

Voices: Teaching the church to think well

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We know that polarization is the mark of our current social, political and religious environments. I don't know if there has been another time where so many people are on opposite extremes of so many different issues — from health care to gun control, to climate change, to foreign policy and many more.

If you are a pastor, a ministry leader, a Sunday School teacher or a small group leader, I know one of your aspirations is to help those you lead think in a more Christlike way. But, additionally, one of our goals needs to be to help them know how to think.

Recently, I read Alan Jacobs' latest book "How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds," and I was struck by this realization: Part of what we are called to do as church leaders is not only to lead people to think well about Christ but simply to lead people to think well.

'The repugnant cultural other'

Throughout the book, Jacobs reveals the forces that drive us to think the way we do. He talks about the force of thinking with others, the forces of attraction and repulsion, the force of grouping and the forces of metaphor and myth. These forces guide our thinking like the banks of a river guide the water.

And even if we do not need to change course, we must be aware that the water will only go where the riverbank allows.

The problem that Jacobs points out in his book (which is definitely worth the read) is that when we are faced with an idea that's contrary to our thinking, although we may find that idea repulsive, instead of labeling only the idea repulsive, we label the one who holds the idea as repulsive — or what Jacobs borrows from Susan Harding and calls the “repugnant cultural other” (RCO).

Jacobs' main goal in the book is to show that the “RCO” is indeed a human being and realize that we might, under different circumstances, hold the same view that we find repulsive.

Moving beyond us and them

In fact, we could say that one of the purposes of Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan was to show this very idea. The priest and the Levite may have been repulsed to the idea of violence, but when violence had a body, a face and a name, the victim of that violence repulsed them. Neither one of them realized that if they had been traveling the road an hour before, it could have been them naked, beaten and in desperate need of help.

This observation is so important for those of us in church leadership because part of our task (as leaders) is to help those under us move beyond the us-and-them narrative projected from the news media, social media and culture. This narrative drives our world because it's the narrative we demand.

The first step to thinking well is to demand another narrative, and demanding another narrative means teaching another narrative, not the narrative of the RCO but a narrative of the “CRO” — “Christ Revealing Other.”

St. Therese of Lisieux famously said, “Everything is grace,” meaning, if we look we can find God in all aspects of life. We can find God even in “them,”

whoever “them” may be. Our task as church leaders is to rediscover that truth within our lives and teach that to those whom we lead.

Three questions

In closing, I want to propose three questions that can help us begin to discover the CRO and begin to start thinking well.

First, can you identify the repugnant idea that has turned into the repugnant other?

Is it those who identify as LBGT? Is it those who hold to Democratic or Republican political ideas? Is it those from other religions?

In their book, “Good Faith,” David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons report that almost nine out of 10 evangelicals would find it “very” or “somewhat” difficult to have a conversation with a Muslim or a member of the LBGT community. I believe this is because we turned people with these beliefs into the RCO.

Second, can you find one place of commonality between what you believe and the belief you find repugnant? Or, to look from a different angle, what are the conditions under which you might hold the same view?

If we can find places of actual or mental empathy, we humanize the RCO and can begin to see them as a CRO. That empathy starts when, in the words of Alan Jacobs, we “realize that in different circumstances *you* could be *that person*.”

Lastly, where is God’s work of grace? Where is Christ revealed?

Going back to Jesus’ story, the Samaritan understood that he could have been the beaten and helpless traveler. The Samaritan knew what it was like to be passed over and shunned, and therefore he was moved to

compassion. Several times in the gospel, we read that Jesus was moved to compassion, and we discover Christ in the beaten traveler and the Samaritan.

Where can we find and begin teaching others to find the work of God's grace in the lives of people — all people, even those with whom we disagree?

Church leader, I invite you to discover the “Christ Revealing Others” around you and begin thinking well, so in turn you can lead others to think beyond us and them.

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