

## CONVERSION: SIMON MAGUS

### Introduction

Conversion to Christ is more than changing a label or adopting a new set of beliefs. The conversion of Simon (known as Simon Magus) in Samaria turned out to be false. Jesus' parable of the Sower should lead us to expect such a thing – stony ground hearers. If we can identify what was missing in Simon's case we will have a better idea of what true conversion is.

### Samaria and Simon

The Samaritans were ancient enemies of the Jews – 'the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans'. Therefore they seemed unlikely candidates for evangelistic work by Jewish Christians; and if it happened they would need special grace to respond, and special assurance that they were accepted.

But Jesus met the woman of Samaria (John 4), and after his resurrection he commanded that the gospel be preached there after it was proclaimed in Jerusalem and Judea and before it was taken to 'the ends of the earth'.

This reminds us of what we have already seen in studying conversions. God shows no favouritism. No one has any advantage. And no one is excluded.

Simon Magus features in other literature. He is known as a highly influential figure in Samaria. He used sorcery – occult practice or highly unusual sleight-of-hand. He visited Rome around 50AD, and it is believed he was treated as a 'god'. That makes Peter's rebuke all the more interesting – does one rebuke a 'god'?!

We live in a celebrity culture. So did they. And Simon was by far the greatest of his day in that part of the world.

### The gospel's impact

The author of Acts records, "believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized." They were amazed at the miracles, received healing, and were filled with joy.

They "heeded", or "believed". In the New Testament that does not always mean a conversion to Christ, though that is presumed. Jesus Parable of the Sower indicates that some will profess faith but 'have no root in themselves' and fall away. The epistle of James shows that genuine faith in Christ produces a change in character and conduct (James 2:14-16). So do John's epistles.

The people were baptised. It was an expression of faith. It should also have been initiation into new life with Christ, a new identity, a testimony to forgiveness of sins, and God's promise of the Holy Spirit.

Simon must have found this challenging. He was no longer to the person they all followed. Jesus took a higher place in their estimation than he ever did. And any other benefit he had from his sorcery would now be lost. A few years later that owners of a possessed slave in Philippi would also find their influence curtailed by the gospel when the girl was freed from the spirit.

He was also amazed at the supernatural power that was manifest through Philip. Luke says, "Simon also believed and was baptised". At this point in the story there is no reason to believe it was not genuine.

Something unique happened in Samaria – and that is why Simon was so impressed. Each stage of the gospel’s expansion had a visible token that explained what was happening and that it was truly of God. At Pentecost the fact that the gospel was heard in the native languages of all present was evidence that the message of Jesus was for all nations (we do not read of the 3000 converts speaking in tongues). When Peter and John affirmed to the Jews that Jesus had risen from the dead the message was accompanied by the healing of a man lame from birth. When Cornelius and his household also spoke in tongues it was evidence to the Jewish Christians that the Gentiles had been received as well as them. In Samaria there were remarkable miracles. The fact that visible evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the converts’ lives came only when Peter and John laid hands on them was affirmation they were accepted by Jewish Christians. In other places the gospel was preached without such events.

What happened in Samaria was bound to impress a man like Simon – such was his speciality. The visible power of the Holy Spirit was greater than anything he had known. It was a threat to his influence. His solution was to offer the apostles money so they could pass this ability on to him.

### **Simon is rebuked**

Peter’s reaction is clear: “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.” Obviously, Simon was not converted to Christ.

His request was a grievous sin, and his heart had not changed.

By imagining the Holy Spirit could be bought he was (in his mind) turning God into something common – on the same level as everything else. We should be very careful how we think of God, and of how we speak about his Spirit. A Christian owes him everything; and he is the holy presence within. We should also be careful what we credit the Spirit with – some people think that any unusual event must be from him, while others associate him with mere changing social values. That is most demeaning, and we should remember God’s words, “My glory I will not give to another” (Isaiah 42:8).

Simon’s pride was so great he thought he was superior to God – that he could ‘buy’ God. The saying, “Every man has his price” cannot be true of God and to think it is outrageous. Yet many people imagine they can twist his arm with their service, repentance, etc. No wonder Peter said, “Your money perish with you.”

Though professing faith in Christ Simon’s heart was not right with God. He still wanted to be the celebrity and make God work for him. There was no repentance – he had not changed. The driving force in his life was still his own craving – Peter described him as “bound by iniquity”; he had not changed himself and had not experienced the change that Christ brings by his Spirit.

It is worth noting how the Bible describes converting to Christ, In Matthew 1:21 Jesus is said to “save his people from their sins”, implying a change of heart as well as freedom from guilt. In Ezekiel 36:26-27 God promised, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.” In Peter’s testimony to the Jewish leaders (Acts 5:31) he described Jesus work as to “give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” – not one, but both.

### **Key part of conversion**

A key part of converting to Christ is a new attitude to God and man. That 'new heart' underlies and prompts our initial act of turning to God for pardon and in faith.

The story of Simon reminds us of some important matters.

It is easy to focus on dramatic things, signs and wonders of various kinds. But that is majoring on minors. They do not change the human heart. And they are not always the Spirit's work. We should focus instead on God's holiness, on our sin, and on Christ's salvation.

We should be aware of the danger of 'easy-believism'. An emphasis on holiness, sin, and salvation should help to avoid that.

The question for each of us is: Do you love the Lord? Has the gospel changed your attitude to him? Do you come to him now in humility and with confidence that Christ's death opened the way for you to come? Do you love his holy character? Does he draw you to himself in love, prayer, and praise? Do you deny yourself for his sake and the sake of those he loves? Do you accept his rebukes as coming from a wise and loving Father? And when you need comfort, do you seek it from him?