

Simon the Zealot: Zealous for the Savior

Sovereign Grace Baptist Church

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Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18; Acts 1:13

Luke 6:12

“And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. 13 And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles; 14 Simon, (whom he also named Peter,) and Andrew his brother, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, 15 Matthew and Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called Zelotes.”

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In order to fully appreciate the character of the apostle called Simon from Cana of Galilee it will be necessary to understand the political climate of the day in which he lived. Palestine was a land under the rule of Rome. For centuries the Jews had been dominated by foreign powers. First there were the Babylonians. Then came the Medes and the Persians. After that the Greeks and the Romans took their place as a world empire. But in all the years of being under the heel of foreign domination, the Jews never got used to the mastery of others and from time to time they managed to put together a revolt against their foreign oppression.

For example, in the second century BC there arose a family called the Maccabees whose sole purpose was to make Israel a free and independent state. When Mattathias, the father of the Maccabees lay dying, his parting message was, *“And now, my children, be zealous for the Law, and give your lives for the covenant of your fathers” (1 Macc. 2:50).*

Time passed. Israel found herself still under foreign domination and yet, the flames of patriotism never died out. During the time of Christ a group of people in Palestine banded together, remembered the word of Mattathias and took for themselves the name of Zealots. Josephus describes them as a group. *“They have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is only their Ruler and Lord. They do not mind dying any kind of death, nor do they heed the torture of their kindred and their friends, nor can any such fear make them call man lord.”*

Such fanatical zeal can easily be misguided and misapplied. There was a natural temptation to use patriotism as an opportunity for guerrilla warfare to burn and rob villages and towns. Wanton acts of destruction were excused and justified. The zealots were guilty of guerrilla warfare. They were also guilty of turning their weapons and violence against their own countrymen. Any Jew who appeared willing to compromise or work with the Roman government was marked for destruction.

Some historians have suggested that the zealots were directly responsible for the most terrible time in ancient Jewish history. The story begins when Rome, tired of the social unrest in Palestine, decided to confront the Jews once and for all when another revolt broke out in Jerusalem in the summer of AD 66. To everyone's surprise, at first, things did not go well for the Romans. A legion of soldiers was actually defeated by the Jews. The uprising became a full war.

Following the death of Nero, the new emperor, Vespasian, placed his son Titus in charge of challenging the Jewish uprising. Deciding that a strong, overwhelming military presence around Jerusalem would be necessary, Titus circled the city with 80,000 men. Meanwhile, inside the walls of the ancient city civil war was taking place. Zealots and moderates were slaughtering each other as they fought for political control. Jewish blood flowed freely in the streets. Once more Titus demanded the surrender of the citadel, but the Jews laughed in defiance.

Growing impatient with the seize of the city being prolonged month after month, Titus used the might of his military machines to literally pound a breach in the northern wall. Soon thereafter another wall was pierced and the Roman legions moved into part of the city. Fierce hand to hand fighting broke out. The body count began to mount rapidly.

Turning to psychological warfare, Titus tried to frighten those who remained in the city into submitting to his force. All the soldiers put on their best uniforms, polished their shields, and displayed their armor. But the Jews were still not impressed nor were they intimidated. Nevertheless the end was in sight for the food supply was running low. Titus had made sure this would happen by instituting a policy of forced starvation. Those who were caught outside the city walls trying to escape or smuggle in supplies were crucified. For a while, about 500 people per day were being put on crosses. To find wood, every tree in the area for miles was cut down. Famine came to the city with a vengeance. Death was everywhere. Desperate with hunger, cannibalism broke out. Women boiled their children and ate them.

As the people grew physically weaker, the battering rams of the Romans continued to break down the walls. By the beginning of July, another part of the city fell. The Tower of Antonio—named in honor of Mark Anthony—was in Roman hands. Nearby was the great Holy Temple. A soldier tossed a flaming torch through the Golden Windows into the Holy of Holies. Soon the sacred place of worship was in flames.

Titus had not wanted the Temple to be burnt but the soldiers went out of control. The madness of war took its toll. In that terrible month of August, AD 70, Jerusalem was devastated as 97,000 prisoners were taken hostage and 115,800

corpses were removed from the city. And yet, despite all of this, some of the Zealots did not give up.

Prior to the final siege of Jerusalem, a large group managed to flee to a high fortress called Masada. They were led by Eleazar. For two years this band of less than a 1,000 men, women, and children withstood 10,000 soldiers of the Roman army sent to subdue them. But their end was inevitable. The Roman General Flavia Silva built a tremendous ramp on the other side of the mountain.

When it was finally clear that all hope of escape was gone, Eleazer summoned the people together in order to suggest a suicide pact. The people agreed to die rather than submit to Roman slavery. The men “*tenderly embraced their wives, kissed their children, and then began the bloody work. Nine hundred and fifty perished, only two women and five children escaped by hiding in a cave*”. Ten men were appointed to slit the throats of the rest and then they would be killed by one of their own. The last person alive was to commit suicide. Such were the Zealots. They were loyal, courageous, nationalistic, and in the end, unconquerable. Simon was a Zealot until he came to Christ.

It is sometimes difficult to discover when or why a person begins to change in a radical way—for bad or for good. Since the *New Testament* tells us nothing about Simon except his name, it is not unreasonable to surmise that Simon came to Christ initially for political purposes. Perhaps Simon saw in Christ another

Maccabee or someone like Judas the Galilean who led an insurrection following the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC. After all, Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as being *at hand*. Perhaps Simon saw in Christ a political leader with supernatural power to the point that He could raise the dead. Whatever attracted Simon to Jesus, the compelling character of the Lord and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit transformed Simon. The total transformation of Simon is manifested in several ways.

First, there is Simon's tolerance of Matthew. As a tax collector, Matthew was the type of person the Zealots looked for to assassinate with their little curved swords. The Zealots hated any Jew with pure passion who united with Rome to exploit their countrymen. In another time and place, Simon would have gladly slain Matthew. But they met as friends in the fellowship of the Savior. The very fact that Jesus was able to bring Matthew and Simon into one group demonstrates how personal enmity can be destroyed by a common love for Christ. Here is a great lesson for Christians in general and the Church in particular. Christian love says, *"I will accept you as you are, and if you change, it will be because of your love for Christ"* (Dr. William Barclay).

Second, Simon's total transformation is reflected by the fact that he subordinated his earthly kingdom longings for the spiritual kingdom of heaven. In the pursuit of money, property, power, social status, security, the soul must not be neglected. When all is said and done this truth remains:

*“This one life shall soon be passed;
Only what is done for Christ will last.”*

Jesus said,

*“What shall it profit a man if he gain
the whole world and lose his soul?”*

There is a third sign of a transformed life. Simon was found in the prayer meeting of Acts 1:13. In an Upper Room, Simon was found to be waiting for the power from on high. In an Upper Room, Simon was found in prayer. The prayer life becomes the bases on which to judge the spiritual health of a soul. Not all of God's people are eloquent. Not all of God's people have prominent spiritual gifts. But all of God's people can pray. The more complete the transformation of the life the more prayer will be displayed.

History does not record what happened to Simon. Even legend is vague about him. He is said to have preached in Egypt, in Africa, and even in Britain until he met his death in Persia. Because of the opposition of two magicians, called Zaroos and Arfaxat, death came to Simon. He was crucified in the year AD 74. Dr.

William Barclay notes, *“Two things strike the investigator of early Christian history: the marvelous manner in which Christian seed is found growing and fructifying in unheard of places; the indifference of the sowers of perpetrating their own name and labors.”*

One day, in the providence of the Lord, the Church will visit again with this obscure apostle who had such a radical change of nature and who was able to give his life for the greatest cause on earth—advancing the Kingdom of God. One reason why Simon was willing to dedicate his life to the service of the Savior and the Church was because he saw the Church as the most glorious of all institutions.

It is possible that many problems in local assemblies would be solved immediately if the Church was seen once more as a glorious institution. It is because of the lack of a fundamental respect for the Church as an institution that individuals can ask some very alarming questions and make some very disturbing statements.

“Pastor, why is the local church important?”

“Pastor, I believe I can worship without the local church through Christian radio, television, and religious literature.”

*“Pastor, why must a person participate
in the corporate life of the Church?”*

“Pastor, it does not matter if the Church is joined,

as long as I am sincere in my faith.”

Such questions and statements show a fundamental disrespect to the Church and yet, in the sight of God the Church is still most glorious. John Newton recognized this glory when he paraphrased Psalm 87.

*“Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God;
He whose word cannot be broken
formed thee for His own abode:
On the Rock of Ages founded,
what can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation’s walls surrounded,
thou may’st smile at all thy foes.”*

Simon loved Christ and he loved the church. Simon died for the church he loved as he served the Savior. May that be our heart’s commitment as well.

The Glory of the Church

1. The glory of the Church is revealed in her Divine election. (Eph. 1:3-6) *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the Beloved.*
2. The glory of the church is revealed by the great price, which was paid to redeem her from the penalty, power, and pollution of sin. (Eph. 1:7) *In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;*
3. The glory of the Church is seen in the adoption of those who believe as children of God. (Rom. 8:15) *For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.*
4. The glory of the Church is displayed in the glorious inheritance that awaits her. To the Church has been given the Kingdom of God (Luke 12:32), eternal life (Mark 10:30; John 10:28; Rom. 6:23; Heb. 9:15) and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. (2 Pet. 3:13 Rev. 21:1)
5. The glory of the Church is manifested in the purpose and place she has in the plan of God. (Eph. 1:14) *That in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus, (Eph. 3:10) To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God. The Church is no parenthetical afterthought in the mind of God. The Church occupies the pivotal place in the heart of God.*
6. The glory of the church is reflected in the majesty of her Master, the Lord Jesus Christ who is King of kings and Lord of lords. (Col. 1:15-19; Eph. 1:22,23)
7. The glory of the Church may be seen in the fact that she is endwelt by God the Holy Spirit. (Eph. 1:13,13;17-19; 3:16) *In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise.*

8. The glory of the Church may be seen in her own intrinsic holiness. (Eph. 1:4; 2:10,21; 5: 26,27) *That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That He might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.*
9. The glory of the Church may be seen in her nearness to the presence of God. (Eph. 2:13,18; 3:12; Heb. 4:16) The Church has the ear of heaven. *Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*
10. The glory of the Church may be seen in the fact that to her was entrusted the gospel. (Eph. 1:9; 3:2-5) God has not entrusted the gospel to business, nor to the government or even to religious auxiliary organizations, or specialized ministries however good all of these things may be. The gospel is given to the Church. Only the Church has a right to say that God *having made known unto us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure, which He hath purposed in Himself.*

*“I love thy Church, O God!
Her walls before thee stand,
Dear as the apple of thine eye,
And graven on thy hand.*

*For her my tears shall fall,
For her my prayers shall ascend,
To her my cares and toils be given,
Till toils and cares shall end.”*

Because the Church is glorious, it is only right that there be a definite identity with the local assembly according to the will of the Lord. Every believer should ask, *How do I unite with God’s people?* The question should be asked because the physical unity of God’s people is designed to reflect the spiritual unity that already exists.

The *Bible* teaches that Christians are not independent of one another. Every imagery in the *Bible* shows an essential unity of some sort whether it is the

Shepherd and the sheep,

the Vine and the branches,

the Head and the body, the theme of unity is the same

(John 13:34,35; Rom. 12:5,10,16; 14:19; 15:14; Gal. 6:2; Eph. 4:32; 5:21; Phil. 2:3,4; 1 Thess. 4:9; 5:11; Heb. 10:24; James 5:16; 1 John 4:12).

The fact that there is a spiritual unity which is designed to be manifested in the corporate life is proven by the apostles who established local churches and gave instructions as to how they were to function and be governed. (Acts 14:21-23; 1 Tim. 3:15; Tit. 1:5) Pastor letters were sent to deal with specific problems and to encourage the saints in the work of the ministry (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). Those who unite with the local Church are entitled to several things.

- Every believer is entitled to the opportunity worship. God loves to see His people gather to praise and honor Him. The worship on earth reflects the worship of heaven itself as a gathered assembly. (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 5:11-14; 7:9-12; 15:2-4; 19:1-8) Because the opportunity to worship is a gift of divine grace, it should not be taken for granted. There is an appointed place, there is a proper time, and there is an acceptable way to worship the Lord.
- Every believer is entitled to the love of the saints according to 1 Corinthians 13. Every believer is to be cared for according to the principles of mercy. (Matt. 25:31-46; Acts 2:45; 4:32-35; Gal. 2:10)

- Every believer is entitled to be edified in a practical manner concerning the Person and work of Jesus Christ. The Lord has given to His church pastors and teachers for the spiritual maturing of the believers. (Eph. 4:8-11; 1 Pet. 2:2; Acts 20:28-32; 1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:16-4:4)
- Every believer is entitled to enjoy Christian fellowship and encouragement. (1 Cor. 12:13-27; Eph. 4:16).

Because the believer receives the gifts of God from the people of God, a holy obligation emerges when membership in the local assembly is finalized.

- Those who unite with the local assembly should endeavor to be a loving person according to 1 Corinthians 13.
- Those who unite with the local assembly should honor the legitimate spiritual leadership of the assembly. (Heb. 13:7,17)
- Those who unite with the local assembly should seek to serve within the body of Christ. (Rom.12:4-10)
- Those who unite with the local assembly should honor the terms of the Covenant and by-laws, as the congregation practices them, in order to promote peace. (Rom. 14:19) *Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.*

Does this mean that all Christians will agree on every point and on every practice? No. But there is a spirit and a mindset that allows for essential agreement so that the work of the ministry can be carried out in a Christ like manner as best as possible.

To be specific, there are certain actions those who are Strong in the Faith can do for those who are Weak in the Faith, and there are some things that those who are Weak in the Faith can do for those who are Strong in the Faith especially when a question arises that is controversial because it not clear to all.

Turning to Romans 14, this point can be illustrated by the question of whether or not Jewish Christians should eat herbs, worship on special days, and eat meat that was once considered to be unclean. When some Jews were first converted to Christ they were Weak in the Faith.

Stronger Christians knew that it was all right to eat herbs and meat that was once forbidden such as pork. Those who were Strong in the Faith knew that the ceremonial aspect of the Law was abolished so that the Seven Great Jewish Festival Days did not have to be observed. So what was to be done with those who were Weak in the Faith. Paul places a burden upon those who are Strong in the Faith to do three things.

First, the Weaker Brother was to be received into the fellowship without an argument being started or an issue being made of personal scruples. *“Him that is Weak in the Faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations” (Rom. 14:1).*

Second, the Weaker Brother’s concerns were to be borne by those who were Strong in the Faith. *“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the Weak, and not to please ourselves” (Rom. 15:1).*

And there is a good reason why this ought to be done. *“For even Christ pleased not Himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me”* (Rom. 15:3).

Because Christ has borne the sins of the saints, the saints should bear the scruples of one another with great sensitivity. So, those who are Strong in the Faith are to receive those Who are Weak in the Faith without being argumentative but with great tenderness in order to not lay a stumbling block before them. *“Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way”* (Rom. 14:13).

As those who are Strong in the Faith ought to do certain things for those who are Weak in the Faith, those who are Weak in the Faith also ought to do something. Specifically, there is to be a holy hush so that an inordinate amount of time is not spent judging one another in matters of personal concern. *“But why dost thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother?”* (Rom. 14:10).

The reason there is to be a holy hush and a non-judgmental attitude is because *“we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. “For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God”* (Rom. 14:10b). *“So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God”* (Rom. 14:11).

When good people disagree over principles and practices it is not to turn personal and accusatory. Rather, those who are Strong in the Faith are to bear the infirmities of those Who are Weak in the Faith. And those who are Weak in the Faith are not to condemn those who are Strong in the Faith.

A loving reception of those who are Weak in the Faith,

a fundamental decision to stay together even when one does

not get their way,

a non-argumentative spirit,

a holy hush in the sense of being non-judgmental on unclear issues,

a willingness to wait and let each person give an account of

themselves before God,

a deliberate bearing with those who are Weak in the Faith,

a pursuing of peace, these are the spiritual characteristics

which will reflect whether a locally assembly is really the Church and different from other social institutions or not.