

Equipping Thoughts for Leaders

Help God's People Avoid Conspiracy Theories



May 1, 2020

Gullibility or Paranoia is not a gift or fruit of the Spirit.

With all the idle time we are probably involved with social media more than normal. I recently read a tweet that identifies a growing problem among God's people during the lockdown,

"Last week my Facebook feed was full of people posting crazy Covid conspiracy theories, followed by posts about evidence for the resurrection. I don't think they realize the message they are actually sending."

Holy Spirit enables us to "bear witness of Christ" not bear witness of conspiracy theories centered around paranoia (Acts 1:8).

Definitions:

- **Conspiracy:** A secret plan by a group to do something unlawful or harmful.

- **Conspiracy Theory:** A conspiracy theory is an explanation for an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful actors, often political in motivation (to make a point against one side or the other), when other explanations are more probable.

A little of my background. I began following the Lord in the 70s amid an end time theology that highlighted people's fears and paranoia. Many real conspiracies were breaking. The nation had come through a government coverup that was discovered by the investigation of Woodward and Bernstein resulting in revelation of the Watergate break-in, and the impeachment of Nixon.

Later we had the middle east embassy taken over and the Iran hostage crisis which spawned the TV news show "Nightline." That interest in a regular news broadcast outside the bounds of traditional news reporting was a factor in the launching of 24-hour news networks with CNN being the first.

In the 90s we saw Matthew Drudge consistently bring up a potential scandal involving Bill Clinton which broke the Lewinski affair leading to impeachment hearings. Many felt that the Clinton scandal and the Drudge exposure, the rising success of 24 hour news channels, and the online phenomenon hastened the launching of extreme Conservative/Liberal news sights and networks that has contributed to the new polarization that we all are faced with today.

In the pursuit of viewers/readers and the money that comes with them, conspiracy theories are circulated in order to hook people into reading and sharing them so viewership will increase. It becomes a problem for God's people when we blindly join any conspiracy theory bandwagon.

Gullibility among God's people is nothing new

Let me digress a little. Gullibility among God's people is nothing new. I remember preparing to teach the section of Church history covering the Middle Ages, the Crusades (1095-1300), and the early Reformation. As many of you may know the Middle Ages was a period that was rife with hostilities, plagues, a lack of education, and religion taking advantage of it with the general public. This was a recipe which spawned a very superstitious culture. The whole worship/reverence of relics was heightened in those days. A relic was a remain of a saint or something that was allegedly associated with a saint or holy place. Relics were reported to contain mystical powers for those who either possessed them or had contact with them. Hucksters took advantage of it for

money and fame. The tales of these relics and powers spread way past any actual reality.

Martin Luther and the protestants opposed this kind of approach towards relics. At Wittenberg (the scene of Martin Luther's protest) there were some 5005 relics including: alleged pieces of the rods of Moses and Aaron, and ashes from the burning bush. At the German city of Halle there were an incredible 8,933 relics, including alleged wine from the wedding feast at Cana, and some of the earth from which Adam was made.

In ridicule of these examples Luther highlighted the ridiculous nature of these tales (for us today conspiracies), "a piece of the left horn of Moses, three flames from the burning bush, and a lock of Beezlebub's beard". Luther also commented, "What lies there are about relics! ... how does it happen that eighteen apostles are buried in Germany when Christ had only twelve?". Elsewhere, Protestant reformer John Calvin claimed that if alleged relics were brought together under one roof "it would be made manifest that every Apostle has more than four bodies, and every Saint two or three."

There can be a similar problem today for Christians as the global pandemic has spawned a corresponding release of conspiracy theories. There is an amazing amount of online sharing of information that isn't fact checked. It's only credibility for Christians is that it was shared by another Christian and it is so far-fetched it must be true. When God's people believe, share, and propagate such things it brings dishonor to the cause of Christ. God calls us to be "wise, not unwise" (Eph 5:16).

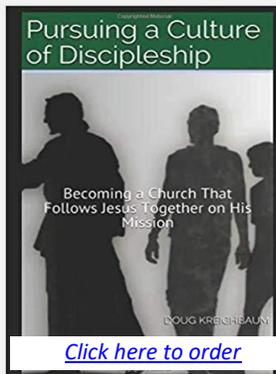
One of the most widely respected non-partisan research/think tanks "Pew Research Center" recently revealed that the most likely people in the US who believe that the Covid-19 virus was created in a lab as a conspiracy were religious Republicans.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/08/nearly-three-in-ten-americans-believe-covid-19-was-made-in-a-lab/>

God's people need to be careful about such conspiracy theories. It may not be completely accurate that the 5G cell towers are being used diabolically to spread Covid-19 or the "mark of the beast" (Rev 13:16-18, 16:2, 19:20) is going to be the governments proof that you have had the vaccine (sarcasm).

I worked in Law Enforcement for several years and have many friends still in it. I am certain that the police officers are not secretly preparing to come and take our guns, close our churches, and spread the virus to Christians who don't comply. It may sound crazy but I once spoke with a Christian leader who didn't know my Law Enforcement

background/connections who told me that he saw the police secretly training in their black fatigues to prepare to come and take our guns, so we had better not have any flags with embroidery across the bottom because those flags are what they will march under.



One church leader I spoke to recently who served in the military and is an advocate for second amendment rights (and he owns several guns) humorously responded to me about the proneness towards conspiracies said, "Well if the police come to take my guns I don't think I will shoot them because I know most of them and they are my friends, and some my Christian brothers."

In the current challenge with the pandemic we must be careful to obey the word, "speak the truth in love...be angry but do not sin...do not lie to each other" (Ephesians 4:15-27). Please don't use your social media feeds to circulate factually unchecked ideas that lead to more conspiracy theories. It really does damage our witness for Christ in the world.

Four simple things that give us wisdom in handling extreme and suspicious online information.

- **When you come across information that sounds extreme or suspect please check it out further before sharing.** Check for corroboration from both the opposite side and neutral news sights.
- **If someone is revealed as an expert check them out before sharing what they are saying.** I did a search on a doctor that was making crazy statements about the origin of the Covid virus and was being shared by several Christians only to find out that he has been disciplined years ago losing his ability to practice in some states. Unfortunately many Christians were sharing his thoughts.
- **The real life that we live is the ultimate credibility and platform for the things we write and say.** Be careful about believing and circulating suspicious information from someone who identifies as a Christian, but you really don't know them or the life they are living.

- **Realize that there is little impartial information being relayed in today's media and news sights.** We live in times of extreme political polarization in which everything is spun one way or another. Most information and news being reported has a slant to support something and destroy what they perceive is opposition. Try to check out information and stories on more unbiased news sites. The following is a credible source of new bias ratings. <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-chart>



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