

Power and Politics

(7 of 8)



Dr. Justo L. González
Dr. Catherine G. González

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Catherine. Acts 8:9-24

But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. ¹They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is that power of God which is called Great." And they gave heed to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power, that any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Justo. Simon Magus is well known to most of us, in part because he has become a sort of theological scapegoat on whom we blame all sorts of evil. In the ancient church, and in many history books to this day, he is credited with being the creator of Christian gnosticism.

Sometime in the third or fourth century, an unknown writer made him the villain of a series of episodes in which Simon Peter and Simon Magus matched their miracle-making might. In the

Middle Ages, those who sought to reform the church gave the name of "simony" to the practice of buying and selling ecclesiastical offices. And in more recent times, Hollywood has produced a movie on early Christianity in which Simon Magus is again the archvillain, who seeks to imitate and to outdo Peter's miracles.

And yet, this long and venerable tradition regarding Simon Magus misses the point of much that is going on here, in this encounter between the magician and the apostle.

Catherine. Let us begin by looking at the text.

First of all, the events took place in an unnamed area of Samaria, to which Philip had taken the message of the gospel. In the outline of the spreading witness of the church, "Jerusalem, and all of Judea, and Samaria," we now reach Samaria. Also, it is clear that the plan of the twelve, that they would devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4), and that the seven would "serve tables," was not working. At least, it was not working as the twelve intended, for in chapter 7, Stephen proclaims the gospel with his word and his death, and in this eighth chapter, it is Philip, another of the seven, who takes the message both to Samaria and to the Ethiopian eunuch.

Justo. Secondly, according to the text, Simon was a believer. He was a sincere believer—at least, there is no hint in the text that he was being hypocritical nor that he was simply trying to learn more tricks for his magician's trade.

All that has been added by later fantasy. What the text actually says is that Simon believed, that he was baptized, that he followed Philip around, and that he was amazed by the events that he saw taking place.

Let us give Simon the benefit of the doubt. Let us not read into the text the result of centuries of exegetical conditioning, and the image of Simon that emerges is very different from that which we have received in popular tradition. Simon was a sincere believer. He may not have known too well what it was that he believed in, but that could hardly be held against him, seeing that the disciples themselves were more than a little befuddled by the teachings of Jesus. So, apparently, he was a sincere believer.

He was also a powerful man. According to the text, his power and prestige were such that all paid heed to him, from the least to the greatest, and that the people around him said, "This man is that power of God which is called great."

Justo. The text also says, in the section just before what has been read, that Philip's preaching was accompanied by "signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying out with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed."

As a result of Philip's preaching, and of the signs that accompany it, all these people that had formerly followed Simon believed in Philip's preaching and were baptized. Simon, too, believed and was baptized.

In this context, it may be important to point out the manner in which the text repeats the word "amazed." Simon "amazed the nation of Samaria" (8:9), and they gave heed to him, "because he had amazed them with his magic" (8:11). Then we are told of Simon, after his conversion that "seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed" (8:13). In other words, just as Simon had previously amazed the city now the signs accompanying Philip's preaching amazed Simon himself.

Catherine. The text then goes on to say that when the apostles in Jerusalem heard what was happening in Samaria, they sent Peter and John. Whether these two were sent to supervise or to strengthen, whether the reaction in Jerusalem was one of joy or one of suspicion, the text does not say.

In any case, Peter and John came to Samaria and prayed for the converts there, that they might receive the Holy Spirit. This is an interesting and perplexing part of the passage. Several things are tantalizing about it and have been used to support very different theological positions.

First of all, Philip's converts received the Spirit when the apostles laid their hands on them. Here some have found support for the practice of confirmation as the prerogative of bishops, while others have found support for the position that after baptism with water, there is a further baptism or outpouring of the Spirit, usually accompanied by extraordinary charismata. (Although it should also be noted that in this text no mention is made of any specific outward signs of having received the Spirit. Also, in passing, one wonders whether Simon was one of those on whom the apostles laid their hands.)

Secondly, we are told that the believers in Samaria "had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." Again, this is a text that has been subjected to divergent interpretations, one insisting that in the very early church baptism was only in the of Jesus and name, and so should it be today, and another taking the word "only" in this text as a sign of a defective baptism, "they had *only* been baptized in the name of Jesus," and for that reason the Holy Spirit, "had not yet fallen on any of them."

In any case, the action continues. Peter and John laid their hands on the believers, who then received the Holy Spirit. Upon seeing that the apostles could do this, Simon Magus tried to buy

this authority from them, for which reason Peter had some harsh words for him. And finally, the text also says –and we often forget—that Simon asked Peter to pray for him.

Justo. Having said all this, it seems clear that a valid way to look at this text, rather than from the point of view of sincerity and hypocrisy, of which the text makes no mention, is from the point of view of power and its workings, which the text does emphasize. Again, they all, from the least to the greatest, said of Simon, "This man is that power of God which is called great." And the matter of amazement, as the text refers both to Simon's magic and to the signs accompanying Philip's preaching, is certainly an issue of response to perceived power.

From that perspective, we can look again at the cast of characters and the role each plays in the narrative.

Catherine. First of all, there is Simon the Magician. He said that he was great. He was power incarnate, at least that is what his neighbors called him, "that power of God which is called great." He was used to wielding power. As such, he understood power. Philip's signs amazed him, and he was willing to accept this power that was even greater than his.

Justo. Then, there is Philip. The text doesn't say much about him, and there is little more to be learned about him by reading the entire book of Acts. Apart from this episode, and that of the Ethiopian eunuch, which appears immediately after this one, there is a brief reference to him in

connection with the election of the seven, and in chapter 21 we are told that later he lived in Caesarea, where his four daughters preached.

The text says no more about Philip, but we can imagine that Simon's conversion added to the prestige of Philip's preaching. The man of whom it was said, "this man is that power of God which is called great" had been converted to Philip's faith and was following him around as he went from place to place.

Did Philip not have the power to confer the Holy Spirit? Or was he simply content with proclaiming the Christ? The text does not say.

Having grown up as I did—a Protestant, in a country where a one's religious allegiance was very much of minority, where one's church had no prestige, and where the commonly held view was that only strange and ignorant people would ever join such a church, I have my own view of what was taking place here. I remember how thrilled we were when some famous journalist decided to join our ranks.

I also remember working as a student pastor in a very small church. The town was small enough that I could visit everybody every week and invite everyone to church. It was a very small church, with some fifteen members, all with the same last name. Most of those people whom I

invited, peasants who lived in the town and walked every morning to their chores in the fields, never came to church.

There was also a teacher in town. He was the one teacher of the one-room school. Men doffed their hats to him, and women greeted him with respect. He probably was the most respected person in town. He also had the strangest ideas—transmigration of souls, reincarnation, and all sorts of astrological calculations, gnostic mumbo-jumbo.

Yet I well remember when finally, probably more out of courtesy than for any other reason, he came to church one evening. Deep inside, I knew that he was simply coming out of courtesy, after I had visited him so many times. Probably also out of boredom, since there was not much else to do in town. But still, I was thrilled. Because he was coming to church, others began coming. And much to my shame, I must now confess, I was ready to soft-pedal Christianity's opposition to astrological calculations and to gnostic mumbo-jumbo!

So, if Philip allowed Simon's catechetical instruction to be deficient, I understand.

Catherine. Then there was the multitude who believed. In the text they appear as a faceless crowd. But look again at the issue of power and powerlessness. They were used to being the amazed, not the amazers. They were amazed at Simon's magic and were willing to call him "that power of God which is called great." They were amazed by Philip's signs.

Then comes the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Great Leveler, by whose power sons and daughters prophesy, young people see visions, and old people dream dreams. Now the amazed also became amazers. Now that power of God that was called great dwelled in them.

Finally, there were the apostles, and in particular Simon Peter. Another Simon. This one was nothing great on his own but rather a Galilean fisherman. He and James and John had been partners (*koinonoi*) in the ownership of a fishing boat. Now, they were partners in a much greater *koinonia*; they were *koinonoi* in the Spirit. As such, Simon, now called Simon Peter, Simon the Rock, was a powerful man. As such, he came to understand the difference between the power of God and human power. Actually, some time before, precisely because he did not understand that difference and wanted to spare his Master the agony, the humiliation, and the defeat of the cross, his Master had said to him: "You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of humans." Simon Peter, *koinonós* in the Spirit, had the power to impart the Spirit. He had the power to share "that power of God which is called great."

Justo. This now leads us to the dynamics of what is taking place in this text. What is taking place, simply put, is that the very power and prestige of Simon Magus made it very difficult for him to understand more fully what Philip was preaching.

Let us look for a moment at the Scriptures on which Philip was basing his preaching: a book that claimed that God's greatest saving act took place when a ragged and undisciplined horde of slaves escaped from the yoke of Egypt. A book largely written by exiles, or by folk whose country had become a mere province of mighty empires. And, even at the height of Israel's power, most of the space in Hebrew Scriptures is devoted, not to the official chronicles of the great acts of kings but to the minority report of the prophets who attacked the corruption of the powerful.

And the New Testament is no different in this respect. A great deal of the gospel narrative is devoted to fisherfolk, prostitutes, publicans, Galileans, and other assorted outsiders to polite society. Actually, the one whom Philip preached and in whom both Simon Magus and Simon Peter believed was an outlaw, condemned to death by the powers of the time. And, to round off this perspective of powerlessness, a significant portion of the Pauline corpus was written in prison, and the last book of the New Testament purports to have been written in exile.

The exiled on the island of Patmos could understand what it meant to be promised a home in the New Jerusalem, and a land in which there would be no sea separating him from his loved ones. Caesar's prisoner could understand what it meant to be free in Christ. The disheartened fisherfolk of Galilee could understand what it meant to become fishers of human beings. But what of all this could Simon Magus understand, he about whom his neighbors said, "This man is that power of God which is called great"?

Power, he could understand. With his power he could amaze. He was ready to be amazed at the power of others and even to submit to it in baptism. But a power to be shared by all? A power to be given equally to him and to those who until yesterday thought that he was the greatest thing on earth? A power he could not use to control others? Certainly not. This power he had to control. This power he had to control; he had to possess; he had to buy.

Catherine. Time has gone by, and the same dynamics are still at work. They are at work at the level of individuals, and they are at work at the level of churches and nations.

There are some of us who belong to traditionally powerful groups or to traditionally powerful churches. It is from that perspective that comes the interpretation according to which Simon Magus was simply a hypocrite; for, if his problem was hypocrisy, we can be certain of escaping it as long as we are sincere. But if his problem was power, the situation is much more difficult. Hernán Cortés was a sincere Christian, yet he did what he did. Many southern slaveholders were sincere Christians; yet they did what they did. Some of the people involved in the Iran-Contra scandal claim to be sincere Christians, yet they did what they did. Sincerity is not enough, especially when sincerity is blinded by power.

This is not to condemn the powerful. It is to point out to them that there is hope but that this hope can only come through repentance, just as mighty Simon the Magician pleaded with Simon the fisherman, "Pray for me to the Lord."

Justo. There are others of us who belong to traditionally powerless groups that are now beginning to feel empowered. Here, there are two options. One is the option I followed when I was a student pastor and which perhaps Philip allowed himself to follow: accept power and prestige from wherever it comes. If it means buying into unjust structures of power, that is alright. After all, we have been victims of those structures long enough.

This is a temptation that assaults many younger and smaller churches, such as the one in which I grew up.

But it is also a temptation that assaults many of our churches in the increasingly secular and post-Christian society in which we live. Indeed, when I hear Christians today boast that some famous athlete is a Christian, or that some millionaire entrepreneur is a Christian, or that there are many people of prestige in their local church, I cannot help but remember how I boasted that the teacher was coming to my church.

Catherine. Then, there is another option. That is to recognize that the power of the Spirit is different from the power of Simon Magus, different from the power of money, and different from the power of prestige. This is the Simon Peter option. It is an option that is both open to

share its power ("the apostles laid their hand on them, and they received the Spirit") and firm as to the nature of that power ("Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God"). It does not seek power for itself but seeks and receives power in order to share it.

This is the power of the Spirit that creates that new community of which we have been speaking these two weeks: a community whose unity is based on a new source; a community that shares its resources; a community that is honest with itself; a community that is strong in the face of evil; a community that meets the world with a sense of mission based on love; a community that seeks the unity of the whole world, and yet takes cultural differences into account; a community, in short, that is powerful yet not with the power of Simon Magus but with the power of the Spirit.