COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN EVANGELISM:
A COMPARISON OF TWO APPROACHES

by

Adam Blood

An Abstract
of a thesis presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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May, 2014
ABSTRACT

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It is the great commission of the Christian faith to “go and make disciples.” (Matthew 28:19) This activity, otherwise known as evangelism, can be analyzed not only from a theological perspective, but also through the lens of communication theory. This study is designed to investigate this persuasive act through the theoretical perspective of Leon Festinger’s Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. In doing so, it compared two approaches; 1) the first emphasized building dissonance through a message of Biblical punishment; and 2) the reduction of dissonance through the message of a loving and gracious God. Through the use of survey type instruments, reinforced through focus group discussions, this study was designed to measure the responses of listeners to evangelistic messages that either evoked or reduced emotional discomfort. The most notable findings were the desire amongst the participants to hear a message that is balanced in its use of the two approaches and the subsequent propensity for backlash against a message that appears one-sided.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

During the author’s years as an undergraduate, it was a yearly occurrence for an evangelist to speak on campus. This speaker would carry a sign that read “you deserve hell.” He would chide passing students about lifestyle choices ranging from sexual behaviors to alcohol consumption. The students who would stop would often grow exceptionally uncomfortable from these comments, and in many cases he would create a striking degree of tension around campus. The major question that this would arouse may be how this speaker intended to get people to truly accept his message when his approach seemed only to evoke public sentiments of discomfort and even resentment. Additionally, other evangelists may attempt to use the message of “eternal punishment” to attempt to persuade listeners to strengthen their faith or to join some sort of church community. Conversion through fear of eternal damnation may appear to be the order of the day in these persuasive appeals.

Conversely, there are other churches and evangelists that appear to avoid all feelings of discomfort and do as much as they can to make their listeners feel welcome and accepted. The intent of these sorts of religious messages seems to be to avoid all of the resentment and resistance of the more abrasive, confrontational style of evangelism. Although the softer message may be much more painless to accept, the more abrasive message was still garnering a considerable reaction, albeit a perceivably negative one. This begs the question, based on Leon Festinger’s (1957) theory of Cognitive Dissonance, which message is more successful in its attempt to persuade others to “convert” to the speaker’s point of view?

It is the great commission to those of the Christian faith, to “go and make disciples” (Mathew 28:19). This practice of attempting to get others to accept and adhere to religious teachings can be referred to as evangelism. In an attempt to get others to establish or strengthen
their faith, there are numerous persuasive methods that can be employed. Ever present in the study of persuasion and attitude change is Festinger’s (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which addresses the discomfort that one can feel when confronted with two ideas that contradict one another. Using dissonance in a persuasive appeal means creating a message that evokes discomfort, then giving the listener a means to reduce that discomfort via a change in attitude or behavior. For an evangelist, this could be achieved by creating dissonance between the listener’s behaviors and the demands of Biblical living, pointing out the eternal consequences, then offering submission to God’s grace as a means of reducing that fear or discomfort. However, when evangelists focus too heavily on either the creation or relief of dissonance, a false dichotomy is created. Instead of a message that uses punishment and grace, the two elements of the religious messages can become presented as opposing points of view. From this false dichotomy, there would be those who focus too heavily on God’s punishment versus those who only make reference to God’s grace without substantial reference to sin and punishment.

In his original sermon in 1741, known as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Jonathan Edwards epitomized the idea that has come to be known as “hellfire and brimstone” when he asserted that this inconsistency between one’s lifestyle and the teachings of scripture would inevitably lead to eternal punishment. It could easily be asserted that the intent of this form of message construction would be to use this dissonance to cultivate fear, and thus to create a captive audience toward the message of Christianity, or essentially to scare them out of hell.

To perhaps counter this more aggressive approach to evangelism, there is another approach that hopes to welcome people into the Christian church by spreading a message of an apparently more forgiving God and a religious community that would refrain from judging people based on their individual lifestyle choices. These evangelists hope to spread the word of a
loving God, as they focus more on messages such as the “good news” of Jesus Christ. It could be
asserted that the listeners might carry within them feelings of dissonance and disequilibrium
before the message is even delivered. The goal of the evangelist is to relieve this dissonance in
order to gain the attention and possible acceptance of the potential convert.

These two approaches in their extremes stand in a sort of polar opposition to one another.
It could easily be ascertained that these two opposing approaches pertain to the issue of cognitive
dissonance, but in entirely different ways. The aggressive approach aims to heighten dissonance
by building such a fear of God’s judgment that it creates a captive audience. The passive
approach aims to reduce dissonance by having the audience focus on the idea of a loving and
gracious God upon whom they can hopefully unload feelings of guilt and persecution to find an
inner peace. Although both of these approaches deal with the issue of Cognitive Dissonance,
there has been no study to date which ascertains which method is more effective from a
communicative and persuasive standpoint.

Festinger’s (1957) theory could be easily used to describe the discomfort felt by believers
whose faith is brought into conflict with their behaviors or the world around them. Kakures
(2009) argued that cognitive dissonance is what occurs when there is “incoherence in one’s
picture of the world and one’s self” (p. 78). For those who believe in God, this incoherence could
come, for example, from the idea of God’s benevolent and loving presence versus the pain and
suffering of an imperfect world, or the inconsistencies between the demands of Biblical living
and one’s current behaviors or lifestyle choices.

Another important element to cognitive dissonance is intensity. Littlejohn and Foss
(2011) point out that the number of elements in conflict and their relative importance have a
significant impact on how intense the dissonance will be, and thus how acute the discomfort may
feel. For instance, one who holds strong religious convictions will probably feel even stronger
cognitive dissonance if he engages in premarital sex, drinks to excess, or regularly commits any
other acts that his faith would lead him to designate as sins. It would be important to point out
that two elements are involved in the relative intensity of the dissonance. The first is the number
of cognitive elements, such as behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that are in conflict. The second is
the relevance of those elements to the person. If there are few inconsistencies or if they are
irrelevant elements, the person will feel less cognitive dissonance.

It would be important to note, in this basic description of cognitive dissonance from a
religious perspective, that often one’s religiosity is very deeply and personally meaningful to that
person. Brenner (2011) pointed out that one’s religious beliefs not only guide their behavior, but
can also be an important and salient element of their identities. Thus, religious belief and identity
for some could be the strongest of all cognitions. Burns (2006) points out “the more important
the concepts challenged the greater the dissonance; the greater the dissonance, the more intense
will be the need to reduce it” (p. 3). Thus, since religion can be a major component of one’s
identity and can often guide many other cognitions, it could be asserted that the emotional
discomfort from dissonance is even stronger when it affects one’s religious beliefs or doctrines.
These arguments suggest that religion can be a strong source of cognitive dissonance, which
justifies further study and thought on this phenomenon.
Applications of Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Several times in his work, Festinger (1957) used an analogy of a smoker who is aware of the negative consequences of smoking. Since the continual act of smoking and the knowledge of its negative effects are incongruent, the smoker could feel a sense of psychological discomfort. He may ask himself, “Why do I continue to behave in a way that I know is unhealthy for me?” With this example of what cognitive dissonance is, Festinger goes on to offer two basic hypotheses. The first is that cognitive dissonance is inherently uncomfortable, and thus individuals will actively take steps to reduce dissonance. The second is that in addition to trying to reduce the dissonance, the person may attempt to avoid circumstances or information that would increase the dissonance. What is important to note is that the reduction of dissonance is achieved through one of three means. The person feeling the discomfort may 1) change his or her cognitions about the issue causing the dissonance; 2) change the environmental factors that create the inconsistency, or 3) simply live with the dissonance. This means that the smoker may either dismiss the idea that smoking is unhealthy, give up smoking, or simply continue smoking, living with the potentially problematic implications. This understanding of cognitive dissonance and its role in the alterations of behavior or attitude is crucial to the understanding of cognitive dissonance as a persuasive function.

One notable area where cognitive dissonance may be invoked is any situation in which one is called upon to make a decision. In reference to this instance, dissonance can easily be compared to the sensation of “buyer’s remorse.” Littlejohn and Foss (2011) will directly relate cognitive dissonance to the idea of “buyer’s remorse” (p.96). An example of this would be when
a shopper purchases an article of clothing and quickly decides that it looked better on display than when they wore it. Festinger (1957) points out that the likelihood of experiencing dissonance and the intensity of that dissonance would be dependent upon three factors. The first is the impact of the decision. This means that trivial decisions, such as what shirt to wear, are going to cause less dissonance than life-changing ones, such as choosing one’s college or career path. The second factor is “the relative attractiveness of the unchosen alternative” (p. 47). This element could come into play in decisions such as vacation destinations or vehicle purchases, where one is often choosing between two or more attractive alternatives. The third is the amount of similarity between the two options. If the available options do not have much difference between one another, the degree of dissonance will be less intense. These three factors combine to describe how cognitive dissonance occurs in decision making situations.

Awa and Nwuche (2010) point out that Festinger’s (1957) theory is the most practical of all the consistency theories when it comes to providing insight into purchase behavior. Their research argues that usually when individuals seek out information before or after a purchase, they are doing so with the intent of reducing post-decision cognitive dissonance. Although the element of post-decision cognitive dissonance is largely applied to buying decisions, it could be argued that decisions regarding one’s spiritual well-being could be just as susceptible to cognitive dissonance. When one decides to make any particular lifestyle choice, that decision may be followed by post-decision dissonance based on moral or religious beliefs. Additionally, the attempt to gather information by seeking counsel with members of the pastoral community or by consulting the scriptures could be described as a means of gathering information to help reduce dissonance.
Additionally, Festinger’s (1957) theory can be used to understand the way people cope with catastrophic events. Masters (2005) applied cognitive dissonance theory to the events that occurred in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Masters noted that such a catastrophe stood in direct contradiction with widely held notions of safety and security. Even in the areas that weren’t directly affected by the attacks, Masters noted that many people felt a heightened state of doubt in their own sense of security, evidenced by their purchases of items such as gas masks. Additionally, the support for President Bush could be described as a means to reduce dissonance by gaining feelings of security through having faith in a leader figure. These behaviors were a way to reduce the degree of cognitive dissonance created by the events of September 11th. This demonstrates that cognitive dissonance can be even stronger when the incongruity relates to one’s feelings towards life and death. In this instance, fear stemmed from cognitive dissonance between the events of September 11th and feelings of security, and the support of a leader figure was a means to reduce the emotional discomfort. If one were to parallel this to the more aggressive style of evangelism, it could be asserted that the fear of eternal damnation would lead some people to take initiative in the development of their faith as a means to address this fear.

Cognitive Dissonance can easily be used to study moral dilemmas independent of religious doctrines. Kaplar and Gordon (2004) studied the role of cognitive dissonance and the justifications for dishonesty between romantic partners. They argued that since most people perceive of themselves as honest people, the act of lying to their romantic partner is likely to induce a considerable degree of cognitive dissonance. The researchers point out, however, that since the intent of the deception is not always immediately apparent, the dishonest party can
reduce the dissonance by giving a seemingly altruistic reason for the lie, such as the intent to protect the partner’s feelings.

Yet another element of dissonance and its role in persuasive messages involves the emotional context of the dissonant ideas. Williams and Aaker (2002) studied the role of mixed emotional messages in the context of consumer behavior and responses to advertisements that present mixed emotions. Although their study made no mention of the role of religion in the ability to accept dissonance, they highlighted an important point when it comes to when an occurrence of dissonance can be accepted and when it becomes exceptionally uncomfortable. They argue that “the ability to change an emotionally based attitude or experience with a cognitively based belief or argument is often difficult” (p.648). In other words, if one of the cognitive elements is emotionally meaningful, the ability to use reason or persuasive arguments to provoke a change in attitude becomes more difficult.

*Cognitive Dissonance and Christianity*

Ever since it’s conception as a theory, cognitive dissonance has been used as a means to understand and measure conflicts of faith. The studies have come in a wide array of settings. Dunford and Kunz (1973) attempted to measure the cognitive dissonance experienced by Christians who violate the Sabbath by doing tasks such as shopping. Tite (2003) studied the degree of cognitive dissonance created when one’s religious beliefs are confronted in a classroom setting. Vinski and Tryon (2009) studied the relation between cognitive dissonance and students’ attitudes towards academic dishonesty. Most notable about the study on academic dishonesty was that the students were enrolled in a Catholic parochial school, so that the feelings of induced hypocrisy and dissonance had the potential to be even more palpable when set within
the context of the moral compass created by an environment where the student’s development is
guided by religious principles.

It is also important to note the role of religious beliefs as a cognition that can create
tension with other beliefs or behaviors in order to create dissonance. Deconchy, Hurteau, Quelen
and Ragot (1997) noted the strength of cognitions that came about because of one’s religious
beliefs, and how much the identity of being a person of faith can affect his or her cognitive
processes. In order to test this theory, the authors put test subjects in situations where they had to
logically solve a set of two or more circumstances that didn’t lend themselves to immediate and
logical explanation. Through the differences in the responses and input between the test subjects,
the authors were able to articulate a striking array of findings regarding the difference in
cognitive processes between believers and nonbelievers. Their research indicated that because
religious belief can often guide the way one’s mind processes new data, a mind driven by secular
thought may respond differently to irrational syllogisms than one driven by religious belief. In
Deconchy’s experiment, people of faith were compared to nonbelievers in how they explained
unusual occurrences, such as “unscrewable clasps of a necklace that are inverted during the
night,” or “nonorganic objects that change color in a constant environment” (p. 265). Since the
believers were more willing to accept an illogical explanation for the occurrence, Deconchy
concluded, “there could be methods of data processing that only belong to believers” (p. 267).
Thus, it could be more simply said that dissonance may affect people of faith differently than
non-believers.

Cognition is not the only area where one can find opposition between secular thought and
religious belief. Burns (2006) pointed out that great dissonance can be brought about in instances
where religion is discussed in otherwise secular settings. Burns also suggested that in many
secular, liberal arts college settings, dissonance can take the form of a deeply powerful learning tool as it would oblige students who identify themselves as believers to engage in higher levels of critical thinking in the pursuit of dissonance reduction. Thus, forcing students to hold competing cognitions in classroom discussions and assignments can force them to truly think and study in order to solve complex problems. The article then alludes to the fact that this tactic is particularly useful in religious studies classes where a student can be confronted with religious ideologies and doctrines that differ greatly from his or her deeply held beliefs. If a student is confronted in the classroom with an idea that confronts religious doctrine, that student may be compelled to read and study the Scriptures because the argument or exercise has taken on a new, deeply personal meaning.

Cognitive dissonance theory has also been used to explain the role of one’s faith in specific contexts, such as those who are expected to treat psychiatric patients who have been diagnosed with mental illnesses such as Major Depression and Schizophrenia. Hartog and Gow (2005) studied nursing students, referring to situations wherein:

“those who indicated a stronger allegiance to ‘faith’ values also attributed a high responsibility to God’s necessary intervention for the healing of mental illness, while the commonly accepted psychiatric approach to healing was considered less important. This resulted in a state of cognitive dissonance, given the demands of their future nursing role in the treatment of patients with a mental illness” (pg. 265).

This dissonance was created by a paradigm where the need for divine intervention to help heal a mental illness was placed in opposition with prescribed methods dictated by the fields of psychiatry and psychology.
Additionally, the very idea of faith can bring with it at least some degree of cognitive dissonance. Smith (2013) alludes to the fact that the realities of the human experience, such as death, illness, and injustice, can stand in direct contrast to the idea of a loving and caring God, as he poses the question, “how do we remain faithful to a God who permits—without interruption or interference—injustice, sickness, and death”(p. 288)? Smith, writing from a theological perspective, points to the scriptures found in the book of Corinthians, arguing that faith must be sustained despite this dissonance, and then gives guidance to the pastoral community to maintain a message of hope that balances the promises of eternity with a concern for the realities of the physical world.

Ward (2013) pointed out another source of dissonance for Christians that comes from the dichotomy of expressing faith through verbal testimony versus faith-based service. He pointed out that evangelism as a whole is threatened when the verbal testimony presented by Christians is not demonstrated through service. Throughout his article, he highlights a schism in the modern church, wherein a dichotomy is created by placing emphasis on verbal messages given by the church at the expense of services ministry and vice versa. Ward then showed how what he calls the “Unholy dissonance” can be reduced by a balance between these two elements of ministry, or as he puts it:

“The Gospel seems evident. Christians are to be witnesses to the saving grace of God evidenced in Jesus Christ. At the very same time, and in ways that are completely harmonized, Christians are to be witnesses, giving evidence through words and deeds that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord of the universe, and with similar commitment and vigor, to undertake and to fulfill the calling as servants, humbly utilizing the resources God provides to relive, comfort, and to heal,
fulfilling the works of compassion and assistance, thus to be engaged in the saving and restorative work of God in his fallen and broken world. Fulfilling these two grand tasks together is what it means to be a Christian” (p. 81-82).

Ward’s argument is essentially that the church becomes divided upon itself when it creates a dichotomy between the act of service and the verbal message of salvation, and that the balancing of these two elements can better the church’s collaboration and efficacy in the world outside of the church walls.

*Dissonances between Scientific and Religious thought*

Furthering the study of dissonance between religious and secular thought, Haag (2010) presented the observation of what he called “science-and-religion” (p. 490) as its own collective field. Haag referred to areas where there are overlaps between the issues of faith and science, and many of these could lie within areas such as stem-cell research, genetic modification, and the issue of medical privacy. Since these issues can be largely prevalent in moral debates as well as academic ones, both the likelihood of evoking dissonance and the extent of that dissonance could be more severe. However, Haag pointed out the idea that dissonance could bring about more than psychological discomfort and could possibly make the science-and-religion field more inclusive, as he suggested there is a “need to avoid extreme positions by finding a middle ground, a place where we can appreciate dissonance” (p. 491). With this, he implicitly points out that questions that cause extreme dissonance, questions that hold two powerful cognitions in opposition to one another, could possibly be the most thought-provoking questions, and thus, the most intellectually useful ones.

One major source of dissonance, when it comes to the idea of religious belief, is the use of science when it comes to explanations for the creation and existence of the natural world.
Recurring popular notions as well as a broad field of academic research seem to suggest that these two schools of thought are by nature incompatible. Valdecasas, Boto and Correas (2013) argue that these two fields of thought are diametrically opposed to one another. This mindset is also clearly articulated by O’Brien and Harris (2012) who asserted “It is common to consider faith and science in terms of two books: ‘the Book of Scripture’ and the ‘the Book of Nature.’ In our media, schools, universities, and even in some churches, it is held that these two ‘books’ are incompatible…” (p.147) With these two schools of thought seeming to stand in opposition to one another throughout society, it is easy to assert that they can also stand opposed to one another as inconsistent, and thus, dissonant, cognitions.

This dissonance between the fields of scientific and religious thought can be used to understand the vocal and often emotional opinions expressed in the debates over the teaching of creationism and evolution in a classroom setting. Reiss (2009) in the hopes of giving recommendations to represent both schools of thought, described these dissonant feelings-although making no reference to cognitive dissonance itself - that many students with creationist beliefs of any kind may feel “threatened” (p. 1939). He even discussed the issue of this inner turmoil with the observation, “I do believe in taking seriously and respectfully the concerns of students who do not accept the theory of evolution while still introducing them to it. Although it is unlikely that this will help students who have a conflict between science and their religious beliefs to resolve the conflict, good science teaching can help students to manage it- and to learn more science” (p. 1940). This environment can in many ways contribute to the dissonances that arise whenever a religious persuasive message is presented.
Dissonances between Religion and Capitalism

Another important facet of the convergence between the study of religion and that of cognitive dissonance is the issue of message construction. One such setting was described by Kelso (2006) who used advertising as a means to study the conflict between capitalist motivations and religious convictions. He alluded to the inconsistency between the two ideas when he noted, “…at the same time, one of the apparent contradictions that defines the U.S. is that, while it pushes the culture of commodities-and the mass media that sustain it, which are themselves chiefly supported by advertisers-probably more than any other country, it remains, according to several barometers, the most explicitly religious land in the West” (pp.29-30). Essentially, this pits the ideas of capitalist competition with religious ideals held by certain members of religious faith. For example, the capitalist idea of market competition may stand in conflict with the Biblical demand of giving to the poor, the pursuit of luxury can negate the Biblical demand for modesty, or the idea of acquiring possessions may conflict with the demand to live sacrificially.

Dissonances between Religion and Patriotism

Lamothe (2009) theorized that a major source of dissonance can be found when a Christian has to reconcile his or her beliefs with other deeply held feelings, such as patriotism. For example, Lamothe refers to the idea that “Christian faith is grounded in the belief that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, which conflicts with patriotic faith that clearly acts first to benefit those who are U.S. citizens” (pg.410). Since the depth of the feelings of dissonance are directly related to how important the cognitions are to the subject, these two deeply emotional cognitions can create a striking degree of psychological discomfort (Festinger 1957). Lamothe discusses all of the psychological strategies that a person in this
position would employ, as well as ways they would reshape their view of both cognitions to make them more consistent with one another. This holds true the idea that the urge to reduce dissonance is stronger in situations where the two cognitions are deeply meaningful to the person sustaining the emotional discomfort.

*Dissonances between Religion and Political Ideologies*

Yet another source of dissonance is the kind that arises when someone’s religious beliefs stand in incongruity with their political affiliations. The kind of dissonance that exists within people of faith can often be exacerbated by a highly polarized political landscape. Ross, Lelkes and Russell (2011) argued that there can be inconsistencies between doctrines of faith and political leanings. In their study, they compared the attitudes of conservative and liberal Christians in the ways they feel that their political ideologies are congruent with the teachings of Jesus Christ. They found that on issues such as the treatment of immigrants and income inequality, conservative Christians felt at least some degree of dissonance. Conversely, the more liberal Christians felt dissonance on matters of perceived Biblical morality, such as abortion and same-sex marriage. The authors also alluded to the mechanisms of dissonance reduction, as members of each group pointed to markedly different issues as central to their faith. For instance, if a conservative Christian feels less dissonance on issues that fall under the umbrella of “family values,” that person may suggest that those ideas are central to his or her religion. This could be drawn as a parallel to the idea that one will alter their cognitions to reduce dissonance, because at the convergence of political ideology and religious belief, one may attach greater importance to the political issues where they feel less dissonance.

Another study on the topic of dissonance and political theory illuminates an important element of Festinger’s theory. That element is the idea of selective exposure, wherein one may
only take in information that would be consistent with his beliefs to avoid any inconsistent feelings. Nam, Jost, and Van Bavel (2013) studied the dissonance avoidance measures that one may take to avoid the emotional discomfort connected to inconsistencies in political mindset. In the context of their study, they point out that politically active individuals are more likely to consume media that is consistent with their beliefs, and avoid media that causes dissonant feelings. Thus, an important point to note is that in order to avoid or reduce dissonance, many may avoid messages that can cause dissonance as a means to reduce their discomfort.

*Dissonance between Religion and Sexual Identity*

Following the three basic routes that Festinger outlined for dissonance reduction, Mahaffy (1996) applied this paradigm to a situation where one can feel dissonance between religious and sexual identity. Mahaffy’s study analyzed survey responses from one-hundred-sixty-three women who self-identified as both Christians and Lesbians. The dissonant relationship between these two identifiers stems from the belief among some Christians that homosexuality is a sinful lifestyle. The survey questions intended to measure and analyze the lack of consistency between their lifestyle and their religious beliefs. Mahaffy’s work validates the idea of the three general methods of dissonance reduction, as she writes, “Resolution strategies included altering one’s religious beliefs, leaving the church, or living with the dissonance” (p. 392). In these instances, the act of altering one’s religious beliefs is an attempt to change one’s cognitions. The act of leaving the church is an attempt to change the environmental factors that cause the dissonance. Meanwhile, some choose to make no such changes and simply live with the dissonance.
Dissonance between Religious Belief and Feminist Ideology.

Another context in which dissonance reduction differs in religious settings is church leadership. Dzubinski (2012) studied the dissonance felt by women in church settings where women are discouraged from or even denied leadership positions. Dzubinski, much like other researchers on dissonance, highlights three general paths that women may take to reduce this dissonance. First, if a woman is denied leadership, she may isolate herself from the church, becoming passive in church functions or leaving the organization altogether. Second, she may attach herself to a male leader figure, becoming the “power behind the throne.” (p. 336) Third, if the church generally discourages women from roles of leadership, but appoint a few women as exceptions to the rule, these women may reduce their dissonance by taking extra steps to justify their placement into the role of leadership. These dissonance reduction techniques are specifically designated for women who feel that their faith is central to their identity, yet have to deal with the discomfort of feeling subordinated by their church community.

Additionally, leadership is not the only element that can cause religious dissonance. Steiner-Aeschliman and Mauss (1996) highlighted the dissonances a woman may feel within a patriarchal church culture if she self-identifies as a feminist. The study found that women who describe themselves as both a feminist and a Christian will often carry a palpable degree of cognitive dissonance, which may result in a reduced feeling of closeness to God. Steiner-Aeschliman and Mauss cited several historical developments in which the church has been indicted by the feminist community for maintaining a general culture of patriarchy, indicated that this schism between feminist and religious ideology can often cause extremely uncomfortable levels of cognitive dissonance amongst some church members.
Dissonance Reduction for Christians.

Based on the rationale that the creation of dissonance and the reduction thereof both play important roles in attitude change, it would be important to recognize which methods of dissonance reduction work in particular settings. Essentially, when a member of the pastoral community intentionally or unintentionally builds dissonance, one typical method could be to build inconsistency between a person’s faith and his or her lifestyle choices. Another approach could be to address an inconsistency between the belief in God and the recognition of the evils and hardships of the modern world. Regardless of the pastoral method of building inconsistency, there are particular ways to describe the actions taken by the audience to reduce the dissonance and thus mitigate the psychological or emotional discomfort. These methods involve not only the methods specifically described by Festinger, but also include: confession (Stice, 1992), transcendence (Burris, 1997), and increased involvement in religious activities (Brennen, 2011).

The first notable dissonance reduction technique in matters of faith or morality is the practice of confession or repentance. The presence of dissonance from a moral perspective could come from actions or practices that violate one’s particular code of morality. Stice (1992) hypothesized, “dissonance is analogous to the feeling of guilt” (p. 69). From the perspective of faith, this dissonance or guilt could come from actions that are incongruent with religious teachings. These actions could be anything that one would consider sinful, ranging from sexual immorality to sins of excess. With this comparison of dissonance and guilt as a backdrop, Stice proposed that confession of one’s sinful activity could be a means to reduce the discomfort. These confessions could range from the Catholic ritual of Confession to the basic calls for private, prayer-driven repentance prevalent in most religious communities. With conditions establishing the willful confession and mandatory confession, Stice found that when believers
are given the chance to willfully confess of their sins, they are more likely to reduce the feelings of guilt and conflict. This might still fall under Festinger’s idea of leaning to live with the dissonance by altering the condition of the sinful life through repentance and forgiveness. If the person feeling the dissonance does not change the dissonant behavior, they could use the act of repentance as a means to reduce the discomfort.

Burris (1997) made a specific link between dissonance reduction and religion through the discussion of a technique that he referred to as transcendence. When other dissonance reduction strategies, such as avoidance or support, can be used to explain common, everyday dissonance, Burris posited that the reduction technique of transcendence can be used to resolve more gripping issues of religious inconsistency. Transcendence occurs when the person feeling the dissonance simply dismisses the inconsistent cognition, or gives it up in trust to the higher power. The study examined issues wherein the Christians’ idea of a loving and protective God stood in seemingly direct contradiction with the travesties and suffering that seem to inundate the news on a daily basis. The participants in the study were shown a news story with a vivid account of a young child who was killed in a drive-by shooting. One test group was given the opportunity to reduce the dissonance through a measure of transcendence, the other was not. Burris found that transcendence would serve as a stronger method of dissonance reduction than the other more typical reduction strategies, such as prayer or repentance. Essentially, the belief in a God that has a higher plan and would intervene on their behalf helped them to look beyond, or transcend, the apparent inconsistency.

Another dissonance reduction technique for Christians can be the act of attending religious services. What is even more notable in this instance is that the act of attending church might not only reduce one’s personal feelings of inconsistency or dissonance, but can also lessen
the inconsistency between one’s image of themselves and the impression made about them by other people. Thus, church attendance could both reduce dissonance within one’s self and with the identity projected to outside observers. This was indicated by Brenner (2011) who found, “over reporting (of attendance) is generated by the combination of a respondent’s desire to report truthfully his or her identity as a religious, church-going person and the perception that the attendance question is really about this identity rather than about actual attendance.” (p. 127)

*Cognitive Dissonance and Evangelism*

Some theological studies have drawn upon the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance to understand the messages of scripture. Wanak (2009) looked to the words spoken by Jesus Christ to draw conclusions about Biblical teachings. Wanak asserted that Jesus frequently asked his listeners questions to lead them to the conclusions He desired as opposed to stating His arguments or observations outright. Thus, the recipient of the message would have to work through emotional and argumentative responses cognitively without having the message or moral relayed to them explicitly. Wanak theorized, “Jesus recognized that developing a new order requires intentionally creating a degree of dis-equlibrium or cognitive dissonance” (p. 170). Jesus would even ask questions that would seem to chide or condemn his listeners; thus, spurring enough dissonance to bring about the critical thinking and self-reflective analysis required to create a change in behavior or attitude. In a sense, this practice could be used as a means to justify the dissonance building approach to evangelism, asserting that Christ himself was using dissonance as a persuasive function. An example Wanak used was when Christ taught a lesson on obedience and used the question, “Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and not do what I say” (Luke 12:46)?
The idea of dissonance, in terms of religion, can be further applied to the way an individual conceptualizes lifestyle choices. Nelson (2011) established what he calls “Discipleship Dissonance” as he makes a reference to the idea of pursuing holiness; meanwhile, recognizing the indwelling existence of sin, as he wrote “The life of discipleship is a life in tension; there is always a gap between our actual realization of holiness and the goal of God-like holiness to which we are called.” (p. 80). Essentially, his writing asserts that there is a paradox between the expectation of holiness levied upon all believers and the reality that there will still be many stumbles and setbacks in the attempt to live a life without sin. This draws a striking parallel between the two forms of evangelism, with the aggressive approach hoping to emphasize the eternal effects of a sinful lifestyle and the gentle approach that does not emphasize the sin itself but instead calls upon the idea of God’s grace to forgive that sin.

Leavey, Randon and McBride (2011) studied the pastoral response to traumatic events and how their responses can evoke an alarming degree of cognitive dissonance. Their study came in response to the striking increase in suicides throughout Northern Ireland, an area where Catholicism is the dominant religion. The members of clergy interviewed indicated that they felt a striking degree of conflict between the grief they felt for the departed and their families and the Catholic Church’s condemnation of the act of committing suicide. The clergy also pointed out that their feelings of discomfort were heightened by the fact that they are limited in the degree of mental health services the church has the propensity to provide to the community, which in many ways can heighten the already traumatic feelings of dissonance. Thus, there is not only dissonance felt by those who listen to religious messages, but in many cases, the messengers themselves can also feel a great deal of dissonance related to their exchanges with the audience.
Dissonance and Persuasive Appeals

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of cognitive dissonance in persuasive appeals. Eisenstadt and Lieppe (2005) investigated how one’s attitude can be changed if called upon to advocate a position contrary to their own. In this instance, the dissonance would exist between their personal opinion or attitude and the one represented by their external advocacy. For example, someone who strongly opposes stem cell research may be called upon to argue its benefits. Studies conducted by Veen, Krug, Schooler, and Carter (2009) found not only that there is neurological evidence for the occurrence of cognitive dissonance, but that the inconsistency will likely cause the subject to change his attitude to be more consistent with the dissonant behavior. For an evangelist, it is important to note that if the message builds dissonance between the religious belief and sinful or destructive behaviors, the listener is just as likely to change the attitude as the behavior in order to reduce the dissonance. Thus, when dissonances between faith and lifestyle are provoked, the listener may be just as prone to embrace the sin as to turn away from it. It may also be a question of justification, wherein the listeners reduce the discomfort by arguing that they are justified in committing the sin. They may also discount the source of the dissonance, in effect telling themselves that their sin isn’t as bad as this or that Greater Sin. There is also dissonance reduction through comparison, where the listener may admit that they are sinner, but are not as bad as someone else.

Based on the role of cognitive dissonance in attitude change, many members of the pastoral community may use it as a persuasive function. Drawing on the example of Jonathan Edwards’ sermon which focuses on the perils of living in sin, cognitive dissonance is built through the use of fear appeals. From this perspective, evangelists will attempt to build dissonance based on two assertions. The first argument is that there are particular demands laid
upon all people by Biblical doctrine. The second argument is that the listener is currently living
in a lifestyle that is contrary to this Biblical doctrine; and because of this, that person’s eternal
fate is hanging in the balance. This creates a fear of the consequences of “living in sin” and thus,
the dissonance between how the person knows they should live and how they do live. The
evangelist hopes that the listener will choose to reduce this dissonance by converting to
Christianity and striving to live a more Biblical life.

In this instance, it would be important to note that the dissonance in these situations is
largely based upon the threat of punishment. Aronson and Carlsmith (1963) studied the threat of
punishment as a persuasive function in the “forbidden toy” experiment. In this experiment, they
placed preschool children in a room and told two groups not to play with an intriguing toy. One
group was given a severe threat of punishment and the other was given a more mild threat. They
found that the children in the mild threat group were actually less likely to play with the toy.
Their seemingly counterintuitive findings were that when it comes to trying to change someone’s
behavior, a milder threat will actually be more persuasive than a severe threat because the milder
threat evokes a higher degree of internal dissonance, leading the subject to self-persuade and
change the attitude or behavior of their own accord. Aronson (1999) later noted that the study
done on cognitive dissonance and the threat of punishment didn’t bring into question the
religious or moral beliefs of the subjects. Thus, a large hole in the field of study exists in the
study of persuasive appeals when it comes to the messages constructed by ‘fear’ evangelists.

In response to the studies conducted by Aronson and Carlsmith (1963), Gire and
Williams (2007) questioned how the level of severity in the threat of punishment would change
over an elongated timeline. Although Aronson (1999) addressed this issue partially, saying that
self-persuasion can have a long lasting effect, Gire and Williams applied his work to honor
systems within universities, comparing those with stringent punishments for honor code violations to those with more mild threats of punishment for similar violations. Their findings indicated that when a more severe threat of punishment is advanced on a more extended timeline, that threat will gain only public compliance; whereas, the mild threats will once again create a long lasting change in attitude, because the behavior will be more internalized. Again, the researchers in this study did not make any allusion to the moral and religious makeup of the participants, and thus, did not address how this study could affect the threat of an eternal, Biblical punishment.

When using cognitive dissonance as a persuasive appeal it is important to note that certain dissonance reduction techniques may run contrary to the intent of the evangelist. Referring to Festinger’s (1957) smoker analogy, Dijkstra (2009) made numerous references to the idea of “disengagement beliefs.” An example of this would be when smokers, confronted by the negative consequences of habitual smoking, argue that other healthy lifestyle habits, such as diet or exercise, reduce concerns for their overall health. In effect, they are saying “my healthy lifestyle outweighs my smoking.” In the context of evangelism, if the cognitive dissonance is too strong, the listener may develop similar disengagement beliefs that reduce their feelings of dissonance. The person feeling the dissonance would assert, “I am generally a moral person who goes to church. I’ve never seriously hurt anyone; that should outweigh my occasional minor sins or poor lifestyle choices.”

Another concern would be the issue of trivialization. Joule and Martinie (2008) suggested that one dissonance reduction technique would be to trivialize one or more of the messages that are causing the dissonance. If someone is trying to advocate a Biblical message that creates a strong dissonance between the demands of Biblical living and the listener’s current lifestyle
choices, the listener may reduce the dissonance by trivializing the message as opposed to changing their own personal attitudes or behaviors. They could trivialize the message by simply asserting that the messenger is an extremist or that it is simply one person’s interpretation of Scripture.

Another concern faced by evangelists who either intentionally or unintentionally evoke cognitive dissonance is the issue of resistance. In response to the highly divisive issue of the religious community’s stance on the LGBT community, Pitt (2011) conducted a study to measure and determine the effects of religious dissonance in homosexual black men. In his study, Pitt’s findings could be used to illuminate the theory that there is a difference between the “church message” that evokes dissonance and the one that relieves it. First, Pitt (2010) noted that when a sermon or message from a religious community evoked dissonance between lifestyle and religious identity, some listeners may reduce the dissonance by leaving the religious community altogether. Second, if the listener is strong in religious conviction but still feels too much emotional discomfort brought on by the dissonance, he or she may reduce the dissonance through blaming the messenger, or as Pitt observed:

“While these men have managed to reconcile their religious and sexual identities, sermons delivered by church leaders disrupt that reconciliation, requiring them to neutralize anxiety-inducing attitudes. Confronted by homophobic rhetoric, these men argue that the speaker is mediating the message between God and themselves and so the fault lies, not in God or even the message, but in the very-human messengers. As a result of this recognition, their focus moves from trying to neutralize the stigma to endeavoring to neutralize the stigmatizer” (p.57).
Pitt’s findings highlight the perils of dissonance-inducing religious persuasive appeals. If the message or messenger are too strong or engender too intense a feeling of unpleasantness within the listener, then the dissonance reduction technique may be to resist the person delivering that message. Inversely, Pitt also found that some may reduce the dissonance by searching for a religious community that is more accepting of their lifestyle or non-Biblical choices; and thus, the message of acceptance and non-judgment may be able to reduce dissonance. This, in turn, has the potential to strengthen the listener’s connection to the new religious community.

An important element to note, when addressing the provocation of cognitive dissonance in the context of religious persuasive messages, is that the listener, in most cases, will strive to maintain not only internal consistency but also a positive self-image. McQueen and Klein (2006) addressed this issue pointing out that when dissonance is evoked that challenges one’s self-image, that person may dismiss the dissonant message in order to reduce the discomfort and maintain their positive view of self. Steele, Spencer, and Lynch (1993) also point out that individuals with higher degrees of self-esteem may be less responsive to messages that create dissonances with the self-image. Additionally, Jarcho, Berkman, & Lieberman (2011) indicated that attitude change can take place very quickly in one’s mind without deliberation to any great extent, and that this kind of attitude change is largely dependent upon the decision-making functions of the brain. Thus, the listener may make a momentary lifestyle change in response to reduce the dissonance, but that decision may not be carried out in the long term.

Considering the aforementioned characteristics, such as political ideology, behavior, or political affiliation, where one can feel dissonance between religious beliefs and behavior, it is important to note that people may always carry varying degrees of dissonance between their religious attitudes and the message of the evangelist. With this concern in mind, many
evangelists may recognize that by easing the discomfort, they may be able to attract more converts or followers by a gentle message that reduces the emphasis by focusing more on God’s grace than on the perils of a sinful lifestyle.
Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of dissonance-building persuasive appeals in messages promoting the Christian faith. Through the use of focus groups, this study intended to determine whether building dissonance can persuade an audience to convert, to take a more active role in their faith, or to refrain from poor lifestyle choices or sinful behaviors. For better clarity, one could divide the act of evangelism into two different approaches when it comes to the use of dissonance. The first, which this study refers to as the “hellfire” approach, is one that builds dissonance in order to persuade the audience to change-based largely on fear appeals, their behavior to avoid the “wages of sin.” The second, which can be describe as the “grace” approach, is one that takes any pre-existing psychological discomfort between beliefs and behaviors and uses a more welcoming, positive message to reduce the dissonance, based largely on forgiveness appeals.

It is important to clarify the reason to divide these persuasive messages along these lines. It is not the intent of this study to claim that an evangelist can either be a “hellfire” or “grace” preacher. To submit that all evangelists fall within this dichotomy would be to commit an either-or fallacy. Instead this study intends to present these two extremes in near polar opposition to one another. By creating a contrast between the provocation and reduction of dissonance as separate functions, the study can provide some explanation to the effect that these actions have. Gauging the responses of listeners to these two messages can serve as a measurement of the risks and benefits of focusing heavily on either element of the evangelistic persuasive message. To weight the effects of a message that builds dissonance through messages about hellfire and condemnation, this study will isolate these dissonance building messages. Inversely, the effect of the grace-focused messages that intend to reduce dissonance can be evaluated when they are separated from their hellfire counterpart and viewed independently.
The first of these messages would be the aforementioned “hellfire and brimstone” message that hopes to persuade people towards the Christian faith with the fear of eternal punishment. This creates or heightens cognitive dissonance through two separate cognitions: one cognition is the interest in Biblical ideologies, and the other is the idea that certain lifestyles are considered sinful and can result in eternal condemnation. The first major concern in the presentation of this message would be whether or not it effectively builds dissonance in its listeners in a way that can provoke significant attitude change. The participants in this study were asked if these kinds of messages make them question their lifestyles and habits, and if so, if this caused any kind of emotional discomfort.

If it could be determined that dissonance had been evoked, the next concern was how the audience intended to reduce the dissonance. Theoretically, the participants would have either had to change the faith-based cognition or the conflicting cognition that has cause the dissonance. The questions in this discussion intended to determine if this dissonance building message would have made them more likely to reduce the dissonance in a way that fits the intended outcomes of evangelism. Following the logic presented by Brenner (2011), Burris (1997), and Stice (1992), actions such as repentance, transcendence, and attendance of religious services can be used as indicators of dissonance reduction, since they are ways that believers not only practice faith but also reduce emotional discomfort. Inversely, this study recognizes the importance of whether or not the dissonance can be reduced by dismissal or trivialization of the message or resistance to the messenger. In order to test the effectiveness of dissonance-building appeals, the following three research questions were addressed:

RQ1: To what extent does a message about sinful lifestyle and its consequences effectively build cognitive dissonance?
RQ2: How does the building of cognitive dissonance between Biblical messages and lifestyle choices affect the attitudes of the audience?

RQ3: How effective is this approach in persuading listeners to make significant and lasting changes in their lifestyles?

Once these questions had been addressed, in order to evaluate the persuasiveness of the second approach, it was also important to measure whether the participants carried with them any feelings of discomfort about their lives or the world around them that seemed inconsistent with what they knew about Biblical messages. Since cognitions ranging from political ideology to daily lifestyle choices can run counter to mainstream religious beliefs, it was important to get some glimpse into the thought process held by the participants before the discussion even began. By comparing the comforting nature of the second approach to the more confrontational nature of the first approach, the study intended to make determinations about whether the goals of the evangelist would be best served by an emphasis on building dissonance or by an effort focused more toward dissonance reduction. In order to determine the effectiveness of the second approach, the following research questions were addressed.

RQ4: To what extent does a message about a loving and forgiving God reduce cognitive dissonance?

RQ5: How does the reduction of cognitive dissonance affect the attitude of the audience?

RQ6: How effective is the dissonance reduction approach in changing lifestyles?

The implications that could be drawn from this research could help better inform the message construction of evangelists from a communication theory perspective. If the goal of an evangelist carries with it the techniques involved in attitude and behavioral change, then it would be important to understand how cognitive dissonance plays a role in this rhetorical context and
setting. If the evangelist would focus heavily on building discomfort and getting the audience’s attention by evoking discomfort, it would be important to understand the potential reactions to that message. Inversely, if the focus of an evangelist would be to present their message as a source of relief from discomfort, then it would be important to question whether they could provide the impetus to a significant lifestyle or attitude change.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

To examine the research questions, the researcher engaged in a series of focus group discussions, supplemented by survey-type instruments that measured dissonant feelings, emotional discomfort, and reactions to religious messages. Focus groups were selected so that the study could encompass both individual and group responses to the religious message. Although the risk of groupthink amongst participants was considered, the researcher and advisor decided that focus groups would still be the best way to gauge the effectiveness of the message from both an individual and group perspective. The participants in the study were asked to read two messages, one that was intended to build cognitive dissonance between lifestyle choices and the demands of Biblical living, and a second message that was intended to reduce dissonance through promoting the idea of a loving and gracious God that is forgiving of sin. By observing the focus group discussions and analyzing the survey responses, the research hoped to determine whether these messages would repel or attract listeners towards the messenger or religious group, and secondly whether the messages would have the intended effect of motivating the target audience change attitudes or behaviors.

The first message (Appendix A) was the kind of message that intends to build dissonance through pointing out behaviors that could be indicated as sinful and alluding to the threat of eternal punishment. The message used verses such as Revelation 20:15, which says, “and if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” This “hellfire” message intended to build dissonance in the form of a fear appeal. Conversely, the “grace” message (Appendix B) was intended to relieve dissonance by focusing on God’s grace. This message used verses such as Ephesians 2:8, which says, “For it is by grace you have
been saved, through faith— and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” This message was constructed to reduce dissonance by focusing less on sinful and destructive behaviors, and more on the gift of God’s grace.

Sample Selection

Focus groups were conducted using 29 participants divided into four groups based upon their own spiritual self-identification. In order to find participants, an announcement was made to undergraduate classes at a small Midwestern liberal arts college (Appendix C). Additionally, the researcher employed a snowball sampling technique, where the respondents who volunteered were asked if they knew other people of similar religiosity who wanted to participate. The students were offered a chance to participate in the study on a voluntary basis; and thus, the study was conducted with a self-selected sample of convenience. One stipulation was that students under the age of 18 were not allowed to participate in the study. Participants then signed an informed consent document (Appendix D) that outlined the risks and confidentiality concerns. A copy of this document was also provided to all participants.

Prior to the focus group sessions, the students completed an intake survey (Appendix E) to determine demographic characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity. In addition to the demographic items, the participants were asked to self-identify by selecting one item from a series of statements that best described their personal religiosity. Based upon their responses, the participants were placed into four groups based on the involvement they have in the Christian faith (Active, Inactive, Nonbelievers, and Agnostic). The participants in the active group were those who were raised in some sort of Christian church community and still actively pursue their faith, as well as those who had been recently converted to Christian faith and were actively seeking information about their spiritual well-being. Participants in the inactive group were those
who may or may not have been raised in the church, but are no longer actively practicing any kind of religion. This group included those who had professed the belief that God exists, but were not actively taking action to develop and strengthen their faith. The nonbeliever group included those who identify themselves as atheists, as well as those who do not understand the concept of God and have given up searching for answers in matters of faith. The undecided group included those who didn’t know where they stood on the issue of God or faith and had no strong commitments one way or the other. Since the literature did not provide an adequate and applicable means of grouping participants, the researcher and advisor decided that these classifications could at least reasonably ensure that the participants could have a candid discussion about the message without having to worry about the discussion being driven off topic by wide differences in belief.

This was intended to help direct and focus the group discussions because the members of each group had similar religious viewpoints; and thus, they would be more inclined to discuss the messages instead of arguing over other issues of individualized beliefs. For instance, if participants who were quite active in their faith had been put into a group with a few nonbelievers, then there would be a foreseeable risk that the discussion could deteriorate into an argument over why one person believes one way or another instead of a discussion that is focused directly on the message and how the participants might react.

This division of groups based on religiosity had the potential to provide several levels of understanding in the findings of the study. Essentially, it asked how the various groups at different stages of religiosity would react to dissonance building and dissonance-relieving messages. For example, an element not present in the research questions that may arise in this kind of focus group discussion was how nonbelievers react to certain messages versus the
reactions amongst active Christians. Additionally, some believers may profess that the grace message takes away some of the deterrence that may cause the avoidance of sinful lifestyles. Essentially, they could have said, “Why should I stop sinning when I know God will just forgive me?” Furthermore, the study hopes to shed some insight on what can repel or attract people to religious faith.

At the beginning of each focus group session, the participants were given a survey instrument (Appendix F) that measured whether or not the participants were harboring any feelings of dissonance with regard to faith, sin, or religious messages in general. An important element to note is that the survey instruments and messages did not give a working definition of sin. This is because the focus of the study was based on how the participants perceived themselves in relation to the messages and not on whether their behaviors fit a consistent standard of sinful behavior. Put in other terms, the focus was on whether the participants see themselves as sinful beings instead of whether or not their daily decisions actually meet the theological definitions of sinful behavior. This survey essentially functioned as a baseline to measure the presence of pre-study or unresolved dissonance. It also inquired as to whether or not the idea of sin held any bearing on the daily behaviors or lifestyle choices of the participants.

Each focus group was then divided into two phases. In the first phase, the participants were asked to read a message that was designed to build dissonance between lifestyle choices and the demands of Biblical living. After reading the messages, the participants were asked to complete a second survey instrument (Appendix G) that helped ascertain whether the message had evoked dissonance. The survey also measured whether or not the participants would engage in activities such as repentance or attendance of religious services, which the literature indicates can be used as a means to reduce religious dissonance (Stice, 1992, Burris 1997, Brenner 2011).
After the participants completed the survey, there was a focus group discussion where the respondents were asked to offer their individual responses to the message. In the second phase, the participants were asked to read a message that focused on dissonance reduction, or “grace.” Once again, a survey-type instrument and focus group discussion were conducted to measure dissonance and what the listener would do to reduce the discomfort. By comparing the discussion response and survey data between the two phases, the two approaches could be compared.

**Phase 1-Dissonance Building (Hellfire)**

Both sections of the focus group discussion were hosted by a fellow graduate student, so that the researcher who designed the study could not influence the responses of the participants. During the first session, the participants were asked to read a “hellfire” message (Appendix A). The message included verses such as “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Once the message was read, the participants were given a survey instrument (Appendix G) that measured whether dissonance had been created or prior dissonance reinforced, and asked if the participants found it necessary to go to church or pray to reduce the discomfort. The participants were then asked a standardized set of focus-group discussion questions (Appendix I) about how they felt, and were given an opportunity to describe how they would respond to this sort of message. They were also asked whether this sort of persuasive appeal would attract or repel them towards religion in general. In order to answer research questions 1-3, the discussion questions were intended to determine: 1) whether or not the message effectively built or reinforced cognitive dissonance, 2) whether this dissonance affected the attitude of the audience, and 3) if this persuasive technique enabled significant and lasting lifestyle changes. Since the sample size in this study was relatively small, the data from the surveys were presented as frequency
distributions, which could then be reinforced by the responses to focus group discussion questions. Although this approach does not have the propensity to yield results with statistical significance, it does allow from some basic conclusions to be drawn.

**Phase 2- Dissonance Reduction (Grace)**

During the second session, the participants were asked to read a “grace” message (Appendix B) that depicts a loving and gracious God that would rather forgive than condemn. The message includes verses such as Ephesians 2:8, which says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” The “grace” message was constructed in a way that intends to welcome the listeners to faith, but instead of building dissonance between Biblical messages and lifestyle choices, the message attempted to reduce dissonance by presenting a life of faith as one that can provide comfort and relief regardless of past decisions or behaviors.

The questions and survey that followed this message (Appendices H and I) were similar to the ones used in Phase 1, but instead of gauging whether or not dissonance had been provoked, the participants were asked if the grace message provided them some relief from feelings of dissonance they may have been carrying with them. In order to answer research questions 4-6, the researcher examined 1) whether or not the message of grace reduced dissonance, 2) whether this dissonance reduction affected the attitudes of the audience, and 3) if this persuasive technique had the potential to enable significant and lasting lifestyle changes. Once again, frequency distributions were presented in tandem with focus group responses to gauge the response of the participants to the message.
Comparison of the two approaches

The focus group discussions were filmed so that they could be compared to one another in hopes of finding consistent themes in the answers from each group, as well as finding points of contrast. In order to do this, and informed consent document was signed by each of the participants in order to ensure privacy and confidentiality. The promise of confidentiality carried with it the reassurance that the participants could speak freely and candidly about the message and how it affects their views on faith. The researcher was also prepared to look for other nuances, such as how the devout responded to one message compared to those who have a more agnostic or even atheist view of religion. Ultimately, this study intended to examine the persuasive appeals of evangelists through a persuasive perspective. If the hellfire message could effectively build enough dissonance to convince the believer to make behavior changes, it could be concluded that building dissonance alone could be an effective means to persuade the listener. Additionally, if the grace message caused the listeners to make a change in attitude or behavior, then one can find some persuasive value in the act of dissonance reduction. Ultimately, this study asked which of these two elements is the most effective.

Following the rationale that certain measures taken by people of faith, such as repentance, transcendence, and attendance of religious services can be a means to reduce dissonance, this study made an inquiry into how effective these two messages are in moving the participants to consider making changes in their lifestyles. In an instance where the participants indicated that they are more likely to pray, to repent or to attend a religious service, it could be logically concluded that the message has spoken to some degree of disequilibrium that they would act to relieve. Since the intent of evangelism could be described as the pursuit of leading
others to take an active role in their faith, this question could be a good indicator of which message is more effective.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The first notable finding came from a cross tabulation of the responses based upon religious self-identification. On virtually all items that measured emotional discomfort and relief thereof, the group that self-identified as nonbelievers responded with either “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” This finding, although rather intuitive, points out an important element in the persuasive appeals of evangelists. If a listener does not accept the major premise of the existence of God, that listener is neither going to be uncomfortable at the thought of hellfire nor relieved by the idea of grace. Thus it would be difficult to build faith-based dissonance amongst non-believers when they have already dismissed the idea of a God that can either condemn or forgive.

The next major finding was the inability of the hellfire message to actually build dissonance within the listeners. Items on the questionnaire were used to gauge levels of dissonance, and the frequency distributions did little to suggest that the message created any feelings of guilt, discomfort, or fear of punishment (See Table 1). This finding is given some explanation by the responses of the participants. The consistent theme amongst most of the participants, regardless of their particular religiosity, was that the message of God’s judgment was one they had learned before, and one they had grown accustomed to dismissing. One participant went so far as to say “I guess I’m kind of desensitized.” Another explained, “A religious preacher would come to our campus and say ‘you’re going to hell.’ I would say ‘thanks, man,’ and go on with my day.” Another participant said, referring to religious messages in general, “It was pushed on me for so long that I just got fed up with it.” Thus, participants within the study group had already heard the potentially dissonance creating message many times, had
learned to ignore or dismiss the message, and therefore, the message had little, if any, potential impact in terms of engendering attitude change.

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<thead>
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<th>Table 1: Dissonance measures- hellfire survey N=29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey Item</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This message makes me uncomfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel I should be more concerned about my spiritual well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing this message makes me feel guilty about sins I have committed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SA=Strongly Agree. A=Agree. N=Neutral. D=Disagree. SA=Strongly Agree

The participants’ responses suggest that the message of punishment and condemnation is ubiquitous in modern society, and thus, they have become numb to this sort of message. Numerous participants made reference to televangelists and public religious groups that have expressed the need to turn from sin and seek salvation. Direct references were made to groups and figures such as Benny Hinn and the Westboro Baptist Church. Additionally, participants noted that the message was one they had heard from family or community members since childhood, as one participant quipped, “I think it (the hellfire message) made me a little uncomfortable, not because it was persuasive but because it brought back a lot of fun memories about Thanksgiving dinners past.” Thus in response to the first research question, “To what extent does a message about a sinful lifestyle and its consequences effectively build cognitive dissonance?” it can be reasonably concluded that at least this particular message about a sinful lifestyle did little to evoke a noticeable degree of cognitive dissonance.
When addressing the second research question, “How does the building of cognitive dissonance between Biblical messages and lifestyle choices affect the attitudes of the audience?” it is important to note that there were a wide array of responses to messages that are designed to build dissonance. Among these responses were several actions or attitudinal stances that are counterintuitive to the goal of the evangelist, such as trivialization of the message or backlash against the messenger. One telling gauge of the participant’s response was the widespread dismissal of the hellfire message. Since it can be concluded that the hellfire message did little to evoke emotional discomfort, it is logical to conclude that it didn’t promote any significant attitude change.

The reactions of the focus group questions suggested that their responses to the message were consistent with the unintended dissonance reduction techniques that were outlined in the previous literature. The hellfire message was dismissed as “fear tactics,” “manipulation,” and even, “religious bigotry.” One respondent in the nonbeliever group argued, “I felt rather disgusted that people would resort to appeals to emotion.” This stance is comparable to a different participant in the believer group that suggested, “I believe that focusing so much on punishment is what steers a lot of people away from wanting to believe.” These responses suggest that the use of a dissonance-building message implies a risk not only of failing to connect with its audience, but also a risk of having the message or the messenger dismissed or trivialized.

The third research question, “How effective is this approach in persuading listeners to make significant and lasting changes in their lifestyles?” addressed whether or not a message designed to build dissonance could actually lead to a significant change in attitude or behavior.
The survey instruments used multiple items to determine if the listener’s would engage in behaviors that are consistent with the goals of the evangelist. The results are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>N=29</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>This Message makes me want to repent of my sins</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>This message makes me want to change certain behaviors or lifestyle choices</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>This message makes me want to attend some sort of religious service</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>44.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SA=Strongly Agree. A=Agree. N=Neutral. D=Disagree. SA=Strongly Agree*

These findings indicate that a majority of the respondents were not moved by the message to make a significant change to behaviors or lifestyle choices. This is consistent to a widespread dismissal of this message that was shared by the four different groups. In a hypothetical scenario where one would hear this message while walking on campus, one participant said, “I would probably walk off,” then explained, “I don’t feel like this is something I would necessarily care to listen to.” Another participant noted that this is a message that was inconsistent with her view on God and faith, saying, “I think the main message of God and Jesus is forgiveness and loving everybody. This message is, like, so not that.”

**Phase 2-Grace**

The next three research questions were designed to evaluate the communicative impact of the grace message. The first research question in this phase asked, “To what extent does a
message about a loving and forgiving God reduce cognitive dissonance?” The answer to this could possibly be ascertained by the groups’ responses to the first inquiry from the focus group interviewer. When asked about how the grace message made them feel, one group responded “much better” almost unanimously. Another participant commented, “If you wanted to convert someone to Christianity, you could be more confident that they might join.” Another participant agreed, saying, “It makes me happy to be able to read a message like this.”

The survey responses gave further insight into the ability of the grace message to reduce dissonance and alleviate discomfort. One of the items on the grace questionnaire, was “I found this message relieving.” Given the first finding that the nonbeliever group was somewhat impervious to faith-based emotional discomfort, it was important to once again recognize that that the ability to relieve discomfort was largely dependent upon the acceptance of the premise that God exists. Thus, the table below shows the frequency of responses to the survey question regarding relief, showing the difference between the sample as a whole and the sample when the nonbeliever responses were removed. It is important to note the tendency toward agreement shifted once the nonbeliever responses were removed from the group. This provides evidence to suggest that the ability to build dissonance is dependent upon the acceptance of the general premise that God exists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Message Response Measures- Grace Survey (N=29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey Item</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find this message relieving- entire sample. (n=29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq. 4 7 11 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 13.8 24.1 37.9 10.3 13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find this message relieving- nonbeliever responses removed (n=23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq. 4 6 10 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 17.4 26.1 43.5 8.7 4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SA=Strongly Agree. A=Agree. N=Neutral. D=Disagree. SD=Strongly Agree
Notice that the tendency toward agreement shifted once the nonbeliever responses were removed from the group. Unlike the hellfire message, which was universally rejected amongst all groups, there arose a difference between nonbelievers and the other three groups in terms of their reaction to the grace message. Additionally, this meets the general theme amongst the focus group discussion that the grace message was uplifting, positive and encouraging. However this finding alone is insignificant if not used to weigh the effect it had upon the attitudes of the listeners.

To judge the attitudinal response, the fifth research question inquired, “How does the reduction of cognitive dissonance affect the attitude of the audience?” The table below shows the response to certain attitudinal stances. Although the answers from the group as a whole are somewhat evenly distributed, once again it can be noted that the removal of the nonbeliever responses demonstrated at least some evidence of attitude shift in reaction to the message.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I trust that God will forgive me no matter what I do- entire sample. (n=29)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I trust that God will forgive me no matter what I do- nonbeliever responses removed (n=23)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This message relieved feelings of guilt I have had for a long time. - entire sample (n=29)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This message relieved feelings of guilt I have had for a long time. - nonbeliever responses removed (n=23)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SA=Strongly Agree. A=Agree. N=Neutral. D=Disagree. SA=Strongly Agree

Since the tendency of the nonbelievers was to mark “disagree” or “strongly disagree” unanimously on the survey items, it became necessary to evaluate the message responses on the
surveys to those who had not rejected the idea of God’s existence. Of those who were not part of the nonbeliever group, the idea that God would forgive was affirmed, with over 60% responding either “agree” or “strongly agree.” However, a larger number of the group indicated that the message did not speak to any feeling of guilt or remorse they carried with them, so the surveys did not indicate much of an attitudinal change. However, the removal of the nonbeliever responses did mitigate the proportion of strong disagreement.

In response to the sixth research question, “How effective is the dissonance reduction approach in changing lifestyles?” there were very few responses that matched what the literature base indicated would be typical responses to faith-based dissonance. The respondents did not indicate that the relieving message would compel them to make behavioral changes. At the same time, the active believers indicated that the dissonance reduction focused messages encouraged them to maintain the mindset of faith. One participant expressed the belief that “You have to become comfortable with talking to God, speaking to him, relying on him.” Another indicated that the grace message was something of a breakthrough in the development of their faith, explaining, “As I started believing, I realize that I’m not perfect and I don’t have to be perfect.” Finally, a third participant in the believer group actually indicated that a behavior may be provoked by the grace message, as she said, “Hearing about the love of God makes me want to go share it to everybody I know.”
Table 5: Dissonance Reduction Measures- Grace Survey (N=29)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This Message makes me want to repent of my sins-grace.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This message makes me want to change certain behaviors or lifestyle choices-grace.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This message makes me want to attend some sort of religious service-grace.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SA=Strongly Agree. A=Agree. N=Neutral. D=Disagree. SA=Strongly Agree

Comparison of the two approaches

Possibly the most telling of the results in the study are the ones that can be observed when the two kinds of messages are directly compared to one another. First, an interesting element to note was the immediate dichotomy that was established in the word choice of the participants. The terms grace and hellfire were almost immediately used synonymously with positive and negative, respectively. This spoke to a wide array of sentiments that were expressed wherein the grace message was favored over the hellfire message.

The focus group discussions held a recurring theme amongst all groups where the grace message was preferred over its hellfire counterpart. The participants were all asked how the grace message made them feel, having read it after the discussion on the hellfire text. Their responses referred to the grace message as “more uplifting,” and some simply responded that the message made them feel “much better.” Another respondent, when comparing grace to hellfire, said “I feel like I would actually shoot this person a smile, because they are more pleasant, instead of ‘you’re going to hell.’” One of the participants in the nonbeliever group, comparing
the two messages said, “I think it (the grace message) doesn’t really attract me, but it repels me less than the initial (hellfire) message.” Another participant in the inactive group shared a similar sentiment, saying “If I chose to go to a church and listen to this message, I would be more accepting of it.”

This general preference towards the grace message was expressed throughout the four groups. Among the nonbeliever group, however, there was a general distaste for the grace message that was comparable to the widespread distaste for the hellfire message. The sentiment was accepted among the nonbelievers to the point that one commented, “I feel that this message is the exact same thing.” One participant stated that the grace message can easily be used to manipulate its listeners, while another said that the grace message promoted condescension as opposed to the outright contempt for sin that was expressed in the hellfire text. At the same time, the nonbeliever group seemed to take less exception to the grace message than they did the hellfire one that came before it. One participant noted, “I’m still not a fan of it, but I would be a lot less disturbed if my Grandma was watching a live church TV show with this message on Sunday, as opposed to if she was watching one with a hellfire and brimstone message on Sunday.” Another nonbeliever, referring to the grace message, supposed that “maybe it’s just the way the passages are written, but I feel like this person would be a lot nicer.”

The most noticeable finding regarding the preference towards the grace message came from the survey responses to the item, “I would avoid a church or evangelist with this kind of message.” This question was placed on the surveys for both the hellfire and grace messages. Although 37.9% of the respondents indicated that they would avoid a church or evangelist with a hellfire message, not a single participant, nonbelievers included, indicated that they would avoid a church or evangelist with a grace message.
### Table 6 Church/Evangelist avoidance survey comparisons (N=29)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would avoid a church or evangelist with this kind of message-hellfire.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would avoid a church or evangelist with this kind of message-grace.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SA=Strongly Agree. A=Agree. N=Neutral. D=Disagree. SA=Strongly Agree

*Other findings*

There were a few additional findings that were notable although they did not directly answer any of the research questions, the first of which was the references to context. Since the message was a single paragraph of text that made little reference to the setting or speaker, many members of the group spoke in hypotheticals about where, or in what setting they would and would not be receptive to the persuasive appeal. Many of the participants referred to the occurrence of open-air preachers that come to speak on campus, one of which was the very same preacher that was referenced in the first sentence of this study. They indicated that if this message was delivered to them by an evangelist campus, they would be much less receptive, whereas they would be more willing to listen to such a message if they actively made the decision to attend a religious service. This presents the idea that the ability to persuade using dissonance is dependent not only on the listener’s belief, but also upon the situation and if the listener has actively chosen to listen to a religious message.

One participant gave an important insight into the element of context, saying, “If feel like if somebody walked up to me on the street with either of these messages, like even if it was a nice person just talking to me, like I would get angry at them because it’s kind of a thing like
they’re just pushing a message. But if it was like in a church setting, I think it would be completely different. Like if I chose to go, I would be more accepting of it.” This expression was widely agreed upon by other members of the group and speaks not only to the element of context, such as a listener’s predisposition to listen to a message in a church environment, but also of the reaction to one who is attempting to persuade. It would be difficult for an evangelist to persuade to any extent if the listener can dismiss their argument by saying it is simply, “pushing a message.”

Additionally, an element of the study’s design was to develop a contrast between hellfire and grace messages when it is possible that both elements can be present in the same persuasive appeal. Many of the participants noted this juxtaposition of extremes, and presented their desire to hear both elements. One participant commented, “I think when you just get extremes, you have more questions than anything.” When this participant was asked to clarify, they said, “I think there’s a middle ground.” This leads to the conclusion that placing too much emphasis on either end of the spectrum between grace and condemnation would strike the listener as an incomplete, or even extreme message.

A basic explanation of a dissonance-based persuasive appeal could be that the messenger provokes dissonance in order to evoke an emotional discomfort, then provides the listener with a means to reduce that dissonance. In the context of an evangelist’s message, this would require him or her to present the hellfire message as a way to make the listener uncomfortable, then present the grace message as means to reduce that discomfort which he or she had created in order to present and develop a complete persuasive appeal based upon cognitive dissonance. One participant in the active believer group argued that without both elements present, the message loses its meaning. They asserted, “Before you can understand God’s love, you have to
understand where that’s coming from, like, ‘I created you to be perfect. You broke away from that, you sinned and there are punishments for that sin, but I love you so much that I’m willing to sacrifice my only son.’ Until you can understand that, I don’t think you can understand God’s love.” Although this argument was a reflection of that participant’s theological stance, it also speaks to the need for a complete dissonance appeal, not just one that focuses heavily on either building or reducing dissonance.

Finally, another interesting finding was the tendency, most noticeable among the active believer and nonbeliever group, to frame the message in terms of another spiritual group. The nonbelievers hypothesized how believers might respond to the message, while the active believers spoke about how hypothetical nonbelievers or undecided listeners could best be converted to believe. The act of expressing belief or nonbelief could put the person in a group that separates them from others, therefore it may be important to recognize that the listeners seemed to evaluate the message not only based on how it made them feel but how they thought the message may affect other listeners outside their belief system.

*Limitations to the study*

The first limitation to the study was the fact that the pool of participants did not have generational representativeness. The four groups were predominantly college students in their early to mid-twenties. Hence, the findings regarding the impact of the persuasive message may or may not be generalizable to older or younger demographics. Many of the participants referred to religious exposure during their childhood, which could mean that they are still developing religious identities that are not predicated upon the religion with which they were raised. An additional limitation of the quantitative findings of the study came from the limited sample size.
With less than thirty participants, it would be difficult to generalize the quantitative findings to a larger population.

It is also important to note the division of the participants based on individual religiosity. The participants were grouped based on responses to their intake surveys in order to give a surface understanding of their general religiosities. This was a necessary element of the design of the study as its purpose was to center the discussion on responses to the message and not on differences of religious affiliation or understanding. However, more specific denominational differences could speak to how accustomed each participant may be to the dissonance-building elements contained in the messages. In this sense, the division could become infinitely regressive, as there are unlimited ways to divide people based upon their religious beliefs and practices. If a participant’s religious background involved frequent exposure to a message focused on punishment language, their reaction may be much different than one who was brought up in a religious organization that seldom focused on the issue of sin and punishment.

Since it would be difficult to establish an intake survey instrument that encapsulates the entirety of a participant’s theological beliefs, any replication of the groups may include some disagreement over basic differences in doctrine. It is also important to note that because of the small sample size, the all of the groups were combined in the presentation of the statistical findings. This had the effect of muting the differences in religious perspective. If the study were to be replicated with a larger sample, it is possible that more differences between the self-identified groups could be observed.

Another element of the design of this study was the decision to have the participants read the message as opposed to playing an audio or visual recording. This was done so that the participants would be more reactive to the argument made by the message as opposed to their
general impression of the speaker. Since the context of the message was brought up by the participants on multiple occasions, it can be reasonably predicted that a recording of a sermon may provoke a different response than a recording of someone delivering the message in a different setting. Additionally, logic would dictate that the relative oratorical ability of the speaker could have an effect on the message’s reception by its audience.

Furthermore, the theological perspective of the listener could have an impact on whether or not the message builds dissonance. Numerous participants gave a statement of their belief or denomination as a disclaimer before giving their opinion, (such as, “I was raised Catholic”) which could suggest that a theological disagreement with the message could keep the listener from developing any kind of emotional discomfort. Among those who expressed that they believe in God, there was still some variance in belief into the role of repentance and the emphasis on the ability to live without sin. Much like the previously stated finding that one must accept the premise of God to experience dissonance, it can also be noted that the listener’s doctrine or interpretation of scripture could mitigate the message’s ability to provoke inconsistent cognitions.
Discussion

Throughout this study, participants were asked to explain their reaction to religious messages on polar opposites of a spectrum with grace messages and hellfire messages put in opposition to one another. These two forms of religious messages, although not entirely representative of the Christian faith as a whole, produced some insights into the communicative elements of religiously motivated persuasive messages.

The first important area to note is that the ability of the evangelist to build dissonance is dependent in most cases upon the listener’s stance on the existence of God. That is, if a receiver of a message has already come a to conclusion that God does not exist, then any message along the spectrum of extreme hellfire to extreme grace is going to face difficulty when it comes to building or relieving dissonance. This speaks widely to the idea of context, wherein using a persuasive strategy based on cognitive dissonance is best suited for an environment where the audience has accepted the major premise that God exists. If one does not at least entertain the idea that God exists, one will not respond to religiously motivated appeals intended to evoke attitude change.

Once the context of belief is established, the next important element to note is that the ability to build or relieve dissonance is based largely on the experiences of the listeners. Numerous participants in the study, regardless of how they self-identified in terms of religiosity, spoke to the ubiquitous nature of religious messages and generally agreed that they were willing to dismiss or disengage from messages that they felt they had been inundated with since childhood. Thus, desensitization and past experience presented themselves in this study as a barrier to the ability to build or connect to feelings of dissonance. A similar element of the findings was that the participants made frequent comparisons to other evangelists and religious
figures, which suggests that if the message is reminiscent of another message delivered by a televangelist or public figure, the response may be affected by the way the listener felt when the similar message was heard.

Finally, the dichotomy of hellfire versus grace presents itself as the most notable finding of the study. The division of persuasive appeals to dissonance building and dissonance reducing messages served as means to compare these two elements of a dissonance based persuasive appeal. The participants not only noticed this stark contrast, but explicitly expressed the desire to hear a centered approach that utilized both the ideas of hellfire and grace. This means that even if it can be concluded that one approach is preferable to another, there is a communicative risk involved in giving preference to either side of the dissonance appeal. Thus, if an evangelist focuses too heavily on either message of punishment or the idea of grace, that evangelist could be easily dismissed by the audience.

Ultimately, the issues of faith and its role in lifestyle choices permeates modern society. Questions of belief and their reconciliation with the world around us are weighed and argued in the minds of believers and nonbelievers alike. An evangelist steps into this conflict whenever he or she makes an appeal towards the Christian faith. The ability of a religious message to evoke or relieve discomfort is an element of persuasion that the evangelist simply cannot afford to ignore. To study and evaluate the role of this discomfort in the development of a persuasive appeal is to better understand the means of the evangelist to answer the great commission of their faith.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to analyze religious persuasive messages that either built or reduced cognitive dissonance, hoping to determine which approach was the most effective in persuasive outcomes from a communication theory standpoint. By conducting a modified, two-part focus group style discussion as a supplement to the survey instruments, this study hoped to draw a few basic conclusions regarding how listeners across the spectrum of faith would respond to these messages. Important conclusions could be drawn in relation to both messages, including elements such as the beliefs of the listeners and desensitization, as well as a comparison of the effects of the two messages.

The first notable conclusion stems from the idea that a complete persuasive message would be one that builds dissonance to some degree, and then gave the listeners a means to reduce that discomfort. To determine the effectiveness of the two phases of this type of persuasive appeal, this study constructed two separate messages that focused exclusively on either building or reducing dissonance. This highlighted the idea that when an evangelist uses dissonance, the provocation and reduction of dissonance should not be treated as an “either-or” decision. This conclusion emanates from the stated desire of the participants to hear a balanced message or an appeal to the middle ground. Thus, a major inference to be drawn from this study is that a religious message that focuses on the use of cognitive dissonance must also focus on balance between themes of punishment and appeals to the idea of a gracious God.

Another important conclusion is that the ability to build or reduce dissonance is entirely dependent upon on the listener’s initial stance on the existence of God. The participants in this study who self-identified as nonbelievers were the ones who expressed the greatest degree of
indifference to the hellfire message. Additionally, while other groups expressed a strong preference for the grace message, the nonbeliever group, although more receptive to the message, were still dismissive of the idea of reducing discomfort through connection to a grace-filled God. When comparing the two messages, the nonbeliever group saw the provocation and relief of discomfort not as a reason to modify behaviors, but instead as a validation of the contradiction they saw within Scripture. This means that if a speaker is presenting a message to an audience largely comprised of nonbelievers, it could be argued that an appeal focused solely on creating dissonance is not an effective approach.

One of the most predictable conclusions was the tendency of participants in all groups to resist or even to express backlash against the hellfire message. This response took various forms, from the previously stated disgust from the nonbeliever group to the feelings of concern from the believer group that such a message would turn people away from faith. The participants demonstrated that if the message does little more than outline the themes of sin and punishment, then they are not likely to be moved to make an attitude change. This highlighted concerns presented in the review of literature that a listener may respond to dissonance by the act of trivialization or rejection of either the message or the messenger.

Additionally, it is important to note that many of the focus group participants expressed that they had been inundated with messages about Biblical punishment before. Respondents drew comparisons to public figures and religious groups, as well as experiences from their past. This creates an important element of message formation. With references to television evangelists and the Westboro Baptist church, it is important for the person constructing the message to be cognizant of the messages that the audience has been exposed to in the past. The messenger should be aware to whom they are being compared when they advance their message.
If the listeners are desensitized to the message of the evangelist, the message will not meet its persuasive goals, no matter how well-intended or scripturally sound it may be.

Another interesting occurrence in the focus group discussions was the tendency for people to evaluate a message based on its reception by a hypothetical listener with beliefs that differed from theirs. This was found most noticeably amongst the nonbelievers and the active believer group. The nonbelievers spoke about the potential persuasive effect of the message amongst those who believed in God. Inversely, participants in the active believer group spoke about hypothetical listeners who didn’t know where they stood on the issue of faith. This means that a listener would be likely to evaluate a religious message not only by how it affects them personally, but also by how they think that message might affect others. This creates yet another nuance in the complexities that must be considered when constructing a religious persuasive message.

Another conclusion can be drawn by the response to the grace message. First, not a single participant indicated they would avoid a church or group with a grace message. This finding was validated by the focus group responses, where all groups said they would prefer the grace message to some degree. The respondents indicated that even if they were not directly persuaded by the message, they felt that they would be more open or receptive to an evangelist whose focus was dedicated to a message of a gracious God. Although this does not directly answer the question of which approach is more effective, it does create an important lesson for someone trying to convert others to the faith. Even if the message of grace does not have a striking persuasive advantage to its hellfire counterpart, it does avoid the considerable risk of resistance from the audience.
Finally, the comparison of the two approaches is largely dependent upon context. Numerous participants stated that they would be more willing to listen to either of the messages in a church setting. Group members also spoke several times about instances where evangelists or open-air preachers spoke on campus. In this analogous situation, the participants then explained how they would react if the campus speaker was using one message versus the other. A few of them indicated that their reservations about certain elements of the message would be much less troublesome if they heard them while willingly attending some sort of religious service. This further reinforces a rather commonplace idea that the persuasive value of a message is largely dependent upon the rhetorical situation.

Ultimately, this study was intended to analyze the role of cognitive dissonance in the construction of religious messages and its effectiveness as a persuasive tactic or tool. By using a tandem of surveys and focus groups, this study attempted to establish some basic conclusions regarding how the use of emotional discomfort affected the efficacy of evangelistic arguments towards listeners of various faith backgrounds. Ever present in these conclusions were the complexities of attitude change on the issue of religious belief. By drawing a contrast between a message that emphasized punishment and one that highlighted grace and forgiveness, this study could help both scholars and evangelists begin to understand the complexities that arise when an evangelist tries to make new converts. It could be most notably concluded that there are risks involved in emphasizing one approach over the other or to the outright exclusion of the other. This means that a message that balances both the provocation or creation and the reduction of dissonance is the most likely to have a persuasive effect.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Hellfire Message

One needs to look no further than the scriptures to understand that God hates sin. Romans 6:23 tells us that “the wages of sin is death.” Look to what you do on a daily basis; do you fornicate? Do you drink to excess? Do you speak with vulgar and profane terms? If your demeanor, appearance, and behaviors have become reflective of a sinful lifestyle, remember the words of Galatians 6:7 “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” We are destined for the same fate: judgment. At the end of our human lives, if we have not turned from sin, our names will not be written in the book of life. Revelations 20:15 tells us “and if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” The only way to save ourselves is to turn from our sinful ways, to repent, and to pray for forgiveness.
Appendix B: Grace Message

There are many who believe there is no place for them in the house of God because their sins are too great. Let me assure you with the words of Ephesians 2:8 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” God wants us to take our burdens, take whatever plagues us today, and to offer it up to him. We are his children, and when all others want us to feel persecuted or weighed down by any of our choices, we must remember John 14:6, where Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The story of Jesus is all the proof we need that God loves us and wants us to be happy, as John 3:16 says it all “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whomever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God will forgive our sins if we believe in Jesus Christ.
Appendix C: Announcement

Mr. Adam Blood is conducting a study on religious persuasive appeals towards the completion of his thesis in the Department of Communication & Sociology. The study will be conducted using focus group style discussions that address how Christian groups try to induce lifestyle changes. Mr. Blood is asking for participants to volunteer. Volunteering for this study will give the participants a chance to have firsthand experience in primary communication research. If you would like to participate, or if you have any questions, please contact:

Adam Blood
Department of Communications
Martin 127 A
blood@ucmo.edu
417-437-1437
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Identification of Researchers: This research is being done by Adam Blood, a graduate student, and Jack Rogers, a professor. We are with the Department of Communication and Sociology at the University of Central Missouri.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of the common persuasive appeals that are used in religious messages.

Request for Participation: We are inviting you to participate in a study on the use of persuasive appeals in religious messages. It is up to you whether you would like to participate. If you decide not to participate, you will not be penalized in any way. You can also decide to stop at any time without penalty. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions, you may simply skip them.

Exclusions: You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.

Description of Research Method: This study involves focus group style discussions about religious messages. Based on answers to a brief survey, you will be divided into groups based on how you identify yourself spiritually. The focus group will meet for two sessions that will last approximately one hour. The focus groups will be filmed for further analysis.

Privacy: All of the information we collect will be confidential. We will not record your name, student number, or any information that could be used to identify you. All surveys and recordings will be stored in a way that makes them inaccessible to those not involved in the study.

Explanation of Risks: The risks associated with participating in this study are similar to the risks of everyday life.

Explanation of Benefits: You will benefit from participating in this study by getting firsthand experience in communication research. We will provide you with a coupon that you may use if any of your instructors award credit for research participation.

Questions: If you have any questions about this study, please contact Mr. Blood, or his advisor, Dr. Rogers. Mr. Blood can be reached at blood@ucmo.edu and Dr. Rogers at rogers@ucmo.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Human Subjects Protection Program at (660) 543-4621.

If you would like to participate, please sign a copy of this letter and return it to me. The other copy is for you to keep.

I have read this letter and agree to participate.

Signature: ________________________________
Date: _________________________________
Appendix E: Intake Survey

Demographic Information

1.) Age: ____

2.) Gender: M______F_______

3.) Ethnicity___________

Please select ONE of the following statements that best describes your faith.

- I was raised in the church and continue to be a strong believer and actively practice my faith
- I was raised in the church but no longer actively practice/participate in my faith.
- I am a new believer and am still exploring my faith.
- I am a believer but college has caused me to begin questioning my faith.
- I do not believe in God. I am an atheist
- I do not understand the concept of God. I have lots of questions and have given up searching for answers for now.
- I don’t really know where I stand on the Question of God or faith.
## Appendix F: Opening Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Strongly Agree, 2 Agree, 3 Neutral, 4 Disagree, 5 Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<tr>
<td>I frequently think about sin when making lifestyle choices.</td>
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<td>I get uncomfortable when I consider the possibility of eternal punishment for sins.</td>
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<td>I pray often.</td>
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<td>I frequently attend religious services.</td>
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<td>I believe that without God’s forgiveness, I will face eternal punishment.</td>
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<td>I believe that I am a sinful person.</td>
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<td>Thinking about my actions in terms of sin and punishment causes me emotional distress.</td>
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<td>I use prayer as a means to relieve my discomfort about my life or my choices.</td>
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<td>I believe that if I repent, God will forgive me.</td>
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<td>The fear of God’s punishment affects the decisions I make.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious messages about the consequences of sin make me uncomfortable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I avoid talking about sin and its consequences with others.</td>
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## Appendix G: Hellfire Questionnaire

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<td>1 Strongly Agree, 2 Agree, 3 Neutral, 4 Disagree, 5 Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>This message makes me uncomfortable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hearing this message makes me feel guilty about sins I have committed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am fearful of eternal punishment.</td>
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<td>This message makes me want to repent of my sins.</td>
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<td>This message makes me want to change certain behaviors or lifestyle choices.</td>
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<td>This message makes me want to attend some sort of religious service.</td>
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<td>I feel I should be more concerned about my spiritual well-being.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would avoid a church or evangelist with this kind of message</td>
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<td>This message makes me feel persecuted.</td>
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<td>These kinds of messages make me dislike religion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Messages like this need to be told more often.</td>
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### Appendix H: Grace Questionnaire

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<tr>
<th>1 Strongly Agree, 2 Agree, 3 Neutral, 4 Disagree, 5 Strongly Disagree</th>
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<th>2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I find this message relieving.</td>
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<td>This message makes me want to pray.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This message makes me want to repent of my sins.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This message makes me want to attend a religious service.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This message makes me want to change my behaviors and/or lifestyle choices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I trust that God will forgive me no matter what I do.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This message relieved feelings of guilt I have had for a long time.</td>
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<td>I would be willing to attend a church with this sort of message.</td>
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<td>Messages like this need to be told more often.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel I should be more concerned about my spiritual well-being.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would avoid a church or evangelist with this kind of message.</td>
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Appendix I: Focus Group Questions

These questions will be read in both focus group discussions:

1. How did this message make you feel?
2. What part of this message, if any, did you feel like was spoken to you directly?
3. Would you feel attracted to or repelled by this sort of message?
4. If this message spoke to any emotional discomfort you may have, what would you do to relieve the discomfort?
5. How does this message make you feel about religion in general?
6. What, if anything, do you wish could be added to this message?