

"THE SAMARITANS AND SIMON THE MAGICIAN"

In the previous passage, Luke told us about the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He also told us that Stephen's execution was followed by an intense persecution of Christians in Jerusalem that resulted in the scattering of Christians throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. As I noted in the previous sermon in this series, the Lord used this persecution to begin to bring about the spread of the gospel. This should not be a surprise to us, for as John Calvin observes, "The government of the Church of Christ has been so divinely constituted from the beginning that the Cross has been the way to victory, death the way to life." The Lord used Stephen's death and the persecution that followed it to ensure that, just as Jesus had told the disciples in chapter 1, they would be his witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but also in Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

In the passage that we are studying tonight, we are told about the witness of Philip, one of the Hellenistic Jews who was appointed as a deacon along with Stephen, in what Luke refers to as "the city of Samaria." This was probably the city of Shechem, which was located at the foot of Mount Gerizim, the Samaritans holy mountain. Luke tells us that Philip's ministry was well-received by the Samaritans, leading to many conversions. There are, however, two questions

that emerge for us as we study this passage. First, what does Luke mean when he says that Simon the magician believed the message that Philip preached? Was Simon genuinely converted? If so, how are we to understand Peter's harsh words to him later in the passage? Second, how are we to understand the fact that these Samaritans received the Holy Spirit as a separate experience after their conversion? Is this supposed to be normative, or was it something unique in the historical unfolding of God's plan of salvation? We will certainly address these questions in this sermon. However, I want to emphasize from the outset that I do not think that either of these points are at the heart of what this passage is about. Instead, the main point of this text has to do with the importance of making sure that the gospel is kept pure. Here we see that *the church's officers need to guard the gospel against those who would seek to use it for the sake of their own personal glory.*

Philip's Success in Samaria

This passage begins by telling us that those who were scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem "went about preaching the word." We need to take a moment to reflect upon this, because it teaches us something that is very important. I am sure that these Christians were not happy about the fact that they were being persecuted for their faith. I am sure that they would have

preferred not to have to face persecution. I would imagine that they probably even prayed that this persecution would quickly come to an end. There is nothing wrong with that. No one wants to suffer. But look at how they responded when this trial came into their lives. They used it as an opportunity to bear witness to Christ. We should do the same thing when we face trials in our lives. Of course, there is nothing wrong with wanting those trials to come to an end. We can certainly pray to that end. But we should also remember that our Lord wants us to view whatever situation we find ourselves in in terms of the opportunities they provide for furthering the cause of his kingdom.

There were many scattered Christians who took advantage of this opportunity to preach the gospel, but Luke focuses his attention upon the ministry of Philip in Samaria. As you probably know, the Samaritans were looked down upon by the Jews because of their impure blood and their impure worship. When Israel's northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in the 8th century BC, most of the Jews who lived there were deported and the region was repopulated with Gentiles. The Samaritans had their origins in the mixed marriages and mixed culture that emerged afterward. Their religion was a blend of Judaism and paganism. To a faithful Jew, Samaritans were not really any different than Gentiles. They were clearly outside the covenant people.

The fact that the gospel came to the people of Samaria with the signs that accompanied Philip's ministry testified that the Lord was beginning to break down the dividing wall of hostility that separated the Jews from the Gentiles. To use the language that Paul employs in describing the Gentiles in his letter to the Ephesians, these people that Philip was ministering to were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. Much like the religion of liberal Christians today, the Samaritans' religion was a false religion, and it could offer them no hope of salvation. But all of this changed when they embraced the message that Philip preached. Again, Paul's words in Ephesians fit perfectly: "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." [Eph. 2:13] These Samaritans were being ingrafted into the body of Christ. They were now part of the covenant people. No wonder there was so much joy in that city!

The "Conversion" of Simon the Magician

It is at this point that Luke introduces the character who stands at the center of the rest of this passage. He tells us about Simon the magician, a man who was held in high regard in this Samaritan city for the mighty works he was able to do.

Luke does not specify whether Simon was genuinely able to do remarkable things or if he was just a fraud, but it is clear that Simon was not what we think of when we use the word “magician” today. He was not just an illusionist. He was someone whom people regarded as very powerful. He himself said that he was somebody great. The Samaritans even called him “the power of God.” Based upon what the Scriptures have to say about sorcery and witchcraft, we can surely say this was a man who was steeped in very dark things.

The way Luke describes Simon in these verses is very significant. Two times we are told that all the people in this city “paid attention” to Simon. They held him in high regard. He commanded their attention and respect. But when Philip came preaching the gospel, the people started to pay attention to what he was saying. Luke even uses those words in his description of Philip’s ministry in verse 6: “the crowds with one accord *paid attention* to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.” You can see Luke’s point. Simon was no longer the center of attention. Philip’s preaching was stealing the spotlight that used to shine on him.

But Luke tells us that Simon himself responded to Philip’s preaching in faith. He believed and he was baptized. Of course, the other thing that Luke says about Simon should raise red flags for us: “seeing signs and great miracles

performed, he was amazed.” From the outset, we are made to wonder just what it was that attracted this man to the gospel. Was he really interested in the message that Philip was preaching, or was he just fascinated by this display of power?

This brings us to the question of whether or not Simon’s conversion was genuine. It is a question that comes to mind because Luke says that Simon “believed,” which is another way of saying that he placed his faith in Christ. But this seems to conflict with the things that Peter says to Simon a bit later in the passage: “your heart is not right before God,” and “you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” Those are pretty strong words, certainly not the kind of thing we would expect to hear said about a true Christian. For this reason, it is natural for us to wonder whether this man was ever really saved at all.

This problem is actually not as difficult as it may seem at first. In fact, it helps us to see an important distinction. When Luke says that Simon responded to Philip’s preaching by believing and being baptized, he is describing what took place externally. He is telling us that Simon made a profession of faith and was admitted into membership in the church. These things are indeed necessary for salvation. A person has to confess Christ in order to be saved. And they should

ordinarily be baptized and brought into the church's membership. This is the clear teaching of Scripture. However, the Bible also makes it clear that it is possible for a person to say something with his lips that is not in keeping with what is in his heart. In other words, it is possible for a person to profess faith in Christ without being truly born again. The harshness of Peter's words towards Simon in this passage may very well indicate that this was the case with Simon. The lesson for us today is sobering: it is possible for a seemingly genuine profession of faith to later prove to be false. True saving faith is evidenced by the fruit of a changed life and by perseverance to the end.

A Second Blessing?

This brings us to the second problem that is raised by this passage. Luke says that the Holy Spirit only came upon these Samaritan converts after the apostles Peter and John came and prayed for them. The Samaritans did not receive the Spirit at their conversion but after it. In the context here in Acts, this should be taken to mean that they did not have the kind of experience of the Spirit that is described in Acts 2, at Pentecost. It does not mean that the Holy Spirit was not at all present at their conversion, since they would not have been able to believe were it not for the working of the Spirit in their hearts. For as Paul says in 1

Corinthians, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14)

As you may know, Pentecostal and charismatic Christians will point to this passage as evidence in support of their teaching about the importance of what is sometimes referred to as a “second blessing.” According to them, the Samaritans’ experience is normative for all Christians and should cause us to look for a special outpouring of spiritual power, typically involving the gift of speaking in tongues, sometime after our conversion.

The problem with this claim, however, is that it fails to understand this passage in light of its context. It takes something that is just as unique as the day of Pentecost and sees it as part of normal Christian experience. As I mentioned earlier, the fact that Samaritans were being brought into the covenant community was a very big deal. An important barrier was being crossed for the first time in redemptive history. In the words of Derek Thomas, “The significance of Jerusalem as the zip code where God’s purposes were localized had now been abrogated.” [227] The outpouring of the Spirit that came about when Peter and John prayed for these believers was an extension of what had taken place at Pentecost. This is something that we will see taking place at a few other points in

the book of Acts. The reason why the apostles had to be present at such a historic moment was because of their unique position as those who were appointed by Christ to give the foundational testimony upon which he will build his church. Every time the gospel crosses into a new frontier in Acts, the Spirit of Pentecost is poured out in installments through the foundational ministry of the apostles .

The Importance of Guarding the Gospel

This brings us to the issue that really seems to be at the heart of what is being taught in this passage. Luke tells us that when Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given to the Samaritan believers when the apostles laid their hands on them, he offered them money and asked them to give him the same power. Now, the context makes it pretty clear what it was that motivated Simon to make such an offer. He was not interested in seeing people get saved. He was not interested in the gospel as the power of God for salvation. He wanted this power for himself so he use it to make money and gain an even greater reputation, just as he had done as a magician prior to the gospel's arrival in Samaria. He wanted people to start paying attention to them again. He was interested in how the gospel might be used to further his own power and prestige.

There are many ways in which people today do this. They treat the gospel as a means of gaining money, power, prestige, or attention. There are the preachers of the prosperity gospel, a gospel of health and wealth, who build empires on the message that they preach. There are the politicians who use Christianity as a means of accumulating votes. There are those who make the Christian faith into something cool in order to secure the admiration and devotion of a particular segment of society. There are those who see the church as a place to display their gifts, not for the sake of service but in order to be the center of attention. There are many ways in which the gospel is treated as a means to some other end. And Peter's response to Simon shows us that the church's leaders need to guard the gospel from those who would seek to hijack it for their own purposes. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a commodity to be bought and sold. It is the free gift of God, and it has to be presented and received as such. When it is not, it is no longer the gospel of God.