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Considering Citizenship: Dare to be a Daniel

Abstract

"In order 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."

Posting about Daniel's example of service from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/considering-citizenship-dare-to-be-a-daniel/>

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Comments

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in things

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Considering Citizenship: Dare to be a Daniel

Abby Foreman

The prophet Daniel figures prominently in children's Bible story books and Sunday school lessons. With a den of lions, a fiery furnace, vain and dream-disturbed royal villains... it's like this book was written for the main stage. 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 and gifted 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 example and important reminder that civil law, or man's law, is *not* the same as God's law. When I think of Daniel's stories, this is where my heart and mind are usually drawn first.

In terms of dramatic this story-telling, 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. Even if the official had refused and this had turned into a more dramatic confrontational story, Daniel's approach is notable. It comes from a place of confidence, trust, and generosity towards the other.

As part of my scholarly work, I have explored the role of trust orientation in relationships between nonprofit service providers and government contractors. Through my review of the literature and my own study, I was interested to find that people who do what Daniel did—trusting others to be basically well-intentioned—are, in turn, trusted more easily by others.¹ The royal official trusted Daniel enough to consider and grant his proposal. High trusters are productive in their working relationships because they forgo the energy spent expecting people to prove their deservedness and worthiness *first* before trust is given. For the cynical among us, we might wonder if these types of people are foolish and easily scammed. But, those with high trust are typically wise and strategic operators—if a person betrays their trust, they'll incorporate that knowledge and experience into working more carefully with that particular person or organization without extrapolating that betrayal to an entire group, organization, community, or the entire human race.

Enough on that; let's get back to Daniel and some of the lessons we can draw from his example. First, we can be confident of *whose* we are and that we serve a risen and 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 you do not hold it all in your hands. Thank the Lord. 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.”² 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 and 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 successfully summarized it years ago in his observations of 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 just and hospitable public space that is not just for our own individual interests.

In 2018, I wrote here about the decline in social trust and connection. Since then, we have seen greater division and decline, now exacerbated by a pandemic that has increased isolation. In order 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 an active and healthy social infrastructure, people have the opportunity to 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.

FOOTNOTES

1. Uslaner, E. (2002). *The moral foundations of trust*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
2. Mouw, R. (2010). *Uncommon decency: Christian civility in an uncivil world*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.