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JOURNAL



Yes, Elvis Is Dead,
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A Pastoral Response to
Conspiracy Theories

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail:
The Embodiment of Faith

by Julie Stiegemeyer

Fall—2023



Greetings in the Name of Jesus.

What is a conspiracy theory? Why do some people believe them? And, can a Christian do so? Learn how conspiracy theories can become a form of idolatry, and why Christians should avoid them in my essay, “Yes, Elvis Is Dead, but God Is in His Heaven: A Pastoral Response to Conspiracy Theories.”

Also in this edition of the **Issues, Etc. Journal**, Julie Stiegemeyer tells about how God’s Word led her from Methodism to the clarity of the Gospel found in the Confessional Lutheranism.

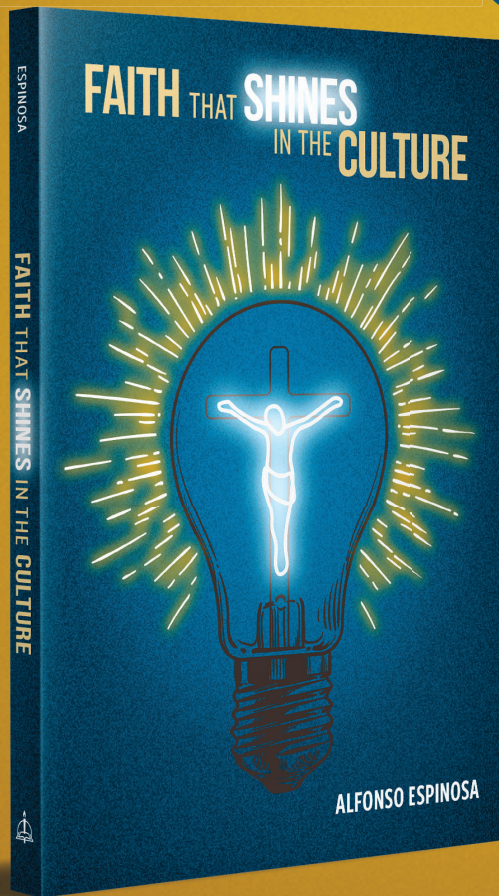
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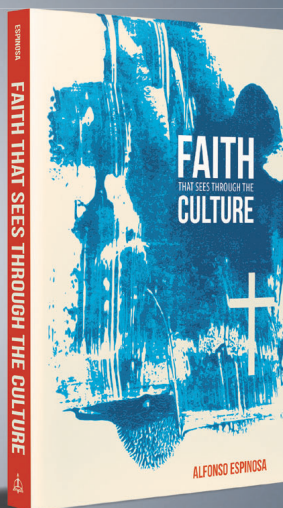
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Yes, Elvis Is Dead, but God Is in His Heaven: A Pastoral Response to Conspiracy Theories

by Todd Wilken

“God’s in His heaven – All’s right with the world!”

Robert Browning, *Pippa’s Song*

We never landed on the moon. The earth is flat. Airline contrails are spraying chemicals to pacify the citizenry, to control the weather, or to vaccinate people against their will. The Illuminati, the Jews, or the World Economic Forum (or all three) control all of the world’s governments and economies.

Conspiracy theories are popular. But are these theories compatible with Christianity? It turns out the reason conspiracy theories are so popular is precisely the reason they are incompatible with Christianity: At the root of these theories is a form of idolatry.

Sometimes, a conspiracy theory is merely a wrongheaded fantasy. Sometimes, it becomes a dangerous falsehood. There are conspiracy theories that don’t extend beyond the boardroom or the county line. Then, there are conspiracy theories that attempt to explain everything from the price of eggs to the outcomes of elections.

A conspiracy theory is an unfalsifiable worldview. Evidence for the theory proves the theory. Evidence against the theory proves that the truth is being suppressed. Lack of evidence proves a cover up. Nothing can prove the theory false because the theory itself is the sole arbiter of truth.

The framework for every conspiracy theory is a web of deception. Things are not as they appear. To quote TV character Jimmy James misquoting Oliver Stone, misquoting Winston Churchill, the truth is “a cipher wrapped in an

enigma, smothered in secret sauce...” To find the truth you must read between the lines, parse events for hidden meaning, and reject the truth as it is presented. As a result, the theorist must be suspicious of everything and everyone in his life. Eventually, the theorist comes to believe that almost everything outside his direct control is orchestrated by powerful but unseen forces.

These forces are often described as having near complete control over the government, the media, business, the entertainment industry, and even the churches. These forces coordinate not only the big events on a global scale but also the events of a theorist’s daily life. Ironically, the conspiracy theorist is skeptical of the people and events in the world around them but never of the theory itself.

At first, the theorist believes that those who doubt his theory are merely naive or stupid. Later, he suspects that those who doubt are unwitting pawns in the conspiracy. Finally, he concludes that those who doubt are willing and active co-conspirators.

The theorist listens only to those who reinforce his ideas. He is convinced that he alone sees the big picture. He alone knows what's really happening. He is frustrated by those who cannot see what he sees. At the same time, the fact that no one else understands proves that he must be right. In the end, the theory isolates the theorist from everyone who doesn't hold his views. This is the result of believing a lie. The conspiracy theory becomes the final authority.

In effect, a conspiracy theory becomes the theorist’s god. The theory comforts him, explains reality, and provides meaning for his life. He trusts the theory above all things.

From theory to worldview and from worldview to religion is a move sadly common among conspiracy theorists.

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Some hold to a conspiracy theory, but their overall worldview may remain otherwise unaffected. Think of the otherwise rational person who is convinced that Elvis Presley is still alive and elaborately faked his own death to escape the pressures of celebrity. Or think of the person who is convinced that the Apollo moon landings were hoaxes, and that the media and government have been covering up this truth for the last half century but otherwise goes about his life unperturbed by the implications of the conspiracy theory.

For others, the conspiracy theory has replaced a truth-based worldview. Think of the person who is convinced that ethnic Jews secretly control all the levers of power in the world, religious, social, political, and economic. For this theorist, there is nothing in the world or his life that remains untouched by the theory. The theory explains virtually everything.

For a few, the conspiracy theory becomes more than a theory and even more than an all-encompassing worldview. For these few, the theory becomes their religion. Those who question or reject their theory are not merely blind or stupid, they are evil. A questioning of their theory-become-religion is heresy. A rejection of their theory is religious apostasy.

At the root of every conspiracy theory is a form of idolatry—the attempt to find understanding, revelation, and ultimately, comfort in something other than the true God. This fact explains why some refuse to abandon a conspiracy theory. We don't want to part with our idols.

A Christian can avoid the idolatrous lure of conspiracy theories by remembering the following truths:

Remember, Christians are lovers of the truth. A Christian cherishes not only the truths of Scripture, but all truth. Most conspiracy theories are not good faith attempts to find the truth, rather, they are deliberate and elaborate attempts

to deny the truth. For this reason alone Christians should avoid conspiracy theories.

Remember, God has not hidden the truth. Another appeal of a conspiracy theory is that it presents truth as something that is hidden. Scripture, on the contrary, presents truth as something that God has revealed. While God certainly hasn't revealed everything that is true, what God has revealed in both Scripture and in His Creation is not hidden.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. (Romans 1:19-20)

God has not hidden himself from his Creation nor has he hidden the truth about the world around us. Does God reveal everything to us? No. But what he has revealed is sufficient for us to live before him by faith and before our neighbors in love. In God's economy of revelation, a Christian doesn't need to search the world around him for a secret key that unlocks true, hidden knowledge.

Remember, the Bible presents reality without resorting to conspiracy theories. The most dangerous conspiracy theories claim to have a Biblical basis. But nowhere in Scripture are Christians directed to understand world events or the events of their own lives by resorting to a conspiracy.

Remember, God ultimately controls the world and the affairs of men. Everything IS being controlled and orchestrated by a powerful, all-seeing entity: God. Men, organizations, or governments may exercise limited control, but God ultimately controls all things.

Remember, the arch of human history is bent toward God's purposes. God's purposes alone guide and channel the course of human events. No individual, ethnic group, corporation or government is able to thwart God's purpose in human history.

Remember, the mystery of God's hidden will is inscrutable. God has not revealed everything we want to know. As fallen creatures, our desire for knowledge and understanding outruns the supply lines of God's revelation. We want to know more than God has revealed. For this reason God has forbidden us to inquire into things he has hidden.

Remember, the key to understanding what is real, and why things are the way they are is Jesus Christ and His Word. God IS in His heaven, and all IS right with the world. We know this because the God who sits on the heavenly throne, ruling the universe from end to end is the man Jesus Christ:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

From the right hand of the Father, Jesus rules. The Apostle Paul tells the Colossians, "In Him, all things hold together" (Colossians 3:17). All is right with the world because all that is wrong with the world has been atoned for with the blood of Jesus. This fact alone declares every conspiracy theory foolish and unnecessary.

Christians don't need conspiracy theories. As a Christian, should you be skeptical of what you see and hear around you? Yes! But rather than fill the void of uncertainty with the false certainty of a conspiracy theory, fill that void with the true certainty of God's Word.

Are dark, unseen forces attempting to control the world and conspiring against us? Yes! But God has already told us what those forces are:

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)



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God has also told us that as powerful as these demonic forces are, they do not control His world; He does. And, He has completely defeated these forces in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Is it often hard to believe that God is in His heaven and all is right with the world, that human history is unfolding according to God's good and gracious purpose? Yes! Is it often easier to believe that someone or something else is in control? Yes! But in those moments of doubt, you are invited and commanded to flee to God and His Word, not a conspiracy theory, for answers. The great Psalm of the Reformation is worth quoting in its entirety here. Read it carefully and note how it speaks directly to the circumstances that give rise to so many conspiracy theories:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
even though the earth be removed,
and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;
though its waters roar and be troubled,
though the mountains shake with its swelling.

There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God,
the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.
The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved;
He uttered His voice, the earth melted.

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord,
Who has made desolations in the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
He burns the chariot in the fire.

Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Psalm 46)

The true God and his purpose for mankind is a better explanation for what is happening in the world and your life than the sinister forces at the heart of conspiracy theories. The true God is also a better God than the idol of a conspiracy theory. Like every idol, the comfort offered by a conspiracy theory is both false and fleeting. The comfort that God gives in Jesus Christ is true and eternal.

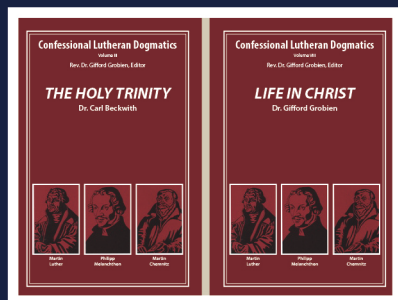
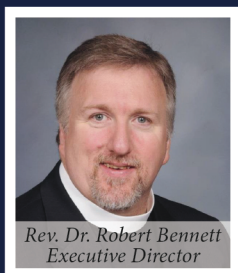


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The Embodiment of Faith

By Julie Stiegemeyer

My story of faith began with the sprinkling of baptismal waters when I was five months old at a font in a United Methodist congregation. I have snatches of memories from my childhood at church—attending Sunday school and confirmation classes, wearing Easter dresses with lacy frills, and hearing children’s sermons. But mostly from those early years, I remember the impact of being a part of the children’s choirs, the younger group led by a family friend, and the older two groups led by my mom.

My mom was passionate about teaching her choristers to sing and to use our voices for prayer and praise. She taught us to sit up tall since “organ pipes and singers too must be straight so the sound comes through.” She taught us anthems like “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” which still occasionally bubble up from a corner of my memory. She taught us about the church year—the names of the seasons, the colors, the rhythm, flow, and life of the church. Years later, I realize how powerful those lessons have been in my life—how music can touch us deeply, at a “heart” level, not only in our intellect; how our bodies are made for music; and how music can enrich our spiritual lives.

I spiritually “wandered” in my high school and early college years. I was a baptized child of God but searched for more than what I found at my childhood church. I had many mentors and friends along the way, notably a vicar at my best friend’s Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod congregation. Every Wednesday evening, my friend and I went to youth volleyball games and afterward to Bible study. The volleyball was pitiful—at least on my part—but the Bible study led by the vicar was just what I needed. My friend and I were very curious, so after all

the other youth had gone home, we badgered this poor pastor-in-training with questions, and he graciously offered us his time, knowledge, and care, which was critical for my spiritual growth.

Another friend attended a Bible church, so I tried that out too. In the Bible studies with their youth pastor, I learned about teachings on the end times. I remember the evening the pastor showed us a chart on the wall and pointed to a large red arrow indicating when the rapture would happen. He also pointed to the thousand years that followed, represented by a blue bar. The rapture sounded terrifying to my ears—Christians disappearing from their cars when driving on busy freeways, resulting in multi-car pileups. I wondered if this was what the Bible taught.

Just after graduating from high school, I attended a Billy Graham Crusade in Denver, Colorado. I stood on the turf of Mile High Stadium next to my employer at the time, a wheelchair-bound woman who had special access to the stage due to her disability. *The Billy Graham* was merely feet away from me. Among the tens of thousands who attended, many streamed down from the stands to pray the sinner's prayer and convert. But even at the feet of Billy Graham, I did not find my new church home.

For my freshman year of college, I attended Seattle Pacific University, a Free Methodist school in Seattle, where I had to sign an agreement that I wouldn't smoke, drink, or dance while attending school. I didn't understand how dancing would negatively impact my spiritual life, but I signed it anyway.

One evening during the fall of my first semester, I attended a student Bible study. The leader talked about salvation in such a way that I seriously doubted if I could be saved, even though I believed the Gospel. After this Bible study, on the outside, my life looked like me attending classes, going to the campus church, and spending time with friends. But on the inside, I was in turmoil. I was

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reduced to basic questions: Who is God? What is His posture toward us? Is He loving or capricious? Does a confession of faith mean something or nothing?

After that, I thought back to my experiences in high school at the LCMS church with the bad volleyball and excellent Bible study and looked for an LCMS congregation nearby. Perhaps there, I would find some answers. So, I looked in a phone book (yes, it was that long ago) and found a nearby LCMS congregation, where I attended for several weeks.

Then, one Sunday morning in 1988, I sat by myself in a blonde-colored pew with the morning sun streaming through stained-glass windows. As the pastor preached his sermon, suddenly, everything became clearer to me. This was not a blinding “Road to Damascus” moment, or a miraculous event witnessing a statue of the Virgin Mary weeping, or a response to an emotional altar call. On that day, through that pastor’s voice, I heard the unfiltered, un-added-to Gospel for what felt like the first time. And what did he say?

- We are all sinners.
- But Jesus died, rose, and lives.
- And He did all of this for all of us—and for me.

It was just that simple. Later, I learned that the pastor was dying of cancer, which made the moment all the more poignant since I now know that God works through the poor and the small. Through this dying man’s voice in the remaining months of his earthly life, God spoke to me. Through these humble means—at a small church with an aging congregation, in an unassuming suburb, through an old man’s voice—God came to me as He comes to each one of us. He comes through the faithful words of an imperfect pastor, through the bread and wine of the Holy Supper, through the waters of baptism. Here, for me, was the Jesus, “who is before all things and in whom all things hold together” (Col. 1:17).

I decided to join this LCMS congregation because of the clarity of the Gospel I heard there. I met individually with the pastor for many weeks at the end of my freshman year in college. We discussed justification and atonement, the Christian life, the mercy of Christ, infant baptism, and holy Communion. And then came my confirmation day, just me among the saints at this little congregation.

As a new Lutheran, I still had many questions. But week by week, experiencing the Divine Service—where God serves me—my questions eased. I had found a spiritual home, hidden in the gracious, merciful embrace of Jesus, who daily forgives my sins. At my various Lutheran congregations over the years, I have heard the Gospel message proclaimed clearly and unapologetically. I am immensely grateful for the pastors and mentors who have taught and continue to be the voice of Jesus in my ears Sunday after Sunday. This includes my husband of 33 years, who has been my Bible teacher in addition to being my husband, father to my child, and my closest friend.

Over time, my faith has grown as I continue to find solace in the redemptive life. The Gospel of Christ has settled into my flesh and bones as the rhythm of the church year ebbs and flows, from Advent to Christmas to Lent to Easter to Pentecost. Each week, I take in the glint of the gold processional crucifix, the colors of the church year spread on the altar, and the flicker of candlelight. I see the chalice tipped toward me as the life-giving blood of Jesus and forgiveness flow into my mouth. I let the F-sharp, the last note of the Agnus Dei, linger in my throat as I am assured of that peace from the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. At Easter, I smell the sweet scent of lilies, trumpeting the glory of the resurrected Jesus. I feel the goose bumps on my arms lift as my small voice joins the congregation when we confess that God is our “Mighty Fortress” on Reformation Day. I confess the creeds full-throated. Through all of these experiences and many more, the incarnated body of Christ

is being formed in me as I am “filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Col. 1:9).

My journey to Lutheranism in my young adulthood connected me to the church of the ages, transcending time and space. My prayers echo those of Christians from Bethlehem to Constantinople to Athens to Dana Point, California. We Lutherans cling to our *solas* for good reason. Our *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura* point us to Christ alone since “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:18-19). Our worship connects these poor sinners in the pews to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the God who rescues us from sin, death, and the devil.

Through my small story, in a small corner of this small coffee shop where I sit and reflect on the embodied Christian life of this one child of God, I am reminded again that in Christ, through the unfiltered Gospel message, we find our true home, our refuge, our hiding place.



Julie Stiegemeier is a Lutheran pastor's wife, mother, author, teacher, and writing coach. She is a graduate of Concordia University Ann Arbor and Indiana-Purdue University in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She is the author of more than 20 books for children. She has taught English as a Second Language, composition, literature, and is currently mentoring graduate-level students on their writing. Learn more at: stiegemeierjulie.wordpress.com

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