

Conspiracy Theories/Theorists and the Church

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We are living in times of uncertainty when conspiracy theories are proliferating and impacting many churches. A number of pastors have asked for some guidance in navigating the pastoral tensions and complexities introduced by the growing challenge of conspiracy theories among the congregation. This is my attempt to clarify the issues and offer some suggestions and ideas. Sorry, it's turned out longer than I expected. I need to make it clear that these are my personal thoughts and not those of the QB Movement.

1. What are conspiracy theories?

A conspiracy theory is a theory that the real truth about an event or issue is being concealed and controlled by a powerful group. That there has been a conspiracy to stop people knowing what is really happening.

2. Are conspiracy theories a modern development?

Not by any means. When I was growing up in the 1960s and 70s, there were numerous conspiracy theories doing the rounds in churches. Let me give a few examples. Some Christians believed that the bbb on the recently introduced bankcard was actually 666, the mark of the beast in Revelation and that the introduction of the bankcard marked the beginning of the Tribulation. Some Christians believed that if you played a Christian rock music record backwards (backmasking), you would hear a demonic message which confirmed that Christian rock music was satanic. Some Christians believed that the Club of Rome (an alliance of influential leaders) was secretly controlling the world.

It was the same in biblical times. Isaiah warned the Israelites with their theories about why the Assyrians were invading and how they could be resisted, "Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it" (Isaiah 8:12).

Gnosticism in the early church was a form of conspiracy theory. The Gnostics believed that the orthodox church was concealing the necessity and availability of secret personal spiritual knowledge that would take believers to a new spiritual level.

It is worth noting that over thousands of years, the Jewish people in particular have been targeted by many conspiracy theories (e.g. by Nazi Germany) which have caused much suffering for them. Conspiracy theories will always be around.

3. Are conspiracy theories ever true?

Yes they are. There are criminal groups secretly trying to access our information and resources. To believe that every phone call or email you received was from a genuine organisation or person would be exceedingly naïve and personally dangerous.

Some powerful groups/corporations/governments/media/criminal organisations are continually trying to conceal and control truth. They don't want people to know what is really happening. They promote their own narrative and agenda. So we must maintain a healthy degree of scepticism about information from untrustworthy, manipulative sources. I will call these – likely conspiracies.

For example, it is likely that totalitarian governments, that cement their power by controlling systems and information, are conspiring against their own people and often against other nations in major ways that they will completely deny. Major conspiracy theories that involve such regimes are more likely to be based on truth.

On the other hand, democratic governments with free press and citizens and regular elections find it much more difficult to control power and information. So major conspiracies that involve these governments are less likely.

There are many groups and leaders that are seeking overall to tell the truth even when it is complicated or difficult. Of course, everyone tells the truth from their perspective, but not everyone is completely untrustworthy. We need wisdom to discern which information is trustworthy. There is not a conspiracy behind everything that is difficult to comprehend or accept. Conveying complex issues in simple terms is a huge challenge and may result in necessary gaps that conspiracy theories can take advantage of.

4. Why do conspiracy theories attract Christians?

First, Christians recognise that there is more happening in our world than what we see. Paul says that our struggle is not against “flesh and blood” (what we can see), but against spiritual powers that we can’t see (Eph. 6:12). We know that there is more going on in our world than what is apparent. Christians who are aware of this spiritual battle and see things in terms of good versus evil, are more likely to find conspiracies.

Second, we live in a broken world where the powerful often seek to use and abuse the weak, so questioning the stories emerging from powerful elites is our calling. Individual Christians have often been at the forefront of challenging vested interests and the narratives they tell to justify their actions (e.g. Wilberforce challenging the slave trade or Bonhoeffer challenging the Nazis). It is our Christian calling to stand with the oppressed against the powerful and to reveal hidden injustices. For example, Baptist World Aid does a great job in revealing conspiracies by large corporations to hide their exploitation of workers in third world countries.

Third, many Christians are not in positions of significant power in business or government or the media. Conspiracy theories are more likely to appeal to those who don’t have access to power. When you don’t understand something or are excluded from influence, it’s easy to conclude that nefarious forces are at work and all is not as it seems. With the rapid change of morality occurring in the West, many Christians are frustrated by their powerlessness. Seeing the real truth that has been hidden from others, offers some sense of control and significance and influence.

Fourth, conspiracy theories provide a sense of camaraderie with others who have the inside story. You belong to a group that has a strong sense of commitment to each other and superiority over those who have been deluded. Together, you alone have the truth. In this way, conspiracy theories have the same attraction as tight religious groups like Christian sects.

Fifth, Christians can also tend to believe what they think honours God without feeling the need to check any countering evidence. In fact, checking for evidence may seem to be disobeying God. Because of this, Christians can be prone to those who would manipulate with untrue conspiracies.

For all these reasons, some positive and some negative, Christians are often drawn to both likely and unlikely conspiracy theories.

5. Are conspiracy theories more prevalent these days?

The last five years in the West have produced a kind of “perfect storm” for conspiracy theories.

First, the world is going through a time of huge moral upheaval. Moral values in many societies continue to change rapidly. Issues like abortion, gay marriage, gender fluidity, and now euthanasia have all been promulgated in Australia over the last five years. While legislation usually follows community opinion, these significant societal changes are still a shock for many in the church who fear for the future and are upset that they are powerless to prevent this.

Second, COVID-19 and its derivative strains are causing great cultural and economic turmoil. Democratic governments are exercising powers that would have been impossible a few years ago. Vaccines have been developed quickly but are distrusted by some. As new strains emerge, the future looks very uncertain. This all produces anxiety and angst. In the face of such powerlessness and unwelcome restraints, it is easy to believe that there is some powerful agenda behind all this.

Third, the West is facing stronger political divides. Trump’s approach to leadership has produced stronger lines of demarcation between the right and the left. Many people have taken sides more passionately, often influenced by the intentionally dividing media. When you believe your party is on God’s side and the other party is both wrong and evil, it’s convenient to believe conspiracy theories about the opposition.

Fourth, easy access to the internet has magnified the problem. The internet assists people to easily find like-minded groups that reinforce and exacerbate their prejudices. The internet allows powerful groups to influence and divide people with both lies and exaggerations. The internet provides a level playing field where anyone’s opinion, no matter how ill-informed or illogical, is equally valid. There is little value placed on verifiable truth online. It’s all about opinions; the stronger the better. The internet naturally increases the influence and reach of conspiracy theories, but the COVID restrictions have made the internet even more significant with many Christians spending less time with church friends and more time online.

With all this coming together (the “perfect storm”), no wonder conspiracy theories are proliferating.

6. Can unlikely conspiracy theories do damage in the church?

Not necessarily. We all have our interests and quirks. That’s okay. I like conquering sudokus. Some would see this as a frustrating waste of time, but I enjoy it and will tell you so. As long as sudokus don’t dominate my life, and I don’t try to foist my interest onto everyone else, and I can maintain good relationships with non-sudoku Christians, then I don’t think there is a problem. Similarly, Christians may have an interest in some unlikely conspiracy theories without it causing problems or damage in the church. They may even be right.

But unlikely conspiracy theories often look for unquestioning loyalty. You’re either for them or against them. This sets them up in competition with God who also calls for complete loyalty. Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt. 6:24). In today’s environment, to some he may also have said, “You cannot serve both God and your conspiracy theories.” Conspiracy theories make dangerous masters that can consume our time and energy and lead us away from serving Christ.

Sometimes, unlikely conspiracy theories gain influence by playing on fear and anger. Believers become fearful and angry that evil forces are controlling things, and no-one understands this and is

doing anything about it. While fear of God and anger at injustice can be positive emotions, generally fear and anger are destructive emotions that spoil our joy and hope and trust in God.

Some conspiracy theories seek to create division. If you are not a believer in the theory, then you are seen as either deluded or evil. This creates a huge challenge to the unity of God's church where Christians love each other despite their different beliefs and priorities. When Christians think that someone's adherence to a particular theory or value is more important than their being saved by Jesus Christ, building unity in the church becomes incredibly difficult.

Some unlikely conspiracy theories are based on lies. As God's children we are called to be followers of truth, no matter how uncomfortable it may be. When we exchange the truth for a lie, we are following Satan who is the father of lies (John 8:44). Truth is vitally important to Christian faith. We need to be very sure before claiming something as truth.

So unlikely conspiracy theories among the congregation can lead to fear, anger, judgmentalism, disloyalty to Jesus, division, and acceptance and proliferation of lies. That is a dangerous mix in a congregation. Sometimes the problem is just the huge amount of wasted time and energy that is invested in following and propagating them. It is true that strongly held conspiracy theories can do significant damage in God's church and divert us from our gospel mission.

But remember that many people will believe an unlikely conspiracy theory to a degree but would never let it interfere with their following Jesus or loving others who disagree.

7. How can we tell if a conspiracy theory is likely or unlikely?

The answer to this question is fraught with problems. It all depends on who you trust. One characteristic of conspiracy theories is that they are self-justifying. Once you believe a conspiracy theory, then any contrary evidence just proves that the theory is true. Let me illustrate from a different field.

Just say that you are faithful in your marriage, but a friend becomes convinced that you are having a secret affair but that you will be loath to admit it. What can you do to change that person's mind when they confront you? Nothing really. The more strenuously you deny having the affair, the more it convinces that person that they are correct.

Conspiracy theories are like that. Once someone becomes convinced that they have unearthed a conspiracy and that everyone else has been duped, then any evidence that counters the theory is just further proof that the conspiracy has achieved its purpose in blinding people to the truth. This means that true believers in an unlikely conspiracy theory will not usually budge in their belief no matter what evidence is produced. In fact, the stronger the counteracting the evidence, the more certain and dangerous the conspiracy appears to the believer.

But for those with somewhat open minds (we are all biased of course), here are a few questions to ask of conspiracy theories:

a. *Would this conspiracy actually be possible?*

For example, conspiracies that involve a lot of people with a lot of hidden information are virtually impossible in a democratic system with free media. Certainly, they are possible in totalitarian regimes or in criminal enterprises where information is tightly controlled, but in large governments or organisations in democratic states with healthy oppositions and free media, big conspiracies are virtually impossible. They require too much control and loyalty.

b. *How would I know if this conspiracy was untrue or an exaggeration?*

If there is no way to check whether a conspiracy theory could be wrong, then it should be held lightly. When “backmasking” was doing the rounds in my youth, I checked it out by playing some records backwards. I heard weird sounds as you would expect (which I guess some might see as satanic) but no subliminal messages. That’s the sort of thing we need to do with conspiracy theories. Check their claims and predictions out. If we can’t, and often it is difficult, then be careful.

c. *What do other sources say about this conspiracy?*

If we only listen to one source, then the evidence will be clear cut. It takes courage to allow your ideas to be tested by engaging with sources that come from different perspectives, but this is healthy. We especially need to listen to those who have expertise in the area. They will not always be correct, but if we refuse to engage with sources that disagree with our perspectives, then it will be very difficult to find the truth. The only source that has a complete hold on the truth is the Bible. Every other source is flawed and will be wrong at times.

d. *What is the fruit of believing this conspiracy theory?*

Jesus told the Pharisees that every tree that did not produce good fruit would be cut down (Matt. 3:10). So looking for good fruit is a key to checking out a conspiracy theory. How does it impact the lives of the believers and advocates? What does it do to God’s church? We have very clear biblical statements on the fruit we are looking for. For example, James 3:17 says that the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. There’s a good test to start with. If a conspiracy theory doesn’t produce fruit like this, it doesn’t necessarily mean that it is wrong, but it does mean that it needs to be treated with caution.

e. *What difference does this conspiracy theory make to serving Jesus?*

Conspiracy theories may have elements of truth, but if believing them doesn’t actually make any difference to the way we live our lives as God’s people, then they are not all that important. On the other hand, if they help us serve God and people more effectively, then exploring and understanding them may be valuable.

8. How can we handle unlikely conspiracy theories/theorists in the church?

I must admit that I’m flying blind here. I’m not pastoring a church and therefore am not in the thick of it. These ideas are for pastors and leaders. Please let me know if any are unhelpful.

a. *Acknowledge that we are all conspiracy theorists.*

At the least, we believe that Satan (the most powerful force outside God) conspires secretly to attack God’s kingdom and his people (1 Pet. 5:8). We believe that there are powerful governments and groups that covertly plot to bring harm and pain to others for their own advantage or profit. None of us should blindly believe everything that is said by corporate or government leaders or the media. We all start in the same place. We all believe that conspiracies do exist and should be exposed.

b. *Teach continually that God is in control.*

This was a major message of the Hebrew prophets in a time of great uncertainty and disruption for Israel (e.g. Isa. 40). This world is not falling apart under the evil plots of powerful forces. God is firmly in control and Christians can be confident and hopeful. We are to be strong and courageous (Joshua 1:9). Emphasise this as much as possible in these uncertain times. People with a strong confidence and trust in God’s sovereignty are less prone to be drawn in by far-

fetched conspiracy theories. When you are speaking with those engaging with conspiracy theories, check that they acknowledge that God is in control of all powers.

c. *Encourage your congregation to be physically together.*

When people are online with fellow-theorists and their favourite news feeds, everything seems so clear cut (2 Tim. 4:3-4). But when they spend time with brothers and sisters who see things from different perspectives and still follow Jesus, it's difficult to be as dogmatic in our positions and as harsh with our judgments. Fellowship may not be helpful for those deeply entrenched in their theories but gathering with others who believe in Jesus is really beneficial for most of us (Heb. 10:24-25). That's partly why the isolation of COVID lockdowns tended to spawn conspiracy theories. There was limited fellowship to bring balance and correction.

d. *Undermine the high priority of conspiracy theories.*

I'm not sure that there is a lot of point in tackling conspiracy theories head on, unless the attack on truth is endangering the congregation. But they can be mentioned along with other idols that distract us and prevent us from serving Jesus and bearing witness to the gospel. However true or not they may be, they must never become idols that inhibit our love for God and our love for others (Luke 10:27, 1 Cor. 13:1-3) or our commitment to the mission of the church.

e. *Offer resources for those wanting to explore the validity of particular conspiracy theories.*

We want our church family to be able to discern truth for themselves if possible. So we need to be on the lookout for reliable, balanced resources that will enable them to make up their own minds. We don't have to push our own perspectives but direct them to places where they can work through the issues themselves. For example, Curtis Chang from Fuller Seminary has developed [resources](#) that address conspiracies around the COVID vaccine. Another helpful (but more pointed) resource is stories from those who have been heavily involved in conspiracy theories and then been freed by God e.g. [Thomas Tarrant's](#).

f. *Talk to the church leaders/elders about your concerns.*

If the church leaders are divided on particular conspiracy theories, there is probably little more that you can do without further unsettling the church. If the church leaders are in agreement, then you may be able to discern together a healthy way forward.

g. *Speak personally with the conspiracy theorists.*

If you find that members of the church family are being pressured or led astray by the theorists or divisions are growing in the church, you will have to tackle the issue. How you approach this depends on the attitude of the conspiracy theorist and the potential damage they may cause.

1. It could involve an honest listening to their perspective and then a gentle explanation of where you or the congregation or the leaders sit.

2. It could involve explaining your concerns about their position and approach and its impact on the church.

3. It could be a strong warning about the biblical dangers of such harmful attitudes (see Scripture in the next section).

Pray about this, but don't necessarily expect any change to their perspective. However, it will give you an opportunity to lay out the boundaries of their attempts to influence.

9. What Scriptures may be applicable in dealing with various kinds of conspiracy theories?

It is best to study Scripture in its context, but here are a few passages that may be helpful to consider. Some of them have already been mentioned. They are listed in their biblical order. I've tried to cover a range of issues.

PROV 12:15 The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.

ISA 8:12 Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.”

ROM 13:1 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves... ⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

1 COR 1:20 Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²²Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

²⁶Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

GAL 5:19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

EPH 4:2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

COL 2:2 My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. ⁵For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is. ⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. ⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

TITUS 3:1 Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, ² to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone... ⁹ But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. ¹⁰ Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. ¹¹ You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned.

JAM 1:26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

JAM 3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

1 PET 2:13 Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.

1 PET 3:15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

2 PET 2:17 These people are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. ¹⁸ For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. ¹⁹ They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for “people are slaves to whatever has mastered them.” ²⁰ If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.

10. Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are not new. Some conspiracy theories are true and even the doubtful ones may not be harmful. They may be healthy indicators of the diversity of the church and its ability to include a wide range of perspectives in its unity. But unlikely conspiracy theories can also become idols or bring division. Good shepherds (pastors and elders) are called to protect the flock (1 Pet. 5:2; John 10:11-13). Dealing well with conspiracy theories is part of that calling.