

Voices: Pastoring people who embrace conspiracy theories, part 2

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Pastors increasingly encounter conspiracy theories and those in their churches and communities who espouse them. In light of this, many pastors are asking, “How do I pastor someone who embraces conspiracy theories?”

Shauna Bowes, Thomas Costello and Arber Tasimi, in their June 26, 2023, *Psychological Bulletin* article “[The Conspiratorial Mind](#),” define “conspiracy theories” as referring “to causal explanations of events that ascribe blame to a group of powerful individuals (the conspirators) who operate in secret to form hidden plans that benefit themselves and harm the common good.”

Last week, I shared [five pastoral principles](#) I have developed in responding to people who embrace conspiracy theories. I share five more principles below.

Five more principles

1. Learn to be a good thinker and help others to be the same.

In a world awash in information and misinformation, it is important for pastors to be good thinkers. This is helpful not only for ourselves, but also so we can be a good example and provide helpful direction for others.

Learning to be a good thinker may include, but is not limited to, such

practices as:

- going to primary sources and original contexts and not relying on cherry-picked quotes by others;
- learning to ask good questions of information and of ourselves;
- using sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles, especially as it relates to the genre of apocalyptic writings in the Bible;
- knowing how to find good and as-objective-as-possible information sources;
- learning to distinguish between the nature of research-based, evidence-driven scientific articles that rely on rigorous notions of what is accurate—because not all ideas and/or sides are equal—versus more popular-level articles that may give equal voice to less reliable and accurate sources (“let’s hear from both sides”);
- discerning logical fallacies, especially the use of confirmation bias in believing conspiracy theories;
- learning the basic statistical knowledge that a relationship between variables does not necessarily imply causation;
- discerning the actual expertise of someone writing or being quoted;
- asking yourself whether you have the knowledge to believe and affirm an outlier voice/position—there always are outliers—instead of a consensus position.

While we as pastors cannot have deep knowledge about a great many topics people may ask us about, we can do the hard work of being a good thinker and helping others to be the same.

2. If someone asks your opinion, it is fine to share it. Nevertheless, do not get into arguments with people.

Few, if anyone, change their mind via arguments. Therefore, it is important to model graciousness in how we relate to people who embrace a conspiracy theory and who disagree with us.

We also must take care not to get into arguments with people, especially via email and online. This can be challenging in today's polarized world.

This being said, there is something powerful when someone can state what he or she believes and stay connected with those who believe differently. Pastors have the opportunity to model this graciousness.

This may be powerful especially in that conspiracy groups often show little-to-no grace to those who disagree with the beliefs of the group. We as pastors have the opportunity to show the better way.

3. Do not use the pulpit or public leadership to attack those who believe a conspiracy theory and are criticizing you.

Our role in the church provides for us a public platform most do not have. It can be tempting to go after those criticizing us for not embracing a conspiracy and do so in a way that shames them publicly. While it may be temporarily cathartic to do such a thing, it will diminish our leadership in the eyes of the church and will not help us to be the pastor God has called us to be.

4. Do not allow an individual or group who embraces a conspiracy theory or theories to dominate a small group or ministry area.

Those who embrace a conspiracy theory or theories often are passionate and evangelistic about their ideas. Because of their passion and intensity, they can dominate or distract a group from their core focus.

There may be times when a pastor needs to address the individual or group and redirect them to their core focus.

For example, there was a Sunday school class in a church where I was the

pastor that, while not embracing conspiracy theories, would use their Sunday school time to go through a particular newspaper and give commentary. While they enjoyed this, we had to redirect them to the Bible as the core focus of what was to be read and discussed in Sunday school at our church.

5. Whether they realize it or not, those who embrace conspiracy theories need you to preach Jesus.

In the midst of all the intensity, loudness and criticism that can come from those who embrace conspiracy theories, what they and everyone in the church you pastor need is Christ.

May we resolve ourselves like Paul: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:2-5).

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