

THE GOSPEL VERSUS MAGIC

by Ray C. Stedman

On the day when the Lord Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives he said to his disciples,

**"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."
{Acts 1:8 RSV}**

The book of Acts is the story of how all that took place, according to the program that Jesus outlined: in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. We have come in our study of Acts to the point where the gospel begins to go out to Judea and Samaria. Until now it has been centered in Jerusalem. Some time has gone by in this account since the Day of Pentecost, and the apostles and disciples and the church are still in Jerusalem. But now we learn how God thrust them out into Judea and Samaria.

The first period closed with the story of how Stephen was killed by an angry and enraged Sanhedrin who could not tolerate the truth which he spoke and so stoned him to death outside the city walls. The men who stoned him laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. Thus the Holy Spirit indicates to us that out of the death of Stephen came at last the preaching of the Apostle Paul, once Saul of Tarsus. The Sanhedrin silenced a voice that was upsetting a city, but, without realizing it, they were awakening a voice that would upset an empire. That is the way God works. Throughout this book we will see how God uses opposition to advance his cause. You can see it in the first paragraph of Chapter 8:

And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. But Saul laid waste the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to a city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Christ. {Acts 8:1b-5 RSV}

Notice that the paragraph begins with persecution and ends with proclamation. The proclamation was due to the persecution. It was by means of the persecution that arose over Stephen that these early Christians were pressed out of Jerusalem, squirted out into the areas around, into Judea and Samaria, and began to preach the word, all according to the program of God. And God used this young man, Saul of Tarsus, even before he became a Christian to accomplish this. God works to use the very obstacles thrown in the path of Christians to advance his cause. You can picture young Saul, enraged over what he regarded as a heresy, trying to stamp it out with all the energy of his flesh, entering house after house, dragging off men and women and committing them to prison. This is the rage of a tortured conscience, which tries, by zealous activity, to cover up its anxiety, emptiness, and hurt. Yet God uses this as an instrument to accomplish his purpose.

He does two things with this rage of Saul's:

1. He forces the church out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria to fulfill the divine program as he had outlined, and
2. He makes the early church depend not upon the apostles but upon the gifts of the Spirit distributed to everyone

-- for these who were scattered abroad were not the apostles. Dr. Luke is careful to tell us that. These were ordinary, plain-vanilla Christians like you and me. And yet they had gifts of the Spirit. But they would never have discovered their gifts if they had not been pushed out, and put to work. So God used this pressure to

place them in circumstances where they began to develop the gifts of evangelism, of witnessing, of helps, wisdom, knowledge, teaching, prophecy, and all the other gifts of the Spirit that had been made available to them.

Sometimes I think that God will have to do this in our day before people will begin to believe that they have spiritual gifts and put them to work. He may have to bring persecution upon us so that there cannot be dependence upon a central ministry, but each one will begin to utilize the gifts that God has given him.

Are you going through some kind of pressure today? Well, it may not be punishment for sins. The pressure, the trials, and the problems that come are by no means always the result of sin in our lives. Sometimes they are, but it may be God's way of moving you, of pressuring you into a new experience, into a new understanding of his truth and of his equipment in your life, and giving you a new opportunity to put it to work.

So, the first mark of the way God works in resurrection power is that persecution leads to the proclamation of the truth more widely than it has ever been before.

Immediately we pick up the account in Samaria:

And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many who were oppressed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city. {Acts 8:6-8 RSV}

Here is the ministry of a layman, Philip. Yet it is a ministry of power, the power of the Holy Spirit. The result was a marvelous demonstration of what Christianity is like. The Holy Spirit has deliberately incorporated into this brief paragraph three marks that always accompany a genuine ministry of the Spirit:

The first is the ring of truth. Notice that it says, "the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip." When a great crowd of people listens intently it is because they think they are hearing the truth. They are struck by the note of reality. This was the way Jesus taught. It was said of him that he did not teach as did the scribes and Pharisees, with quotations from other authorities, but what he said hit people as the truth and they were arrested by it. They said, "Never did any man speak as this man speaks," {cf, John 7:46}. This is always characteristic of someone who genuinely proclaims the gospel, because the gospel is truth. It is the way things really are. As Philip talked this way, people stopped and listened. They said, "This man is saying something that is right on target." The proclamation of the gospel always has about it that ring of truth and authority.

Second, is the accompaniment of power: "For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed." Here is power that sets men free, power that delivers. This was immediately manifest in Samaria when Philip preached there. These miracles -- the freeing from demonic spirits, the healings -- as we have seen before in Acts, were evidences of the power of God manifested on a visible and physical level, in order that they, and we, might be encouraged to understand that God would also free them in the spirit. That is where man is really bound -- in spirit -- and he needs to be set free there. These physical miracles were a demonstration of God's power to heal, both physically and spiritually. Wherever the gospel goes it gives liberty.

The third mark is joy: "So there was much joy in that city." When people are set free it always fills them full of joy.

What other agency in our day can do this? Our American cities are, for the most part, seething pools of human misery. You drive around them and see people, millions of them, living in squalor and poverty, in filth and degradation. And you know also that within them there is loneliness, emptiness, and depression of spirit. Life looks gray and dull, drab and uninteresting to them. What can set them free? What can fill them with joy? The glory of the gospel is always that, wherever it goes, even though it may not immediately change their outward circumstance, it does fill people with joy. And soon the circumstance begins to change as well.

This has been the story throughout history. As people are filled with joy by the power of the Word, they begin to change for the better. The gospel gives us joy.

I remember one woman who was converted a number of years ago by believing the truth. She had never had anything to do with a church before. She was just filled with joy, and she wanted to say so, but she didn't know the right words. She had not learned "Hallelujah!" yet, and so she just said, "Whoopee! Whoopee!" That is the kind of joy the gospel gives.

This is what was taking place in Samaria -- they were whooping it up.

But notice the contrast in the next paragraph. "But..." That word always indicates a corner to be turned:

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. They 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. {Acts 8:9-13 RSV}

In this section the Holy Spirit deliberately contrasts the marks of authentic Christianity with those of a false and counterfeit faith. Simon the Magician appears in this account as another manifestation of the attack of the devil against the church, from within. Remember that Jesus had said that though he was sowing good seed in the field of the world, an enemy would come at night and sow bad seed in the midst of the wheat, and that they would grow up together.

This is the third occasion in the book of Acts when we find the sprouting of the devil's seed. The first was the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who manifested hypocrisy, even though they were really genuine Christians. The second was the dissension which sprouted among the disciples when they quarreled over the distribution of goods to the widows. The third is this manifestation of religious falseness.

Notice its characteristics. The primary and outstanding mark by which this kind of religious falseness can be recognized is given to us right away:

... 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. {Acts 8:9 RSV}

All false faith exalts personalities, makes much over men. It involves the inflation of an individual, usually by self-aggrandizement. These individuals are always egocentric, always pointing to themselves, exalting themselves, and using religious terminology to make a great deal over themselves. That is the quality of counterfeit Christianity.

Genuine Christianity makes nothing of the individual. "We preach not ourselves," says the Apostle Paul, "but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves your servants, for Jesus' sake," {cf, 2 Cor 4:5}.

But here we have a man who exalts himself.

I remember a few years ago attending a service put on by one of the famous (or infamous) faith healers of our day, a man who has milked millions of dollars from earnest Christians by the faith healing racket. I attended this meeting just to hear what he was saying. He began preaching what I thought sounded like a good gospel message. He started out well, took his text from the Scripture, began to develop it well, and I began to settle back and say to myself, "I've been wrong about this man!" -- until he came to the conclusion! Rather than giving an invitation to the thousands who were present to come to know Jesus Christ, this is what he said: "If

you want to know God, then have faith in my prayers. If you want to meet God, believe that my prayers will lead you to God. Come forward and kneel here, and I'll pray for you." The whole direction of his message was toward himself and his prayer.

That is false Christianity. It always attempts to interject a mediator between a believer and his God. But, "There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus," {1 Tim 2:5}; no other. Counterfeit Christianity tries to insert a priesthood of one sort or another, a mediator, someone great, someone who has an "in" with God, someone who has a special channel to God that other people don't have. When you hear that sort of thing, you know that you are hearing again the same kind of false Christianity that appeared here in the book of Acts.

The second mark is a wide following, a wide-spread delusion:

They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is that power of God which is called Great." {Acts 8:10 RSV}

They did not even dare to think of coming to God themselves. They thought of him as so removed, so distant, that he would not appear himself but he would send his "power," as though the power of God were a different personality from God himself. They said, "This man is that power of God." The whole city believed it, from the least to the greatest. It was a wide-spread delusion. It is from this that counterfeit Christianity derives its strength. The leaders of false cults point to the numbers that follow them and say, "Look at all the people who believe in us. 50,000,000 Frenchmen can't be wrong! With all these adherents we must be right." But one of the chief characteristics of a false faith is that it can delude millions, mislead the masses. These false leaders always have great followings.

The third mark is that of a counterfeit power:

And they gave heed to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. {Acts 8:11 RSV}

When the Scripture uses this term, *magic*, it is not talking about sleight-of-hand tricks done before an audience. It does not mean slick little maneuvers in which the hand is quicker than the eye, so that we think we see something when we don't. Rather, it applies to the occult, as performed by those who have somehow established a relationship with demonic powers and are using them to accomplish what look like good wholesome miracles which cannot be distinguished from the real thing. But they never last.

There was such an instance when Moses appeared in Pharaoh's court and God told him to throw his staff down on the ground. When he did it became a serpent. When he picked it up it again became a staff. Immediately the magicians of Pharaoh's court threw their staffs down and these also became serpents. It looked as if they had power equal to that of Moses. But then God told Moses to throw his staff down again. This time it became a serpent which ate up those other serpents. God always has an edge.

So, Simon was doing miracles which, for the moment, relieved people, but which, later, left them bound worse than before. Many of the demonic people who were released by the preaching of Philip had probably been bound originally by the magic of Simon.

This explains many of the miracles in these so-called "faith healing" meetings. It has been well established that many of these miracles -- which apparently occur and look real at the moment, even to those watching over television -- are of this nature. Investigation discloses that in two weeks or a month the people are right back in the same condition, or often very much worse. They may have been miracles but they were done by a false, counterfeiting power.

We are seeing the return of the occult in our own day. Thirty years ago people would have laughed if you had suggested that the intelligent, educated people of today would believe in witches and warlocks, astrology and horoscopes. But it is right back with us, and we are going to see much more of it in days to come. We will probably see much of the very kind of thing exhibited here in the book of Acts. And if you are one of those

people who have been trapped into believing only what you see, thinking that, because you see it, therefore it must be real, you will be swept right along with all this -- because it can appear to be very genuine! But it is false and temporary!

The fourth mark of false Christianity is found in Verse 13:

Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. {Acts 8:13 RSV}

The devil must have been the first one who ever said, "If you can't lick 'em; join 'em."

That is exactly what Simon does. If this were the only statement about Simon in the Scriptures we would have to conclude that he had become a Christian, because the language used to describe him is the same as that used for genuine believers. "Simon himself believed, and was baptized." He took upon himself the symbol of identification with Jesus Christ and thus openly joined this company who said they belonged to Jesus. But the rest of the account makes crystal clear that this man was not a believer. He was not regenerate; he was a fraud, a sham. He said the right words and did the right things. He did whatever the others did -- whether they raised their hand, or stood up, or came forward -- whatever Philip may have asked them to do, Simon did the same. And he was baptized. Yet he was unchanged. His heart was unregenerate, as the rest of the account will make clear, and he thus became an example of the favorite trick of the devil: When you can't lick 'em; join 'em.

The one means by which the church has been rendered weak and ineffective, more than any other, is by unregenerate people coming in and taking on the outer garments of Christianity, calling themselves Christians, but remaining still unchanged in heart and life. That has ruined more churches than anything else possibly could.

Now, to some degree that is impossible to prevent. There may be some here this morning who have been members of this church but who are still unregenerate -- and there is nothing we can do about it. But, as we will see, God the Holy Spirit, working in power through his people, can expose this kind of thing.

Let us read on for the third example of how the power of God works to expose and overcome evil in the church.

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." {Acts 8:14-24 RSV}

The account reopens with the genuine manifestation again of authentic Christianity -- the coming of the Holy Spirit. But it says of these believers in Samaria that the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on them. Well, then what had happened to them? They had believed, they had been baptized; what had happened? Can a person become a Christian without the Holy Spirit?

We must be very careful in reading this to see exactly what they had, and what they did not have. They did have power. Manifest in their midst was the operation of the Holy Spirit, in power, to set them free from the illnesses and depressions that had been besetting them. And they had joy. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit, and this kind of joy can never be produced except by the indwelling Spirit. Power is an outward sign; joy is inward. Both outwardly and inwardly they were demonstrating the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They had

the Holy Spirit. They were regenerate. They had been baptized in water as a testimony to that very regeneration which had occurred within their hearts and which manifested itself in the joy that was there.

So we would make a great mistake if we said that the Holy Spirit was not yet in Samaria. He was. But, what the account specifically says is that they did not yet have the Holy Spirit fallen upon them. You see, there are various terms for the ministry of the Holy Spirit used in Scripture. The Holy Spirit does a great variety of different things, yet he is behind all of them. This account makes clear that they had not yet received a certain manifestation of the Spirit. What was it? They had not yet been baptized by the Spirit into the one body. They were still separate, individual, regenerated Christians, just as the apostles themselves had been before the Day of Pentecost. The apostles had been born again; they had been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on them. On the Day of Pentecost he did, and they were then baptized into a body and made members of one another, members of one body in Jesus Christ. They also received the gifts of the Holy Spirit. What the Christians in Samaria had not yet received was this baptism into the one body, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

When Peter and John came down they first prayed for the church. Then they laid hands on them and the Samaritans, too, received the baptism of the Spirit, making them one body in Jesus Christ. (No signs accompanied that, at all.) They also received the gifts of the Spirit, among which was probably the gift of tongues. Because it was probably by that sign that Simon and others recognized that the Holy Spirit had been given to them.

Now, let us be very clear about this. Someone says, "You have to have the gift of tongues in order to have the Holy Spirit." No, no; on many occasions, for example later on at Antioch of Pisidia, in Chapter 13, we are told that new groups of disciples were filled with the Spirit, but there is no mention of tongues. "Well, then, you must have the apostolic ministry." No; in the very next chapter Paul has hands laid on him by a man who is not an apostle, Ananias, and he receives the Holy Spirit. "Oh! then, it must be by the laying on of hands. That is the way!" No, no; in the tenth chapter, though Peter the Apostle is there at the house of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit is given to the hearers before he can lay his hands on them. You see, the Spirit of God is sovereign and he does many things. He does them in a different order, sometimes, because that is his sovereign right. Yet he always accomplishes the full program.

This last week I was watching some of the workmen who were pouring concrete in the patio. I love to watch people work. Two men were working away to expose the aggregate for decorative effect. But they were talking about bowling. They never said a word to each other about what they were doing. One would pick up a certain instrument and do something with it. Then the other would pick up another tool, and use that. They were working together doing different things in beautiful harmony, and were getting the job done, but they never said a thing to each other about the work. They understood what they were doing, and -- even though in one area they would do the different tasks in a certain order, but in another area, in another order -- when they got through the whole job was done right.

That is what the Spirit of God is doing here. If he had come upon these Samaritan disciples when they first believed in Jesus, there could easily have developed a church of the Samaritans, apart from the church of the Jews. As you well know there was already existing at that time a wall of partition dividing the Jews from the Samaritans. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, nor the Samaritans with the Jews. Had the Spirit of God come upon this church when Philip first went down there, it could easily have produced two separate churches. But, by tying it all together with these apostles who came down from Jerusalem, the Spirit of God was saying, "There is one body; not two. There are no great distinctions in the church; there is only one church, and that is all. The Samaritans belong to it equally as much as the Jews." Thus he was teaching these early Christians the great truths that are so familiar to us today.

Finally comes the exposure of this false ministry of Simon's:

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." {Acts 8:18-19 RSV}

Just think of the blindness and ignorance exhibited here! This man, unregenerate as he was, actually thought that God's power could be bought with money. So he insulted the apostles and God by suggesting that they give him this power for money. This shows how unregenerate his heart was, how blind it was, that he would have the gall to do such a thing. How little he understood of the grace, and majesty, and the might of God! His very name has been given to the sin of trying to buy religious power with money. It is called "simony" because of this man. Notice how Peter exposes it. Listen to the bluntness of the truth:

But Peter said to him, "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" {Acts 8:20 RSV}

In our translation this is rather mild. Peter puts it much more forcefully than that. To be very literal, Peter actually says, in Greek, "To hell with you and your money!" It was a terrible thing that this man had suggested -- that God's power could be bought with money, as though God were but a mechanism, subject to man's whim and caprice. Peter tells him very plainly, "You and your money are both going to hell if you don't change your attitude!" Then he points out the problem to him:

"You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God." {Acts 8:21 RSV}

"That's your problem, Simon," he says. "You may have believed in an intellectual way, but your heart is unchanged. Your heart is not right before God. You're a phony, you're a fake, a fraud, pretending to be something you are not." "I see," he says, "that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." He reads that man's heart, full of bitterness and in the bond, the enslavement, of iniquity. He had never been set free! And so he says,

"Repent [change your mind] therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you." {Acts 8:22 RSV}

God reads hearts and does not listen to words. But this man is so far from repentance that this is how he replies:

And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord [you pray for me, Peter], that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." {Acts 8:24 RSV}

In other words, he refuses to act personally. He still tries to put the responsibility off onto someone else, while he desires only to escape the penalty. There is no thought here of his actually repenting of his insult against God's grace. It is no wonder, therefore, that this man became one of the earliest and greatest opponents of the gospel.

Read the apocryphal books and you will find a great deal about Simon Magus there. He was one who hindered the gospel everywhere it went and continued to be the exponent of the devil's lie. But, naturally, he was never able to prevail, as is testified by the fact that you and I are worshipping here today.

The lesson, of course, is that though God's grace is able to overpower evil -- nevertheless, as Jesus said, "Woe unto him through whom evil comes. It were better for that man that a mill stone be hanged about his neck and he be cast into the depths of the sea than that he should offend one of these little ones who believe in me," {cf, Matt 18:6, Mark 9:42, Luke 17:2}.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for the exhortation of this passage to our hearts -- that we should be genuine and real, and not fake or phony. What a terrible thing it is in your sight, Lord, to be something that we are not, to pretend to a reality that does not exist. Lord, search our hearts this morning. May there be no Simon Maguses among us. Rather, even though we are struggling and are filled with weakness and frailty, may our hearts cry out in honesty before you, "Lord, you are our refuge and our strength. You alone can set us free. You alone can

cleanse us. You alone can read our hearts. And we put ourselves into your hands to do with as you will." We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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