



The Reflector

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Simon the Sorcerer

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A number of “Simons” are mentioned in the New Testament. There was Simon, whose surname was Peter, also called Cephas, who was one of the twelve apostles of the Lord. In the list of apostles there is also Simon the Canaanite, or Simon the Zealot, as he is also called. There was also Simon, a man of Cyrene, who was compelled to bear the cross of Jesus on the way to Calvary. But the Simon of this lesson is Simon the sorcerer, whose brief history is given to us in the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.

This man was in Samaria at the time Philip went there to “preach Christ unto them.” In fact, he had been there for a long time before Philip went. His work of deception is described for us in Acts 8: 9-11. This record tells us this: “But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, this man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.” Thus we are told that Simon was engaged in the use of sorcery. Sorcery means the use of magic, necromancy, witchcraft, soothsaying, fortune-telling, sleight-of-hand tricks, and other such things. The use of any of these often baffles the minds of men. Whatever form of sorcery Simon engaged in—whether simply sleight-of-hand tricks, some other form of magical arts, the claim to foretell the future by the aid of divine power, or simply fortune-telling, he had succeeded in deceiving the people. He had been “giving out that

himself was some great one” and had “bewitched the people” to such an extent that they had great regard for him and had concluded that “This man is the great power of God.” But it was all deception. He was not aided by divine power at all and was simply practicing “fakery” as a means of livelihood, as many others are doing today.

But Philip went to that city to preach Christ to lost men and women. In connection with his preaching he actually wrought miracles by the power that God had given him. He cast unclean spirits “out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.” Verse 7. There were no tricks, schemes, artifice or deception about this. The people could see the difference between the tricks of Simon and the miracles of Philip. Consequently, they “gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.” Verse 6. As a result, “There was great joy in that city.” Verse 8. Furthermore, Luke tells us in verse 12: “But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.” Not only were the Samaritans thus converted, Simon the sorcerer was converted too. The inspired historian informs us in verse 13: “Then Simon himself believed also and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.” This shows that Simon became a converted man, a child of God. It points out the fact that he obtained the salvation of his soul. Jesus had said in Mark 16: 16: “He that believeth

and is baptized shall be saved.” The very things that Jesus specified in this great commission upon which he promised to bestow salvation were done by Simon. “He that believeth and is baptized,” said Jesus, “shall be saved.” And Luke says that Simon believed and was baptized. That being true, we can be sure of the fact that Jesus bestowed the salvation as promised.

Many people do not believe that Simon was saved. They say his conversion was not genuine, that it was a sham conversion, and that he never really did what God requires men to do. Well, what do you think about it? Are you going to take what uninspired men say about it or what the book divine says? Modern preachers say he did not believe, that he only pretended to believe; but Luke says, “Simon himself believed also.” Had it been only a pretense, Luke evidently would have revealed the sham involved. But he did not. He actually says that Simon believed. Well, that is enough to save any man, without anything else, according to modern preachers who preach salvation by faith only. But Simon did more than that—he believed and was baptized. If his belief was not genuine, neither was the faith of the Samaritans. The preceding verse tells us that the Samaritans believed, and then Luke says that “Simon believed also.” Note that word “also.” It means that Simon did what the others did—they believed; he believed also. So whatever the Samaritans did, Simon did; if their faith was genuine, his was genuine too. Therefore, he did become a child of God, for he did what Jesus said men must do to be saved.

But following that obedience to the will of God Simon committed sin. His sin is revealed to us in verses 18 and 19 of this chapter, the eighth chapter of Acts. I trust you will read it with me. Here is the way the passage reads: “And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.” Incidentally, this shows us how miraculous gifts were bestowed on men. It was not through the

“laying on of the disciples’ hands.” That is the way modern-day-healers would have it. But it was “through laying on of the apostles’ hands.” Just any disciple could not lay hands on others and give them the power to work miracles. No one could do that but the apostles. That explains why the apostles Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to Samaria. Philip, the evangelist, was already there, and he had been able to work many miracles; but he could not lay hands on others and give them the Holy Spirit. He was not an apostle. So two of the apostles came from Jerusalem to lay hands on the Samaritans and give them such power. Hence, when the last apostle died and the last man died on whom they had laid hands, the gift of miracles must have ceased. No man lives today who ever had the hands of an apostle laid on him; consequently, no man lives today who has the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit. But Simon wanted that power and offered to buy it from the apostles with money. This also shows that such power did not belong to all disciples, for if it did, he would have had it already; and there would have been no occasion for him to try to buy it with money. But he did not have such power. None did except the apostles. So he tried to purchase it; but in doing so, he sinned.

In referring to this sin Peter said in verse 21: “Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.” And at verse 25 he said: “For I perceive that thou are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” This statement does not read as I have heard men quote it. Preachers sometimes quote it like this: “I perceive that thou are yet in the gall of bitterness and still in the bond of iniquity.” It is quoted this way for the purpose of proving that Simon was never really converted, that it was all a matter of pretense, and he had never been freed from his former sins. This would, of course, set aside any possibility of his being a case of apostasy. It would prove that he did not fall from grace. And all of that would be true, of course, if the passage said: “Thou are yet in the gall of bitterness” or “Thou are still in the gall of bitterness” or “Thou are still in

the bond of iniquity.” Surely that would prove that his old sins were still clinging to him. But it just so happens that the words “yet” and “still” are not in the passage. Had you ever noticed that? Look at it again in verse 23. Does it say, “Thou art yet in the gall of bitterness”? The word “yet” isn’t there, is it? But “Thou art in the gall of bitterness.” Does it say, “Thou art still in the bond of iniquity”? The word “still” is not there, is it? But “Thou art in the bond of iniquity.” So Peter tells him what his condition is now—not that he had never been made free from sin. We have already found that he had, for he did what Jesus said men must do to be saved.

Besides this, when Peter told him what to do to get forgiveness, he made a statement that proves that only one sin was charged against him. Let us read it in verse 22: “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.” Notice that “this thy wickedness.” The word “this” is a singular demonstrative pronoun. He was not told to repent of all the wickedness of his past life, but only of “this wickedness.” His former wickedness had already been forgiven him upon his obedience to the word of God. But here is a sin he committed since, and this wickedness is charged against him. And he was told to repent and pray “that the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.” The passage does not even say “that the thoughts of thine heart may be forgiven,” but it says “thought”—just one. The only wicked thought charged against him was the thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money. So the whole story proves that Simon became a child of God, then sinned, or fell from the grace, or favor, of God and had to meet certain conditions to have this sin forgiven.

In the story of Simon, we have, therefore, what we may call the second law of pardon. It is the law of pardon to the erring child of God. People have often said that if baptism is for the remission of sins, then every time a child of God sins he would have to be baptized again. That might be true if baptism was required of a child of God. But when Peter commanded men to “be baptized for the

remission of sins” in Acts 2:38, he was talking to alien sinners, not to children of God. The commandment of baptism belongs to the law of pardon to the alien sinner. But to the child of God who sins, God has given a different law that does not include baptism. That law is shown in this story. Let us read it again: “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.” Verse 22. So the law of pardon to an erring child of God involves repentance and prayer to God. And, of course, as other references clearly state, by a confession of such faults. When the child of God sins he is not to “repent and be baptized,” as alien sinners are required to do, but he must “repent and pray God” for forgiveness.

Denominational preachers have inaugurated the mourners’ bench system of getting religion and have required alien sinners to “pray through to salvation.” I have often called upon such preachers to give the passage in God’s book in which God ever commanded alien sinners to pray for forgiveness. In response to that call I have had them produce Acts 8:22. But this text has no reference to alien sinners. The language here is spoken to a man who had already obeyed the gospel of Christ. He had already received the forgiveness of his alien sins. He was not an alien sinner, but an erring child of God. You can’t take the language addressed to him and apply it to an alien sinner without wresting the Scriptures. There is no passage in which God requires alien sinners to pray through to salvation. But in Acts 22:16 we have the case of an alien sinner, Saul of Tarsus, who was seeking to be saved. He was engaged in prayer when Ananias, sent by the Lord, came to him to tell him what to do. If prayer is the plan for an alien sinner, Ananias should have told him to pray on. But he did not do so. He stopped the prayer by saying: “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” This alien sinner was down praying, but the man of God told him to tarry no longer in prayer, to arise, (to get up), and to be baptized that his sins be washed away. Alien

sinners are told to “repent and be baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2: 38), but they are never told to “repent and pray God for forgiveness.” Children of God who sin are told to “repent and pray God” that their sins might be forgiven (Acts 8: 22), but they are never told to “repent and be baptized for the remission of sins.” Let us, therefore, not wrest the Scriptures by applying to aliens or to Christians those things that have no reference to them.

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A Balanced Approach

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

“And it came to pass from that time forth, that the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers were behind all the house of Judah. They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon... So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days” (Nehemiah 4:16-17; 6:15 KJV)

Nehemiah had the task of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Not everyone wanted it rebuilt. So, there was strong active opposition to the project. Yet, despite the opposition, the wall was finished in 52 days. How? By a balanced approach. Half the people worked while the other half brandished weapons. It also says that “every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon.” Without this balanced approach the wall would not have been finished.

There is a parallel to this story in the building up the church. It would be great if the church could be built up without opposition. But that is not how things are. But we cannot spend all of our time and effort in warding off the opposition. That would leave no time and effort for building. Nor can we spend all of our time in building. That would leave

our work open to be torn down with impunity faster than we could build. It takes both!

We have known churches that were virtually destroyed because about all the preaching/teaching done was against all the “isms” and potential moral dangers that are out there threatening the purity and peace of the church. The results: a doctrinally strong and morally upright church that was still spiritually weak. Much like the church at Ephesus, they “cannot endure evil men” and “put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not,” and ... find them to be false. But, have left their first love and need to repent of it (Rev. 2:1-4).

On the other hand, we have known churches virtually destroyed because about the only preaching/teaching done was to encourage developing traits of strong Christian character and positive spirituality – even a strong academic knowledge of the story of the Bible. But, they became a people tossed to and fro for every wind of doctrine because they had not been challenged to really discern between good and evil. They were not told, in specific terms, about the “enemies of the cross of Christ” that are out there ready to pounce on them and take advantage of their naivety concerning false doctrine and “respectable” worldliness. They saw all issues that arose to be “much ado about nothing” and put the heads in the sand or looked the other way. The church’s effectiveness was destroyed by those who have “crept in unawares” and taken them captive at will. They may have even been upbeat and happy while subtle doctrinal error and “respectable worldliness” ate away at their spiritual fibre, because they had become so desensitized to the harm that such causes. ■

I have often told the story of Irvan Lee’s saying, “I hear some preachers preach on certain things and no one seems to get upset, but when I preach on the same things people get upset with me.” A fellow preacher spoke up, “Irvan, the difference is that you preach like you think someone has been up to it.” There is a lot to that. - eob