

"ACTING WISELY IN CONNECTION WITH THE STATE"

(Acts 19:23-41)

(Ajith Fernando)

The reaction of the state to Christianity was an important issue to Luke. We too should regard this with utmost seriousness. But how does this flesh itself out in daily life? Many of us know of situations where people make use of a special connection they have to influence unfairly the process of justice. Surely Luke is not advocating this. Rather, he seems to be implying that there are non-Christian judges who are reasonable and who abide by the law. In times of difficulty we can appeal to such for protection under the law. Such protection may be necessary for Christian activity to go on. Christians have done this throughout history to good effect. With certain repressive states, of course, such attempts may end in disaster. But that does not exempt Christians living in those states from thinking how best they can relate to the law of their land.

In recent years as opposition to evangelism has mounted in Sri Lanka, we have been grateful for a constitution that ensures the people's right to practice and propagate the religion of their choice. In times of crisis we have appealed to that. The fact that some Christians know influential people in the government has also helped in enabling us to get the protection that is rightfully ours. But there are mumblings afoot now to change this constitution, which will result in the curtailment of freedom of religious practice and propagation. Some Christian leaders are therefore trying to prevent such changes, using every opportunity they have to influence our leaders. Some are writing articles and publishing them in secular forums, just as the early apologists did in defense of the Christian practice of evangelism. Some are meeting their friends in the government to lobby support for the cause. Some are alerting the world Christian community in the hope that others will speak up on behalf of Christians in Sri Lanka.

A few years ago the president of a Muslim country ordered the banning of a new Bible just a few days before its release. The protests and pleas of the Christians in that country were of no avail. This president visited the West around this time. On this trip a U.S. Senator told him that he was the first president in the history of the world to ban a Bible. The Pope also talked to him about this ban. As a result, he removed the ban as soon as he returned home!

Should we, then, go after friendships with influential people? Should we give time and energy to "hobnob with the big wigs"? This depends on one's personal call. The influential people in a society also need Christ, and we should attempt to make friends with them so that we can witness to them. We must assume that Paul presented the gospel to the Asiarchs, just as he did to everyone he met. Some may be called to move in those circles in order to influence them to give the work of the gospel the protection it requires. Such should be supported by the Christian that they are accountable to. This group can help them avoid breaking Christian principles as they move around with those who live on this high social plane.

Like Joseph, Nehemiah, Esther, and Mordecai, we should use any esteem we have won with national leaders to represent the cause of God's kingdom and to highlight the need for the protection of his people. While the church and acts was possibly too young to produce politicians, the biblical attitude to society has a place for devout Christians to enter into the sphere of national life so is to influence it through Kingdom principles.

