

CONFRONTATION!

by Ray C. Stedman

When the Apostle Paul wrote his last letter to his son in the faith, Timothy, he said, "In the last days there shall come perilous times," {cf, 2 Tim 3:1b KJV}. Those last days began when our Lord first appeared upon the earth. We make a great mistake if we read that as though Paul was talking only about the future. He was talking about the present age, his own day. All the time that lies between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ are the last days. During that whole time there would come periods of crisis, times of danger, times of peril, when men would be "lovers of self, lovers of money, ... and lovers of pleasure, rather than lovers of God," {cf, 2 Tim 3:2 RSV}. Whenever those conditions prevail they are, indeed, perilous times. Selfishness creates violence, the demand to have your own way, do your own thing, stand up for your own rights, this -- spread large across a nation -- creates pools of dissent and attrition against one another, and results in waves of violence with bloodshed breaking out everywhere.

We are clearly in one of those "times of peril" today. As you know there is an uneasy tension clear across the nation today. It has taken as its symbol the war in Vietnam, and now the Cambodian invasion. Yet these are not the real cause, nor the reason behind this tension. It is there for other reasons. But it helps make our day one of the "times of peril," the times of danger that the Scripture speaks of. And, as we study through the book of Acts, we are seeing the early church facing just such a time. Therefore there are tremendous lessons here for us who face a similar time of peril in our own day.

We shall pick up our study in Acts, the fifth chapter, beginning with Verse 12. The closing words of this fifth chapter present a series of events which center around the confrontation of the apostles with the Sanhedrin, the Jewish rulers. As we have frequently found in Acts, these are symbolic actions which occur in the realm of the physical in order to reveal to us the continuing possibilities to us in the realm of the spiritual. That is a helpful key to the way God teaches. He teaches by visible, physical events which illustrate invisible spiritual situations and forces. The visible is occurring because of the invisible event which is not seen. That is what we must understand if we are going to face life and understand it properly. You can never explain what happens in this world on the basis of an evaluation and assessment of visible things. The Bible, with one voice, says that this is the case. You must look behind the visible to the invisible. This is what God is forever doing. But he allows us to see the invisible by means of visible events.

Now, in this section, there are four great factors brought out that will always be present whenever the church is operating, in the midst of times of peril, as God intended it to operate. These four factors are clear in this account. If we are aware of what is going on in our own day we can see that these four are very essential to us and must be present in our own hour.

The first is found in Verses 12-16, where you have a clear demonstration of the power of God.

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high honor. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and pallets, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. {Acts 5:12-16 RSV}

This sounds like the days of Jesus all over again, does it not? Here is a tremendous display of physical healing power at the hands of the apostles. The result was that multitudes were added to the church, increasing it far beyond the five thousand we had already noted before, so that there was a tremendous number of Christians in the city of Jerusalem. No one knows how many but it must have been well into the thousands, perhaps even

ten thousand or more, in a city which at that time had a normal population of about forty to fifty thousand. Here is obvious evidence of the power of God at work.

But there are many people who are troubled by this account. They say, "What is wrong with the church now? Why don't we have signs and wonders and mighty events like these taking place?" Many people, feeling that such signs are the mark of power have tried to reproduce these signs and wonders, and the result has been certain of the healing movements of our day, with faith healers who travel about declaring that they are able to heal as the apostles did -- and that signs, wonders and miracles are taking place by their hands. You can hear a great deal of propaganda about that in these days.

But, if you investigate, you will find that it is not the same thing at all. The "miracles" that seemingly take place in these great healing meetings are usually of a psychological character which restores people temporarily. But if you check on them two weeks or a month later you will find them right back in the same afflictions they had before.

Many are troubled by this passage and say the church is not living in power unless these physical miracles are present. But now we must notice some things about this account that are carefully given to us by Dr. Luke.

First, he says, these were done by the hands of the apostles. These were not done by the believers in general. They were done by the hands of the apostles, who gathered themselves together in Solomon's Porch, and no one dared add themselves to them because these were obviously men anointed by God with unusual and striking powers. These powers were in answer to the prayer of the apostles. Remember, in Chapter 4, Peter and John had been brought before the Sanhedrin and when they came back to the others they prayed together and this was their prayer:

"And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus." {Acts 4:29-30 RSV}

That is what they asked God to do, and that is what he did. These signs and wonders were done for the apostles. They constitute, therefore, what the Apostle Paul later on, in Second Corinthians 12, calls "the signs of an apostle," {cf, 2 Cor 12:12}. He said to these Corinthians, "You are questioning my apostleship. You're asking if I really am an apostle because I'm not one of the twelve. Well, let me ask you this. Have you not seen the signs of an apostle that I have done among you?" These signs you see were specifically to accompany the ministry of the apostles to whom was assigned the task of laying the foundations of the church, of giving the Scriptures upon which the church must rest.

These signs had been predicted by the Lord Jesus himself as accompanying those men of faith who were believing in the resurrection power of the Lord. These are a fulfillment of the closing words of Mark's gospel, which has also been a troublesome passage for many. You will not find it in the text of the RSV because it is a questioned passage. Certain of the early manuscripts do not possess it and it is given as a footnote in the RSV. It begins with the appearance of the risen Lord to his disciples and he upbraids them, scolds them, for their unbelief. They would not believe that he was risen from the dead. Now get the picture. Here is the risen Lord appearing before them and scolding them because they would not believe that he was risen. So powerful was their unbelief that even when he stood before them they questioned it. Then, after telling them to go preach the gospel to every creature, he adds these words:

"And these signs will accompany those who believe in my name: [the colon belongs here, not after "believe"] they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick and they will recover," {Mark 16:17-18 RSV Margin}.

To whom did the Lord say that? To the apostles! Then Mark says,

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went forth [Who went forth? The apostles.] and

preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them [the apostles] and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. {Mark 16:19 RSV Margin}

Now there are the signs of an apostle. They were never intended for the church at large. They were intended to confirm the ministry of these mighty apostles who laid the foundations of the church in the giving of the Scriptures. Not only were they to manifest the power of God in physical ways, but this physical manifestation was to be a symbol, a sign, of the spiritual power that God would release among the people. It is always a mistake to put emphasis upon a physical miracle. Physical miracles, although they attract attention, also confuse people so that ultimately they miss the point of what God is saying. That is why the Lord Jesus consistently said to the men and women that he healed in the days of his flesh, "Now don't tell anybody about it." He did not send them out to broadcast the story; he said, "Go home and say nothing to anyone." He did not want the confusing effect of physical miracles to thwart his spiritual ministry.

That is exactly what happened here in this passage in Acts 5. We read that when the apostles began to heal the sick and to cast out demons and relieve those who were distressed, that multitudes "carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and pallets, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them." That is a manifestation of the superstition that immediately begins to develop when physical miracles occur. There is nothing here to suggest that the apostles encouraged this kind of thing at all. Nor does it say that the shadow of Peter falling on them did heal them. I do not think it did. This is a superstitious response of people who were caught up with the tremendous excitement of physical healing and they thus began to obscure the point of the spiritual lesson involved.

Jesus had said (John 14:12), "He that believes on me the works that I do shall he do also..." Those words again were spoken to the apostles. "He that believes on me the works that I do shall he do also..." and here they are, doing the same works that Jesus did, the same miracles of healing. "And," said Jesus, "greater works than these shall he do," {John 14:12b RSV}. Greater works than physical healing? What greater works? Why, spiritual healings. That is what God is after. God wants to heal the whole of man, the hurt in man's spirit most of all. That is where the problem really lies. Every person ever healed by the Lord Jesus, or by the disciples in the days of the early church, died. The physical healing was a temporary thing, with no exceptions: They all died. But when God heals the spirit, it is an eternal event. There is an inward change that is never lost, it goes on forever. When God heals a man from the inside out, he makes him a whole person. It does not really matter what happens to the physical -- at best it is only a temporary thing. The great thing that God is after is the healing of the hurt of humanity in its spiritual sickness, its evil, its darkness and its desperateness. That is always where he desires to start.

The power here manifest physically is a symbol and a guarantee of the spiritual power available to the church at all times. I do not mean that God has stopped healing physically, he has not.

Just this last month I had the wonderful experience of seeing a woman delivered, by prayer, from a brain tumor. The doctors had given her just a few months to live, and through prayer the tumor disappeared. The doctor confessed it, saying, "It's gone. I don't know where, nor why, nor how, but it's gone." But, up to now, I have never said a word publicly because I do not want superstition and undue emphasis to develop with everyone excited about physical healings.

That is not what God is after. The deepest need of man is spiritual healing, not physical. But the power of God to heal spiritually is present and available to us. That is what this passage is saying. And when spiritual healing happens, multitudes will be added to the church.

The second factor evident in this account follows immediately,

But the high priest rose up and all who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the common prison. But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out and said, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and taught. {Acts 5:17-21a RSV}

For some reason most of us know of the event which occurs a little later in the book of Acts, about Peter being released after being put in prison. But almost no one ever mentions this event, which came first, when all twelve of the apostles were put in prison and were suddenly released by the intervention of an angel and sent to preach in the temple again.

Then follows one of the classic examples of doubletake in all history.

Now the high priest came and those who were with him and called together the council and all the senate of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, and they returned and reported, "We found the prison securely locked and the sentries standing at the doors, but when we opened it we found no one inside." Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were much perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. And some one came and told them, "The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." When the captain with the officers went and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. {Acts 5:21b-26 RSV}

What is the lesson God is trying to teach us here?

Why, that there is a liberty in the Spirit which nothing man can do will ever eliminate. "Where the Spirit of God is, there is liberty," {cf, 2 Cor 3:17}. There is power in God to set men free when they are put in prison. It is no problem to God to get a man out of jail. He does not even have to go through a bail bondsman, he simply sends an angel. It happens again in the book of Acts. He can even send an earthquake, as he did for Paul and Silas at Philippi. It is no problem to God to get his people out of prison.

But it is also clear, from events later on in Acts and in church history, that God does not always intend to get his people out of prison, physically. The point of the story is, as Paul beautifully put it another place, that "the word of God is not bound," {2 Tim 2:9}. Man cannot stop the word of God. Man cannot stop the power of God. The resurrection power of a living God cannot be held by prison walls, gates, bars, and chains. Men have been taught that lesson again and again in history, and yet they never seem to learn. They strike back with the only procedure they know -- to put someone in prison, lock them up. But you cannot lock up ideas. You cannot hinder the preaching and the teaching of the word of God with prisons. There is a tremendous liberty always present whenever the word is spoken in power. It cannot be stopped simply by the arrest of Christians.

The third factor is in the next section:

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given those who obey him."

When they heard this they were enraged and wanted to kill them. {Acts 5:27-33 RSV}

That last sounds familiar, does it not? All that Peter and the other apostles did was simply to tell these men the truth. They stood before them and very quietly said, "Look. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you killed." That is a clear statement of fact. "God has exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." That is another statement of fact. "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit." With that simple statement of clear, plain truth, these rulers became violently furious and enraged, and set about to kill them.

What does that show?

It shows clearly the fallen character of man. Man is in the grip of forces beyond his knowledge and ken, evil forces which are implacably opposed to the will, purpose and love of God. Whenever truth is uttered, it enrages men like this. They oppose it with the only weapon they can think of -- physical violence. This explains the fact that wherever the gospel goes it not only invites men, attracts men, and redeems men, but it also enrages others. It is always a disturbing thing. But God wants us to look beyond this immediate opposition of men and understand that the opposition would never occur if it were not for the existence of certain malevolent beings behind men.

This is what Paul says in Ephesians 6. "We wrestle not against flesh and blood," {Eph 6:12a KJV}. It is not, finally, men who are the problem. We are opposed "by principalities and powers, by wicked spirits in high places" {cf, Eph 6:12b}, by tremendous beings of malevolence and evil who are seated in positions of power behind the scenes and are manipulating men, keeping them under control, and using them as puppets. That is where the opposition and hostility is coming from. If you do not view the opposition to the gospel from that point of view you will not ever understand life. You cannot explain what occurs in history unless you understand it from that point of view. There are evil forces at work.

That is why theological liberals shake their heads at humanity and say, "What's wrong?" They are baffled because they take into consideration only what they can see -- human beings -- and they say, "What is wrong with human beings? Why do they act this way? Talk to them individually and they're nice, courteous and gracious; but put them together in a mob and violence breaks out and darkness and death. What's the matter?" Well, says the Scripture, these men and women, these students and others, are being manipulated by powers they are not aware of. They have thoughts arising in their hearts which they think originate with themselves, but they are being put into their minds by invisible forces which are at work to oppose the will and purpose of God. That is why it is so useless to attempt physical resistance against these kind of forces. What good does it do to kill, and burn, and destroy those who are the puppets of evil forces? They will only raise up other men and use them in their place. What advantage is gained by wiping out at the polls groups of people who are opposed to something that God wants done? The evil forces will only raise up other men and women to do it all over again. What God wants to get across to his people is that they will never do any real good until they attack the spiritual forces. God has placed in our hands the spiritual equipment to do so. The next verses of the passage illustrate this.

But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, held in honor by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a while. And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you do with these men. For before these days Theudas arose, giving himself out to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was slain and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean arose in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan of this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"

So they took his advice, ... {Acts 5:34-40a RSV}

Now here are the apostles confronted with the same group that had just murdered their Lord, threatened by the same hostility that had accomplished the death of Jesus. Their lives are at stake. These rulers are enraged and they want to kill them. Then why didn't they? Surely the apostles could not have predicted how God would deliver them. They had no way of knowing that there was seated on that very council a man with a calmer frame of mind, who would listen to reason and would lay a quieting hand upon these tumultuous passions. But God knew. And God knew how to use that man, and when to have him speak. It was God who was behind the actions of Gamaliel.

It is true these were men controlled by evil forces, but they were also subject to the sovereign overriding of the Holy Spirit. Though this account does not mention it directly, I am very confident that the church was praying for the twelve apostles. In answer to that prayer, God restrained those evil forces, using one of the enemy to do it.

What does that do to you? Doesn't that turn you on a bit? You sit there so unimpressed by this! But I get excited about it. God uses the very forces opposed to the gospel to fight against themselves and restrain themselves.

Many of you know that the whole area here was very tense on Thursday of this week after violence broke out on the campus at Stanford. Most of us were wondering what would happen next, especially when it was published in the papers that the Academic Senate was to meet at Stanford and consider the demands made by radical students for the complete ousting of ROTC from the campus, plus several other impossible demands. Christians began to pray. Those who have learned how to operate with spiritual weapons did not sit and wring their hands; they gathered together and began to pray. They asked two specific things:

1. That God would give the Academic Senate at Stanford University the courage to do the right thing: to yield to demands which were right and proper and to resist those that were improper, and
2. When the demands were not met, that the radicals be restrained; that God would thwart their announced plans to burn down the campus.

Well, the Academic Senate met, and they did not yield to the impossible demands of the radicals. They did what they thought was right, and they had the courage to say, "No!" where they needed to say, "No." The radicals met together that night to carry out their threat to burn down the campus. But, by the report that was given to me, they immediately fell into confusion. They began to squabble among themselves. One would stand up to speak, and then another, and they would oppose each other, and they could get nowhere. Finally someone stood up and said, "What's the matter with us? Why can't we get together? Now's our time to act. We've got to act!" But even that exhortation fell in vain, and they were unable to act. The report that was brought to me the next day was that the campus was like a tomb on Thursday night (perhaps in many more ways than one).

Now that is the restraint of God. When are we going to start believing the Scriptures? When are we going to act consistently with the spiritual weapons God has given us? When are we going to believe that God is moving today exactly as he moved in the days of the early church?

A man came up to me after I had spoken along these lines at a meeting of laymen in Colorado Springs. He had a strong British accent, and he said, "Sir, I want to ask you a question. Do you mean it when you say that the church today is no different than the church of the first century?" I said, "I mean it with all my heart. I am absolutely convinced there is no difference whatsoever between the church of our day, in its possibilities and potential, and the church of the first century as it affected the world of that day." Tears began to roll down his cheeks. He gripped my hand, and he said, "Bless you. My heart has been crying out for years to hear somebody say that today. You don't know what it means to hear you say that." The book of Acts is still being written today.

There is one other factor here and it closes the account.

So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. {Acts 5:40-42 RSV}

I love that. They did not stop. They counted themselves fortunate to suffer dishonor for his name. It seems to take Christians so long to face up to the simple declaration of Scripture that, when they were called to be a Christian, they were called to suffer. As Paul said in his letter to the Philippians, "It is given to us not only to believe on him but also to suffer for his name's sake," {cf, Phil 1:29}. We are called to this. Suffering is an integral part of the Christian experience. It is not something that is unusual or reserved for just a few; it is for all. Peter said in the passage read to you this morning, "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you," {cf, 1 Pet 4:12}. Don't think it strange. You go through problems, difficulties, heartaches, disappointments, ostracism and coolness from

others, all for the sake of "the Name." Don't think that is strange. That is part of the "sufferings of Christ for his body's sake" {cf, Col 1:24 KJV}, which Paul speaks of. It is that to which we are called.

In a world that is run by illusions, governed by deceptions, and is a victim of lies and maliciously evil falsehoods, what else can we expect if we stand for the truth? People will think we are strange, at times. People will think we react in funny ways. There will be some degree of coolness, even among those who are, in many other ways, friendly toward us. They will think we are a little odd. But it is they who are odd; it is we who are normal. When a normal person lives in a world full of oddballs, they think he's odd. But that is the suffering to which he is called. Like these disciples, we ought to thank God for it and rejoice in it. Jesus said that, didn't he? "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my name's sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, ... for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you," {cf, Matt 5:11-12 KJV}.

The church, then, is not to wring its hands, and say, "Oh what a terrible thing! We're being opposed! These committees against us, and the powers that be, etc., they won't let us do what we want. What an awful thing!" No! Rejoice, like these early Christians did. Count it an honor that you have been called to suffer a little for his name's sake.

Stand up and be counted. These are perilous times, are they not?

Yet these same four factors are as present with us today as they were in that early day:

1. Power, the power of God to change lives, to heal, to restore, to make people whole. It is manifest all around us, everywhere, on every side today.
2. Liberty, the word of God is not bound. Nothing can stop it, nothing can hinder it, nothing can thwart it or change it. Our physical circumstances are quite irrelevant. It does not make any difference.
3. Opposition is here, terrible, deadly opposition, designed to strike to the heart, to the jugular vein. As Joe Blinko used to put it, "The devil is no pimple-squeezer; he goes for the jugular vein."
4. But also there is suffering; suffering but rejoicing in that suffering.

To this we are called!

Prayer:

Our Father, help us to stop playing at this business of being a Christian, to stop playing church, stop making it a religious episode once a week in our lives, but to understand that here in these relationships of which we have been speaking, in our tie with the living God, is all that it takes to change the world around us; and that the events of this day and hour that are reflected in the newspapers are tied into what we do or do not do here in this place. Help us to understand, Lord, that we are the salt of the earth, we are the light of the world, and we must begin to act that way again. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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