

Commentary: What is centrist?

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This article is 1 of 9 in the [Leading from the Center series](#) by three writers.

From 1981 to 1992, I was a graduate student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. After earning a Master of Divinity degree, I immediately enrolled in the Ph.D. program with an aim to major in church history focusing on the Reformation era. However, I found myself enamored with the history of American Christianity in general and Baptist history in particular.

Any astute Southern Baptist will recognize those years at Southwestern coincide with a major controversy in our denomination. Unavoidably, this controversy marked me in some ways.

In fact, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the topic—*Factors Contributing to the Resurgence of Fundamentalism in the Southern Baptist Convention: 1979-1990*. This scholarly project allowed me the opportunity to study the tensions experienced in this conflict by those on the right and on the left. I conducted interviews with movement leaders Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler, and with Baptist statesman Herschel Hobbs as a part of my research.

Pastoral experience

In addition to this academic exercise, I began serving as a pastor of a local Baptist church in 1983. For the past 40 years, this has been my profession. I have served churches in rural communities, suburban contexts, mid-sized cities and, for the past 22 years, in the heart of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex.

I am quite familiar with the theological spectrum and its expression through local churches, associations and denominations. I have attended all manner of denominational gatherings, local pastoral affinity groups, multi-faith associations, civic organizations and community action meetings.

I have worked with fundamentalists, conservatives, moderates, liberals, progressives, nones, atheists and agnostics on various projects across the years, during which I have observed the actions of both extreme theological liberals on the left and ardent fundamentalists on the right.

I've attended meetings where I was either the most conservative or the most liberal person in the room. Further, in my generation, we have had the splintering of various denominational bodies along theological lines. Consequently, there has been a weakening of relationships and a diminishing of helpful theological dialogue resulting in a further bolstering of extremism.

I cannot adequately express my disappointment and discomfort with these developments. It has been to our detriment on many fronts.

Between the extremes

Through the years, I have given myself to much theological reflection, prayer and dialogue with other dissatisfied fellow pilgrims. I have expressed my desire for us to find a “third space” or a “third way” that would offer more authentic community and missional partnership. While I have found some of that in my current state convention, it is in my local churches where it has been most gratifying.

Today, I am blessed to pastor a “purple” church. Our church has found a way to engage in deep relationships, forge meaningful ministry partnerships, celebrate the diversity of viewpoints, acknowledge the reality of profound differences in theological perspectives, and yet maintain a

sweet fellowship.

What word might I use to describe what I have experienced in my own churches? I've never been a fan of the label "moderate." It is inadequate. I prefer the word "centrist." What is "centrist?"

Defining 'centrist'

Theological centrism is, for me, a holy middle. It is a space deep and rich with conviction. It is a position that is biblically based, Christ-centered, missionally focused, relationally healthy and historically orthodox.

Theological centrism offers the space to hold tension, live with some level of ambiguity, engage relationally across a spectrum, partner in mission with like-minded brothers and sisters, and speak with grace and clarity.

Some might argue the centrist position is theologically weak and lifeless. It is too "watered down" to accomplish anything. It can't "move the needle" in today's loud and boisterous cultural context.

During the height of our denominational controversy, one prominent conservative pastor supposedly quipped, "The only thing in the middle of the road is a dead skunk."

I beg to disagree. The middle of the road—the centrist position—is a good and honorable position to hold. The centrist position offers adherents the opportunity to avoid the extremist views so often held by the right and the left.

I contend the center of the road—a little left-of-center or right-of-center—offers us a better path than the edges of the road or the ditches.

Through the years, I have met many who migrate toward the left or right edges of the road. I've met my share of those off in the ditch as well. My

experience has been “ditch people”—right or left—are incredibly similar in demeanor and action despite their theological differences.

‘A wonderful alternative’

We currently live in a quick-to-judge, soundbite, mic-drop society. Everyone wants a quick fix, a simple answer to complex issues that is understandable and tweetable. Folks love to argue their case.

Many love their echo chambers. Some refuse to listen to news that does not fit their conclusions or strengthen their narrative. This is all to our detriment. The centrist position offers us a wonderful alternative in today’s climate.

A theological centrist must hold to sincere and deep theological convictions. Though we are historically orthodox in our views, we make room for nuance, disagreement, diversity, complexity and what oftentimes is messy.

Our methods of applying those convictions may not be as loud or tweet-worthy as our brothers and sisters on the extremes, but they are just as deeply held.

I’m grateful to be a part now of a developing missional movement comprised of theological centrists from across North America who range from right-of-center to left-of-center in our views.

We have found great joy in fellowship and are experiencing great synergy as we are creating shared missional investments that are Christ-centered, historically orthodox and missionally significant. To say I have found my tribe is an understatement. I am thrilled beyond measure.

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