

Considering Citizenship: Dare to be a Daniel

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CONSIDERING CITIZENSHIP: DARE TO BE A DANIEL

The prophet Daniel figures prominently in children's Bible story books and Sunday school lessons. With a den of lions, a fiery furnace, and a vain and dream-disturbed royal villain, it's like this book was written for the mainstage. Daring Daniel who stands up for his faith in the face of royal pressure certainly deserves the reference he receives in Hebrews 11 as a one of the heroes of the faith.

Daniel and his three friends, even as a part of the captive contingent, were talented young people. As far as we can tell, Daniel and his pals served their king well and were highly regarded. In the stories of Daniel, I am struck by how Daniel remained loyal not only to who he was, but to whose he was. God clearly owned Daniel's heart. Although he lived in a place of tension, Daniel intentionally demonstrated devout Israelite beliefs while also serving capably—in most instances—his Babylonian captors. When Daniel and his friends refused to follow the king's edicts because they contradicted God's law, they engaged in civil disobedience. This stands as an important reminder that civil law, or man's law, is not the same as God's law.

Not many people consider Daniel's role as a respected bureaucrat, one who could successfully negotiate and advocate. In Chapter 1, Daniel negotiated with an official regarding the royal food and drink. When the official first denied his request to avoid defiling himself with royal food and wine, he negotiated. He made a sensible time-bound, outcome-based proposal: "let's give it a 10-day trial period and see" (vs. 12). The royal official agreed; after 10 days, the vegetable and water diet produced better results.



These results led to a change in royal policy. Because Daniel was confident in whose he was, he chose not to operate from a place of fear or defensiveness. He continued to pursue a reasonable solution and granted the official the benefit of the doubt, assuming that the official was well-intentioned and open to engaging in logical problem-solving. Daniel's approach is notable; it comes from a place of confidence, trust, and generosity toward the other.

Here are some lessons we can draw from Daniel's example. First, we can be confident of whose we are and that we serve a risen, sovereign Lord who holds it all in his hands. You may be called in big or little ways to work for change and confront the powers of the day, but, thank the Lord, you do not hold it all in your hands. Daniel lived faithfully through a tense time of serving kings while being confident that his ultimate loyalty was not to a king, not to a nation, not to his family or friends, but to his sovereign God. Second, Daniel extended grace to others through his interactions with royal officials, even when they disagreed. Theologian Dr. Richard Mouw calls this "convicted civility." Third, Daniel used his less-than-ideal position in society to work for good. Moses, Joseph, and Esther likewise advocate for their people based on their placement within the current power structure.

It is a useful exercise to take a moment to consider that we live in a different political and social setting than Daniel. Living as a citizen in a democratic country provides opportunities for direct involvement in the actions of the government. We tend to focus on either our own personal freedom or our interactions with the government when

we think of democratic citizenship. We have the constitutional right to free speech, we can protest, we have the right and privilege to vote, and we can contact our elected representatives to urge their action on matters important to us. Although these are important elements, reducing citizenship to just these is too narrow a definition. Alexis de Tocqueville summarized it years ago when observing early American life: the presence of a vibrant, active associational life that was not governmental and not market-driven. This means the freedom to associate, to work in the diverse public square or civil society to promote the common good and to create a hospitable public space that is not just for our own individual interests.

In recent years, we have seen greater division and decline in social trust and connection, now exacerbated by a pandemic that has increased isolation. To be good and attentive citizens, we should consider using our freedom to devote time and resources to the health of our local churches, civic organizations, and communities. When our families, churches, nonprofits, and communities are filled with a healthy social infrastructure, people can flourish more fully as social and relational beings.

Following Daniel's lead, we can extend a grace-filled trust to our neighbors as we work together in our organizational and community life to respect and honor our fellow image-bearers. And we can do so completely confident of whose we are.

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