

The Buddha Pedestals

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I don't know what to make of them," Stephen said to himself as he thought about the statues of Buddha he had seen in the homes of the church elders. "Are they idols, or are they symbols of national loyalty? In either case, do they not undermine the local Christians' allegiance to Christ? And what should I do? Should I raise the issue in the annual meeting of the churches next week, or should I leave it up to the elders to decide on the matter? But do they as new believers really understand what is at stake here?"

Stephen Ling, an American-born Chinese, had come as a missionary to Nong Pai in northeastern Thailand to minister to the new Thai Christian community there. With a theological degree and training in evangelism and discipleship by a Christian organization in his background, he was excited about his new assignment. He had worked hard on learning the local language and culture and now felt at home in the administrative center where he lived.

The work had been started five years earlier by Jerry and Sue Lannin, American missionaries. It had grown to 550 believers in 49 congregations that met in local homes. Each church was composed of from two to twelve families and led by an "elder." Staff at the administrative center, located in Udon Thani, the capital city, coordinated the work of the existing churches and planned new evangelistic outreach. When the Lannins retired, they invited Stephen to take charge of their work. One of his chief tasks was to train the elders. Each week he visited a number of them in their village homes and helped them prepare for the services they would conduct in their homes the following Sunday.

Stephen's first visit was to the home of Seum, the young elder of Nong Pai, to help him study the apostle Paul's doctrine of grace. Seum ran a general store and lived in the quarters attached to the rear of the store. Worship services were held in his large living room. In the entry Seum had hung two rows of pictures. In the top row were photographs of the military graduation class of one of his family members; the queen of Thailand, the king, and the crown prince; a collective picture of the head monks of the Thai monastic order and Thai military officers; and a military recruiting poster. Under them hung magazine

and calendar pinups of pretty Thai girls in bathing suits. On the far right of these was a statue of the Buddha. In later visits Stephen found that this was typical of most village homes, including those of Christians, for in the minds of the people in that part of Thailand there was a close tie between Thai nationalism, the royal family, the military, and Buddhism.

At first Stephen had hoped that the weekly Bible teaching would persuade the Christians to get rid of their Buddha pedestals. But most of them, including the elders, kept the pedestals as an act of patriotism and an expression of political loyalty to the king. Stephen realized that local history played an important part in their decisions. The northeastern part of Thailand had a long record of invasions and political and military instability, and the people wanted to affirm their allegiance to the government that had brought them peace and stability.

Now, four months later, Stephen was making his regular visit to Nong Pai to meet with Seum and several other elders. When Stephen asked them why they kept their Buddha pedestals, Seum pointed out that neither he nor his family performed rituals at the Buddha shrine in order to gain merit. Though he affirmed the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ eliminated the need for merit—making, he said, "I am a Thai and a loyal subject of our king. So I keep the Buddha pedestal to show my solidarity with my neighbors, my town, and my country." Wassana, a senior elder, defended Seum's position by appealing to Paul's doctrine of Christian liberty found in Galatians and his discussion of eating meat offered to idols in his letter to the Corinthians.

Back at the center, Stephen questioned the decision of the elders, and wondered whether such a decision should be left in their hands. They looked to him for biblical instruction, yet in this matter they seemed sure of themselves. The annual meeting of the churches would be held in a week. Could he as the missionary let the matter lie? If not, what should he do? He did not want the Christians to be accused of disloyalty to their country, but he knew that non-Christians would consider them Buddhists if they kept their Buddha pedestals. Moreover, in the long run it would open the door to syncretism. Finally, after considerable prayer and study of the Scripture, Stephen decided to