The Effects of Fear Appeals and Cultural Assimilation on the Church

This study focuses on two common though latent factors of Southern Baptist churches—appeals to fear and the assimilation of outside cultures. These variables play a significant role in shaping both the church as an organization and the communication that takes place within that organizational framework. The intended purposes, roles in communication, and effects of these factors are examined in light of previous research as well as in the context of Groupthink Theory. The purpose of this analysis is to consider the question, “What effects do fear appeals and cultural assimilation have on the church?”
One might argue that the institutional church has been history’s most effective communicator over the course of its 2,000 years, though “effective” has not always been beneficial. It might also be argued that the institutional church has preserved the civility of human culture. Nonetheless, one cannot deny its role in some of history’s greatest breaches of that same civility. The church has spanned an eventful history, and many have chosen—and many still choose—to simply overlook its less-than-pleasant side. Yet, to fully understand an organization with a past as intricate and varied as that of the church, one must examine both its virtues and shortcomings, and they are many. What is it that allows the church an extensively influential role, even to this day? Its foundation is entirely spiritual, yet especially in America the church is a very visible and dominant organization. According to the United States Census Bureau (2003), 91 percent of Americans have some sort of religious preference, with 78 percent of those being either Protestant or Catholic (p.67). Indeed, the church continues its central role in American life nearly 2,000 years after its conception.

Perhaps the world’s oldest and most broadly defined organization in the world, no generalizations can be made about the global church, and even attempting to generalize a particular denomination would be folly. Any conclusion reached here pertaining to the church is strictly relative to those who engage in the communication and organizational practices mentioned in this analysis, common as they may be. So, for the sake of further specificity, this analysis will define “the church” as the typical American institution affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), as this author has had extensive contact with churches of this particular denomination. In addition, second to only the Roman Catholic Church, the SBC is by far the largest single religious organization in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau).

The SBC has “grown to over 16 million members who worship in more than 42,000 churches in the United States” (A Closer Look, About Us, para.1). The Southern Baptist Convention defines a church as:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel … and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. … This church is an autonomous body. … The New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ, which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages. (A Closer Look, Basic Beliefs, para.10)

By both secular and spiritual standards, the church is an organization maintained by professed believers in Jesus Christ who fulfill certain tangible and symbolic criteria and engage in an ongoing effort to communicate the message of Jesus Christ to others; it is a purposeful organization.

Southern Baptist churches are generally more concerned with outreach than almost any aspect of religious practice. In a survey of Southern Baptist churches, it was found that 45 percent of congregations valued the pastor’s sermons more than anything, while 33 percent valued “reaching the unchurched” more than anything else. Relative to other Christian denominations nationwide, “They value reaching the unchurched to a greater extent, but value communion or the Lord’s Supper to a lesser extent. They are also more likely to have actually invited someone to attend worship services with their congregations” (Jones, 2002, p.44).

The church has historically been an organization in which communication is one of, if not the, most important aspect. As times change, so do the ways human beings communicate with each other, and this is indeed true of those involved in the church. One discomforting method that has been employed at times is fear appeals, and this topic will be further explored in this analysis.

The second topic examined in this analysis is the institutional church’s tendency to engage in unnecessary cultural assimilation. Christianity has left a permanent mark on the world, and from the manner in which it spread in its early days to the manner in which it spreads now, cultures all over the world have encountered the
message of the church. However, this has often cost these cultures their individuality and traditional lifestyles.

After these variables are examined in light of previous research and in relation to the church, Groupthink Theory will be considered to explain the relationship among these variables and the church. This analysis is primarily a discussion of communication within an organization—the church. Communication is a basic component of fear appeals and cultural assimilation, and these topics cannot be discussed apart from communication, especially in the context of the church.

**Literature Review**

**Fear Appeals**

The fear appeal is a relatively new concept in communication research, though it may be one of the oldest and most common strategies of persuasion in human history. According to Ragsdale and Durham, “the majority of this research was done in the period from 1953 to 1973” (1987, p.9). Despite this era of fear-related research, Ragsdale and Durham echo the beliefs of many researchers when they claim that “summaries of fear arousal research reveal that its findings are often conflicting” (1987, p.10). “Most research in the area generally known as ‘fear appeals’ has examined the persuasive effects and effectiveness of different types of threat-based communications on various groups of consumer subjects” (LaTour and Rotfeld, 1997, Introduction, para.1). For the sake of profitability, fear appeals have been of major interest to advertisers, and research has generally shifted to consumer studies in recent years.

Fear appeals can be broken down into at least two variables: the communicated threat and the emotional fear response. For this reason, several researchers prefer the term “threat appeal” over “fear appeal” for the sake of specificity. LaTour and Rotfeld define a threat as:

An appeal to fear, a communication stimulus that attempts to evoke a fear response by showing some type of outcome that the audience (it is hoped) wants to avoid. Fear is an actual emotional response that can impel changes in attitude or behavior tensions . . . The distinction is important because research has often examined what were labeled ‘levels of fear’ but, in reality, were different degrees of harm portrayed or types of threats. (1997, Threats: appeals to fear, para.2)

This analysis focuses mainly upon communicated threats, or threat appeals, though the term “fear appeals” will be used throughout this study because of its common usage by researchers.

Fear appeals are rather difficult to study for several reasons, chiefly because everyone reacts differently emotionally. This alone disallows universal conclusions regarding the effect and utilization of fear appeals. “The effect of varying a source, message or receiver factor cannot be understood in isolation from the content of the message” (Ragsdale and Durham, 1986, p.41). Neither can the effect of the message be understood in isolation from its receiver. Thus, when studying fear appeals, it is imperative that one considers the audience, among other things. “A response to fear is probably specific to the situation, topic, person and criterion. Thus, the form of the relationship will vary across combinations of these four factors” (LaTour and Rotfeld, 1997, Threats: appeals to fear, para. 5). As the relationship between the sender and receiver varies, so will the effect of the fear appeal. “‘Demographic characteristics and personality traits moderate the relationship between fear manipulations and attitudes,’ making audience analysis essential” (Ragsdale and Durham, 1987, p.10).

Further research tends to suggest that the effectiveness of fear appeals varies depending upon the level of fear incorporated into the message—high or low—and the characteristics of the receiver. “High or low levels of fear arousal clearly do not produce uniform effects but rather interact with listener characteristics” (Ragsdale and Durham, 1986, p.41). Depending upon the listener, a varying degree of fear appeals may be more appropriate and effective.

Despite this possibility for variance, a linear relationship between communicated fear and persuasion has commonly been found.

In general, the greater the actual fear activation engendered by a communication the greater the persuasion . . . The repeated conclusion has been that increases in fear are generally associated with changes in behavior, attitudes or intentions, though the relationships are sometimes small and less definitive for behavior than intentions. (LaTour and Rotfeld, 1997, Fear arousal and persuasion, para.1)

In other words, research has shown that fear usually has an effect on people, and that effect is generally the participation in the behavior suggested by the fear appeal. “Fear arousal via communications is unlikely to be counterproductive,” and if any sort of effect is
achieved, it is usually, though not always, the desired effect; fear appeals rarely backfire (LaTour and Rotfeld, 1997, Fear arousal and persuasion, para.5).

Though fear appeals containing a high level of fear generally glean the intended result, Ragsdale and Durham suggest that the appeal’s source must be perceived as credible to the audience because threats often result in negative reactions, though not necessarily rejection. “Listeners exposed to a strong fear appeal showed the greatest amount of subjective dislike of the communication and made more complaints about the content,” an effect which might be transferred to the speaker” (1987, p.10). This may be translated as the rare “counterproductive” results mentioned by LaTour and Rotfeld, but it must be understood that it is the communication that is held in contempt, not necessarily the sender of the message, and the fear appeal may in fact be successful in promoting the behavior, regardless of the receivers’ feelings toward the actual communication. However, a credible source may neutralize this resulting negativity. “When there is a highly esteemed source for a warning and the probability of punishment is high, subjects are more likely to be compliant” (Ragsdale and Durham, 1987, p.10).

In the eyes of the typical conservative Southern Baptist church, the pastor and his associate ministers are often the most credible of sources. According to Ragsdale and Durham, “religious conservatives also are more likely to heed the advice of a prestigious source, such as a minister” (1986, p.41). Not only does the credibility cause church members to heed advice, but as previously discussed, it causes them to be more compliant to fear appeals used by their ministers. “The positive evaluation of source credibility by [groups exposed to high fear appeals] may help to explain how contemporary preachers seem to ‘get away with’ using such a time-worn technique as fear arousal” (Ragsdale and Durham, 1987, p.13). Not only do their audiences allow them to arouse fear, but, according to Ragsdale and Durham, “many listeners to contemporary preaching are accustomed to hearing religious fear appeals and may not regard preachers who avoid them as highly as those who do not” (1987, p.13). In other words, many congregations actually prefer to be provoked by fear.

Fear appeals in the church often serve as a method of gaining compliance by conjuring a “conversion experience” in non-members, preaching “eternal damnation as a consequence of rejecting the Christian message,” and to promote a variety of behaviors among regulars, including church attendance, evangelism and detachment from the secular (Ragsdale and Durham, 1987, p.9). Because these fear appeals come from credible sources, they often achieve the intended result, an effect that causes cultural assimilation and the perpetuation of the church system, both of which will be discussed.

Cultural Assimilation

Assimilation theory was first developed in the 1930s by a variety of scholars such as William Thomas and Robert Park. America was in a state of active immigration, and “both Park and Thomas were at the forefront of an attempt among sociologists and anthropologists to advance a new theory about social interaction that was based upon the concept of culture” (Cayton and Williams, 2001, p.3). The time was ripe for the studying of various cultures and how they adapted to life in the melting pot of America. It was in this adaptation that researchers like Thomas and Park saw a general shift to conformity—assimilation into the pre-existing American culture rather than the retention of one’s own culture. This prompted researchers to develop the assimilation model.

In the assimilation model, a process of Anglo conformity characterizes the movement toward a ‘cultural unit.’ Assimilation was the prerequisite for good jobs, higher education, a certain degree of social acceptance, participation in public and political life, etc. Minority groups were expected to give up their traditions and adopt Anglo-American culture. Some were ready to do so eagerly even if it meant giving up much of their original heritage. (Shah, 2003, p.167)

The assimilation model has proven to effectively explain the process of assimilation not only in immigrants, but also in organizations. Though assimilation is often studied today in terms of workplace socialization, the concept of assimilation is, at its most basic, “the process of transforming an individual from outsider to insider” (Hess, 1993, p.194). Cultural assimilation then is simply the process of transforming an individual from cultural outsider to cultural insider, or the absorption of cultures that deviate from the culture of the norm group. “Each organization has its own distinctive set of roles, appropriate behaviors, ethical standards, norms and values—its culture” (Hess, 1993, p.191). Thus, culture is not only a thing possessed by each different country, but also something unique to each organized group of individuals, or organization.
Cultural assimilation always involves at least two cultures or organized identities. Hatch and Schultz define an organizational identity as that which “members perceive, feel and think about their organizations. It is assumed to be a collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization’s distinctive values and characteristics” (1997, The concept of identity, para.1). Because of this spectrum of possibilities for organizational cultures, research in cultural assimilation has often involved such topics as paradigms, identity, socialization and alienation, among others. Identity is one of the chief matters of importance when discussing assimilation, as the establishment and maintenance of an identity for both the organization and the assimilated individual is core to the assimilatory process. “Assimilation involves the interaction of socialization and individualization. Socialization refers to organizations’ attempts to mold individuals to meet their needs while individualization comprises individuals’ attempts to mold organizations to meet personal needs” (Kramer and Miller, 1999, p. 360). Though commonly viewed as a one-way street, assimilation affects all variables of the equation.

This being so, cultural assimilation is not inherently a bad thing. The assimilation of cultures has occurred throughout history, and all cultures today are combinations of previous cultures; assimilation is naturally unavoidable, but it can also be beneficial. This natural assimilation is the cause of global diversity and occurs through simple interaction between members of different cultures. However, cultural assimilation can also have grave results for the affected cultures if the process is unnecessary and unnatural. The church is often the setting of such a process.

Cultural assimilation is present in the functioning of the church, most notably in the spreading of the Christian message, commonly called “missions,” though this by no means requires that detrimental cultural assimilation be at work. First, cultural assimilation requires that two cultures be in conflict, whether in space or ideology. However, for Christianity to be in conflict with a culture, it would first require that Christianity be naturally aligned with a certain culture, and that is certainly not the case. “The historical embodiment of Christianity in particular cultures itself serves as a serious obstacle for further inculturation” (Mattam, 2002, p. 310), a proper definition of “inculturation” being “an intimate transformation of the authentic cultural values by their integration into Christianity and the implantation of Christianity into different human cultures” (“Varietates Legitimae,” 1994, para. 4). While cultural assimilation would be the absorption of a culture into the church culture, inculturation would be a balanced exchange benefiting both the church and the encountered culture—the church communicating the Christian message to the culture, and the culture integrating their values into the existing church. Indeed, A.P. Elkin, a former professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney, once claimed, “continuity with the past . . . is essential” (McGregor, 2001, p. 41). Like many culturally sensitive missionaries have before and since, Elkin believed:

The real, though difficult, task facing missionaries was to integrate the Christian faith into the existing social, cultural and religious order, in the process transforming it into what he was confident was “a richer view of life and a loftier system of moral and social sanctions. (McGregor, 2001, p. 41)

Because a culture is much more than an ideology, though certain cultural practices may be in conflict with Christian principles, Christianity in no way requires the elimination of an entire culture, or the assimilation of that culture into the culture of the church, since there is no established culture of the church.

The problem arises when members of a church believe that their own culture is applicable to those who would be in the church worldwide. When these churches send out missionaries to Eastern parts of the world, nothing short of reckless cultural assimilation occurs as non-Western cultures proclaim the American Southern Baptist subculture as Christian culture and expect to learn nothing of their own faith from the encountered cultures. This has been the unfortunate history of Western churches:

Continual transformation was neglected by the Churches in the West which considered the form and shape they took in the West as final, to be transported to every culture and people. The structures and dogmatic assertions, which were meaningful at one time and place should not be made obligatory everywhere. (Mattam, 2002, p. 309)

And so, as cultures are assimilated rather than having Christianity integrated into them, an injustice is done to the potential of the global church; rather than taking a variety of forms and enriching its members worldwide, the Western-oriented “structures and dogmatic assertions” become internationally solidified as the culture of the church itself. The result is a uniform organizational structure that is becoming increasingly more common, and its effects may be more detrimental than beneficial.
Analysis

The church is not commonly perceived as an organization to be studied in the context of Groupthink Theory; this model is usually associated with organizations or groups whose flaws are more exposed than those of the church. However, as has been demonstrated, fear appeals and cultural assimilation are areas in which the church is facing a crisis in organizational communication. The following analysis of Groupthink Theory will further explain and link these variables.

Groupthink

Groupthink is a theory conceived by Irving Janis to explain the phenomenon that occurs when “groups are, under certain specifiable circumstances, prone to act much differently and to use a faultier decision-making process than they would if they either worked individually on the problem, or worked in groups that were free of certain constraints” (Courtright, 1978, p. 229). Additionally several “symptoms” commonly indicate groupthink. Courtright lists these as: extraordinary group cohesiveness, group detachment from morality by thinking and speaking in abstract terms, a group leader who unconsciously considers only a narrow spectrum of solutions, a feeling of group infallibility, and “the emergence of ‘mindguards’ who protect the group from any facts, criticism, re-evaluations, etc.” that would eliminate the infallible attitude of the group (1978, p. 229). Griffin (1997) adds “belief in inherent morality of the group,” “collective rationalization,” “out-group stereotypes,” and “direct pressure on dissenters.”

Janis claims that group cohesiveness is “the major condition that promotes groupthink” (Courtright, 1978, p. 230). Groupthink requires a tightly-knit organization of individuals who “share a strong ‘we-feeling’ of solidarity and desire to maintain relationships within the group at all costs” (Griffin, 1997, para. 8), and this is usually found under the banner of a certain ideology, such as nationalism or religion. The individualistic nature of Americans makes them a prime target for groupthink—when they band together, it’s usually for something rather important to them. When something as paramount as God is factored into the equation, which is of the utmost importance to a large percentage of Americans, it is a recipe for coalition, especially when there is an evil to conquer, such as unbelief.

This can easily create an “us versus them” mentality and cause church members to begin “thinking and speaking in abstract, euphemistic terms” (Courtright, 1978, p. 229) such as “saved” and “lost” that serve to solidify the boundaries that separate those who attend church from everyone else, a clear illustration of Griffin’s “out-group stereotypes.” This has and can evolve into a church subculture, and those who fail to participate in the subculture are seen as in need of rescue, regardless of personal faith. A rampant evangelization process can develop from this mindset in which valid, diverse cultures are viewed not only as trivial obstacles to salvation, but even contrary to the church subculture, and they are accordingly assimilated, the result of which usually takes on a particularly Western visage.

Because most pastors believe themselves to be spiritually responsible for their congregations, they can also play the role of “self-appointed mindguards” (Griffin, 1997, para. 19) in which they filter ideas, theologies and issues through their own belief systems and present their own perspective to the congregations, whose members often equate the pastors’ perspectives with the will of God. Pastors may take the “mindguard” role very seriously, even to the point at which they knowingly allow the congregation to believe the pastor’s perspective to be infallible.

Groupthink illustrates how, due to the cohesiveness of many Southern Baptist churches, missions, evangelism and outreach can be approached in a manner detrimental to other cultures, prompting unnecessary and unnatural cultural assimilation. Groupthink is also demonstrated by the organizational structure of the typical church in that members commonly display a great deal of cohesiveness, a belief in inherent morality, out-group stereotypes, and the employment of “mindguards,” among other symptoms. Such an environment is ripe for the usage of fear appeals by the leaders of the church to gain compliance, as well as by those who engage in assimilative evangelism. Thus, Groupthink explains the effect of cultural assimilation by revealing how it aids in the perpetuation of the church system and its hierarchical means of communication at the sake of cultural integration and diversity.
Conclusion

The church is a diverse organization, and its relationship to organizational communication shares that diversity. As has been illustrated, Southern Baptist churchgoers are generally greatly influenced by those in leadership positions within the church. This influence often comes in the form of fear appeals, which are made possible by the pastor’s credibility in the eyes of the congregations. This sway can be used to gain compliance in a number of areas ranging from conversion to perpetuation of the church system. These two factors are key elements in the second variable discussed—cultural assimilation. The assimilation process is not necessarily detrimental if cultural integration occurs. However, typical evangelism and mission work often takes on a very ethnocentric persona, and the outreach of the church often results in the unnecessary assimilation, and sometimes elimination, of “outsider” cultures.

Following the discussion of these variables, Groupthink Theory was incorporated into the research. Groupthink linked fear appeals and cultural assimilation, predominantly through factors such as leadership credibility and organizational cohesion within the church. When an organization has a highly formalized and centralized structure, combined with the spiritual nature of the organization, leadership is given a great deal of credibility. This allows leaders to employ fear to gain compliance. When group cohesion is strong, an “us vs. them” mentality can be fostered, and “outsider” cultures can be assimilated with little concern for integration.

More research is unquestionably needed in the areas examined in this study, specifically fear appeals and cultural assimilation on the part of the church. Yet more than anything, this study reveals the need for greater scrutiny into the methods and motivation behind several fundamental structural and communication practices of the church. As has been observed, there are indeed detriments, and more research may shed further light on just how damaging such practices may be. The leadership of the institutional church has taken advantage of its organizational structure and has proven to be an effective communicator—effective in using fear and increasing cohesion—to gain the compliance of churchgoers. And though the spreading of the Christian message is supposed a chief concern of the church, there are times when it communicates little more than a culture or a fear.

References


