

## Cognitive Dissonance

### Acts 7:55-8:3

<sup>55</sup>But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” <sup>57</sup>But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup>Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup>Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

8And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup>Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup>But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

Well...it's nice to see you all here this morning. You made it. Normally, that's no big deal, but you know, yesterday the world was supposed to end. Again. I say again because it's honestly amazing how many times throughout history some guy decides what the world really needs is for him to sit down with a calculator, a calendar, and the book of Daniel or Revelation and figure out when the end of the world is supposed to be. Of course what's even more amazing is how many people decide to LISTEN to this guy. But do you know what is truly bizarre? What's bizarre is that many of the people who follow these end of times prophecies- when the date comes and the world doesn't end; many of these people actually wind up believing in their leader even more than they did at the start!

Over 50 years ago a psychologist named Leon Festinger managed to infiltrate a group whose leader was predicting the end of the world. The leader, a woman named Marian Keech,

claimed that the end of the world would happen on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1954. As often happens in these situations her followers came in two kinds: one group gave up everything, their jobs, their homes, and their money to support her; and another group believed what she was saying but hedged a little and didn't go all in. You know, just in case.

Well, on midnight December 21<sup>st</sup> an interesting thing happened. Both groups had gathered at Marian Keech's home. They prayed throughout the night until around 4 AM Keech had ANOTHER vision. She told her followers that God tells her to tell them that the world didn't end because of the faithfulness they showed, but that it would if they didn't increase their efforts and grew their movement. Now, the group of folks that didn't quit their jobs and sell their homes- they wind up leaving and falling away from the group. But, and here's where it gets interesting, the folks who had given up everything- they were jubilant about this new vision and became even more zealous than before and spent more time than ever going to the streets with their signs and street preaching.

Now this really shouldn't have happened. According to the dominant theory of that day, behavioralism, scientists believed we're primarily motivated by carrots and sticks. If people sacrifice mightily and these beliefs turn out to be true, THEN they should become more involved. But when people sacrifice and are punished with failure- they should become disaffected.

And so a new and incredibly powerful psychological theory was born, called cognitive dissonance by Festinger.



Here's how it works. When people wind up with contradictory beliefs, in this case I'm an intelligent person on the one hand, and I-quit-my-job-because-I-thought-the-world-would-end-and-it-didn't on the other, this dissonance causes us great distress. And we have a powerful drive to reduce this dissonance, and this drive is nearly as powerful as the drive to reproduce, eat, and survive. Now, this drive to reduce cognitive dissonance isn't bad in itself- the problem is that in order to reduce the tension we'll do anything to make it happen, even if it means pulling the wool over our own eyes.

While we could just face the dissonance and change our beliefs or behavior, what we tend to do is to cling to our original beliefs and then use justification, blaming, and denial to ease the dissonance. In the case of Marian Keech the folks who didn't invest very much simply saw her for what she was and moved on- sadder but wiser. But the folks who invested everything- it was simply too painful to see reality. It was far easier to believe in Marian's second vision and to keep throwing good money after bad. They had invested so much in her they literally needed her to be right- reality literally be damned. ☺

In parliament one English politician Lord Molson once quipped hilariously that he would be happy to look at any additional evidence, provided, and I quote "that it confirms the opinion to which I have already come." (p. 17 Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)



Well, cognitive dissonance and the drive to reduce it- this is what's driving our text this morning.

Stephen is one of the most famous early Christians. Just about every city has at least one or two churches named after him. The church took his story here in Acts and spun it, turning him into a manly, rugged prototype for anyone anywhere who has been persecuted for their faith, and who, instead of backing down, keeps the faith even to the point of lashing out at their interlocutors. The church has always portrayed him as the "you can't handle the truth" character in our history.

There is certainly something to be said for the church's version of him. Stephen is falsely accused by leaders in Jewish council, the Sanhedrin. And rather than cower before them he spends 53 verses lecturing them before they finally can't take anymore of his lip and stone him to death.

But his story is more complicated- and a lot more interesting. His actual story starts a chapter before. The church was split between it's original Jewish members and the newer Greek ones. The Greek ones were complaining that no one was taking care of their widows. The solution? The church decided to have an ordination and installation service. No seriously. They decided that there were now so many people to take care of that they needed to dedicate SOME people to focus on preaching and worship and outreach and OTHER folks to be deacons and focus on caring for people. Stephen was ordained in the very first class of deacons ever.

And it turns out that he was doing a great job. He was like a one man meals-on-wheels spending his days taking food to widows and visiting with the sick. He was doing such a good

job that the competition started to get jealous. Leaders in the synagogue were getting complaints that these Christians were taking better care of people than they were. But instead of imitating Stephen, they decided to get rid of him. They accused him of speaking against God and Moses, and this is what landed him in front of that council.

He wasn't an early Christian Rambo out there getting in people's faces and trying to bring down the synagogue. He was an extremely nice guy, who just had a gift for caring for people and wound up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But when the synagogue leaders hauled him to court, it didn't go as they expected. He didn't speak against God or Moses. He didn't go off on some crazy Christian rant about how he was all right and they were all wrong. He simply, and carefully, retells the story of Israel starting with Abraham, pointing out that the people had made a lot of mistakes along the way, and that now maybe, just maybe, they were wrong about Jesus, too. His sermon wasn't about how he was doing something new and radical- it was about how consistent his beliefs were with all the old stories.

But here's the thing. All the people Stephen was talking to? These were the religious leaders, the pastors of the day. They had all grown up in the synagogue. They all went to seminary. They had invested an ENORMOUS amount of time and energy and had always believed the way they worshipped and believed was the right way. And now to have this incredibly nice, gentle deacon offer such an informed and intelligent description of what he believed- well it created a LOT of cognitive dissonance. I mean they were all reading the same Bible. But they wound up in one place, and Stephen wound up in this totally different place. How could that BE???

And tragically, the pastors that day did what comes so naturally to us- instead of pausing and recognizing this intense discomfort they were feeling was an opportunity, they decided that they wanted to get rid of it as fast as they possibly could. And like the followers of Marian Keech, these guys had invested so much of their lives in their tradition- well it was just easier to hold fast to their beliefs and get rid of Stephen. The text says they literally “close their ears” to him. Well, this is the very definition of how we deal with cognitive dissonance so much of the time- we close our ears, or shut ourselves off to whatever it is we finally decide is to blame for making us feel so twisted up inside.



I wish I could tell you this phenomenon isn't really that common- that it's just something those OTHER people deal with. You know, whoever THEY are. But frankly it's how we're wired. All of us. To cope with the incredible amount of conflicting information we see every day, as well as our own inconsistent behavior, we say we want to lose weight and then somehow find ourselves eating a bear claw, we do whatever we can to reduce all this dissonance.

That bear claw? We tell ourselves that it's just one, AND we have a rough day ahead of us and deserve it. Justification.

That terrible comment that just came zinging from our lips? Well, they deserved it we think to ourselves. We blame them for our misstep.

Or that nagging suspicion we have that we've been paying too much for something? Ah, this is my favorite. Denial. We will tell ourselves things like “you get what you pay for” and that in the long run we'll be happy we paid this much.

My favorite example of this comes from a Harvard professor Martin Shubik called the dollar auction. Shubik does this all the time with groups. Here's how it works. In one famous example with wall street executives he held up a hundred dollar bill. He tells them he's going to auction it off. There are only two simple rules. The highest bid wins. But, and here's the catch, the second highest bid, the losing bid, will still have pay up, but with nothing to show for it.

So, it always starts off the same way. Some guy knows a deal when he sees it and yells out the lowest bid he can think of. How about a dollar for a hundred dollar bill? That's a no brainer. But then someone else, not wanting to let THAT guy get away with this, offers a bid for two dollars. And it goes on like this until they reach the 100 dollar mark. Well, guess what happens? Whoever has the lower bid doesn't want to get stuck giving up a 100 bucks for nothing, so he will actually bid 101 dollars. And of course then the other guy is thinking the same thing, so he bids again, too. And they're both thinking this is nuts, but they both have invested so much money there's no way they want to lose- I mean losing money is bad enough, but losing money and looking stupid in front of all your friends is unthinkable.

In that example with the wall street types: that 100 dollar bill sold for 465 bucks. 465 bucks, all because once they had invested, they didn't know when to face reality and cut their losses.

And if you think this is just a game, I will simply say the name Greg Odom to you. How can the Blazers cut him, right? They've invested so much. And so they keep chasing that loss, hoping against hope it will, someday, pan out.



So, what is there to do? I mean are we just doomed? Well, yes. And no. If you believe the vast amount of research done with cognitive dissonance it appears that we are just hard wired to reduce the pain we feel when we find ourselves facing paradox. Elliot Aronson, Festinger's student, has demonstrated our reaction to cognitive dissonance cuts across age, gender, and culture. Our drive to reduce cognitive dissonance is as universal as our need to breathe. So yeah, in this sense none of us is immune. It's how we are.

BUT. Aronson is equally optimistic about our ability to learn better ways to cope. In fact many people believe that one of the most admirable skills one can have is the ability to face up to cognitive dissonance when we feel it, see it for what it is, and even learn from it. Aronson believes the three most important things we can do to improve how we cope with cognitive dissonance is to become aware of it, welcome criticism, and then learn how to allow our experiences to modify and change our beliefs. And we are hungry for people who can do this; we want to be people, who can do this.

One of the things that made Lincoln so amazing, for example, is that according he showed us how a leader not only can tolerate criticism but actually welcome it. When Lincoln became president he appointed some of his fiercest critics to his cabinet. Edwin Stanton, for example, called Lincoln a "stupid ape" to his face, and Lincoln decided this was just the kind of person he needed as one of his closest advisors. He welcomed criticism- he knew it would make him smarter. (NPR interview with Aronson)

In 1961 after the Bay of Pigs disaster President Kennedy went before the American people, explained our failed attempt to invade Cuba, and then apologized saying, “This administration intends to be candid about its errors. For as a wise man once said, ‘An error does not become a mistake until you refuse to correct it...and the responsibility for this failure is mine, and mine alone.’” (Quoted on p. 218) Kennedy didn’t try to hide what happened. He didn’t blame it on someone else. And he didn’t deny it. He owned it. And his popularity soared. We are hungry for people like this- for people who can learn.



The early church was, too. One of the most remarkable things about this story is how Luke manages to tell Stephen’s story, while at the same time weaving in a brand new character- slipping in this unknown guy named Saul.

While Luke describes the leaders closing their ears against Stephen and rushing forward against him with heavy stones in their hands, Luke deftly mentions that a young man named Saul was watching the whole thing. Using the exact same language he uses when he describes the crowds on Palm Sunday laying their coats before Jesus, he says the leaders lay down their own coats before Saul’s feet as a kind of foreshadowing of the violent role Saul would play.

And it’s a violent role indeed. Here we know Saul is persecuting the church. He stands by and nods approvingly as Stephen is stoned to death. And by his own admission Saul, later known as Paul, calls himself the chief of sinners.

But. But. While this may seem like bad news in the story- I think it’s actually good news in hiding. Because while Saul rages against the church, later, when he’s on the road to

Damascus, and he experiences the voice of Christ asking him why he's persecuting his body- and Saul doesn't close his ears, he doesn't deny the voice. He listens. And he changes. And talk about surrounding yourself with critics- he winds up joining the very group of people he once persecuted.



This week when you find your own ears closing, when you find your own heart walling itself away from another- ask yourself this. Ask yourself who do you want to be? Do you want to pick up a rock and join the crowd? Or do you want to kneel down with Saul there in the loose gravel of the road and say: "You know, maybe there's more going on here than I understand." Who do you want to be? **Amen.**