

# THE DISPENSATIONAL PLACE OF MIRACULOUS SIGNS AND WATER BAPTISM

The truths which we have been considering vitally affect our *practice* as members of the body of Christ and our *service* for Him, for if we do not clearly understand God's message and program for the present dispensation, how can we serve Him effectively?

The prevailing confusion in the church is largely due to ignorance and even indifference as to these matters. How many of God's people today are trying zealously to serve Him, without first finding out exactly what it is He wishes them to do! Hence, even among those who sincerely trust in Christ as Savior, many are still striving vainly to establish His kingdom on earth, while others seek for some or all of the miraculous powers of Pentecost and all together insist on practicing the ordinance of water baptism, though unable to agree as to *who* should be baptized, or *how*, or *why*.

Miraculous signs and baptism deserve exhaustive treatment in separate volumes, but we must deal with them briefly here because of their relation to the whole dispensational problem.

## MIRACULOUS SIGNS

It cannot be denied that miraculous demonstrations abounded during our Lord's earthly ministry and the period covered by the book of Acts. Neither can it be denied that such demonstrations abounded among *Gentile members of the body of Christ* before the close of the Acts period.

Some hold that *all true* believers today *do* possess the miraculous powers of Pentecost, since our Lord, in His "great commission," explicitly said: "*And these signs shall follow them that believe. . .*" (Mark 16:17,18). Others believe that certain people are granted the power to work miracles, especially miracles of healing. Notwithstanding these claims, however, *God is not* bestowing miraculous powers upon men today. If the "great commission" with its Pentecostal signs were indeed being carried out today there would be no question about miracles, for saved and unsaved alike were compelled to acknowledge the mighty miracles of the Pentecostal era<sup>63</sup> ([Acts 3:11](#), [4:14,16](#), etc.).

---

<sup>63</sup> Note: we refer to supernatural *gifts* and *demonstrations*. We recognize, of course, that miracles are being performed all about us constantly, but while God, for example, may miraculously heal the sick, according to His will, He does not use "divine healers" to accomplish this, nor have we the right to claim physical health in the present dispensation. As one has said: "Despite the 'divine healers,' the death rate is still one apiece!"

As to alleged evidence of the supernatural powers of present day Pentecostalist "healers": the Roman Church, the Unity movement, Christian Scientists, and others who claim healing powers can present "evidences" fully as convincing. Are their powers, then, also God-given?

## MIRACLES AND SPIRITUALITY

The usual reason given for the absence of these powers is lack of faith and spirituality. If only we had the faith of the early believers, we are told; if only we were as spiritual as they, we too would possess these miraculous powers.

It is not denied that even the most consecrated believer falls far short of God's standards of spirituality, nor that there is a particular lack of true spirituality among Christians today, but this does not explain their inability to perform miracles. Such an argument would be answered by the case of the Corinthians alone. Paul called them *unspiritual* babes ([1 Cor. 3:1](#)) and sternly

rebuked them for their carnality, for their "envying, and strife, and divisions" (I Cor. 3:3), for their immorality (I Cor. 5:1), for their dishonesty and oppression of each other (I Cor. 6:7, 8), for their unfaithfulness in giving (I Cor. 9:11-14), for their selfishness and pride (I Cor. 11:21,22) and exclaimed to them: "And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned!" (I Cor. 5:2, cf. 4:18).

Yet this *same* Corinthian church, at this same time, *abounded* in miraculous gifts (I Cor. 1:7, 12:8-11, 14:12,18,26). The absence of these miraculous powers in the church today must, therefore, have another explanation.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SIGNS

First the general fact should be noted that in Old Testament history miraculous demonstrations prevailed in times of great crisis as, for example, in the cases of Moses and Aaron and of Elijah and Elisha. Doubtless the call to Israel to repent, from the time of John the Baptist to Pentecost, and the presentation of Christ to Israel for her acceptance, was the greatest crisis in Israel's history up to that time.

Secondly, it had been predicted by the prophets that miracles would abound at Messiah's coming (Isa. 35:5,6, etc.). This is why we read in Matt. 8:16,17:

**"When the even was come, they brought unto Him many that were possessed with devils: and He cast out the spirits with His word, and healed all that were sick:**

**"THAT IT MIGHT BE FULFILLED WHICH WAS SPOKEN BY ESAIAS THE PROPHET, SAYING, HIMSELF TOOK OUR INFIRMITIES, AND BARE OUR SICKNESSES."**

This, also, is why Peter declared at Pentecost:

**"Ye men of Israel, hear these words; 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, as ye yourselves also know" (Acts 2:22).**

Thus Paul writes to the Romans that "Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision ... to *confirm* the promises made unto the fathers" (Rom. 15:8).

In the third place, we should remember that these miracles had a special significance in connection with the casting out of Satan, so long the prince of this world (John 12:31), and the establishment of Christ's kingdom, for we read in I John 3:8:

**"... FOR THIS PURPOSE THE SON OF GOD WAS MANIFESTED, THAT HE MIGHT DESTROY THE WORKS OF THE DEVIL."**

Thus, in His attack on the kingdom of Satan, our Lord said:

**"And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand?"**

**"BUT IF I CAST OUT DEVILS BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD, THEN THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS COME UNTO YOU" (Matt. 12:26,28).**

In accordance with this the Lord also commanded the seventy to declare in each city the significance of the miracles they wrought there:

**"AND HEAL THE SICK THAT ARE THEREIN, AND SAY UNTO THEM, THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS COME NIGH UNTO YOU" (Luke 10:9).**

In Acts it is the same for, remember, Acts is the record of what the Lord Jesus *continued* to do and to teach after His resurrection ([Acts 1:1,2](#)). The miracles of the Pentecostal era were wrought by the *risen Christ*, so that Peter, referring to one case, declared:

**"And His name through faith in His name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by Him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all" (Acts 3:16).**

**"BE IT KNOWN UNTO YOU ALL, AND TO ALL THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL THAT BY THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST OF NAZARETH, WHOM YE CRUCIFIED, WHOM GOD RAISED FROM THE DEAD, EVEN BY HIM DOTHS THIS MAN STAND HERE BEFORE YOU WHOLE" (Acts 4:10).**

And as Christ had been "approved of God" by miraculous signs, so we are told in Heb. 2:3,4, of the "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."**

This "great salvation," which "began to be spoken by the Lord," was, of course, that of Matt. 1:21 and Luke 1:67-77, and concerned the reign of Christ on earth. And now this message was "confirmed ... by them that heard Him," so that Peter offered to Israel the times of refreshing and the return of Christ, upon condition that they repent and turn to Him ([Acts 3:19,20](#)).

And so God confirmed our Lord's Messiahship with mighty signs and wonders, both during His earthly ministry and after His ascension into heaven.

### **MIRACLES AMONG THE GENTILES**

What, then, was the reason for the miraculous gifts among the Gentiles, especially under Paul's ministry? Even these were associated indirectly with the Messianic kingdom.

We must not forget that Paul, though entrusted with *another* commission and "the gospel of the grace of God," nevertheless *confirmed* Peter's message and proclaimed and proved to the Jews everywhere that "Jesus is the Christ," for the offer of the kingdom, made at Pentecost, was not officially withdrawn until Acts 28:28. Hence, it is not strange to find these miraculous confirmations of Christ's kingdom rights continued until that time.

We must also remember the inspired declaration that "the Jews require a sign" ([I Cor. 1:22](#)). The way *they* could tell that the new program was of God was that Paul had all "the signs of an apostle" ([II Cor. 12:11,12](#)) and that the Gentile believers also possessed miraculous powers. Even before Paul went to the Gentiles, Peter was sent to the first Gentile household to be thus convinced.

Note the record concerning this:

**"And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. "FOR THEY HEARD THEM SPEAK WITH TONGUES, AND MAGNIFY GOD . . ." (Acts 10-45,46).**

### **MIRACULOUS GIFTS WITHDRAWN**

But with the setting aside of Israel there was no longer any need of this, and the later epistles of Paul do not even recognize such gifts as being in order. Indeed, in his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle made it clear that their miraculous powers were to be withdrawn:

**"CHARITY [LOVE] NEVER FAILETH: BUT WHETHER THERE BE PROPHECIES, THEY SHALL FAIL; WHETHER THERE BE TONGUES, THEY SHALL CEASE; WHETHER THERE BE KNOWLEDGE, IT SHALL VANISH AWAY" (I Cor. 13:8).**

Certainly Paul did not mean that supernatural *predictions* would fail to come true, nor that men would stop *talking* or *knowing*. He referred to the miraculous *gifts* of prophecy, tongues and knowledge.

These were to be "done away."

**"AND NOW ABIDE FAITH, HOPE, CHARITY [LOVE], THESE THREE; BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS CHARITY [LOVE]" (I Cor. 13:13).**

As to the healing miracles: those who were healed by the Lord and His followers would doubtless have entered into the kingdom and have gone on living, had the kingdom been established, but now that Israel rejected Christ and His reign all these healed ones died. So it was not because our Lord had failed that those He healed did not remain alive and well; it was because the kingdom was refused and "this present evil age" settled down upon the world.

In Paul's early letters there is abundant proof that the gift of healing was already being withdrawn, for there he says:

**"FOR WE KNOW THAT THE WHOLE CREATION GROANETH AND TRAVAILETH IN PAIN TOGETHER UNTIL NOW.**

**"AND NOT ONLY THEY, BUT OURSELVES ALSO, WHICH HAVE THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THE SPIRIT, EVEN WE OURSELVES GROAN WITHIN OURSELVES, WAITING FOR THE ADOPTION, TO WIT, THE REDEMPTION OF OUR BODY" (Rom. 8:22,23).**

**"FOR IN THIS [TABERNACLE] WE GROAN, EARNESTLY DESIRING TO BE CLOTHED UPON WITH OUR HOUSE WHICH IS FROM HEAVEN" (II Cor. 5:2).**

Add to these passages such statements as the following: "*Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day*" (II Cor. 4:16), "*There was given to me a thorn in the flesh ... lest I should be exalted above measure*" (II Cor. 12:7), "*And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling*" (I Cor. 2:3), "*Through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first*" (Gal. 4:13), "*Who is weak, and I am not weak?*" (II Cor. 11: 29), "*Epaphroditus . . . was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him*" (Phil. 2:25-27), "*Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick*" (II Tim. 4:20), "*Use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities*" (I Tim. 5:23).

## TAKING PLEASURE IN INFIRMITIES

The gift of healing, then, was being withdrawn as Paul wrote his early epistles. God, however, was replacing it with something better, for we are *"blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places"* (Eph. 1:3). Indeed, our high and holy calling, our perfect position in Christ, our spiritual wealth, might well puff us up did not God allow us to be visited with bodily affliction (II Cor. 12:7). Meantime He assures us: *"My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness"* (II Cor. 12:9).

Thus these afflictions become blessings in disguise and serve to draw us closer to God. This is why the Apostle Paul goes on to say:

**"... MOST GLADLY THEREFORE WILL I RATHER GLORY IN MY INFIRMITIES, THAT THE POWER OF CHRIST MAY REST UPON ME. "THEREFORE I TAKE PLEASURE IN INFIRMITIES, IN REPROACHES, IN NECESSITIES, IN PERSECUTIONS, IN DISTRESSES FOR CHRIST'S SAKE: FOR WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN AM I STRONG" (II Cor. 12: 9, 10).**

## WATER BAPTISM

Water baptism and miraculous signs both belong to the so-called "great commission" (Matt. 28:19, Mark 16:16-18, Acts 1:8), yet, strangely, many pastors who would excommunicate any of their members for speaking in tongues or seeking to perform miracles, nevertheless cling tenaciously to the practice of water baptism. Surely it would seem that if the "great commission" is for our obedience today, the Pentecostals are more consistent than the great majority of their Fundamentalist brethren in this matter. Here, then, let us point out briefly the dispensational significance of water baptism and the glory of the "one baptism" of the present dispensation.

In all the division and confusion which has prevailed in the church over the subject of baptism, the primary question at issue has been almost completely overlooked. That question is not whether water baptism is found in the Scriptures, nor *who* should be baptized, nor *how*.

The *first* question which concerns us is: should we practice water baptism now? Is it included in God's program for *the present dispensation*?<sup>64</sup>

If, instead of becoming wrought up over secondary questions, the spiritual leaders of the past centuries had first asked themselves this basic question, much discord and heartache could have been avoided.

<sup>64</sup> See the author's booklet entitled: "Water Baptism: Is It Included In God's Program For Today?"

## WATER BAPTISM AND THE MESSIANIC KINGDOM

We have already seen that the opening message of the New Testament Scriptures is *"Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Matt. 3:2). This message was first proclaimed to Israel by John the Baptist and was later taken up by our Lord (Matt. 4:17) and His twelve apostles (Matt. 10:5-7).

The proclamation of this message and its results are what the "Four Gospels" record.

The fact that this kingdom was now proclaimed "at hand" indicates that it had been predicted and expected, and so it had.

Under the Old Covenant God had promised:

**"Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people: for all the earth is Mine:**

**"And ye shall be unto Me A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS, and AN HOLY NATION.  
These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel (Ex. 19:5,6).**

Until they did obey God's voice indeed, only certain people *in* Israel were set apart as priests, but in connection with the coming of Messiah and the conversion of all Israel, God later promised that they would indeed become a whole nation of priests through whom the Gentiles should approach God:

**"BUT YE SHALL BE NAMED THE PRIESTS OF THE LORD: MEN SHALL CALL YOU THE MINISTERS OF OUR GOD ... (Isa. 61:6).**

The first rite to be performed at the induction of the priest into his office was his washing with water (Ex. 29:4). This spoke of his need of cleansing before approaching the presence of God. Hence, as John proclaimed the kingdom at hand, in which all Israel should stand before God as priests, he demanded repentance and water baptism for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4).<sup>65</sup>

That John's baptism was associated with the manifestation of Christ to Israel cannot be denied, for John himself said:

**"AND I KNEW HIM NOT: BUT THAT HE SHOULD BE MADE MANIFEST TO ISRAEL THEREFORE AM I COME BAPTIZING WITH WATER" (John 1:31).**

Mark well, John baptized the people *"for the remission of sins."* Nor was this changed after the resurrection of Christ, for at Pentecost Peter offered Christ's return and the times of refreshing to Israel, again calling upon them *to "repent and be baptized ... for the remission of sins"* (Acts 2:38) <sup>66</sup>

This was in strict obedience to the commission given to him by the risen Lord, in which it was expressly stated that *"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved"* (Mark 16:16).<sup>67</sup>

As with miraculous signs, the departure from this program came with Israel's rejection of her risen Messiah and the raising up of Paul to proclaim the gospel of the grace of God. And, like miraculous signs, this part of the program was not discontinued all at once. Even after the raising up of Paul God still continued for some time to stretch forth His hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people (Rom. 10:21).

The departure, however, did not begin until after Saul's conversion. Then Peter was sent to the first Gentile family only to have his sermon interrupted while, to the astonishment of His companions, these Gentiles were saved and received the Holy Spirit apart from water baptism (Acts 10:44, 46).

True Peter *then* baptized them (Acts 10:47) to keep the books straight, as it were, but the departure from the program of the "great commission" is clear. The practice of water baptism continued for some time after this, while Christ was still being made manifest to Israel.

---

<sup>65</sup> Under the Mosaic law the priests and those ceremonially "unclean" were both washed, or baptized. Thus under the kingdom program the Jews and the "unclean" Gentiles alike had to be baptized (Matt. 28:19).



<sup>66</sup> Those who speak of "Christian baptism" beginning at Pentecost under the "great commission," should carefully note this fact. At a public debate on this subject we once produced six books and booklets by prominent Fundamentalists, upholding their baptism theories, in which they had quoted Acts 2:38, but had omitted the words "*for the remission of sins.*"

<sup>67</sup> Fundamentalists who claim to be carrying out the "great commission" generally interpret this to mean: "*He that believeth and is saved ought to be baptized.*" It can only be said in this connection that those who thus handle so plain a statement from God's Word may also "interpret" other passages to mean what they do not say. Modernism and the cults have already gone down this road.

## PAUL AND THE "ONE BAPTISM"

But in the ministry of Paul, with which the rest of Acts is concerned, water baptism is *never* required for the remission of sins. Obviously, then, another commission was replacing that given to the eleven before our Lord's ascension.

It is significant that while Paul did baptize some,<sup>68</sup> and mentions this in his first letter to the Corinthians, he states that he is glad he has baptized so few of them, adding:

**"FOR CHRIST SENT ME NOT TO BAPTIZE, BUT TO PREACH THE GOSPEL: NOT WITH WISDOM OF WORDS, LEST THE CROSS OF CHRIST SHOULD BE MADE OF NONE EFFECT.**

**"FOR THE PREACHING OF THE CROSS IS TO THEM THAT PERISH FOOLISHNESS, BUT UNTO US WHICH ARE SAVED IT IS THE POWER OF GOD" (I Cor. 1:17,18).**

It is also significant that Paul, *the apostle of the Gentiles and minister of the body of Christ NEVER ONCE, IN ANY OF HIS LETTERS, COMMANDS OR EVEN EXHORTS US TO BE BAPTIZED WITH WATER.*

In his later letters, written after the setting aside of Israel, he states emphatically that there is now but "ONE BAPTISM" ([Eph. 4:5](#)). This baptism is the operation of the Holy Spirit whereby believers are made one with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection ([Rom. 6:3-4](#), [Gal. 3:26,27](#), [Col. 2:9-12](#)), and so are also made members of "one body," the "body of Christ" ([I Cor. 12:13,27](#), [Gal. 3:26-28](#)).

If believers, especially spiritual leaders, better understood the "one baptism" by which the "one Spirit" baptizes us into "one body," our unity in Christ would be more fully enjoyed. Indeed, we are exhorted to endeavor to "keep" or *observe* the unity that the Spirit has made, remembering that there is but "*one body ... one Spirit ... one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father...*" ([Eph. 4:3-6](#)).

One thing is certain: the student who is willing to put aside preconceived notions and human traditions, and search the Scriptures concerning this "one baptism" with an open mind, sits down to a veritable feast of spiritual good things.

<sup>68</sup> He also circumcised Timothy, spoke with tongues, healed the sick, etc.