

**Cognitive Dissonance in Proclamational Evangelism:
An Illustrative Case Study**

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Abstract

This paper considers cognitive dissonance theory in the context of proclamational evangelistic methods in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. An illustrative case study is presented of one such evangelistic series, highlighting specific practices that appear to manage cognitive dissonance to induce changes in belief and behavior among evangelistic prospects. Implications for the innovation of evangelistic methods are also explored, along with questions for further research.

Keywords: cognitive dissonance, inconsistent cognitions, dissonance reduction, proclamational evangelism, Seventh-day Adventist Church

Cognitive Dissonance in Proclamational Evangelism: An Illustrative Case Study

Cognitive Dissonance Theory has long been applied to the study of persuasion, and one of the earliest studies looked at its application in a religious context. But little scholarly attention has been paid to cognitive dissonance in the area of Christian evangelism.

This illustrative case study looks at one specific type of religious persuasion, proclamational evangelism, as it is used to recruit new members to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It explores how various characteristics of proclamational evangelism are used to leverage cognitive dissonance in evangelistic prospects to induce changes in belief and behavior. As evangelistic-minded pastors and church leaders consider changes to evangelistic methods, implications for effectiveness in this innovation process are also considered.

Proclamational Evangelism

Proclamational evangelism is the public preaching of an evangelistic message and has several unique characteristics in Seventh-day Adventist church practice (Anderson, 2014; Walter, 2018). First, it is a series of meetings that takes place multiple nights per week over the course of several weeks. Second, these meetings are open to the public, and the series frequently has an associated marketing campaign run at significant cost to the church, for the purpose of recruiting members of the public to participate in the meetings. Third, at these meetings the foundational doctrines of the denomination are explained, using the Bible as the primary teaching source. And finally, during these meetings participant is invited to make a series of decisions to accept the denomination's interpretation of Scripture, leading to a decision for baptism and ultimately to becoming a member of the church.

Among members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, proclamational evangelism is more commonly known as *public evangelism*, or a *public evangelistic series* (Hernandez, 2021). In some cases, shorter *bridge events* lasting 3-6 nights might be offered to the public on a specific topic (Walter, 2018). These are different from this paper's definition of proclamational evangelism, however, because they do not cover the full spectrum of doctrine of the church. For this reason, public evangelistic series are sometimes referred to as *full-message series* among denominational leaders (Delafield & Gibbs, 2009). Because of its emphasis on making a sequence of decisions leading to a "harvest of souls for the Kingdom of God," it is also known as a *reaping series* (Walter, 2018).

Membership is important to Seventh-day Adventists, and has a very specific definition and process. It requires extensive Bible study leading to an understanding of, and agreement with, 28 fundamental beliefs (General Conference, 2016, p. 44-51). Traditionally, specific behavioral changes were also required prior to official membership, such as abstaining from tobacco and alcohol use. Once these prerequisites are met, an individual becomes a member upon baptism by immersion or, if the individual was previously baptized by immersion, a public profession of faith.

The 28 fundamental beliefs include many that are common to other Protestant denominations, such as the infallibility of Scripture, the Trinity, and the grace of God expressed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (General Conference, 2015, pp. 3-11). And as with every denomination, there are also beliefs outside the mainstream. For example, worship services take place on Saturday, not Sunday, because members believe that the seventh day of the week is the Sabbath that God blessed as holy and set aside for rest. The denomination also

emphasizes the soon return of Jesus, believes in soul sleep, and makes an explicit connection between a healthy lifestyle and godly living.

Due to the biblical literacy required to understand the fundamental beliefs of the church, becoming a member is a process that can take months or even years. The definition of a Seventh-day Adventist *member*, then, is someone who has completed the required Bible study, been baptized by immersion, and has their name on the books as a member in regular standing of a local Seventh-day Adventist congregation (General Conference, 2016, ch. 6).

Even with the difficult requirements placed on each individual prior to becoming a member, the denomination continues to grow. In 2009 it was listed as one of the fastest growing denominations in the United States (MacDonald, 2011), and membership has grown 5.4% in this country over the six year period ending in 2019 (NAD Secretariat, 2020).

Proclamational evangelism has been the primary driver of growth in the Seventh-day Adventist Church since the denomination was founded in the 1860's (Bull & Lockhart, 2007), and last received significant scholarly attention in the 1970's (Chong et al., 1976; Johnson, 1977; Japas, 1978). One such study found 93% of new Adventists attended at least one public evangelistic meeting and over half attended all the meetings of one or more series (Chong et al., 1976, p. 63), suggesting this experience was at that time an important step toward membership. A more recent study showed that over 90% of Adventist young adult member respondents had attended one or more public evangelistic series (Parker & Charvat, 2019), suggesting it continues to be a valuable methodology for recruiting new members.

Historically, proclamational evangelistic methods have been used by many Christian denominations, receiving some scholarly attention (e.g., Dickenson, 1968), but today have been largely abandoned by the broader evangelical church community (Whiting, 2022). There is some

evidence, though, that proclamational evangelistic methods continue to be effective in gaining Seventh-day Adventist converts (Parker, 2017; Burrill, 2018, April 22). Despite its effectiveness, there is widespread opposition to proclamational evangelism among Seventh-day Adventist members (Delafield & Gibbs, 2017; Larson, 2019; Kidder, 2020), resulting in decreased usage of this method (Burrill, 2018, April 22). Most of the criticism has centered on its perceived lack of effectiveness, disingenuousness, and irrelevance to contemporary culture (Larson, 2019; Hannon, 2020; Kidder, 2020).

Despite this criticism, proclamational evangelism continues to be practiced by many local Seventh-day Adventist churches, with membership growth a subsequent result (Anderson, 2014; Parker, 2017; Walter, 2018). The big question is, why? What is it about this old method that continues to make it effective today? Cognitive dissonance theory provides an explanation as to why proclamational evangelistic methods continue to be effective at gaining Seventh-day Adventist converts, as well as the specific communication and psychological processes driving its effectiveness.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Over the 65 years since its formulation by Leon Festinger (1957), the theory of cognitive dissonance has received widespread attention and generated mountains of research (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019, p. 3). Early on, communication researchers noted its value (Carter et al., 1969), and today it remains a foundational theory in the communication discipline that continues to generate significant attention among communication scholars (Littlejohn et al., 2021, p. 51). It has also received broad attention in recent leadership research (Müller, 2019; Theodoulides et al., 2019; Senbeto & Hon, 2021; Veltrop et al., 2021; Pattison & Corser, 2022).

The theory posits that related thoughts, or cognitions, can be consistent or discrepant. Cognitions are mental elements such as attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs. Two cognitions are consistent if one leads to the other, and they are discrepant if they are inconsistent with each other. Cognitive discrepancy leads to psychological discomfort, or dissonance. Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019) explain, “The magnitude of dissonance between one cognitive element and the remainder of the person’s cognitions depends on the number and importance of cognitions that are consonant and dissonant with the one in question” (p. 4).

Humans use several strategies for reducing dissonance (McGrath, 2017). First, they can remove discrepant cognitions, choosing not to retain thoughts that lead to the dissonance. Second, they can add new consonant cognitions. Third, they can reduce the importance of dissonant beliefs. And fourth, they can increase the importance of consonant cognitions. In addition, resistance to changing a particular behavioral cognitive element is dependent on how much pain or loss such change requires, as well as the pleasure, or reduction in pain, that would come from the changed behavior (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019, p. 4).

To illustrate, Festinger in 1957 described a tobacco user who hears that smoking is bad for their health. This causes dissonance discomfort, because the discovery that smoking is bad for health is discrepant with the cognition that they continue to smoke. The smoker can reduce this dissonance by stopping smoking, removing a discrepant cognition; or they could choose to disbelieve that smoking is bad for health, removing the other discrepant cognition. They might also find some positive benefits of smoking, which adds additional consistent cognitions to the behavior. Alternatively, they might decide that the risk of health issues from smoking is less than other activities, such as the danger of automobile accidents, which would reduce the importance

of the discrepant cognition. Finally, they could consider the pleasure they get from smoking to be an important part of life, thereby increasing the importance of the consistent cognition.

While Festinger used the terms “dissonance” and “inconsistency” interchangeably, more recent scholars have made a distinction between inconsistency, defined as the “property of the relation between cognitive elements,” and dissonance, which is the “aversive feeling” that comes from inconsistent cognitive elements (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2019).

Gawronski suggests the reason humans find cognitive consistency to be so important, and therefore the dissonance arising from cognitive inconsistency to be so uncomfortable, is that it implies mistakes in the individual’s belief system (Gawronski, 2012). Inconsistency serves as an unambiguous indication that one’s beliefs must be updated to fix this error.

Several factors have been identified as impacting the amount of dissonance felt from inconsistent cognitions (Littlejohn et al., 2021, p. 52). First, more important decisions lead to higher levels of dissonance. Second, the comparative attractiveness of the alternatives impacts dissonance. When the selected alternative is attractive, dissonance is reduced, while when the not-chosen alternative is attractive, dissonance is increased. Finally, the more similar the alternatives, the lower the dissonance.

Researchers have looked at several tactics that can be applied in persuasion environments to leverage cognitive dissonance to change a belief (Carpenter, 2019). These include using repetition, focusing on consonant cognitions, emphasizing credibility, developing social support, increasing task difficulty, and offering freedom of choice.

Repetition

Repetition can lead individuals to change belief. One early study found that repeated exposure to counterattitudinal information can increase cognitive dissonance, leading directly to

belief change (Anderson, 1971). Another study found that information integration shapes belief through the averaging of various pieces of information (Anderson & Farkas, 1973). As inconsistent cognitions are introduced, cognitive dissonance grows, until a tipping point is reached. The new cognitions overwhelm the previous ones, resulting in a reduction of cognitive dissonance as a new belief is accepted due to the repeated exposure to this new information. Because of this, beliefs typically move in the direction of the new information being assimilated. As more information is processed, the weight of the belief is increased, making it harder to change in the future (Phillips, 2021).

Consonant Cognitions

To add weight to a new inconsistent cognition, other cognitions that are consonant with the new belief can be emphasized (Phillips, 2021). Humans naturally do this as a way to eliminate new discrepant cognitions, but this same process can be used to help someone integrate a new belief that is inconsistent with previous beliefs (McGrath, 2017).

Credibility

Early on, researchers looked at the role credibility played in cognitive dissonance. Aronson et al. found that getting a discrepant message from a highly credible source produced higher dissonance discomfort than a similar message from a less credible source (1963). Essentially, the credibility of the source adds weight to the cognition delivered by that source, encouraging belief change (Phillips, 2021).

Social Support

Studies have shown that social support for an inconsistent cognition increases dissonance, leading to an attitudinal change to reduce this discomfort (Lepper et al., 1970; Strobe & Diehl,

1981). In other words, social judgment increases the weight of the inconsistent cognition, driving toward a change in belief (McKimmie et al., 2003).

Task Difficulty

The more effort someone puts into a task, the more valuable the resulting reward is perceived to be. In cognitive dissonance theory this is known as the *effort-justification paradigm* (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019, p. 7), and has been confirmed in multiple studies over the years (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Beauvois & Joule, 1996; Harmon-Jones et al., 2015; Harmon-Jones et al., 2020). Therefore, requiring more effort to gain the benefit of a specific change in belief increases the value of that belief, and leads to a longer-lasting change.

Freedom of Choice

Scholars have looked at the impact of forced compliance on cognitive dissonance (Joule & Azdia, 2003). When someone is forced to comply with a rule that is inconsistent with other cognitions, they have less dissonance about that behavior than if they freely chose to follow that rule. As a result, belief is more likely to change when there is freedom to choose that belief, rather than being forced by circumstances or authority.

Application to Christian Evangelism

One way individuals reduce dissonance discomfort when confronted with inconsistent information is by changing their belief (Vaidis & Bran, 2018). Because of this, cognitive dissonance theory has obvious application to Christian evangelism, which has as its core purpose an intention to change beliefs and behavior. Evangelism involves life-altering decisions with clearly dissimilar alternatives, suggesting significant cognitive dissonance when considering the alternatives (Littlejohn et al., 2021, p. 52). In fact, one of the first studies on cognitive dissonance

looked at religion (Festinger et al., 1956). The evangelistic conversion process requires changes in thought and behavior, and cognitive dissonance plays an important role in this shift.

For example, the concept of sin is well established in the Bible (New American Standard Bible, 2020, Gen. 3, Rom. 2:22, Rom. 3:23, Rom 5:12-14). A foundational doctrine of the Christian faith, that Jesus died as an atoning sacrifice (Rom. 5:11, 1 Cor. 15: 3-4, 1 John 2:2), only makes sense in the context of a world with sin.

However, research in 2017 found that one-third of American adults who claim no religious affiliation do not believe sin exists, and 74% of all Americans do not believe that sin has eternal consequences (Lifeway Research, 2017).

To receive the free gift of salvation, one must first recognize they are a sinner, so this must be communicated as part of the evangelism process. However, if someone doesn't believe in sin, this communication adds a discordant cognition, leading to dissonance discomfort. The individual then has several strategies for reducing this cognitive dissonance, some of which work against the evangelistic process. They could refuse to believe sin exists, removing the discrepant cognition entirely, or add new consonant cognitions, such as deciding that since they generally do good, sin is not relevant. They might reduce the importance of the new dissonant belief, such as by deciding that sin is not a big deal, or increase the importance of consonant cognitions, like by deciding their belief in themselves is more important than a belief in sin. These are all natural defense mechanisms that work against the evangelistic process.

To counteract this, the evangelist can emphasize cognitions that are consonant to the concept of sin. For example, by helping the person believe in the value of the Bible first, this belief in the Bible then becomes a consonant cognition when the idea of sin is raised. If the person is persuaded that the Bible is a highly valuable source of life information, the value of this

cognition is raised, making the idea of sin a more consonant cognition than the belief that they are not a sinner themselves. In addition, the communicator can show the value of this belief and the potential benefits, both now and in the future, that can be gained from it, increasing the importance of the cognition.

Illustrative Case Study: The Great Reset

Consider a recent proclamational evangelism event conducted by one particular Seventh-day Adventist church. Beginning Feb. 4, 2022, the Adventist Community Church in Vancouver, WA, conducted a public evangelistic series entitled, “Revelation Today: The Great Reset.” The series included 21 meetings over the course of four weeks, with all meetings held in the church sanctuary. Most of the meetings were in the evening, starting at 7:00 p.m., with three additional meetings taking place during the weekly worship service on Saturday mornings at 11:00 a.m. The evening meetings were held Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. The featured speaker was Eric Flickinger, an evangelist for It Is Written Television, a media ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

According to SermonView Evangelism Marketing, the company hired to recruit participants, the event was promoted through direct mail to 149,664 area homes and via an online advertising campaign on Facebook and Instagram advertising (personal communication, April 7, 2022). This campaign resulted in 157 guests reserving seats, with 55% of these generated from online. According to the senior pastor, Roger Walter, on opening night there were 220 people in attendance, including both guests and current members (personal communication, April 14, 2022). Over the course of the series, a total of 189 unique non-member guests attended at least one meeting.

This series used prophecies in the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation as a framework to share Bible doctrine. The sequence of the meetings covered a range of doctrinal topics. The first night's presentation was on the validity of the Bible as demonstrated through the prophecies found in Daniel 2. Topics that might generate significant cognitive dissonance were the seventh-day Sabbath in the 6th meeting, the second coming of Jesus in the 8th meeting, soul sleep in the 9th meeting, biblical health and wellness in the 13th meeting, and the antichrist in the 14th meeting.

The author's experience at the 9th meeting, which occurred on Feb. 16, 2022, is described next in more detail.

Ninth Meeting: Death and the Supernatural

Outside the church was a large banner with a montage of images and the series title, "Revelation Today: The Great Reset." The design of this banner matched the marketing mailer, invitation cards, and online advertising. Several greeters were stationed both outside and inside the main entrance, welcoming guests. Two teenagers with tablet computers checked in returning attendees, while first-time guests were directed to go to the registration table to register and check in. Each guest who checked in was given a name badge to wear.

The stage of the sanctuary held a large 20-foot wide by 10-foot tall backdrop with the same art as the outside banner and the other marketing materials. Prior to the start of the meeting, the speaker, church pastors, and other church leaders made their way around the lobby and the sanctuary, greeting guests by name.

The meeting itself began shortly after 7:00 p.m. with a welcome by one of the pastors. Wearing a business casual outfit, he told a brief personal story about having a Bible study with a group of students when he was in college. This story included a reference to the supernatural

realm, which set up the evening's topic. The pastor then invited the speaker to the stage, who was wearing a suit and tie. The speaker was asked two audience questions following up the previous night's topic on the second coming of Jesus and heaven, which he answered using Bible verses. The speaker then invited guests to place questions in a box in the lobby, to be answered in future meetings.

Continuing the welcome portion of the program, the speaker told the audience that each of them would receive a study guide on the topic at the conclusion of the meeting, along with two small gift books. He also reminded the guests that for every five meetings attended, each guest would receive a gift of a "fine art print" featuring biblical art. This was followed by a prayer led by the speaker.

The speaker then launched into the presentation topic, on death and the supernatural. Through stories, statistics, quotes, scientific research, and Bible passages, he established the topic and shared what the Bible says about it. He then revealed several common misperceptions about the topic and dealt with those objections. Throughout the presentation he used the New Kings James Version for Bible passages, each of which was shown on the screen. Various photos and paintings of Bible stories were also shown on the screen to illustrate stories and quotes. The entire presentation, lasting a little over an hour, was woven around the story of the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1-44.

The speaker included personal touches in his presentation, such as a story of when he attended the University of Florida, and another about his grandparents. He concluded with an emotional story about the recent death of his grandmother, ending the meeting with a prayer about the comfort of Jesus and the day when death will be no more.

As the audience left, each received a printed Bible lesson on that night's topic, along with two small books, also on the topic. The speaker made himself available in the lobby and chatted with guests for about half an hour after the meeting. Pastors and other church members also interacted with guests after the end of the program.

Six weeks after the end of the series, the senior pastor, Roger Walter, reported eight new members as a result of the series, with another five individuals, who had been introduced to the church through this series, continuing the Bible study track toward membership (personal communication, April 14, 2022).

Analysis

There are several features of both the entire series and the individual meeting that appear related to the management of cognitive dissonance among evangelistic prospects. Intentional or not, the evangelist employed several of the strategies described above for using cognitive dissonance to induce belief and behavioral change. These include raising the value of new cognitions, giving added weight to consonant cognitions, emphasizing credibility, using repetition, developing social support, leveraging task difficulty, and offering freedom of choice.

Valence of Cognitions

A cognition with higher valence, or value, to a subject has more impact on increasing or decreasing the dissonance resulting from an inconsistent cognition (Chung & Fink, 2008). Several aspects of both the series environment and the presentation worked to increase the valence of cognitions consistent with new beliefs introduced by the speaker.

The series topic itself offered value to participants. Bible prophecy is a complex topic requiring guidance from an expert (Seed, 2010). Using Bible prophecy as the framework for teaching Bible doctrine increased the value of the resulting information presented.

During the presentation itself, the speaker did several things to raise the valence of the new belief being presented. For example, during the opening prayer the speaker said:

As we look tonight at a subject that is often misunderstood, a subject about which there is often great confusion in the world, we ask that you help us to find your will in it. Help us to discover the truth from your word, rather than to follow the fables that sometimes we've been told. We know that you've told us we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free. Tonight, Lord, we just want to be free, so we ask that you will bless us tonight in our time together. (Flickinger, 2022, 13:36-14:08)

This appears to serve the purpose of warning guests that inconsistent cognitions will be coming, so they can prepare for dissonance discomfort. This may have the result of raising the credibility of the speaker, and thereby the weight of the introduced belief, when that new inconsistent cognition is introduced. In addition, the benefit of this coming cognition was raised by tying it to the idea of freedom. This benefit gives more weight to the new belief, propelling the guest toward adopting the belief to reduce dissonance discomfort.

As he introduced the subject, the speaker said, "I've had more people tell me that this topic we're talking about tonight gave them more peace, more satisfaction, than any other subject that we talk about in the entire seminar. And I hope that will be the case with you" (22:35-22:48). Again, this raised the value of the new belief, helping move toward its adoption.

Weight of Cognitions

The event increased the weight of one cognition consistent with new beliefs as they were introduced, that of scriptural authority. The structure of the entire series also reduced the weight of other cognitions inconsistent with these new beliefs, specifically those coming from exposure to secular media.

Scriptural Authority

Throughout the series, the Bible was put forth as the authoritative source of truth and therefore given tremendous weight. Once a guest accepted this belief in the Bible, it became a cognition consistent with each new belief as it was introduced. The weight of the Bible as a consistent cognition helped the new belief to be adopted by the guest. For example, at one point, when talking about a commonly-held belief related to death, the speaker said:

Search for the term “immortal soul” or “undying soul” in the Bible. Do you know how many times you’ll find it? Exactly zero. Not a single time. Now, I know it’s very popular. I know we hear it a lot in church. I know we’ve probably been to some funerals where we’ve heard it. But one place you’re not going to find it is in the pages of Scripture. Please look. Search. Dig. Google it.... It’s not there. (33:32-34:05)

Later in the presentation, he said:

Now, I know that there are some best-selling books that say differently. So we have to make a decision. Are we going to believe those best-selling books, or are we going to believe *the* best-selling book [speaker holds up the Bible]. We have to choose what we’re going to base our belief on. Is it going to be the Bible, or stories that people tell? How many of you think that we’d be better off if we believe the Bible [speaker raises hand]? That’s where we’ll find correct answers that are not going to lead us in the wrong direction. (51:52-52:25)

The Bible was repeatedly emphasized, giving weight to it as a consistent cognition. Over the course of this one meeting, a total of 29 scripture passages were quoted, and another 9 were referenced or alluded to without quoting the verse in full.

According to Chung and Fink, the weight of each consistent cognition adds to the overall weight, leading to adoption of the new belief (2008). Giving the Bible weight as a consistent cognition helped drive guests toward the adoption of that new belief.

Reduced Media Exposure

Beliefs tend to move toward the new cognitions being integrated (Phillips, 2021), and information integration shapes belief through the averaging of various pieces of information (Anderson & Farkas, 1973). Because of this, it is important to minimize exposure to cognitions that are inconsistent with each new belief being introduced.

Because most television programs propagate a belief system inconsistent with the church's biblical perspective (Kidder & Penno, 2016), minimizing exposure to such television programming will help reduce the weight of cognitions inconsistent with the new beliefs. A side effect of the structure of the meetings in this case study, which occurred five nights per week for four weeks, did just that. Participating in the meetings necessarily meant guests were not consuming television programming during that time, reducing the weight of cognitions promulgated by this programming. This allowed the average of information being integrated to be weighted toward belief change.

Furthermore, the study guides and books offered at the conclusion of each meeting reduced media exposure as well, as time spent studying and reading this material meant less time for consuming other media.

Credibility

Several characteristics of this event worked to raise the credibility of the speaker, thereby increasing the weight of new beliefs as they were introduced. The speaker wore a suit, which culturally indicates professionalism and authority. The environment itself raised the credibility of

the event in several ways. These included consistent, high-quality graphic design in marketing pieces, the banner outside the church, and the large backdrop on stage. The mail piece was a large bifold mailer printed on glossy paper, implying a high-value event. Requesting that guests pre-register made the event appear to have limited supply, raising its value (Lynn, 1991), and the registration table itself in the lobby also raised the perceived value of the event. All these characteristics increased the credibility of the speaker and the event itself, thereby increasing the valence of each new belief that was presented.

Repetition

The series itself is highly repetitive, with various cognitions building on previous ones. The series started with an emphasis on the authority of Scripture, which was repeated in every meeting. There was also repeated appeal in most meetings to the Lordship of Jesus, as revealed in Scripture, and participants were invited to step forward in obedience to Jesus.

Within the ninth meeting studied in this case, the concept of soul sleep was the new cognition being introduced that was inconsistent with commonly held beliefs. This concept was repeated in numerous ways through stories and Scripture, and guests also went home with a Bible study guide and two small books, all of which would add repetition to the belief.

Social Support

It appears that part of the power of public evangelistic meetings is the social support provided in this environment. Guests interacted with several church members prior to even sitting down at the first meeting, and there were “row hosts” assigned to various sections of the seating area whose task was to engage guests in conversation before and after each meeting, building a relationship. Repeated exposure to the same individuals leads to relational bonding (Littlejohn et al., 2021, p. 227), which in turn provides social support for belief change

(McKimmie et al., 2003). The name badges worn by both members and guests aided in this social bonding.

There was a social aspect to the presentation itself. Several times, the speaker asked a question of the audience, anticipating agreement. For example, he asked, “How many of you think that we’d be better off if we believe the Bible?” and raised his hand as an example (Flickinger, 2022, 52:05-52:18). Most people in the audience raised their hands, too, demonstrating widespread social support for the statement.

Task Difficulty

One of the criticisms of public evangelism among Seventh-day Adventist members is the substantial time commitment required to participate (Larson, 2019; Kidder, 2020). Yet for those who participate, this very commitment raises the difficulty level of the task, which is found to decrease dissonance for cognitions related to that task (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Beauvois & Joule, 1996; Harmon-Jones et al., 2015; Harmon-Jones et al., 2020). In addition, the Bible study guide provided to each guest at the conclusion of each meeting was homework that required additional effort. The effort-justification paradigm suggests that participants who put more effort into the event will find more value in the resulting beliefs (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019, p. 7).

The long-term effect of this effort is a reduction in post-decisional dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002), which would lead to higher retention of these new members in the church.

Freedom of Choice

Throughout the public evangelistic series, freedom is granted to each guest to make decisions on their own. While an environment was created conducive to acceptance of each belief that was introduced, compliance was not forced. This increased the dissonance discomfort

of new beliefs, which would lead to the adoption of the new belief to reduce dissonance discomfort (Joule & Azdia, 2003; Phillips 2021).

Discussion

This evangelist demonstrated all four characteristics of transformational leadership (Avolio et al., 1991). He provided inspirational motivation, speaking passionately to provoke an emotional response, leading toward change. He offered intellectual stimulation by introducing the inconsistent cognition through an overwhelming number of Bible passages. By interacting with each evangelistic prospect outside the formal meeting, he showed individualized consideration. Finally, he demonstrated idealized influence as he encouraged each person to strive toward the ideal life.

Cognitive dissonance among participants in proclamational evangelism appears to be tactically managed through many characteristics of public evangelistic meetings. Anderson & Farkas point out that as new information is integrated, it shapes belief through the averaging of various pieces of information (1973). As inconsistent cognitions are introduced, cognitive dissonance grows, until a tipping point is reached. The new cognitions overwhelm the previous discrepant ones, resulting in a reduction of dissonance discomfort as a new belief is accepted due to the repeated exposure to this new information. Because of this, beliefs typically move toward the information being assimilated. As more information is processed, the weight of the belief is increased, making it harder to change in the future (Phillips, 2021).

Many of the characteristics of public evangelistic meetings would result in decreased effectiveness if removed from the method's structure. For example, reducing the number of meetings lowers the information repetition and reduces the task difficulty, which would work against belief adoption. In addition, a shorter series would not reduce media exposure by the

same amount, resulting in more weight given to cognitions inconsistent with Scripture. Through the Covid-19 shutdowns in 2020, many churches attempted to hold public evangelistic meetings online, but found the effectiveness was reduced (Witzel, 2022). Cognitive dissonance theory would predict this, due to the reduced social support participants receive in a computer-mediated environment.

On the other hand, there are tweaks to public evangelistic methods which may increase effectiveness. For example, evangelist Steve Vail in the Carolina Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has tested a seating arrangement with participants in table groups (personal communication, April 7, 2022). Initial results have been promising, suggesting this has the potential to improve effectiveness by increasing social bonding between members and guests, resulting in higher social support for the new beliefs.

The belief framework of Seventh-day Adventist doctrines can lead to significant cognitive dissonance among people newly exposed to these beliefs. As church leaders innovate evangelistic methods, it is important to ensure that cognitive dissonance is effectively managed throughout the process to drive toward belief change. Whether the innovation is evolutionary, with small tweaks to the method, or revolutionary, attempting wholly new approaches, the strategies for managing inconsistent cognitions and the resulting dissonance discomfort must be considered for the innovation to be effective.

Future Research Paths

Analysis of this illustrative case study leads to additional questions that should be considered in future research. One area of study is to look at how widespread proclamational evangelistic methods actually are today among Seventh-day Adventist churches in the United

States and Canada, and what the quantitative relationship might be between the use of these methods and the numerical membership growth in churches who use them.

Another study should ask new members to reveal how they were introduced to the church, and what specific evangelistic methods propelled them toward membership.

Furthermore, what is the synergy between proclamational evangelism and other outreach methods used by Seventh-day Adventist churches, such as friendship evangelism, compassion ministry, personal Bible study, and bridge events? Do churches who employ all these methods grow faster than churches who employ fewer of them? Which methods, or combination of methods, correlate with the highest rates of church growth?

From a marketing perspective, the question of topical effectiveness should be explored. How do response rates for meetings advertised using biblical prophetic imagery compare with those more focused on current events or a more general Bible-study focus?

Cultural differences might also be considered. How is proclamational evangelism practiced in Hispanic, African-American, and other ethnic churches? What is the correlation of these practices to numerical growth in these cultural contexts?

The question of retention should also be looked at. Specifically, how many new members are still active in a local Seventh-day Adventist church two years after joining? Is there a correlation between participation in public evangelistic meetings and higher retention rates of these new members?

Finally, active opposition among Seventh-day Adventist members has led to decreased usage of proclamational evangelism. This leads to a practical question: How can cognitive dissonance related to proclamational evangelistic practices be leveraged among these members to induce a change in belief? If proclamational evangelism was demonstrated to be a crucial

component in church growth, what can be done to persuade them to support these methods in their churches?

Further research is warranted to answer these questions.

Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventist proclamational evangelism features many practices that manage cognitive dissonance to induce change in belief and behavior. These include using repetition, focusing on consonant cognitions, emphasizing credibility, developing social support, increasing task difficulty, and offering freedom of choice. While these practices were used by the denomination for over 100 years before Festinger proposed the theory of cognitive dissonance, it is clear this theory has explanatory power about the effectiveness of these methods, and offers a strong theoretical foundation for future evangelistic innovation.

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