

A classic thing happened the other day that reminded me about who I always want to hang out with professionally. I had a pretty obscure question about federal income taxes, so I walked down the hall to talk to Dan. Now the first thing you should know is that this event happened well before 7:00 am, because Dan is consistently one of two people at my workplace who's at work very early, often before dawn. The second thing you should know is that Dan's a professor of accounting and a national and international tax specialist, including his advising for a significant stint residing in Europe. The third thing you should know is that Dan is quite committed to being very reliably accurate for his clients and his students. The fourth thing you should know is that Dan is simply humble in the best, Christian sense of the word.

So, when I asked Dan my obscure question about federal taxes, he asked me a couple of clarifying questions. Then he gave me the response that true experts are always willing to give in the interests of high accuracy and top quality: Dan simply said, "I don't know." Of course, the fact that Dan said "I don't know" and was willing to say that is precisely a hallmark of a top expert!

That morning I went on to teach four classes, from 8:00 am to 1:30 pm, and when I returned to my laptop and checked my email, I found an email sent to me by Dan. And that email simply had one piece of content: a link to an answer to the question I had asked Dan early that morning. Dan didn't even have any extra commentary. None needed. The link was sufficient.

Now, you gotta know a couple of additional things here. Dan is a very busy guy. And I'm not a client of Dan's—I'm simply just a co-worker. Dan didn't owe me an answer or a follow-up conversation or anything else. But, to his credit, he just couldn't stand leaving it at "I don't know." He wanted to get to the right answer for his own learning, an answer that would hold up for use in his own toolkit. Then he shared it with me. And he didn't work to embellish it with a bunch of his opinion. So let's recap: first, the honest response: "I don't know." Second, the answer, properly researched. All hail Dan the man!

If there's anything you should wish for and work towards, it's surrounding yourself with knowledge workers like Dan, both in your professional life and your personal life. And sadly, they are pretty scarce! That's largely because the American culture has evolved to often placing a premium on appearances and opinions above real substance and truth, even on vitally important matters. You know that, all too well!

Take the COVID pandemic, for example. Is there anyone hearing my voice right now who believes that the national, state-level, and local policy makers truly knew all the necessary facts at the times they were making policies? Well, no, because we know the pandemic was evolving! Nevertheless, the supposedly top medical people, the talkers in front of the hungry TV cameras, spoke confidently of "Science" with a clear capital S, often with the unmistakable tones of worshippers who have heard from their God. In the COVID era, which have you substantially heard from those in power: "I don't know"—or "The Science tells us"...as if it were capital-T Truth, not subject to change?

But change did come, as it always does. And the capital-S Science apparently continued to speak into the ears of its anointed worshippers, the supposed "answers" or "remedies" to the pandemic would change, often in a very short period of time. Apparently, to policy-making politicians and bureaucrats, capital-S Science is completely reliable today and speaks to the insider experts who issue iron-clad decrees of what must be done *today, urgently, to the letter, down to each and every person!* But then the Science-gods change their minds tomorrow, and only the prophets of Science can discern the paths we absolutely must change to next! "Please, Dr. Fauci, can we meet for church in our little town this week?"

Do you think I'm against science here? Absolutely not! In our era, we enjoy unimaginable fruits of God's bounty and humanity's ever-growing understanding of science. Wow—digital amazements, space travel, mechanical inventions, new pharmaceuticals—the list is endless! And humanity will continue to unlock the secrets of science that God authored from the beginning. In fact, we are appointed by God to be good stewards of everything, including the responsible management of ongoing, evolving scientific discovery!

So what we're talking about today is what the posture of truly-responsible experts should be—those humble actions to be taken prudently on what is actually known, those careful communications to clients or consumers or constituents about what is truly known. That's right, real experts unswervingly avoid overreach for the sake of appearing more like end-all experts or for the sake of gaining and keeping power.

All this brings remembrance of the established church centuries ago, where access to unapproved translations of the Bible was forbidden. Names of banned translators like John Wycliffe and William Tyndale come to mind. See, church authorities were against ordinary Christians reading translations into commonly-used languages—they wanted to control what "God would tell us." And along these same lines of control, as students of history, we're well aware of conflicts between Galileo and the Roman Church.

Interestingly, all this is really *not* about science or about God or about Science vs. God. Ultimately, there's no conflict between God and science because God created it all! What it was about in Galileo's time and what it's *essentially* about in our time too, is this: *the power of people over other people*. Of course, legitimate truth and doctrine and policy are very worthy of close attention and advocacy. But all too often in history, the stripping away of layers reveals it's really about power over others—getting it...keeping it!

The problem for the people with power over COVID policy is that, in the modern era, *you can't easily keep people in the dark simply as an exercise of your will*. Having a spokesman for a government say "Science tells us" is in the same boat as a pastor of any given church saying "God tells us"—because listeners have stronger resources and greater authority to refer to than just the voice of a spokesperson. And rightly so!

But that doesn't mean that everybody is an expert—people can't possibly be an expert in everything! It does mean that people have the right to be wrong. And there's the rub for many focused on COVID issues: they worry about the community problems that arise if everybody doesn't wear a mask or get vaccinated according to what "Science tells us." What they seem to be less focused on are the community problems that arise and fester because of some policymakers condescendingly forcing their ever-changing version of Science on others via government requirements—you know, like people being forbidden to visit dying family members in medical or living facilities "due to COVID." Did Science really tell us that?

Suppose that the key officeholders and appointed bureaucrats handling COVID policy had actually said something like this. "It's too early for us to know exactly the magnitude of what's unfolding and what to exactly expect. We simply don't know enough, and well-qualified medical experts can and do legitimately disagree. We see this manifested by how different localities listening to different experts have addressed these issues differently. But we do believe this pandemic is dangerous and deserves the close attention and prudent action of every local policymaker and of every citizen who respects their neighbors while cherishing their personal freedoms to make choices affecting their lives. But because we live in a republic, this process will likely be very messy and contentious."

Would that fix the issue? Of course not! But humanity and governments are not in charge of fixing pandemics, only responding to them in balance with other priorities. Still, a posture of humility—one that includes accurate answers of "I don't know"—would go a long way towards letting families and communities work out their differences without governments reducing basic freedoms. Government cannot create virtue; it can only try to create an uncertain measure of safety. Of course, such government-virtue-installing extends well beyond COVID, including by activist Christians of every political stripe. Yes, it's a well-worn practice for governments to force citizens into coerced behaviors. But the truth is, *people actually own their own virtues*—we know this because Jesus Himself will hold every person accountable.

Here's the deal. There's a lot of wisdom and humility and power and winsomeness that's manifested by simply saying "I don't know." It's actually how people become true experts, by not overreaching into areas they don't really have the answers to. That's just basic integrity. We should all strive to be like Dan and say "I don't know" when we don't know, and in so doing, build our record as humble truth-tellers.

