 3:1-3).... In summary of our present phrase, we see that Paul's ministry and life basically encompass the 'signs of a true apostle.' His preaching was instrumental in the formation of the Corinthian church; his life was one of purity and honesty. For Paul "the signs of an apostle were the insignia of the apostleship."¹¹

To this catalog of data, Martin adds his conclusions that miraculous signs "are not the primary criterion for deciding whether or not a person is an apostle"¹² and that Paul "is trying to show his readers that external signs are not enough."¹³ Martin finishes with a flurry:

He [Paul] is a true apostle because God called him. Paul is pleading with the Corinthians to dispense with the secondary criteria (signs, wonders, mighty works) and judge would-be apostles by the yardstick of the primary criterion, named the *signa apostolic* of the crucified Jesus (13:1-4). If the Corinthians would follow this standard, then Paul would be seen by them as not being inferior to the super-apostles or the false apostles. But until this is done, Paul may continue to seem second rate when compared with them.¹⁴

The appeal here is to the following context of our passage. In light of that, not only is Martin arguing that the marks of an apostle are broader than the signs and wonders performed by Paul, he is also suggesting that Paul is directly downplaying his supernatural miracles.

What should be made of such argumentation? First, it is possible to hold the view that the marks of an apostle are more than signs and wonders without denigrating the role that supernatural manifestations play in apostolic experience. Martin simply oversteps. He may do so because of the humility Paul shows earlier in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 although he does not allude to it in his statements above.

Second, there is a methodological concern that comes to the fore when reading commentaries that emphasize proofs of apostleship other than signs and wonders *when talking about 2 Corinthians 12:12*. Lists as those above are at best the development of a biblical theology on apostleship at the level of book or Pauline corpus. However, such lists, while serving a purpose for proper interpretation overall, cannot be read into 2 Corinthians 12:12. The verse contributes to the list more than the list contributes to the verse. While there may be a reciprocal relationship between this verse in its immediate context and the context of the entire

¹¹ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40, gen. eds., David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 434-35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 435.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 437.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 438.

book, the words of the text cannot be overridden by the catalog of data from elsewhere in a direction contrary to its immediate context.

Third, the justification for understanding that Paul is focusing on signs and wonders in 2 Corinthians 12:12 (even if the marks are more than supernatural manifestations) can be found in the preceding context. This section undermines conclusions such as those of Martin. The entire section from chapters 10 to 13 constitute a discussion of Paul's person and how he should be viewed by the Corinthians. Much of the data for Martin's view comes from chapters 10-11. However, in chapter 12 there is a move on the part of Paul to highlight his apostolic authority in miraculous matters. He discusses a man who was caught up to the third heaven to receive direct revelation from God (v. 1-4). Virtually all commentators, including Martin, agree that this man is Paul's way of talking about himself.¹⁵ Paul may talk in this third person way to highlight the issue of boasting which has been raised earlier and will continue to be discussed.¹⁶ He has moved from a defense of his apostleship on other grounds (chapter 11) to a new point in defending his apostolic authority – he indeed performs signs and wonders and miracles. He can and has received revelation from God.

Even then Paul suggests he cannot boast about the revelations he receives. He goes on to share with the Corinthians the fact that God had allowed Satan to attack him with a thorn in the flesh to prevent such boasting (v. 7). It is possible that the Corinthians knew of his malady from his prior visit to them. They may have wondered why he failed to heal himself (I wonder that today about famous faith healers who get sick and die). At any rate, the context of 2 Corinthians 12:7-11 may explain a possible objection to his status as an apostolic revelation receiver. Verse 12 may serve then as a summary statement of the entire section of 2 Corinthians 12:1-12. Most commentaries end the section at verse 10 so that verse 12 is the second verse of the next section. However, the actual shift takes place in verse 13 where Paul begins to talk about the Corinthian situation and his desire to visit and assist them.

In light of all of these considerations, 2 Corinthians 12:12 must certainly refer to the rather strong role that apostolic performance of signs and wonders and miracles play in marking a man as an apostle. With this understanding as background, it remains to be seen if integration with other texts suggests a theological conclusion that one unique way that these marks play out is that only apostles could bestow sign gifts to others who were not apostles.

Other Pauline Passages

Three other Pauline passages potentially speak of human instrumentality in the giving of spiritual gifts to others. Romans 1:11 states, "For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established."¹⁷ Apparently, one out of the many reasons Paul wanted to visit the church at Rome was to "impart" or share some spiritual gift. The word for gift is *pneumatikon* not *charisma*. This observation may not make a big difference in light of the former being part of the introductory verse for 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Here, also, there is an array of opinions. Newell represents one view when he notes: "Spiritual gift' does not refer to the 'gifts' of I Corinthians 12; but to such operation of the Holy

¹⁵ Ibid., 391.

¹⁶ Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 835.

¹⁷ NA27 reads ἐπιποθῶ γὰρ ἰδεῖν ὑμᾶς, ἵνα τι μεταδῶ χάρισμα ὑμῖν πνευματικὸν εἰς τὸ στηριχθῆναι ὑμᾶς.

Spirit when Paul with his message should come among them, as would enlarge and settle them in their faith.”¹⁸ The idea of spiritual encouragement in general through the preaching of the Word appears to be paramount in Newell’s mind. On the other side is Haldane who remarks: “The opinion of Augustine that this means the love of one’s neighbor, in which he supposes the Church at Rome was deficient, has no foundation. It was not a new degree of the Spirit of sanctification that he desired to communicate, for this Paul had it not in his power to bestow, 1 Cor. iii., 6. He appears to refer to some of the extraordinary gifts conferred by the Apostles, by which they might be more established in their most holy faith.”¹⁹ By extraordinary gifts Haldane no doubt refers to the sign gifts. Beyond that he also avers that the Apostles were the ones that passed them on to others.

If one accepts Haldane’s conclusion (which would need further justification), one must deal with the fact that spiritual gifts apparently already existed among the Roman Christians according to chapter 12, with even prophecy being mentioned.²⁰ However, this is not a serious problem. There are those at Rome who have already had apostolic contact such as Prisca and Aquila (16:3).²¹ Hence, one cannot deduce that the Christians who are at that time in Rome received any sign gifts apart from apostolic bestowal if, indeed, sign gifts are in view in the first chapter of Romans.

The Pastoral Epistles also provide two possible examples of human instrumentality in the bestowal of spiritual gifts. The two may need to be taken together. In 1 Timothy 4:14, Paul urges the young Timothy: “Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery.” Later in 2 Timothy 1:6, the Apostle tells his spiritual son, “And for this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” In both cases, the word *gift* is from *charisma*. Ironside takes the gift here as that of being a pastor.²² Hendriksen notes “This imposition of hands symbolizes *the transfer* of a gift from the Giver to the recipient. In the present instance it signifies that gracious act of the Holy Spirit whereby he confers his special favor upon Timothy, enabling him to carry out the duties of his important office as apostolic representatives.”²³ While most commentaries speak of the pastoral duties of Timothy

¹⁸ William R. Newell, *Romans: Verse-by-Verse* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1994), 12.

¹⁹ Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1878), 38. Not surprisingly, the Augustinian monk Martin Luther follows closely the view of Augustine from which Haldane distances himself. See Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, translated by J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 22-23.

²⁰ It is beyond the scope of this presentation to debate the identification of the gift of prophecy in Romans 12.

²¹ This state of affairs would be contrary to Woodrow Kroll who argued: “Knowing that this local church had not had the apostolic stamp of approval placed on it, Paul wished to visit them to do so” (*The Book of Romans: Righteousness in Christ*, Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series, gen. eds., Mal Couch and Ed Hindson [Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002], 9). This could only be true if Paul held a special status among apostles which Paul argues against in 2 Cor. 10-13.

²² H. A. Ironside, *Timothy, Titus & Philemon* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1947), 109.

²³ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 159-60.

due to context, the text is not explicit about the identity of the gift. One cannot rule out any supernatural manifestation gift but nothing in the context demands it.

Another item of note is that in the first passage it is the elders (presbytery) which lay on hands to bestow. In the second passage, Paul speaks of himself as the one who imparted the gift to Timothy. Kent suggests that the laying on of hands should be viewed as something which accompanies the impartation of the gift and not as instrumental.²⁴ However, the more important question for consideration here may be whether the two passages are talking about the same event. Virtually all the commentaries seem to suggest so.²⁵ However, what are the implications of this deduction? For one, it would suggest that *if* any kind of supernatural manifestation gift is involved, there is apostolic presence for its bestowal.²⁶ Nonetheless, one cannot push the data too far. The passages leave a kind of ambiguity due to the absence of information. As Litfin suggests,

The language [of 2 Tim. 1:6] is highly imprecise and may reflect nothing more in the apostle's thinking than a general association between Timothy's ordination (which involved both a prophetic message and the laying on of hands by Paul and the elders) and the young man's awareness of his own abilities. Surely the language does not bear the weight of any detailed conclusions about how spiritual gifts are bestowed, much less full-blown theories of apostolic succession or of ordination as a means of grace.²⁷

In light of this predicament, one should not be overly dogmatic about the verses in the Pastorals. However, the survey has shown that in other Pauline epistles outside of the Corinthian correspondence, when the matter of bestowal of gifts comes up, unless something has been missed, there is always apostolic presence.

Patterns in the Book of Acts

When looking at the narrative given in the book of Acts, one must remember the oft-voiced caution about using narratives for prescription. However, observed patterns are helpful in understanding how God has decided to do things. Ryrie remarks, "My own feeling is that we should attempt to follow as many details as possible for the patterns for church life as they are revealed in the New Testament. Otherwise, there is no satisfactory answer to the question of

²⁴ Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 164-65.

²⁵ For example, Ironside, Hendriksen, and Kent all agree that there is one event in mind covered by the two passages.

²⁶ Earlier Kutilek was quoted to say that even non-sign gifts have ceased due to the lack of apostolic bestowal. He would no doubt take some of his impetus for the view from the Pastoral Epistle passage under consideration. I am somewhat hesitant to embrace this view since the workings of spiritual gifts are intertwined thoroughly with the doctrine of the body of Christ. It seems to me that, if all spiritual gifts go, we must ditch the entire metaphor of the body and all that it means for the Church. Such should not be overthrown without extreme caution and much study. It may not prove to a fruitful trail to travel.

²⁷ A. Duane Litfin, "2 Timothy" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, eds., John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 750.

why the patterns are there. And since they are there, I want to use them today.”²⁸ It is in the same spirit that an investigation of supernatural manifestations in the book of Acts is necessary to provide assistance on the matter at hand – answering the question of whether the bestowal of supernatural manifestations required or normally required apostolic presence.

Transitions in the Book of Acts

The transitional nature of the gradual unfolding of the work of the Spirit in the book of Acts (chapters 2, 8, 10-11, 19) is instructive. In Acts 2, the Church is birthed with the coming of the Spirit with clear manifestations. There is a sound like wind (v. 2). There is the visible miracle of tongues of fire (apparently never repeated—v. 3). The apostles speak in tongues (for the purposes of communicating to the Pentecost crowd—v. 4ff). Some scholars such as Gaebelein argue that all assembled believers at that time spoke in tongues.²⁹ The textual evidence seems to go in a different direction. As Ger notes, “The traditional understanding has been that the recipients of the gift of tongues were the full company of the one hundred twenty believers. While this is possible, it is difficult to reconcile with the internal evidence of the passage. Luke seems to indicate that the supernatural empowerment that morning was only granted to the twelve apostles.”³⁰ Ger goes on to give three reasons for understanding the Twelve as the only ones speaking in tongues at that moment: (1) the identification of the referent for “they” in Acts 2:1 as going back to the apostles in the previous context of the latter part of chapter 1; (2) the identification of the tongue-speakers as Galileans; and (3) God’s supernatural work in the book of Acts (2, 8, 10-11, 19) to authenticate the apostolic calling.³¹

The second aspect of the transition is found in the narrative in Acts 8 involving Philip the “deacon” ministering to the half-Jewish Samaritans (v. 4-13). What is interesting for our purposes here is that many are coming to accept Jesus in light of the supernatural miracles performed by Philip such as healing and exorcisms (v. 6-7, 13). However, no one else is doing signs and wonders other than Philip. We know that Philip is one of those who left Jerusalem due to persecution and that he is not an apostle (v. 1-2). Apparently, he is not bestowing on others the ability to perform signs and wonders even when he can do them himself. Interestingly, Peter and John make a visit to Samaria when they hear about the great things happening (v. 14-24). As part of the transitional outpouring of the Spirit, they pray that the Samaritan believers might receive the Holy Spirit. This is where Simon (the Magician) offers money to obtain the authority to give the Spirit to others when he *saw* the receiving of the Spirit (v. 18). If the occurrence here was a silent, spiritual reality of the Spirit’s bestowal there would be no reason for the mention of him seeing something. Apparently what has happened, implied but not described, is supernatural manifestation – probably speaking in tongues as at Pentecost. Philip did not bestow this ability.

²⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), 404.

²⁹ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* (reprint ed., Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), 39. Gaebelein’s work was originally published in 1912.

³⁰ Stephen Ger, *The Book of Acts: Witnesses to the World*, Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary, gen. eds., Mal Couch and Ed Hindson (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2004), 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

Only the apostles bestowed this in the transitional narrative account.³² More than any other passage in the New Testament, the Acts 8 account forces the interpreter to consider the possibilities of apostolic bestowal of sign gifts.

The third aspect of transition is found in Acts 10. The story of the Gentile Cornelius begins with an angelic visit giving him revelation (vv. 3-6). At this point, one cannot say that Cornelius is any more than a Gentile searching for God but who believes that He can be found associated with the Jewish community of faith. The revelatory information given to Cornelius does not establish him as an apostle, but it does lead him to have an encounter with apostolic presence. Peter comes to preach the gospel to Cornelius four days later after his vision from God (vv. 19-20, 30). After his brief message (vv. 34-43), the Holy Spirit comes upon the Gentiles of Cornelius' household (v. 44) with the result that the Gentiles speak in tongues as a manifestation of the Spirit (v. 46). While the order of events in this account for Gentile reception of the Spirit may be slightly different than the reception of the Spirit by the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, there is one commonality.³³ The Spirit does come, and there is tongue-speaking. In this case, in the transition of the book of Acts, God calls for an apostle to be the instrument of granting the Spirit along with supernatural manifestations.

The fourth transition point is found in Acts 19:1-7. Each of the previous turning points in the sequence found the Apostle Peter involved in opening up the possibilities of reception of the Spirit and, somewhere in the context of the account, the occurrence of supernatural manifestations. In Acts 2, only the apostles initially speak in tongues. It is not clear what happens along the path after that. In Acts 8, Peter, along with John, bestows the Spirit and supernatural tongue-speaking by means of the laying on of hands. In Acts 10, Peter alone is present when the Spirit is bestowed with the associated tongue-speaking, but this time it is only by his speaking that God grants the bestowal. Now in Acts 19 it is the Apostle Paul's turn to open doors in God's revealed plan. In meeting the disciples of John the Baptist, he lays hands on them to update them in their faith. The Spirit comes upon them and they speak in tongues (19:6).

The summary conclusion of these major transition points in the book of Acts is that there is apostolic presence at the time of supernatural manifestations, many of them clearly a bestowal by means of the Spirit's work through individual apostles and no one else. However, there is more in the book of Acts to consider.

Peter and Paul

Traditionally, the book of Acts is sometimes called the book of the "Acts of the Apostles." From one perspective, this can be narrowed down to the book of the "Acts of Peter and Paul." Little information is given about others. In addition to Peter's work on the day of Pentecost, he heals the lame man in Acts 3. In Acts 5, Peter miraculously bestows death upon Ananias and Sapphira, which they probably did not view as the bestowal of a sign gift! The immediate context following this fearful event shows the people placing the sick on cots out in the street so that Peter's shadow might fall on them. This may simply show superstition in the

³² B. B. Warfield argues that only apostles could bestow sign gifts to others on the basis of the Acts 8 passage as given here (*Counterfeit Miracles* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918], 22). Jon Ruthven, a Pentecostal/Charismatic disputes this argumentation in *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Post-Biblical Miracles* (Revised ed., Tulsa, OK: Word and Spirit Press, 2011), 85-86.

³³ For a list of the differences with discussion see F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 230.

minds of the people and not any true intention on God's part to use Peter's shadow to heal. Later in Acts 5, Peter and all of the apostles are delivered from prison by an angel of the Lord. Here they receive the benefit of God's supernatural activity but do not exercise that activity themselves. A repetition of sorts happens in Acts 12 where Peter alone is imprisoned and released through supernatural intervention of an angel in response to the prayers of believers in his behalf.

Similarly, the accounts in the life and ministry of Paul demonstrate the ongoing relationship of the apostle to signs and wonders. The account of Paul's conversion and the ministry of Ananias on his behalf will be dealt with in a later section. Several other examples are instructive. During the first missionary journey, Paul causes blindness to fall upon the false prophet Bar-Jesus (13:6-12). Then in Acts 14:3, Paul with the entire missionary team was "speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands." No reference is made to granting these gifts to others, but certainly apostolic presence may have allowed it if the thesis of this paper has any merit. A man lame from birth is healed by Paul at Lystra in 14:8-11 similar to what Peter had done in Acts 3. In Acts 16, the account states that Paul was guided by special revelation from the Holy Spirit in his travels, including the famous Macedonian vision (v. 6-10), and that he was delivered supernaturally from prison (v.26ff). A general statement of Paul's later ministry at Ephesus is given with the words: "And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul" (19:11). The text even says that handkerchiefs and aprons were sent from the body of Paul to the sick, who were healed or freed from demons (v. 12). Even more eye-catching is the raising of poor Eutychus seemingly from the dead (20:9-10), something Paul was constrained to do after his preaching had put him to sleep! In addition, Paul experiences a poisonous snake bite with no consequences (28:3-6) and continued an ongoing ministry of healing sometimes with the laying on of hands (28:8-9). In short, the performance of signs and wonders appears to be a common experience for the Apostle Paul. However, in the Acts narratives it is not clear that he ever gave the sign gifts to others except for the transitional moment in Acts 19 cited earlier.

Other Occurrences of Signs and Wonders in Acts

From the above discussion, it is already seen that others besides apostles performed signs and wonders as Philip did in Acts 8. Philip shows up again in Acts 21:9 with four daughters prophesying presumably with prior apostolic contact although not every detail is known. Paul had come to stay with Philip (v. 8), and the time spent in that home became the occasion for the prophet Agabus to come down from Judea to make a prophecy about Paul's future imprisonment if he went to Jerusalem (v. 10-14). It is unclear if Agabus had previous apostolic contact and bestowal of prophetic giftedness. His departure from Judea may have placed him where he had easier contact with some of the apostles. The observation cannot be pressed further. Stephen, also one of the seven "deacons" of Acts 6 like Philip, performed "great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:7). Of course, he clearly had apostolic contact with the laying on of hands for commissioning by the apostles (v. 6). Furthermore, while Peter and Paul receive most of the attention for performing signs and wonders, there are clear statements in the book of Acts that all of the apostles were involved in doing signs and wonders (2:43; 5:12).

What is to be made of all of the patterns found in the book of Acts? For one thing, it is certain that there is no clear occurrence of anyone other than an apostle bestowing the ability to perform sign gifts to another believer. The passage raising the most curiosity to the question at

hand is Acts 8 where Philip, who is not an apostle, does not pass on the ability to perform sign gifts to others. However, Peter and John, who are apostles come and do so. The descriptive nature of the literature should be considered and not taken super-dogmatically. Perhaps we should say that the data does not demand the conclusion that only apostles could bestow sign gifts to others, but it does allow for such an understanding.

Possible Objections

In this section, possible objections will be raised to the idea that only apostles could bestow sign gifts to other believers. One is canonical in scope; another is an exegetical example; a final one is somewhat theological in nature.

Antecedent Revelation to the Church Age

One of the theological conundrums relative to the sign gifts of the Church Age is the relationship of those sign gifts to the signs and wonders cited throughout antecedent revelation. Is there continuity, discontinuity, or both between the more ancient occurrences and those practiced by the early Church? Cessationists offer a discontinuity between the sign gifts of the Apostolic Age and the current absence of sign gifts in the twenty-first century. What about the other direction? Is there discontinuity between the signs of the Apostolic Age and what preceded them? Another way of asking the question is to wonder if signs and wonders are performed in any unique fashion relative to the Church Age? The answer is important to consider. All cessationists affirm that the apostolic office in any formal sense is something initiated by Christ and installed as part of the Church. Thus, there is no apostolic office in the Old Testament. Yet, signs and wonders occur in the Old Testament without any apostolic presence.

Cessationists often cite the two major Old Testament times where signs and wonders were performed: (1) the time of Moses (Ex. 3ff) and (2) the time of Elijah and Elisha (1 & 2 Kings). The time of Christ and the Apostles constitutes the third leg of the major manifestations of the Spirit within biblical history.³⁴ Of special interest is the New Testament narrative given in Mark 9:38. Here John informs Jesus that the disciples found someone casting out demons in the Savior's name. This believer was doing signs and wonders while not being in the "special" group of disciples that Jesus was molding into His future Apostles. It would be difficult to visualize, given the nature of this account, that anyone in the inner circle, including even Jesus Himself, had bestowed that power on the man in question. He was not part of the original group sent out. Yet, he possessed the ability to perform signs and wonders apparently without the benefit of human instrumentality from elsewhere.

For the one who considers the possibility that only apostles bestowed sign gifts to others, such antecedent revelation apart from any planned apostolic presence creates a counter-argument. The Mark account above is especially troubling since the original apostles are already in their preparatory phase and are performing some signs and wonders as Jesus sends them out. The interpreter must, however, practice dispensational sensitivity. The formal functioning of the sign gifts through apostles formally begins on the day of Pentecost for *the Church*. Furthermore, God's purposes for the sign gifts involve the baptism of the Spirit and the creation of the body of

³⁴ This is a major contention of John MacArthur in *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 112-16. Jack Deere responds with a full appendix in his work *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 253-66.

Christ (Rom. 12; Eph. 4; 1 Cor. 12-14). The signs and wonders are listed within the lists of spiritual gifts affecting the entire body of Christ. This is a reality that is unique to the Church Age. Therefore, it is best to ignore counter-claims gathered from revelation antecedent to Acts 2. Some may struggle with this lack of continuity between earlier signs and wonders and Church Age signs and wonders. One should take solace, however, in the fact that God is a good dispensationalist!

Ananias and Paul

Another counter-argument can be found in the story of Paul's conversion. It is more significant than antecedent revelation since the Church Age is already on the move. Simply put, Ananias, a disciple from Damascus, is ordered by God through means of a vision to go to Paul, who had been blinded on the Damascus Road in his famous encounter with Jesus (Acts 9). There is no indication that Ananias has experienced apostolic contact although such an event cannot be ruled out entirely. Ruthven takes this passage to be a fatal exception which mars the entire cessationist enterprise.³⁵ However, Ruthven misses the difference between the transition passages listed above and this reception of the Holy Spirit. It is not a wild, fatal view to see Paul's apostolic appointment as a special case in light of the key role he will play in the history of the Church. While cessationists might prefer Peter to be the instrument for Paul's healing and reception of the Spirit, Ananias serves the role instead without indication that he ever had any trace of apostolic presence. The story can easily be read as if God has directly called Ananias without any prior human instrumentality.

However, some commentators still see a unique apostolic, albeit temporary, calling for Ananias. Bruce describes the event this way: "In the eyes of Paul's opponents and critics, a private Christian like Ananias could not in any case have had the power to commission him.... [However] Ananias for this special purpose occupied such an exalted status that his words to Saul were the very words of Christ. Having been sent by the Lord to lay his hands on Saul, he was on this particular occasion a duly commissioned apostle."³⁶ Bruce may press too far with the language here. Nonetheless, the one who would argue that only apostles could bestow sign gifts to others must pause and consider this passage. The only answer may turn out to be that the conversion of Paul stands alone as a special event.

The Will of the Spirit

An issue with theological ramifications comes from passages which teach that spiritual gifts (including sign gifts) are granted by the will of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:11; Heb. 2:4). It could be argued in light of this fact that God does not use human instrumentality to bestow spiritual gifts. Even most Pentecostals, however, do not go that far. Fee, a continuationist, offered: "The hope, of course, lies with v. 11 [1 Cor. 12:11], that the one and the same Spirit will do as he pleases, despite the boxes provided for him by those on both sides of this issue."³⁷

³⁵ Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata*, 84-85.

³⁶ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 200.

³⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 175.

Presumably, one of the boxes would be the view that only apostles could bestow sign gifts to other believers. Fee would probably not stretch the idea beyond the breaking point knowing that God works sovereignly in conjunction with human instrumentality. For example, it is God who saves the soul but God has decreed human instruments to proclaim the gospel and be part of the process by which this is brought to pass. Consequently, this issue is not really a problem.

Conclusion

The preceding meditations started with the “problem” of 2 Corinthians 12:12 and the “signs and wonders and miracles” as, at least, part of the marks of an apostle. It matters little if they are exclusively the marks in that passage or whether they are part of a composite list from context. There is still the issue of how signs and wonders join the list of marks in light of the fact that those other than apostles performed signs and wonders. The question was asked, “Could the fact that only apostles gave the sign gifts to others explain the uniqueness apparently required by the passage?” A survey of other selected passages (more would need to be examined) demonstrates that overwhelmingly apostles were the ones who granted to others the sign gifts. The only clear exception to this understanding is possibly the example of Ananias who brought the Holy Spirit and healing to the newly established Apostle Paul in Acts chapter 9.

Perhaps, dogmatism on this score should be tempered. In discussing 2 Corinthians 12:12, Carson commented: “Although miracles in the post-Pentecost period of the New Testament are sometimes done by the hands of non-apostolic figures, normally apostles are the agents. In that sense, miracles constitute one ‘mark’ of an apostle.”³⁸ Borrowing from Carson’s language, the theologian can offer to go a little further; *normally* apostles were the only ones who bestowed sign gifts to other non-apostolic believers. With this understanding, the connection of the sign gifts to the Apostolic Age is strengthened and not diminished.

³⁸ D. A. Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10-13* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 158.