

The First Christian Heretic

International Bible Lesson

Acts 8:9-25

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“For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin” (Acts 8:23—NIV).

When Philip fled to Samaria to escape the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem, he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. He cast out unclean spirits and healed many people. Therefore, many men and women believed and were baptized. The secret of Philip’s success rested in the fact that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Before Philip went to Samaria, the people there followed a magician named Simon, a sorcerer who received his abilities from evil spirits. Luke wrote that Simon believed what Philip preached and followed him everywhere. When the apostles laid hands on the believers they received the Holy Spirit, all except for Simon. The Bible tells us why Simon did not receive the Holy Spirit. God only gives the Holy Spirit “to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32). Simon believed the facts Philip preached, saw the miracles that Philip performed, and followed him to learn more, but Simon did not want to obey God. Instead, as he saw Philip cast out evil spirits and heal people, he became bitter and the evil spirits who had helped Simon work magic held him captive to sin. Without any desire or intention to obey God, Simon offered Peter money to buy the Holy Spirit so he could do what the apostles did and give the Holy Spirit to others too (perhaps to regain his popularity). Peter told Simon to repent of his wicked thoughts, but Simon only wanted Peter to pray that he would not suffer the consequences of his sins. Unrepentant, Simon continued to attract followers, and later church historians called him the first Christian heretic.

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Thinking Further

1. What do you think was the source of Simon’s magic or sorcery? Give a reason for your answer.
2. Why do you think people listened eagerly to Simon?
3. What did Philip proclaim and why do you think people listened to him?
4. Why do you think the Church in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to see Philip?
5. How might Simon’s belief been different from the others who believed, and why do you think he did not receive the Holy Spirit along with those who received the Holy Spirit when the apostles laid their hands of them?