



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

The Story of Simon Magus

Acts 8:9-24

June 24, 2007

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I. **Simon Magus Believes**

- In **Verse 9**, Luke introduces Simon, a man ‘who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria...’
 - Because the Scriptures say that Simon practiced **magic**, he is often referred to as Simon Magus.
 - The Latin word of ‘great’ is *magus*; therefore, in today’s language it would be like calling him Simon the Great! or Simon the Magnificent.
 - Also, the Greek word translated ‘magic’ refers to the art of the Medo-Persian Priests of the ancient Persia [modern-day Iraq]. According to John MacArthur, ‘It was a mix of science and superstition, combining astrology, divination, and occultic practices with history, mathematics, and agriculture. It could be trickery or demonic.’
- Then, Luke states, in **Verses 9 – 11**, ‘[Simon Magus was] claiming to be someone great; and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, ‘This man is what

is called the Great Power of God.’ And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.’

- The ‘great someone’ that Simon was claiming to be was no doubt a deity...a god.
 - Ernst Haenchen writes that it seems clear that ‘the great power’ was a Samaritan designation for the supreme deity’ and that ‘Simon declared that this deity had come to earth in his person for the redemption of men.’
 - It is certainly probable that Simon was masquerading as a Christ-figure; or as the Samaritans referred to the coming-Messiah – the *Tabeb*.
 - In the mid-second century, Justin Martyr, a Samaritan himself, described, ‘A Samaritan, Simon, who did mighty acts of magic’ and was ‘considered a god’ and was revered and worshipped by ‘almost all the Samaritans’ and even some in Rome who build a statue in his honor.
Justin, *Apology*, I.26
 - Near the end of the second century, Irenaeus described Simon as ‘glorified by man as if he were ‘a god’ as well as the originator of ‘all sorts of heresies.’
Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.23.1-5
 - Interestingly, third century Christian writers began referring to Simon as the Father of Gnosticism.
- Then, Luke writes, in **Verse 12 – 13**, ‘But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.’
- First, observe, the Samaritans. Luke states that ‘they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.’
 - In other words, Philip was preaching the Gospel – ‘the **good news** about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.’ He was preaching salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone!
 - Therefore, it appears that the **object** of the Samaritans’ faith was the substance, or the essence of Philip’s preaching – the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - The Amplified Bible translates this Verse, ‘But when they believed the good news (the Gospel) about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (the Messiah) as Philip preached it...’
 - Therefore, these seem to be genuine conversions...genuine new believers.

- Secondly, observe Simon. Luke simply states, ‘Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip...’
 - Notice, with respect to Simon’s faith, Luke gives **no object!**
 - However, from outward appearances, it would seem to nearly everyone that Simon was a believer [in Christ].
 - Yet, as we read the whole Verse, it appears that the object of Simon’s faith was Philip, and what powers Philip had to offer.
 - This occurs even today. A gifted speaker draws followers; yet, the followers are believing in him because of his gifts – not the Gospel. This even occurred in Paul’s ministry. In 1 Corinthians 1:12, Paul says, ‘...each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I am of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’”
 - Simon’s profession of faith did not involve repentance from sin and faith in Christ. Rather, it appears to have been born out of selfish desires and motives. [Recall the scene of Jesus before the Jews who ‘believed’ in John 2:23-24].
 - Throughout this country [and the world] today, thousands of churches are growing by leaps and bounds. People are professing faith and being baptized. Yet, one must ask the question: What is the object of their faith?
 - What is the essence of the message the preacher or teacher is proclaiming? The reason we must ask this question is because, it is the essence...the substance of the message which becomes the object of the ‘believer’s’ belief. Therefore, if the preacher is preaching something other than the true Gospel message, the one who professes faith is NOT professing faith in the Gospel of Christ!
 - Furthermore, the new believer may even be quite sincere. There seems to be no reason to think that Simon was not sincere. However, sincerity saves no one. Christ and Christ alone saves.
 - Tragically, we are often so quick to baptize individuals that we do not seek to understand the true essence of their faith.

James Montgomery Boice writes, ‘We are often so interested in getting members into our churches that we make the demands for membership almost meaningless. As long as a person will say a few right things, we consider the person to be regenerate and proceed to the baptism. Then we add such persons to our rolls, saying, ‘We increased our congregation by 13 percent last year, and the year before that we only increased it 10 percent. Things are really going well.’

Boice continues his analysis by comparing our churches today with the churches in the Puritan age: ‘Compare how churches function today in terms of membership with how they functioned in what was probably the strongest period of all for American churches, the age of the Puritans. In those days membership in the churches did not represent a large percentage of the population, perhaps 6 or 7 percent of the population as contrasted with 45 or 46 percent now. Yet the churches were tremendously effective. One reason is that today, if a church has a membership of two thousand people, it probably knows where about one thousand of those members are, and about five hundred come to church. But in the days of the Puritans, if a church had five hundred members, one thousand were in church and the congregation was having an impact on at least two thousand.’

- Luke concludes this Verse by saying, ‘and as he [Simon] observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.’
 - In other words, what amazed Simon was not the grace that had just saved him; but, rather, the signs and wonders that he could touch see and feel. [This scene seems to parallel the work of Moses and the magicians of Egypt. In Egypt, the sorcerers, like Simon here, realized the power working in Moses was much greater than their own [recall, as well, the prophets of Baal].

II. The Samaritan Believers Receive the Holy Spirit [through the Laying on the Apostles’ hands]

- **Verses 14 – 17** state, ‘Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.’
- This passage is most certainly, at least at first glance, one of the more difficult passages in Acts to interpret. It is often used by both Roman Catholics and modern-day Charismatics [a far apart as they are theologically] to describe a ‘two-stage Christian initiation.’
- The **Roman Catholic** position is as follows:
 - Cyprian, in the 3rd Century, said the following concerning this passage:

‘Exactly the same thing happens with us today; those who have been baptized in the church are presented to the bishops of the church so that by our prayer and the imposition of our hands they may receive the Holy Spirit.’
Cyprian, *Letters*, 73.9

- Modern Roman Catholic scholar George D. Smith wrote that that Samaritan incident, here in Acts 8, ‘bears all the marks of a normal procedure.’
The Teaching of the Catholic Church
- Another Roman Catholic, Ludwig Ott, explains the Roman position in the following manner: ‘(a) The Apostles performed a sacramental rite, consisting of the imposition of hands and prayer; (b) The effect of this outward rite was the communication of

the Holy Ghost...'; (c) The Apostles acted in the mandate of Christ...The matter-of-course manner...presupposes its ordinances by Christ.'

- In other words, for the Roman Catholic follower, Christian initiation involves **first**, baptism [in which the individual does not receive the Holy Spirit]; and **second**, the laying on of hands by a member of the priesthood [typically, during Confirmation]. It is at this time that the individual receives the Holy Spirit.

- The **Charismatic** position is as follows:
 - The first state of 'Christian initiation' involves conversion [repentance and faith] and regeneration [rebirth]. However, the second stage of initiation is 'baptism in or with the Holy Spirit.' This second stage is often times [but not always] in conjunction with the laying on of hands. Further, it is believed that this second stage is accompanied by the individual 'speaking in tongues' as evidence of being baptized 'in or with the Holy Spirit.'
 - According to paragraph 7 of the Assemblies of God 'Statement of Fundamental Truths': 'All believers are entitled to, and should ardently expect, and earnestly seek, the Baptism in the Holy Ghost and fire, according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. This was the normal experience of all in the early Christian church...'
 - Myer Pearlman, an Assemblies of God Bible teacher, states: 'While freely admitting that Christians have been born of the Spirit, and workers anointed with the Spirit, we maintain that not all Christians have experienced the charismatic operation (i.e. baptism) of the Spirit, followed by a sudden supernatural utterance.'

- However, the plain and clear teaching of Scripture contradicts these two positions. As John Stott [himself an Anglican] writes, 'Initiation into Christ, according to the New Testament, is a single-stage experience, in which we repent, believe, are baptized and receive both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, after which by the indwelling power of the Spirit we grow into Christian maturity.'

- But, the question remains, 'Why was there a delay between the believers' baptisms and the receiving of the Holy Spirit?'
 - Luke seems to indicate that this was a unique experience when he states, in Verse 16, 'For He [the Holy Spirit] had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had **simply** been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.'
 - In other words, the word 'simply' seems to indicate that the 'normal', 'normative' experience was that believers received the Holy Spirit in conjunction with 'baptism in the name of Jesus.'

- Some scholars point to the fact that, in **Verse 16**, Luke states, ‘For He had not yet [outwardly] **fallen upon** any of them...’ may not rule out the possibility that the Holy Spirit **indwelt** each new believer at the point of their baptism and conversion [working in them inwardly].
- These scholars contend that what occurred in **Verse 17** was an **outward working** of the Holy Spirit, manifesting itself in outward signs, such as speaking in tongues. It would have been these outward signs that Simon would have observed in Verse 18.
 - John Calvin writes, ‘To sum up, since the Samaritans had the Spirit of adoption conferred on them already, the extraordinary graces of the Spirit are added as a culmination.’
 - The phrase, then, ‘For He had not yet fallen upon any of them...’ in **Verse 16**, would mean that the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen upon them **outwardly**. Once the Spirit did outwardly fall upon them, in conjunction with the laying on of hands by the apostles, they received ‘extraordinary graces of the Spirit,’ such as speaking tongues.
 - B.B. Warfield also wrote that what the Samaritans received through the laying on of hands by the apostles was ‘the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit.’
- When dealing with difficult passages, such as this one, we must first remember that we are always to **interpret Scripture with Scripture**.
 - When we do this, we quickly realize that the normative conversion experience involves the immediate reception of the Holy Spirit.
 - Peter clearly states, in Acts 2:38-39: ‘Peter said to them, ‘Repent and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.’
 - Peter clearly seems to indicate that repentance, baptism, forgiveness, and the reception of the Holy Spirit occur simultaneously.
 - The teachings of the Apostle Paul are most certainly consistent with those of Peter.

Romans 8:9 states: ‘However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.’

- Then, if the normative experience of the believer is to receive the Holy Spirit at the time of conversion, why the delay here?

- The answer to this questions rests on the fact that the events in Acts 8 in Samaria, similar to the events in Jerusalem at Pentecost, in Acts 2, are **unique, never-to-be-repeated** events in **salvation history**.
 - The conversion of the Samaritans in Acts 8 indicates that the Gospel message has gone, for the first time, beyond the borders of Jerusalem and Judea into the Gentile world.
 - John Calvin said that ‘the conversion of Samaria was like the first-fruits of the calling of the Gentiles.’
 - John Polhill accurately states, ‘[The Samaritan scene in Acts 8] is a major stage of salvation history. The Spirit, as it were, indicated in a visible manifestation the divine approval of this new missionary step beyond Jerusalem.’
 - **Therefore, it should not surprise the modern-day reader that the Holy Spirit would act in a unique, never-to-be-repeated was during this unique, never-to-be-repeated event.**
- Yet, the question remains, ‘Why?’
- The answer to this question goes back to the historical hatred between the Samaritans and the Jews.
 - As the Samaritans were so hated by the Jews, what would the salvation of Samaritans, and their inclusion in the covenant community of God, do to a church that is nearly 100% Jewish at this time?
 - Calvin writes, ‘[There was a genuine] danger...of their tearing Christ apart, or at least of forming a new and separate church for themselves.’
 - However, to ensure the unity of the universal church [which was to be composed of both Jews and Gentiles], the apostles went down to Samaria to give the ‘official stamp of approval’ on the Samaritan converts. This act ensured that the apostles of Christ, themselves Jews, played a vital role in preserving the unity of the church by using their unique apostolic authority to ‘endorse Philip’s bold policy of Samaritan evangelism.’ [Stott]

John MacArthur writes, ‘Why did the Samaritans (and later the Gentiles) have to wait for the apostles before receiving the Spirit? For centuries, the Samaritans and the Jews had been bitter rivals. If the Samaritans had received the Spirit independent of the Jerusalem church, that rift would have been perpetuated. There could well have been two separate churches, a Jewish church and a Samaritan church...By delaying the Spirit’s coming until Peter and John arrived, God preserved the unity of the church. The apostles needed to see for themselves, and give firsthand testimony to the Jerusalem church, that the Spirit came upon the Samaritans. The Samaritans also needed to learn that they were subject to apostolic authority. The Jewish believers and the Samaritans were thus linked together into one body.’

- Geoffrey Lampe asserts, ‘at this turning-point in the mission something else was required in addition to the ordinary baptism of the converts. It had to be demonstrated to the Samaritans beyond any shadow of doubt that they had really become members of the church, in fellowship with the original ‘pillars’...An unprecedented situation demanded quite exceptional methods.’
- John Stott states, ‘The official visit and action of Peter and John were historically exceptional. These things have no precise parallels in our day, because there are no longer any Samaritans or any apostles of Christ.’
- ❖ Therefore, the actions of the apostles Peter and John, in accordance with the delayed working of the Holy Spirit, seemed to ensure that, from this point onward there would be unity within the church. The Apostle Paul’s words in Galatians 3:28 would be a reality: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’

III. Simon Seeks to Purchase the Authority of the Apostles

- **Verses 18 – 19** state, ‘Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone one whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’
 - Luke does not inform the reader what Simon saw; however, we know that it was an impressive outward sign of the working of the Holy Spirit in/on the Samaritans upon whom the apostles laid their hands.
 - Also, Simon was a professional magician. Therefore, if he could, in some way, obtain the ‘secret’ to the apostles’ impressive power, then he could make a great deal of money impressing audiences in the region.
 - It was not uncommon in this time for professional magicians to purchase or exchange ‘trade secrets’ to make their business more lucrative.
 - However, Simon clearly did not understand the nature of who God is and how He works. For, the Holy Spirit, like the wind, blows where **it** wills’ (John 3:8).
 - The Holy Spirit, as being fully God, is fully Sovereign and never subject to the human will.
 - Because of Simon’s sin, the term ‘simony’ has become synonymous with the practice of the buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices.

IV. Peter Rebukes Simon

- Immediately, in **Verses 20-23**, Peter, in his typical ‘Petrine manner’, rebukes Simon, saying,

‘But Peter said to him, ‘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.’

- Peter’s words echo Old Testament language. He states, ‘You have no part or portion in this matter...’
 - The words, ‘part’ or ‘portion’ often times referred to the privileges, blessings, and inheritance of God’s covenant people [Deuteronomy 12:12; 14:27].
 - It seems rather clear, then, that Peter is declaring that Simon is not a part of God’s covenant community.
- Then, Peter gets to the ‘heart’ of the matter, stating, ‘your heart is not right before God.’
 - Peter knew something that the Reformers would later echo: we are not saved *by* good works, we are saved *unto* good works.
 - The issue is the **heart**. Good works will necessarily flow from a regenerate heart. This does not mean that we do not seek to do good works. However, if we are regenerate, we will want to do good works. The same is true with our relationship to the Law [the Deacalogue, the 10 Commandments]. We are not saved by keeping them, for Christ fulfilled the Law. Yet, we are still bound by them, and if we are saved, we want to keep them. Just as Christ Himself said, ‘If you love Me, you will obey My commandments.’
 - However, we, simply because we are human, care more about the outward appearance than the nature of the heart.
 - Consider child-rearing: We encourage good behavior and we reward it, often times with little understanding, or even care, of the nature of our child’s heart. We simply want our children to cause us the least amount of stress and heartache – ‘just be quiet’ we tell them. However, Peter, as an apostle of Christ Himself, goes to the heart.
 - As a church, this should be our mission as well. Many people are good at being able to go through the motions, pray a prayer, be baptized, without having a regenerate heart. This is exactly what Simon did.

- Yet, we should seek after the heart, not simply converts.
- Then, Peter demands that Simon **repent...** 'For...you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity.'
 - These words are possibly the harshest that Peter has to offer. In Deuteronomy 29:18, the phrase 'gall of bitterness' is a reference to idolatry as a root that brings from the fruit of apostasy.
 - Peter concludes by calling Simon a slave to sin – words reserved for an unbeliever.

V. Simon Cries Out

- This section concludes with Simon crying out **Verse 24**, 'Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.'
 - Tragically, Simon's words do not reflect a regenerate, repentant heart.
 - Rather, they reflect the heart of one who is more concerned about his personal comfort than anything else.
 - First, Simon does not even repent directly to the One he had offended – God. Rather, Simon asks Peter and John to pray for him.
 - Yet, the reason for the prayer is not because Simon realizes his sin. The reason for Simon's plea is all too familiar to each of us – he does not want to suffer to the consequences of his actions.
 - As one scholar [John Polhill] writes, 'A proper response to God's gift of salvation is much more than simply a 'what-is-in-it-for-us?' approach. It involves genuine commitment in response to the work of God's Spirit.'