

Not Done in a Corner

by Dennis Lange

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His apostles for a period of forty days. Before He ascended into heaven, He gave them this charge, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation“ (Mark 16:15). He said, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem“ (Luke 24:46,47). They were to preach the gospel to all the world and the starting point was Jerusalem.

On Pentecost, the fiftieth day after the resurrection, the Spirit of God was sent from heaven with a noise like the sound of a mighty rushing wind (Acts 2:2). That noise drew a crowd of thousands to the place in the temple where the apostles were. The twelve apostles spoke in the languages, even the local dialects, of the Jews who had gathered from every nation, causing those in the crowd to marvel. Peter stood and preached the gospel. He preached the first message of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus in the very city where the events had occurred, and not many days after their occurrence.

In Acts 26, Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea by the governor of the province, a man named Festus. He was being held because of false charges brought against him by the Jews. During this time, King Agrippa and his wife Bernice visited Festus. The governor brought Paul to the king to tell his story. The apostle told of his persecution of the church, of his road to Damascus encounter with Jesus, and that he was commissioned by the Lord to tell of what Moses and the prophets had foretold of Jesus. After listening, Festus said, “Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad.” But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner” (Acts 26:24-26).

Paul was certain that King Agrippa knew of Christianity and the things Paul had taught him because “this has not been done in a corner”. Those words meant a great deal to King Agrippa, because it pointed out to him that he himself had knowledge confirming what Paul had said. Those words also have great significance for us today.

Christianity was not something that occurred in a corner.

There are some people who believe that God still works miracles through men today. They believe that some men have miracle-working powers given to them by God. When asked, “Where is someone who has raised the dead?”, their answers are more than a little suspicious. “Oh, I have a cousin in Kansas and someone at church told him about a missionary that he once knew. The missionary was in Africa, and while he was there, someone had told him of another village, where twenty years before that, a person raised someone from the dead.”

Sorry, but I have trouble believing things that were done in a corner.

The crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus didn't happen in a corner. The Passover was celebrated in Jerusalem that week and there were thousands and thousands of people who came to the city for that feast day. Jesus was taken before Pilate so the Roman government in that region was involved. He was taken before Herod. The rulers of the Jews were party to the events. As Christians preached the gospel throughout the Roman Empire during the first century, the stupendous events at the time of the crucifixion were told. An earthquake shook the city and the temple veil was torn in two. There were six hours of darkness while Jesus was being crucified. If those events weren't true, it was easy for those who lived at the time to deny they ever happened. But those in the first century *knew* the events occurred and tried to explain them away. The Greek historian Thallus, whose histories were written about 80 AD, argued that the six hours of darkness were caused by an eclipse. Of course, early Christians simply pointed out that that was impossible. An eclipse doesn't last that long.

The resurrection of Jesus didn't happen in a corner. Paul wrote, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also." (I Cor.15:3-8). Paul's words were an open invitation for anyone to investigate the witnesses who had seen the risen Christ. He was one, and those in Corinth knew his character. They also knew that he could perform miracles because they had witnessed them. But there were also nearly 500 witnesses who had seen Jesus after His resurrection that could be questioned. One cannot make such a statement, which almost begs for someone to investigate, if the statement is not true.

Moreover, the city of Jerusalem knew of the story of the resurrection. Roman soldiers had been at the tomb, guarding it. When an angel appeared, they "shook with fear and became like dead men" (Matt.28:4). They went to the Jewish leaders with their story and were told to say that the disciples had come while they were asleep and had stolen the body (v.13). If these things were not true, those in the first century could have said so. If this was *not* the story of the Jewish leaders, they could have certainly pointed it out wherever Christians taught this in the first century. Not only do the words of Matthew confirm that that was the story originally told by the Jews, but they show it was *still* being circulated by them at the time of his writing. He wrote, "...this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day" (Matt.28:15). If it was not being widely spread among the Jews at the time of Matthew's writing, he would have been exposed for lying. These things were not done in a corner.

First, John the baptist and then Jesus for a period of three years, stirred the nation of Israel with their preaching and the miracles that accompanied. Jesus, popular with the multitudes was then arrested, tried, and crucified. The earthquake, the rending of the

temple veil, the resurrection of many saints who appeared in the city at that time, the resurrection of Jesus, and the story of the guards would have been topics of continuing discussion among the populace. Visitors coming to Jerusalem for Pentecost would have been regaled with many stories. Those Jewish visitors from all over the Roman Empire would have taken those stories home with them. And it was on Pentecost, with the sound of rushing wind and the speaking in tongues by the apostles that the gospel in all its full glory was preached, in the very place where these things happened. Three thousand responded that day and the number of disciples continued to increase in the days that followed.

The rapid spread of Christianity in the first century means that all its claims were open to inspection across the Roman Empire. In Rome in 50 AD, Jews created a disturbance with Christians and caused Claudius to expel all Jews from Rome. The New Testament says that Paul went to Corinth and “found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome” (Acts 18:1,2). Aquila and Priscilla, were Jewish Christians, expelled from Rome by Claudius along with unbelieving Jews, showing how far Christianity had spread in 17 years. Christians were persecuted in Rome by Nero in 68 AD. Unbelievers who want to late-date Christianity cannot, because it spread throughout the Roman Empire and was viewed by those of the first century.

Acts 9 speaks of the conversion of a well-known Jewish Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus, the man who became the apostle Paul. He persecuted Christians and went to the high priest for the authority to persecute Christians even as far as Damascus (v.1,2). In Gal. 1:14, he said that before his conversion, he was “advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries”. The book of Acts speaks of the opposition by Jews to Paul in Perga (Acts 13), in Iconium (Acts 14), in Lystra (Acts 14), in Thessalonica (Acts 17), and in Corinth (Acts 18). In Jerusalem, Jews from the same area of Asia, stirred up the city against him, falsely accused him, and he was arrested (Acts 21). Thus, according to all we read in the New Testament, Paul was a figure who was well-known both to Christians and to their enemies, the bitterest of whom were the Jews. If Paul were an invention, unbelieving Jews would quickly point out the fiction, providing living witnesses that could say that such a man never existed. They could point out that such a man never persecuted Christians and then turned and converted to Christianity. Paul was such a well-known figure to both believers and unbelievers that his story could not have developed in a corner.

Because the events that surrounded the ministry of Jesus were of such a spectacular nature and occurred in the midst of large populations that could turn and cry “LIES!” if they never happened, we have the enemies of Christianity as witnesses today to its veracity. It is as if God put Christianity on a stage in the first century with the world watching as an enemy audience, looking intently for something that was invented or faked, ready to point a finger of accusation the moment the least little thing was found to be suspect. Instead, their tacit acceptance of the events tells that they occurred just as they were preached to that watching audience. The Jews saw the miracles of Jesus and simply refused to believe, claiming He cast out demons by the power of the devil

(Matt.12:23,24). They couldn't refute the empty tomb so they invented a story
(Matt.28:12-14). Thallus knew that friend and foe had seen the six hours of darkness at the crucifixion. It was thus futile to dispute the fact so he tried to find a natural explanation for the unnatural length of blackness.

The case for Christ was tried before a watching and hostile world in the first century. The weak complaints, all the enemies of Christianity had to offer, were futile. Many simply refused to believe. That case, tried almost 2000 years ago, comes down to us. What shall we do - simply refuse to believe, or accept the fact that the Son of God suffered for our sins, was buried, and rose on the third day? What we *should* do is believe and obey the gospel that we might be saved.