

Sign-Gifts

Question:

Odi, good morning. How are you and your fiancée? I know the Lord is with you.

Q:when did the church attain maturity? On the issue of gifts disappearing actually. When the full canon of scripture was given?

Love

Response:

Good morning sir. We are doing very fine, thank you sir.

About your question, first, I wouldn't take Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:11 to apply to the Church in a literal way. For example, there have been seven ages of the Church (as you know, we're now in the seventh one). In some ways, rather than these ages being consecutive growth stages, they are a lot more like cycles. They are "generations" with significantly different characteristics, like different cohorts of the same military, only in this case separated by time.

When Paul talks about acting one way as a child and another as an adult, his point was that whereas at a particular point in the history of the Church we relied on one way of doing things, it was foolish to continue to rely on that way when a superior way became available. At the time that he wrote that particular letter, the New Testament was still not complete even, but his words were meant to prepare them to "give up" reliance on the sign-gifts that were bridging the gap until the New Testament was completed.

So, while I wouldn't quite say that the Church matured and therefore did not need the sign-gifts anymore, I would say instead that the Lord's Desire to give us the Truth rather than signs was balanced out by our own natural hardheartedness. The Lord only accommodated us by giving us time to accommodate the "naked" Truth by giving us reason to receive it. Without that stopgap of the sign-gifts, it is entirely possible that the New Testament would have been rejected.

As soon as the New Testament was completed with its message and its bearers sufficiently endorsed by the Lord through multiple signs of power, there was no more reason for the sign-gifts. If it was a matter of the whole Church coming to maturity, then we wouldn't still be struggling individually to grow to maturity. The proportion of individual believers who do grow to spiritual maturity is actually very small throughout the history of man.

The maturity of the Church as a whole is discussed by Paul in Ephesians 4:13, but its temporal fulfillment is more about the completion of the number of all those who believe and remain steadfast in faith, since we know that although the Lord wants us all to grow to spiritual maturity, the vast majority of us will not. The full maturity of the Church as a single organism is a matter of holding on to the Faith of Jesus Christ no matter what until the end of our lives or the return of the King. So, when all of us have been rigorously tested and we have refused to give up our faith, then the Bride is ready for her Husband. That is what makes us the Church: our choice to believe God in Jesus Christ and to not give up or waver in that faith. But as individual

believers, spiritual maturity is a different matter. Not only must we believe, we must also come to understand what we believe in a degree that makes it ridiculous for us to even contemplate ceasing to believe. This is not the defining mark of a believer, so it does not define the Church as a whole. Rather, it defines individual entities within the Church or we could say that while faith is the common attitude of all believers to the Lord, there are degrees to which we individually believe.

So, again, I would conclude that the issue was more that the Lord wanted to give us the Truth as soon as we could actually tolerate it. That was why although to accommodate our hard hearts He gave us sign-gifts first, His goal was to provide the full revelation of the Truth that we need to finish our course in this world at the earliest possible time that we could receive it. For the believers who were of the generation that received that full revelation, the proof was clear. The authority behind the New Testament was made abundantly perspicuous to them. For us, we have only to read the Bible to see that it is true. They had to be persuaded to even read it in the first place. What was going to give them a good reason to test it? The sign-gifts are the answer. Even people like Peter who was one of the bearers of the message needed visions and the evidence of his own eyes and ears when the Holy Spirit caused Cornelius's household to begin to speak in different languages when He filled them (Acts 10:9-48; 11:15-17) to believe that the Salvation he was given to proclaim was also meant for the Gentiles (in spite of Acts 1:8). Although that generation, like us, had natural revelation to tell them about God, they needed some way of being sure that it was really the God that was manifest in the physical universe that was sending these really incredible messages to them by the mouths and letters of people like Peter, Paul, Luke, and the others. Consider too, just as I already mentioned above, that even those who carried the message needed to be assured that it was the Lord Who was really sending them.

The reason for all this is that the revelation in the New Testament is different, although not contrary to, the revelation in the Old. That is, God was saying new things that He had not said before. So, anyone looking at the Old Testament was still going to have to have faith enough to accept things that were not revealed in it.

Today, however, we have the complete testimony of the Bible. Sign-gifts cannot help us in any way. There is no new information that requires endorsement by the Lord. Whatever we hear now is at best going to explain or bring to the surface something that is already in the Bible. In other words, what the sign-gifts did for the generation of the Apostles is what the Bible does for us now, except that the Bible does far more. Today we can know that something is true just by seeing whether the Bible says that it is or not. We know too that God has nothing more to say to us beyond what He has said in the Bible (Revelation 22:18-19).

So, there is no reason for sign-gifts anymore. There hasn't been since the New Testament was completed. The Church need not have reached its full number (which is what our corporate maturity means, and "perfection" or "completeness" is the better word in this context) in order for the sign-gifts to be removed. Paul's words were referring to the crutch that sign-gifts represented in the absence of the real thing, namely, the completed New Testament).

Please let me know if I need to clarify anything further. And sorry for the delay in answering.

PS.: A poor but possibly useful analogy here is that the original Gatling gun was really good and a game-changer in battle, but it would be madness to use it today in warfare when weapons far superior are available. 200 rounds per minute may have won the war in the early twentieth century, but today that would be a foolish thing to use against 6000 rounds per minute machines.

The same way, while sign-gifts did some good before the New Testament was complete, it would be foolish to depend on them once the full New Testament has become available.

Note also that just as the bronze serpent became a snare in the wilderness, so too sign-gifts could and did become a snare to many ever since. That is one reason that these things are never meant to last. The Truth is what matters. All the props, supports, and crutches are only given and useful when the Truth is still not fully available.