

Simon Magus and the Polity of the Church

Turn with me to Acts 8 and let's look at another story about a man whom the Church through the millennia has looked down on with condescending smug self-satisfaction at his obvious greed and error. We of course have in humility risen above this man's crass grasping for material gain.

Simon the Sorcerer actually thought he could buy the power to control the Holy Spirit!

For 2,000 years when the Church has preached on Simon the Sorcerer it is with the same, smug satisfaction we feel when we know we are better than someone else. It's like that other where the apostles argued about, "Who was the greatest? Who would get to run the church?" We know that it is wrong to pridefully pick the greatest to rule the Church, like the Apostles tried to get Jesus to do. In the same way we know that it is prideful to think you can buy power over the Holy Spirit like Simon the Sorcerer tried to do.

Heck, those of you who are spiritual know that it is pure arrogance to think that you can control the Holy Spirit at all, whether you buy the power like Simon tried, or just believe that an elder is the only one in the Church who has this power over the Holy Spirit.

Stare up at text and reread it them at Camera.

Were you paying attention, I didn't notice what I had written until I said it out loud. I said Simon Magus thought that he could control the Holy Spirit as if he were an apostle or an elder in the Church. Did you get that? It spun right past me. But stop, do the elders in the Church, or the priests in the Catholic Church **control** the Holy Spirit? Did Peter? Does your church believe that?

Turn with me to Acts Chapter 8 and let's read starting in v 5

⁶And the multitudes [in Samaria] with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. ⁷For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸And there was great joy in that city.

But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone **great**,¹⁰ to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, **“This man is the great power of God.”**¹¹ And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.¹² But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.¹³ Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.

¹⁴Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them,¹⁵ who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.¹⁷ Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸And when Simon saw that **through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given**, he offered them money,¹⁹ saying, **“Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”**

²⁰But Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because **you thought that the gift of God** could be purchased with money!²¹ You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God.²² Repent therefore of this your **wickedness**, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.²³ For I see that you are **poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.**”

²⁴Then Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me.”

When Simon saw Philip healing the sick in Samaria, he was impressed. He accepted this new religion and confessed faith in Jesus Christ. Healing the sick, working miracles. “OK, Impressive, I will try the Jesus thing.” But then the Spiritual Big Wigs in Jerusalem send some key people down, Peter and John, who were trained by Jesus personally.

Simon the Sorcerer was a leader himself. This made him sit up and take note. He “saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given.”

The Christian Sorcerer understood power and control. He realized that it is one thing to attract a crowd, build the buzz and take advantage of mob expectation which made it possible to work

miracles and maybe even heal people. Though what he was seeing Philip do was clearly more than what he had learned at Hogwarts.

This was different. All Luke says is the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of hands. Simon the Christian Sorcerer saw something in that which He understood was not showmanship, something real, genuine, lifechanging, game changing was taking place here.

Simon got it dead on the money. The Filling and empowerment of the Holy Spirit is the practical heart of this religion he had just joined. Whoever imparts the Holy Spirit is someone who controls the Church. And there is no doubt that he is almost correct, it is true that the leaders in the Church impart the Holy Spirit. But you can see that he is thinking of the Church as a controllable thing an organization that imparts power over God to its leaders.

How small a step from “leaders impart the Holy Spirit.” To “Leaders control the Holy Spirit.”

Where is that small step taken? It is taken when the power to impart the Holy Spirit becomes the property of the leadership, the elders, or priests and is denied to be properly done by mere members.

Go look at any sermon ever preached on this text. As the Church leaders down through history preach on this point, they jump to the self-aggrandizing implications of this control, you know, Simon wanted to get rich, famous, powerful, have a following he could control. As everyone who knows the story of Aladdin knows, if you control the Genie you’re rich, powerful and famous. So sermons on this text keep their listeners focused on the shiny object in front of them, power, fortune fame. Don’t let them stop and think of the implications of controlling the Holy Spirit institutionally. That is different. Of course the ordained clergy do not control the Holy Spirit!

Or do they?

Take a brief inventory of what the leaders of the Church control, whether we call them elders or priests. They control who becomes an elder, that is who can lay on hands and impart the Holy Spirit. They control who can receive baptism and communion. They

control who gets examined by them and if there is a trial they are the judges. They and no one else controls everything necessary to control the grace of the Church and who gets it.

Back to Simon the Christian Sorcerer. From start to finish Simon saw what Peter was doing as THE important point to step into leadership. Whoever controls the Holy Spirit, controls everything, the money, the people, the power, the policy, the message, the worship, the rituals, . . . everything. So Simon the Christian Sorcerer does the professional thing, the Christian thing, the leadership thing, the Spiritual thing, as one professional Spiritual, Christian, Leader to another, he realizes there is no such thing as a free lunch and decides to invest in the Church Franchise Business. And he asks Peter, ““Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

Simon got it, you cannot lead in the Church of Jesus Christ or any organization if you do not have powers that everyone else **doesn't** have, and the most important power for credible leadership is you must be someone who can control . . . er. . .cough cough, . . . impart the Holy Spirit.

OK your sitting there after 2,000 years of spiritual and philosophical and theological development on the matter.

1) you know that nobody controls the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Spirit is like the wind He comes and goes as He wills, you can only see his effect, not control it.

2) You know that a ritual is not how you get the Holy Spirit, or get saved, or receive spiritual strength from fellowship, or the sermon, or Bible Study, or the Lord's Supper. You know there isn't a series of things you “do” however right and holy it is to do them in order to get God to “do” something for you.

3) and you assume that the leaders of the Church have this same idea. Perhaps they do. But do they practice it? or do they practice something closer to Simon's idea?

So what did Simon the Christian Sorcerer know?

1) He knew that not everyone could do what Peter did, namely impart the Holy Spirit. It is a special power and if He could get Peter to give him the power, he too like Peter could lead.

2) Simon knew that in order to lead you must be able to do things that no one else could do, like control the Holy Spirit and when it comes to religion, rituals are how you control God and the people who need you to do something so they can get something from God. In this case it's the ritual of laying on of hands. Indeed control of the ritual gives you control of all who think that something important comes from the ritual. The next step he hadn't taken yet, but that would be to teach everyone that something important comes from the ritual . . . which the priest happens to control.

Whose polity does your Church practice, the one you gave in those two points above: the fullness of the Holy Spirit is available to the entire Church? It's the blessings, teaching and grace imparted is by God to His people?

Or is it the Church doctrine of the Christian Sorcerer, that it is the elders and priests who have the power to control the Church, to control the sacraments, to control the grace, to control the teaching.

The Church for 2000 years preaches in smug prideful humility putting down the Disciples who wanted to be the greatest. BUT, the minute the Church escaped the ministry of the Apostles, it organized itself, by choosing the greatest among them to be priests and paid them to have control of the means of grace. They then found the greatest of the priests, made them bishops and the greatest bishop and made him Father (you know him as the Pope).

Not content to ignore Jesus on this small point, they went on to be sure that only their priests and bishops (not the congregation) had the power to control the rituals, control the grace the rituals imparted to the people who watch them perform the rituals, and even control the Holy Spirit who is the power behind the rituals and the imparted grace they represent when done by the right people the priests and later the protestant elders Baptist, Reformed and Lutheran, all of them.

The Protestant reformers immediately saw that there is only one Mediator between God and Man. That God imparts His Holy

Spirit directly to those whom He predestines and calls, justifies, adopts and glorifies and His Church has no other door than Christ and His finished work. Only priests think they have exclusive control of that door. We are not, I repeat NOT PAPISTS! They said.

However, regardless of the theory, when it comes to running a Church protestant elders Reformed, Lutheran and Baptist are the only ones who control the rituals, and by implication the grace, the message, the policies, the money and who is in and who is out — who has the Holy Spirit and who does not. The elders are the only ones who can impart the Holy Spirit, rightly divide the word, examine everyone when they think it necessary and admit or deny access to the holy things of worship and God.

Then when it came time to preach on who is the greatest, Catholic priests and Protestant pastors alike mocked the disciples for thinking that Jesus needed the greatest of the 12 to lead them. “Ha Ha Ha Silly Disciples, isn’t pride a subtle thing don’t we all struggle with it.” is usually the conclusion of the sermon.

When Simon the Sorcerer is preached on, the same message comes through. Greedy Simon saw his opportunity for power and money and control. So, he offered to buy power over God. He tried to get Peter to show him the trick of controlling the Holy Spirit. “wicked” Christian Sorcerer. “Poisoned by bitterness” Christian Sorcerer. “Bound by iniquity,” Christian Sorcerer. “And you know . . .” have said the pastors and priests for the last 2,000 years, “It is easy for us to fall into the same trap he was in and think we can use God, and control God for our own gain.” Is the usual moral of the story

And they are dead on right. The very structure of Church Authority makes of the elders the “Greatest” just like the Apostles wanted to be, just like Simon the Christian Sorcerer wanted to be, of whom they said, “This man is the great power of God.” .

In our Churches as soon as we got the apostles out of the way, (around 60-80 AD) we have found the greatest in the congregation and pay them Sunday after Sunday to be the only ones who have the power to preach and teach with authority along with some part time elders and priests. We give them the power to be the only ones who can examine someone in the congregation (if necessary to put them on trial where they are the only ones fit to judge them and the congregation must agree with their judgment,

they control the Church you see.) The elder's task is to see if you are fit to participate in the rituals, fit to worship with the righteous, fit to receive grace. In short, these leaders are the ones who perform the rituals that release the Holy Spirit and Grace to the congregation.

If it bothers you that I have been calling Simon the "Christian" Sorcerer, now you can see why. He was a Christian, just like we are. He had a doctrine of the power of leaders in the Church, just like the Church does. Is your Churches view of its elders another version of Christian Sorcerer? You can find out by going down the list of ways we access the grace of God and see if the Elder is standing squarely at that door alone (or with fellow elders) admitting only those that he sees fit to impart the Grace of the Holy Spirit to.

But wait, am I calling your pastor and elders and perhaps priest Christian Sorcerers?

No of course not. I am speaking of the structure of Church authority we all grew up with. Most elders are entirely unaware that the very structure of their authority and power is inconsistent with the one who said, "The gentiles choose the great ones to rule over them but it is not to be so among you." To be fair, it never occurred to them that Jesus commanded his elders and pastors and shepherds to rule over people with no more earthly organizational institutionally imparted power than he exercised, that is, the power of a servant to rule and control the household, not the power of the master to rule and control the Household. He did not want them to control the Holy Spirit through various rituals, he wanted the Holy Spirit to control them.

And so, you and I and our pastors, elders, bishops, shepherds, and priests stepped into what made sense, an organization of elders with the exclusive power to control who is in and who is out of the Church, who is baptized and who takes communion. Who needs to be examined what is preached and how worship is done.

Whatever their theology says about controlling the Holy Spirit, their organizational power structure makes clear that they, the Elders, have control of the Spirit of God and therefore of you. The elders have what the Chinese would call, "The Mandate of Heaven."

What Simon the Christian Sorcerer understood as the power to impart the Holy Spirit.

They are like a man who was raised as an orphan, goes on with his life and is married. Then one day while researching his birth mother he discovers she is his wife. It's not what he intended when they met and married. I don't think structuring their Church authority structure to align with Simon the Sorcerer's doctrine of Church power is what most pastors intend either. I do know this, Peter said Simon though he didn't know better, was wicked, poisoned by bitterness and bound in iniquity. I trust the same is not true of pastors who believe that the power granted by an organization is the same thing as the power granted by the Holy Spirit but shrug their shoulders and say, "Oh well what can you do about it now?"