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Cognitive Dissonance

By: Jennifer Bradbury

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Candice is a ball of energy who loves life, laughter and fun. Her friends are an eclectic mixture of people: jocks, nerds, Democrats, Republicans, homosexuals, atheists, Buddhists and Christians of all traditions. She's the middle child in a churchy family. Candice's older sister is your typical church kid, who—though not yet 20—knows she wants to become a pastor. Candice's younger sister is a champion of service, volunteering weekly at our church's English as a Second Language ministry.

Unlike the rest of her family, Candice is not so sure about Christianity. Her fierce independence makes it difficult for her to simply accept what others tell her to believe. For Candice to believe something, she must wrestle with it herself, carefully and logically examining an issue from all sides before reaching her own conclusion.

Take the issue of homosexuality, perhaps the most divisive in the church today. Candice has been taught that *the Bible says homosexuality is wrong*, and because of this, she—like many of her peers—believes the church is anti-gay.

For someone like Candice, whose circle of friends actually includes gay people, an irreconcilable conflict is set up between the Christian worldview the rest of her family espouses and the culture she lives in. Often this leads the Candices of the world to simply reject Christianity as an outdated, irrelevant worldview.

Knowing how polarizing this topic is, I decided to experiment this year

with a different approach to teaching about homosexuality, centered on intentionally creating cognitive dissonance.

Dissonance is something most often associated with music. It's the rather unpleasant sound created by a chord still in need of resolution. Outside of music, dissonance often refers to disagreements or a state of unrest. The term *cognitive dissonance* describes the tension that exists when we come into contact with viewpoints that differ from our own. Such dissonance results in a state of intellectual unrest that must be resolved before growth can occur.

Developmentally, when youth encounter cognitive dissonance, one of two things occurs. Either they assimilate new information into their existing body of knowledge, or they expand their current worldviews in order to incorporate and allow for this new information.

Because of this, even though we often think of dissonance as a negative thing, in actuality, cognitive dissonance can serve as a catalyst for intense spiritual growth in young people like Candice.

Hoping to prompt that kind of spiritual growth in my students, I set about creating cognitive dissonance in regard to homosexuality. To do this, I developed a four-week series intentionally designed to bring our students into contact with Christians with differing viewpoints on the subject.

During week one, Andrew Marin from The Marin Foundation shared stories from his ministry and his philosophy regarding bridge building with the gay and lesbian community.

Even though many teens, including Candice, have friends who are gay, teens seldom encounter people who identify themselves both as gay and Christian. For this reason, during week two, an ordained, gay Methodist pastor shared his story with us. He then walked through Scripture, describing how he interprets those passages related to homosexuality.

In week three, our senior pastor shared his theology of Scripture as the "cradle of Christ" with us and used it to share his perspective on homosexuality with us.

For week four, we simply gave Candice and her peers the chance to respond to and question the varying perspectives they'd heard throughout the series.

The result? A lively, animated, still ongoing conversation that became far less about the issue of morality and far more about how we as Christians can live in the midst of this kind of tension and still honor God.

By the end of this series, even though Candice and her peers still had differing opinions regarding homosexuality, what they agreed on was this: *There are some issues, like homosexuality, that simply are too complex to be reduced to black and white and must be dealt with in shades of gray.* And even though this is often an area in which teens are not comfortable dwelling—because our students saw adult Christians disagree with one another over this issue—they learned that there is actually room in the

kingdom of God for diverse opinions.

Moreover, they learned that disagreements over how to interpret Scripture actually have the power to teach us more about God and our own faith, something that was certainly true in this case. As the faith of our teens deepened as a result of healthy discourse over their questions, their picture of God and his kingdom grew larger—something that was especially important for Candice.

Just a few weeks ago, I had coffee with Candice's mom. As we talked, Candice's mom said how amazed she is at the spiritual hunger she now sees in Candice, who even a year ago was “so far removed from Christianity.”

When I asked what had prompted the change, Candice's mom replied, “The homosexuality series. Candice was ready for a fight. She got to argue and express her opinions. But her opinions also were shaped by others. Somehow, in the midst of this, Candice met God.”

Since meeting God, Candice's thirst for him has only grown, something demonstrated by her regular participation in our youth ministry's Bible study. Recently, we were exploring the story of Samson and Delilah. As we did, Candice read ahead until she reached Judges 16:20, which talks of how the Lord left Samson.

Upon seeing this, Candice exclaimed, “What the heck? You guys always teach us that God will never leave us. But if God left Samson, why couldn't he also leave me?”

Cognitive dissonance strikes again.

Yet once again, Candice has met God there. Rather than causing her faith to stumble, this dissonance has instead propelled Candice toward Christ, forcing her to wrestle with the reality that sometimes Scripture contradicts what we've been taught. As Candice has tried to make sense of this, she's learned to take ownership of her faith, resulting in a growing, maturing relationship with Christ, whom she's falling more in love with every day.