

Alarm to Evangelicals

The Strange Case of Simon Magus

Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness". Jesus, Matthew 7:22-23, NASB

Samaria was a religious ghetto that devout Jews tried to avoid (John 4:4). Half-breeds, part Jew and part Gentile, lived in the province north of Judah. Ostracized by the Jerusalem community, the Samaritans built their own worship center, and held as their sacred writings the first five Old Testament books known as the Torah. Yet, the risen Lord Jesus Christ announced that one day the Gospel would be preached in that province (Acts 1:8).

After persecution arose, persecution orchestrated by the as yet unconverted Apostle Paul, and forced the Christians to leave the comfort zone of Jerusalem, God used Philip, an ordained layman, to preach the gospel in Samaria. During Philip's ministry in a Samaritan city, a "power encounter" occurred between the evangelist and a former practitioner of the occult arts named Simon the Great, who, in previous years, had duped Samaritans into believing that he possessed "**the Great Power of God**" (Acts 8:10). But the "great" met a greater. Simon's feigned power paled in comparison to that of Philip who, in the power of God, performed extraordinary exorcisms and healings among the Samaritans. Simon was impressed--so much so that he, along with many others, apparently believed "**the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ**" (Acts 8:12). He was even "baptized" into Samaria's First Baptist Church!

Amidst this overwhelming response to the gospel in Samaria, and fearing that the long-standing ethnic and religious schism between Jews and Samaritans would transfer into the life of the new Samaritan church, the Jerusalem apostles promptly dispatched Peter and John to the scene. Upon arrival, they gave apostolic sanction to the work of God in Samaria thereby uniting it with what God had done in Jerusalem. In that sanctioning, Peter and John first prayed for the Samaritans, that they would experience Pentecost like they had in Jerusalem, and then "**laying their hands on them,**" the new Samaritan converts began "**receiving the Holy Spirit**" (Acts 8:17).

In the midst of all this however, all was not well in Simon's heart. He coveted, and therefore attempted to buy, the authority and power of the apostles, power and authority that was not theirs to give. To Peter he made a request: "**Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit**" (Acts 8:20).

To this Peter responded, "**May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the**

Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity" (Acts 8:20-23).

Amidst God's spiritual blessing, and Simon's attempt to buy into it, the question arises, was Simon a true or a false believer? Did he really know Christ? In the classifications of Jesus' parable (Matthew 13:24-30), was Simon wheat or a tare? Regarding the controversy of the supposed genuineness of his conversion, no real consensus can perhaps be reached. Good and sincere Bible students and theologians fall on both sides of the issue. After all, Simon believed, and additionally, like any good Baptist, was immersed. But how could Peter have said to one who was a true believer, "**To hell with you and your money!**" (Acts 8:20, Phillips Translation). As such, the example of Simon Magus plays into the current debate over Lordship salvation. Yes, he believed (In modern parlance, we might view that he claimed to be a "born again" Christian.). He was even baptized. But was he really saved? Allow me to share why I do not think that Simon was a true believer.

First, as a bystander, Simon witnessed the divine conference of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans through the apostolic laying on of hands, though he himself apparently stood outside the loop. In the narrative, Luke contrasts the recipients of the Spirit (verses 14, 15, 16, 17) with Simon. The wording suggests that Simon was an onlooker and not a participant. This may further be indicated by Peter's address to Simon, "**You have no part or portion in this matter . . .**" (Acts 8:21). Simon had no right to receive the Holy Spirit. In another context, the Apostle Paul wrote that, "**[I]f anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him**" (Romans 8:9b). If then Simon did not, in contrast with the rest of the Samaritans, receive the Holy Spirit, then we can assume that in spite of what he might have superficially believed about the message and the miracle-working ministry of Philip, he remained unregenerate. And failing a new birth that can only come from heaven, he was lost (John 3:5).

Simon's attempt to purchase apostolic power and authority insulted the sovereign grace of God. A common practice of ancient pagan religions was (is) to sell and auction-off priesthods, and perhaps in such a mode, Simon was trying to purchase the position and what he perceived were the magical powers and tricks of Philip. Maybe earlier in his life he had bargained with others to obtain the secret arts of the occult. To Simon, Christianity involved position and power for purchase, and not a Person to worship. In other words, Simon believed the notion that he could purchase "supernatural powers to promote himself." The case of Simon Magus serves to remind us that, though it promises people forgiveness for their sins, the gospel does not offer naked power for the control and manipulation of others. Neither does it promise health, wealth, or a "wonderful plan for our life." The Cross provides solely for the remission of our sins. In experiencing true conversion, motive means everything, and Simon's motives were not right. Like him, people attend and join churches today for all kinds of selfish and fleshly motives. Churches exist to serve and entertain them. The case of Simon Magus begs the question all of us ought to ask ourselves, what are our motives? Are we like him?

As he did with Ananias and Sapphira, and in accord with his innate prophetic gift, Peter examined the spiritual secrets of Simon's heart and said to him, "**[Y]our heart is not right before God**" (Acts 8:21b). Further, Peter said to him, "**I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity**" (Acts 8:23). Such language indicates the

continuing state of Simon's idolatry and slavery to sin. The Gospel had not liberated Simon. To indict Simon for reason of his bondage in sin, Peter goes to the Law and draws upon a passage where Moses compared Israel's idolatry to be like "**a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood**" (Deuteronomy 29:18). Note also in the Deuteronomy context (verse 19) that all the while their hearts are committed to the vanities, the idolaters of Israel make pretense of being on God's side, of being at "peace" with Him! Moses envisioned the existence of boastful persons within Israel whose hearts would remain idolatrous ("**the root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood**"), and whose living would remain ungodly ("**though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart**"; Deuteronomy 29:19). In his denunciation of him, Peter applies Moses' profile of an unbelieving idolater to Simon. Might the same profile be applied to many outwardly confessing evangelicals today? Having made a claim to faith, they remain *in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity*.

After his stinging rebuke of Simon's attempt to buy into the apostolate, Peter calls upon Simon to "**repent of this wickedness . . . and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you**" (Acts 8:22). It becomes a point of note that in the Deuteronomy passage that Peter uses to indict Simon, the Lord would never forgive such sin as Simon was involved in (Deuteronomy 29:20; See Hebrews 6:1-8.). Likely, that is why Peter introduces Simon's forgiveness as only a possibility.

In response to Peter's call for him to repent, Simon then says, "**Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me**" (Acts 8:24). Simon's comeback indicates that he believed Peter could serve a priest-like function for him. Yet, it was not within the domain of Peter to forgive sins or make intercessory prayer for that. Let that warn us against sacerdotalism, about accepting any sort of sacramental approach to God offered by any church. Salvation cannot be by human device. Trying to get on the apostolic bandwagon, Simon Magus was, I believe, a religious conformist. Like so many today, he went with the latest religious fad and wanted the religion of the apostles to serve his agenda. To that end he desired to buy from Peter influence that was not for sale. In the end however, Simon could not muster himself to ask God's forgiveness for it all.

Simon the Great was not saved.