



# **The Sign Gifts In History – The Facts**

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by  
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One thing you learn rapidly when writing regarding Biblical Doctrine is that you will very likely be wrongly ‘labelled’. One of the ‘labels’ that is readily attached to the authors of this article is that of ‘Cessationist’. What does this term infer? Do all who use it understand it alike?

The term ‘Cessationist’ is unhelpful in that it conveys the impression of a belief that God no longer acts supernaturally – nothing could be further from the truth! The moment that one even hints that some supernatural spiritual gift, vividly described in Scripture, is no longer in operation today or is being counterfeited, the ‘labelling’ begins.

Too many Christians today seem only to be aware of, or focus on, *nine* miraculous sign gifts; yet Scripture mentions at least *nineteen*! One of them, the gift of ‘tongues’, is then most often emphasised...yet the Bible carefully orders this as the *least* of the gifts! (1Cor.12:28)

What exactly were the miracles and signs that Jesus, the Apostles, and some of their disciples performed? And are they with us today? Of course, many believe they are, in that they have either been in operation during the past two thousand years, or have been, or are being, ‘restored’ to the church in these last days.

Recently we have been asked by readers, including the leader of an Australian Pentecostal ministry, to comment on some quotes by early Church fathers and their mention of the miraculous sign gifts. These same quotes, we have observed, are being constantly proffered by those who insist that the gifts have never ceased and have been evident throughout church history. The misuse of quotes and the misunderstanding between the *miraculous* and the *gifts of the miraculous* is nothing short of staggering. In addition to this is the deception of quoting out of context and/or the use of non Christian writings. As an example take Jack Deere, a leading American signs and wonders apologist, who has written books and articles that have thoroughly deceived many Christians. His quotes and emotive arguments are exaggerated, out of context and based very much on experiential evidence. Several articles and books have thoroughly exposed his errors but sadly have not attained as broad a market as Deere’s books. (1)

This article is dedicated to applying relevant Scripture and an accurate history to the claims of today regarding the ‘sign’ gifts. The popular quotes and claims to miraculous gifts are examined in their true context.

Most Encyclopedias mention the Montanists in the second century and then usually jump to the 13th Century before any claims for Spiritual gifts are made. The reason for this is because after the 1st Century the references to the continuation of these gifts are almost negligible. Even a scant reading of the early church fathers should convince any reader that *they were simply unanimous in their statements that the gifts had ceased.*

However, there are a handful of doubtful references often used in an attempt to show that the gifts continued: (underlining ours).

A popular quote from the second Century is that of **Irenaeus (AD120-202)**. Many who use this quote *exclude* the [bracketed section]. [ *‘For this reason does the apostle declare, We speak wisdom among them that are perfect ] who have received the Spirit of God, and who through the Spirit of God do speak in all languages, as he used Himself also to speak. In like manner we do also hear many brethren in the Church, who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God, whom also the apostle terms ‘spiritual’, they being spiritual because they partake of the Spirit, and not because their flesh has been stripped off and taken away, and because they have become purely spiritual’.* (2)

The reader will see the difference the bracketed section makes to the entire quotation. The alleged evidence of Tongues in the 2nd Century is based on this *one* quote. Yet it is actually speaking of the (past) *Apostles* and *real known foreign languages* as found in Acts 2! It is a far cry from the unknown ecstatic utterances of the modern Charismatic/ Pentecostal movement. Irenaeus elsewhere referred to *false* miracle workers in his day which many use out of context in an effort to prove their legitimacy. Ignatius actually grouped the prophets with the apostles and regarded them as *past*. (3) Writing around AD 250 he said few traces of any gifts remained and he even differentiated these trace reports from the New Testament gifts. (4)

Another common quote is by **Tertullian (AD160-220)**. Again, many exclude the [bracketed section]: [*‘even if the Creator promised them for His Christ who is not yet revealed, as being destined only for the Jews, to have their operations in His time, in His Christ, and among His people*’]. Let Marcion then exhibit, as gifts of his God, some prophets, such as have not spoken by human sense, but with the Spirit of God, such as have both predicted things to come, and have made manifest the secrets of the heart; let him produce a psalm, a vision, a prayer – only let it be by the Spirit, in an ecstasy, that is, in a rapture, whenever an interpretation of tongues has occurred to him; let him show to me also, that any woman of boastful tongue in his community has ever prophesied from amongst those specially holy sisters of his. Now all these signs (of spiritual gifts) are forthcoming from my side without any difficulty, and they agree, too, with the rules, and the dispensations, and the instructions of the Creator; therefore without doubt the Christ, and the Spirit, and the apostle, belong severally to my God...’ (5)

The reader will again note the difference the bracketed section makes. Here Tertullian is actually speaking *against* the spurious use of ‘gifts’ by Marcion! Although this is the crowning quote for many, they fail to realise that Tertullian is challenging false gifts! It must also be realised that Tertullian himself was for a time caught up and deceived by the *Montanists*, an *heretical* sect.

Unfortunately many Pentecostals cite the *Montanists* as proof of the use of the gifts, including tongues, in early centuries. Sadly, many are not aware that the early church clearly considered this movement as *heretical* and one that seriously deviated from Apostolic doctrine.

**Montanus (AD160)** who founded the Montanists movement was involved in ‘prophesying’. A close look at the quotes used by Pentecostals to show the gift of tongues in the Montanist movement actually show no proof of Tongues but rather *prophetic* utterances. Montanus and two women proclaimed the near approach of the age of the Holy Spirit and of the millennial reign in Pepuza, a small village of Phrygia, upon which the New Jerusalem was to come down. Maximilla (one of the ladies) said: *‘After me there is no more prophecies; but only the end of the world.’* (6)

False prophecies were common to the Montanist movement. Montanists prophecies were described as being: *'...carried away in the spirit and wrought up into a certain kind of frenzy and irregular ecstasy, raving and speaking, and uttering strange things, and proclaiming what was contrary to the institutions that had prevailed in the church...'* (7) Many sincere believers including Tertullian were caught up for a time in the Montanist movement.

Kydd, a *Charismatic*, who made a study of the gifts in the first three centuries, states: *'There is no example of a non Montanist Christian prophet coming from the second half of the second century.*(8) *...Following about AD260 evidence for the presence of spiritual gifts is non existent.'* (9)

In reference to the gift of tongues, by the time of Chrysostom and Augustine 'glossolalia' (speaking in tongues) was unanimously considered a thing of the past. Professor Glen Hinson at Southern Baptist Theological seminary, in reference to the gift of tongues, wrote: *'The first sixteen centuries of its history were lean ones indeed. Although we find several references in the early fathers, they leave us in no doubt about the apparent insignificance of tongues in their day. Some contemporary scholars even doubt whether the Montanists, often cited as the ancient prototype for the Pentecostals, actually practised Glossolalia.*

*Then, if the first five centuries were lean, the next were starvation years for the practise in Western Christendom and doubtful ones in Eastern Christendom. The few scattered references to it are dubious in themselves and made even more dubious by the characteristic credulity of the middle ages. From the middle ages there is another gap to the seventeenth century, first among the English dissenters and then among the Cevenols in France. For the next two centuries, we can discern only isolated references here and there. Only in the twentieth century has glossolalia prospered.'* (10)

We then come to **Novatian** (died **AD346**). Again, note the bracketed section often excluded in the references we have seen: [*'He is one and the same, distributing His offices according to the times, and the occasions and impulses of things...He is therefore one and the same Spirit who was in the prophets and apostles, except that in the former He was occasional, in the latter always...since they were henceforth*

*armed and strengthened by the same Spirit, having in themselves the gifts which this same Spirit distributes, and appropriates to the Church, the spouse of Christ, as her ornaments.] This is He who places prophets in the Church, instructs teachers, directs tongues, gives powers and healings, does wonderful works, often discrimination of spirits, affords powers of government, suggests counsels, and orders and arranges whatever other gifts there are of charismata; and thus makes the Lord's Church everywhere, and in all, perfected and completed'. (11)*

Because many exclude the bracketed section, they are not aware that Novatian is writing primarily about the Holy Spirit, and commentators believe he is referring to the *past*. This is backed up elsewhere where he states that tongues were a thing of the past.

Another popular quote we have seen is *attributed* to a **Celcus**, apparently describing Christian prophets of his day: '*Strange, fanatical, and quite unintelligible words of which no rational person can find the meaning*'. However, this is actually not a quote by Celcus but by **Origen** refuting Celcus, who was an heretical philosopher! Origen is actually not speaking of tongues here but the act of prophesying. In the same discourse Origen accuses Celcus of being dishonest: '*Celcus is not to be believed when he says he has heard such men prophesy; for no prophets bearing any resemblance to the ancient prophets have appeared in the time of Celcus.*' (12)

As to this 'prophesying', **Origen (3rd Century)** agreed with the consensus of church fathers that in their day no prophets had come like the ancient prophets.

We have seen from the above quotes how the very few references attributed to the early church fathers are no proof at all, and are regularly being *misused* and misquoted. But let us now look at a small selection of a *huge* number of testimonies declaring that the miraculous gifts simply did not continue after the first century. These are quotes simply ignored by too many today!:

**Chrysostom (AD345-407)** referring to 1Cor.12-14 speaks of the cessation of miraculous gifts: '*This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer*

*take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity hath produced us again another question; namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more?’* (13)

**Augustine (4th Century)**, referring to tongues in the New Testament, writes: ‘...these were signs adapted to the time...that thing was done for a betokening [purpose] and it passed away.’ (14)

As one author writes: ‘...by the time of Chrysostom there is no evidence of glossolalia in the eastern church, and that by the time of Augustine there is no trace of tongue speaking in the western church. A question we are moved to ask already at this point is this: if glossolalia is as important a gift of the Spirit as present day Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals say it is, why did God allow it simply to disappear from the church?’ (15)

From the time of the first few centuries AD there is a huge chasm of silence regarding the miraculous gifts, until the **13th Century**. From this period the so called ‘cases of miraculous gifts’ cannot be honestly used by those who claim to be Biblical Christians. These accounts feature Roman Catholic saints and mystics and are often idolatrous and exaggerated accounts of healings and miracles. And yet, even here there are still so few reports.

Then we come to the **Jansenists** of the **17th Century**, a Roman Catholic offshoot who claimed to speak with unknown tongues. The *Jansenists* were a sect who left the Roman church but still clung to its doctrines. Jansen rejected the doctrine of Justification by Faith and the Imputed Righteousness of Christ. He taught a relationship with Jesus was only possible through the Roman Catholic Church.(16) There were many claims of cures at the grave sites of ‘saints’. It is documented that numerous mental sicknesses arose within this group. (17)

The **Quakers (1624-1691)**, claimed miracles, healings and tongues. In ‘prophesying’ they were not unlike the earlier heretical *Montanists*. In doctrine they denied the full deity of Christ, the imputation of Adam’s sin and the atonement. They were known to ‘*march through the streets naked and exhume bodies with the expectation of restoring them to life*’. (18)



The *Shakers* under ‘mother’ Anne Lee of New York claimed the use of some miraculous gifts. Lee claimed to be the second incarnation of Christ and was acknowledged by many as ‘mother in christ’. She rejected the Trinity, the bodily resurrection, the atonement, believed in a form of sinless perfection, and salvation in the next life. (19)

The shakers were one of the first non Roman Catholic groups to speak in unknown tongues and exhibit the same manifestations as the later Pentecostal church. There were reports of naked dancing while speaking in unknown tongues.

The *Camisards (1702-1705)* exhibited physical and sometimes violent manifestations. All kinds of miracles were claimed – lights in the sky; gunshot wounds rendered harmless; shedding tears of blood; and children supposedly ‘prophesying’. Some say there were ‘tongues’, but the ‘prophecies’ were in real languages which differs from today’s Charismatic/Pentecostal unknown ecstatic utterances.

The *Irvingites* in the *18th Century* claimed a restoration of many miraculous gifts but eventually they began contradicting one another and fell into disrepute with the outcome being immorality and unfulfilled prophecies. This group eventually became the *Apostolic* or the *Catholic Apostolic Church*. They also claimed to speak in unknown tongues.

Although many will use these groups mentioned as evidence for the gift of tongues, they fail to realise that these groups were *heretical* in doctrine, extreme in practices, and did not display the biblical gift of *known foreign languages* as in Acts 2, but instead the counterfeit – ecstatic unknown utterances – spoken against by the Apostle Paul.

The same unknown tongues were also featured amongst the early *Mormons*.

Some of the descriptions of the manifestations and extremes of these sects make horrifying reading and are practically identical to what has been seen in recent Pentecostal ‘revivals’. (20)

Some also cite the *Anabaptists* as evidencing the miraculous gifts. There were two groups of Anabaptists – often called the *Radical Anabaptists* and the *Sober Anabaptists*. The *Radical Anabaptists* were involved in extremes and excesses and false prophecies.

Today many are using these accounts without documenting the teachings and bizarre behaviour that went along with the use of these false ‘gifts’. *The miraculous gifts were simply not evidenced in any orthodox biblical Christian group* during the above periods! The incidences mentioned were confined to Roman Catholic groups, mystics, Gnostics, sects, or as fleshly extremes in the church. They were not considered by the church at the time to be orthodox. Between the end of the 1st century and the 17th century it is arguable that no true orthodox Christians practised the true miraculous sign gifts. It was certainly not a part of the Reformation

Another cause of error is the lack of understanding in the difference between miraculous sign gifts and miracles. The miraculous gifts involved humans inherently exercising signs, wonders and miracles without failure. These were the ‘*signs of the apostles*’. Many historical accounts used for the continuation of the gifts are actually not speaking of ‘gifts’ but rather accounts of reported healings and miracles without the activity of man at all.

After the 17th Century the next period commonly cited is the late **19th Century** where there were isolated cases of unknown tongues at some Christian holiness camp meetings or revival meetings. However, *they were usually considered either demonic or a fleshly extreme.*

The following quote from Wesley is often called upon: ‘*Both adults and children fell under the power of the spirit. They shrieked, swooned, fell to the floor as if dead, babbled senselessly, cried out in praise of God, and so on.*’ (21)

Many who use this quote fail to realise what Wesley was really saying here and that the people affected by these extremes were not believers! Wesley realised that fleshly extremes were a part of some of his meetings. He spoke of nature mixing with grace and ‘*Satan likewise mimicked this work of God in order to discredit the whole work.*’ (22)

None of the Reformers found the miraculous gifts to be that which God had permanently given to the church. Martin Luther wrote: ‘*And since we have this sure prophecy [The Word of God] which is being fulfilled at present – miracles are no longer necessary to confirm this doctrine...*’ (23) ...‘*They make themselves ridiculous, therefore, by*

*pretending that they are endued with the gift of healing...He [God] does not exert those manifest powers, nor dispense miracles by the hands of the apostles, because that gift was temporary, and...immediately ceased.'* (24)

John Flavel, a leading Puritan preacher wrote: *'...but now these extraordinary ways are ceased (Hebrews 1:1,2) and we are no more to expect them.'* (25)

Thomas Watson wrote in 1660: *'...there being then extraordinary gifts in the church which are now ceased.'* (26)

John Owen in 1679, writing about the supernatural gifts: *'That dispensation of the Spirit is long since ceased, and where it now pretended unto by any, it may justly be suspected as an enthusiastic delusion.'* (27)

The great commentator, Matthew Henry, in 1712 wrote: *'These [tongues] and other gifts of prophecy, being a sign, have long since ceased, and been laid aside, and we have no encouragement to expect the revival of them; but on the contrary, are directed to call the Scriptures the more sure Word of prophecy...'*

The great revivalist Jonathan Edwards, so often selectively misquoted in recent Pentecostal 'revivals', wrote: *'Since the canon of Scripture has been completed, and the Christian church fully founded and established, these extraordinary gifts have ceased.'*(28) *'I do not expect a restoration of these miraculous gifts...nor do I desire it. It appears to me that it would add nothing to the glory of those times, but rather diminish from it...I have seen so much of the power of God in a more excellent way as to convince me that God can easily do without it. They who leave the sure word of prophecy – which God has given us as a light shining in a dark place – to follow such impressions and impulses, leave the guidance of the polar star to follow a Jack with a lantern. No wonder that sometimes they are led into woeful extravagances.'* (29)

Another great revivalist, George Whitefield, said: *'I never did pretend to those extraordinary operations of working miracles, or speaking with tongues.'* Other names such as Buchanan, Dabney and Smeaton all wrote similarly.

Writing in the nineteenth Century the ‘*prince of preachers*’, Charles Spurgeon, penned: ‘*The apostles were empowered to do many things, but who are you? Do you claim to be their successors? Then work miracles similar to theirs: take up serpents and drink deadly things without being harmed thereby; prove to us that you have seen the Lord...*’ (30)

Regardless of the readers or the authors persuasion concerning the continuation of or the cessation of the ‘sign gifts’ (1Cor.12), there is no doubt that the teaching for at least 1800 years, was that the extraordinary ‘sign’ gifts had ceased.

But here we come to the real point of why this is fact and truth. Many Christians are simply unaware of the *Scriptural purpose* for the miraculous gifts!

In the Old Testament Moses was given power to work miraculous signs ‘*that they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee*’, (Ex.4:5). This purpose for miracles is repeated throughout the Bible. In the New Testament the miraculous gifts were signs which pointed to the *Messiahship of Christ* and the *credentials of the apostles*: ‘*And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God...*’, (Jn.20:30,31); ‘*...Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you...*’, (Acts 2:22).

When John the Baptist asked the disciples for proof of the *Messiahship of Christ*, Jesus said to His disciples: ‘*Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached*’, (Lk.7:21-22).

Other verses (below) make interesting reading when one considers the Greek tenses and moods of the verbs used. When referring to the miraculous gifts and ‘signs of an apostle’, the Greek uses the *aorist indicative* – which means a *definite* time (indicative), and in the *past*. The action is specific at a set point in time past and is not continuous or repeatable: ‘*Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you*

*in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds*, (2Cor.12:12); *‘How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will?’*, (Heb.2:3,4).

Beware of those who would attempt to rearrange, change or distort the facts of history concerning the miraculous sign gifts; including those who are attempting to ‘restore’ the miraculous gifts. For 1900 years there was the understanding that the miraculous gifts were for a very important purpose – *that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God...*, (Jn.20:30,31) *...a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs...*, (Acts 2:22); and that they were *‘signs of an apostle’*, (2Cor.12:12).

The healing of the dumb, blind, lame and possessed unbelievers; speaking new revelation; raising the dead; and the ability to speak in recognisable foreign languages (unlearned by the speaker), were all in direct fulfilment of Old Testament Messianic (and other) prophecy, (Matt.11:3-5).

Just as Moses was confronted with false miracle workers whilst before Pharaoh, today we have many counterfeits in the church – men who are *‘false christs’* and *‘false apostles’* (Matt.24:24; 2Cor.11:13), who claim to have, or are lauded as evidencing, the miraculous sign gifts. They ‘make merchandise’ of God’s people, (2Pet.2:3).

For God to now revert to new revelation through prophets, after having sent His Son, would greatly devalue Christ – and would be senseless. Yet, self proclaimed ‘prophets’ abound today.

Tongues, Biblically, are ‘known languages’ and were a sign in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy to the Jews. Biblical tongues are therefore said to be *‘...for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not’*, (1Cor.14:22).

To hold to a view that the miraculous gifts ceased or that they are not needed today, does in no way limit God, nor show a ‘lack of faith’. Rather, it requires a discernment between the apostolic ‘sign gifts’ operating for a specific *purpose* and time; and the gifts given to the church by the Holy Spirit in these times – helps, administration, faith,

ministry, exhortation, mercy, giving, etc. You don't hear too much clamouring after these gifts in the church today!

We are also warned of the current Signs and Wonders Movement. In *every* place where signs and wonders are mentioned in connection with the end-times the reference is to *lying* or *false* signs and wonders! (Matt.24:24; Mk.13:22; 2Thess.2:9; Rev.13:13) Yet many today seek after, and entertain, the current signs and wonder movement. Jesus said '**...An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah**', (Matt.12:39; 16:4).

The church, beginning with the Fathers and continuing with great saints too numerous to mention, have committed in writing their convictions on this matter and these writings are available to us today. Their testimony has stood unchanged for nearly 2000 years. To ignore or twist the testimony of those who carried 'the faith once delivered' is to greatly devalue the work of those God used during these many years.

Ultimately it is Scripture which determines the truth of this matter. Scripture shows us clearly the fulfilled *purpose* of the 'sign' gifts; and the church has always taught and testified to this as the historic faith.

### **Index:**

- (1) The book '*Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*' by Thomas Edgar is a refutation of Deere's book '*Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*'. Other articles exposing Deere's works are '*Who Surprised Whom? The Holy Spirit or Jack Deere?*' by Richard L. Mayhue, *Masters Seminary Journal*;
- (2) Iranaeus, '*Against Heresies*', II, 31.3
- (3) Ignatius, '*To the Philadelphians*' 5. 1,2
- (4) Origen, '*Against Celcus*', 1,2; 2,8; 7,8
- (5) Tertullian, '*Against Marcion*', Book V, Ch.VIII
- (6) '*History of the Christian Church*' by Philip Schaff, 2:425

- (7) *'Ecclesiastical History'* by Eusebius, V,16
- (8) *'Charismatic Gifts'* by Kydd, P.34
- (9) Ibid 57
- (10) *'Glossolia'* by Stagg, Hinson and Oates, P.45,46
- (11) Novatian, *'Treatise Concerning the Trinity'* XXIX
- (12) Origen, *'Against Celsus'* VII,11
- (13) Homilies in 1st Corinthians: Homily XXIX and XXXVI
- (14) Homily No.6 on 1John
- (15) *'Tongues Speaking'* by Hoekema, P.19
- (16) *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th edition 12:892
- (17) *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of religious knowledge* (1967)
- (18) *'Speaking With Tongues'* by Cutten, P.68
- (19) *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Hastings 3:782
- (20) *'The Gift of Tongues'* by Mackie, 71-72
- (21) *'Glossolia'* by Stagg, Hinson and Oates, P.64
- (22) *The Journal of John Wesley*, 239
- (23) *Works*, Vol.24, P.366
- (24) *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol.II, P.637.
- (25) Flavel, Vol.II, P.308
- (26) *The Beatitudes* 14
- (27) *Works*, IV.518
- (28) 1738, *Charity and Its Fruits*
- (29) *'Marks of the Spirit of God'*
- (30) New Park Street Pulpit, Vol.10, P.542

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