

Commentary: The value of centrism for the church

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This article is 3 of 9 in the [Leading from the Center series](#) by three writers.

I love the church. I love the “big C” church, and I love the local church down on the corner. I’ve spent my adult life serving local churches. I am humbled by the calling of God on my life that has allowed me such a privilege.

The church is where theology and real life merge in real time. It is a beautiful thing to behold. This is exactly how God designed it to be. It has been that way since Pentecost. Think about it.

Diversity of the early church

What does Luke tell us about the people assembled in Jerusalem when the Spirit of God was given to his people? Luke writes, “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5).

There were Greek-speaking Jews from the Diaspora as well as Aramaic-speaking Jews from Palestine in Jerusalem for Pentecost. This theologically and culturally diverse setting was the context for the birth of the church. We know from reading Acts 6 the membership of the first church reflected this diversity.

In time, the church spread across the ancient Greco-Roman world of the first century. The Book of Acts records how the gospel was embraced by Jews and Gentiles as Christians began to share their new-found faith.

In studying the writings of Paul and Peter in the New Testament, we further discover the churches established in this era demonstrated the uncanny ability to offer community to people from all walks of life.

In contrast to the segmented norms of first-century life, churches in strategic communities—such as Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Colossae, Ephesus, Antioch and Rome—were places where cultural norms were set aside as believers gathered together in missional communities of faith.

Amazingly, churches were places where men, women, Aramaic-speaking Jews, Greek-speaking Jews, Gentiles, slaves, masters, the poor and the wealthy came together for worship, fellowship and service for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These “colonies of heaven” became compelling examples of both a unity and a community thought to be impossible to the people of the first century. The power of the gospel to bring disparate people together offered a stark contrast to the divisions of everyday life and proved to be a powerful force of transformation.

Church at Antioch as example

As a pastor, Bible student and church historian, I have given much time to research and reflection on how God used the church in the first century. In particular, the church at Antioch has become both an inspiration and a model for me as I have sought to lead the churches I have served.

Acts 11 records how this church was marked by diversity from its inception as both Jews and Greeks were reached with the gospel. Further, the church was a center of radical spiritual transformation that led others to refer to its members as “Christians” for the first time.

The grace of this church was on display as it readily accepted both

Barnabas from Jerusalem and Saul from Tarsus into its leadership circle. The generosity of this church was demonstrated by its willingness immediately to assist the Mother Church in Jerusalem when a great famine created a great need.

It also became the first “sending” church of the New Testament era when it released Saul (Paul) and Barnabas for a missionary endeavor that would change the course of Christian history. Wow, what a church!

Diversity, discipleship, dexterity, devotion, grace, generosity, courage, imagination—all were on display in Antioch. The church moved beyond the limitations of the extreme Jewish/Christian perspective that the gospel was limited to the Jews. Yet, the church honored the Jewish heritage of the founders of Christianity.

From my perspective, the church at Antioch found a centrist path that could be emulated in any century by any church.

Centrism is like a river

From a practical perspective, I have found the image of a spring-fed, stream-fed river to be helpful to me as I lead a centrist church. Imagine a river comprised of several streams and springs. No one stream could muster the force of the entire river on its own.

As these sources merge, the deepest part of the channel is in the middle of the river. In that deep central channel, the various sources contribute value, strength, power and life.

With Antioch as my theological/ecclesiological/missional inspiration, and images like a river as my practical inspiration, I have sought to lead our local church to find the path that brings diverse perspectives towards the center so we might be deeper and more effective together as a church.

No one stream or perspective always carries the day. We are sharpened, honed, challenged and blessed as we offer our views and contribute to the mix at the deepest level of our church. As the river continues to flow, it feeds the streams as well. We all benefit from the life of an effective church.

Centrism is like the early church

Today, the temptation is to migrate toward the extremes of the theological spectrum. Consequently, there are examples of churches that have become incredibly homogeneous theologically, ethnically and even politically. While I understand the temptation, I don't feel called to lead a church toward either extreme.

Today, we have an opportunity similar to our first-century forbears to offer something unique to our polarized culture.

We can distinguish ourselves by developing colonies of heaven where the cultural divisions that have become normalized in our day can be overcome by the sweeping power of the Spirit of God. We can forge missional fellowships that bring divergent perspectives together in the deep channel of shared community.

As my friend Travis Collins has pointed out, [centrist leaders hold deep convictions](#). Our theology is anything but "watered down." I am committed to the centrist position. From Antioch to Arlington, I am convinced life flourishes in the deep water.

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