

The Christian Economist as a Dream Interpreter

The Christian economist in government service can gain considerable insight from a study of the life of Daniel. Daniel's initial role in Babylon was similar to that of many government economists. He was expected to prepare forecasts of the future for use in government decision making. Although the technology of forecasting has changed from dream interpretation to statistical analysis of economic data, the ethical and spiritual issues related to the forecasting profession remain similar to those of Daniel's day.

In the life of Daniel, we see three different roles in which government economists find themselves: the staff economist who is not personally known to the top leadership, the trusted personal advisor to a senior official, and the administrator who exercises personal power. In each role, Daniel provides a useful model for the modern Christian economist.

I. Daniel the Staff Economist

Daniel was thrust into a foreign culture through captivity. After being selected for the king's service, he first received three years training "in the language and literature of the Babylonians" (Daniel 1:4). Before Daniel could offer useful advice, he needed to know how to communicate. The Christian economist of today must spend extensive time becoming familiar with the language and literature of the specific position to which he or she is called. Fully understanding the context in which one serves helps make the advice useful and allows it to be given in the appropriate language. In the government, each department and even administration has particular language that is used to communicate. Those who do not know the language cannot be useful. Ignorance of things the leadership considers important creates skepticism about the knowledge of things in which only the economist is expert. Daniel took his training seriously so that he could communicate fully with the king when called upon.

The Christian economist will to some extent share the fate of all the other economists, whether good or bad. Some political leaders appreciate the economists and others do not. They may assign impossible tasks as a test of whether the economists can perform. Daniel almost lost his life early in his forecasting career because of the combination of unrealistic expectations by the king and incompetence by other dream interpreters.

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Nebuchadnezzar was skeptical of the ability of his forecasters. He asked them to tell him both the dream and its interpretation, rather than the standard procedure of the king telling the dream and letting the forecasters provide the interpretation. When the forecasters balked at the new requirement, the king issued a strong form of eliminating the economics department: "This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon" (2:12). Daniel was among those sentenced to death, even though he had no direct part in the fiasco of the dream interpretation. Daniel intervened first with the executioner "with wisdom and tact" asking "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" and then went to the king with a request for time. When that request was granted, he gathered his friends and prayed and then received a vision of both the dream and the interpretation. He then received a promotion and honors, as well as saving both his own life and that of the other dream interpreters.

Important lessons from this story include the role of prayer, tact, and technical competence, as well as the recognition that bosses are not always appreciative or even rational. Daniel faced a difficult situation not of his making. He determined to do something about it and approached the problem with wisdom and tact, always maintaining deference toward the established power. He gathered friends and prayed for wisdom, then took the answer to the king.

Modern government employees are not likely to face the loss of their heads for failure. However, they may well lose their jobs or influence. We are called to serve not only the righteous masters, but also the overbearing and difficult (I Peter 2:18). Some assignments will be impossible and some supervisor expectations unreasonable. We should not concentrate on the fairness of the assignment or the likelihood of reward, but on accomplishing the tasks given to us in the best way possible.

II. Daniel the Trusted Personal Advisor

After Daniel's success at saving the forecasting department of Babylon, he became a personal advisor to the king. He was still expected to practice his specialty, interpreting dreams, but was no longer an anonymous member of the "magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners." He was personally known to the king and was called upon for solving particularly difficult problems. His biggest test in this role came when Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a tree being cut down and the stump bound with iron and bronze. The usual group of advisors announced they were unable to interpret the dream. Daniel was then called in and recognized the dream as a forecast of judgment on the king. Nebuchadnezzar would lose his mind and his kingdom and dwell with the beasts. Given the king's record, the interpretation was delicate. Bad news for a powerful, irrational boss is never welcome and often results in harm to the messenger. It is even possible that the other advisors recognized the meaning of the dream but were afraid to tell the king.

Daniel responded with a combination of deference and honesty. He also used the occasion to offer advice beyond his technical specialty. Daniel indicated the negative nature of the dream obliquely at first: "My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries!" (4:19). He then presented the straightforward interpretation of the dream: "You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven" (4:25). Daniel did not stop with the interpretation, but offered some additional unsolicited advice: "Therefore, O King, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue" (4:27).

The role of personal advisor is often earned through good performance with a technical specialty. Economists who

perform well may find themselves as the trusted advisors of senior leaders. That role brings both rewards and dangers. Political leaders do not like to receive criticism and may create strong pressures to shade the truth toward good news. It is particularly difficult to be in a situation as Daniel found himself: the possessor of bad news about his boss that was not known to the boss himself. However, at the risk of death, Daniel not only presented the news but added unsolicited advice to repent. It was only through the performance of his technical duties in an exemplary way that he earned the opportunity to provide private advice to the king.

One of the critical roles that the government Christian economist can provide is that of private advice to the political leaders they serve. That role comes about by being useful to them. Daniel did not simply seek an appointment with the king to ask him to repent, though presumably he knew that repentance was desirable for the king even before the dream. He first earned the respect of the king through performing his duties in an outstanding fashion, then offered the spiritual advice in an appropriate setting that came about because of his status as a trusted advisor. The role of advisor requires combining the technical knowledge of economics with the "message of wisdom" (I Cor. 2:6) and the "language and literature of the Babylonians" (Daniel 1:4). Thus one must know his or her economics specialty, know the Scriptures and be full of the Holy Spirit, and know the language and customs of the particular workplace in order to function well as a personal advisor.

III. Daniel the Envied Administrator

Daniel survived a violent change in administration. The Chaldean kingdom was overthrown and replaced by the empire of the Medes and Persians. Daniel not only escaped death in the conquest but was appointed to a high position in the new kingdom. The new king Darius organized his empire with 120 satraps reporting to three administrators. Darius appointed Daniel to one of the three top

positions. In this role, Daniel moved out of the pure forecasting business. There is no record that he interpreted dreams or made other forecasts for Darius. His general wisdom and integrity appear to have been the distinguishing factors. Frequently, successful economists move into administrative positions. In such positions, they do less formal economics and more general administration and policy making.

In his new role as administrator, Daniel again excelled in every task given to him. "Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom" (6:3). The king's plan to promote Daniel to supervision over his previously equal partners made the other leaders envious and led to their efforts to protect their own positions by undermining Daniel. Bureaucratic infighting is not new and is not likely to end soon. Excelling in government service creates favor with the administrator and fear and envy by colleagues who see a threat to their prestige and positions. One person's promotion causes the denial of a promotion to someone else. Those who excel and attain high office should expect to have enemies even among their ostensible friends and colleagues.

In Daniel's case, the envious administrators failed to find any grounds for criticizing Daniel's government service: "he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (6:4). They did not even attempt to attack him directly to the king because of his reputation and respect. Instead, they presented a seemingly non-controversial proposal that flattered the king's vanity. They announced that all the administrators and satraps had agreed that people should pray only to the king for thirty days. The assertion of unanimity was clearly a lie because it is inconceivable that Daniel had agreed to the proposal, but enough were agreed to make the unanimity claim believable. The king signed the decree without knowing it was directed against Daniel, but was not able to revoke it when he realized the truth. He was

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tricked by his advisors into taking action against a trusted subordinate through adopting a seemingly innocuous and non-controversial policy. Daniel continued his practice of prayer three times a day as the envious administrators expected him to do. Daniel was then put into the lions' den despite the efforts of the king to save him.

Success and failure go together in government service. Those who are promoted to high office incur both envy of their colleagues and efforts by the next administration to replace them. Reverses are not necessarily a result of fault but come about through exemplary behavior as well. No one should be surprised at reverses of fortune in government.

The Christian economist who is promoted to a senior position gains a great opportunity to practice forgiveness. He or she can fully expect that others are attempting to cause harm to reputation or position. In order to keep a proper attitude, it is critical to routinely forgive both known and unknown offenses. Challenges will come over aspects of the job or over personal attributes. Just as Daniel continued his customary prayer after the decree was signed, the Christian administrator is called to carry on his or her duties in a forgiving spirit of service to the leader, without being sidetracked by the various kinds of bureaucratic infighting that are routine in all kinds of government service.

IV. Conclusion

Several lessons for the Christian economist in government service can be drawn from Daniel's life: (1) *Be diligent in ordinary work.* Diligence includes competence in the formal economics useful for the particular job, attention to the needs of

the organization, and awareness of the language and constraints of the organization. The Christian economist need not be the most brilliant performer, but should never be accused of slacking off or resting on civil service protections against adverse action for failure to perform. He or she earns the right to advise senior leaders through diligence in assigned duties and a reputation for trustworthiness. (2) *Be especially honest.* This includes ordinary kinds of workplace honesty such as not abusing sick leave as well as honesty in economic conclusions and recommendations. Government and consulting economists have strong pressures to produce forecasts or studies that please the boss or client. Just as Daniel told the truth to Nebuchadnezzar even when it was contrary to what he wanted to hear, so it is necessary for Christian economists to tell the truth in their professional activities. (3) *Respond with tact and deference to authority even when being unreasonably challenged by bosses or colleagues.* Daniel first came to prominence from his response to the king's angry order to cut off his head. (4) *Be prepared to offer wise advice when the occasion arises.* The government policy context offers an ideal opportunity to mix Christian value judgments with formal economic analysis. Christian economists who are known for their diligence and integrity are likely to be asked for advice. It is often difficult to predict when the opportunity will arise. In some cases, there is a formal structured project with known deadlines. In other cases, a crisis arises suddenly and advice is sought immediately with no time for full preparation and studies. ■