

Scripture: Acts 8:4-25
Message: More Than Magic?
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Magic tricks or sleight of hand is so much fun. Magicians can do seemingly fantastic tricks which boggle the mind. They make the impossible seem so easy. We think that there must be some sort of explanation, but we do not know what it is.

Have you ever watched the TV show called *The Carbonaro Effect*? It's fun to watch the tricks which he does and how easily people are fooled. Let me show you a couple examples:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xldCjq3Y448>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkQfbXAzejE>

(Or instead of watching the videos, read the following illustration.)

A magician tells a story in which he shows how easy it is to make someone think that a person doing magic tricks has some supernatural power.

He goes to a pizza parlour with some friends as witnesses. He picks out someone who was eating by himself and sets out to convince this lone person that he, the magician, is from Pluto. Here is his story:

I bought a pizza and walked over to his table. "Do you mind if I join you?" I asked.

"Sure. Have a seat," he replied.

After some small talk, I then said, "I can't find my fork. Look! There it is." As I said this, I reached into the air and, by sleight of hand, produced the fork from thin air. His eyebrows raised so that they almost touched his receding hairline.

"Oh, I forgot to get my ice water," I said. So I took my napkin and covered my hand with it. When I removed it, presto--the glass of ice water! When I placed it on the table, my new found friend immediately grabbed it to make sure it was for real.

I had also ordered a side order of olives. I took one of the olives in my right hand and placed it in the palm of my left hand. Closing my hand, I commented on the quality of the olives they served, and how much I liked olives. Slowly, I worked my hands back and forth, and when I opened them, all that was left was the pit. At this point this fellow was becoming profoundly disturbed.

"What are you, some sort of magician or something?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"All the tricks you have been doing," he responded curiously.

"They aren't tricks," I stated.

"Well what are they?" he asked.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe me if I told you," I answered. As I said this, I pretended to notice some tomato sauce on my napkin. I folded it in half, and when I opened it, the spot was gone. It took a monumental effort to keep myself from rolling over with laughter as I witnessed the expressions on his face. Quickly, I changed the subject and temporarily halted the "miracles." Finally, after twenty minutes, with his curiosity eating him alive, he relented and asked, "Come on, what were you doing a few minutes ago?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," I stated as the cat-and-mouse game continued. "You'd probably laugh and think I was crazy," I added.

"Hey, man. Look at me. I'm serious. You have got to tell me what you are doing," he replied in earnest.

"Okay, you promise not to tell?" I asked, setting the hook.

"No, man. It stays with me," was his eager reply.

"I'm from Pluto, and I have my powers beamed down to me," I said with a straight face that would have rivalled any sculpted statue.

"You're kidding!" he blurted out.

"I told you that you wouldn't believe me." I snapped back.

"No, no no. I believe you. It just sounds so incredible. Can you do something else?" he asked, wanting to believe.

I then proceeded to perform from my arsenal of impromptu tricks, seemingly causing objects to levitate, change form, and move invisibly from one place to another. He actually thought that I was from Pluto.

This author says that he spent the next three months trying to track this fellow down long enough to tell him that he was not from Pluto.

The point is, given the proper circumstances, anyone can be made to believe that they have just seen something which never took place as they *believed* it happened. A person can be made to *believe* that something happened even if that something never did happen. For a magician to excel in his craft, he must do more than be able to fool his audience by a hand

that is quicker than the eye; he must first fool the mind and then fool the eye.

In our story from the Acts 8 we read about Simon, a man of Samaria, who was also a magician. Many people followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. People even said, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." Simon was seen as having some supernatural power, as if he were some kind of god.

Then along comes Philip, having escaped from the persecution in Jerusalem. He came to Samaria and was telling the story about Jesus Christ. Along with his preaching came miraculous signs, including casting out evil spirits and healing many paralytics and cripples. The people pay close attention to this new "magician."

Yet there is something different about him. Philip comes with more than just a power to do magic or miracles. He comes with a spoken word, with good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. The people are attracted by the miracles, but they believe because of the word. As a result of their faith, they were baptized.

Even Simon, the great magician himself, believed and was baptized. Simon continues to follow Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. If there is something that will get under the skin of a magician, it is another magician who can do better tricks. A magician is intrigued when a fellow magician can fool him.

Word of Philip's work, and the acceptance of the word of God by the people in Samaria, came to Jerusalem. (Remember Jesus' words to his disciples that they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria... Here is the story of the gospel reaching Samaria.) Peter and John are sent, probably to confirm the reports. What they do in front of Simon's very eyes tops it all off. They lay their hands on the believers and those who were baptized received the Holy Spirit. This must have been accompanied with some external obvious signs, perhaps something like on Pentecost, because it obvious that a change has occurred.

Simon is astounded. What he wouldn't do to be able to perform such a trick! What he wouldn't give to have such power! "Hey, Peter and John, what can I pay you for your secret? Give me this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." To himself he was probably thinking, "This would be an excellent addition to my repertoire."

Maybe Simon is on to something. Is Christianity not just a big bag of magic tricks? Say the right words and you will get your way. We just call it prayer. If the expected result does not happen, then the problem was in the way the words were said, or the right words were not

said properly.

How about our attempts at doing all the "right" things? If we live a good life and obey all the commandments, then God will love us and bless us, right? The way to success is to keep God happy. You keep him happy by doing the things he likes--be kind to others, go to church, read the Bible. Then he will be nice to you.

Faith in Jesus Christ supposedly changes lives. Is that not a classic example of self-deception? Remember, given the proper circumstances, anyone can be made to believe that they have witnessed something which never took place in the way they *believed* it happened. Could we not say the same thing about someone who claims to be different now that they believe in Jesus? They are only doing it to themselves and fooling themselves. They only believe that something has happened, even though there is really nothing.

Philip, Peter, John, and any evangelists for that matter, are nothing more than a bunch of magicians, doing a bunch of magic tricks, all in the name of Jesus Christ. Is our faith based on more than the subtle tricks of some sneaky people? Is our faith more than weak minds deceiving themselves? Is Christianity more than mere self-deception?

This has been, and may very well be, a challenge that Christians will hear for a long time. I will confidently state that the the good news of salvation is something entirely different than magic. New life is Jesus Christ, the power of the gospel, is real. This is not some deceptive word, but the Word and work of the Creator of the heavens and the earth. This is not some trick, but the effective power of the Holy Spirit who changes lives.

Can I prove that? Not likely in a way that will satisfy the greatest skeptic. I can say that there is consistency in God's Grand Story through the ages, as recorded in his Word. There is the testimony and example of so many lives who live out this change in their lives and live out this teaching of the good news. There is the element of faith, but also the evidence of history and changed lives.

There is also the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus died and came to life again and was seen by the disciples and many others. We do not follow a dead leader, but a living Lord and Saviour. This testifies to new life and hope for all who believe.

Or in the words of David Copperfield, an accomplished magician:

"The miracles of the Bible go beyond anything that any magician or illusionist could ever perform, but greater than any physical miracle was the ability of a man named Jesus to bring

purpose and meaning to the lives of millions of people throughout the centuries.”

André Kole, another magician and friend of David Copperfield says, “I carry tons of equipment to present my magical programs throughout the world. In order for David Copperfield to accomplish his “miracles”, he presently carries over 30,000 pounds of equipment with a staff of at least 40 people. [Jesus did not use or need tons of equipment to perform his miracles, as evidence of his divine power.]

“However, the greatest evidence for the existence of God is the person of Jesus Christ. And the greatest evidence that he was and is God were the incredible miracles that He performed. These miracles were witnessed by tens of thousands of people over a period of 3 years.

“Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come into a personal relationship with God except through me." Either that statement was the biggest lie or it was the greatest truth that has ever been spoken by any person in the history of the world. Following that statement Jesus said, "If you have a difficult time believing my words - then believe because of the mighty miracles you see me do" (See John 14:6, 11). The miracles confirmed the fact that Jesus was and is God.”

The resurrection of Jesus confirms that he is God. The testimony of changed lives throughout history confirm this is more than magic or deception. I stand here today, not as one deceived, but one who believes and lives a new life in Jesus. I have a relationship with a living and personal Saviour and God.

Yet it’s also so easy to fall into the trap which Simon fell into. We try to have some sort of power over God. Or we try to earn God's blessings or buy his power with our own good efforts. Or we try to use God’s power for our own advantage or to gain recognition from others. But God's grace is free. God's power is his own and cannot be bought. God is sovereign and cannot be manipulated by our petty attempts at trying to influence him.

Simon, in Acts 8, is rejected because he has fundamentally misunderstood what supernatural power is for. He wants the power for his own ends, rather than proclaim the good news because it is the good news.

God blesses us that we may bless others. God forgives so that we may forgive and help others know forgiveness. God gives his Spirit so that we may serve. All of this is to God’s glory, not our own advantage or popularity.

God invites us to put our trust in him and his power. There must be a complete surrender to the Word of God. There must not be any premeditation where we think we can use God for our own advantage. We must turn away from our own ideas of self-sufficiency and depend totally on God, telling God's Grand Story.

The evidence of power in Acts 8 came with the story of Jesus, the testimony of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the story of forgiveness and hope and peace with God.

Was Philip merely a Christian magician? He was an effective servant of the living God. Were his miracles merely deceiving tricks? They were evidence of the power of the risen Jesus Christ over the forces of sin. God is at work in his world. He is to be trusted. His power works in your and my life and all around us. Let his power and his Story work through you to draw people to himself.

Amen.