

DRAW THE LINE

Daniel 1:1-21

They say that politics is the art of compromise. I guess that in any workable relationship we have with another person, then there have to be some elements of compromise. If both parties are rigid in insisting on having it as “my way or the highway” in everything that comes up, then failure is often the predictable outcome of that relationship. There is a lot of wisdom needed in deciding what issues are important enough to be uncompromising and know what else really doesn't matter. In the final analysis, most things in which decisions are needed, the choices are not all that critical. A bit of good advice is to choose your battles carefully and don't be adamant about the trivial which can waste a lot of time and energy and that approach will buy us a lot of “good will” and allow energy to be focused on the more important things that are worth drawing the line that we will not cross.

That then brings up questions of “Where **do** we draw the line?” What are the issues that are so important that we need to “stand our ground” and not compromise? Several events in the life history of Daniel present excellent case studies of how to answer such questions. The event we will look at today would seem to be one that might appear to many observers to be a good candidate for compromise, but it was one in which Daniel and several of his friends drew the line.

The Setting – 1:1-2

¹ In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god. Daniel 1:1–2 (NASB95)

This was one of many invasions of that area by the Babylonians. The likely trigger for this act of war of besieging the city was a failure of Judah to pay the taxes or tribute that had been imposed on them several years before. We tend to think that the IRS is oppressive, but this was really bad even compared to the IRS. Nebuchadnezzar was like the IRS on steroids. He hit the Jews where it really hurt them. He confiscated their religious treasures and took them to his country and put them in the pagan temple of the Babylonian god Nabu.

Notice the two dimensions of the conflict that was happening as described in these verses. There is a horizontal and vertical aspect and these perspectives can be found throughout the writings of Daniel. In some sense, the events that are described in the overall context of this book are representative of the overall larger struggle between good and evil.

In the horizontal dimension (physical realm) we see that Jehoiakim was reigning in Judah and that Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and besieged it. This is Babylon versus Jerusalem. In the vertical dimension (spiritual realm), we see that the Lord gave Jehoiakim and some of the temple vessels into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. This is the city of this world system against the city of God. This conflict started in Genesis chapter three where we see enmity declared between the serpent and the seed of the woman and finds its culmination in Revelation chapter eighteen in which we find “Babylon is fallen.”

In the horizontal view, it appears that Babylon had won against Jerusalem and that the god of the Babylonians was greater than the God of Judah. In the vertical view, we see that God is in control and that God was using Babylon to execute judgment upon Jerusalem for its sinfulness.

Evaluate What Others Demand – 1:3-7

³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, ⁴ youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵ The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service. ⁶ Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Beltshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach and to Azariah Abed-nego. Daniel 1:3-7 (NASB95)

In addition to hurting Judah by stealing the treasures from the temple, more damage was done to them by kidnaping the finest of their youth and taking them to Babylon to work for the Babylonian way of doing things. These young people first needed to be “reeducate” so that their thinking would be what we might today call “politically correct.” This education program was like a college education which was designed to train future leaders and would teach them the Chaldean language, their history and literature which would be infused with the world view and philosophy (religion) of those people. Recall that this area was referred to as the land of Shinar. This was where the tower of Babel was built and was the heartland and birthplace of pagan religions, astrology, and the seeds of humanism were sown and took root there.

We can compare what Babylon was doing with what is happening today in our nation. Those in political power today advocate making government-controlled education universal and that it needs to start very early in the life of every child. The ideal is that every person would get a college degree. Many people who have examined the teaching materials that are being used are convinced that the ultimate goal is to produce a population that has politically-correct thinking. Instead of producing leaders by selecting the brightest and highest potential youth, the efforts today are so diluted that what we are producing is a general population that can barely “follow” (much less lead) and many of them wind up being parasites whose only activity is “consumption and no production” of anything except illegitimate children who cannot escape the welfare trap.

Since we have become so “anti-Christian” in our government, then a new language that is politically correct is being forced on our culture, a reinterpretation of history that excludes the impact of Christian thought has been written and the endorsement of behaviors such as killing babies in the womb, homosexual practices and legalizing of mind-altering drugs is common place. Where do we as the Church draw the line?

In verse five, we see that these bright young people were given what was considered the best food the Babylonians had and the best wine. It could be described as that which was “fit for the king.” Does this sound familiar to what our government is trying to do with prescribing what foods will be allowed in public schools and even what can be served in restaurants? There are laws that will not allow you to buy raw milk for human consumption even though it can be readily purchased in European countries in vending machines. The government has promoted a recommended diet (the food pyramid) that is completely contrary to what is needed for good health and leads to obesity and a multitude of health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. In conjunction with large corporations, we have allowed contamination of our foods sources with genetically modified grains and vegetables and antibiotic-laced meat products that are sold in our stores. Most of the processed foods we buy contain some form of high-fructose corn syrup with can lead to a multitude of health problems. Where do we as individuals draw the line?

In this passage we find the introduction of four young men of stellar character who would

have significant roles in demonstrating what is important enough to know “where to refuse compromise” and to faithfully hold to the truth of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. Their names were Daniel which means “God is my Judge,” Hananiah which means “the Lord has favored,” Mishael which means “a godly person,” and Azariah which means “the Lord has helped.” Obviously, these names were “religiously” unacceptable in a pagan-philosophy driven nation. Their names were changed to Beltshazzar which means “lord (Baal) of the straiteneds (those who were restrained) treasure,” Shadrach which means “royal” or “the great scribe,” Meshach which means “guest of a king,” and Abed-nego which means “servant of Nebo.” The purpose of these name changes was to remove any reference to Jehovah God and to replace them with names related to no gods or to the gods of the Chaldeans.

Should we then be surprised to find that freedom of expression is being restricted in our nation when that expression is related to God, to Jesus, to Christianity? However, at the same time there no limits on how vulgar and perverted words might be that are used in literature, in the media or even in public statements.

Act Boldly on Principle – 1:8-10

⁸ But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king’s choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself. ⁹ Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials, ¹⁰ and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king.” Daniel 1:8–10 (NASB95)

The diet that was being provided for these young men was either deliberately or coincidentally working to destroy their prior religious background. The food was seen by Daniel as something that would defile himself. This was likely because it contained meats such as pork or catfish which was forbidden in Kosher foods. It is also possible that the foods had been offered in sacrifices to the pagan gods of the Chaldeans which would also make such foods unfit for consumption by a devote Israelite. While there were no restrictions on wine in the Law of Moses, however, there may have been some concern regarding the way the grapes were processed that would be related to possible contamination of the wine if it were not properly handled. What the Babylonians produced probably did not meet Kosher standards.

While there is some possibility that they could have been physically harmed by eating pork and catfish and drinking Babylonian wine, the major concern appears to be religious purity. That then raises the question of where do we draw the line with regard to various elements of our faith. Baptist churches are known to have (as part of their church covenants) some statement regarding abstinence from beverage alcohol. Some members are very careful to never cross that line and others see nothing wrong with consumption of alcoholic beverages. We could identify any number of items that might be questionable with regard to their effects on our physical health and the use of some of these might also be detrimental to our spiritual witness. Each of us should consider the impact our choices and determine where we draw the line.

This issue was so important for Daniel and his friends that they were emboldened to take a stand and that resulted in a request (not a demand) for an exception so that they could be faithful to what they understood would be pleasing to God. That was the horizontal element of the situation. The vertical aspect is seen in that God had intervened on their behalf by influencing the person in charge of getting these young people ready for working in the Babylonian system.

How important would it be to have the favor (rather than the opposition) of those in

charge when we are dealing with people in the world around us? I have seen it work both ways in the lives of various people in their jobs. This favorable or unfavorable outlook by those in positions of influence typically has more impact on a person's success in their career advancement than ability or skill or character. Those who are favored get promoted and those who are not favored get forgotten or find resistance in everything they propose or try to do. Many times we give credit to "luck" rather than realizing that the source of such favor is related to God's causing something to happen.

In applying the lessons of this account to our lives, we should not overlook the fact that Daniel took the initiative in trying to obtain something out of the ordinary. While the official viewed Daniel favorably, he did not take the initiative to provide an accommodation. Too many times we just wait around for someone to come to us with an opportunity to serve or to get involved in various things when we should be taking the initiative.

Be Prepared for Tests – 1:11-16

¹¹ But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ "Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see." ¹⁴ So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food. ¹⁶ So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables. Daniel 1:11-16 (NASB95)

When it comes to questions of drawing the line versus compromise, it may be necessary to use a creative approach. Daniel was undoubtedly a very astute young man with a sharp mind. He recognized the dilemma with which the overseer was faced in doing something that was not exactly what the king wanted done. Instead of making a scene and making demands, Daniel proposed a "conditional compromise" that would allow an alternative to the prescribed diet based on results.

Obviously, the method of operation of the king's official had not become so bureaucratic that he was oblivious to results. He was willing to engage in this "conditional compromise" that would be principle and results driven rather than blindly following some ill-conceived regulation. The lessons for us when we are faced with tough decisions and choices are to know what we are doing and to realize that results really do matter.

The fact that the results were favorable showed that Daniel and his friends who participated in this test or experiment were disciplined enough to "eat their veggies" and to also give attention to their overall health and appearance. They knew that a lot was dependent on their success. This is a realization that every one of us should keep in mind. The advice to be prepared for tests is good since so many things we encounter in everyday life are, in fact, tests that will show to us and anyone else who is watching whether we have integrity or hypocrisy.

Trust God for Wisdom – 1:17-21

¹⁷ As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams. ¹⁸ Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's personal service. ²⁰ As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm. ²¹ And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king. Daniel 1:17-21 (NASB95)

Commitment to being faithful to what we believe that God wants us to do is always rewarded by God. These four excelled in what they did. They learned what was taught and they

made a favorable impression on those who observed them. When the final exams came, they passed their exams (interviews with the kings) in such an impressive way that they were chosen for positions of great responsibility. As the king continued to interact with these young men, he found them to have better wisdom and understanding than all of the advisors he had been using.

If they had not applied themselves with diligence to their education and if they had been satisfied to just get by, then they would not have had the opportunity for their superb intelligence and skill to be discovered.

There are a lot of people who are smarter and wiser and more logical than those who are “in charge” in many areas. The problem is in how to have their skills discovered and used to benefit the world. Many times the key to being discovered is the basic integrity, the commitment and the willingness to draw the line with regard to what we will accept in our lives.