

The Wired Word

Conspiracy Theorists Quoting the Bible

Sunday, September 6, 2020

Student Handout

Dear Class Member,

A movement called QAnon has been in the news lately, and if you know nothing about it, our next lesson can be an introduction. Unfortunately, QAnon is built on conspiracy theories, some of which are quite grotesque and possibly dangerous, and it sometimes masquerades under some aspects of Christianity. The purpose of this lesson is to remind ourselves of the Bible's unflinching loyalty to truth.

During this time of social distancing to control the spread of the virus, *The Wired Word* is including in the TWW student version the full lesson, with all the biblical commentary and additional discussion suggestions normally available only in the teacher's version.



QAnon Illustrates Frailty of Human Reasoning

The Wired Word for the Week of September 6, 2020

In the News

Have you noticed something called QAnon in the news lately? It's been labeled a conspiracy theory -- or perhaps a family of conspiracy theories -- and it fits that description. But what makes it a matter of concern to Christians is that it sometimes uses Bible quotes and other aspects of Christianity to support its bizarre claims. And it has risen to the level of news because more than a dozen people running for Congress as well as a few currently elected officials have expressed some degree of support for QAnon theories.

The basic theory QAnon touts is "that a secret cabal in government, the media, and other influential institutions is engaged in child sex trafficking, cannibalism of a sort, and the usual conspiracist bugbear of world domination and human sacrifice," explains Bonnie Kristian, a columnist at *Christianity Today*. One sub-theory alleges that there's footage of Hillary Clinton and her aide "ripping off a child's face and wearing it as a mask before drinking the child's blood in a Satanic ritual sacrifice," Kristian says.

Other conspiracy theories being promoted by and through QAnon, include that 5G radio waves are used for mind control, that Bill Gates is related to the devil, that masks can kill you and that the germ theory isn't real.

The movement began with an October 2017 post on the anonymous imageboard 4chan by "Q," who was presumably an American individual, but subsequent posts under that designation probably came from a group of people. Q claimed to have access to classified information involving the Trump administration and its opponents in the United States. NBC News found that three people took the original Q post and expanded it

across multiple media platforms to build internet followings. Others believe that it is part of Chinese and Russian efforts to spread social unrest in the United States by injecting narratives designed to increase distrust.

The original post predicted that Clinton would be arrested and massive riots would break out nationwide on October 30, 2017. But when no such things occurred, those who bought into the claim concluded not that the prediction was wrong but that the cabal interfered with it happening. With that kind of assumption by those already convinced, the failure of the strange predictions to occur does not hinder the growth of belief in and support for QAnon's "prophecies" or, as they are called within the movement, "drops."

"The cabal is QAnon's version of the Fall -- its explanation for what's wrong with our world" says Kristian. "Q is the movement's John the Baptist. Drops are its Scripture. And Trump is its messiah, ostensibly working at great personal cost to defeat the cabal and usher in a new age of American greatness," Kristian says, though there's no record of President Trump himself making that claim. His public comments about QAnon thus far have been limited to "I don't know much about the movement other than I understand they like me very much, which I appreciate," which he said during a White House press briefing in response to a question about the group.

QAnon's parallels to Christianity even include an apocalyptic prediction of a "storm" or "Great Awakening" in the future when all will be straightened out.

Writing in *Baptist News Global*, Bible teacher Aaron Coyle-Carr points out that part of the popularity of QAnon is that like all good lies, Q's narrative contains a dose of truth.

"Take, for example, Q's basic claim that there is a dedicated syndicate of elites running this country for their own gain," says Coyle-Carr. "There's plenty of room to interrogate the motives of our public officials, but it's relatively easy to see that power is concentrated in the hands of a few. Just two political families, the Bushes and the Clintons, have dominated American public life for an entire generation. Fourteen members of the House and Senate have served in the federal legislature for more than 35 years. And while wages stagnate and unemployment soars, American billionaires added \$637 billion to their wealth in the middle of a pandemic."

Coyle-Carr asks, "Is it an organized cabal with Satanic motivations?" Answering his own question, he says, "Almost certainly not. But it is an alarmingly unequal distribution of power."

He also mentions the fact that many people worldwide are trapped in human trafficking.

"This is not to say that Q is not lying about plenty of things, arguing in bad faith and making plenty of errors in judgment, logic and data analysis," Coyle-Carr says. "But it does suggest that we would be foolish to dismiss Q followers as an entire mass of unhinged lunatics. Their narrative taps into some dark truths about the nature of our democracy and attempts to address some of the deepest anxieties of the present age."

Nor are conspiracy theories confined to political fringes. The "Trump collusion with Russia" conspiracy dominated large media organizations for well over a year and was believed by millions -- and is still believed by some. Conspiracy narratives can be useful and attractive for those who *want* to believe them.

But like most conspiracy theories, QAnon's claims are distortions. Coyle-Carr calls them "loosely collected, far-ranging, bizarre and possibly dangerous."

And Kristian is even more direct: "QAnon is predatory drivel that undermines the authority of Scripture and pilfers trust we owe only to Christ. American Christians have a responsibility to learn to identify it -- and flee."

More on this story can be found at these links:

QAnon Is a Wolf in Wolf's Clothing. *Christianity Today*

(<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/august-web-only/qanon-is-wolf-in-wolfs-clothing.html>)

Is QAnon a Prophet or Provocateur? And How Should Christians Respond? *Baptist News Global*

(<https://baptistnews.com/article/is-qanon-a-prophet-or-provocateur-and-how-should-christians-respond/#.X0ztN8hKg2x>)

Evangelicals Are Looking for Answers Online. They're Finding QAnon

Instead. *MIT Technology Review*

(<https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/26/1007611/how-qanon-is-targeting-evangelicals/>)

Congregations for Conspiracy Theorists? *Bill's Faith Matters Blog*

(https://billtammeus.typepad.com/my_weblog/2020/08/8-26-20.html)

Applying the News Story

Despite how long the human race has been around, we don't fully understand why our reasoning ability can be so easily misled. Nor do we know why some of us seem to *need* to believe conspiracies, and others of us see truth as but one of several options for explaining why the world is as it is. We recognize that our emotions interplay with our reasoning and sometimes override it, but that recognition doesn't necessarily cause us to sort the two out. And why are some of us born skeptics while others of us are born believers?

TWW team member Bill Tammeus comments, "The insidious thing (well, one among many things) about such conspiracy theories is that there is no good way to argue against them because if you do that you become part of the conspiracy that is trying to keep the truth from being known. It's a vicious circle that, once again, reveals the fragility of human reason."

This lesson can't answer all those questions about human peculiarities, but it can remind us that the Bible indicates that the pursuit of truth can lead us to God. As Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

The Big Questions

1. When do you find it easier to believe something you've been told -- when lots of information about it is widely available, or when you get information you might not otherwise have but now have only because people passing it on claim to have insider knowledge? Why?
2. Is knowledge of absolute, objective truth -- at least regarding human interactions and relationships -- even possible? Or is truth always entangled in personal motivations and narratives that distort it, deliberately or not? How can we be assured that our knowledge of truth is "close enough" to be of value and to be distinguished from falsehood?
3. Have you ever accepted as true something you'd heard (or seen on the Internet) but later you became convinced that it was not true? If so, what changed your thinking?
4. What makes you inclined or disinclined to accept theories that claim that people or groups are colluding in hidden ways to produce a particular outcome? What impact does your faith in Christ have on your inclination or disinclination in that regard?

5. What is the essential difference between being a believer in Jesus and a believer in a conspiracy theory? Is it possible to be a believer in both, and what happens when the two beliefs clash?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 6:16-19

There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him:

*haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil,
a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.*

(For context, read 6:12-19.)

Proverbs 6:12-19 includes two poems (vv. 12-15 and 16-19) that together sketch the inside and outside of human evil. The first poem focuses on how bodily parts can be agents of wrongdoing, and the second poem, quoted in full above, focuses on the sins that spring from those agents.

Questions: Why do you think the verses above speak of God hating things that are an "abomination" to him? How might this biblical poem apply to the instigators of conspiracy theories -- who presumably know they are starting unfounded rumors?

Matthew 10:16 (NASB)

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. (For context read 10:5, 11-23.)

Jesus said this to the Twelve as he sent them out to carry the good news of the gospel to several towns of Israel. Paul Anleitner, a pastor in the Twin Cities, noted that one reason QAnon appeals to some Christians is because it can feel like a way to live out Jesus' instruction above, to "be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves." The problem, Anleitner says, "for followers of QAnon who are Christians is that they actually aren't being shrewd enough." For as the *Christianity Today* article headline reads, "QAnon is a wolf in wolf's clothing."

Questions: If Jesus were sending you out on a good-news mission, what instructions do you think he would give you in light of your personality, needs and placement on the skepticism-gullibility scale? What would Jesus warn you against? Explain your answer.

John 8:32

... and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. (For context, read 8:31-59, especially vv. 31-36.)

It is amazing how confrontational this exchange is between Jesus and those whom the gospel writer John describes as "the Jews who had believed in him." The harshness of the interaction is obviously not, then, being presented as rooted in a deep-seated animosity toward Jesus; rather, it seems to erupt from being confronted with difficult truths about oneself. Yet Jesus did not intend these truths to be harmful. As the focus verse makes clear, the intent was for this truth to free them from false impressions about themselves.

The truth is also freeing when it enables us to step away from unfounded claims.

By the way, in Christianity, truth is not a dogma or doctrine but, rather, a person, Christ Jesus.

Questions: What are some basic standards that help you establish fundamental truths? When has something truthful helped you abandon or reject an idea or assumption some others were passing along as "the real story"? How did you arrive at that truth?

Ephesians 4:25

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. (For context, read 4:25--5:2.)

This passage in Ephesians speaks to more aspects of human speech than just honesty. It enjoins Christians from "evil talk," which in this context is contrasted with speech that "is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear" (4:29). Notice that such truthful speech is limited according to the need, and that need is defined as the ability to edify rather than to tear down another (4:31). This requirement for truthfulness is grounded in the relationship we share as "members of one another." We owe others nothing more and nothing less than we would owe ourselves.

Questions: In what ways does the trust established through acts of kindness and forgiveness (4:32) help you to hear and evaluate claims about others? Does a person's normal practice of building up rather than tearing down others help you put that person's claims in perspective? Why or why not?

Does it help when you have a group you trust to help you arrive together at biblical truth? What is the result when there is a strong-willed individual in the group who insists a falsehood is true?

For Further Discussion

1. React to this, from the late Christian apologist, Ravi Zacharias: "If the truth does not survive, you may as well turn the lights out, because to somebody whose mind is bent towards deceit and a lie, the darkness becomes the light. ... truth is imperative, so critical in our times." We must demand truth from our political leaders, Zacharias said, and we ourselves must speak the truth, live by the truth, and model living by the truth. Only then will truth set us free.

2. Respond to this, from Aaron Coyle-Carr, quoted in the "In the News" section above. He writes, "Given all the lies, fraud and manipulation, is there anything that can be done to stop or at least reason with the Q[Anon] movement?"

"Tragically, in the opinions of many experts who study cults and conspiracy theories, the answer might be no. At least for those who consider themselves 'true believers,' normal methods of discourse have difficulty penetrating the layers of self-supporting argumentation that surround Q. For those in the deepest, the only way out might be their own disillusionment.

"But not everyone is a true believer. Plenty of people start out investigating Q cautiously, moved by its zeal for victims of human trafficking or intrigued by its claims to make sense of a senseless world. Those who are on the fence are the ones who have the best chance of being influenced away from Q and toward something better. But how?"

Coyle-Carr then offers three suggestions:

- "First, we have to be honest, faithful and compassionate dialogue partners. No one ever has been shamed or lectured into changing their mind. We can begin by acknowledging all the ways in which Q hits close to home. We can listen to anxious hearts with compassion. We can share resources that don't make our conversation partner feel demeaned.
- "Second, we can be wise. Refuting the specific claims made by Q or other conspiracy theorists is generally ineffective and should be avoided. We can also learn to recognize when someone is arguing in bad faith and refuse to waste our time and energy. We can use our resources to support good and ethical journalism, science and politics.
- "Finally, those of us who identify as Christians have an obligation to tell a better story. Christianity has the capability to speak compellingly about the problem of evil in the world, God's eschatological vision and humanity's role in both. We have to stop being afraid to talk about sin, the demonic, repentance, and yes, even apocalypse. Q's apocalyptic vision borrows many of our tropes, after all. It's high time we started using them ourselves."

3. When a conspiracy theory or cult hijacks an actual issue such as human trafficking, how, if at all, might that affect the attention given to addressing the real issue?

4. Evaluate this statement: "Truth can't be absolutely known" does not mean that "nothing is true," although it is often taken that way.

5. Discuss this from TWW consultant James Gruetzner: "I first heard of QAnon a few days ago from a coworker. He finds it 'entertaining' and off-the-wall in a dark way, similar to some anime and horror literature. He knows at least one person, however, who does believe some of the stuff QAnon puts out, but to him it is obviously humorous. He also believes that most of the QAnon posters know they are writing fiction, and that a fair number are from outside the United States. (This is not his own 'conspiracy theory,' but the impression he's gained from reading it for awhile.) My real wonder is: Why is this making national news? It is at most a small and fringe group involved." [Editor's comment: It is making national news because some political candidates and a few elected officials have espoused support for some of QAnon's ideas. It is now also present in Germany and is making international news.]

6. Discuss the following: The Christian satire new site *The Babylon Bee* (<https://babylonbee.com>) prominently advertises and displays that it is a satire site -- yet at times people believe their stories. That probably reflects what a person wants to believe: If a person is for or against President Trump or Sen. Biden, then that person is primed to believe a story in accord with that disposition. However, some of its satire this year has come so close [to reality], that people jokingly call it "America's newspaper of record." To top it off, so much actual news would be considered satire a few years ago. *The Babylon Bee* just started a new site, *Not the Bee*, <https://notthebee.com> (<https://notthebee.com>), showcasing straight-up stories which one would hope had been satire.

Responding to the News

Make a commitment to vet, to the extent possible, the truth of things you hear and read (especially online) before passing them along to others. One way to do this is to be sure the source is balanced in its presentation of ideas, and well respected in its area of knowledge. Another way is to look for corroboration of the stories or information in other reliable sources.

If your own pastor has not, from the pulpit, said anything about the QAnon phenomenon and danger, now would be a good time to encourage him or her to help educate the congregation about it.

Prayer

O God, you sent your Son into the world to be for us "the way, the truth, and the life." Through his example and the scriptures we learn both the necessity and the complexity of truthfulness in our relationships with you, others and with ourselves. Help us to be open to the fullness of truth, even when the consequences may be difficult. Grant us wisdom to discern when the "whole truth" is not being told. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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