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REFORMED THEOLOGY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO THE CONSPIRATORIAL MINDSET

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Introduction

During times of societal change, crisis, uncertainty, and fear, conspiracy theories flourish.¹ False conspiracy theories do great harm to society by stoking hatred, fear, and violence. When embraced and spread by Christians, they divide congregations and discredit the witness of the church in the broader community. At its worst, the eagerness to embrace conspiracy theories can be an alternative to the Christian faith and way of life.

Conspiracy theories gain some of their appeal by offering a false and lesser version of what the Gospel offers. For this reason, wise pastoring toward a robust embrace of the tenets of the reformed faith may be a powerful antidote to the conspiratorial mindset.

Defining Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories per se are not mentioned or defined in Scripture, though several secular definitions have been proposed. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines a conspiracy theory as “A theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as a result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators.”² Dr. Nick Dinfonzo says that conspiracy theories follow this form: “a secret powerful group is harming people like you and me.”³

By these definitions, conspiracy theories can be either true or false. To believe in the Iran Contras, the Tuskegee experiments, or the Holocaust is to believe in true conspiracies theories.⁴ Much of what evangelical Christians believe might be considered to be “conspiracy theory” and, for example, some have labeled creationism as a conspiracy theory.⁵ Thus, not all of them are false.

It should also be noted that it is a common tactic in the broader culture to label the views of one's opponent as conspiracy theories so as to quickly shut down debate and discussion, a tactic that should be avoided by Christians that desire to conduct themselves honestly.

¹ Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories* (London:Routledge, 2018), 24.

² “Conspiracy Theory” Merriam-Webster.com. 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com> (8 April 2022).

³ Nicholas DiFonzo, “A Christian Psychology of Rumor,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Volume 38, 7.

⁴ Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories* (London:Routledge, 2018), 3-4.

⁵ <https://theconversation.com/why-creationism-bears-all-the-hallmarks-of-a-conspiracy-theory-153831>

So not everything that is called a conspiracy theory is false, not everyone who is called a conspiracy theorist is one, and some conspiracy theories should be believed because they are true.

As Christians, our belief in human depravity certainly makes room for the conspiring of evil people in secret to do harm (Proverbs 1:11). So not every conspiracy theory should be immediately dismissed as an impossibility. The purpose of this paper is not to legitimize or debunk any individual conspiracy theories. Though, for the sake of working with a real world example, it will recklessly presuppose a “globe earth.”

The Conspiratorial Mindset

Those with the conspiratorial mindset show an excessive eagerness to embrace conspiracy theories. They make sense of the world by involving their belief that malevolent conspiracies are operating behind many events, and this way of thinking becomes ingrained. The best single predictor that someone will believe a conspiracy theory is that they believe another, even an unrelated or contradictory one.⁶ This shows a readiness to accept narratives that follow the pattern “a secret powerful group is harming people like you and me.”⁷ One study found that “those who believed that Princess Diana staged her own death are also more likely than average to believe that Princess Diana was murdered.”⁸ Some will believe conspiracy theories simply because they are such, and this way of thinking is what is being primarily addressed in this paper.

This mindset involves more than simply belief. Dr. Nick Difonzo suggests the use of the term “embrace” of rumors, which includes several dimensions, including belief, sharing with beliefs with others, investing identity in the theories, giving attention to them, and being affected by them.⁹

The Spread of Conspiracy Theories

⁶ Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories* (London:Routledge, 2018), 37.

⁷ Nicholas DiFonzo, "A Christian Psychology of Rumor," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Volume 38, 7.

⁸ Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories* (London:Routledge, 2018), 37.

⁹ Nicholas DiFonzo, "A Christian Psychology of Rumor," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Volume 38, 5.

Conspiracy theories tend to spread more rapidly during times of societal crisis.¹⁰ During these times, people have a heightened sense of fear and, as a result, are vigilant to look for threats, blame scapegoats, and search for causes that could explain the massive effects they see in the world.

New communications technologies have historically contributed to the spread of conspiracy theories. Flat earth theories boomed when newspapers did in the 1840s¹¹. The internet has made spread of conspiracy theories easier for the common person, and social media algorithms create the impression that many more people embrace them than actually do. YouTube videos also provide access to countless hours of conspiracy theories, and each video is followed by a suggestion of related videos, enabling a viewer to fall down a rabbit hole of endless viewing that reinforces these ideas.

Damage Caused by Believing in and Spreading False Conspiracies

In history, societal belief in false conspiracy theories has created significant hatred. Hitler used conspiracy theories to stoke fear of the Jews to enable him to carry out his atrocities.¹² Much more could be said about the harmful effects of conspiracy theory embrace and spread in society, but the focus here will be on Christians in congregations.

Because conspiracy theories create a sense of belonging and community among their adherents, the tight-knit community created by these beliefs can become more important than the community of the local church. Stories of church splits during the pandemic due to conspiratorial thinking in a certain clique are not hard to come by. Because conspiratorial beliefs can be given pride of place in their adherents' systems of knowledge, those adherents have often been willing to publicly excoriate those who do not hold those beliefs on social media, and then come to the Lord's table together on the following Sunday without a sense that they have done any wrong to the body.

The public witness of Bible-believing Christians has also been greatly harmed by their ready embrace of conspiracy theories and their speed to spread them online. Being loose with the truth, gullible,

¹⁰ Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories* (London: Routledge, 2018), 23.

¹¹ Weill, Kelly. *Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything* (p. 22). Algonquin Books. Kindle Edition.

¹² <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-4/myth-jewish-conspiracy>

and willing to spread falsehoods garners Christians the reputation of not being able to discern truth, judge soberly, or speak with wisdom. Beyond all of these considerations, of course, is the fact that spreading falsehoods is a violation of the ninth commandment.

The True Conspiracy Theory

As Christians become known as people who are quick to embrace conspiracy theories, some observers have even seen Christianity as one more conspiracy theory that “these people” believe in their panoply of other unrelated conspiracy theories.¹³ Perhaps, they might think, the Christian’s belief that the world, the flesh, and the devil are conspiring to harm us by keeping us from Christ is simply one more fictional conspiracy theory that these people can’t discern. Shouldn’t Christianity, then, be dismissed just as we dismiss the beliefs that the world is flat and that lizard people are secretly living among us? Since Christianity bears the marks of a conspiracy theory, shouldn’t we consider it to be false?

Perhaps a Tolkienian answer to this question is helpful: Christianity is the “true conspiracy theory” that offers the true version of what all other conspiracy theories offer. What attracts people to conspiracy theories is often a false version of the “real thing” that Christianity offers. Perhaps these attractive elements of conspiracy theories are best abated by urging our congregants to seek the true thing offered by Christianity and a robust embrace of reformed theology.

The Lure of Conspiracy Theories

Not all of those given to the conspiratorial mindset are the same. A wise pastor will not take a one-size-fits-all approach to ministering to those with this mindset. But many of the appealing factors behind conspiracy theories are simply deficient and false versions of what Christianity offers.

False Soteriology

Conspiracy theories offer a deficient soteriology by promising safety from evil by secret knowledge. “Conspiracies theories are ways to construct order and meaning in times of uncertainty. They let us shape our fears into something we understand.”¹⁴ If only everybody came to believe that this theory

¹³ Rev. Charles S. Cram, *Christianity and Other Conspiracy Theories*, (Self-Published, 2021).

¹⁴ Weill, Kelly. *Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything* (p. 4). Algonquin Books. Kindle Edition.

were true, our eyes would be open, and we would all be rescued from lies by our superior knowledge. Likewise, conspiracy theories can provide a sense of safety that comes from having an “explanation for things that feel incomprehensible and beyond our control...Dutch psychologists, for example, found that if students were asked to describe a situation that made them feel powerless, they were more likely to subsequently believe in a conspiracy.”¹⁵

Like all false forms of salvation, the ready embrace of conspiracy theories engenders pride. Those who are “in the know” can roll their eyes at those who still believe that the world is really a globe and can find some grounds for boasting. This is attractive to the self-righteous heart. Carl Trueman says that “conspiracy theories have an aesthetic appeal: they make us feel more important in the grand scheme of things than we are. If someone is going to all this trouble to con us into believing in something, then we have to be worth conning.”¹⁶ This belief that we are not sheep, but instead think for ourselves is attractive.

Kelli Weill, a non-Christian author who immersed herself in the gatherings of Flat Earthers, discussing Jan. 6 events, mentioned that participants described feeling like this was their ‘1776 moment’, and that they had an almost “main character” approach to politics wherein they were looking for “purpose”, “significance”, and to be “at the center of the drama.”¹⁷ This finding of the true self in the embrace of conspiracy theories, a false salvation, is a powerful draw.

False Ecclesiology

Embrace of conspiracy theory often unites the adherent to a community. Kelly Weill described the conferences of the Flat Earth Society where eager young adherents can’t wait to meet the “big name” experts in flat earth doctrine, where a real sense of camaraderie is palpable, and where being part of the inner-circle of true knowledge creates security, unity, and belonging.¹⁸ One can’t help but notice some of

¹⁵ Weill, Kelly. *Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything* (p. 8). Algonquin Books. Kindle Edition.

¹⁶ As quoted by Justin Taylor, “The Vanity of Conspiracy Theories and the Banality of Real Evil,” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/the-vanity-of-conspiracy-theories-and-the-banality-of-real-evil/>.

¹⁷ Michael Shermer Show Ep. 251. Kelly Weill on Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything.

¹⁸ Weill, Kelly. *Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything*

the similarities to a church service or an evangelical conference in her descriptions. The adherents to these theories find their identity in the new community they become part of. For this reason, when they are called upon to give up these theories, it can provoke a visceral reaction against doing so. They can sense that they are not only being asked to change their minds, but also their sense of belonging, their significance, their identity, and their people.

False Hamartiology

Some conspiracy theories are appealing because of their ability to explain the secret cause of our troubles. The conspiring of evil people to do us harm becomes the biggest problem there is, and from this we must be saved. “Such worldviews may be characterized as Manichaeism, in the sense that they cast the world in terms of a struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, and hold that this polarization will persist until the end of history, when evil is finally, definitively defeated.”¹⁹

False Grand Narrative

Conspiracy theories, as sense-making mechanisms, offer “a grand narrative about why the world is the way it is— and who (or what) is to blame.”²⁰ They explain the world, and offer a deficient version of the biblical narrative of the nature of sin, the fall, salvation, and sometimes even our eschatological hope, as a future where everyone embraces this knowledge leads to a better world.

It should be noted that most conspiracy theories are not consciously identified by their adherents as religions. In fact, the majority of flat-earthers around the globe identify themselves as Christians and biblical literalists.²¹ Just as we wouldn’t identify most of our idols as such, and often see them as completely compatible with our Christianity, those with this mindset often believe their beliefs are true and consistent with their faith.

¹⁹ Michael Barkun, “The Nature of Conspiracy Belief”, <https://california.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1525/california/9780520238053.001.0001/ups-o-9780520238053-chapter-1>

²⁰ Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, (Public Affairs, NY, 2020), 30.

²¹ Weill, Kelly. *Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything* (p. 107). Algonquin Books. Kindle Edition.

Many more comparisons between what is offered by conspiracy theories and what is offered by the Christian faith could be drawn.

A Pastoral Approach

Adherents to conspiracy theories will understandably “dig in” and seek to reinforce their beliefs when they perceive they are being attacked. It is likely that someone who would speak out against their beliefs will be considered part of the problem. Mockery is ineffective²².

Three years after the International Flat Earth Research Society was formed, a parody group called the “Man Will Never Fly Memorial Society” was organized. Its members flew to annual meetings in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, and, lubricated by copious amounts of alcohol, pretended that they believed that human air travel was impossible.²³ There was no noticeable decline in membership over at the Flat Earth Society.

Gentle Exposure of Logical Inconsistencies

An invested pastor may be able to gently expose some of the logical inconsistencies of adherents. Those who deeply distrust the government also trust hundreds of conspirators to keep secrets and operate in harmony. Jonathan Kay, who wrote Among the Truthers, said one of the basic features of the conspiratorial mindset is a deep belief in the hypercompetence of the evil cabal that runs the world, along with the deep distrust in authority, science, and institutions.²⁴

Some with the conspiratorial mindset are prone to logical fallacies such as the proportionality bias, wherein they wrongly assume that a massive effect must have had a proportionally massive cause. To believe that COVID-19 could have been caused by a small virus that jumped from a pangolin to a human seems unlikely because of how massively disruptive the pandemic has been. So people look for a broader conspiracy that may have been involved to create the virus in a lab and release it for nefarious purposes. Occasionally, there is a conspiracy to be found, but a large effect can have a very small cause.

²² <https://www.staseos.net/post/who-s-afraid-of-conspiracy-theories>

²³ Weill, Kelly. *Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything* (p. 65). Algonquin Books. Kindle Edition.

²⁴ Kay, Jonathan. *Among the Truthers*. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Long-Term Preaching and Teaching the Grand Truths of the Reformed Faith

Piper suggests that what is needed is “personally, relationally, prayerfully to constantly do our best to direct that person’s attention toward grand central realities of the Christian faith that are right at the heart of what God is doing in Jesus Christ. They think they are being biblical and passionate for truth, but in fact, the main truths hold no interest for them. It does little good to try to address their speculations directly. There’s just so much conjecture that you can’t get anywhere. What’s needed is an awakening of the heart to the superior worth and greatness and beauty of the most important things in Scripture.”²⁵

Consider some of the truths of the reformed faith and how they offer far more than conspiracy theories:

God is Sovereign, the Cabal is Not

Psalm 115:3 “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” Even an evil cabal is no match for God, who reigns freely over all things.

The Biblical Grand Narrative Ensures Final Triumph of God and His People

Romans 16:20: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

God is Good to Us in the Gospel, Casting Out Fear

God spares no good thing from us, and therefore the things we fear don’t need to be feared:

Romans 8:31-39: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or

²⁵ <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-should-we-respond-to-christian-conspiracy-theories>

distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Sin is Within and Without

Our greatest problem is not “them” out there:

Romans 7:22-24 “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

The Necessity of Creaturely Dependence on God and Others

Psalm 100:3 “ Know that the LORD, he is God!

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”

Creatures will always live with dependent uncertainty.²⁶ Our view of human weakness and depravity means we can’t excessively trust authorities. Our view of ourselves as limited creatures means we also need them; most of what we know is derived from others.

We Learn Truth in Christian Ways

²⁶ Nicholas Difonzo and Jeffrey S. Black, “Trustful Waiting and Enemy Loving Responses to Fallen Uncertainty and Relationality: Christian Psychology Soul Care in an Age of Conspiracy Rumors.”

We have a high view of evidence, as even our gospels gained credibility by their derivation from eyewitness testimony.²⁷ We are loving hearers who receive information graciously, giving the benefit of the doubt, testing all things, and taking every thought captive to Christ.

When We Still Believe There's a Conspiracy

When we wisely weigh evidence and speak with reliable, trusted authorities, we may still believe a conspiracy is taking place. This does sometimes happen. But even then, Difonzo writes, we practice “trustful waiting” and “enemy love”²⁸ as opposed to anxious surmising and enemy hatred. God is good and can be trusted. We are still careful not to spread unsubstantiated facts, and to repent when we have done so.

Conclusion

Evil people sometimes conspire to harm people like us. But when we are readily drawn to embrace these conspiracy theories, we may be practicing a deficient religion. The robust embrace of reformed theology could satisfy the anxious soul so that much of the allure of conspiracy theories could dissolve and claims could be evaluated, embraced, or dismissed in a measured and Christian way.

²⁷ Nicholas DiFonzo, "A Christian Psychology of Rumor," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Volume 38, 8.

²⁸ Nicholas Difonzo and Jeffrey S. Black, "Trustful Waiting and Enemy Loving Responses to Fallen Uncertainty and Relationality: Christian Psychology Soul Care in an Age of Conspiracy Rumors."