

Commentary: Clear and compelling communication of centrism

August 7, 2023

This article is 9 of 9 in the [Leading from the Center series](#) by three writers.

On Friday nights in the fall, I communicate from the center—the center of a high school football field. Sometimes both the decibels and the emotions are rather high. As a referee—the one with the white hat—clear and compelling communication with everyone involved, including those with competing interests, is as important as my grasp of the rules.

Whether it's a high school football game, a school with various constituencies or a congregation that values disparate opinions, to hold the center is not easy.

David Brubaker can help us.

Brubaker is a dean at Eastern Mennonite University and a master mediator. I became a fan and student of Brubaker when I was preparing to help churches deal with conflict through the Center for Healthy Churches. His book *When the Center Does Not Hold* is a helpful resource as we talk about “clear and compelling communication of centrism.”

Brubaker teaches us to communicate with clarity, compassion, courage and connection—four “Cs” he attributes to John Maxwell. Let's consider each of those, with an emphasis on holding the center of “big tent” congregations.

Clarity

In congregations that value diversity of opinion, it is important that the leader be clear—clear with himself or herself and clear with the church.

To be clear with oneself is to understand one's values and to act consistent with those values. To be clear with oneself requires investing enough prayerful time and energy to know what he or she believes about matters that really matter. We simply cannot afford not to hold convictions on key topics.

The congregation deserves to know what their spiritual leaders believe. People tend to feel manipulated when their leaders are not forthcoming about their beliefs. I believe the people in the church I serve deserve to know my position on important topics—even the tough, divisive ones.

A lack of clarity is unhealthy even for the leader. Russell Moore observed in his latest book, *Losing Our Religion*, “[Y]ear after year of playing to whatever ‘the base’ wants or expects from the church of Jesus Christ does something not only to the institution ... but also to the souls of those playing the game.”

Cognitive dissonance weighs heavy on the spiritual leader.

Brubaker quotes Brené Brown: “Daring leaders who live into their values are never silent about hard things.”

He also echoed the observation by Speed Leas that murkiness is as dangerous as authoritarianism.

Compassion

Brubaker notes: “Clarity compels us to speak with conviction. Compassion

invites us to listen with concentration.”

Arrogance and indifference from the leader are lethal. After all, we are shepherds, not CEOs. It requires a loving heart and a thick skin to deal compassionately with people whose views differ radically from our own—especially if we often find ourselves in their crosshairs. But if Jesus is our model of leadership, we have to love people enough to hurt.

Courage

Because so many of us lead with our hearts, it requires a great deal of valor to risk having those hearts broken. We are tempted to be reticent regarding divisive issues. Nonetheless, people deserve clarity, honesty and the willingness to make tough calls from those who lead and serve them. Clarity, honesty and the willingness to make tough calls require grit.

The desire for approval, so common among us, makes leadership in conflict difficult. Yet, the willingness to endure criticism and disapproval is a brave choice good leaders make.

Connection

I admit my natural response to conflict is to withdraw emotionally from those who oppose my leadership. It’s easier emotionally to write people off—to dismiss them. But in my heart of hearts, I recognize how gutless and unhealthy that is. So, when I’m at my best, I engage them.

It is a hard choice, for example, to visit our detractors in the hospital, to write them notes of congratulations after significant events or to officiate the funerals of their parents. A commitment to remaining connected means the choice to care for people who really don’t like us.

Treating people with dignity does not require our admiration. It does

require intentional connection, unless, as Brubaker notes, the relationship had become abusive.

Those are the four “Cs” I learned from Brubaker. I would add one word of my own: Infrequency. Too bad it doesn’t start with a ‘c.’

Infrequency

The Bible spends little time on the topics that dominate today’s culture wars. So should we.

Out of respect for the authority of the Bible, I believe we should speak as clearly and courageously as the Bible speaks about hot topics. But, out of that same respect for the authority of the Bible, we should hesitate to speak more frequently than Scripture does about those divisive subjects.

The spiritual lostness of humankind, the injustices experienced by the marginalized, the Great Commission and the Great Commandment—the Bible speaks often of such things. Our preaching should reflect the priorities of the Bible.

If we are going to be salt and light, we must tackle—from a biblical perspective—the issues being debated in our wider culture. Yet, hot topics should not define us. We should be known for timeless truths, of which grace is a principal.

When we spend a lot more time than the Bible does on particular issues, we begin to sound like we are driven by agendas rather than God’s Spirit. Some ministers seem to like a good fight, and that seems like more of a personality flaw than faithfulness to Scripture.

As I saw somewhere, “Anyone can steer the ship when the seas are calm.” These days of such polarization demand our clear and compelling communication. They require the courage of conviction and the choice of

compassion. These days require the wisdom to know when to speak and when to remain silent.

So, buckle up, friend. Holding the Baptist center will require the best leadership we can offer.

Travis Collins is senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala. The views expressed are those of the author. This article is 9 of 9 in the [Leading from the Center series](#) by three writers.