

When Did the Gift of Tongues Cease?

(By Pastor Dennis Kiszonas)

No one was more “charismatic” than the Apostle Paul. He wrote to the Corinthian church that “they came behind no other church” when it came to the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 1:7)—no church had more of the gifts of the Holy Spirit than the Corinthian church, yet Paul says that he spoke in tongues more than all of them (1 Cor. 14:18)!

No one was more charismatic than Paul, yet the Lord revealed to him that those sign gifts were going to cease:

“whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away” (1 Cor. 13:8).¹

Here Paul writes of the gift of tongues, the gift of prophecy and the gift of knowledge (see 1 Cor. 13:1-2) and states that the Lord Jesus had revealed to him (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3; Gal. 1:11,12) that a time was coming when these sign gifts were going to cease to operate.

The question has always been: when? When would these gifts cease?

This study focuses on that question—when did the sign gifts cease?

Arranging Paul’s letters in the order that he wrote them

We begin by setting up a time line of Paul’s ministry. Paul was saved in Acts 9 when the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Paul would go on to write 13 letters in the New Testament—from the Letter to the Romans to the Letter to Philemon. When we remember that Paul is the subject of at least half of the Book of Acts, we realize that half of the 27 books in the New Testament are either about him (The Book of Acts) or were written by him (13 letters).

Paul’s letters are arranged in our Bible by two principles: The letters to the churches are put first—nine letters from Romans to 2 Thessalonians, then the four letters written to individuals—from 1 Timothy to Philemon.

The letters are also arranged by length—Romans is longest and is first, then the Corinthian letters, then Galatians, etc. Longer letters are first, shorter ones later.

But to understand when the sign gifts ceased, we need to read Paul’s letters in the order that he wrote them. When we arrange the letters in the order that they were written, all becomes clear!

Paul’s Letters in the order that he wrote them:

The first 6 of Paul’s letters can be fit into the Book of Acts—we can read Acts and then read Paul’s letters and we can see where Paul was when he wrote these letters.

The Letter to the Galatians is first

In Acts 13,14 Paul and Barnabas went on their first apostolic journey which took them into Galatia—cities like Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, etc. Soon after Paul returned from this journey he wrote the letter to the Galatians (see Galatians 1:6 where Paul writes to the Galatians and says, you are “so quickly

turned.”). Galatians was written soon after Paul returned from that first journey—soon after Acts 14:27. That makes Galatians the earliest of Paul’s letters.

1 and 2 Thessalonians

The next letters Paul wrote are the two letters to the Thessalonians. In Acts 17, Paul, on his second apostolic journey, came to Thessalonica and preached there. Many were saved, but Paul was driven out of town. Paul continued on to Corinth where he wrote the two letters to the Thessalonians. Timothy’s return from Macedonia mentioned in Acts 18:5 is also reported in 1 Thessalonians 3:6. And in 2 Thessalonians 2:5 Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his teaching, as if it had not been very long since he had been with them. So the writing of 1 and 2 Thessalonians can be placed into Acts 18 during Paul’s ministry in Corinth, and that makes them the second and third letters that Paul wrote.

1 and 2 Corinthians

The next two letters that Paul wrote are the two letters to the Corinthians. In Acts 18 Paul spent a year and a half ministering in Corinth—see Acts 18:11. He later returned to his home base at Antioch (Acts 18:22), and later in his third apostolic journey he arrived in Ephesus (his ministry in Ephesus extends all the way through Acts 19—a period of more than two years, see verse 10). It is here in Ephesus during Acts 19 that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians—see 1 Corinthians 16:19. Shortly after that Paul traveled to Macedonia (see Acts 20:1 and 2 Cor. 2:13) and that is where he wrote the second letter to the Corinthians.

Romans

In Acts 20:2,3 Paul arrived in “Greece,” i.e. in Corinth again, and spent three months there enjoying the hospitality of a believer named Gaius (mentioned in 1 Cor. 1:14). In Gaius’s home, in Corinth, Paul wrote the letter to the Romans (see Rom. 16:23).

This is the last letter written during the Book of Acts. In Acts 21:33 Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, and would spend the next 5 years in prison, right through the end of the Book of Acts.

So, to sum up what we have seen so far, from Acts 9 through Acts 28 we read of the earlier ministry of the Apostle Paul and find that during these years he wrote 6 of his 13 letters. The order of these first six books is:

1. Galatians—end of Acts 14
2. 1 Thessalonians—Acts 18
3. 2 Thessalonians—Acts 18
4. 1 Corinthians—Acts 19
5. 2 Corinthians—Acts 20
6. Romans—Acts 20

In Acts 21 Paul was arrested and remained a prisoner through to Acts 28, and beyond.

The Prison Epistles—Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians

Shortly after the end of the Book of Acts, while he was still a prisoner, now in Rome, Paul wrote four letters—the “prison epistles”: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and Philippians. In each of these letters he writes of his “chains”—see Ephesians 6:20, Colossians 4:18, Philemon 13 and Philippians 1:13.

The Pastoral Epistles—The letters to Titus, First and Second Timothy

Paul was released from this imprisonment and continued his ministry for a few years, perhaps 3 years. During this time he wrote the three letters known as the “Pastoral Epistles,” because these letters were written to Paul’s co-workers—Pastor Timothy and Titus. Finally at the end of his life he is again in prison. This time he anticipates being beheaded for the Lord and writes the last letter, Second Timothy.

Summary:

We have surveyed the 13 letters written by the Apostle Paul, arranging them in the order in which Paul wrote them:

During the Book of Acts—6 letters:

1. Galatians
2. & 3. The Thessalonian letters
4. & 5. The Corinthian letters
6. Romans

Then after the Book of Acts ends—7 more letters:

The 4 Prison Epistles:

7. Ephesians
8. Colossians
9. Philemon
10. Philippians

Then the 3 Pastoral Epistles:

11. Titus
12. 1 Timothy
13. 2 Timothy

Now let’s read the letters in the order Paul wrote them

Having surveyed the 13 letters and having put them into their chronological order, let’s see what they tell us about the question: when did the sign gifts cease?

In the first six letters, all written during the period covered by the Book of Acts, we find that the sign gifts were operating in all these churches. All through the Book of Acts we read of tongues, the gift of

prophecy, the gift of healing, etc.—for example, tongues and prophecy in Acts 19:6, the gift of prophecy in Acts 21:10-14, the gift of healing in Acts 19:11-12 and 28:8,9, etc.

And in the “Acts Epistles” we read of the gifts operating in the churches that Paul founded. In Galatians 3:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:20, 1 Corinthians 12,13,14, 2 Corinthians 12:12, Romans 12:6—in all these letters we read about the gifts in operation right through to the end of the Book of Acts.

But, during this time in the Book of Acts, the Lord revealed to Paul that the sign gifts were going to cease—1 Corinthians 13:8-12. The gifts were all in operation all through the Book of Acts period and are mentioned in the letters written during that time, but the Lord had revealed that the sign gifts were going to cease at some time in the future.

When the gift of tongues ceased

Now we turn to the prison epistles, the four letters written shortly after the end of the Book of Acts, while Paul was a prisoner in Rome—Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and Philippians...and we find that there is not one word about tongues, or the gift of healing. Even where we might have expected Paul to write of tongues in the passage about being “filled with the Spirit” in Ephesians 5:17, he has nothing to say about tongues. And as for the gift of healing, we read of a co-worker of Paul’s, Epaphroditus, who fell seriously ill during this time (Phil. 2:25-30) and Paul no longer had the gift of healing, and was no longer able to heal as he did only a few years earlier in Acts 28:9. The sign gifts were no longer operating at the time that Paul wrote the Prison Epistles.

Tongues in the Pastoral Epistles?

In the 3 Pastoral Epistles, as in the prison epistles, we do not read of tongues or the gift of healing operating at this time. We do read of prophecies that had been made about Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:18 and 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6, but these were given years before. So far as we read in these three letters, we wouldn’t even know that there had been a “gift of tongues.”

And, again, in places where we would have expected Paul to mention the sign gifts, he is silent. When Paul gives Timothy and Titus instructions regarding the choice of men to be elders in the churches, Paul says nothing about the desirability of these men having a gift such as prophecy, or healing, or other sign gifts (see Titus 1:6-9 and 1 Tim. 3:1-10). The gifts of tongues, prophecy, etc. were no longer in operation by the time Paul wrote the pastoral epistles.

It is clear that the gift of healing has ceased because, as in Philippians, Paul was no longer able to heal, even his co-workers. Timothy was suffering stomach problems and frequent infirmities (1 Tim. 5:23) and Paul can’t heal him, doesn’t recommend that he go to a healer in the church, doesn’t send a prayer cloth or a bottle of anointing oil (remember the miracles of some 8 years earlier in Acts 19:11-12). Likewise in 2 Timothy 4:20, Paul has to leave behind his co-worker Trophimus who had fallen sick on the last journey. Paul’s gift of healing (Acts 28:9) was no longer operating in Philippians 2:27, 1 Timothy 5:23 and 2 Timothy 4:20.

Summary

The sign gifts, tongues, prophecy, the gift of healing, etc. were operating all through the Book of Acts, and these gifts are mentioned in the letters that Paul wrote during the Acts period. But when we turn to the letters written after the Book of Acts—the 4 Prison Epistles, and the 3 Pastoral Epistles, we find that

the sign gifts either aren't mentioned at all or we see—as with the gift of healing—that they were no longer operating in Paul's life. What he could do in Acts 28, he could no longer do in Philippians, or in 1 and 2 Timothy. He could heal all the sick on the island in Acts 28:9, but he couldn't heal any of his closest co-workers—Timothy, Epaphroditus, Trophimus—after the close of the Book of Acts.

Arranging Paul's letters in the order that he wrote them allows us to see the pattern of truth that is found in the Word of God:

The sign gifts were operating in Acts and in all of the Acts Epistles: Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans.

But in this time period, in 1 Corinthians 13:8-12, Paul tells us that the Lord had revealed to him that these gifts would cease some day. And they did, because in the letters written after the Book of Acts, the sign gifts had ceased, just as the Lord said that they would.

The pattern could not be clearer, and the contrast could not be sharper between the earlier letters and the later letters, between the time when all the sign gifts were operating, and the time when all the sign gifts had ceased.

We can now give a scriptural answer to the question that we started with: when did the sign gifts cease?

The answer: The sign gifts ceased at the end of the Book of Acts. There is no record in Scripture of any of the sign gifts operating in any of the letters that Paul wrote after the end of the Acts period, and it is clear that the gift of healing had ceased since Paul could no longer heal even his closest co-workers after the close of the Book of Acts.

Why did the sign gifts cease?

Having seen the pattern of truth regarding the gifts, we need to ask, why did the gifts cease at this time?

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:8-12—

“Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.”

The gift of tongues, prophecy and knowledge during the Acts period were only “in part”—they were incomplete, they did not communicate the full knowledge that the Lord had to reveal. But the Lord revealed to Paul that “that which is perfect” was coming. In English, as in Greek, this is a neuter pronoun—“that thing which is perfect.” Paul was not writing about the coming of “He who is perfect” but of the coming of a “thing” which is perfect. When it came, then the gifts which were only “in part” would cease.

It would be like the difference between being a child and becoming a grown man, or between seeing someone's face reflected in a wavy ancient mirror, and seeing the person face-to-face.

Before the end of the Book of Acts, during the Acts period, and in the letters written during the Acts period, the Lord had only revealed part of the “dispensation of grace” (Eph. 3:2) to the Apostle Paul, but He had not yet revealed the entire message to him. It was still only “in part” during the Acts period, but with the close of the Book of Acts, the Lord completed the revelation of the “Mystery” (see Eph. 3:3,4,9 and Col. 1:26,27, etc.). “That which is perfect” was finally revealed in all its fullness to the Apostle Paul and at that moment, those things which were only “in part” passed away from God’s program.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12—

“Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.”

When Paul wrote “now I know in part,” he used the common word for “know,” the Greek word *gnosis*.

But then, when he wrote “but then I shall know...” he changes the word from *gnosis* to *epignosis*, “to fully know.”

We could paraphrase Paul’s statement: “Now, as I’m writing 1 Corinthians in Acts 19, I have *gnosis*—I know, in part, what God’s message is for us today in the dispensation of grace, but then—when that which is perfect has come—I shall have *epignosis*—the full knowledge of God’s message of grace for us today.”

All through the Book of Acts Paul had only “*gnosis*,” partial knowledge of the message of grace, but when we turn to the Prison Letters we suddenly find Paul using that word “*epignosis*”—he had now received that “full knowledge” which he didn’t have when he wrote to the Corinthians:

“For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge (*epignosis*—full knowledge) of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ” (Col. 2:1-2).

“For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge (*epignosis*—full knowledge) of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light” (Col. 1:9-12).

In all the seven letters written after the close of the Book of Acts, Paul uses this word “*epignosis*”—the full knowledge. What he had not yet received in 1 Corinthians 13, he now has. That which is perfect had come and so the sign gifts had passed away.

The “sign gifts” were signs for God’s “sign people”

The close of the Book of Acts was also the close of God’s dealings with the nation of Israel for now nearly 2000 years. Acts 28:25-28 stands as God’s last words to the nation of Israel for nearly two millennia. The Jews sought after signs (1 Cor. 1:22) so God gave them signs—among the Gentiles!—in order to provoke Israel to jealousy (Rom. 11:14). But with the close of Acts, God sets aside Israel for a time, and when God gave up on the “sign people” for a time, the sign gifts passed out of His program.

I speak in tongues, what should I do?

Many Christians today have had an experience that they think is the scriptural gift of tongues. After studying Paul's letters and the scriptural teaching concerning the cessation of the gift of tongues, they ask, "What should I do now?" There are several possible explanations for the experience—it may be a psychological experience or even a spiritual experience, but clearly, from the Word of God, it is not the Spirit's gift of tongues.

What should they do? Simply: Stop! Stop speaking in the tongue because it is not from the Holy Spirit.

For many this is a great relief. They've been taught that a person has to speak in tongues to prove that he is really saved, or that he really has the Holy Spirit dwelling within. So they've "learned" to speak in tongues, but when they see from Scripture that this gift is not in operation from the Lord today, they can at last cease their effort to prove their salvation and start to walk by faith and not by sight.

For some, Paul's instructions to the prophets at Corinth will be pertinent:

"If anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Cor. 14:30-33).

When we are having an experience that we learn from the Scriptures is not from the Lord, it is time to "keep silent," and remember that our spirits are to be under our own control—"the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets."

The Lord's warning

The Lord warned that experiences can be deceiving:

"Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matt. 7:22-23).

Yes, they really had had these experiences. They had prophesied in Jesus' name, they had cast out demons and done miracles in His name. The Lord does not deny that they had done these things. But then He tells them that even while they were doing these things, He had never ever known them. It is important that our faith be based on the Word of God and not on experiences because experiences can deceive us.

A note about the gift of healing

As we have seen, Paul was able to heal many sick people all through the Book of Acts. He healed every sick person on the Island of Malta in Acts 28. And he wrote to the Corinthians about the gift of healing that was operating in their church during the Acts period (1 Cor. 12:9). But we have also seen that with the close of the Book of Acts, the gift of healing ceased to operate. Paul could no longer heal anyone—not Epaphroditus in Philippians 2, not Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:23, not Trophimus in 2 Timothy 4:20. The gift of healing had ceased to operate, along with the other sign gifts.

Today God no longer gives the gift of healing, and there are no "healers." But we should not think that God Himself no longer heals! In Philippians 2 we read of a healing that God did after the gift of healing had ceased to operate:

“Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need; since he was longing for you all, and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick.

“For indeed he was sick almost unto death; but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.

“Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful.

“Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem; because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me” (Phil. 2:25-30).

Paul commends Epaphroditus very highly for his faithfulness even unto death. But when Epaphroditus fell sick—near to death—Paul was no longer able to heal him because the gift of healing had ceased to operate. But we read that Epaphroditus was healed—directly by the Lord: “He was sick unto death but the Lord had mercy on him....”

There is healing today, but there is no gift of healing, there are no “divine healers.” There is no gift of healing today but God still heals... sometimes. He healed Epaphroditus, but He did not heal Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:8-9 or in Galatians 4:13-15, or Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:23, or Trophimus in 2 Timothy 4:20. He heals according to His will today. But the promise that He gave to Paul is still our promise today in the dispensation of grace:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Whether we are well or sick, whether we are like Epaphroditus or like Timothy, we can always claim this promise from the Lord that His grace and strength are sufficient for us. He never allows us to suffer something that He doesn’t give us the strength to live through.

Notes:

1. All references have been taken from the New King James Version.