

**Jesus as the Truth:
A Christian Framework for Thinking About Conspiracy Theories**

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I

“The Democratic party is run by a secret cabal of pedophiles!” So says a conspiracy theory that appears to be held by not a small number of people. Despite the lack of evidence for such a belief, this claim appears to be popular among many individuals. Conspiracy theories like this are not uncommon, and many are even held by Christians. But how should Christians approach conversations with people who accept these claims? Is there a Christian framework for thinking about conspiracy theories?

Christians have always been deeply interested in truth. After all, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). And Paul tells us “to fasten the belt of truth around your waist” (Eph. 6:14). As Christians, then, the foundation of our framework is this starting point: Jesus is the truth. There is no doubt much that can be said about that claim, both theologically and philosophically. But for our purposes, we want to focus on one crucial implication of it, which is that Christians must be committed to what is true. Truth is not a matter of opinion. We are not relativists.¹ Someone may sincerely believe something and yet it turn out to be false. Being passionately committed to a belief doesn’t make it true. We believe the framework that begins with Jesus as the truth can help Christians think more carefully and critically about

¹ Relativism is the view that what is true is relative to who is speaking; that is, what is true for one person or community may not be true for another.

conspiracy theories and engage more effectively with those who accept and propagate conspiracy theories.

In this chapter, we begin with a brief definition and characterization of conspiracy theories. Then we unpack what we mean by having a Christian orientation towards truth, discussing two important biblical themes that we believe are relevant to thinking about conspiracy theories. We then offer some lessons that the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, in our view, ought to teach Christians. Finally, we provide some practical suggestions for Christians who want to respond to this cultural phenomenon.

II

What exactly is a conspiracy theory? We accept a definition given by Jared Millson: “A conspiracy theory is an explanation of some alleged fact or event in terms of the actions undertaken by a small group of individuals working in secret.”² As Millson points out, conspiracies are common in human experience, and some conspiracy theories are harmless and some are even true. The conspiracy theory that the 1972 Watergate break-in was sponsored by the Republican National Committee was at first widely disputed, but it turned out to be true. However, we are interested in those conspiracy theories that the vast majority of sensible people consider false or even obviously false, for example, that Dwight Eisenhower was a secret Communist, that NASA faked the moon landings, that the 9/11 attacks were brought about by the CIA or other American groups, or (more controversially) that Biden’s election in 2020 was stolen away from Trump.

² Jared Millson, “Conspiracy Theories,” <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2020/12/17/conspiracy-theories/>

Why do conspiracy theories occur and what characterizes them? There seem to be typically five steps in the evolution of conspiracy theories. (1) Some event occurs, often a bad or catastrophic one, and people are fearful, in part because they feel that they have no control over or influence on it. (2) The question naturally emerges: Why did this happen? Who is responsible for this event? Here is the heart of a conspiracy theory: a group of conspirators are then accused; they are to blame. (3) A conspiracy theory is then propounded and publicized, and so-called “research” (which may often be no more than scouring one’s favorite websites or social media pages) is done to support its claims. (4) More people are brought on board to accept the conspiracy theory; in our internet age, this can readily be accomplished. (5) Objections to the conspiracy theory are answered, usually by offering *ad hoc* additions to it. These additional explanations are *ad hoc* because they lack independent support for accepting them other than the fact that they save the theory from the objections. Thus, the conspiracy theory becomes immunized from virtually any critique.

Conspiracy theorists are often highly suspicious of government officials and reports, as well as the opinions of scientists or experts. The accusation is that such people are withholding or distorting the truth, either because they are biased or because they are intentionally aiming to manipulate others to achieve malicious ends (for example, to undermine certain political or religious groups). Conspiracy theories tend to give their advocates a false sense of security or confidence, as in “I know the truth and you don’t.” Conspiracy theorists are typically not relativists on truth (“You have your truth and I have mine”); they are fully convinced that their theory is true.

III

There are two important biblical themes that we believe are relevant for Christians responding to conspiracy theories: discernment and false prophets. Discernment is the ability to distinguish between truth and falsity. I Thessalonians 5:21 enjoins us to “test everything,” including the words of prophets. Hebrews 5:14 speaks approvingly of “those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil” (see also Phil. 1:9-10). Unfortunately, we are living in a time of increasing biblical and theological ignorance, even among church-goers. Discernment seems to be a rare thing; it is easy for people to be “blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). We believe that studying Scripture, theology, and even philosophy and logic are of great practical importance in developing our facility for discernment.

While we believe the Holy Spirit primarily assists Christians in becoming discerning, we also believe that discernment takes some effort. It’s much easier to belong to or follow a particular individual (such as a pastor or media personality) or particular group (such as a Christian organization or news source) and decide to believe whatever is presented. But this exhibits intellectual laziness and a lack of intellectual humility. Our favorite speakers or media personalities can be mistaken, and Christians should be willing to test everything they read or hear, first on whether it is compatible with the teachings of Scripture, but also on whether it is reasonable or supported by the available evidence. If we are truly humble, as we are commanded to be, then we should recognize that we might be mistaken. The people or organizations we rely on might also be mistaken. Accordingly, we need to engage in the labor of trying to figure out the truth.

Additionally, both the Old Testament and the New Testament severely criticize false prophets, that is, those who speak falsehoods purportedly on behalf of God (See Jer. 14:14; 23:1, 21; Zech. 10:2; I John 4:1). Now conspiracy theorists do not usually claim to be speaking for God. But there are important similarities between them and false prophets: Both try to deceive people on important (not trivial) points and often succeed in misleading many people. Jesus points toward an important epistemological criterion in deciding which of the people who claim to speak for God are false: “You will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:15). Accordingly, we must ask: Are the consequences of their teachings good or bad? We can ask the same question about the teachings of those who promulgate conspiracy theories.

IV

What can or should Christians learn from the phenomenon of conspiracy theories? We suggest three things.

The first lesson is this: trust in God. It is said that the most frequent command in Scripture is “Do not be afraid” (see, for example, Isa. 8:12-13). Conspiracy theories often arise out of fear.³ We certainly do live in a world in which terrible things happen that we are powerless to prevent or even shape. Yet in the face of such events, God wants us to trust our lives and the lives of our loved ones to him. It is true that we are powerless to stop many of the events that we worry about, but God is in control. In this sense, a conspiracy theory can constitute a spiritual problem for Christians who are committed to it: they focus on it rather than trusting in God.

³ For more on this tendency, see Karen M. Dogulas, Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Turkey Nefes, Chee Siang Ang, and Farzin Deravi, “Understanding Conspiracy Theories,” *Advances in Political Psychology* 40 (2019): 3-35.

If this happens, we think Christians should go back to the fundamental claim—that Jesus is the truth. Along with the myriad of things this claim implies, one thing it tells us is that Jesus is fully in charge and has not lost control. In the upper-room discourse (captured in John 13-17), the disciples are troubled by what they are hearing from Jesus. His response is for them to have full confidence in him, trusting him even when things seem shaky and uncertain. If all authority has been given to Jesus (Matt. 28:18), then our anxiety does not have to lead us to embrace an answer that blames the problems onto some secret organization or group of conspirators. Maybe there is one, maybe there isn't. But we won't feel the compulsion to jump to the conclusion that there is a conspiracy afoot. Once we have total trust in Jesus, we can work towards discerning whether what we are hearing or reading is true or false, and we can examine the fruits of those ideas as well of those who write or speak (and you should be doing that to us, the authors writing this very chapter!).

Once our sense of security is placed in the fact that Jesus is in control, we can then see that it is often reasonable to trust proper authorities in their specific areas of expertise. We accept that there are authorities in different domains: religious authorities, moral authorities, scientific authorities, political authorities, and so on. In order to function as a community, we need trust, trust in others but also trust in authorities.⁴ This does not imply that we shouldn't question what we hear from those authorities. Still, our attitude to those who have spent years training and studying should be an attitude of trust and not an attitude of suspicion (unless of course there is good reason to be suspicious). Scientific investigation is not easy, as it often involves higher mathematics and probabilistic reasoning, and many people have not been adequately trained to

⁴ For more on this, see Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

understand the calculations that support scientific hypotheses. It is reasonable, then, for us to trust those who are experts in these areas. One caveat: it is easy for experts in one field to slip into talking about some other area where they are not experts, and their authority does not carry over. So discerning Christians must try to figure out if and when this sort of thing is happening.

Not only should we investigate the claims of media sources and alleged experts, but we should also be willing to scrutinize the claims from people coming from our own group. There may be a tendency to give someone who is from one's own religious, political, or ideological brand a pass—as long as they are on the “right side.” However, we should care about truth. Perhaps someone's own side is giving a bad argument or spreading falsehoods. Followers of Jesus who love the truth should be willing to speak up against these things; not harshly, but honestly—and always “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Even Paul was willing to rebuke Peter when he saw Peter acting in a way that “was not in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). Rather than criticizing opposing religious or political parties or agendas, we should first look at ourselves and at our own affiliations—after all, there's a good chance there is a beam in our own eyes while we are obsessing over the speck in another's (Matt. 7:5).

The second lesson is to be reminded that gossip is a sin. As Paul says, we must not be slanderers or “inventors of evil” (see Rom. 1:28-30). I Peter 2:1 reads, “Rid yourselves...of all slander.” And II Timothy 2:23 says: “Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.” Like conspiracy theorists, those who engage in gossip often see themselves as exerting power, as in “I know an important secret that others do not know until I tell them.” One motive, then, for entertaining conspiracy theories may be a sinful desire to be part of what C.S. Lewis calls an “Inner Ring.” Lewis worried that such a desire would “be one of

the chief motives” in a person’s life unless one “takes measures to prevent it.”⁵ This is the desire to be “in the know” or to have membership in an exclusive group that somehow has not been duped like the rest of society. Now sometimes people find themselves in situations where they are privy to insider-knowledge, and that is not necessarily bad. What does seem problematic is the inordinate desire to be on the inside, and that can be sinful.⁶

The third lesson is to be careful since it is easy to become obsessed with conspiracy theories. We believe that Christians should be spending their time not on propounding conspiracy theories but thinking about positive things. As Paul says, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8) In other words, we need to look at the world, and at our own lives, from God’s perspective—not from the perspective of the secular world.

The draw of conspiracies is, in part, because they are fascinating. Conspiracy theories, like gossip, are often alluring—they shock and surprise. Sadly, the discrediting or demise of another person can become entertainment for us. And it is easy to get sucked in, going deeper and deeper into the labyrinth, especially websites that offer more click-bait to draw people into the “real truth” of the matter. Not only is there usually no evidence or support for believing these claims, but often these stories are not edifying to the reader or listener. And the claims spread when people start sharing this alleged information, when they may try to exhibit that they are “in

⁵ C.S. Lewis, “Inner Ring,” *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

⁶ Furthermore, as sin often yields negative consequences, the pushing of false or unsubstantiated reports can yield disastrous results, such as death threats received by restaurant owners on account of the conspiracy theory stated in the first sentence of this chapter (which led to “Pizzagate”). Many thanks to Susan Peppers-Bates for this point.

the know.” But as Christians, we should ensure that “no corrupting talk comes out of [our] mouths, but only such as is good for building up” (Eph. 4:29). Jesus even warns that on the day of judgment, people will have to give an account “for every careless word they speak” (Matt. 12:36). Even if there is a political, religious, or secular group that we strongly disagree with, speaking falsely or uncharitably should not be the disposition of a truth-loving follower of Jesus. If someone is in sin, we are not to gossip, slander, or bask in entertaining stories but are to find ways to help that person overcome their sin by the Spirit’s help. And if it seems that we are unable to do anything, because it has to do with powerful people or with the government, Christians can always pray.

V

We now want to offer a couple of practical suggestions for Christians given the lessons gleaned from the cultural phenomenon of conspiracy theories. The first suggestion focuses on direct interaction with those who embrace conspiracy theories, and the second suggestion offers a long-term strategy for Christians to undertake.

Christians encounter conspiracy theorists frequently, even among friends and loved ones. Indeed, some Christians are committed to certain unreasonable conspiracy theories. We believe that this fact can do great harm to the cause of Christ (for some of the reasons stated in the previous section). But what should we do when we encounter such folk? The first point is to avoid the temptation to argue, at least not right away. They often have replies to objections already worked out; arguing with them or claiming that their responses are *ad hoc* will usually only produce the result of deepening their commitment to their favored conspiracy theory.

We believe that a prudent approach is to follow a three-step procedure that was developed by Seth Freeman, a Professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs and NYU’s Stern School of Business and an eminent expert on conflict resolution and negotiation strategies. Seth is also a Christian. His strategy is primarily designed for conversations between people who disagree strongly about politics and public policy, but we believe it can be fruitful in conversations about conspiracy theories as well. His procedure involves *paraphrase, praise, and probe*.⁷

Suppose you are talking to friends or loved ones who strongly accept a conspiracy theory. What should you do? First, you should politely ask them to explain their point of view. Listen carefully to what they say without interruption. Then attempt to paraphrase their viewpoint as fairly as you can. That is, mirror back to them their own views, stressing important thoughts and feelings.

Second, you should praise them for something—anything—that you can approve of. Say something like, “I can tell that you’ve studied the problem a lot,” “I can see that you’ve thought about this issue a great deal,” or “I appreciate your passion and concern for this question.”

Third, you should gently and respectfully probe, that is, dig deeper and offer some alternative views. You can say things like, “Here is where I am confused,” “Let me get your take on this particular problem,” “Here is where I am seeing problems in your view,” or “I’m going to push back now.”

⁷ This was taken from an online presentation to the Claremont Colleges Christian Scholars Group on February 16, 2021. This idea was drawn from Rapoport’s Rules, which was developed by game theorist and conflict management expert Anatol Rapoport.

We think this will produce a better result than arguing at the drop of a hat or simply clamming up. You may not convert friends or loved ones away from the conspiracy theory, but you might succeed in helping them to become a little more open-minded. Or you might plant a doubt or two that might later lead to such a conversion. At the very least, you haven't shut the door on conversation, and you've opened yourself to being a caring dialogue partner who wants to know what is true. In discussions, we're not trying to show that we are right; rather, we are trying to find out what is true, because Christians are committed to the truth. Accordingly, we need to model our own openness to revising our own beliefs. But on the assumption that the person you are talking to is holding to an unreasonable conspiracy theory with almost no evidence and is offering *ad hoc* explanations for every criticism, keeping that door open is important, as the hope is to help fellow Christians become equal partners in our mutual pursuit of truth. This may take time and may require plenty of patience, but we must remember that Jesus was extremely patient with his disciples (and is always extremely patient with us!), and so we should likewise exercise the same kind of patience with others.

VI

Our second suggestion is this: while some Christians are called to withdraw from society, we believe that more Christians should actively enter into those institutions that appear to be truth-undermining. For example, there was a time in the early to mid-20th century when it seemed that the university, and especially in philosophy departments, was a hostile place for Christians. Around that time, a few Christians who were philosophy professors began to do good scholarly work, calling Christians neither to be afraid of the profession nor to hide their Christian

commitments.⁸ Since then, a large number of Christians have entered into the discipline of academic philosophy, and it is difficult to find a philosophy department in a well-respected college or university that does not have at least one Christian in it. From almost having no Christians to the plethora of Christians and Christian scholarship that we see now, we've witnessed formerly hostile environments become places where Christians can thrive and serve to carry out their vocation in pursuing truth as they follow Christ.

Similarly, one area today that receives much criticism, especially by some Christians, is the news media, especially what can be labeled as "mainstream media." Now there are Christian journalists, but there seems to be too few of them. And news sources do exhibit bias or perpetuate political agendas in order to boost ratings, and this seems true whether the news source has a conservative or progressive bent. What is needed are Christians in journalism who are willing to speak the truth and not merely what is popular or what will satisfy or flatter their fan-base. Sometimes it is hard to take a stand and call out something as wrong or evil when the rest of your group or party disagrees. However, Christians who are committed to the truth should be courageous and willing to do so. Moreover, the media is often criticized for being unreliable given its biases and hidden (or not-so-hidden) political agendas. But organizations can regain trust by becoming places that are trustworthy and by filling them with trustworthy people.

Now we understand the source of frustration for many Christians. We have read or seen many news reports that paint Christians or Christianity in inaccurate or unflattering ways. Often,

⁸ For one notable example, see Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): 253-271.

the problem seems to be ignorance of what Christianity even is.⁹ And we are not called to take an eye for an eye (Matt. 5:38). Just as there has been a rise of Christians in philosophy and academia, we hope for a rise of Christians in the media, especially those willing to speak the truth at the cost of unpopularity. We would expect such individuals to be willing even to admit mistakes and rectify them, being okay with such admissions since all sources of information apart from Scripture are fallible. However, we hope that all Christians who are committed to the truth would not consume only media that reinforces their current allegiance but would exercise discernment and avoid sources that include slander or denigration of people who are experts in their fields. Perhaps this may seem idealistic to some. But to us, this looks like Christianity at work in the media.

VII

Our starting point in thinking about conspiracy theories is to claim that Christians should value truth because Jesus Christ is the truth. Pursuing truth involves reading widely, assessing evidence carefully, and valuing the opinions of those who are in a position to know. We must also practice discernment and reject those who speak in flattering ways but do not bear any fruit. The lessons we have learned is to deepen our trust in God, to avoid gossip and slander, and to unglue ourselves from unedifying obsessions—and this may help us steer clear of problematic conspiracy theories. Our hope is that Christians will engage in more productive conversations with each other—paraphrasing, praising, and probing each other’s views. Finally, we long to see

⁹ We fully recognize that there are many differences among different Christian branches and among Christians. But there is much overlap as well, and much of what is depicted in many news sources seems at best to be a caricature of any real Christian or Christian commitment.

more Christian journalists who are willing to stand up for the truth. These may be lofty hopes, but we also believe in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, and so we maintain that our hope is rational. We are striving to live our lives seeking truth, and we hope to be joined by all who are following in the way of Jesus, who is the truth.¹⁰

¹⁰ Thanks to Charles Barker, Gaston Espinosa, David Frederick, Seth Freeman, Craig Friske, Alan Padgett, Susan Peppers-Bates, John Baptist Santa Ana, and James Smith for helpful comments on earlier drafts.