

Simon the Sorcerer

Little attention has been paid to the experience of the man known as Simon the Sorcerer, as recorded in Acts 8:9-25. I wonder why? I am convinced he has a great deal to say to us – if we will listen!

Let me sketch the background. When persecution broke out against the early believers in Jerusalem, and they were forced to flee for their lives, they ‘were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria’; all of them, that is, apart from the apostles (Acts 8:1-2). But they did not keep quiet. Wherever these scattered believers ended up, they ‘preached the word’ (Acts 8:4). ‘Preaching’, of course, means that they witnessed to Christ by speaking, not only in the sense we usually understand today, but by means of personal conversation, testimony, witness, and so on. They preached Christ. Philip, in particular, preached Christ in Samaria (Acts 8:4-5). And he enjoyed great success. So much so, ‘there was great joy in that city’. Many ‘believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ’, and ‘were baptised, both men and women’ (Acts 8:8,12). Above all, one man, this Simon, ‘believed and was baptised’ (Acts 8:13). I say ‘above all’ because he was a remarkable and important figure in that society. Well, Simon was converted and baptised.

So far, so good. But...

Time passed, as it has a habit of doing, and, as with us all, it brought events which collided with profession. Events! A young reporter once asked Harold Macmillan what was the most difficult thing about being Prime Minister. He replied at once, adopting his best patrician tone: ‘Events, dear boy! Events!’ So it is in the Christian life. There is no

test for a profession of Christ like the passing of time and the occurrence of events.

Simon professed faith and was baptised. Now when the apostles, Peter and John, came to Samaria, he observed what went on. Simon, before his professed conversion, had been both a sorcerer and a local superstar. When he saw the gift of the Holy Spirit come upon the disciples through the hands of the apostles, Simon immediately hankered after such power for himself. So much so, he made the fatal mistake: he offered them money. He thought he could buy the ability, the power, to be able to bestow the Spirit.

Of course, all this is remarkable and extraordinary. I make no bones about that. The extraordinary, however, is not what concerns me here. No! I'm interested in the principles underlying these events.

What do we have here? We have a man who, when we first meet him, is clearly ungodly – a master-practitioner in the occult. He is the local big-shot. But he hears the gospel preached. He professes faith in Christ. He is baptised. *But events prove it was all a sham, all a pretence.* Whether or not he had deceived himself, I cannot say, but he certainly fooled others. But events, and his reaction to them, proved he had not really been converted at all.

As I say, it's extraordinary from start to finish. And yet... Sad to say, I fear that – leaving aside the extraordinary – there are not a few people who are in a similar position to Simon. I can see I need to explain.

It's like this: in my experience of the Christian life – an experience going on for well-nigh 60 years – I fear quite a number of people that I have met have been attending meeting houses, going to services, and the like, year in, year out, but who sadly lack a saving experience. They are unconverted. Some, however, have done more than attend. Some have become church members. Some have become church officers. And, I fear, some have occupied pulpits.

Do I hear somebody object with Christ's words: 'Do not judge'? If so, I have two answers. First, I have been a preacher for almost all of those 60 years, and as a preacher, surely I have to make some assessment of those who hear me, and what they most need? Imagine a doctor who refused to make a judgement about a patient who came to his surgery! That's my first reply. My second is to ask that we let the quotation go on a bit: 'Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you' (Matt. 7:1-2). In other words, I not only ask the question of my hearers, I must ask it of myself. And, just as I press my hearers to ask themselves if they truly are converted, I must ask myself. I do! Indeed, reader, I ask you. What question?

By way of reply, let me recognise that I have made some very serious charges. More, I confess they are impossible to prove. The truth is, no man is competent to pronounce, finally, upon the state of another. But – and of this there cannot be the slightest doubt – God has recorded Simon's experience for a purpose. And one of the main purposes that I see in it runs along the lines of Christ's assertion: 'You will recognise them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?... You will recognise them by their fruits... The tree is known by its fruit' (Matt. 7:16,20; 12:33; see also Jas. 3:11-12). That's the question: 'Am I a true Christian? Have I been truly converted? Have I got the fruits?'

That's the first use I would make of Simon's experience. But that's not the end of it. Oh no! Once the cat was out of the bag, and Simon had shown his true colours (pardon the mixed metaphors), Peter did not hesitate. In unmistakeable terms, he let Simon know that he was unconverted, and in an appalling state (Acts 8:23). The apostle could not have been stronger in his rebuke of Simon.

And I see a valuable lesson here. When it becomes clear that someone meeting among God's people – or someone who is actually a member of the church, or is an officer or whatever – that such a person is actually unregenerate, the church must have the necessary grip, and take the requisite biblical stance. The New Testament is unequivocal: the unregenerate must not be allowed to continue in their false position (1 Cor. 5). Notice that Peter did not allow Simon to go on thinking all was well. Peter did not talk about Simon behind his back. No! He confronted him, rebuked him, and told him in words as plain as could be that he was yet in his sins.

How should we apply this? Well, if we find we have unregenerate members, we should remove them. And if we find we have unregenerate attenders, we should make sure we do nothing to deceive them. Rather, we should take all necessary steps to undeceive them. I am very much afraid that this goes right against the grain for the majority of the churches these days, but I am unrepentant. I fear today most churches do all they can to include the unregenerate and make them feel as welcome and as much a part of the fabric as anybody else. The consequence and responsibility for that will prove to be exceedingly heavy – both for the individuals, and for those who allowed them to continue in such a false position. Peter certainly did not allow Simon to remain a contented attender!

There is more. Though Peter could see that Simon had shown that he was unregenerate, the apostle had no hesitation in commanding him to repent: 'Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart' (Acts 8:22). 'So what?', do I hear you ask? 'What else should he do but command a sinner to repent?'

Quite! Seems obvious, doesn't it? But not to hyper-Calvinists. Who are they? They are people who do not believe that the unregenerate should be commanded to

repent and believe. Amazing, isn't it, that some should try to argue that the unregenerate should not be commanded to repent and believe? But that is precisely what they claim. They adopt that position, of course, because they realise that the unregenerate have no power to repent and believe. I could not agree more. And they think – in their well-intentioned way – that it is utterly illogical to command spiritually dead sinners to repent and believe. And so it is! They also think that such sinners might get the wrong end of the stick and think that, when they are commanded, they must be able to repent and believe.

There is a short answer to all that: since the Bible commands the unregenerate to repent and believe (Isa. 45:22; 55:7; Acts 17:30, for a start – and, especially, here), and since God shows in his word that this is a vital part of what he calls 'preaching the gospel', then we must do it. The logic and the consequences are none of our business. Our responsibility is, like Peter, to command all men to repent and believe. The logic and consequences of it all we must leave to God. Peter did. And so must we.

It stands out a mile: Peter knew that Simon was unregenerate. Nevertheless, he commanded him to repent. Indeed, it was precisely because he was unregenerate that Peter commanded him to repent! Furthermore, he had no idea whether Simon was elect or not. He said so: 'Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. *Perhaps he will forgive you* for having such a thought in your heart'. Peter knew that if Simon was elect he would repent and God would forgive, of course, but what he did not know was whether Simon was elect. But none of that stopped the apostle. He preached the gospel to Simon and commanded him to repent and believe. As for election, if Simon truly repented it would demonstrate that he had been elected of God from eternity. But Simon's repentance was Peter's concern, and he made sure it became Simon's. And that's all there is to it!

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On the day of Pentecost, when the Jews were convicted under Peter's preaching, they cried out, asking what they should do. Peter told them to repent. And many did. Though some did not, many did (Acts 2:37-41). You see, some were elect, and some were not. But Peter didn't have a clue which was which! Indeed, it was none of his business. His duty was to direct them all to fly to Christ. And that is exactly what he did. And that is what we must do.

And still we have not finished with Simon. Look at his response to Peter: 'Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me' (Acts 8:24). Good, isn't it? Simon, concerned, begs Peter to pray for him. Excellent!

Well, no, I'm afraid I can't agree. Of course, there's nothing wrong in praying for another. But if a sinner wants to be saved, he should not start by asking others to pray for him. What should he do? He should pray to God himself! I know of no text which assures me that if sinners ask another – the pastor or whatever – to pray for him, then he will be saved. I find plenty of texts, however, which tell me that if any sinner calls on the name of the Lord, believes on Christ, looks to God for salvation, he will undoubtedly be saved (Isa. 45:22; Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:13; and so on). Just now, I mentioned Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost. As I said, when the Jews were convicted under Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost, and they cried out, asking what they should do, Peter told them to repent. He did not tell them that he would pray for them to repent. He commanded them to get on and repent and believe for themselves. Quite right, too!

I recall that a lady came to C.H. Spurgeon and asked the way to be saved – and, if my memory serves me rightly – asking for prayer on her behalf. She had done this several times already. Spurgeon was blunt. He refused. He told her

that he had done this time and again, that she knew what she had to do, and she should get on and do it!

You see, there is a big point at the back of all this. Men love an intermediary – a priest – between them and God. Well, there is a mediator, there is a priest – but only one: the Lord Jesus Christ. Sinners should fly to him and him alone. Sinners should look to him and him alone. Sinners must deal directly with Christ for themselves. Mother and father can't do it for you. You can't do it for a parent or a friend. No pastor can do it for you. Each of us must go to Christ as an individual for ourselves. But I have no hesitation in saying that all who look to Christ will be saved. Reader, go to Christ at once and go for yourself. You will receive a rich and warm welcome, I assure you! Whatever you do, do not entertain any thought of an intermediary – call him what you will, you are undoubtedly turning him into a priest. Christ is the only priest!

So, as we come to take our leave of Simon, may I ask you, reader, if you have ever made a profession of faith? No? You have never trusted Christ to save you? No? Then do it now. Rather, come to Christ! Now!

But do I hear you say that you have made a profession of Christ, and you continue to do so? You do profess Christ as your Saviour and Lord? Very well. Then I ask you: Is it true? Are you living a lie, or is it true? I have already quoted the apostle's demand that we should examine ourselves in this matter. I urge you to do so.

I cannot put it any better than William Gadsby:

*Pause, my soul! and ask the question,
Art thou ready to meet God?
Am I made a real Christian,
Washed in the Redeemer's blood?
Have I union, have I union
With the church's living Head?*

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*Am I quickened by his Spirit;
Live a life of faith and prayer?
Trusting wholly to his merit;
Casting on him all my care?
Daily longing, daily longing
In his likeness to appear?*

*If my hope on Christ is stayéd,
Let him come when he thinks best;
O my soul! be not dismayéd,
Lean upon his loving breast;
He will cheer thee, he will cheer thee,
With the smilings of his face.*

*But if still a total stranger
To his precious name and blood,
Thou art on the brink of danger;
Canst thou face a holy God?
Think and tremble, think and tremble,
Death is now upon the road.*

Once again, I ask you to search your heart as to this question of a priest. Oh, he is not always called by such a name, but the love of a visible priest is endemic in us all. I will not take time to prove it here, but the evidence is as clear as the nose upon our face. Beware of priestcraft! Learn from Simon's mistake. Christ has opened a new and living way to God. There is no need of any human intermediary. In fact, the very notion of it is an abomination. It is an offence to Christ. Why? Because Christ is All. Prove him to be so for you. Prove him so by coming to him now to save you. He will! He is willing. Are you?