

## The Work of the Spirit

The last two centuries have brought about sweeping changes in the way that the greater church recognizes the Holy Spirit. Even more so, over the last half century, a greater importance on the manifestations of the Spirit have entered into historically uncharismatic denominations. The question that all churches must answer at some point is: how do the gifts of the Spirit manifest themselves in the modern church?

To start, I want to frame the conversation. The battle over the charismatic gifts has been fought by two groups: Cessationists and Continuationists. The Cessationists hold to the belief that the gifts ended after the Apostolic age. The Continuationists hold to the belief that signs and wonders are the same today as they ever were. I don't believe that a proper reading of the New Testament can rule out the continuation of the gifts in the church today, but I also see widespread abuse in the way that they have been practiced. It is essential that we acknowledge the unique role of the Apostles in the history of the church, but we must not forget that God has poured out the Spirit in unique ways through history, including: Reformation, Great Awakening, and in the determination of the Canon of Scripture. Rather than start at practice, let's look at the biblical definition of signs and wonders in both the Old and New Testament, and then look at the debated scripture on the gifts through the lens of this definition.

### Biblical Teaching on Signs and Wonders

#### OLD TESTAMENT

Signs and Wonders in the Old Testament are seen in two places. The first (1) is centered on the Exodus. The second (2) place we see miraculous works are through God's prophets, specifically Elijah and Elisha.

**1.** Before any miraculous acts happen in Exodus (save the burning bush), God declares His purpose for the Signs and Wonders that will soon occur (this includes the ones done 'by' Moses and not). God states: *But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them"* (**Exodus 7.3-5**). The purpose of the Signs and Wonders in the Exodus is for God to declare His mighty power to His creation. This was not just for Pharaoh and the Egyptians, but for God's people then and now. In **Exodus 10.1-2**, God declares, *Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord.* These miraculous actions take place so that God's greatness can be recognized by His people (**Deuteronomy 6.20-24, Joshua 24.17, Acts 7.36**). It is a tangible reflection of a God who has sovereign control over all things. ***The Signs and Wonders exist to strengthen the faith of His people.***

The Signs and Wonders that we see here are not just random acts that occur here and there. They are attached firmly to the Covenant of Abraham. They are specifically connected to the fulfillment of God's promises to His people. God could have accomplished the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan in a much quicker way, but He chose to do it in a way that gave His people a glimpse of both His mercy and power. The Signs and Wonders in Israel's redemptive history always contain an aspect of mercy for His people and an act of judgment on His enemies (**Exodus 11.4-7, Exodus 14.30-31, Joshua 6.21-25**).

These signs which are blessings of hope to the people of God are horribly destructive acts to those who are not of God's flock. ***The Signs and Wonders exist to separate those who are God's people from those who are not.***

2. Elijah is an interesting case, because he was the recipient of God's direct miraculous work in His early ministry (led to the desert, fed by ravens), and became a vessel for God's work later in his ministry. The first signs that we see Elijah do are with the widow of Zarephath (**1 Kings 17**). He first makes their flour and oil sustain (**17.16**), and then raises her son from the dead (**17.22**). The response of the widow gives us a glimpse into the purpose of these signs, *Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth* (**17.24**). ***The Signs and Wonders were given to bring credence to the Word of the Lord, and to the man who carries it.***

In the great battle of God vs. Baal on Mount Carmel (**1 Kings 18**), the sign of God leads to worship. As the fire consumes the altar, the people respond: *when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God"* (**18.39**). ***The Signs and Wonders show the Truth of Yahweh above other gods*** (this is also seen in the Plagues in Egypt and God's appearance on Mt. Sinai).

The signs of Elisha carry similar purpose to those of Elijah. There is an additional theme in the story of Naaman in **2 Kings 5**. Naaman is not a man of God. As a matter of fact, he was an enemy of Israel. In his original reaction (**5.11-12**) we see his feelings toward God are not of honor and majesty, but a thing to be used for his own needs. When he trusts the word of Elisha and is healed, his demeanor changes dramatically. In **5.17b**, he says: *for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the Lord*. The healing of Naaman did much more than just take his leprosy away, it changed his heart. ***The Signs and Wonders are used by God to melt the hearts of men, bringing heart transformation.***

Beyond simply the immediate recognizable purposes of these signs, they were ultimately to point forward to Jesus Christ. After the resurrection of Jesus, He appears to two men on the road to Emmaus. They are beginning to doubt that Jesus was the Christ, and He shows them the validity of His mission by showing how the history of Israel (the OT) existed to foreshadow Himself. *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself* (**Luke 24.27**). The Signs and Wonders are used by God primarily for the purpose of giving Jesus the glory that He is worthy of, *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (**Philippians 2.10-11**).

## **NEW TESTAMENT**

In order to frame the discussion of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament, we must organize the signs into three groups: (1) those done by Jesus, (2) those done by the apostles, and (3) those done by others (this would include the 72 sent out by Jesus in **Luke 10**, Stephen and Philip, as well as the gifts of the early church).

1. Jesus performed more miracles recorded in Scripture than any other. Looking closely at the miracles performed as well as how the Bible refers to these actions, we can draw a clear perspective from which to understand the signs and wonders performed by Jesus.

**a. They were used specifically to give credence to the Messianic claims of Jesus.**

Jesus came to earth as God incarnate, but even in full deity (**John 1.18**) Jesus was not an extraordinary specimen of humanity (**Isaiah 53.2**). His identifier was not in appearance, but in what he did. He was not just to be different, but he was to fulfill specific prophecy sent by God through his prophets. These prophecies included works of healing (**Isaiah 35.5-6**), forgive the brokenhearted (**Isaiah 61.1**), and bring the dead back to life (**Ezekiel 37.12**). We see Jesus referring to these signs as proof when questioned by John about His role: *Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them (Luke 7.22).*

**b. They were used to reveal the character of God.**

The fulfillment of prophecy supported Jesus claims, but they also gave a glimpse into God's sovereign plan. The signs and wonders of Jesus (especially the resurrection) revealed how ALL things are coordinated to fulfill the predestined will of God. The signs and wonders of Jesus show His power over many aspects of creation (storms, sickness, life, nature), but also show His sovereignty through time (promises and fulfillment). Upon receiving the Holy Spirit, the first sermon from the apostles refers to this: *Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. (Acts 2.22-24).*

**c. They were used to give visual experience to what was being preached.**

The miracles of Jesus are not just displays of power, but are signs that point back specifically to the words of Jesus. The feeding of the 5,000 is followed by Jesus referring to Himself as the *Bread of Life (John 6)*. Between the death of Lazarus and his resurrection, Jesus takes the time to teach that He is the *Resurrection and the Life (John 11)*. After healing the man born blind Jesus points to how He brings sight to the spiritually blind (**John 9**). These miracles do not exist apart from the spoken word, but to support and enrich it.

The miracles of Jesus existed specifically to acknowledge His divinity, reveal the manifold wisdom of God, and to bring visual power to the Word.

**2.** The role of Apostle brought with it the ability to perform miraculous signs. Paul uses this ability to justify his work (**Romans 15.19**). And what was His work? *To be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God (15.16)*. Paul had a specific work (grafting in of the Gentiles), and the signs and wonders were given to help him specifically accomplish the work that he was called (face to face by Jesus) to do.

Likewise, the other apostles are seen throughout the Book of Acts performing miracles (**Acts 5.12**). The Apostles were those directly called and commended by Jesus. They were the eye witnesses to what Jesus had said. They were the leaders of His newly established church. Their unique giftings corresponded with the task that they were to perform, to: *make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (Matthew 28.19-20)*. This job existed differently for them than it does for us, because there were no recorded gospels, THEY WERE THE ONES WHO RECORDED IT. So we see again that signs and wonders are used to confirm their appointment, and make the Word evident: *And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles (Acts 2.43).*

The signs and wonders of the Apostles were not just random acts done by random men to show the power of God. Instead, they were divinely instituted signs to instill Jesus Christ and His Word with their rightful power and authority. *It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Hebrews 2.3-4).* While the meaning of this verse is not agreed upon, it seems to point to the signs and wonders as being specifically attached to those who heard (Apostles) for the purpose of providing an established message of truth. The signs can not be detached from that which they point to, namely Christ and His Word.

3. The third group performing signs and wonders we will simply call others. These are either provided to us in descriptive form (Stephen, Philip, and the 72) or as prescriptive as we see in the letters of Paul. Stephen is given credit for performing wonders and signs among the people (**Acts 6.8**). Philip travels performing signs and wonders in the presence of Simon the sorcerer (**Acts 8.13**). We also see the Jesus sends 72 out ahead of Him to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom and to heal the sick (**Luke 10.1-12**). In all three of these we see divine appointment of their task. For Stephen and Philip, they are given specific authority from the apostles to be those who in deed match the apostolic authority of the word being carried out by the apostles. For the seventy-two, they were the heralds of Jesus Christ Himself; sent out by Jesus, for the task of preparing the way. So again we see the miraculous gifts existing to support the authority of the Word.

The final teaching that must be addressed is the seeming prescriptive teachings of Paul in **Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12**, and to a lesser extent **Ephesians 4**. It is important to note that these sections of Scripture are all about the distribution of gifts; the focus of the teaching being: THAT NOT ALL PEOPLE HAVE THEM. Somehow this context seems to have been lost in many discussions of the charismatic gifts. Likewise, it is necessary to understand that Paul was writing in a time when the Apostles were performing signs and wonders and many of His readers would have experienced the miracles of Jesus Christ. All of this to say, the text seems to be walking people away from desiring the gifts that they see being done, by focusing on the fact that the Spirit *apportions to each one individually as he wills (1 Corinthians 12.11)*. The gifts exist to show that God is in control of how His ministry is empowered, so mankind in their wisdom cannot take credit.

### **God's purpose for signs and Wonders**

The survey of the Biblical text on signs and wonders, reveals to us the purpose of the Spirit in using them. In the Old Testament there was no recorded Word. God was establishing His character and introducing Himself to His people. Specifically we see:

1. The Signs and Wonders exist to strengthen the faith of His people.
2. The Signs and Wonders exist to separate those who are God's people from those who are not.
3. The Signs and Wonders were given to bring credence to the Word of the Lord, and to the man who carries it.
4. The Signs and Wonders show the Truth of Yahweh above other gods.
5. The Signs and Wonders are used by God to melt the hearts of men, bringing heart transformation.

The purposes of signs and wonders in the Old Testament are almost entirely replaced by the Word in the New Testament. What I mean is, the tasks that the Signs and wonders are meant to fulfill, are referred to by the NT as tasks linked to the Word:

1. Scripture exists for the strengthening of the faith (**2 Timothy 3.16-17**).
2. The Scripture discerns who are God's and who are not (**Matthew 13.11**).
3. Scripture contains authority as proceeding from the Spirit (**2 Peter 1.21**).
4. Scripture is the Truth that distinguishes itself from falsehood (**Ephesians 1.13**).
5. Scripture convicts and reveals the heart (**Hebrews 5.12**).

In the New Testament we see additional purposes of Signs and Wonders:

1. To support the messianic claims of Jesus
2. To reveal the character of God
3. To make heavenly ideas understandable
4. To justify the specific instruments that God was using (Apostles, Stephen, Philip)

The purposes of signs and wonders in the New Testament are also applied to the work of the Word:

1. Scripture is given to give first hand account of the Messiah (**John 21.24**).
2. Scripture is given to reveal the character of God (**1 Corinthians 2.6-13**).
3. Scripture is given to us to make God knowable (**2 Peter 1.12**).
4. Scripture is used to judge those who are instruments of God (**1 John 4.1-6**).

In conclusion, we see that the primary way that God moves in the world is through His Word. The Word of God is not separate from the Spirit, but the Spirit is the means by which people understand the Word. God works as He wills, and so it would be foolish to put limits and boundaries on Him, but it is important to clarify how and why God may use Signs and Wonders, built out of the purposes in Scripture as well as the character of God.

### 'Test the Spirits'

**1 John 4.1-6** tells us that we must 'test the spirits' to see whether or not they are from God. This is because the existence of miraculous signs does not equal faithful representation. In the Bible we see the magicians of Egypt (**Exodus 7-8**) performing many of the same plagues as Moses. Paul refers to the work of Satan coming, *with all power and false signs and wonders* (**2 Thessalonians 2.9**). So we know that all signs are not from God. The question becomes: how do we know?

1. Does this sign bring clarity to the revealed Word of God (**Ephesians 4.12-13**)?

The Word is the primary tool (or weapon) that God uses for His work. Signs and Wonders are always connected to supporting, clarifying, and buttressing God's revelation, not adding to or confusing it.

2. Does this sign bring glory to Jesus Christ or to the person (**John 7.18**)?

The glory of the Savior is the focus of Scripture. As soon as we get sidetracked on rituals, even amazing acts, we are drawn away from the true power of God: Jesus Christ Himself.

3. Does this sign confuse the sufficiency of the gospel (**1 Corinthians 2.1-5**)?

The Bible tells us that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross was a once and forever payment for sin. There are no additional works needed to earn God's favor, including the ability to perform miracles.

**4. Does this sign edify others and foster unity in the church (1 Corinthians 12-14)?**

In **Ephesians 4**, **Romans 12**, and **1 Corinthians 12**, we see that whenever gifts are mentioned they are always book-ended by verse about love and unity. The gifts are given to build up the body of Christ, so any acts that tear away at this should be avoided.

**5. Is the sign accompanied by a life that reveals the presence of the Spirit (Galatians 5.22-25)?**

If we view the gifts as some sort of spiritual anointing apart from the gift of the Spirit that all Christians receive, then we can also dismiss all of the verses that declare the work of the Spirit in the heart and mind from those who display supernatural gifts. These are not exclusive. You cannot perform the work of God, without first having a life changed by God.