Guarding the civic gateways

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We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate, but there is no-one else - Lyndon B. Johnson



Esther and Mordecai
- Aert de Gelder (1685)

Ministering at the city gate

Almighty God through all history has led his people to minister at the gate of pagan communities, as the hub of social interaction and the place to settle matters of justice, administration, trade, law, security and civic leadership. There the people of God have proclaimed wisdom and righteousness to bless and enrich society. Moreover, they have expressed heartfelt concern about injustice and immorality, and have sounded a firm warning that un-repentant communities are at risk of divine chastening, and cataclysmic judgement.

So Abram, Lot, Mordecai and Esther provided superb ministry in the civic arena of pagan cities in Old Testament times. Their work to bless and enrich ungodly contexts was a prelude to their expression of concern about injustice and immorality, leading either to reform or to chastening and judgement. Such servants contrast with Jonah who spoke grudgingly to Nineveh, though God declared, *"Should I not be concerned about that great city?"* (Jonah 4:11).

Therefore the wise servant has the responsibility to bless and warn society which left to its own devices will experience the penalty of unwise and sinful choices, leading ultimately to divine chastening. Accordingly our Lord Jesus blessed and healed people in many places, but warned unrepentant cities including Korazin and Bethsaida. Moreover, he instructed his disciples to *shake the dust off your feet* to warn ungodly towns (Matthew 10:14-15).

Heeding the biblical examples of Abram, Lot, Esther, and Mordecai, the followers of Jesus are encouraged to interact positively with unbelievers: *Live such good lives among the pagans that ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God* (I Peter 2:12). We are further called to be precise about sin and its consequences, as we speak up publically, at the city gate.

Sharing wisdom in the gateway

A vast array of administrative, commercial, and social interaction occurred at the gateway of ancient towns and cities. Such activity is described in various Old Testament passages that effectively provide a job description for all who would echo the words of "Lady Wisdom" (God's wisdom personified) as she *calls aloud in the street ... raises her voice in the public squares ...* and *cries out in the gateways of the city* (Proverbs 1:20-21).

Whether holding a particular office or sharing wisdom apart from official duty, God's people rightly aspire toward leading and shaping society at the city gate. Accordingly God's servant may share wisdom that is needed at the civic gathering - in contrast with the foolish person, for whom wisdom is so high that *in the assembly at the gate he has nothing to say* (Proverbs 24:7). Instead, Godly persons may endorse worthy actions that occur at the city gateway:

- Considering significant social and cultural questions (Genesis 34:20);
- Administering punishment for criminal offences (Deuteronomy 17:5);
- Deciding who enters (Joshua 20:4);
- Shouting the news (II Kings 7:11);
- Settling family law and the sale of ancestral property (Ruth 4:1-11);
- Commending good works that are worthy of praise (Proverbs 31:31);
- Hearing a *defender in court* - a "reprover in the gate" (Isaiah 29:21).

In the gateway a king would encourage the people going out to defend the city against attack (II Samuel 18:4) - and then welcome their return (19:8). At the gate the prophet Micaiah challenged King Ahab (II Chronicles 18), and there Jeremiah (17:19-20) prophesied to the kings and to the people.

Officials held special responsibility at the city gateway. So the nobleman was *respected at the city gate* and took his seat *among the elders of the land* (Proverbs 31:23) - as did the Patriarch Job (29:7). Concern was raised at the Benjamin Gate in Jerusalem by the palace official Ebed-Melech, who urged King Zedekiah to repent of the unjust treatment of Jeremiah (38:4-10).

But the role of sharing wisdom at the city gate belongs to all whom God has called to public ministry, regardless of whether they occupy any official role. Since *wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city* (Ecclesiastes 7:19) we may rightly conclude (with Donald H. McGannon) that *leadership is action not position.* Hence Lot, Abram and Mordecai enriched, warned and challenged pagan cities without holding any formal position, but through personal commitment towards reaching the world God loves.

Abraham and Lot ministering to Sodom and its leadership

God's people may be instrumental to bring blessing, chastening, deliverance, witness and warning to pagan societies that will either repent or be judged. So Abram and Lot ministered to Sodom, whose people *were sinning greatly* (Genesis 13:13); they were *arrogant, overfed and unconcerned, they did not help the poor and needy, they were haughty and did detestable things* (Ezekiel 16:49). Yet to such a people Abram and Lot ministered faithfully:

Abram rescued Lot *and the other people* of Sodom who had been captured by four oppressive kings. Delivered from that chastening, the king and the people of Sodom owed Abram everything. But instead of keeping the goods, Abram exacted a tithe and gave it to Melchizedek - *priest of God Most High.* Rebuking Sodom's king, Abram spoke of the *Creator of heaven and earth*, and refused to accept goods from the people of Sodom (Genesis 14:11-23).

Lot dwelt within the city of Sodom (14:12) that presumably benefited from his expenditure as a very rich man. Described as *sitting in the gateway* (19:1) he was mocked as one who *"wants to play the judge"* (19:9). Those references indicate concern for civic matters, as a *righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men - for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard* (II Peter 2:7-8). Loving the people, whom he called *"my friends"*, [literally he stated, *"please, my brothers"*] Lot warned them: *"don't do this wicked thing"*, and brought conviction by ostensibly offering his virgin daughters who were *pledged* to men of Sodom (Genesis 19:7-14).

Mordecai and Esther ministering within the city of Susa

Ministering to the pagan Persian Empire, Mordecai the Jew gave deliverance, warning and witness in its capital city. While *sitting in the king's gate* in the city of Susa, Mordecai exposed a conspiracy to kill King Xerxes, and so he saved the life of the pagan king (Esther 2:21-23). Further, at the king's gate he recognised the unworthy character of Haman, and publicly refused to kneel in homage (3:2; 5:9). So for Mordecai the gateway was a place to detect and respond to subversion, and a context to raise concerns that may appear to be politically incorrect, but which have the greatest good of society at heart. When a law condemned all the Jews, Mordecai wore sackcloth and ashes near the king's gate, giving public witness to his grief for God's people (4:1-6). Then as he advised Queen Esther, deliverance was achieved which saved the Jews and promoted Mordecai to the highest civic position under the king (10:3).

Watching over the community

The work to keep watch at the gateway provides opportunities of sharing the gospel, along with practical wisdom that promotes community security. Hence the biblical approval of watching at the gates is linked to God's own work: *Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain* (Psalm 127:1). So his people can promote community safety and security, while urging unbelievers to place their hope in God as the true source of salvation.

The world must learn that if God were to cease watching, then the work of the watchmen is in vain, but as people genuinely ask God to guard the city, the work of the guardians at the gate achieves success. But the work at the civic gateway and the proclamation of the gospel are in decline as wider society and the faith communities have forgotten the time-honoured theology of gatekeeping. The steady demise of neighbourhood watch, service clubs and civic associations represents a serious threat to social cohesion, but also provides a tremendous opportunity for God's people to take up the challenge.

It is time to restore a theology of community gate-keeping that encourages the public to observe and report apparent criminal activity or suspicious behaviour. A key gatekeeping principle - *If you see something, say something* - is based on a biblical precept that a serious offence occurs if a person fails to speak *when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned* (Leviticus 5:1). The duty is also asserted in the Book of Proverbs: *If you say, 'But we knew nothing about this,' does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?* (24:12). It also relates to keeping watch and tackling the decline of standards in the media, the legislature and in the education system.

Watching over a community has a basis in the work of the Apostle Paul as he faced shipwreck. He rallied the discouraged, reported the behaviour of those who were seeking to abscond from the ship, and he called attention to God - giving thanks when urging the exhausted people to eat and survive (Acts 27). Paul's work accorded with the Lord's purpose for the wise steward - who shall *take charge of ten cities* (Luke 19:17). Regardless of whether the cities might value the law of God, every society has wrongdoers whose behaviour needs the ministry of the Lord's servants who aspire to leadership at the city gate.

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