

Why Believing Conspiracy Theories Corrupts Your Christian Witness

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Today's world is being shaped by lies in terrifying ways. In recent weeks, for example, we have witnessed Vladimir Putin's disinformation campaign to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

But it's not just officials in the Kremlin making spurious claims; during the pandemic we've also been bombarded by falsehoods. Conspiracies appear in our search results, while scrolling on social media or in conversations with friends and family.

What were, at one time, beliefs held by extremists, fringe groups or eccentric uncles—*the earth is flat, the moon landings were faked, I know who really shot JFK*—have now filtered into the mainstream consciousness, aided by technology that makes sharing content easier. In a world that can be confusing, complex and at times seemingly out of control, conspiracies offer us the illusion that we can understand reality without too much effort on our part.

Christians in the US, in particular, have been linked to conspiracy theories, with real-world consequences. In two surveys from the Public Religion Research Institute, white evangelicals were found to be one of the most likely religious demographics in America to buy into one or more of the claims of the political conspiracy theory QAnon. The theory has been found to have shaped the motivations of Americans involved in the storming of Capitol Hill, which resulted in the deaths of at least two people.

QAnon started with cryptic posts on an online message board, but it soon went mainstream. The conspiracy theory alleges—among other claims—that a vast Democrat pedophile ring operates out of a pizza parlour in Washington DC. In the ‘canon’ of QAnon, Donald Trump is the leader of a movement resisting this hidden evil and there will be an apocalyptic moment (referred to as a ‘storm’) that will sweep away morally corrupt elites.

Why Do Christians Believe Conspiracies?

Pervasive distrust makes conspiracies plausible. When the government lies or the media misreports, distrust can fuel paranoia. When people cannot trust their leaders, they turn to other sources of information. Now we have ‘alternative facts’ to counter ‘official narratives.’

Scandals in the media in recent times, as well as innocent mistakes made by reporters, may also be fueling people’s changing perceptions of journalism as a force for good. This can lead to a mass exodus from traditionally trusted sources of information. This paranoid posture encourages conspiracies, not because people want to believe lies, but because they believe they’re already being fed them.

Confirmation bias also makes us susceptible to conspiracy theories and, in this respect, Christians are no different from non-Christians: we interpret our world downstream based on what we believe upstream. For example, if you believe the earth is flat, you’re more likely to engage and share information that confirms this belief. This process is aided by algorithms online that serve you more of the content you usually click on and share. Because the world is fast-moving and we’re all prone to confirmation bias, information that doesn’t fit our worldview is swiftly dismissed rather than interrogated and weighed. “That isn’t real, it’s photo shopped,” is an easy response to an image that challenges our understanding of our world and our place within it. Heading

upstream to question our foundational beliefs can be a long and painful process, one that many would prefer to avoid. And so lies beget lies.

More Scandalous Than Any Conspiracy

Finally, Christians may wrongly assume our faith acts as a key to omniscient knowledge. The reasoning goes: because we know *the* truth, we must know *all* truth. Just because scripture presents an alternative understanding of ultimate matters—of human sin, death and salvation in Jesus—it doesn't follow that anything claiming to be an 'alternative' take is true. Alternative and conspiratorial explanations of politics, pandemics or vaccines are not automatically more plausible.

In the New Testament, the apostle John reminded early Christians that "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). With one eye on the Bible and the other on our world, conspiracy theories about hidden evil might seem attractive. After all, wasn't there a hidden plot in Esther? Didn't Daniel fall prey to a conspiracy against him? But we must ask ourselves another question: what did God intend when He gave scripture to the Church? Unlike conspiracies, scripture doesn't entertain our quest for control or provide answers to our predictions and suspicions; in fact, it's full of mystery. Perhaps John wrote Revelation not as a secret code for the next world order, but to help us imagine living true to the coming kingdom in *any* world order.

In 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was reflecting on how German Christians embraced Hitler. He concluded that "stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice... Against stupidity we are defenseless." He was making the point that some Christians had exercised extremely poor judgement when deciding where their allegiance lay. But despite Bonhoeffer's assessment of the situation, he checked himself: "Nothing we despise in other men is inherently absent from ourselves."

It is easy to shame strangers—and even friends—who share conspiracies, but I read that quote from Bonhoeffer as an invitation to embrace a different approach. We can make a stand for what is right in ways that do not belittle others—and which might actually help to change their minds. Contempt only serves to coerce people into ‘correct beliefs’ through shame.

One way we can live in love with our neighbors who buy into any conspiracy theory is by learning the humility to more regularly say: “I don’t know.” Conspiracies offer a sense of superiority, of being ‘in the know.’ We disrupt that misplaced confidence by embracing the posture that confesses our limitations. No one is completely correct in the beliefs they hold, theologically, politically or otherwise.

Neither do we enjoy finding out we’ve believed a lie; we all appreciate being given the dignity to change our minds without shame.

We can also learn the art of persuasion. Minds are changed over time. Arguments are not persuasive but combative. Picture truth not as one massive boulder we roll down a hill at someone in an argument, but instead, as one of those annoying pebbles that get stuck in your shoe. Eventually, you have to stop walking, take off the shoe and deal with the pebble. Persuasion is the act of placing pebbles of truth in people’s shoes. They can come as questions, honest conversation or empathy that seeks to understand someone else’s perspective.

When Conspiracies Come to Church

Within this landscape, it is likely that conspiratorial outlooks are held by some in our churches. And while I may be advocating for a compassionate approach, when it comes to discussing conspiracy theories with Christians, I would err on the side of caution. It is imperative that non-believers who come to our churches to explore Christianity do not leave

thinking they must embrace these theories to enter the kingdom of God. It may not be the task of those in the pulpit to denounce political conspiracies week in and week out, but the church does have a role to play in forming Christians who are bearers of truth. Paranoia is not the lens through which Christians should view the world, or as Philip Yancey once said: faith is “paranoia in reverse.”

Ironically, Christianity is more scandalous than any conspiracy. It takes an act of God in us to confess that all reality hinges on a Jewish peasant hanging on a criminal’s cross in a backwater province of the Roman Empire. The church confesses that this man is the Creator God incarnate, the God of Israel, resurrected, reigning over and reconciling the entire cosmos to Himself. But while the grace of God brings us to recognize that Jesus is Lord, it doesn’t provide transcendent knowledge about what’s going on in the White House; we have brains and experts for that.

Conspiracies may confirm our suspicions and allow us to feel we’re in control, but they corrupt our Christian witness. So rather than reducing the complexities and chaos of the world to a few neat theories, why not embrace our faith and “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7)?

In this process we must not sever our connections with people who believe conspiracies, because when Jesus said, “love your enemies” and “love your neighbor” (Matthew 5:43-44) he kept a door open for change; one we must not shut through contempt or cynicism.

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