

Fake news, conspiracy theories and the End Times – SUMMARY

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We Christians need to be doubly on the alert, carefully checking the main news but also carefully approaching criticisms of the main news, including claims of prophetic revelations about fake news and claims of prophetic discernment of sinister conspiracies.

DECEPTION, INCLUDING OF BELIEVERS, IS A SIGN OF THE END TIMES

Jesus warns that deception is a prominent aspect of the End Times. He said to the disciples “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, “I am the Messiah,” and will deceive many” (Matt 24:4-5). He added “At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people” (Matt 24:10-11). He warns “At that time if anyone says to you, “Look, here is the Messiah!” or, “There he is!” do not believe it. **For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.** See, I have told you in advance.” (Matt 24:23-25).

Paul warns of the deception of the lawless one (the Antichrist) which will come about through positive signs and wonders and displays of power. “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie” (2 Thess 2:9). These good signs and wonders will give the false impression that the Antichrist is a good person.

ALL PROPHECIES SHOULD BE TESTED BY EXPERIENCED CHRISTIANS

Paul says that all prophecies should be tested by those who have the gift of prophecy to check that it is not false – “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said” (1 Cor 14:29). They can also be tested by Christian church leaders.

Sadly, there have been numerous “prophets” in the modern church who have greatly influenced many Christians. Only to be found to be false prophets.

The real issue is End Time deception, including of believers. Sincere, committed Christians can be led astray.

FAKE NEWS AND FALSE CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE AN ANTICHRIST TREND

Fake news and conspiracy theories often have the effect of undermining people’s trust in politicians and other influential individuals or groups in the world. There seems to be a widespread disillusionment with politicians in today’s world. Sometimes it is clearly deserved.

I have had several Christians contact me recently giving strong support to Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin and saying that the very serious criticisms of such people are actually fake news. I believe they are misled. In the main article I list a considerable amount of evidence which shows that Trump and Putin are dishonourable men.

WE NEED TO RECOGNISE THE OTHER DANGERS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES/FAKE NEWS

It is obvious that fake news endangers genuine news, not only by contradicting it but also by undermining trust in the media. The media doesn’t always get things right. But there is a high degree of reliability in some of the better newspapers and organisations like the BBC. And we need to be reliably informed of what is going on in the world so that we can pray intelligently and so we can seek to understand what God is doing in our world.

Similarly, false conspiracy theories can not only mislead us but can cause us to miss genuine conspiracies.

So, we need to look critically at current conspiracy theories and fake news, asking searching questions about the evidence and the validity of the conclusions drawn).

HOW DO WE AVOID BEING DECEIVED BY THE MEDIA AND BY “PROPHECY”?

1. We should avoid jumping to conclusions.

2. We should pray seriously for discernment (Jas 1:5).
3. We should check if the message is biblical.
4. We should note the reaction of spiritually-mature Christian leaders to the prophecy.
5. In the case of a prophecy about a news item, we should check out different news sources, not rely on just one.
6. We should seek reliable evidence for the theory.
7. We should try to check the motives of the person responsible for the conspiracy theory.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOOSING THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

I have mentioned some serious criticisms of Donald Trump, but I also strongly oppose Jo Biden's support for liberal abortion. This illustrates the point that political voting is normally choosing the lesser of two evils. No politician is perfect. So we have to vote for the good in a person, weighing up the seriousness of their faults.

It is vital that we vote for democracy, rather than for someone who will lead us – officially or de facto – towards dictatorship. We have not only seen such trends in Trump and Putin but, on a lesser level, with Boris Johnson who has been accused of undermining democracy in various ways. Other political leaders are similarly open to criticism.

We have to follow the principle of supporting the good and strongly opposing the bad. Often good things have the potential to turn bad. For example, we need international cooperation for peace, to combat pandemics and to deal with global warming. These are good factors. But some Christians oppose the UN, World Health Organisation, Paris Climate Agreement because of their potential for moving towards oppression and world government. But we should not throw out the good with the bad. We need to strongly support the good but strongly reject the bad. We live in a global village.

A blanket opposition to political leaders who have some bad policies is undiscerning. A blanket support for political leaders who oppose those with bad policies is undiscerning. We must carefully examine the credibility and moral honour of the former, as well as the latter. We must weigh up the evils and choose the lesser of two evils.

[I also list numerous conspiracy theories in an appendix to the main article]

Fake news, conspiracy theories and the End Times – MAIN ARTICLE

One of the prominent characteristics of modern society, with its extensive electronic communication, is the prevalence of fake news and false conspiracy theories. We Christians need to be doubly on the alert, carefully checking the main news but also carefully approaching criticisms of the main news, including claims of prophetic revelations about fake news and claims of prophetic discernment of sinister conspiracies. Jesus told us to test the prophets and we will return to that.

Deception, including of believers, is a sign of the End Times

It is important to remember that Jesus warns that deception is a prominent aspect of the End Times. He said to the disciples "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, "I am the Messiah," and will deceive many" (Matt 24:4-5). He added "At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people" (Matt 24:10-11). He warns "At that time if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Messiah!" or, "There he is!" do not believe it. ***For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.*** See, I have told you in advance." (Matt 24:23-25).

Paul warns of the deception of the lawless one (the Antichrist) which will come about through positive signs and wonders and displays of power. "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie" (2 Thess 2:9). These good signs and

wonders will give the false impression that the Antichrist is a good person. The Antichrist's deception is further described in Rev 13:11-14. (The NT warns about false prophets on several other occasions Matt 7:15; 2 Pete 2:1; 1 Jn 4:1)

All prophecies should be tested by experienced Christians

Paul says that all prophecies should be tested by those who have the gift of prophecy to check that it is not false – “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said” (1 Cor 14:29). They can also be tested by Christian church leaders. It is very unwise, and contrary to NT teaching, simply to accept a prophecy, especially on an important and controversial subject.

Sadly, there have been numerous “prophets” in the modern church who have greatly influenced many Christians. Only to be found to be false prophets. We need to bear this in mind in dealing with claims of prophetic insights, including about political leaders.

The real issue is End Time deception, including of believers. Sincere, committed Christians can be led astray.

Fake news and false conspiracy theories are an antichrist trend

For a long time there has been false propaganda in the world. But modern media make such deceit much more effective and widespread. We have already noted that the coming of the Antichrist will be in the context of deception. And 1 John 4:3 points out that the spirit of antichrist was in the world in NT times and that there were many antichrists in the world at that time (1 Jn 2:18). It is clear that this is still the case today, but there will be one ultimate fulfilment.

Fake news and conspiracy theories often have the effect of undermining people's trust in politicians and other influential individuals or groups in the world. There seems to be a widespread disillusionment with politicians in today's world. Sometimes it is clearly deserved. Many British people have a low opinion of Boris Johnson and feel he undermined moral values in Westminster. Some of his colleagues also fell into immoral behaviour. The fact that many Conservative Party politicians supported him staying in office brought further disrespect for the political establishment. This is all understandable. But it raises other serious issues, for example disillusionment with democracy and an openness to strong men with charismatic personalities taking over.

Critics of political leaders often point towards alternative leaders who are deemed to be very good people. But these “good people” can sometimes be megalomaniacs who use fake news and conspiracy theories about other people to glorify their own credibility. They can also claim that criticisms of themselves are fake news or conspiracy theories. The potential for the Antichrist to use this to obtain major support and come into leadership is clear.

I have had several Christians contact me recently giving strong support to Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin and saying that the very serious criticisms of such people are actually fake news. They also make very strong criticisms of those who oppose such people. I believe they are misled.

Donald Trump

Donald Trump claims that the 2020 election was stolen from him by dishonest vote-counting. This has led him to bring some 60 lawsuits alleging election fraud and other irregularities, all of which have been dismissed as without evidence by state and federal judges (some of which were appointed by Trump). Also many of his colleagues have dismissed the idea that the election was stolen from him. Very significantly, Trump's daughter Ivanka has stated the election was not stolen from him. All of this surely proves beyond reasonable doubt the election was not stolen from Trump.

Yet there are many people, including many Evangelical Christians in the US, who still firmly believe that the election was stolen from him. This is very disturbing, given what we have said above about deceit bringing the Antichrist to power. (Just to be clear, I am not saying Trump is the Antichrist!).

The flip side of this is that many of these Trump supporters strongly condemn President Biden. Let me say immediately that I strongly condemn, for example, Biden's apparent support for abortion on demand. Abortion kills babies and such an evil is only justified to prevent a greater evil – such as the death of the mother. But, again, in choosing between political leaders, all of whom are imperfect, we have to carefully consider which is the lesser of two evils.

We need to take seriously that Trump is accused of a great deal of bad behaviour (in addition to his claims about a stolen election):

- We have seen Trump acting in a bullying way many times in public. I don't want to be cynical but my question is whether Trump's pro-Christian words and actions have been because he relied on the support of Christians, especially Evangelical Christians. The Pope, without identifying the US or Trump by name said: "Today, listening to some of the populist leaders we now have, I am reminded of the 1930s, when some democracies collapsed into dictatorships seemingly overnight. We see it happening again now in rallies where populist leaders excite and harangue crowds, channelling their resentments and hatreds against imagined enemies to distract from the real problems. People fall prey to such rhetoric out of fear, not true religious conviction." I think this is true of Trump.
- The Washington Post's Fact Checker claims he made he made 16,241 false or misleading claims during his first three years in office. It added that the president averaged more than 22 false or misleading claims a day in 2019.
- He is accused of hate speech about Muslims and in 2016 the UK Parliament debated whether to ban him from visiting the UK because of this.
- The U.S. Justice Department filed a lawsuit against the Trump organization for discriminating against African Americans. The case was settled out of court.
- 24 women have accused Donald Trump of inappropriate sexual behaviour in several incidents over the last 30 years. A 2005 video showed Trump bragging about how he could just start kissing attractive women and grabbing them in a sexual way just because he was famous. His first marriage ended because he had a long affair with actress Marla Maples.
- He was a Reality Show host and such shows pander to the low instincts of their audiences.
- Trump has been sued many times by his business partners, contractors, clients, employees, and banks. He once ran the Donald J. Trump Foundation established in 1988, but it was shut down by the NY State Attorney General's office in 2013 for multiple violations.
- He has undermined action about global warming and Medicare for all and gun control.
- He incited the January 6th attack on the Capitol, the very heart of US democracy. Some of the evidence coming out in the hearings in America about Trump's behaviour on that day is appalling.

Yes, he has indirectly brought about a reversal of the US position on abortion, and he did show a very positive attitude towards Israel (which many Christians would support). But should Christians really give support to a man with the above faults becoming President of the US?

Vladimir Putin

Another example of fake news is the defence and support some Christians give to Putin. This is despite the fact that it is quite clear that Putin has invaded a neighbouring country in order to gain territory, with the result that many people are killed, including a large number of innocent civilians. All of that is beyond reasonable doubt. There is overwhelming media evidence of these deaths. "Prophetic" defences of Putin are not credible. The fact that Christians believe such "prophetic" views shows the power of the spiritual deception in our world. It is beyond belief that thousands of media reporters from many countries would be conspiring together to put out fake news about Putin

There are other negative facts about Putin. There was great freedom in Russia after the collapse of the USSR. The West initially welcomed Putin becoming President. But Putin has presided over an undermining of democracy, and reversion to there being no independent media. There have also been serious accusations of corruption against him.

In July 2021 Putin published an article which states that Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians should be in one Russian nation. In February 2022 Putin gave a speech in which he said he would not occupy any Ukrainian territory and added "We are not going to impose anything on anyone by force." Then he invaded Ukraine, after which Leonid Ivashov, a retired Russian Colonel-General and the chairman of the All-Russian Officers Assembly, publicly called for Putin to resign over threats of a "criminal" invasion of Ukraine. These points are well-documented.

It is clear that he is seeking to restore Russian territories and the 'glory' of Russia, which involves invasion, war and the killing of many people, including innocent civilians and children.

We need to recognise the other dangers of conspiracy theories/fake news

It is obvious that fake news endangers genuine news, not only by contradicting it but also by undermining trust in the media. I'm not saying that the media always get things right. But there is a high degree of reliability in some of the better newspapers and organisations like the BBC. And we need to be reliably informed of what is going on in the world so that we can pray intelligently and so we can seek to understand what God is doing in our world.

Similarly, false conspiracy theories can not only mislead us but can cause us to miss genuine conspiracies. I say more about this below. And there will be some very important conspiracies in the future, which Christians will need to recognise. For example, I believe in the reality of the coming Antichrist and in the 'mark of the beast' (although I don't know what form the 'mark' will take). We will need real discernment over these End Time issues.

One of the main callings I believe God has given me is to encourage Christians to take the Bible teaching on the End Times seriously. After all, Jesus made it very clear that we should be recognising the 'signs of the times' – signs that we are moving towards the End Times. Some of the early signs are repeated (like signs on a motorway). But later signs include one-off events.

There are various responses to this idea of watching for the signs of the times. Some Christians go overboard and can even become as naïve as some of the conspiracy theory people. We need to avoid that. Others are either cynical or threatened by the subject so they avoid it. That is sad because it means they are not doing what Jesus said we should be doing. A third group seek to take a careful approach to recognising the Signs of the Times. They look for reliable evidence and prayerfully weigh it up before drawing conclusions.

The current conspiracy theories and fake news can influence the first group, causing them to accept the false ideas. Just as serious, the current conspiracy theories and fake news can encourage the second group to be even more cynical and become even more distant from Jesus' teaching that we should seek to recognise the Signs of the Times.

So, we need to look critically at current conspiracy theories and fake news. (By critically, I don't mean being negative and cynical but being very careful and asking searching questions about the evidence and the validity of the conclusions drawn).

How do we avoid being deceived by the media and by "prophecy"?

I write as someone who believes God does give important prophetic messages and that they should be taken seriously. But, as stated above, we need to test them. How do we do that?

8. We should avoid jumping to conclusions.
9. We should pray seriously for discernment. The Lord promises "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" (Jas 1:5). Seek that wisdom seriously. But remember that God often uses means to communicate with us. He doesn't always communicate directly and immediately to the person praying. One of the main means is fellowship. Seek to pray with others and to consult Christian leaders or other mature Christians. That is one of the main ways God speaks to us.
10. We should check if the message is biblical. We may need help from Christian leaders for this.
11. We should note the reaction of spiritually-mature Christian leaders to the prophecy.
12. In the case of a prophecy about a news item, we should check out different news sources, not rely on just one.

I regularly read or watch numerous news sources – secular and Christian - from different political backgrounds (Two daily papers, two TV news channels; five other daily news sources - some of them Christian - and six weekly news sources – some of them Christian). I want to gain as accurate a picture as possible of what is going on in the world. I take a similar approach to writing about the situation in Israel. Having lived and ministered in Israel, I have a website about the Israeli-Palestinian situation. I believe the re-establishment of Israel is a (partial) fulfilment of prophecy, but I am concerned for Palestinian welfare. I read one daily Israeli newspaper and a daily

Christian (Messianic) news magazine. But I also read three regular newsletters which are critical of Israel. I believe this is the right (Christian) approach rather than simply reading sources I agree with, swallowing biased opinions, let alone accepting fake news. This is the principle of having two or three witnesses to establish the truth of an issue (Jn 8:17-18; 2 Cor 13:1, etc).

13. We should seek reliable evidence for the theory.

14. We should try to check the motives of the person responsible for the conspiracy theory. For example, it is not difficult to imagine the motives for the conspiracy theory that Joe Biden supporters fixed the US election (despite a dozen or so judges dismissing the Trump lawsuits in various states on the issue because of lack of evidence). If the person conveying any theory has a personal interest in doing so, that should make us doubly critical of the theory.

The importance of choosing the lesser of two evils

I have mentioned some serious criticisms of Donald Trump, but I have also mentioned two very serious criticism of Joe Biden, his support for liberal abortion and LGBTQ rights. This illustrates the point that political voting is normally choosing the lesser of two evils. No politician is perfect. So we have to vote for the good in a person, weighing up the seriousness of their faults. I follow this approach. I am a floating voter and have voted for 4 different parties in fairly recent years.

It is vital that we vote for democracy, rather than for someone who will lead us – officially or de facto – towards dictatorship. We have not only seen such trends in Trump and Putin but, on a lesser level with Boris Johnson who has been accused of undermining democracy in various ways. Other political leaders are similarly open to criticism.

We have to follow the principle of supporting the good and strongly opposing the bad. Often good things have the potential to turn bad. For example, we need international cooperation for peace, to combat pandemics and to deal with global warming. These are good factors. But some Christians oppose the UN, World Health Organisation, Paris Climate Agreement because of their potential for moving towards oppression and world government. But we should not throw out the good with the bad. We need to strongly support the good but strongly reject the bad. We live in a global village.

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Appendix: Other conspiracy theories

THOSE PROMOTED BY TRUMP

- That everyone should read a letter sent to Trump by retired Cardinal Archbishop Vigano saying he believes there is a great secret global plan called “the Great Reset” organised by a global elite. He believes government actions over the pandemic are being used as “instrumental to the establishment of an inhuman faceless tyranny” and that the Covid pandemic is being overstated by political leaders. It is a health dictatorship.
- That predominantly white countries are promoting immigration, integration, low fertility rates and abortion in such a way as to turn white people into a minority (“White Genocide”).
- That vaccines cause autism. This theory has caused increased rates of infection and death from diseases such as measles in many countries.
- That the noise from wind farms can cause cancer.
- That Climate Change is not caused by human activity
 - That “global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.”
- That Barack Obama was not born in the US (and so shouldn’t have been President) and is secretly a Muslim.

THEORIES NOT PROMOTED BY TRUMP

There are many other conspiracy theories that Trump did not refer to. Some of them are bizarre but they are established theories:

- That pharmaceutical companies assist in the creation of diseases (almost 50% of Americans are said to believe that).
- That water fluoridation is a communist plot to weaken the US population.
- That accounts of the Holocaust are untrue and were created to advance the interests of Jewish people and to justify the re-establishment of the State of Israel.
- That the US Moon landings were not real but staged by NASA in a film studio.

- That there is a secret underground city beneath Denver International Airport which is headquarters of the New World Order, an organisation seeking to take over the world.
- That UK Prime Minister Harold Wilson was secretly a KGB spy.
- That the 9/11 attacks were controlled demolitions.
- That Bill and Hilary Clinton have assassinated 50 or more of their associates.
- That Paul McCartney died in a car accident in 1966 and was replaced by a look-alike.
- Elvis Presley's death was faked.
- Adolf Hitler survived the Second World War and fled to the Americas or Antarctica.
- That the Bush family, Margaret Thatcher, Bob Hope and the British Royal Family have been under the control of alien reptiles (or even were alien reptiles). This is propounded by British conspiracy theorist David Icke.
- The earth is flat, not round, but the evidence is repressed by organisations like NASA and Global Positioning Systems.
- There is also the weird Q'Anon theory.

Conspiracy Theories are not new. In 68AD the Roman Emperor Nero committed suicide but theories circulated that this was a fake and he was still alive. Some Christians believed this and were afraid he would return to persecute them (he had been a vicious persecutor). So, obviously, there have been many conspiracy theories and fake news theories in times past, but modern media with its rapid circulation of views has turned it into a serious threat.