

When NASA first started sending up astronauts into space, they quickly discovered that ballpoint pens would not work in zero gravity. To combat the problem, NASA scientists spent a decade and 12 billion dollars to develop a pen that writes in zero gravity, upside down, underwater, on almost any surface including glass and at temperatures ranging from below freezing to 300 degrees Celsius.

The Russians used a pencil.

Sometimes the answer is so obvious, it eludes us.

Here in our Scripture today, from Acts chapter 8, we see this. Philip heads out to Samaria and shares the good news of Jesus Christ and many believe...but for one man, Simon, a clear understanding of Christianity is impossible to grasp.

Why?

Simon continues to interpret spiritual things through his pagan understanding, and so he cannot comprehend Christian spiritual concepts. Simon seeks to understand and explain events around him by a pagan spiritual worldview, and so, he just doesn't get what is obvious to everyone else.

Jesus is all we need.

Last Sunday, we saw that Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, the highest religious court in the land. The whole encounter didn't end well. Stephen explained how Jesus Christ was greater than any temple, Stephen said that we didn't need the Temple, we only needed Jesus Christ. The council took Stephen out and killed him by stoning him to death.

There standing by was Saul, who would now lead the persecution of believers of Jesus Christ. Philip along with other believers, leaves the city because of persecution. Notice that the Apostles stay. The persecution, at this point, appears to be against the Hellenistic Jewish believers, which are, as we learned, are people of Jewish origin who speak Greek and not Aramaic like the local Jewish population did. Philip speaks Greek and believes in Jesus so he leaves, the Apostles speak Aramaic, so they stay. Perhaps the persecution is

only against the Hellenistic Jews at this point because Saul may have believed that the Hellenists were the root of the Christian thought that a Temple is not needed anymore.

However, not all Hellenistic believers left Jerusalem, still, most appeared to have fled the city. Another reason Philip may have left, isn't simply just fear of persecution, he may have believed as many of the Hellenists believed, that by rejecting Stephen's testimony, the city of Jerusalem had sealed an irrevocable doom - therefore the wise would abandon Jerusalem for it was doomed to destruction.

Whatever the reason, Philip heads out to Samaria....HOLD ON, stop right there. We have seen in chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, that only people of Jewish origin are believers in the new church, in other words, every single person in the church, and there are over 25,000 at this point, every single person is of Jewish origin. Christianity was of Jewish origin, and was only presented to people of Jewish origin - but here we see Philip heading OUT of Israel and into Samaria.

Did the Apostles think of this? Are the Apostles taking the Gospel to the Samaritans? No, it is this man Philip, who first appears in Chapter 7. Now remember, the Apostles did lay hands on Philip, and as we saw this laying on of hands was a sign of a transfer of authority. So Philip, though not an Apostle, has authority, don't ever listen to folks who tell you that you cannot speak of the Gospel and use the name of Jesus in any location.

Many years ago I was asked to pray at certain a city function. As I was walking to the podium to pray my short prayer, a man grabbed my arm, pulled me over to the side and sternly whispered in my ear, "You absolutely cannot use the name of Jesus at a city function."

He would not let go until I gave him some kind of indication that I understood exactly what he had just said. Wiggling free, I stepped up to the podium, addressed the audience saying, "Let us pray," bowed my head, gave the guy a quick look with one eye, and proceeded to say the name of Jesus at least 13 times in a 45 second prayer.

The event went on without a hitch, the city remained stable, the world did not end. In fact, I was asked to come back, probably because it was the shortest prayer they had ever heard at a city event.

The Gospel is for everyone, the Gospel is for all places, there is not a place where the Gospel should not be, there is not a person who does not need the Gospel - Philip understands this, so he goes to the Samaritans.

Who were the Samaritans? Originally, the Samaritans were identified with the Northern Kingdom of Israel (2 King 17:29). The Assyrians had conquered Israel and they took the people of Israel into exile - but they did not take everyone, a remnant of Jewish people remained in the land. The Assyrians then resettled the area with other conquered people, "People from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim"(2 Kings 17:24). The Assyrians did this to help reduce the treat of rebellion within their empire. Some of the Jews left behind in Palestine intermarried with these newly arrived people and this intermarriage eventually led to worship of foreign gods.

Later, when the exiled Jews returned to Israel, Ezra and Nehemiah refused to let the Samaritans help with rebuilding (Ezra 4:1-3; Neh 4:7). We also see that the Samaritans erected a rival Temple to Yahweh on Mount Gerizim, saying that this was the chosen place to worship God - not Jerusalem. Like the Sadducees, they only believed in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), but, like the Jews, they believed that the one true God was Yahweh, so they are not pagans, but it is clear that the people are suffering from pagan beliefs as they hold up Simon with such great esteem.

So Philip goes to Samaria, and what does he do? He preaches the Gospel and through him the Holy Spirit works miraculous signs. Philip casts out evil spirits and he heals many people. This sounds like what is happening to Peter and John. And, see, verse 8, there is great joy in the city. The people are finally free from the things that have oppressed them, so, many people believe.

Simon the Sorcerer was among those who saw Philip and believed. Simon not only believes, but he is among those who Philip baptizes (verse 13). Now if we were to stop there, Simon would be just another believer who dedicated his life to follow Jesus Christ, but Simon cannot seem to grasp what everyone else understands with ease and so Simon finds himself in trouble with Peter and John.

Simon practiced witchcraft he was not just a magician at the circus. A magician relies on the skill of sleight of hand, whereas, a person who practices witchcraft relies upon the spiritual world - in other words Simon was involved in the occult. He was regarded as

able to channel divine power and divine revelation. Understand that Simon isn't performing tricks, Simon calls upon spiritual forces to do his bidding.

Nature of Simon's belief is uncertain, but it appears that he truly did believe, however, Simon's view of how the spiritual world worked, warped his view of how spiritual things really are.

Now, in movies today occult activities have been taken and placed into the realm of fantasy or the realm of science fiction. We go to the movies and see special effects on the screen, and no matter how real they appear, no matter how much we get caught up in the action of the movie, we know that the special effects about the occult are just special effects. So, to some degree we have become accustomed to the idea that the occult is fiction - after all, everything we see in the movies is fiction, Harry Potter is not real - but let me assure you that the occult is not fiction, the occult is very real.

In brief, a person involved in the occult attempts to command spirits to do their will. This is what Simon was involved in, and this is the avenue Simon used to accomplish his exciting wonders. Simon had mastered the ability to command spirits. Most likely, at some point Simon was schooled in the occult and probably paid good money for this education

Egypt had magicians who were along the same line. They are able to replicate to some degree what Moses accomplishes miracle wise. Again, these magicians were not the sleight of hand type, but they used spiritual forces to accomplish their feats.

Many today will claim that there is a power, a force or an energy that is neutral. It is not positive or negative, it is just energy. They claim that this energy is impartial and impersonal, it is neither good nor evil. They claim that if we want to have a better life, all we have to do is tap into this neutral energy - don't believe such nonsense. Ephesians 6:12, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Simply put, either it is the power of the Holy Spirit, or it is something else, and that something else is not God, and it will not be kind to you. Look, the people of the city were suffering all kinds of spiritual chaos - well no kidding, they were following a man

involved in the occult, a man who was so strong in the occult he is called the Great Power.

In our day Ouija boards, psychic consultations, and palm readings are examples of the occult in our society. Don't be a fool and become involved in any of these things, they will ultimately only cause you grief.

Simon has a lot of spiritual baggage, but, he does come to believe, but here we see that there is more to Christianity than expressing believe, there is such a thing as orthodoxy - there is such a thing as the correct understanding of the Gospel and the incorrect understanding of the Gospel. Here we see the incorrect understanding can cause us great trouble.

Before we jump in to Simon's encounter with Peter and John let me inform you that this Simon is depicted in post-apostolic writings as the father of all Gnostic heresies. Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Tertullian all speak against Simon in connection with heresies. Luke probably knows more about Simon than he is telling us in this passage, but Luke shows us that Simon has a big problem.

What is Simon's problem? Simon thinks, "Its all about me."

Notice that Philip has great power, but unlike Simon, he is not called the great power. Philip knows this; It is not about Philip, it is about Jesus Christ. Philip and Simon are a wonderful contrast: Philip a humble man who allows the power of the Holy Spirit to work through him; Simon a self seeking man who feeds on power.

Why do you think Simon shows up in the first place? There is a new power in town and Simon wants a part of it, so he follows Philip everywhere. There is a fine line between serving God and serving ourselves, be careful not to cross it.

Peter and John come to town. They are there to check the situation out. Remember, only Jewish people have joined the church so far. Samaritans are only half Jewish at best, so the Apostles have to see if it is really true: Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for people other than people who are Jewish? Peter and John come out because this isn't the normal situation. These are the first people to believe who are not purely Jewish.

What they find is a bunch of believers. They are saved, but not filled with the Holy Spirit. In general, throughout the NT it is assumed that those who believe have also the Holy Spirit, but here we see an exception, so to speak. Clearly they have the Holy Spirit, because they believe, but there are no outward manifestations that have been seen over and over again when people believe. It is clearly implied that some kind of outward manifestations marked the receiving of the Holy Spirit on this occasion.

Here, we see that the Samaritans are a people who are very much outsiders as far as Jews are concerned. They need to be granted a very public confirmation so that the Apostles can know without a doubt that the Gospel is for those outside Judaism. So, in this instance the Apostles are present when the Holy Spirit arrives in power. An Apostle is not needed to bring the Holy Spirit, but irrefutable evidence is needed for these, quite frankly, racist Apostles, to see that the Gospel is for everyone.

Imposition of hands here is a symbol of incorporation into the church, it is not the Apostles transferring the Holy Spirit from themselves to the people. Only secondarily is the laying on of hands here a sign of the spirit, for as we learned last week, power comes from God alone - not from men. The Apostles arrive, lay hands on the people and their status has changed instantly. The Samaritans were outsiders in Judaism, but in Christ they are equal.

In our country and in England the root of the end of slavery was found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Slaves turned their lives over to Jesus Christ and became deacons and elders in their churches. The missionaries saw these people as equals and realized that slavery must be ended. For the slaves, Jesus raised their status instantly, one moment outsiders, then next equals.

Simon sees that the Apostle's lay hands upon the believers and the Holy Spirit arrives. He sees their power, and he wants their power for himself too.

We need to step back here and realize that Simon is not a complete idiot. We read this and say to ourselves, "Well obviously the Holy Spirit cannot be bought Simon, you big dummy." But, to Simon this is how the spiritual world worked. Simon would have previously purchased various charms, books and lessons on working with spirits in the occult. Simon would have previously used his knowledge to command these spirits to do his bidding. So here, Simon thinks the things of God work the same way the occult

works. Perhaps Simon believes that there is a secret spell that is cast or maybe there is an object he can own that will give him the power he need. In occultic literature there are many attested incidents of spiritual power being attached to certain objects and when the object is given or taken, the power resides with the new owner - in other words, the spirit follows this object.

All that to say this: Simon treats Peter and John like they are fellow members of the occult. Simon is offering a deal, like he would any other magician of the day. I'm sure that Peter and John were not pleased to be confused with members of the occult.

Simon's past wouldn't just drop away. Simon wanted his walk in Christ to be all about him, this is a sin, and this sin captivated him. Simon craves the power to reproduce at will. Though Simon has become a Christian, he still sees the world like he always has. The occult is about human power over spirits, Christianity is about the Holy Spirit's power over believers. The Holy Spirit controls us, we in no way, control the Holy Spirit.

See, we as Christians have a dual nature. When we become Christians, we become a new creation, but we still are ourselves. So, we have a spiritual nature that is from God and a fleshly nature, the one we have always had - and these natures battle each other. You can read the detailed explanation in Romans chapter 7.

Simon is a Christian, but he has the old Simon still there and is not able to let the Holy Spirit take more control. Simon had believed, but still shown signs of his old nature. It is his old occultic belief system that is not compatible with Christ.

Peter does not tell Simon that he will go to hell when Simon makes his offer, nor does Peter say that Simon is lost forever. I'm telling you, in the Greek text there is no hint of that.

Peter does rebuke Simon. You know there is a thing as the correct understanding and incorrect understanding. The incorrect understanding of spiritual things can lead a believe to a life of disaster.

What does Simon misunderstand? First that salvation is a gift from God, we cannot to earn it or buy it (verse 20). Therefore Simon cannot participate in the ministry until his he

repents and his heart is right before God. (In essence Simon is asking to join into the Christian leadership with his offer of payment.)

Did you catch that? It is about his heart more than it is about his mind. Sure Simon had an intellectually incorrect understanding of how the Holy Spirit works, but his misunderstanding wasn't just a result of poor thinking, his misunderstanding was because of the condition of his heart.

Simon chooses to see and hear things by his own standards, his old standards. See Simon's heart is still concerned with Simon. Simon is like many people in the Christian churches today, they come to Jesus because it will make their life better. Jesus will solve their problems, Jesus will influence their finances, Jesus will raise their self esteem - life will be great with Jesus on my side....because it is all about me.

Simon is terror stricken at Peter's reply. To have incurred the displeasure of men of such power at their command was an awful thought. So Simon shows the self centered nature of his heart, saying, "pray for me". Simon does not repent, Simon does not pray, Simon does not seek understanding, Simon continues to operate under the paradigm that it is all about Simon.

Sunday after Sunday, you have heard me say the same thing: When I give my life over to Jesus, it is not about me anymore, it is about Jesus Christ. Every event, every problem, every victory are about Jesus Christ. Simon is the personification of the person who does not understand this concept.

Whatever Simon's intentions, Simon's legacy is one of great harm to the church simply because he thought it was all about me.....