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Christians And The Conspiracy Theory Contagion

With the recent announcements about potential breakthrough vaccines we've seen a proliferation of conspiracy theories rise to the surface once again (although curiously they were circulating months before the breaking news alongside other harmful and misleading ideas such as who is responsible for the virus). Whether it's to do with the vaccine tampering with our DNA, or Bill Gates (having created the Covid-19 bioweapon in the first place!) unleashing the next stage of his master plan to control humanity by implanting trackable microchips in us, I guess we shouldn't be surprised: such theories have always been a refuge for the gullible or fanatical.

However, the thing that I've found simultaneously shocking, saddening and embarrassing is the increasing number of Christians who seem to have bought into recent conspiracies – not only subscribing to them but also being key protagonists in their promulgation.

Social media of course has many benefits but it has contributed significantly to the crisis of truth in our digital age; indeed social platforms, including direct messaging

apps, have become a breeding ground for manufactured deceptions and dangerous misinformation to spread around the world almost as fast as the coronavirus itself.

Conspiracy theories – ideas that explain an event or set of circumstances often as a result of some kind of sinister or secret plot that “they” want to hide from us – can be explicit or subtle. Though easily dismissible and quickly falsifiable, they are often indefeasible because of the lightning speed that they spread around the world. Consequently the ideas are very hard to tackle once disseminated into the public, not least because those who are challenged about spreading them often categorise the people who call them out as amongst the naïve, deluded or even the conspirators. But for those who get pulled in to the alluring vortex of conspiracy theories, the algorithmically-curated content on social platforms keeps on churning out material that only confirms their biases and further entrenches them into the social and political bubbles where only those who support their own narratives reside.

Without question many people who believe conspiracy theories do so sincerely but – when we consider that God is the source of wisdom and the Bible is the book of wisdom – why is it that certain Christians are so quick to post intellectually lazy claims that mix faith, politics and pseudo-science? I get it: during uncertain and challenging times like these in which people feel frightened or threatened we are all the more susceptible to conspiracy theories. But it’s disconcerting to see the amount of Christians getting caught up in the nonsense and being sucked in by the gravitational pull of fake news – and to see many getting outraged by things that are not actually true.

Why are Christians susceptible? Is it because of our eschatology which means we are always on high alert to anything such as wars or pandemics that sniff of one-world government or end-time events – being too quick to see things that are not actually the case in reality? Similarly, might it be that our heightened awareness of the invisible war that is going on in the spiritual realm causes some of us to unduly call conspiracy on those things that are not? Or might there be somewhat of a spiritual narcissism to it all – that we perceive we are more spiritual when we dispense seemingly secret knowledge which others are ignorant of? Certainly I’ve seen posts from people on social media almost revelling about being in the know (not being fooled by the politicians and the experts like the rest of the masses!) – but actually this smacks more of a soft Gnosticism than of true biblical Christianity

(Gnosticism was an ancient heresy which held that only an enlightened few actually knew what is going on in the world).

Whatever the reason, spreading misinformation is a decidedly unchristian thing to do – not least when it scapegoats or demonises certain people or groups and engenders reactions that are contrary to the character of Christ. Of the seven things that Proverbs 6:16–19 says that God hates, remember that three of them are *“a lying tongue”, “a false witness who pours out lies”* and *“a person who stirs conflict in the community”*. We also do well to recall that the first conspiracy theory was spawned by Satan in the garden of Eden when he twisted the truth and told the first humans that God was holding secret information from them – and of course, it all started to go wrong for them when they started to listen to this voice.

One of my biggest concerns about the conspiracy theory contagion plaguing our social feeds at the moment is a pastoral and missional one. The other day I saw a Facebook friend – a Christian – promoting a conspiracy theory about mask-wearing; though it was clothed in biblical garb, it was foolish and ill-informed. But soon after this, they wrote a separate post about the power of Jesus to answer prayer. I asked myself what my non-Christian friends would make of this; to me it seemed as if my Facebook friend was totally oblivious to the message being sent about their witness. When in one breath we spread unproven conspiracy theories and then in the other breath share gospel truths, it undermines confidence in the truth claims of the Bible. We say to a watching world that truth does not matter to followers of Jesus – and if they can't trust our judgement on earthly matters, why should they trust us with the eternal claims we are making about God?

Sometimes the consequences of spreading conspiracy theories are minor, but make no mistake about it, they can also cause much damage too – and in the case of Covid-19 they can be deadly. As a local church pastor I've witnessed the destructive impact of conspiracy theories on the vulnerable these last months – for example, I can recall a person with underlying health conditions making poor Covid-safety decisions because of a conspiracy theory that was sent to them by a family member which made them think that they were complying with the anti-Christ by following government guidelines.

So this is a plea: play your part in stopping the spread of conspiracy theories (cf. Isaiah 8:11–12). Exercise wisdom and discernment in determining who and what is worth listening to – and what is not. To this endeavour, using the acronym FACT, I want to suggest four things we can do to play our part in standing for truth in this

time of misinformation and confusion – something that can help us distinguish conspiracy theories from real and actual conspiracies:

1. Fact-check

You may believe something you've read or heard but you have a responsibility – before God and before others – to do the research and check out the truth claims. Instead of gullibly consuming fake news or alternative facts from spurious sources without any clear evidence, scrutinise the facts. Do as much as you can to check that what you are sharing is correct before you share it. What do the independent fact-checking websites such as *Snopes* or *Full Fact* have to say? Bear in mind that sometimes the most potent conspiracy theories are a hybrid of real and false information.

2. Apply Spirit-filled, common sense critical thinking

I get it: these days there is a lot of mistrust of media, government and other institutional authorities but that can cause us to look for or interpret information that only confirms our own biases. Nowadays it's possible through the internet to find confirmation for almost anything you want – if you want to believe that the earth is flat or that the Bush administration collaborated with Bin Laden in 9/11, you'll find it with a quick search. Assess the validity of opposite opinions with some common sense critical thinking. Apply some logic; ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom as to how to sift through competing truth claims. As the apostle Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:22 (MSG), *"Don't be gullible. Check out everything, and keep only what's good. Throw out anything tainted by evil"*.

3. Consider the sources

Examine the credentials and qualifications of both the originator of the idea and/or the reliability and authority of the person who shared it with you. Don't just trust the social algorithms in your feed to be displaying unbiased content to you – or simply the fact that the person who sent it to you said that the Lord told them it was true. It has been said that this is the day of the death of expertise but, though confidence in experts has eroded (partly due to the ridiculous notion of "alternative facts"), expertise does matter (so be sure to listen to people who know what they're talking about!). Scrutinise the links, quotes, references, etc. Remember that as the "father of lies" (John 8:44), all slanderous conspiracy theories find their source in Satan.

4. Think twice before you share

Before you press share, take a moment to think. Pressing 'share' might be an insignificant thing to you but think about the ramifications on others, especially the vulnerable. The other day I read some notes from a sermon I preached in the noughties (that's a disclaimer, if you didn't guess!). The message was called 'Taming The Tongue' and my final point was to *think twice before you speak*. I shared this acronym:

T - Is it True? Is it Treacherous?

H - Will it Help? Will it Hinder?

I - Is it Inspiring? Is it Injurious?

N - Is it Necessary? Is it Needless?

K - Is it Kind? Is it Killing?

I think we can apply the same questions to all our social media postings, especially when it comes to controversial topics and conspiracy theories: *think twice before you post*.

So there are four points through which I hope we can inoculate ourselves against the conspiracy theory contagion that is sadly finding a home amongst certain Christians today. But if you're thinking that you don't have time to do these four things, then can I respectfully say: you probably shouldn't post, for you run a real risk of breaking the command in Exodus 20:16 not to bear false witness.

As Christians we should heed Paul's exhortation in 2 Timothy 2:23 not to have anything to do with "foolish and stupid arguments". We may not like someone or something but we are not to slander – say something untrue – even about our enemies. We should have no part in spreading such lies or misinformation; instead, as ambassadors of Christ, what we share should be a reflection of Him – and He is truth.

Ultimately, conspiracy theories hurt the witness of the Church. Knowing that on Judgement Day we will give an account for every careless word (cf. Matthew 12:36), let's hold to what is true and resist what is false. And let's not squander the incredible opportunity before us at such a time as this to present God's truth to a polarised world. Let's honour Christ by honouring truth and let's seek to be a compelling witness for Him before a watching world.