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ARTICLES

Dealing With Conspiracy Theories

By Frank M. Hasel

Conspiracy theories seem to be flowering these days and have become the focus of much public attention. While conspiracy theories have always thrived during times of crisis and upheaval,¹ they now seem to be all-pervasive in large segments of society² and even in some quarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It also looks as if conspiracy theories have become more socially accepted today than ever before.³ In light of the fact that some 50% of the American population believe in at least one conspiracy theory, chances are high that we will be confronted with this phenomenon in one way or another.⁴ This calls for discernment and prudence. If we are inclined to such thinking, we are probably tempted to see ourselves as reflecting a healthy and natural skepticism—particularly directed toward the common interpretation by the powers that be in a given society, social context, or what is disseminated by mainstream media.⁵ Sometimes this skepticism is also directed toward the established findings of science.⁶ Hence, proponents offer alternative and often counterintuitive hypotheses to explain the events of the world. We might even wonder why everyone else seems so blind and deceived. On the other hand, if we are more hesitant about conspiracy thinking, we might be tempted to see followers of such theories in not so positive a light and may even have the impression that some of them are paranoid in their suspicion and fear.⁷ The danger we face, then, is using the phrase “conspiracy theory” in a derogatory sense to discredit people and their ideas as unscientific and flimsy. With this more negative view of people who espouse conspiracy theories, we might think that they never trust anything—or rather, only trust those claims

that fit their preexisting worldview and perspective.⁸ But perhaps even more crucial is the question of what we can do when we notice these preconceptions in our own thinking and how we relate to each other when we are faced with such thinking. To tackle this issue, we must first understand the difference between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories.⁹

How Does a Conspiracy Differ From a Conspiracy Theory?

The essential meaning of a conspiracy is “a secret plan made by two or more people to do something that is harmful or illegal.”¹⁰ The English word “conspiracy” is derived from the Latin verb *conspiro/conspirare* and means “to plot/unite,” “to act in unison,”¹¹ or “to act in accordance with someone.”¹² A conspiracy, therefore, is never the work of one individual, but always of a group, whether small or large.¹³ But here we encounter a conundrum: actual conspiracies do exist.¹⁴ So how do we differentiate between genuine conspiracies and those plots that we usually associate with conspiracy theories? One difference is that in a conspiracy theory a conspiracy no longer must be proven but has become the basic prerequisite for one’s further explanations and thinking.¹⁵ When we no longer carefully evaluate various hypotheses and probabilities, but instead our suspicion and doubts have become an ideology where no supervisory authority is trusted anymore, a threshold has been crossed.¹⁶ The fact that politicians sometimes lie and corporations at times cheat does not mean every event is the result of tortuous conspiracy. Another difference between real conspiracies and a conspiracy theory is that actual conspiracies are

deliberately hidden, real-life actions of people working together for their own malign purposes. Conspiracy theories, in contrast, are deliberately complex and reflect an all-encompassing worldview. Instead of trying to explain one thing, a conspiracy theory attempts to explain everything, discovering connections across domains of human interaction that are otherwise hidden.¹⁷ In doing so, conspiracy theories often oversimplify world events in order to find a scapegoat or an explanation for events that otherwise appear unexplainable or threatening. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of proven conspiracies are relatively short-term projects, whereas conspiracy theories almost always posit a much larger timeframe where not just one offence but a whole series of crimes over a period of years, decades, and even centuries is proposed, often on a global scale. Real conspiracies are usually the work of a small group of people, whereas conspiracy theories involve scenarios where at least dozens, but usually far more, people are involved. A gigantic deception like the staging of the moon landing or the 9/11 attacks would require hundreds, if not thousands, of insiders and accessories. But the large number of insiders that would be necessary for such a complex plot militates against the reality of their existence because it is virtually impossible to keep the activity of such a large group secret.¹⁸ We also must keep in mind that historical events are complex sets of facts. The world as we know it is made up of an extremely large number of interacting agents, each of whom has their own set of goals and agendas. This poses a significant problem for conspiracy theories where large-scale plots are presumed. For a conspiracy to be successful, all parties would have to set aside their own interests and devote themselves entirely to the service of such a global conspiracy. However, that different groups all act in concert is something that is very unlikely, if not impossible.¹⁹ For this to happen, one must assume that human beings can direct the course of history according to their own intentions by linking together disparate phenomena defying all probability.²⁰ In other words, for conspiracy theories to succeed one must assume that history is plannable. We have to keep in mind, however, what philosopher Karl Popper has aptly argued—namely, that the relevant question when explaining dramatic historical events is not “Who wanted something to happen?” but “Why did things not happen exactly in the way that somebody wanted?”²¹

While there seems to be no single definition of what a conspiracy theory is, one expert lists the following three basic criteria that are characteristic: 1) nothing happens by accident, 2) nothing is as it seems, and 3) everything is connected.²² Wherever these three elements are present, a conspiracy theory is at work that asserts the existence of a plot. This leads us to the question of why some Christians seem to be so attracted to conspiracy theories.

Why Are Some Christians Susceptible to Conspiracy Theories?

If conspiracy theories encompass the three aspects previously mentioned, one can see why some conservative Christians could easily be seen as being potentially receptive to conspiracy thinking.²³ Seventh-day Adventists and Bible-believing Christians accept the existence of supernatural forces and realities, be they evil (Satan and demons) or good (God and His angels)²⁴—something that more liberal theologians and people who accept a naturalistic worldview²⁵ would deny.²⁶ In many conspiracy theories there is a stark contrast between good and evil forces that almost has a dualistic character.²⁷ According to the Bible, forces between good and evil exist and are at work in this world. They influence kings and political leaders (Rev 13:12–17; 17:2). But we must keep in mind that Jesus never told His followers to be concerned with “secret” events or conspiracies. Jesus called us to be watchful (e.g., Matt 24:42; 25:13; 26:41). Interestingly, all the events Jesus pointed to as signs of the times for His coming were observable. We do not have to guess or speculate about them. And we should not be troubled by rumors (Matt 24:6). The Bible reports various real conspiracies that took place during biblical times, where a few people conspired together to accomplish some of their plans.²⁸ In conspiracy theories, however, there is a tendency to link disparate phenomena and connect them in such a way that a grand plot emerges where nothing happens by accident.²⁹ Perhaps another reason why some Christians are receptive to such grand conspiracy theories is that in their thinking events are divinely predetermined and do not happen by accident. This is even more so for some conservative Christians who are influenced by Calvinistic theology. Calvin proposed that everything in the spiritual realm is predestined by God.³⁰ This led Calvin to propose his infamous concept of double predestination, where God predestined from eternity not only those who would be saved, but also those who would be eternally condemned.³¹ Such an all-encompassing understanding of predestination can easily lead people to believe that everything in this world is interconnected, and that everything follows a secret predestined divine plan.

While there is biblical truth to the fact that God knows the future and is in control of world events,³² and while the Bible acknowledges that there is a great controversy between God and Satan and his evil forces, we must be mindful of some other important biblical perspectives that are equally present in Scripture. Otherwise, we will distort the biblical teaching—and, by implication, also the character of God and reality. First, the Bible also teaches that there is genuine human freedom, which Calvin and Luther denied when it comes to matters of our salvation. Seventh-day Adventists believe that biblically speaking, we are sufficiently free to choose whether we want to accept

God's salvation or not and hence we are responsible for our decisions. Furthermore, according to the Bible, not everything in this world is predetermined. We must take into consideration that sometimes humans do plain stupid things. If there is original sin, then there also exists original stupidity. Otherwise, the existence of sin would have a reason and thus be excusable. We must allow for stupid and accidental things to happen in the course of history. Some of the bad things that happen are not planned. They happen unintentionally. The Bible affirms that some things happen accidentally.³³ In other words, in this world many things happen that are not planned, and not all of our plans always work out as intended.

But God's plan to save us will work out and will be successful in the end, the Bible tells us! It is important, therefore, to remember that the Bible, when it speaks about the great controversy between good and evil, always has God's salvific perspective in mind that focuses on the success of God's ultimate salvation for us. The biblical writers are aware of Satan's schemes (Eph 2:2) and his deceptive practices³⁴ and they warn us to be alert. But the clear focus of the biblical writers is on God's grace and power to save us and on Jesus Christ as the victor in the controversy between light and darkness. Jesus is the cornerstone of our salvation. Especially the prophetic information in the apocalyptic books of the Bible focuses on Jesus' victory over sin amidst all the intricacies of the evil powers who are at work in this world. Yes, evil forces exist, but when we invent all kinds of conspiracy theories and focus our attention on those negative schemes, we veer off in our focus. Our focus should be on the mighty God of Scripture, who is powerful to save and who is utterly capable of delivering us from sin and evil. Our trust should be in God—not in our knowledge of secret conspiracies. Our knowledge of conspiracies and their secret plots will not save us. Only God saves. And despite all that God has revealed to us about the future and the time of the end, we know there will still be an element of surprise in what will happen (Matt 24:44).³⁵ As the prophet Habakkuk indicates about God's declaration of action in our behalf, "I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you" (Hab 1:5, NJKV). So, let us remember that the Bible tells us that the righteous will live by his faith (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17), not by his knowledge of large-scale conspiracies. Therefore, let us be people who are aware and alert, but not afraid. This leads us to the question of why so many people are so fascinated by conspiracy theories.

Why Are People Fascinated by Conspiracy Theories?

There are various reasons why conspiracy theories are appealing to some people. We will briefly look at a few reasons that might play a role in why conspiracy theories are attractive to certain people.³⁶

Conspiracy Theories Claim to Bring to Light the Truth

Conspiracy theories claim to pursue the truth of a certain matter and declare that they reveal the true hidden plot of a story. We all want to know the truth as it really is. Nobody likes to be deceived by others. It seems that many are inclined to conspiracy theories because people have a genuine desire to follow the truth, even if it is unpopular in the eyes of the majority or it goes against the grain of an established position. When people believe that masses have been fooled by the government, or the media, or science, it is understandable that they want to follow the truth instead. We have to be careful, however, that in our search for truth we do not end up just accepting things that fit our preferred thinking, but rather that we remain open to carefully listening to alternative interpretations and explanations and honestly deal with the available evidence.³⁷ Unfortunately, many conspiracy theories have gradually become self-isolating echo chambers—especially on social media, where only those ideas are entertained that fit our preconceived convictions and opinions. When they become self-perpetuating rationalizing endeavors, every piece of contradictory evidence becomes part of the conspiracy and people are no longer interested in pursuing truth, but rather only trying to confirm their preconceived opinions among people who share the same outlook. Such "confirmation bias," however, will only expand the scope of our deception.

Conspiracy Theories Give a Sense of Security and Make Us Feel Special

Conspiracy theories allow people to gain a coherent and consistent understanding of the world. They thus help to meet the desire in all of us to be secure and in control. Especially when we are anxious and feel powerless, we are more likely to subscribe to conspiracy theories³⁸ that give the impression of providing answers to inscrutable events. To explain the otherwise unknown gives us a sense of security. When we think that we know the course of events, we feel safe and assume that we are more in control.³⁹ For many people this is more attractive than having to live with inscrutable events or a future that is not known in all its details. We human beings do not like to live with unanswered questions, especially if they pertain to significant aspects of our lives and human existence. We all have a hard time living with random events. Most people dislike chaotic circumstances. No one can live in constant ambiguity. The idea that we are at the mercy of forces we do not fully understand or comprehend and that we are subject to powers outside of our control is frightening. We want to know who did it, and how it was done. We feel a sense of safety when we recognize a familiar pattern, because our intelligence, given by God, is a pattern-seeking intelligence.⁴⁰ To discern patterns helps us to construct stories that make sense and give meaning to the world

around us.⁴¹ Conspiracy theories, however, hijack this human ability and link loosely connected events into something semi-coherent that makes sense, thus providing context and meaning to events that otherwise frighten us. In the words of Christian writer D. L. Mayfield, “people believe conspiracy theories because it is psychologically easier to believe a singular and unlikely narrative rather than engage in a hard and complicated reality where our long-term participation is needed.”⁴² The irony in this is that the far-reaching effects of a conspiracy theory often are far more frightening than the event the conspiracy theory tries to explain.⁴³

Conspiracy Theories Can Make Our Reality Seem More Exciting

Another reason why conspiracy theories are so popular is that most everybody likes a good conspiracy thriller. Government bureaucracy appears rather boring compared to conspiracy theories that have a much more entertaining appeal. Decoding secret messages, connecting dots, and assembling pieces of information into a coherent narrative can become a lifelong scavenger hunt that brings purpose and urgency to the mundanity of our daily lives.

While the previously mentioned reasons are not an exhaustive list why conspiracy theories are so widespread, they are indicators why they are so popular. It is interesting that the internet also plays a significant role in the spreading of conspiracy theories. We will therefore briefly look at this important factor.

The Role of the Internet

It has been pointed out that “contemporary media represents a particularly fertile ground for conspiracy theories.”⁴⁴ Conspiracy theories do not merely lurk around on obscure websites. When one starts looking for them, they seem to be everywhere.⁴⁵ While the internet is not solely responsible for the spread of conspiracy theories,⁴⁶ the large reach of the internet has some noteworthy impact, because it makes conspiracy theories more easily available to large groups of people.⁴⁷ It is no surprise that on social media conspiracy theories have found a welcome home. Today many forums are free from moderation and expert screening and allow like-minded people to converse and spread their private opinion in an expert-like manner. This has led to what some have called a “death of expertise,” where the surplus of data and sheer unlimited information has actually made many of us dumber.⁴⁸ The credo of a fair number of people today is that each person’s opinion about anything must be accepted as equal to anyone else’s.⁴⁹ Furthermore, today’s information ecosystem has drastically changed the ways in which information, as well as mis- and disinformation⁵⁰ are produced, disseminated, and consumed.⁵¹ Not only is information much more readily accessible with greater

ease and speed, but the internet has also made it easier to question the narratives presented by official media and politicians.⁵² Before the internet existed, conspiracy theorists had very limited opportunities to communicate as a group. They normally could get in touch with each other via phone or letter or meet in person occasionally. Today they can daily stay in contact with each other in virtual communities as online groups, regardless of national boundaries.⁵³ Furthermore, whereas in the past editors would have filtered out what they deemed nonsense and decided whether a given opinion was too outlandish to be published, today anyone can leave a comment below an article on a reputable website within seconds. Websites and social networking profiles are easy to set up and to maintain. The traditional gatekeeping role of the media and respected publications has been largely nullified by the possibilities of the World Wide Web.⁵⁴ In this way the internet has brought to public attention ideas that would have found little or no audience in the past. Today orthodox and heterodox knowledge are equally accessible and often are presented side by side, suggesting that they are of equal value.⁵⁵ This has led to an infodemic⁵⁶ where half-truths and misinformation have skyrocketed. According to one expert on conspiracy theories, this situation has led to a demise of expert knowledge on social media because “the importance of expertise has rapidly diminished, while lay knowledge or alternative or self-appointed experts are on the rise.”⁵⁷ We know that experts can be wrong in many ways, from outright fraud to well-intentioned but arrogant overconfidence in their own abilities, and sometimes they simply make mistakes. It is important, however, for us to understand how and why experts can err, and to be aware that they are less likely to be wrong than non-experts.⁵⁸ The diminishing of expert knowledge is further supported by the microblogging service of Twitter, with its brief soundbites or rumors that often are unsubstantiated because short tweets are not required to be backed up with evidence.⁵⁹ All this has made Twitter not only the ideal medium for mobilizing followers,⁶⁰ but also has led to a plethora of alternative perspectives and voices claiming to counter the allegedly biased and deliberately manipulated information by the traditional media. Many people in the digital age think that “the truth” is always just a Google search away.⁶¹ But we need to remember that in the era of decentralized media, false information has better prospects for spreading than truth.⁶² And we need to be mindful that the algorithms of the internet search engines and social media we use almost exclusively confront us with information that reinforces our existing assumptions and thus ultimately ensures that the results of our internet searches only feature content confirming what we already believe.⁶³ This easily leads to so-called echo chambers in which the basic assumptions of conspiracist rationale is not really questioned⁶⁴ or where arguments from outside can

no longer penetrate or are no longer taken seriously.⁶⁵ Unfortunately all this has led to a fragmentation of the public sphere where mistrust and doubt toward established authorities is on the rise.⁶⁶ Similar dynamics can be observed within the church.

This leads to a final but crucial aspect of our investigation: how can we make sure we do not uncritically fall prey to a conspiracy theory, and how can we talk and communicate effectively with people who believe in conspiracy theories?

How to Talk With One Another

Talking with someone who firmly believes in a conspiracy theory can be challenging. Many find themselves so deeply convinced about their beliefs that significant parts of their life and worldview center around them. That is why simple arguments often do not change the mind of another person, but tend to only reinforce our prior opinions. Nevertheless, here are a few things that can help when we talk with one another on this issue:⁶⁷

1. **Appreciate the people.** Reaching the hearts and minds of those who hold different opinions only works if we have a *genuine* desire for the appreciation and well-being of the other person. This does not mean that we approve of everything they believe; we simply distinguish between the person and their opinions and acts. This is what Jesus practiced in His interactions with other people. Only reaching out to others in order to prove that we are right does not foster a trusting relationship. It matters *how* we talk to each other. If we want to succeed winning another person, it is easy to conclude that the ends justify the means. “But it is worth remembering that the means are a measure of our character. When we succeed in changing someone’s mind, we shouldn’t only ask whether we’re proud of what we’ve achieved. We should also ask whether we’re proud of how we’ve achieved it.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, do not take things personally if they disagree with you. Some people will not change their minds, no matter what you say. Research has shown that merely listing counterarguments to a hypothesis that is promoted does not lead people to change their minds.⁶⁹ Often *how* we communicate is far more important than what we say to the other person. So, stay calm and stay friendly.
2. **Listen; do not preach.** As it is true for any other person who has firm convictions, people who believe in conspiracy theories will not be swayed by people who mock their views. Nobody is inclined to listen to people who are cynical, sarcastic, or who ridicule

others. We need to learn to listen attentively and to meet people respectfully. The power of attentive listening is a sign of respect that one shows for the other person and is an expression of our care.⁷⁰ It can open the door to our hearts so that we are more willing to listen to each other. For this to succeed, try focusing on the person you want to reach—not the myth you want to debunk. Instead of lecturing them, listen attentively and learn to ask good questions, such as: How did you become interested in this theory? Where did you get your information from? Have you considered other explanations? Try to find out if certain fears are behind the interest in particular conspiracy theories. Try to learn what they are afraid of and how they think this theory might help them cope with or respond to their fears. Fears are powerful motivators and need to be taken seriously. Good questions often can be more convincing than the best argument.⁷¹ Whenever possible, have the conversation offline and in person.

3. **Check the sources.** Always carefully check the sources and their authenticity and credibility. Look who wrote the content and who is quoted in it. Are they named? Do they have expertise in the area and experience in the particular subject that lends credibility to their claims? In a time when deepfakes⁷² and fake facts are increasingly widespread, careful fact-checking becomes essential.⁷³ Are other viewpoints mentioned in the article? Be wary of claims made by “insiders,” anonymous internet posters, or anyone citing hearsay as fact. Also, check the dates: misinformation peddlers often post old photos or news stories and claim they are new. Similarly, verify extraordinary claims. If you read something that makes an incredible claim—one that seems too good, too awful, or too weird to be true—check to see if it is being reported elsewhere. If it is an important story, other outlets will confirm the details. Be cautious of explosive claims when they are only being made on one website or by one social media user.
4. **Check the context.** On the internet and in social media, it is now extremely easy to copy and share information that might not be wrong in and of itself, but that originally was stated in a specific context and was connected to a different setting than that in which it is now being used.⁷⁴ Furthermore, in longer quotations, the elimination of sentences or words often can create a very different message than was originally intended.⁷⁵ In such creative recombinations of information, the

original text is freed from its context and decontextualized by combining it with new and different contexts. The information that is thus converted into bits and pixels becomes available everywhere and is rather difficult to protect and almost impossible to control.⁷⁶ Try to check the original source that is cited and see if the quote distorts the original meaning or even leads to false conclusions.

5. **Be wary of content that plays on emotions.** Misinformation and conspiracy theories often exploit feelings of anger, fear, or other intense emotions. Be cautious of content that features strongly emotional language, or that seems intended to make others outraged. Also be mindful of your own use of language. If something really gets you fired up, wait until your emotions have cooled before reposting or sending anything to friends.
6. **Expand your media diet.** Checking a variety of news sources—including some mainstream local, national, and international outlets as well as reputable fact-checking websites⁷⁷—is the best way of staying informed and avoiding rabbit holes of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Do not rely solely on social media for your news.
7. **Be aware of connecting the dots properly.** Be mindful of theories that ratchet up from small events that might be true to much larger global events. Often a global or universal extent makes it less probable and less likely to be true. When a conspiracy theory tends to comingle facts and speculations without properly and appropriately distinguishing between the two and without assigning degrees of probability or factuality, be alert and cautious. Often events are connected that need not be causally related. When no solid evidence supports these connections except the allegation of that conspiracy or when the evidence fits equally well to other causal connections—or to randomness—the conspiracy theory is likely to be false. We certainly all must gain greater

media literacy where we learn to discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources of information and we need to be aware that the results of our Google and Facebook searches are not necessarily “the truth”; they often may not reflect reality but rather, to a large extent, our own personal preferences. Be aware that falsehood spreads more easily than truth.

8. **Determine the impact of the conspiracy theory.** Find out and sense what impact the conspiracy theory has on the life of the person who believes in it as well as on those around them. If it encourages cynicism, derogatory sentiments, anti-Semitic theories, paranoia, or end-time fear and anxiety, then something is wrong. When these theories slander perceived enemies with innuendo and unsubstantiated allegations, a red flag should go up. If the knowledge of such a theory promotes pride and self-righteousness, be warned. As the apostle Paul says, “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1, NKJV).

As Christians we are told to “examine everything carefully” and “to hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess 5:21, NASB). We are also encouraged to “love your enemies and do good” (Luke 6:35, NASB). This also applies to those who espouse different opinions. This spirit of Christ should characterize all of our interactions as we share the hope of Christ’s salvation and trust God’s promises when we encounter other opinions and face the future.



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¹ There is some research suggesting that people tend to turn to conspiracy theories when they are confronted with crisis situations. See Zaria Gorvett, “What We Can Learn From Conspiracy Theories,” BBC, May 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200522-what-we-can-learn-from-conspiracy-theories> (accessed November 11, 2021).

² Michael Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), 6, points out that the latest empirical studies show that “half of the population of the USA, and nearly as many in most European countries, believe in at least one conspiracy theory”; see also Daniel Jolley, Silvia Mari, and Karen M. Douglas, “Consequences of Conspiracy Theories,” in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (London: Routledge, 2020), 231.

³ Conspiracy theories are not new; they have been in existence

for a long time. For a helpful overview of the history of conspiracy theories, see the discussion in section 5, “Histories and Regions,” in Butter and Knight, *Routledge Handbook*, 525–673; section 6, “What Do Conspiracy Theories Look Like Around the World?,” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 335–407; and part 3 in *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, ed. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 257–526.

⁴ It has been pointed out that all human beings carry traits that favor faith in conspiracy stories; see Katharina Nocun and Pia Lamberty, *Fake Facts: Wie Verschwörungstheorien unser Denken Bestimmen* (Köln: Quadriga, 2020), 32.

⁵ For differences in proponents and objectors of conspiracy

theories, see Michael J. Wood and Karen M. Douglas, "Conspiracy Theory Psychology: Individual Differences, Worldviews, and States of Mind," in Uscinski, 245–256. See also the discussion in Nocun and Lamberty, 9–45.

⁶ Josh Pasek, "Don't Trust the Scientists! Rejecting the Scientific Consensus 'Conspiracy,'" in Uscinski, 201–213; see also Jolley, Mari, and Douglas, 236. It seems that some of this skepticism in some Christian circles is connected with the dominant scientific view in much of the natural sciences that sees evolution as responsible for the origin of life.

⁷ While paranoid people believe that literally everybody is after them, conspiracy thinkers believe a few mighty and influential people are pursuing almost everybody. Paranoid people principally mistrust others while conspiracy thinkers are rather critical towards the system (Nocun and Lamberty, 35).

⁸ Brian E. Keeley, "The Credulity of Conspiracy Theorists," in Uscinski, 422.

⁹ On the history of conspiracy research, see the helpful overview in Michael Butter and Peter Knight, "The History of Conspiracy Theory Research: A Review and Commentary," in Uscinski, 33–52.

¹⁰ Merriam-Webster, s.v. "conspiracy," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy> (accessed November 10, 2021).

¹¹ Latdict, s.v. "conspiro, conspirare, conspiravi, conspiratus," <https://latin-dictionary.net/definition/13479/conspiro-conspirare-conspiravi-conspiratus> (accessed November 18, 2021).

¹² Online Latin Dictionary, s.v. "conspire," <https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/latin-english-dictionary.php?lemma=CONSPIRO100> (accessed November 18, 2021).

¹³ Butter, 9.

¹⁴ From outlaws plotting bank heists, to corporate executives planning to mislead their customers, to bribery, to political scandals, and cover-ups like Watergate, there are plenty of things happening in this world that are the result of conspiracy between interested parties or secret plots by powerful conspirators (Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* [New York: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015], 62). See also "How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory When You See One," The Open University, <https://www.open.ac.uk/research/news/how-spot-conspiracy-theory-when-you-see-one> (accessed November 10, 2021).

¹⁵ Nocun and Lamberty, 44.

¹⁶ Ibid. 45.

¹⁷ Timothy R. Tangherlini, "An AI Tool Can Distinguish Between a Conspiracy Theory and a True Conspiracy—It Comes Down to How Easily the Story Falls Apart," *The Conversation*, November 13, 2020 <https://theconversation.com/an-ai-tool-can-distinguish-between-a-conspiracy-theory-and-a-true-conspiracy-it-comes-down-to-how-easily-the-story-falls-apart-146282> (accessed November 10, 2021).

¹⁸ Butter, 19–20. See also Michael Shermer, "The Conspiracy Theory Detector," *Scientific American*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-conspiracy-theory-director/> (accessed November 10, 2021). According to a group of researchers from the UCLA and the University of California, Berkeley, even the most convoluted conspiracy theory has a distinct structure that is less complex than the things that actually happen. That is very different from real-life scandals, which tend to unravel as new evidence merges. See Timothy R. Tangherlini et al., "An Automated Pipeline for the Discovery of Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theory Narrative Frameworks: Bridgegate, Pizzagate, and Storytelling on the Web," *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 6 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233879> (accessed November 10, 2021).

¹⁹ Butter, 20.

²⁰ Ibid., 23.

²¹ As quoted in "How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory When You See One," The Open University. See also Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 2, *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 1962), 93–95, as quoted in Butter, 21–22.

²² Butter, 10. See also "How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory When You See One," The Open University, where additional aspects of conspiracy theories are listed, such as dividing the world into good and bad and scapegoating people and groups.

²³ On the complex relationship between conspiracy theories and religion, see Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Conspiracy Theory and Religion,"

in Butter and Knight, *Routledge Handbook*, 371–383; Brian L. Keeley, "Is Belief in Providence the Same as a Belief in Conspiracy?," in Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprem, 70–86; and Michael Wood and Karen Douglas, "Are Conspiracy Theories a Surrogate for God?," in Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprem, 87–105.

²⁴ See, e.g., Job 1:6–12; Eph 2:2; 6:10; Col 1:16; Heb 8:2; 9:11; Rev 12:3–4, 7–17; 13:7, 14–17.

²⁵ See Brian L. Keeley, "The Credulity of Conspiracy Theories: Conspiratorial, Scientific, and Religious Explanations Compared," in Butter and Knight, *Routledge Handbook*, 426–428.

²⁶ For a recent discussion of this important difference and its implications for biblical interpretation, see Frank M. Hasel, "Recent Trends in Methods of Biblical Interpretation," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Frank M. Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute/Review and Herald Academic, 2020), 405–461.

²⁷ According to Butter, 32, conspiracy theories deal with the struggle between good and evil.

²⁸ Cf. the following biblical passages where the word "conspiracy" occurs in the translation of the NKJV: 2 Sam 15:12; 2 Kgs 12:20; 14:19; 15:15, 30; 17:4; 2 Chr 25:27; Isa 8:12; Jer 11:9; Ezek 22:25; Acts 23:13.

²⁹ Butter, 23.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1960), III.xxiii.7, 955–956. Luther had a similar understanding of predestination, albeit not as pronounced as Calvin. On Luther and his view, see Harry J. McCord, *Luthers Lehre vom unfreien Willen* (Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1967).

³¹ Calvin himself admits that "the degree is dreadful indeed" (III. xxiii.7, 955–956) because it fosters a fatalistic mindset. See also Calvin, III.xx.17.

³² We find this especially in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation.

³³ The Bible acknowledges accidental sins—that is, sins that were not planned or intended (see Num 35:11, 15; Josh 20:3, 9). It also reports incidents where people disguised themselves and suffered the unexpected and accidental consequences of unintentional acts, like the shooting of a deadly arrow that hit the disguised king Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35:22–24 and led to his death.

³⁴ In John 8:44 Satan is called the father of lies.

³⁵ The Bible clearly teaches that we do not know the exact time and hour of His coming (Acts 1:7) and we do not know when the bridegroom Jesus will come again (Matt 25:13). Hence, we are called to be alert, attentive, and awake.

³⁶ The following list is not exhaustive, but rather intends to provide some insight as to why conspiracy theories are attractive to some people. See also the discussion in Joe Forrest, "Why Your Christian Friends and Family Members Are So Easily Fooled by Conspiracy Theories," *Instrument of Mercy* (blog), May 7, 2020, <https://instrumentofmercy.com/2020/05/07/why-your-christian-friends-and-family-members-are-so-easily-fooled-by-conspiracy-theories/> (accessed November 11, 2021).

³⁷ See Philipp E. Dow, *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), who mentions the following important characteristics of our search for truth: intellectual courage, carefulness, tenacity, fair-mindedness, curiosity, honesty, and humility.

³⁸ Jolley, Mari, and Douglas, 231.

³⁹ Nocun and Lamberty, 31.

⁴⁰ So Forrest.

⁴¹ Nocun and Lamberty, 53–55.

⁴² As quoted in Forrest.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Simona Stano, "The Internet and the Spread of Conspiracy Content," in Butter and Knight, *Routledge Handbook*, 483.

⁴⁵ Joseph E. Uscinski, Darin DeWitt, and Matthew D. Atkinson, "A Web of Conspiracy? Internet and Conspiracy Theory," in Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprem, 106.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 111, point out that the internet reinforces conspiratorial views for those people who are already prone to them.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 111. Nocun and Lamberty, 127, think that the internet has changed some foundational parameter where people are no longer dependent on classical media when they want to reach large numbers of people with their thoughts.

⁴⁸ This is the conclusion of Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105–133.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁰ Misinformation is the unintentional spread of false information; disinformation is the intentional spread of false information.

⁵¹ See Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Petter Törnberg, “Echo Chambers and Viral Misinformation: Modeling Fake News as Complex Contagion,” *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 9 (2018): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0203958> (accessed November 10, 2021), as quoted in <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.646394/full#B4> (accessed November 10, 2021).

⁵² Butter, 122.

⁵³ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁴ Darin Dewitt, Matthew D. Atkinson, and Drew Wegner, “How Conspiracy Theories Spread,” in Butter and Knight, *Routledge Handbook*, 324. See also the discussion in Nichols. In some cases, mainstream media may be part of the problem, because the ideological biases of some journalists are no longer trusted as impartial purveyors of information.

⁵⁵ Butter, 1, 28. Similarly also Nocun and Lamberty, 95.

⁵⁶ The term “infodemic” was used by the director general of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who warned already at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020 that conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus have spread as rapidly as the virus itself; see the editorial, “The COVID-19 Infodemic,” *The Lancet: Infectious Diseases* 20, no. 8 (August 2020), [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(20\)30565-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30565-X) (accessed December 3, 2021).

⁵⁷ Butter, 128. See also Nichols, *passim*.

⁵⁸ Nichols, 10–11, 24.

⁵⁹ Butter, 143–144.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 144.

⁶¹ Ibid., 127.

⁶² DeWitt, Atkinson, and Wegner, 324. According to an MIT study, the dissemination of false information on the internet is 70% more likely and successful than the spreading of true information. It takes six times longer for truth to reach 1,500 people, the MIT study has discovered (see Giuliano da Empoli, “Wut + Algorithmus = Chaos,” interview by Oliver Gehrs, Fluter, December 15, 2020, <https://www.fluter.de/algorithmus-populismus-1%C3%BCgen-interview> [accessed December 3, 2021]). On the tendentious character of the results given while researching something on YouTube, see the report in Nocun and Lamberty, 140–143.

⁶³ Butter, 130. See also Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia and Filippo Menczer, “Biases Make People Vulnerable to Misinformation Spread by Social Media,” *Scientific American*, June 21, 2018, reprint from *The Conversation*, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/biases-make-people-vulnerable-to-misinformation-spread-by>

-social-media/ (accessed November 29, 2021)

⁶⁴ Butter, 131.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 130.

⁶⁷ In some of the subsequent points, we follow the tips of the Associated Press, “How to Talk to Believers of COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories,” April 6, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/how-to-talk-to-believers-covid-19-conspiracy-theories-fc2a0c3e9d6816629da61d9b-c3f317e5> (accessed November 10, 2021) and the information provided by the European Union on “Identifying Conspiracy Theories,” European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-responsefighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en (accessed November 10, 2021).

⁶⁸ Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* (New York, NY: Viking, 2021), 160.

⁶⁹ Nocun and Lamberty, 62.

⁷⁰ Grant, 159. Similarly, Dow, 52, who points out that “very few things give people a greater sense of their own value and worth as individuals than being truly heard. Being given this kind of attention tells us that our views have significance, and, therefore, so do we. And nothing attracts us to another person more than a belief that that person values us.”

⁷¹ Nocun and Lamberty, 283–284.

⁷² In deepfakes, powerful techniques from machine learning and artificial intelligence are used in which a person in an existing picture or video is replaced by someone else's likeness. This has garnered widespread attention for their manipulative uses in pornography, fake news, hoaxes, and financial fraud.

⁷³ This fact checking should be done through institutions and websites that are certified by the International Fact Checking Network. See “International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) Codes and Principles,” Fighting Disinformation, Rand Corporation, <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/fighting-disinformation/search/items/international-fact-checking-network-ifcn-codes-and.html> (accessed November 30, 2021); and “International Fact-Checking Network: Empowering Fact-Checkers Worldwide,” Poynter, <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/> (accessed November 30, 2021). Among the credible organizations is dpa-Faktencheck; see “dpa-Faktencheck,” Credibility Coalition, <https://credibilitycoalition.org/credcatalog/project/dpa-faktencheck/> (accessed November 30, 2021), for an extensive list of numerous other fact-checking organizations.

⁷⁴ Nocun and Lamberty, 271.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 272.

⁷⁶ Joana T. Puntel and Moisés Sbardelotto, “From the Historical Reformation to the ‘Digital Reformation,’” *The Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 2 (2020): 215.

⁷⁷ See note 73 in the present study. In our polarized political and social environment, a balanced perspective that takes into consideration sources from across the sociopolitical spectrum can be helpful.

“The greatest victories to the church of Christ or to the individual Christian are not those that are gained by talent or education, by wealth or the favor of men. They are those victories that are gained in the audience chamber with God, when earnest, agonizing faith lays hold upon the mighty arm of power.”

Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 203

Lessons From Matthew 17

By Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 17 opens with the account of Peter, James, and John witnessing the transfiguration, an event six days after and closely connected to Jesus' saying that concludes the previous chapter.¹ Jesus had promised that some standing there would "by no means [*ou mē*] taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matt 16:28). All three Synoptic Gospels implicitly present the transfiguration about a week later as the fulfillment of this prophecy (cf. Mark 9:1–2; Luke 9:27–28),² which leads to a question about Elijah's return (Matt 17:10–13 // Mark 9:11–13; cf. Mal 4:5–6). After coming down from this glorious mountaintop experience, they meet the other disciples who were unable to heal a boy of epilepsy, which issues in a discussion about faith (Matt 17:14–21) and Jesus' warning them again of His approaching death and resurrection (Matt 17:22–23). The chapter closes with a very practical question—on paying taxes (Matt 17:24–27).

Interpretation of Matthew 17

1. Verses 1–8

- The fact that the "high mountain" location of the transfiguration is not specifically identified has not prevented speculation as to which mountain it was. The traditional site of Mount Tabor, six miles east of Nazareth, is unlikely since a Roman garrison occupied its summit; it was not a place where they could be "by themselves" (and Luke 9:28 adds that they went there to pray). Others suggest it may have been Mount Meron, the highest mountain in Galilee, or Mount Hermon, which is nearly 9,200 feet in elevation. More likely, the mountain was in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee (cf. Matt 17:22).³
- The Greek word used to describe Jesus' being "transfigured" is *metamorphoō*, the same word Paul uses for the renewal of the mind and the spiritual transformation Christians experience by beholding Jesus (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18). But the transformation Jesus underwent was clearly physical, with His face shining as the sun and His garments appearing to glow white hot.
- As the disciples grow accustomed to the glorious sight, Moses and Elijah are seen conversing with Jesus. Both these men had

received revelations of God on Mount Sinai and both are expected to return in connection with the messianic kingdom. Together with Jesus they vividly symbolize in miniature the coming kingdom of glory, fulfilling the prediction of Matthew 16:28. In view of this connection, it can be inferred that the two heavenly figures represent those who will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air at His coming (1 Thess 4:16–17)—Moses, the resurrected ones (cf. Jude 9); and Elijah, those translated.⁴

- The voice from the cloud that overshadowed the three men bathed in heavenly glory, perhaps making the ground tremble as it did when God spoke from Mount Sinai (Exod 19:18)⁵ such that the disciples "fell on their faces" to the ground (Matt 17:6). The voice gives a similar affirmation of Jesus as at His baptism, except that here the Father also commands the disciples to "listen to Him" (Matt 17:5, ESV). Not only does this command echo the prophecy that a prophet like Moses would arise (Deut 18:15; cf. Acts 3:22), meaning the disciples were urged not just to hear but comprehend the words of Jesus, especially regarding the true nature of His messianic mission (Matt 16:21; 17:9, 12).
- Jesus encourages the trembling disciples, characteristically urging them to not be afraid (e.g., Matt 10:31; 14:27; 28:10).

2. Verses 9–13

- The disciples are not to tell anyone what they had seen on the mountain, lest it raise popular hopes of a conqueror-messiah that would ultimately be dashed. The word "vision" (*horama*) is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in Acts, where it mainly refers to prophetic visions (e.g., Acts 9:10, 12; 10:3, 17, 19), but it can also refer to unusual or memorable sights (Acts 7:31; cf. LXX Exod 3:3; Deut 28:34, 67).
- Having seen Elijah on the mountain, the disciples ask about the scribes' assertion that the prophet's coming must precede that of the Messiah. Although Jesus had earlier made the connection of John the Baptist with Elijah (Matt 11:14; cf. Mal 4:5–6), it seems that the disciples were not present to hear it (cf. Matt 11:1), so now Jesus repeats the same essential

truth that John came to call Israel to repentance in order to restore the nation to the purpose God had for it.

- From later rabbinic discussions, it seems the prophecy of Malachi had been interpreted in line with exclusivist Jewish hopes of national restoration: “Elijah will not come to declare unclean or clean, to remove afar or to bring nigh, but to remove afar those [families] that were brought nigh by violence and to bring nigh those [families] that were removed afar by violence.”⁶

3. Verses 14–23

- It must have been a startling contrast to descend from heavenly glory to the rabble and confusion of the valley (described more fully in Mark 9:14–15). This situation arose from the failure of the disciples who stayed behind to heal a boy of epilepsy (which in Mark 9:25–27 is attributed to a demon).
- The father’s address of Jesus as “Lord” (Gk. *kyrie*) could be translated “Sir” and even his kneeling could be interpreted as merely a gesture of humility in view of the colossal request.⁷
- Jesus rebukes the unbelief—not only of the father and the disciples, but of the entire “faithless and perverse generation”—because they were repeating the sins of their ancestors who died in the wilderness at the time of the exodus, as “children in whom is no faith” (Deut 32:5, 20).
- Some early manuscripts contain here the favorite Matthean descriptor for the disciples’ lack of faith—“little faith” (*oligopistia*), seemingly a kinder term than “unbelief,” which is the word found here in most New Testament manuscripts,⁸ as is the entirety of verse 21.⁹ Probably it was added here by copyists who attempted to harmonize Matthew’s shorter version of this incident with Mark 9:29. More importantly, genuine faith can accomplish the impossible through divine power because “with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:26; cf. Luke 1:37). But faith is essential, as Jesus affirms to the father struggling to believe in light of the disciples’ failure. “If you can believe,” He says, “all things are possible to him who believes” (Mark 9:23).
- Having stressed the importance of faith, Jesus attempts again to warn His disciples of the impending trial their faith is about to undergo when He will be betrayed, killed, and yet raised on the third day. The truth now begins to dawn on them, but not fully enough to grasp this as a necessary fulfillment of prophecy. They are deeply grieved but this seems to be overshadowed by their

rivalry and focus on who was to be the greatest in the kingdom (Matt 18:1).

5. Verses 24–27

- In this final section of the chapter, Peter is asked two questions, one by the collectors of the temple tax (cf. Exod 30:13–16; Neh 10:32) and then one by Jesus. The phrasing of the first question in Greek seems to assume the worst of Jesus by His opponents—an opinion that may have been encouraged by Jesus’ rebuke of money changers in the temple (John 2:13–22).
- Peter, ready to defend the Master Teacher, affirms that Jesus would pay the tax, though Jesus does not consider it a necessary obligation for Him.
- Furthermore, by His death on the cross, Jesus would win back rulership of this world from the devil who claimed it (John 12:31–33). This may underlie Jesus’ immediate question to Peter once the disciple returns home. In this case, Peter answers correctly that kings do not require customs or taxes of their own children. Similarly, Jesus as the Son of God should be exempt. The temple is, after all, His Father’s “house” (John 2:16; cf. Luke 2:49).
- To avoid placing any unnecessary stumbling block in the way of faith in Him, Jesus finesses the problem by means of a miracle, instructing Peter to pay the tax from a coin that would be found in the mouth of the first fish he catches.

Application of the Chapter

Some important lessons we may glean from Matthew 17 include:

1. The disciples lost the blessing they might have received by sleeping through much of what transpired on the mount of transfiguration. “Failing to watch and pray, they had not received that which God desired to give them,—a knowledge of the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”¹⁰
2. While Peter’s enthusiastic suggestion to build tabernacles for the three glorious figures may amuse us, God Himself interrupted it, urging the disciples to listen rather than speak. This reminds us that frequently, and certainly in such a rapturous experience of divine glory, silence is golden (Prov 17:27–28).
3. It is not the amount of faith we have but how we submit to situations that will grow our faith that determines the extent to which belief will be followed by appropriate action. “Earnest, persevering supplication to God in

faith—faith that leads to entire dependence upon God, and unreserved consecration to His work—can alone avail to bring me the Holy Spirit’s aid in the battle against principalities and powers.”¹¹

4. Not only the expression of doubt, but even just a lapse of faith on our part may make it more difficult for others to believe in God and the Bible.
5. Cultural expectations and/or a self-focus can blind us to some of the most important truths God may be trying to teach us, both as individuals and as a church.
6. Neither Jesus nor any Bible writer justifies the nonpayment of taxes, but urges cooperation

with government officials to the extent that it can be done without violating any biblical principle (Matt 22:21; Rom 13:6–7; cf. 1 Pet 2:13–17).

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¹ The first word of the chapter is the Greek conjunction *kai* (“and”), connecting what follows with the previous verse despite the chapter division.

² Mark and Luke do not refer specifically to the coming of the Son of Man, but only to seeing the kingdom of God.

³ This may be inferred from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 418–419.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 421–422.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 425.

⁶ Michael J. Wilkins, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (New Testament)*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 108, citing *m. Eduyyot* 8:7.

⁷ The Greek word (*gonypetōn*), elsewhere in the New Testament only in Matthew 27:29; Mark 1:40; 10:17, is never clearly used in connection with the worship of Jesus, and different from the word normally used in Matthew for worship (*proskyneō*; see, e.g., Matt 2:2, 8, 11; 4:9–10; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17; cf. 18:26).

⁸ Only here is the noun form found; elsewhere it is the adjective *oligopistos* (Matt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28).

⁹ The verse is omitted in many early manuscripts and versions (N^a B¹ Θ 0281. 33. 579. 892* e ff¹ sy^c sa bo¹⁸).

¹⁰ White, 425.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 431.

BOOK NOTES

Reinhardt Stander

Preterism, Futurism or Historicism? Dissertation

Stellenbosch University,
South Africa.
March 2021. 298 pp.

Preterism, Futurism or Historicism?

By Gerhard Pfandl

This dissertation seeks to determine which of the three methods of interpretation mentioned in the title is the most appropriate hermeneutical method to interpret apocalyptic prophecy. To do so, Stander has developed an analysis model whereby the three schools of interpretation are critically evaluated. He develops the analysis model in chapter 2. In chapters 3, 4, and 5 he critically analyzes preterism, futurism, and historicism. In chapter 6 he summarizes his findings and presents his conclusions.

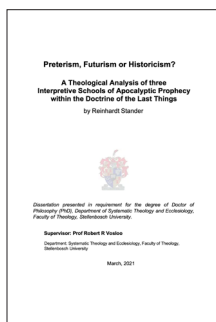
In his introduction Stander briefly defines preterism as the view that sees “the fulfillment of Revelation’s prophecies as having occurred already, in what is now the ancient past.” Futurism views apocalyptic prophecies “as fulfilled in the far future during the biblical end times—far removed from the original writer’s day.” Historicism views prophecy as “fulfilled throughout history, from the original writer’s day to the

climax of the biblical end times” (p. 8). In the introduction he also identifies himself as a Seventh-day Adventist who interprets apocalyptic prophecy with the historicist approach, thus seeing the apocalypse as the unfolding of history.

Method of Analysis

Stander’s analysis model to evaluate the different schools of interpretation consists of five tiers:

1. The christological analysis asks the following questions: Is the interpretation revealing Christ as prophet and King? Is it revealing the resurrected Christ, the coming Christ, and the victorious Christ?
2. An apocalyptic analysis looks for a cosmic sweep, an eschatological emphasis, and the use of symbolism. It looks for an eschatology



from outside of history, that has its origin in the divine sovereignty and includes unconditionality.

3. The prophetic image analysis asks: Is the symbol recognized as fluid, representative, and may it vary in different contexts? Are the reasons for the symbol used understood? Is the symbol considered within its immediate and literary context?
4. The exegetical analysis explores two key doctrines—namely, the coming of Christ and the coming of the antichrist. It asks the following questions: Does this interpretation view the coming of the antichrist to be literal, real, and observable and view the parousia as destroying the antichrist? Does this interpretation view God as being in control of end-time events?
5. The practical relevance analysis asks: Does this interpretation offer hope in one's situation, help one make sense of life, and impart motivation to spirituality?

Findings

Applying the five-tier analysis model to preterism in chapter 3, Stander firstly finds that preterism is not sufficiently christological, which removes the very essence and goal of prophecy. Secondly, preterism is not in line with the character of apocalyptic—the very literature it claims to interpret. Thirdly, preterism is vulnerable on exegetical grounds. Lastly, preterism is not relevant or practically applicable to a Christian's life in the present, as Revelation is not prophetically applicable to us or our time (pp. 118–119).

Applying the five-tier analysis model to futurism in chapter 4, Stander believes it to be christological. However, he finds that futurism ironically does not recognize the Apocalypse as apocalyptic, and thus interprets its prophecies literalistically. In addition, he finds that futurism cannot be exegetically substantiated. Yet in the practical relevance analysis, futurism can provide much-needed hope and sense to people's present situation (p. 188).

Applying the five-tier analysis model to historicism in chapter 5, Stander finds that historicism is, at its core, christological. It recognizes the Apocalypse as apocalyptic and interprets it in a manner true to apocalyptic principles. Historicism passes the prophetic image analysis, proves to be exegetically sound, and is found to be relevant and practically applicable to a Christian's life in the present (p. 265).

Considering that the author is a Seventh-day Adventist, it is not surprising that in his conclusion he says that historicism has not only made positive contributions to the doctrine of last things, but is the only adequate hermeneutic for apocalyptic prophecies because it takes apocalyptic and history seriously. It

consistently applies the cosmic sweep of apocalyptic throughout history to the coming eschaton and builds faith in God through fulfilled prophecies. Furthermore, historicism is inherent in the texts of both Daniel and Revelation (pp. 272–273).

Evaluation

In his introduction the author quotes several scholars concerning the meaning of the terms “eschatology,” “apocalypse,” “apocalyptic,” and “apocalypticism,” but it is not clear what these terms mean for him. In the section “Definitions of Key Terms,” these words do not appear. He only provides explanations for the terms “preterism,” “futurism,” and “historicism” that are the focus of the dissertation. As far as the other terms are concerned, he seems to side with Ralph Tate, who differentiates between eschatology and apocalyptic prophecy as follows: “Eschatology is concerned exclusively with the doctrine of the end of the age; apocalypse refers to a revelation and a particular type of writing that discloses that revelation” (p. 3).

However, “eschatology,” the doctrine concerning the end, can describe a radical break in the course of history, not just the end of history. Such breaks in history we find in the prophecies concerning Israel and Judah's end; this is sometimes called historical or national eschatology. “Apocalyptic,” or apocalyptic eschatology, on the other hand, always describes the end of history, the end of the world, when this present age will be followed by God's eternal kingdom.

The author provides a lot of valuable information on the various schools of interpretation. His evaluation of the various schools is thorough and important, but he only deals with preterism within evangelicalism. This is what I call “historic preterism”—that is, preterism that accepts the inspiration of Scripture. It considers the book of Daniel as a revelation from God, but generally limits the fulfillment of its prophecies to the time between Daniel in the sixth century BC and the first coming of Christ, following the demise of the fourth kingdom in Daniel 2 and 7. The book of Revelation is applied to the first century of the Christian era, in which the “man of sin” (2 Thess 2:3) appeared in the person of the Roman Emperor Nero and the second coming took place in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, at which time the Old Testament dispensation came to a close and a new order of things began.

This dissertation ignores completely the historical-critical or modern-preterist school, which encompasses probably 90% or more of preterist interpreters. The roots of this school go back to Porphyry, a philosopher in the third century AD, who taught that the book of Daniel was written by an unknown Jew in the second century BC, and that Daniel's prophecies, therefore, are vaticinia ex eventu (“prophecies written after the event”). Historical-critical scholars, who

deny the inspiration and authority of Scripture and, therefore, also the existence of true prophecy, see the book of Daniel as a reflection of the political and religious situation of the Jewish people under the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who persecuted the Jews. They believe that the prophecies of the book of Revelation refer to historical events in the time of the Roman Empire during the first century AD.

An evaluation of the historical-critical or modern preterist school of interpretation would have enhanced the value of this dissertation for Seventh-day Adventist scholars, who frequently must deal with the arguments of historical-critical scholars. Nevertheless, this dissertation is a valuable addition to the library of Adventist scholars. Applying the five-tier analysis model to futurism in chapter 4, Stander believes it to be christological. However, he finds that futurism

ironically does not recognize the Apocalypse as apocalyptic, and thus interprets its prophecies literally. In addition, he finds that futurism cannot be exegetically substantiated. Yet in the practical relevance analysis, futurism can provide much-needed hope and sense to people's present situation (p. 188).

Gerhard Pfandl

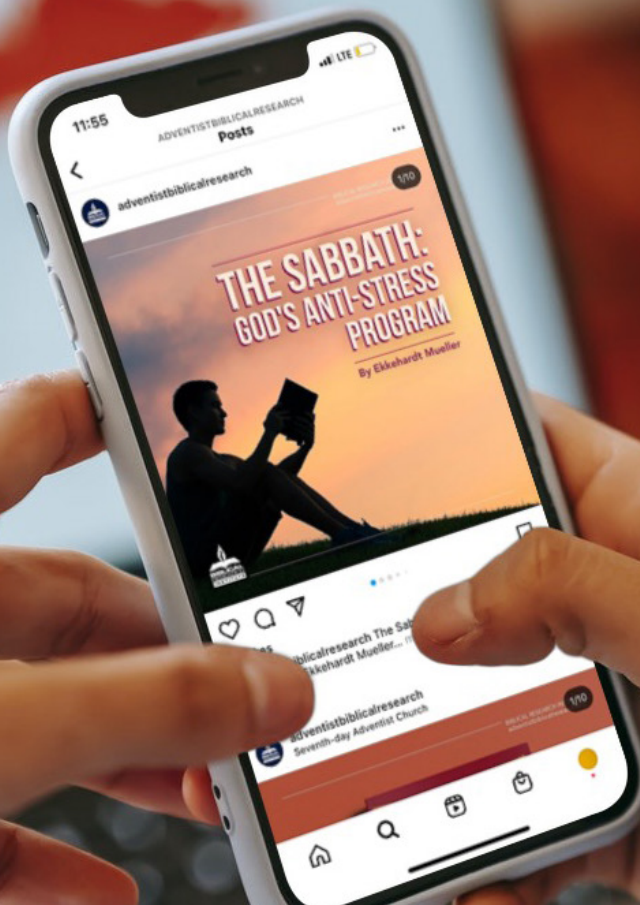
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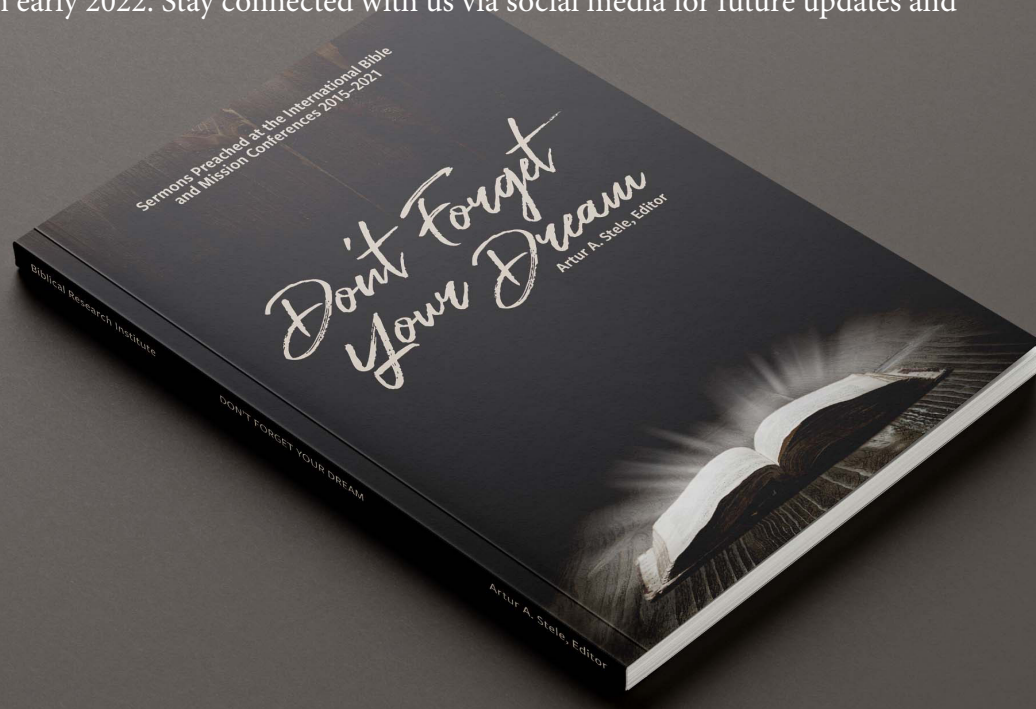
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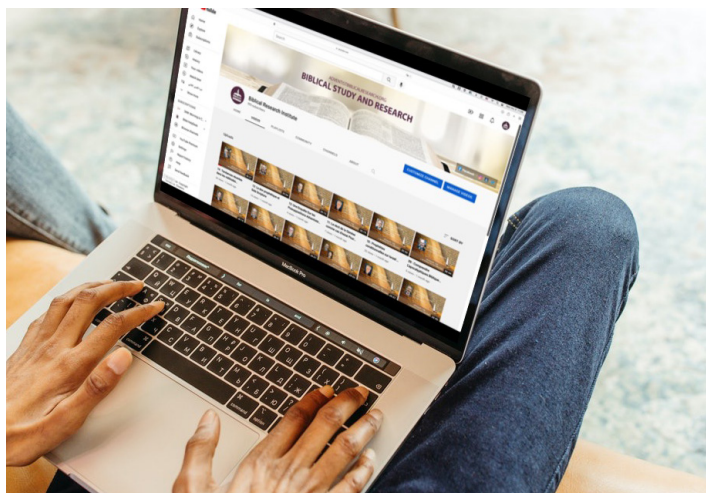
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Kwabena Donkor Retires

By Elias Brasil de Souza

As of April 2021, our colleague Dr. Kwabena Donkor has retired as associate director of the Biblical Research Institute (BRI), which he joined in 2004. Dr. Donkor hails from Ghana, and before his service at the BRI, had served as a church pastor in Australia and Canada and earned a PhD in systematic theology from Andrews University. His vast intercultural experience and theological expertise have been a blessing to the church throughout his years of service. His sensitivity to cultural issues and his ability to address them theologically was one of his many significant contributions to the publications, committees, and other projects during his service at the BRI.

Dr. Donkor coordinated a distinguished team of African scholars to address the spiritualistic African religious environment. As a result, he produced a volume titled *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa*, published by the BRI in 2011. With this publication, Dr. Donkor provided an invaluable resource to pastors, missionaries, and evangelists as they minister in an increasingly syncretistic culture—not only in Africa, but in other regions of the world as well.

In addition to these achievements, he contributed book chapters to various projects and authored specific studies titled *The Nature of Christ: The Soteriological Question* (2005), *The Emerging Church and Adventist Ecclesiology* (2011), and *God in 3 Persons—In*

Theology (2015), all published by the BRI. He also published scholarly articles in academic journals such as the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*. But his theological acumen found recognition also among evangelical scholars, as shown by his contribution to the volume edited by Millard J. Erickson and other distinguished scholars, titled *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, published by Crossway in 2004.

Finally, we should mention that Dr. Donkor's talents transcend the field of academic theology. He is a songwriter, having composed several hymns published in the Ghanaian Seventh-day Adventist hymnal. Thus, he does theology not only through academic papers and other technical publications, but also through music. He believes that theology must touch the heart as well as the mind. In this matter, Dr. Donkor joins the gallery of theologians who were also songwriters, such as John of Damascus (c. 675/676–749), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Martin Luther (1483–1546), and Charles Wesley (1707–1788).

We thank Dr. Donkor for his service and invaluable contributions to the BRI, his commitment to the authority of Scripture, and his unwavering support for the message and mission of the church. We wish him all the best in his years of retirement and pray that he will continue to bless the church with his theological writings and musical compositions.





Ekkehardt Mueller Retires

By Frank M. Hasel

Dr. Ekkehardt Mueller retired from his position as associate director of the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) at the end of December 2020, after a long and very fruitful ministry.

Ekkehardt joined the BRI in 1997 and served as an associate director of the BRI until 2020. From 2011 to 2015 he also served as deputy director of the BRI. During his more than twenty-three years of service at the BRI, his work was blessed by the rich experience and expertise he brought to the task. Previously he had served as a pastor, and later as ministerial secretary, and director of the education department of the South German Union from 1993 to 1995, where he was responsible for the continuous education of pastors. He then served as ministerial secretary of the Inter-European Division (EUD, then Euro-Africa Division) in Berne, Switzerland, from 1995 to 1997, where he chaired the oldest Biblical Research Committee on the division level. Born in East Germany, Ekkehardt grew up in West Germany and earned two doctorates from Andrews University: a DMin in 1987 and a ThD in 1994 in New Testament studies with a dissertation focusing on the microstructural analysis of Revelation 4–11. Ekkehardt has been blessed with many outstanding abilities employed in his service for the Seventh-day Adventist Church and to God's glory. What many may not know is that he is a talented artist and has painted many pictures. In addition, Ekkehardt is an accomplished musician who often accompanies his wife Geri, a music teacher, on the harpsicord or organ in concerts and in church settings.

With Ekkehardt's retirement the BRI loses an exceptionally productive Adventist scholar. Over the course of his life, he has published more than 260 articles, some thirty book reviews, and authored some fifteen books that have been translated into many languages. He also edited six scholarly books, some of which will soon be available through the BRI.

Ekkehardt also was the principal author of two Adult Bible Study Guides, on the book of Hebrews (2003) and the Johannine Epistles (2009). But his rich and prolific writing activities were only part of his work for the BRI. He also served as a guest lecturer at Zaoksky Theological Seminary (Russia), Samyook University (South Korea), Theologische Hochschule Friedensau (Germany), Washington Adventist University (United States), Seminar Bogenhofen (Austria), Saleve Adventist University (France), and Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (Philippines), and was the speaker at many conventions and Bible conferences around the globe. While at the BRI, Ekkehardt served as secretary of the Biblical Research Committee for many years and initiated several new projects that have proven to be a great blessing, such as initiating the BRI newsletter *Reflections*, of which he served as editor from 2003 to 2009. He also chaired the Biblical Research Ethics Commission, which addresses important ethical issues and gives advice on church statements, and chaired the Theology Committee of the Faith and Science Council. Beyond this Ekkehardt worked with numerous division Biblical Research Committees around the globe. In this capacity he fostered a collegial atmosphere among Adventist theologians around the world that helped unite Adventist scholarship and connect it more closely with the church.

Ekkehardt is exceptionally loyal to the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and was very dedicated in his work. Sometimes one would get the impression that he was doing the work of more than just one person! While he never delighted in theological controversy, he had the courage to take a biblical stand on important issues such as abortion and noncombatancy, to mention but two recent issues. If he considered it necessary, he spoke convincingly to voices on both the theological far left and far right and challenged all of us to focus more fully on what

the Bible says. He also had a unique ability to foresee trends within the church and prepared statements that would help address issues from a biblical perspective. His strategic foresight helped the church respond to issues that confront us.

Perhaps one of Ekkehardt's greatest strengths is not only his ability to present a superb theological exegesis of biblical passages and to think thoroughly, biblically, and theologically on issues, but also the rare talent he has of bringing to the theological task a warm pastoral heart. His rich pastoral experience helped him to see the other person as a human being who deserved respect and who should be treated with dignity and fairness, no matter how different his perspective on things may have been. This rare combination of

rigorous and serious academic scholarship along with genuine pastoral concern can be seen in several of his publications. He developed and published Bible study guides to help train church members to give practical Bible studies. Several of his practical and sustained theological expositions have been included in the *Minister's Bible* (published by Safeliz, 2015).

In his capacities as associate director and deputy director of the BRI, Ekkehardt Mueller has faithfully served the world church for many years with great dedication. His deep commitment to the Word of God and to the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been obvious in all he did. His careful theological scholarship will have a lasting impact and will be a blessing for generations to come.



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Index to *Reflections*

The first issue of *Reflections* was published in January 2003. Since then, we've published many articles.

While it's possible to use Acrobat to simultaneously search all past issues of *Reflections* for one word or phrase, some readers have asked for a formal index. From now on, you will find a pdf index at the end of each newsletter that you can download.

If you wish to search simultaneously all past issues of the newsletter for one word or phrase in Acrobat, you must download from the BRI website:

<https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/newsletters>
all of the *Reflections* issues PDF's to one folder.

Open any issue in Acrobat, and then press Shift +Command+F (Shift+Ctrl+F on Windows). In the Search window that appears, be sure that you click the radio button that says, "All PDF Documents in," and in the dropdown menu below that, choose the folder in which you placed your *Reflections* issues.

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Reflections seeks to share information concerning doctrinal and theological developments among Adventists and to foster doctrinal and theological unity in the world church. Its intended audience is church administrators, church leaders, pastors and teachers.

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