

Edmund Clowney has referred to the Church as the *colony of heaven*. It is an “other-worldly” community, but not because it has renounced the material world or has adopted a set of spiritual principles that distinguish it from the secular world or naturalistic philosophy. If those things were to constitute its other-worldliness, then the same designation would apply to any number of religious groups and even the “spirituality” embraced by many individuals. The Church is other-worldly in the strict sense that it is not “of this world”: That is, *it is the human component of the new creation in Christ*. Its otherworldliness is *ontological*, not philosophical, ideological, moral, ethical or physical. The Church is not of this world because it is *of Christ*; its members share in His life and are being transformed into His likeness by His indwelling Spirit.

Thus Christians are set apart from this world, not by what they do or believe, but by who they are. They transcend this world precisely because they have become sharers in the divine nature, and this new life has delivered them – in their very nature and persons, not simply their doctrine or practice – from the fallen, corrupt creation (2 Peter 1:2-4; cf. Ephesians 5:1-8; Colossians 1:13). Because of what Christ’s Church is *in itself*, it is out of synch with the present order of this world as it continues under the effects of the curse. And being out of synch with the world, the Church finds itself – as a matter of course – butting up against its patterns and ways.

There is an unmistakable contrast between the Church as “new creation” and the present world, and this “misfittedness” is the ultimate source of all the various threats to its life and well-being. This fact explains why they began to emerge from the moment the colony of heaven became manifest in Jerusalem. Luke has shown that those threats are internal as well as external. Moreover, his narrative demonstrates that the latter only strengthens the Church and empowers its life and message in the world. It is internal threats that pose grave danger to the heavenly community because, like any sort of malady afflicting an organism, they act to distract, debilitate, and deviate it from its true identity and function. So it had been in Jerusalem and Judea; so it would be in Samaria.

3. The first internal threat to the Samaritan church paralleled the experience of the church in Jerusalem, namely the presence of *diversity* within its ranks. The very nature of the Church insures the ubiquity of this threat; even communities of believers drawn from the most homogeneous people groups will eventually face it. Persecution was driving witness to Christ beyond Jerusalem and Judea into Samaria, and it was bearing its fruit among the Samaritan people. The Church was increasing in numbers, but this meant an increase in diversity. And if the relatively minor differences between the Hebraists and Hellenists had challenged the unity and harmony among the saints in Jerusalem, the addition of Samaritan believers to a Jewish Church greatly increased that challenge.
 - a. Differences between the Jews and Samaritans were long-standing and painfully pronounced. They had a shared Israelite heritage, but even what they had in common added fuel to the contempt, distrust and ongoing conflict between them. Jewish-Samaritan enmity had its roots in the hostility that existed between Israel and Judah during the era of the divided kingdom, but was enlarged and strengthened in the centuries following Israel’s conquest by the Assyrians.

Following the pattern of ancient empires, the Assyrians deported and relocated residents of the nations they conquered, thereby fracturing national identity and pride and preventing the sort of synergistic zeal that facilitates effective insurrection. By manufacturing pluralistic communities throughout their empire, the Assyrians hoped to secure greater stability and more manageable subjects.

This reintegration occurred in Israel as well, but with the result that Jewish separateness and pure ethnicity were compromised. There was no regathering of the northern ten tribes as with the southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah; Ephraim (as designating the sub-kingdom of Israel – Hosea 4:1-6:4, 11:1-12) remained largely diffused among the Gentiles, lost by intermarriage and the influences of Gentile culture.

Thus the Samaritans of the post-exile period were descendents of the ten tribes of Israel, but ones who had been rendered impure: defiled genetically, culturally and religiously. The Jews of Jesus' day – who were predominantly descendents of the restored remnant of the sub-kingdom of Judah – utterly despised the Samaritans, whom they regarded as the unclean product of unholy, forbidden marriages. This flagrant violation of the Law of Moses was grave enough, but the Samaritans multiplied their offense by perpetuating Israel's pre-exile violation of the law of the central sanctuary (cf. 1 Kings 12; John 4:19-20) and perverting Yahweh's worship. As far as the Jews were concerned, the Samaritans were the product of God's judgment upon the disobedient northern kingdom (ref. 2 Kings 17:1-41), and they felt righteously justified in their hatred and rejection of them.

- b. The enmity between the Jews and Samaritans was centuries-old and deeply entrenched at the time of the Samaritan mission, and the addition of Samaritan believers to the household of faith would have introduced serious challenges to the Church's unity in mutual acceptance, trust, and undistinguishing love. It's interesting that Luke made no direct mention of this situation, especially after treating it in regard to the Hebraists and Hellenists. *And yet he didn't ignore it altogether; rather, he addressed it at the level of salvation-historical fulfillment.*

Luke focused his attention on the Spirit's work in Samaria, especially as it implicated the involvement of the apostles. In this way he highlighted two key issues respecting the Church and its early life: The first is the progress in the realization of God's intention to take for Himself a global covenant people; the second is the Church's growing awareness and acceptance of this divine purpose and the practical obligations it imposed on them.

And so Luke emphasized, not specific instances of Jewish/Samaritan discord and its resolution, but God's testimony that He was bringing Samaritans into His household by giving them His Spirit. Moreover, He provided that testimony to the apostles, for their recognition and appreciation of His work was to be the foundation for the Church's understanding and practice going forward. Peter and John got the message (8:25), and carried that message back to Jerusalem.

4. The Samaritan mission enlarged the ever-present threat posed by diversity in the Church, but it also introduced a new peril that is a concern in the balance of Luke's account as well as in the New Testament epistles. This peril is *false faith*, and Luke treated it in the person of Simon the magician, a resident of the city of Samaria where Philip was ministering the gospel (8:9). Simon is a paradigm of false faith, and yet he found a notable counterpart in Saul, the Jewish Pharisee: Both understood and embraced biblical truth concerning the divine person and purpose – Saul with respect to Yahweh, Israel's God; Simon with respect to Jesus of Nazareth. Both men were deeply moved and motivated to action on the basis of their convictions, and both considered themselves sincere followers of the true God. Most importantly, both shared the same psychology of unbelief in their apparent "faith." Each one's unbelief manifested itself uniquely, but Simon and Saul shared the common ground of a "natural mind."
 - a. Luke's intention in recording the episode with Simon is evident in his description of him. That description is conspicuous in its narrowness, with Luke confining himself to such information as was necessary to make his contextual point. Simon served as the instrument for that point, but Luke's concern transcended him.
 - Toward that end, Luke described him as a man who had practiced magic arts among the Samaritans for quite some time, and as a result had gained for himself a distinguished reputation with them. His sorcerer's powers magnified him in his own eyes and he relished the fact that he solicited the same honor and awe from his observers.
 - By the time Philip arrived in the city, Simon was widely acknowledged and celebrated as a man who possessed divine power in a unique way: "*This one is the Great Power of God*" (8:9b-10).
 - b. Simon's "signs and wonders" had for a long time held the attention of the Samaritans in that district, but now he found competition in the person of Philip. Philip first drew the Samaritans' attention away from Simon by his own miraculous signs, but the magician found many of his followers forsaking him altogether when they came to believe Philip's proclamation of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God (8:11-12). Indeed, Simon himself was profoundly moved by Philip's proclamation and power in the Spirit; joining his former devotees in baptism, he began to follow Philip.
 - c. To all outward appearance, Simon had become a disciple of the Lord Jesus. He had believed Philip's message and joined with the community of faith by being baptized. More than that, he had forsaken his former ways (ref. 8:9) and become Philip's companion in the ministry of the gospel. But one key piece of Luke's description indicates that all was not as it appeared: Day-by-day, standing alongside Philip, Simon was constantly amazed "*as he observed signs and great miracles taking place*" (8:13). Not Christ and His gospel, but the allure of personal, supernatural power, had captured Simon's heart.

This truth became openly evident when Peter and John arrived in Samaria. Philip was a godly man full of the Spirit and wisdom (6:3), and he would have communicated to Simon that the signs and wonders he'd been performing were the work of the Holy Spirit. Simon had marveled at the Spirit's power in action, and when he observed that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the hands of Peter and John, he concluded that they must have authority over this Spirit of power. And if they, being men, had this authority over divine power, perhaps they could confer it upon him. Simon sought, not the indwelling of the Spirit Himself, but authority over the Spirit – authority to tap into the Spirit's power for his own purpose. *Simon had forsaken his sorcerer's ways – probably with all sincerity at the time, but the seduction of power remained, enticing him to seek to obtain what he now perceived to be a superior power.*

Simon's true concern was clear to Peter when he offered to pay the apostles to obtain the same authority he perceived they had (8:18-19). Peter reacted by rebuking Simon's hypocrisy and arrogant blasphemy. This baptized believer in Christ was unmasked as an imposter whose apparently cleansed heart was actually filled with the bitter gall of envy, being bound up in the iniquity of selfish pride (8:20-23). For all his apparent faith and fellowship in the ministry of the gospel, Simon really didn't know the Lord he professed. So when Peter exhorted him to plead with Christ for forgiveness, Simon responded by asking Peter to intercede for him (8:24). Simon couldn't call on a Savior he didn't know, and what he desired from Him wasn't forgiveness, but escape from punishment.

This consideration makes clear the parallel between Simon's and Saul's unbelief. These two men had very different backgrounds and very different lives. One had been a pagan sorcerer and the other was a devout Pharisee. They differed even in their "faith": Saul clung fiercely to Yahweh and His law and opposed Jesus and His teaching; Simon was a professed follower of Jesus and His gospel. Saul and Simon appeared to be very different, but they shared the same psychology of unbelief. *Both men's perception, conviction and commitment to spiritual truth were framed by their inherent self-referential self-concern.* In the end, both sought **power**: Simon sought to establish his personal power and authority before men; Saul sought to establish his personal righteousness before God.

Saul's piety, devotion and zeal for God were palpable and intimidating; Simon's faith was more reserved. But both were deeply moved by their inward convictions which, at some level, were sincerely held. It's easy to look at Simon and condemn him as a conscious, flagrant hypocrite, but that would be a mistake. For, whatever his hypocrisy, it was neither blatant nor consciously calculated, for Philip would not have embraced and baptized such an individual as an authentic believer in Christ.

Luke's account indicates that Simon's counterfeit faith was concealed until Peter and providence exposed it. But, most importantly, it highlights a crucial development in the life of the fledgling Church. Simon has the distinction of being the first pseudo-believer in the household of faith, but he would not be the last. In that way, he is a fearful foretaste of the grave danger that lay ahead for Christ's Church – a danger that endures to this day.