

## *PK's Perspectives...* Cognitive Dissonance

In 1957, the social psychologist Leon Festinger coined the term “cognitive dissonance” to describe the inner stress that results from holding two or more contradictory beliefs at the same time. An example would be the person who believes in the sanctity of life and that life begins at conception while also holding to the belief that abortion is a reasonable practice - these beliefs are undeniably contradictory. According to Festinger, people will attempt to alleviate the inner stress of cognitive dissonance by either changing their minds about one of the ideas or, more commonly, convincing themselves the ideas really aren't contradictory which usually results in an incoherent mishmash of ideology, theology, and behavior!

A recent report, entitled “Reviving Evangelism,” found that virtually every practicing American Christian believes that “part of their faith means being a witness about Jesus.” Similarly, virtually all of them agree that “the best thing that could ever happen to someone is for them to know Jesus.” Yet, the same study found that nearly half (47%) of Christian churchgoers who consider religion an important part of their lives believe that sharing their faith is wrong! Specifically, they believe it's “wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes they will one day share the same faith.” If you're wondering how one can simultaneously believe that knowing Jesus is the best thing that could happen to a person and that telling that same person about Jesus is somehow wrong, you understand what cognitive dissonance means.

Our strongest beliefs influence our behavior. In Proverbs 23 we are told that “as a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” According to Matthew 6:24, Jesus was actually the first to identify cognitive dissonance: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other.” I think it's important for a follower of Jesus to be on the lookout for areas of cognitive dissonance in his or her life. It's hard...but sometimes I have to ask myself if there are examples in my life that point towards the existence of conflicting beliefs in my heart and mind. If my actions do not consistently agree with what I say I believe, then I'm probably holding on to a competing belief that is causing conflict - dissonance - in my life.

I say I believe everything I have comes from God and belongs to God...but I refuse to honor God with a tithe. Bazinga! Cognitive dissonance: I believe everything belongs to God AND I obviously believe it all belongs to me to do with as I please. I say I believe worshiping with the Body of Christ is important...but I only do so when it's convenient. Bazinga! Cognitive dissonance: I believe community worship is vital AND I obviously believe my weekends are mine to do with as I please. I say I believe prayer is indispensable...but I rarely have a time of personal prayer aside from blessings before a meal. Bazinga! Cognitive dissonance: I believe prayer is indispensable AND I believe it's okay to not pray regularly. I say I believe a husband should honor his wife...but I also have no problem privately viewing internet pornography. Bazinga! Cognitive dissonance: I believe I should honor my wife AND I believe that what my wife doesn't know won't hurt her. You get the idea...

It can be brutal to open yourself to the examination of the Holy Spirit; to ask God to reveal areas of your life wherein you wrestle with two masters, where competing beliefs are causing conflict. The psalmist shaped his prayer like this: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” Cya in Sunday School & Worship, PK.