

Of Salvation and Signs

Part 1

1 Corinthians 1:22

For Jews ask for signs, Greeks seek after wisdom...

The Jews had a right to demand signs, for this was one of the ways they were supposed to recognize when a prophet was sent from God. God gave Moses signs to show the people (Exodus 4:1-9), and down through the years, God sent other prophets, many of whom also gave signs to the people. But God did more than this: He also gave the people instructions on how to recognize whether or not the signs were from God.

It is important to understand that *false* prophets could also show the people signs - in their case, of satanic origin. This meant that the mere *presence* of signs and predictions (even if they came to pass in the way the prophet predicted) was *not sufficient proof* that a prophet was from God. There were additional criteria: Not only must the prophet's signs and predictions come to pass, but everything the prophet did would have to be such as to point the people to the true God (Deuteronomy 13; 18:17+). These instructions are relevant even today, for we are told that in the last days, there will be *many* miracles, signs and wonders (2 Thessalonians 2:9) that are Satan-inspired, and many will be deceived. This proves that the mere presence of signs and wonders is *not* a guarantee that a prophet (or his message) is from God.

Through Moses, God promised the Jews that he would someday send a prophet who was like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18). This was understood (especially in Jesus' day) to refer not merely to *a* prophet (one of many), but to a *specific* prophet ("*the*" prophet) - to one who was different from all the rest, but very much like Moses. The apostle John mentions this in several passages, in which people were wondering if either John (the Baptizer) or Jesus were "the" prophet - examples: John 1:21, 25 (referring to John) and John 6:14; 7:40 (referring to Jesus). In John's case, they might have wondered if baptism was a sign (since he performed no miracles - John 10:41). In Jesus' case, his miracles, as well as his words, led them to wonder if he was "the" prophet.

These are some of the reasons that, when Jesus came, the people asked him to show them signs and miracles. This in itself was not wrong, and he often performed signs and miracles, which confirmed his authority to do what he did. But when the people (especially the leaders) kept asking, *while at the same time ignoring the signs and miracles that he was continually showing them*, he began to refuse their request, or to answer in ways they didn't want (example - Matthew 12:39).

Part 2

2 Corinthians 12:12

Truly the signs of an apostle were worked among you in all patience, in signs and wonders and mighty works.

Hebrews 2:3b-4

...so great a salvation--which at the first having been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard; God also testifying [bearing witness] with them, both by signs and wonders, by various works of power, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will...

The apostles were sent to the people with the Good News about Jesus. And just as he did when Jesus began *his* ministry, God attested to *their* message by signs and miracles (2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3-4). Why? The Jews *needed* it - though non-Jews were often present, too. Every time the Good News was taken to a new territory - especially one in which Jews were present (such as during the apostle Paul's travels) - God would again attest to the message with signs, miracles and other works of power.

Does this mean that the Jews who saw the signs would turn to God in large numbers? No. Only a few of them repented; the majority saw the signs and either ignored them or explained them away. For the majority, signs became nothing more than a sign of condemnation, such as described by Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:21-22. (In this instance, the sign was "tongues," and it was a sign to those who continued to remain in unbelief.)

Part 3

Act 2:4, 12

[The apostles] were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak. ... [The people] were all amazed, and were perplexed, saying one to another, "What does this mean?"

Act 8:6

The multitudes listened with one accord to the things that were spoken by Philip, when they heard and saw the signs which he did.

Act 10:44-46a

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the word. They of the circumcision [Jews] who believed were amazed ... because the gift of the Holy Spirit was also poured out on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in other languages and magnifying [praising the greatness of] God.

There are three instances in which the presence of the apostles and signs had a *special* significance. These were the three times that the Good News (or gospel) was introduced to a new "category" of people. In the book of Acts, people are divided into three categories: Jews, Samaritans (half-Jew / half-non-Jew) and Gentiles (non-Jew). For the first converts in *each* of these groups, apostles needed to be present, so that it

could be substantiated that the gospel was, indeed, intended for people of that group. This was especially true when the gospel went beyond Jewish borders, for it was generally accepted (though incorrectly so) that only Jews could receive it. (People didn't understand that the gospel was a *new* covenant, not merely an extension of the covenant the Jews had received from Moses - a covenant which they had repeatedly broken, down through the centuries.) In each instance that the gospel went to a new category of people, the Holy Spirit also sent signs to confirm that the message was for them. At times, these signs were also present in the ministries of some of the apostles' closest helpers (such as Philip - Acts 6:5; 8:5-8), but the apostles themselves had to be present, before the people could receive the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 2, we read about the apostles bringing the Good News to the *Jews*. The apostles were present, as well as the necessary signs of their apostleship. The people turned from their sins (2:38 - repentance), believed the Good News (2:41 - accepted Peter's message), and were baptized (2:41). The people received the gift of the Holy Spirit (promised in 2:38-39, to "as many as the Lord our God will call to himself"). Signs were present, both before and after this event (2:1-11 and 2:43).

In Acts 8, we read about the bringing of the Good News to the *Samaritans*. Philip, one of the apostle's original seven helpers (Acts 6:1-6), was chosen to preach - specifically because he was known to be filled with the Spirit and with wisdom. As he preached to the Samaritans, signs were present (8:6-8). Various people believed and were baptized (8:12-13) - though the belief of Simon the sorcerer (v. 13) was of dubious nature. At this point, however, one necessary "ingredient" was still absent: The presence of the apostles. Once the apostles arrived, the people received the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8 is the *only* recorded instance in which water baptism is mentioned as happening a significant amount of time *before* the people received the Holy Spirit. This happened because an apostle needed to be present, to confirm the "new" work that God was beginning to perform. Even Philip, who had the ability to perform miracles, could not qualify for confirming this work, because he was not an apostle.

In Acts 10, we read about the introduction of the Good News to the *Gentiles*. In this instance, God sent Peter to Cornelius, a Roman army officer. As soon as Peter began to talk about the need for trusting (believing) Jesus (10:43), signs - in this case, speaking in tongues - began to occur (10:46). This implied that the people, who were *already* described as "God-fearing" (10:2), were believing the Good News. At that time, the Gentiles were given the gift of the Holy Spirit (10:44-47) and soon thereafter they were baptized in water (10:47-48). As with the two previous introductions of the gospel to a group of people, an apostle was present, signs were present, and the people believed the Good News and were baptized. Both at that time, and later (when this specific incident was reviewed by others - 11:15-18; 15:7-9), the events that occurred here were interpreted as God indicating that the Good News was given also to the Gentiles.

These three special situations are not repeatable events. God showed - *once for all time* - that the Good News was for *all* classes of people: Jews, Samaritans (half-Jews), and Gentiles (non-Jews). He sent the Holy Spirit to the people, in the presence of his chosen apostles, and he confirmed it with signs and miracles. Furthermore, he gave us a historically accurate account of these three events (in the book of Acts), so that we would never again have to question who the Good News belonged to.