ON SIMONY

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Acts 8: 9-13, 18-24

This text is very familiar to all of us. It is familiar, because Simon Magus has become a sort of theological boogeyman whom we blame for 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 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 is again the arch-villain, who seeks to imitate and to outdo Peter's miracles.

And yet, this long and venerable tradition regarding Simon Magus misses the point of what is taking place here, in this encounter, between the magician and the apostles. For according to the text, Simon was a believer. He was a sincere believer. 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 later by fantasy. What the text actually says is that he believed, that he was baptized, that he followed Philip around, and that he was amazed by the events which he saw taking place. The text then goes on to say that when the apostles came, they laid their hands on the believers, who then received the Holy Spirit, and that Simon Magus tried to buy this

authority from them, for which reason Peter had some hard for him. And finally, the text also says--and we often forget—that Simon repented, and asked Peter to pray for him.

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 which emerges is very different from what we have received in popular tradition. Simon is a sincere believer. He does not know too well what it is that he has believed in, but that could hardly be held against him, seeing that the disciples themselves were more than a little befuddled by the teachings of Jesus. He was a sincere believer. He was also a powerful man. According to the text, his power and prestige were such that all the people around him said: "This man is that power of God which is called Great."

And now, in Philip, Simon saw a power far greater than his own. He was amazed. He believed in this power and submitted to it in baptism. And yet, he still remained a great and powerful man. His conversion, as he saw it, added to the prestige of Philip's preaching. Even the narrator of Acts seems to have seen it this way, for the reason why he takes time to describe Simon's prestige is precisely to show how great a thing his conversion was.

In order to understand the dynamics that are taking place here, it is helpful to have grown up, as I did, in a country where one's religious allegiance is very much in the minority. I remember how thrilled we Protestants in Cuba were when some famous journalist decided to join our

ranks. I also remember working as a young student pastor in a church in a very small town, and how enthused we were when the one teacher in the one decent school in town visited our church a few times. He was adding power and prestige to our church—and, in our situation, we sorely needed any sort of power and prestige we could get.

And yet, as I look back upon that time, I recall a certain malaise that I felt as I tried to minister to the teacher. At that time, I attributed that malaise to my intellectual inability to deal with some of his questions. Now I know better. My intellectual shortcomings were great--and still are. But there was another factor involved in the situation. There was something in that situation that made the Gospel easier to understand for the less cultured people of that small village than for the supposedly learned teacher before whom everybody doffed their hats. And what I submit to you today is that that something was precisely the same thing which made it difficult for Simon Magus to see what the Gospel was all about, namely, the question of power and powerlessness. Put in a nutshell, the issue is this: Scripture was written by people who were out of power and oppressed, and for whom the presence and activity of God were experienced as empowerment and liberation. Therefore, for the powerful to understand what Scripture is all about is as easy as for a rich person to enter the Kingdom, or for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.
Let us look for a moment at the Scriptures on which Philip was basing his preaching: A book that claimed that God's greatest saving act had taken 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 Old Testament is devoted, not to the official chronicles of the Kings, but to the minority reports 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 fishermen, prostitutes, publicans, and other assorted outsiders to polite society. Here again, the great saving act is to be found in the public execution of Jesus—overshadowed, it is true, by the resurrection, but by a resurrection which is only known to the relatively small circle of believers. Technically, the one about whom Philip preached and in whom Simon believed was an outlaw. 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 can understand what it means to be promised a home in the New Jerusalem and a land in which there will be no sea. Caesar’s prisoner can understand what it means to be free in Christ. The downtrodden and disheartened Galilean fisherfolk can understand what it means to become fishers of human beings. But what of all this can Simon Magus understand, about whom his neighbors say: "This man is that power of God which is called Great"?

When it comes to understanding the Gospel, Simon had two strikes against him before he ever stood at home plate. And if that seems harsh, think about Pharaoh, who struck out before he came to bat in a game in which he didn't even choose to play--for that is what the writer of

Exodus means when he says that God hardened his heart. But, back to the case of Simon, what to us and to Peter sounded like a bribe, to him may well have been no more than an honest effort to support the church in exchange for some of the authority of the apostles. Simon missed the point, no doubt, but the reason why he missed it was more his own power than lack of sincerity.

This should not surprise us, for similar episodes have repeatedly taken place in the life of the church, and not always have the ministers of the Gospel been as vigilant as Peter was in this case.

Take for instance the case of Constantine's conversion. A few decades ago, it was fashionable among historians to assume that Constantine was a calculating political genius who decided that he needed the support of the church in order to make his rule more effective and that he therefore faked his conversion. I do not wish to return to that theory, which has been abandoned for strong historical reasons. On the contrary, most contemporary scholarship agrees that Constantine was sincere in his conversion and that most of the Christian emperors who succeeded him were just as sincere as he was. It is clear, however, that his understanding of the Gospel was very different from that of the church, which he eventually joined. It had to be so, for he came to the church from a position of power, and that very church until quite recently had been a despised and often persecuted minority in the Empire. It is also clear that even those bishops, who were his close religious advisers, did little to disabuse him, in spite of

the fact that some of them were sticklers for orthodoxy in other cases. When Constantine, who was not even baptized, was called “the bishop of bishops,” no voice was raised in protest. And I do not say this by way of judgment, since I well remember how ready I was to overlook the weird notions on the reincarnation of souls that my teacher friend was proposing in my small village church. I say it simply to point out how easy it is for the ministers of the Gospel to overlook the heresy of the powerful.

For there is indeed a heresy of the powerful. Or, better still, there is a heresy of power. It is the heresy that occurs when the powerful in the land interpret for their own convenience the Gospel of the empowerment of the weak and the liberation of the oppressed. It is a heresy which pervades the entire body of Christian doctrine, from the doctrine of God to the doctrine of last things.

Take, for instance, the doctrine of God. The God of Israel is an active God--perhaps even a meddling God--who intervenes in the affairs of history in order to free the oppressed and humble the powerful. The God of the New Testament is the God who raises Jesus Christ from the dead and thus mocks the power of Roman justice. But the God of the power heresy is little more than a distant God that is wholly transcendent justification of the present state of things. The main attribute of the God of the power heresy is changelessness, just as the main socio-political goal of those who are in power is to keep things from changing too much.

Or take the doctrine of Jesus Christ. When the power heresy takes over, the carpenter from Galilee becomes the *pantokrator* who sits on his throne high up in heaven, just as the emperor sits on his throne in Constantinople. And here again, this is no mere coincidence, for the emperor and his court have a stake in fostering the worship of a God who is as much like the emperor as possible. A God who is more like a condemned carpenter than like an Emperor would be too much of a threat for the power heresy.

Or let us look at the doctrine of last things. In Scripture, the hope of the people of God is most often described in terms of a Kingdom or a City—in other words, in terms of new relationships among human beings in the presence of God. But this again would be too threatening for those whose power is responsible for the sorry state of earthly kingdoms, and thus the power heresy transforms the Christian hope into an individualistic dream, where we are promised, not a place in the heavenly city of Scripture, but a suburban cloud where we can enjoy the music of our harps in complete privacy.

And so, when we look more closely at it, the sin of Simon Magus is not so alien to our day. It is the sin of civil religion. It is the sin of a sort or evangelism that claims to be apolitical, and which thus implicitly says that God does not really mind the injustice of the present order. It is the sin of those who, like Simon, are called great and powerful in human society, and who believe that that greatness and that power can somehow be turned into brownie points for the Kingdom.

But let us not be too hasty to condemn Simon; for perhaps we, too, like him, have two strikes against us when it comes to hearing the Word of God. Simon is not only the conservative evangelical who confuses the divine will with the law and order that sustain his power and privilege. Simon is not only the church member who threatens to withhold financial support if the church continues seeking to be obedient to the radical nature of the Gospel. Simon may well be each one of us, and all of us collectively. And this had nothing to do with whether or not we are sincere. It has to do rather with the fact that we are among those who are called "great" and "powerful" in human society. If your income is anywhere above the poverty level in this country, you are richer than ninety percent of humankind, and therefore when it comes to getting through the needle's eye, your camel is that much fatter. If you are white, male, and belong to the priestly caste—or to the professorial club—you've almost got it made. Which means that, like Simon, you've got two strikes against you.

What, then, can be done? The first thing we must do is to acknowledge that, humanly speaking, our chances of hearing the Word of God directly are about as good as the chance that a camel has in getting through the eye of a needle. We must begin by acknowledging that the only source of our hope is that this, which is humanly impossible, is still possible with God. In other words, we must begin by acknowledging that for us to hear the Word of God will take no less than a miracle. As long as we count on the fact that we can quote Scripture backward and forward, we are not ready to receive this miracle. We are still caught in Simon's trap as long as we count on being citizens of a nation that has traditionally called itself Christian; or as long as

we count on being faithful members and leaders of the church; or even as long as we count on having a fervent religious experience. The only thing we can count on is the miracle of God's grace, which does things which are humanly impossible.

And then, Scripture tells us something else about the manner in which God performs this miracle. Scripture tells us quite clearly that very often the Word of God to the powerful comes in the cry of the powerless and the oppressed. God's Word to Pharaoh comes to him only in the cry of the Israelites, "Let my people go." Pharaoh either hears that voice, or he does not hear the voice of God at all. The Word of God to Simon, the mighty magician, comes through Simon the fisherman. It is the mouth of babes and infants that chants the glory of God. It is to little children that the Kingdom is promised.

What we can then do in obedience to Scripture is to heed the cry of the powerless and the oppressed and to listen for God's Word in it. It may well be that, when the emptiness and the weakness of our power is revealed to us, we shall be able to say, like Simon Magus to Simon Peter, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." And this will indeed be faith for us—when we discover how dependent we are precisely on those whom we oppress, exploit, and ignore for God's grace.

Within the context of a theological seminary and theological reflection, this has very concrete applications. I shall not go into these in detail, but one can at least say that probably the most

significant theological development of our time is the fact that new voices are being heard in the field of theology. Their voices are not coming from the traditional North-Atlantic centers of theological power and prestige. They are coming rather from Blacks, women, and other traditionally powerless people, who are experiencing the liberating and empowering thrust of the Gospel. Many of these people are speaking to the entire North-Atlantic establishment, including the church, words which are no less harsh than those that Peter the apostle addressed to Simon the magician, “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 with God.” It may well be that this is the word which today God speaks to the powerful through the cry of the oppressed. Will we at least have Simon’s faith, and heed that word, and respond to it in faith? That is the question that the church and each one of us must face at this crucial time in the history of humankind.