

**Text: Heb 2.3-4**

Last week I emphasized the imperative of the gospel: there is no escape if you refuse its message.

Today we will underscore the imperative with the:

*Certainty of the Message*

Let's read the first four verses of Heb 2 again:

Heb 2.1-4

You will notice that the last verse touches on “signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit...”

That brings up the topic, in our era, of the so-called charismatic gifts. My notes have several pages filled with discussion about this topic. One of my commentaries mentioned a technical paper written on the Greek of this passage which I downloaded and read.

I will not try to reproduce all that discussion today!

However, the charismatic gifts of the first century, at least, clearly have a role to play in the message of the gospel, accepted both by us and by the Christians Hebrews addresses.

What we are aiming at in this message is *certainty*.

In the first century, there were all kinds of strange fellows running around trying to make a buck one way or another. We ran into one of them in Acts 8, Simon Magus.

You may not recall, but after the experience in Samaria mentioned in Acts, this Simon went on to Rome where he may have been exalted by some as a god (possibly due to his ‘magic’ arts).

He is one example of many.

One of the reasons Paul refused to take money from the local people where he was starting churches was the fact that itinerant “philosophers” would travel around giving speeches for money. Many of these made many outlandish claims, promoting strange religions and sometimes bizarre practices.

This is sort of like the internet today!

How would you react to the claims of the apostles in that environment?

Here they are, telling the story of a Jewish prophet who the Romans crucified, but who the apostles claimed had risen from the dead to grant forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

How would that sound to you?

Consequently, during the first century, God did something to support the claims his apostles made. That's what the author of Hebrews refers to in our passage. The record of supernatural gifts, the charismatic gifts, gave *certainty* to the gospel message.

**Proposition:** God confirmed the gospel to the first century hearers, who passed it on to us. Their certainty calls forth our faith.

## I. Impeccable Source (3b)

A. The gospel comes first from the Lord himself

1. We find threads of the gospel in the OT, from the prophets
2. The full flowering of the gospel comes in the NT, first with John (Mk 1.4-8)
3. Then Jesus came, was baptized by John (Mk 1.9-11), was tempted by Satan (Mk 1.12-13), then came preaching the same gospel (Mk 1.14-15)

To fully flesh this out, we would need to read the entirety of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John!

Our point here is that the gospel first was spoken by the Lord himself

B. The Lord's gospel repeated by the Lord's witnesses

1. The language of Hebrews could include more than just the apostles, but could not be less than the apostles
  - a. Jesus said to the apostles after the resurrection: You are witnesses (Lk 24.48)
  - b. Jesus send the apostles to witness in the world (Ac 1.8)
  - c. The apostles took up the mantle of witness (Ac 3.25, 5.32, 10.39)

2. As noted, the circle of those who heard Jesus is wider than the apostles alone
  - a. However, in Hebrews, the only person called an apostle is Jesus himself (3.1)
  - b. The signs mentioned in v. 4 are called the “signs of a true apostle” in 2 Cor 12.12
3. The bottom line:
  - a. The original source, Jesus, is impeccable as a reliable source
  - b. The witnesses of Jesus are also an impeccable source, as we will see

### C. A sidenote about authorship [Hebrews]

1. Notice that the author includes himself in this: “it was confirmed to us”
2. That excludes the author as an “ear-witness” of Jesus
  - a. The author heard “ear-witnesses” but was not an “ear-witness”
  - b. The author could be someone like Luke, Barnabas, Apollos (all names some have suggested, I favor Luke)
3. This verse really cinches the point that the author *can't* be Paul: Paul insisted he got the gospel directly from the Lord (Gal 1.1, 12)

Back to our message, the gospel originates in the most impeccable of sources, our Lord himself.

## II. Significant Confirmation (4)

- A. The gospel message in the foundational era carries God’s direct support
  1. “God testifying with them” – unique phrase
  2. Underlying word is a unique compound
 

*sunepimarturontos*

    - a. sun = “with”
    - b. epi = “upon”
    - c. martureo = “to bear witness” (root of word “martyr”)
    - d. Lit.: to bear witness at the same time together with

3. This word never occurs in LXX, only once in the NT

“It is ... emphasized by its position, rarity, complexity, and length.”<sup>1</sup>

4. It means God actively took part in confirming the preaching of “those who heard” (3)

B. God’s method of confirmation: signs

1. “Both” – in English, we think of two things joined by this word, in Gk you can have a whole list: here we have four

2. The four means of confirmation

a. Signs

b. Wonders

c. Miracles

d. Distributions of the Spirit (“gifts” in NAU)

3. The signs defined

a. Signs: Includes miraculous events, but focus is no meaning, not sensation, “what the thing signifies”

b. Wonders: miraculous events with the emphasis on the impression they make, “astonishment, awe”

c. Miracles: lit. “powers” – the miracle in itself, as a supernatural act

Ac 8.8ff., the healing of a lame man at Lystra a prime example: a sign, a wonder, a miracle (or “power”)

d. Distributions of the Spirit

1) Not “gifts” *i.e.*, “charisma” as so often in 1 Co 12

1 Cor 12.4 ¶ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 196.

- 2) Rather, “divisions,” as in the “dividing” or “parceling out” of the Holy Spirit
- 3) The same things are in view (tongues, healings, etc.), but the emphasis is on different distributions to different participants
  - a) Witnesses
  - b) Converts
4. When these things manifest themselves, God’s point is that “the word first spoken by the Lord” is true, is certain

### C. A sidenote on the continuance of the signs

1. The grammar of the passage puts these signs firmly in the past
2. They had a purpose, confirming the message of the witnesses
3. Their purpose served, there is no indication that they continue
4. And if they did continue, how would they uniquely confirm the message of the first witnesses alone?
5. Continuance would speak to *ongoing revelation* – very little more of that to come
  - a. Hebrews one of the last epistles in the main wave of NT writing
  - b. Maybe 2 Peter/Jude contemporary or soon after
  - c. Writings of John still to come, as a kind of postscript or capstone of the NT
6. At this point we have evidence of at least a waning of gifts

2 Tim 4.20 Erastus remained at Corinth, but **Trophimus I left sick at Miletus.**

Again, back to our message, the gospel originated with the Lord, repeated by witnesses, confirmed by divine enablements of the apostolic age.

## III. Personal Reception (“to us”) (3c)

### A. The message to the third generation and beyond: “to us”

1. The author includes himself (not an “ear-witness” to Christ)

2. The author includes his readers
3. Surely the author's words apply to us

Each of us have come to Christ in a different way, but we have *one thing* in common:

- Someone told us

The message, once confirmed, became the repeated refrain of generation after generation of believers.

- Somewhere down the line, someone told us, and we believed

B. The whole point of this passage: pay close attention to what we heard  
(1)

1. There are two messages: the light and the heavy
2. The light message is the long story of the OT anticipation of the Messiah and his ministry
3. The heavy message is the brilliant story of the Messiah and his redemption

Pay attention!

4. Now this message has the added heft of divine confirmation

It is "truly true!"

Verily, verily — (to borrow from the κιν)

Pay attention!

### Conclusion:

**Proposition:** God confirmed the gospel to the first century hearers, who passed it on to us. Their certainty calls forth our faith.

Do you pay attention? Do you make the gospel, the Bible, the center of your thinking?

Many distractions (some necessary) in our lives, but we should daily, many times a day, circle back to our Lord and what he has done for us.

If you don't know him, pay attention! The message is *certain*.