

Easter in Bolivia

Dr. Duane Gish, Vice President and co-founder of ICR, was scheduled to travel to La Paz, Bolivia for Easter of 1994 to speak ten times to various groups about Creation and the Flood. Unfortunately, Dr. Gish was informed a month before the trip that he needed quadruple heart bypass surgery as soon as possible and it wasn't advisable that he travel to Bolivia. The altitude of La Paz is over 10,000 feet and he would be putting himself in grave danger if he were to go before surgery. I agreed to go in his place.

I was met at the airport in La Paz by my two translators, Pedro and Pablo, and offered a coca leaf to suck for a few hours to stave off altitude sickness. The La Paz airport is the highest commercial airport in the world at 11,000 feet and it's common for tourists to suffer tooth pain and headaches during their visit to La Paz, which is only a thousand feet lower.

I spoke at ten different churches and schools and several other venues, like a group of pastors, a college science class at the University of La Paz, and the Bolivian Academy of Science. I was warmly received by all groups except possibly, the Academy of Science.

Most of the people I spoke to had little or no knowledge of young-earth creationism but were very receptive. In fact, one of the professors at the University was so responsive that she started a group to study and discuss creation after I left, which became a formal creation organization. I arrived about three weeks after some new missionaries from Shadow Mountain Community Church in San Diego, Tim and Holly Nyquist, started their ministry in La Paz. They discovered such an interest among the Bolivians that they oriented their primary ministry to creationist teaching throughout Bolivia.

Probably the most interesting church I spoke to while in Bolivia met in an old converted movie theater in downtown La Paz. It was associated with a charismatic TV and radio ministry which broadcast Christian music, preaching, and special programming in Spanish throughout Central and South America. A crowd of about one thousand people showed up on Wednesday evening for my presentation.

I've never been among such an enthusiastic group of worshipers, before or since. The song service lasted over thirty minutes and included loud singing, raised hands, and enthusiastic dancing. Many of the younger congregation danced and jumped to the sounds of traditional Christian songs and Bolivian flute and drum music. Some of the dancers could jump over three feet off the floor. It reminded me of the Kenyan style of dancing.

When it came my turn to speak, I started awkwardly because of the contrast in the topic and the change in volume of sound between the previous celebration and my technical topic. My translator was Pedro, who was the person who invited me to La Paz and the primary TV personality on the local Christian network. I had been working with another translator, Pablo, earlier in the week, so it took a little while for Pedro and me to get into rhythm with each other.

I would speak a sentence or two, pause, and he would translate. Then I would speak again, pause, and he would translate. When you speak through a translator, you are not only dependent on him to get the message correct but to also express the emotion of the topic. I slowly became more comfortable with the interplay between us, and was able to exaggerate my vocal, facial, and hand motions to communicate more directly with the audience before Pedro provided the translation.

I wasn't sure how my presentation had come across when I finished. When you speak through a translator you can only cover half as much material and you need to be more selective about what you say. In doing so, you can easily cause the oration to be stilted and forget to make important points. However, I was gratified to discover during the question and answer period at the end that I had effectively communicated with my audience. They asked some of the most penetrating questions I've ever received from any audience.

I traveled to Bolivia with the mistaken impression that I would be talking to audiences who had little knowledge of theology or science. I had assumed that I would be interacting with a Third World culture that was unaware of the intricacies of the bible and science. I was wrong! The Christians in La Paz were, by and large, intelligent and aware of the issues. They were also very interested in the topic of origins.

One thing I was told by several missionaries in Bolivia which confirmed similar stories I'd heard from workers in other countries like Mexico, Central America, and Ecuador, that discussions about origins is an effective way to introduce Christianity into native cultures. There appeared to be a real thirst for knowledge about biblical creation and earth history such as the Flood in Bolivia. Almost all cultures have ancient stories about an original man and woman in a garden, a boat filled with animals and a terrible flood, and a white being who is expected to visit them someday. It's a joy for missionaries to tell these people about the stories in the Bible we take so lightly.

The predominant religion in Bolivia is Roman Catholicism, derived from the missionary activity of Spanish priests hundreds of years ago. As in most Catholic cultures there is still a strong influence from native religions. The "Church" has adopted some of the native practices internally and some native religions have gone underground in defiance of the efforts by the priests to eradicate them.

Most evangelical Christians in South American were former Catholics. They became disenchanted with the formalism of the "Official Church" and the liberal social agenda of many Catholic priests. They were attracted to evangelical Christianity by the "Good News of the Gospel" and a freer style of worship practiced by charismatic Christians. In addition to the many evangelical missionaries from many different denominations active in South America, the radio and TV stations out of La Paz, Bolivia and Quito, Ecuador have also become effective in spreading the Word.

The day after speaking to the large church service in the renovated movie theater, Pedro invited me to conduct an hour-long interview with him for his weekly television program. We talked about Creation, the Flood, the Ice Age, and other topics. The interview was all conducted in English without translation. Pedro had the program translated into Spanish. Several months later I received an email from some missionary friends in Panama, Terry and Lori Hyde, informing me they had recently seen me on Christian TV in Panama City. They were surprised that I had learned to speak Spanish. Apparently, Pedro had done such a good job dubbing my responses in Spanish for the interview that they thought I had become a native Spanish speaker.

During the week in Bolivia I had a unique opportunity to observe Good Friday activities in La Paz. I had been hearing music coming from the roof of the building across the street from my hotel all week. The National Military Band had been practicing a mournful dirge all day, every day, over, and over again. I couldn't understand why they kept playing it all week long.

On Friday evening I found out. The band led a procession through the streets of La Paz for Good Friday. The band was followed by soldiers from all branches of the Bolivian military, the President and his cabinet, the Supreme Court, both Houses of the Legislature, the Archbishop of the Catholic Church in Bolivia, cardinals, priests, and nuns, followed by large, heavy effigies of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

The band played the somber dirge music at the head of the parade with a slow cadence and paused between each step. All the units behind moved at the same slow pace in absolute silence. The President and the military were in full dress uniforms, the Archbishop and cardinals wore brightly colored robes of red, white, and blue colors with matching, high-pointed caps, according to various orders. There were hundreds of pointed caps in the parade, terribly reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. Following the cardinals were the priests and nuns dressed in more restrained black and white robes with ornate crucifixes.

Then followed the effigies borne on the backs of from 20 to 40 bearers. The effigies were normally mounted on the inside walls of the cathedral in downtown La Paz but had been taken down for the procession. Each effigy weighed as much as a ton, so each bearer was carrying from 50 to 100 pounds. Occasionally a bearer would stumble, and the effigy would tilt slightly, and groans could be heard as the bearers righted it. Behind the effigies followed individuals carrying crosses, flagellating themselves, or crawling on the ground.

The parade wound through downtown La Paz for over an hour, eventually ending at the cathedral. People stood along the streets crossing themselves as the effigies came past and falling in behind the procession at the end.

I returned to my hotel that night astonished at what I had seen and experienced. I was alternately amazed and saddened by the devotion of Catholics to their religion. I could not imagine that a culture was so devoted to a single

religion that the entire government, church, and people would be united in such a public spectacle. I felt sorry that Christians in the US couldn't be more unified and openly express their devotion to God. But, then I felt great sorrow for how deluded most of the people were, I had seen in the parade. They didn't understand that salvation comes as a gift because of Christ's death and doesn't require additional sacraments, penance, or flagellation to earn favor with God.

On Sunday morning I attended the International Christian Church of La Paz and was given a brief opportunity to tell of my visit with various evangelical churches, schools, and groups during the week. Many of the diplomats and their families from the US and other countries attend this church.

The fellowship and joy among like-minded Christians in the service that morning was like walking from night into day. I'd never experienced such a contrast between the darkness of Good Friday and the brightness of Easter morning. We tend to think of Christ's death on the cross as a sad, morbid memorial and Christ's resurrection on Easter morning as a happy, joyous, celebration. And this is true, but one event requires and reinforces the other.

Christ's death was necessary for our salvation and Christ's resurrection was necessary to prove that He was Who He said He was, and to allow the Holy Spirit to empower us to live a godly life. So, the death of Christ is part of the Good News - The Gospel.

I returned home to the US with a much greater appreciation for the culture of Latin America and the opportunities for missions abroad. I feel that I was able to make a small contribution to Bolivians learning about origins and earth history. I hope and pray that the seeds planted in La Paz will continue to grow and flourish under the work of those still laboring there.