

The Hermeneutical Disadvantage of the Powerful

(1 of 3)



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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. (10) They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is that power of God which is called Great." (11) And they gave heed to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. (12) 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. (13) Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

(14) Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, (15) who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; (16) for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (17) Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. (18) Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, (19) saying, "Give me also this power, that any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (20) But Peter said to him, "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!. (21) You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. (22) Repent therefore of this wickedness of your, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. (23) For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." (24) And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

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.

Let us begin by looking at the text.

First of all, the events take place in an unnamed place in Samaria, to which Philip has 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," is not working. At least, it is 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.

Secondly, according to the text, Simon is a believer. He is 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 is a sincere believer. He may not have known too well what it is that he has believed, 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." We would say that he was "a pillar in the community."

The text also says, in the section just before what has been read, that Philip's preaching was accompanied by signs that 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 who 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.

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, with which we will not deal in detail. But let me make a parenthesis to point out several things that 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 outward signs of having received the Spirit.)

Secondly, we are told that the believers in Samaria had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Again, a text that has been subjected to divergent interpretations: One insisting that in the very early church baptism was only in the name of Jesus 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 apparently repented and certainly asked Peter to pray for him.

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, which the text uses to refer 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.

First of all, there is Simon the Magician. He was power incarnate—at least, that was what his neighbors called him. He was not a bad guy. He is just a big shot. He was used to wielding power. As such, he could understand power. Philip's signs amazed him, and he was willing to accept this power that was even greater than his.

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 chapter 6, 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 were preachers.

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.

Having grown up, as I did, in a country where one's religious allegiance was very much of a 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 is 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 about transmigration of souls, reincarnation, astrological calculations, and all sorts of 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 because 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.

Then there are 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 at Philip's signs.

Then came the gift of the Holy Spirit—the Great Leveler, (Acts 2) by whose power sons and daughters prophesy, young people see visions, and old people dream dreams. Now the amazed have also become amazers. Now that power of God which is called great dwelled in them

Finally, there are the apostles, and in particular Simon Peter. Another Simon. This one is 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 are partners in a much greater *koinonía*: they are *koinonoi* in the Spirit. As such, Simon, now called Simon Peter, Simon the Rock, is a powerful man. As such, he has come 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 and the humiliation and 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, however, had the power to impart the Spirit. He had the power to share "that power of God which is called great."

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 which 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. People who would hardly feel at home in the United Methodist Church or in Palm Springs. 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. 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 can Simon Magus understand, he, about whom his neighbors say, "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.

Time has gone by, and we have found ways to avoid dealing with the harsh lessons of this text.

One way is by mystifying it. It deals with magicians, and signs, and miracles. Therefore, it must belong to an alien world and has nothing to do with us.

A second way is by theologizing it. I suspect that much of what we call theology is simply a means to avoid having to deal with issues of obedience. And so, in this text, we could spend forever—indeed, churches have spent forever—debating the laying on of hands, or the kind of baptism that the Samaritans had received. And, while engaged in such debates, we have to do nothing about the text and our lives today.

Or we avoid the radical impact of the text by psychologizing it. Simon Magus was a hypocrite, we say. No matter that the text does not say so. He must have been a hypocrite. And, since we are not hypocrites—at least, not most of the time—the text does not refer to us.

But the text does refer to us. The same dynamics of power and the obfuscation it can cause 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. 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 pleads with Simon the fisherman:

"Pray for me to the Lord."

There are others of us who belong to traditionally powerless groups and who 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, I cannot help but remember how I boasted that the teacher was coming to my church.

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.

Today, most of our churches stand in an odd situation within this spectrum. As a whole, the church is losing power and prestige in our society. The time when the church spoke and everybody listened is long gone. But, precisely for that reason, we are tempted to do what I did in that little church where I served while in seminary: We are tempted to think that power comes to the church from those who have power in society; that the more prestigious members we have in our church, the better for the mission of the church. And therefore, we give power in the church to those who have power and prestige in society.

When we look more closely at it, the sin of Simon is not so alien to our day. It is the sin of civil religion, which sanctifies war and justifies the injustices in society. It is the sin of a sort of evangelism that claims to be apolitical and that thereby implicitly says that God does not really mind the injustice of the present order.

But also, thanks be to God, the hope of Simon Peter is still ours today. Do we wish to be powerful in evangelism? Let us begin by recognizing that it is not a matter of how well we plan our evangelistic outreach, nor even of how much money we put into it, but that true evangelism, like the rest of the life of the church, only takes place by the power of the Holy Spirit. Do we wish to speak a powerful word to our society? Let us begin by challenging whatever dehumanizing structures of power there may be, not only in society but also in the church. Do we really wish to be faithful in our stewardship? Let us begin by telling those who think that their money buys them some special privilege in the church, "Your silver perish with you."

I know it sounds terrible. I don't like it at all. After all, I have more money, more education, better health than the vast majority of humankind. I have already lived much longer than the life expectancy of most people in the world. In many ways, I am privileged, and therefore I don't like the implications of this passage. It must have sounded pretty bad to Simon Magus when Simon Peter said to him, "your heart is not right in this matter." I can even imagine Philip cringing at these harsh words said to his star convert.

And yet, Simon Magus, Simon whom traditions have used as a theological and moral whipping-boy, Simon showed us all the way to a new hope: "Pray for me to the Lord." There is no other way, my brothers, my sisters, than the way of repentance. There is no other way for us today, enmeshed as we are in the sin of Simon, than to say to each other: "Pray for me to the Lord."

My brothers, my sisters, I beg you, pray for me to the Lord!