

The First False Convert

(Acts 8:9-24)

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Introduction

Most of you know of the great relationship that I had with both sets of my grandparents.

They spoiled me right in so many ways.

But both sets had lived through the Great Depression.

In fact, each were in their early 20s or late teens during those difficult economic times, and it made a mark on their lives that lasted until their 70s.

Both of my granddaddies had a difficult time throwing anything away and my grandmothers worked hard to save money anyway possible.

Case in point, my dad's mother never purchased a dress in her lifetime.

Instead, she would buy material, plug in her sewing machine and make her own.

When I would stay with her in the summers, we would clean off the dining room table and cut out dress patterns.

And what was neat about the patterns is that they could be used to make multiple garments for my grandmother.

She would often make 3 dresses at a time, all a different color from the same pattern.

If you have never seen a garment pattern, and there are patterns for dresses, for pants, for coats, for shirts.

If you have never seen one, there are interesting to look at.

They are very thin sheets of paper that lay out the steps to cutting and sewing and finishing the piece of clothing that the person is crafting.

And most can be used multiple times.

After we finished, my job was to fold the paper and stick in back in the envelope for another use at another times.

With that in mind, the book of Acts provides a pattern of sorts for the rest of church history.

In other words, the events we see and note in the early days and weeks and months of the church form the outline for how the church age will go.

Think about it this way.

The book of Acts has provided the pattern for preaching as Peter stands up and opens the OT and preaches to the people.

We have seen the pattern for church leadership as the disciples have become the leaders of the church.

We have seen the pattern for conversions as people hear the word preached and then repent and believe in Christ.

WE have seen the pattern for church membership as new believers are counted and added to the church.

We have seen the pattern for church activity as believers gather daily and listen to the apostles teaching and take the Lord's supper and enjoy fellowship with one another.

And those are all good patterns that we still follow today.

I am preaching to people who are gathered to learn and grow.

I am preaching to people who may need to repent and believe.

We practice church membership and we enjoy church fellowship.

And we do those things to continue the pattern established in the very early days of the church.

But we also seen some negative patterns in the book of Acts as well.

We have seen the pattern for church persecution as the Peter and John and the rest of the disciples are arrested for preaching the resurrection of Christ.

WE have seen the pattern for sin in church as Ananias and Sapphira lie to God and immediately die in a gathering of the church.

WE have seen the first critics in the church who are upset about food distribution to the Jewish widows.

And we have also seen the first person killed for their faith in Christ.

Tonight, we see another disturbing pattern emerge in the church, and that is the issue of false converts.

And what I mean by false converts are people who make a profession of faith and may even be a part of the church for a while but ultimately it turns out that their faith was phony.

It wasn't genuine.

It wasn't real.

And the issue is difficult because how do we explain these people.

On the one hand, we don't want to be unbiblical by saying that they lost their salvation because the Bible never says that salvation can be lost.

However on the other hand, we don't want to say that these people are saved even though they no longer demonstrate the fruit of salvation in their life.

So what do we do?

Well, we simply call them false converts..

Their conversion was false.

They were never saved and they are in danger of an eternity in hell unless they truly repent and believe in Christ alone.

Well, Simon becomes a pattern for false conversion in the church and we meet him tonight in Acts 8:9-24...

Let's meet him and hear his story..

Acts 8:9..

9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; 10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." 11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. 12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. 13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized [e]in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they began lay-

ing their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. 18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or portion in this [f]matter, for your heart is not right before God. 22 Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the [g]bondage of iniquity." 24 But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

What I want to do in our time is help us understand the passage while also pulling out some traits of the falsely converted..

This isn't going to be a complete list of what a false convert looks like but I think we can gain some valuable insight.

And look I want to be clear.

False converts are everywhere and have been everywhere since the beginning of the church age.

So let's do our best to identify them so that we can steer clear of their example but also call them to the true salvation.

The first note to make about Simon is this..

I. The Falsely Converted Focus on Self (9-11)

Now as we arrive at verse 9, the setting is Samaria, which is the the middle region of Israel.

We arrived in Samaria two weeks ago as Philip made his way there.

Remember, the church is but days or weeks ago, having begun in Jerusalem 50 days after the crucifixion of Jesus.

And all the activity of the first 7 chapters of the book of Acts takes place in Jerusalem.

But when Stephen is killed by angry group of Jewish leaders at the end of Acts 7, the church is scattered.

Now some remain in Jerusalem with the apostles but others flee the city fearing the same persecution or death.

And all of this scattering fulfills the prophecy of Jesus which he spoke in Acts 1 when he told his followers that they would become his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.

So Philip, who was most likely a close friend and helper of Stephen, heads out of town when Stephen is stoned and he heads north.

And that takes him to the region of Israel known as Samaria.

And two weeks, we saw his arrival there.

His preaching there.

And we saw the fruit of his preaching there as many were saved and rejoiced.

But Samaria will not all be a bed of roses for Philip because we now meet Simon.

Go back to verse 9..

9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; 10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." 11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

Now Samaritans were not your normal everyday Jews.

They were a people who had descended from a generation of Jews that intermarried with Gentiles.

Though the year is no 30 AD, there was still much trouble in Samaria because the Jews there had disobeyed God back in 700s BC by marrying foreigners.

And the issue was not racial or cultural or ethnic, the issue of intermarriage was spiritual.

God's word was clear.

Believing Jews were not to marry unbelieving pagans for the simple fact that light has no business with darkness.

You see, spiritual influence rarely runs uphill.

Most of the time, the unbelieving spouse influences the believing spouse to compromise.

And that had certainly been the case in Samaria when the Assyrians deported some Jews into their land but brought their people into Israel.

The resulting marriages ending up creating a people who were at best confused about God because one spouse believed and the other remained in unbelief.

And by the time, we get many generations down the road, it is no wonder that the Samaritans are fascinated by magic and sorcery and the like.

And a man like Simon had made a great name among the people of Samaria because he was a skilled magician.

Now to be clear, most magic is simply the art of illusion and deception.

Done well, magic makes you think you see something that you really didn't through sleight of hand or other deceptive means.

The hand is truly quicker than the eye.

And magic and illusion have existed ever since man understood the value of deceiving others.

For Simon, the value of his magic was his popularity and fame.

Notice what the Samaritans called Simon.

The Great Power of God.

And that is a normal reaction to someone who does something out of the ordinary.

They are seen as gods, and Simon must have loved the attention.

The end of verse 9 says that he claimed to be someone great.

This is the point of magic.

To entertain and to deceive in order to get paid and get famous.

And Simon was doing both in an area of world where people should know better but didn't.

Now I want you to see here is simply this..

Arrogance is not the way into the kingdom of God.

Jesus said that is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven.

But the same could said for the arrogant man.

Salvation begins with absolute humility when a person moves from trusting in themselves to get to heaven trusting in Christ alone.

Salvation is marked by the complete abandonment of self.

In a sense, all are arrogant in their unbelief, but the move from death to life is marked with humility and meekness.

That is not to say that Simon can't change, but man who is comfortable with being called the Great Power of God faces the eye of a very tiny needle to find his way to heaven.

Sadly, that arrogance will rear its ugly head again in our text.

I will simply offer this to you.

When examining the claims of those who call themselves Christians, a true humility is always a great sign.

But a haughty and arrogant spirit is a big red flag.

A second trait of the falsely converted is this..

II. The Falsely Converted Focus on Works **(12-13)**

So Simon is popular in all of Samaria.

He is getting rich and famous, but then Philip shows up.

And remember.

These early believers are going to be given the power to do some incredible things...

John and Peter have healed a lame man.

Philip has healed and cast out demons.

And look, none of that is magic.

None of those are illusions or deceptions.

There are legitimate supernatural miracles done by God through these early believers in the church age.

Now understand, every magician knows the deception behind his magic.

He knows that what he is doing isn't real, but here comes Philip into town and he is doing the real stuff.

I mean making a coin disappear kinda pales in comparison to making a lame man rise and walk.

So Simon feels the pressure of Philip, but he also knows this is something very different than his side show.

So what does he do?

If you can't beat them, join them..

Verse 12..

12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. 13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

Two things that Luke notes here are very important.

One Simon was amazed at the signs and miracles.

And let me tell you this.

False converts love the show.

They love coming to church for the spectacle of it.

They like the songs.

They like the tear jerking stories.

They like the inspirational talks.

They like the externals of the church.

The fellowship, the passion, the music...

I have a preacher friend who tells me of a man who comes every Sunday to his church, and tells him, "I just love the preaching."

I don't believe the words, but the enthusiasm and delivery is addictive.

Look, there are people who come to church to be entertained.

Take away what they like and they are gone.

Simon loved the miracles.

Look, there were masses that followed Jesus for the same reasons.

They loved the spectacle of it.

Many of them left when the tide began to turn against Jesus, and many false converts do the same today.

But it is not just Simon's fascination with the external miracles, Luke also notes the Simon was baptized.

And boy this is a hard one to swallow for a room full of Baptists who value baptism and the symbolism of it.

But I don't tell you that being baptized is a sign of salvation.

There are plenty of people who went under the water but will also be under the wrath of God for all eternity in hell.

We love baptism.

We value it.

We obey Christ's command to be baptized.

But we are not fooled just because someone is baptized.

Many false converts love the outward ceremony of the church.

They love the pageantry and the intimacy of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but their heart are far from God.

I would simply say this.

Be wary of people who focus more on the external works than the internal work of the Spirit upon the heart.

Look, I love baptism.

I would certainly loved to witness one of early miracles in the church.

But my faith is not based on what I see but on what God has done inside of me.

Now Simon's fascination with externals will become evident in a few verses but be discerning of people who love the show more than the work of the Spirit in their own heart.

A 3rd trait of the false converted in found in verses 14-21..

Let's call this..

III. The Falsely Converted Focus on Money **(14-21)**

Verse 14..

14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized [e]in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

Now, let's make some sense of this because these verses have been abused and misinterpreted various ways over the years..

The first note to make in our minds is that this was a unique time in church history.

Today (and for the vast majority of church history) when a person is saved, there is no need to pray and lay hands on them for that person to receive the Holy Spirit.

And the reason for that is simple.

True belief results in the immediate indwelling of the Spirit of God.

No matter where or when a person is saved, the Holy Spirit comes and indwells that person immediately and in full measure.

However for a short time in church history and we are going to see this again in the book of Acts, there was a need to verify the spread of the gospel.

And Peter and John and the rest of the disciples who were there in Acts 2 when the Spirit initially came at Pentecost were the ones that the Lord would use to verify salvation.

Look, let me tell you something.

There is nothing wrong with inspecting the claims of those who say they are believers.

As news got back to the disciples in Jerusalem that the Samaritans were getting saved, there would be skepticism.

So the Lord sends Peter and John to verify these claims, and when they get there, the Lord allows Peter and John to bear witness to their receiving the Holy Spirit.

Now how did God make this delayed arrival of the Spirit evident?

Well, Luke doesn't tell us.

Many Bible commentators suggest that it may have been a repeat of Pentecost where the Spirit came and stood over the heads of the Samaritans like flames of fire.

Maybe the Samaritans were enabled to speak in foreign languages like the believers in Acts 2.

WE simply don't know what occurred to make the arrival of the Spirit evident to all.

But in the end Peter and John were satisfied that the Samaritans were true believers.

And this is important because the church needs unity, and God has made it evident to the disciples that the gospel is going to all people just as He promised in Acts 1.

But this outward display of the arrival of the Holy Spirit is not only evident to Peter and John, it also catches the eye of Simon.

Remember, he is in this scene with Philip, and he is someone who is fascinated with the outward displays of power and signs.

Verse 18..

18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Simon, like most false converts, attached himself to Christianity to see how it would benefit him.

Just like Judas, the most well known false convert of all time, Simon is obsessed with money.

He has done magic to get rich and grow famous.

But now he sees true miracles taking place, and instead of falling on his face and worshipping the God who does the miraculous, Simon reaches in his pocket and try to buy the miraculous.

This is so typical of those who are falsely converted.

They are obsessed with money.

They want it.

They crave it.

And they use it to satisfy their lustful hearts.

Beware of anyone who claims to know Christ but seems to have an obsession with money and greed.

Hey look, just turn on your television to TBN.

There are plenty of people who claim to be Christian preachers who are actually false converts with an obsession for money.

And notice how Peter reacts to Simon..

Verse 20...

20 But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or portion in this [f]matter, for your heart is not right before God.

If you look at the original Greek, Peter literally says that Simon and his money can go to hell if he thinks he can buy salvation.

The word for perish is apolian, which is the same word that Jesus used when He said that the broad road leads to destruction.

Peter is making it abundantly clear that Simon is not on the narrow way to eternal life but he is on the broad road to destruction.

He is not saved despite his baptism.

He is not part of the church, despite hanging around Philip.

His heart is not clean.

His life is not right.

And he will perish with his money in hell if he does not repent and believe in Christ alone.

So much for the thought of handling false converts gently.

Instead, Peter goes at Simon full force, and the reason is simple.

People posing as believers do way more damage to the church than people who simply admit their unbelief.

So be wary of those who profess to know Christ yet have a clear love and obsession with money.

Money is good, and God created it as a blessing to people.

The love of money is bad and the root of all evil.

A final trait of the unbeliever is found in verses 22-24...

IV. The Falsely Converted Focus on Man (22-24)

Verse 22..

22 Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the [g]bondage of iniquity.”

Though Peter is direct with Simon, he shows much kindness here by laying out the way to heaven.

Repent and ask for forgiveness.

Yet, how does Simon respond?

Verse 24..

24 But Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”

Once again, here is Simon looking outward instead of inward.

The gospel is not a call to get the preacher to pray for you.

It is not a call to get the church to pray for you.

It is not a call to seek help from man.

The gospel is call for the person to seek the help of God.

The gospel is a call to look inward and admit the sin to God and ask for forgiveness.

So many false converts make much of the pastor or the church or the people.

And all of those are good things, but the first requirement of salvation is to see the inward filth of sin and go to God for forgiveness.

Many false converts never talk about their own fallenness.

They never acknowledge their own sin or faults or shortcomings.

Many simply refuse to admit their defeat.

But salvation begins with sin is acknowledged to God, not man.

Conclusion

So the false convert is often hard to spot but keep an eye on a person's pride, a person's view of money, a person's view of their sin, and a person's focus on external works..

And show grace, but be careful..

Let me end with a biblical illustration of this passage.

Luke 18:9-14..

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

What is that?

That is a focus on self..

12 I fast twice a week;

What is that?

That is a focus on external works.

I pay tithes of all that I get.'

What is that?

That is a focus on money.

And notice who the Pharisee was praying to?

Verse 11.

He was praying to himself.

He wasn't talking to the Lord.

He was bragging on himself.

But now notice the tax collectors prayer.

13 But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be [f]merciful to me, the sinner!'

What kind of prayer is that?

It is prayer of humility that acknowledges his sin and seeks forgiveness from?

Which prayer saves and which prayer sends you to hell?

Verse 14.

14 I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

I am going to end with this.

I think you will be surprised at how empty heaven is.

In fact, you will be shocked.

And the main reason is this.

Not all who claim Christ truly know Christ is a saving way.

Be on lookout for those who say they are saved yet offer evidence that they aren't.

Avoid their influence but pray for their souls.

Let us pray.