

## COVID-19 IN THE LIGHT OF TRUTH AND THE LIE IN REVELATION

By Ekkehardt Mueller

**W**e have arrived in the age of “fake news.” Fake news is a kind of journalism, propaganda, and maybe even approach to life that consists of deliberate misinformation. Fake messages are written and posted with the intent of creating one’s own “truth,” to conceal one’s motives and actions, and, on a larger level, to mislead organizations and/or individuals, gain financial or political advantages, and harm others. Fake news is often spread with sensational, exaggerated, or false claims in order to attract attention. It is not limited to public and social media, but is also found in politics, market research, science, the religious realm, and elsewhere. While deception and intentional misinformation have always been with humanity—since the serpent in paradise—it seems to have attained such an unexpected and bewildering level that it has become almost impossible to tell lies and falsehoods from truth.

### Conspiracy Theories

Related to fake news are conspiracy theories.<sup>1</sup> Conspiracy theories consist of explanations of events and situations—past, present, or future—suggesting that certain powerful persons and/or groups behind the scenes pursue threatening and harmful goals related to the life or way of life of individuals or entire populations. They may be triggered by deep distrust in official statements and explanations—justifiable or not—and be motivated by religious theories or political agendas. By definition, conspiracy theories are unable to prove their claims—that is, they lack sufficient evidence. On the other hand, they may not be falsified or refuted easily, if at all. Thus, they become a matter of faith. Adherents to conspiracy theories often live in their own world. Their theories have become true to them, even if they are questionable, wrong, and harmful. Some also believe that these theories must be shared with others and strongly defended. Typically, these people can no longer be reached by rational arguments. Rather, each

argument against a conspiracy theory is typically incorporated into the theory in order to strengthen and validate it. Scott A. Reid states,

Conspiracy theories increase in prevalence in periods of widespread anxiety, uncertainty, or hardship, as during wars and economic depressions and in the aftermath of natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, and pandemics. . . . This suggests that conspiratorial thinking is driven by a strong human desire to make sense of social forces that are self-relevant, important, and threatening. . . . The content of conspiracy theories is emotionally laden and its alleged discovery can be gratifying.<sup>2</sup>

“Conspiracy theories once limited to fringe audiences have become commonplace in mass media, emerging as a cultural phenomenon of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.”<sup>3</sup>

Here are some examples of conspiracy theories: 1) Supposedly, the United States government created the AIDS virus in order to “kill homosexuals and African Americans.”<sup>4</sup> 2) There “are claims that Elvis Presley’s death was faked, and that Adolf Hitler survived the Second World War and fled to the Americas, to Antarctica, or to the Moon. . . . Some theorists believe that Denver International Airport stands above an underground city which serves as a headquarters of the New World Order. Theorists cite the airport’s unusually large size, its distance from Denver city center, Masonic and alleged Satanic symbols . . . Bible conspiracy theories posit that significant parts of the New Testament are false, or have been omitted.”<sup>5</sup> 3) It has been suggested that the General Conference is infiltrated by Jesuits. 4) Allegedly, Bill Gates is “the creator of Covid-19, . . . a profiteer from a virus vaccine, and . . . part of a dastardly plot to use the illness to cull or surveil the global population.”<sup>6</sup> Similar ideas are floating around regarding Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National In-

stitute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

What are some of the problems with conspiracy theories? First, they may be true or false; by definition, we do not know. If they are false, conspiracy theories are fake news and are deceptive. If we do not know that they can be supported by clear evidence beyond doubt, it is irresponsible and morally wrong to disseminate them.

Second, they may hurt and harm severely those who are attacked, especially if the targeted people are innocent.

Third, conspiracy theories are able to destroy trust and thereby the fabric of society. For instance, there is no way to know if Jesuits have infiltrated the church. But if we constantly think about them, we have to be suspicious about all fellow workers. Yet if we do so and others do the same, the organization becomes inoperable. We should not forget that God has promised that He will take care of His church, and therefore, we do not have to worry.

Fourth, conspiracy theories create an alternative reality. The more we hear and talk about them, the more they take on a life of their own and the more biased we become, convinced they are true even if they are wrong. They no longer allow us to look at all evidence with fairness<sup>7</sup> and may psychologically harm the persons believing in them. Maybe Paul's message to Timothy applies also to such a scenario today: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season. . . . For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Tim 4:2–4, ESV).

Fifth, the Gospels do not leave us a track record of Jesus pursuing and sharing conspiracy theories.<sup>8</sup> He had other priorities—namely, proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God and salvation from personal sin and from death through Himself. His emphasis was on good news, not bad news. He did not build barriers to other people by the use of claims to conspiracy, but rather tried to tear walls down by giving each and every one an opportunity to become a child of God and be saved. Since Jesus is not only our Lord and Savior but also our example, we need to follow His approach to other people and to life.

Some conspiracy theories in the context of COVID-19 have already been mentioned. Here are some reiterated by Adventist believers: "Dear Friend and Fellow Believer, the good news is that corona virus is not such a big deal. The bad news is that gov't is lying to us and that means more trouble. . . . You need to **see this video!** All the hospitals are empty!" "I posted 5 reasons that Gates' plan to depopulate the world is flawed." "Dear Friend and Pastor, Coronavirus is a crisis brought by CDC, WHO, Bill Gates and forces pushing a New World Order to humble the US and require UN and martial law." "Halleluia—Justice is being served—if this is a shock, it shows how biased the media is. This 16 min video has good evidence behind it. Faucii [sic]

Indicted, Faces Military Tribal To Answer For Crimes Against America."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic raises again the question of truth versus lie. But the issue is much deeper than only fake news and the occasional conspiracy theory: the issue is a basic and systematic assault on truth. Many people's approach to COVID-19 continues to disintegrate the truth.

### Truth and Lie

Alexander Schwalbe speaks of "lies and deception everywhere." He writes, "When in the process of secularization God faded into the background, a sacralization of politics followed. . . . Now the fragmentation of reality and the dissolution of our previous experience of the world seems to be followed by a destruction of truth. After God is forgotten . . . truth can also be forgotten. Instead, the lie is spreading."<sup>10</sup> Miroslav Volf states, "The truth about the past cannot be had, the argument goes, and the demand for truth is dangerous. I disagree strenuously."<sup>11</sup>

How do we define lies and falsehoods? While truth is the antidote to the lie, the lie may be so successful that it overpowers truth—at least temporarily. Wikipedia makes a good start by explaining a lie in the following terms:

A lie is a statement of which the sender (*liar*) knows or suspects that it is untrue and which is expressed with the intent that the recipient believes it anyway, or in other words, "the (also non-verbal) communication of a subjective untruth with the aim of creating or maintaining a false impression with the other party." Lies are used to gain an advantage, for example to conceal an error or a forbidden action and thus avoid criticism or punishment. People also lie for the sake of politeness, shame, fear, insecurity or distress ("white lie"), in order to thwart the other party's plans or to protect themselves, other persons or certain interests (e. g., privacy, intimacy, economic interests). They also lie compulsively/pathologically or for fun sake.<sup>12</sup>

Lies can be expressed in words (Prov 6:19), in a way of life (Ps 62:9), in errors (2Thess 2:11) or in a false form of religion (Rom 1:25). . . . Lying is characterized in various ways, e. g. by Cain's evasive answer (Gen 4:9), Jacob's intentional lie (Gen 27:19), Gehazi's false representation of his Master's behavior (2Kings 5:21–27) and the deception practiced by Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5:1–10). Lying is the sin of the Antichrist (1John 2:22) and all habitual liars lose eternal salvation (Rev 21:27).<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, Christians and Adventists are affected by this problem. Whether we want it to or not, culture exerts an influence on us and shapes us—at

least to some extent. In the public sphere, lies are usually acceptable and not punishable as long as they are not perjury. So-called “white lies”—that is, deciding to be untruthful in difficult situations—are considered tolerable or perhaps even the necessary and right thing to do. For instance, in the Mediterranean world, deception “is a strategy for establishing and protecting honor, as well as for bringing shame upon one’s enemies.”<sup>14</sup>

Even if we confess to accept the Ten Commandments, we may consider some of them to be more important than others. Lying, fake news, and conspiracy theories are understood as trivial offenses, while murder is considered to be a serious crime.<sup>15</sup> Usually, the effects of adultery are more dramatic than the effects of a lie. Yet one can also drive people to suicide with a lie or incite persecution by making false allegations. “Deception, the act of deluding or misleading others, is an important ethical issue in the Bible and in moral discourse. In Scripture, deception basically constitutes a false witness and is condemned (Exod. 20:16).”<sup>16</sup> Thus, an offence against one of the Ten Commandments is a sin, as is the offence against any other of the Ten Commandments.<sup>17</sup>

### The Lie in the Book of Revelation

In the book of Revelation nine texts are found on the subject of lying: There are false apostles who are liars (*pseudēs*, Rev 2:2). Some people claim to be Jews, but they are not really. They are lying (*pseudomai*, Rev 3:9). The false prophet (*pseudoprophētēs*, Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10) spreads lies and falsehoods. Three texts describe the terrible consequences for liars: “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars [*pseudēs*], their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev 21:8). Whoever uses the lie to achieve his purposes has no access to the new Jerusalem: “And nothing unclean will come in, and no one who does abominations and lies [*pseudos*], but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” (Rev 21:27). “Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying [*pseudos*]” (Rev 22:15). Fortunately, there is a group of true followers of Jesus, the 144,000. “No lie [*pseudos*] was found in their mouth” (Rev 14:5).

These texts provide the following information:

- *If there is a lie, there must also be truth.* Without truth, there is no lie. While truth is called into question nowadays and people can no longer distinguish between truth and lie, we find chaos happening before our eyes. Conceptually, lying and deception are closely related. Jezebel, claiming to be a prophetess, seduces (*planaō*) God’s servants (Rev 2:20). Satan deceives (*planaō*) the whole world (Rev 12:9)—that is, all the people and nations who follow him (*planaō*, Rev 20:3, 8, 10). The beast that comes out of the earth “deceives

[*planaō*] those who dwell on the earth” (Rev 13:14). As false prophet (*pseudoprophētēs*), it performs miraculous signs, deceiving (*planaō*) those who receive the mark of the beast and those who worship his image (Rev 19:20). Babylon deceives (*planaō*) all nations by its sorcery (Rev 18:23). So, deception and lying are major themes in Revelation. On the other hand, Revelation uses the word “true” or “truthfully” (*alēthinos*) ten times. True are Jesus (Rev 3:7, 14; 19:11) and God (Rev 6:10), and therefore also God’s ways (Rev 15:3), God’s judgments (Rev 16:7; 19:2), and God’s words (Rev 19:9; 21:5; 22:16).

In his gospel, John describes Jesus as personified truth (*alētheia*, John 14:6), who speaks the truth (*alētheia*, John 8:40, 45–46). “As Christ is the cause of life, so he is the cause of truth.”<sup>18</sup> The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth (*alētheia*, John 15:26). The devil is “a liar [*pseustēs*] and the father of lies [*pseudos*],” and truth (*alētheia*) is not in him (John 8:44). However, what John reports as eyewitness is true (*alēthēs*, John 10:41; 19:35; 21:24; 3 John 1:12). Lying (*pseudomai*) means not practicing the truth (*alētheia*, 1 John 1:6). The truth (*alētheia*) is not in a liar (*pseustēs*, 1 John 2:4). No lie (*pseudos*) is of the truth (*alētheia*, 1 John 2:21). Lie is lie, and truth is truth. The truth is absolutely true, coherent, and consistent.

So, there is truth. It cannot be mixed with lies; otherwise it is no longer truth. Truth and lie are mutually exclusive opposites. Truth corresponds to the character of God; lies reflect the character of Satan. Truth must therefore be embodied in the followers of Jesus. So-called half-truths and white lies have no place with Christians. Ignoring the truth means bowing to the lie.

- *It is extremely dangerous to lie.* Revelation makes blatant statements on the subject of lying. It talks about liars and about those who love and practice the lie. Since the kingdom of God is truth, the liar and deceiver and the one who consciously lets himself be deceived have no place in this kingdom. The matter of lying is so serious that it excludes access to the new Jerusalem and thus access to God, leading to the second, eternal death.

- *Lies and deception threaten the Christian community and the individual Christian.* The lie either completely destroys faith or alters the content of faith so that it no longer correctly represents God’s character, will, and plan for humanity. Thus, the liar rebels against God and breaks the relationship with Him. But a lie also has the potential to destroy human relationships. Ellen G. White states that the person who uses “untruths sells his soul in a cheap market. His falsehoods may seem to serve in emergencies; he may thus seem to make business advancement that he could not gain by fair dealing; but he finally reaches the place where he can trust no one. Himself a falsifier, he has no confidence in the word of others.”<sup>19</sup> D. W. Gill points to some consequences of lying:

Lying is wrong first of all, then, because it alienates us from the God who is truth itself.

Second, lying destroys community and interpersonal relations (Prov 25:18; 26:18–19, 28). . . the trust which is essential to community is undermined. A third reason lying is wrong is that it destroys the liar himself. The contradiction between the liar’s knowledge of truth and his participation in the lie is a dehumanizing surrender of personal wholeness and integrity. Furthermore, one lie inexorably leads to further lies to cover up the first. The web of falsehood produces a kind of bondage that is the opposite situation to the knowledge and practice of the truth which sets one free.<sup>20</sup>

- *There is not only a lie as an individual act, but also as a system.* There is an individual’s lie. There is also corporate falsehood. This can be seen with the false prophet, who was controlled by demonic powers, and with the false apostles. The apocalyptic Babylon deceives mankind to achieve its goals. This is to mislead Christianity and the faithful followers of Jesus.
- *We are responsible for lying.* Of course, difficult circumstances can lead people to attempt to escape them by the use of lies—for example, when there seems to be no good alternative, and honesty might be considered dangerous for people’s lives. Nevertheless, we are responsible for how we deal with such situations. Carl Zuckmayer (1898–1977), a German author and playwright, whose father was of Jewish descent but had converted to Christianity, got into trouble with the Nazi regime. When he tried to escape to Switzerland, he was interrogated by a Nazi officer at the border. Instead of lying about his problems, he admitted that he was not a member of the party, that his works were banned in Germany, and that he did not agree with the National Socialist worldview. However, instead of arresting him, the officer was flabbergasted by Zuckmayer’s honesty and helped him cross the border to Switzerland, to safety.<sup>21</sup> However, we do not renounce the lie just because we hope or reckon that things will turn out well. That does not always happen. We renounce it because it is right to speak truth and it is wrong to lie, regardless of the circumstances.
- *We are not only responsible for lying, but also for accepting the lie.* Revelation 22:15 speaks of loving the lie. Similarly, Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12 states, “And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” Obviously, one can enjoy the scandal. But that is as reprehensible as is lying. Followers of Jesus, followers of the Truth, are committed to the truth.
- *Fortunately, there are people who have completely distanced themselves from the lie.* The context makes it clear that they worship God and observe His commandments. They are clearly on God’s side and trust His power and love to make right decisions under the most difficult situations. They are committed to truth and proclaim the truth (Rev 14:6–12). Thereby, they

automatically uncover deception.

### Implications

Commitment to truth and opposition to lie, falsehood, and deception leads to implications.

1. *We reject plagiarism in whatever form.* Even if common in educated or not so educated circles, we do not claim the work of other persons as our own work. We do not cheat.
2. *We do not indulge in conspiracy theories and do not proclaim them publicly.* They are not verifiable. Having to retract them or having them be proven wrong over time may be harmful to God’s cause. We also need to be as objective as possible and look at any issue from different perspectives. Mature persons listen to critique and are grateful for feedback. While we may make educated guesses with regard to the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, we must remain cautious even if the audience prefers a “clear” message. Clear messages are to be proclaimed where Scripture is definite—for instance, “You shall not bear false witness” (Exod 20:16).
3. *We avoid the use of double standards.* Trying to promote what is good in an unethical way, because we think that the good must be enforced at any rate, is still problematic. In the name of so-called truth, morality can easily be abandoned. It is just not true that the end justifies the means.
4. *As individuals we commit ourselves clearly to Jesus.* We do not deny Him with our conduct, complacency, or cowardice. We pay taxes to the government. We support justice. Vishal Mangalwadi writes,

Those who followed Jesus were tired of men’s stories and their kingdoms. They were seeking God’s kingdom, a kingdom that did not derive its legitimacy from the sword, philosophy, or myths, but from truth. Therefore, while Jesus’ followers honored civic authority as divinely ordained, their commitment to truth empowered them to resist the sword when demanded that they bend the knee before falsehood. . . . It was their commitment to truth that forbade ascribing divinity to Caesar or submitting to brute force exercised apart from goodness.<sup>22</sup>

5. *Christianity is particularly affected by lies and conspiracy theories promoted in social media and elsewhere.* Fake news is not funny or entertaining, but rather absolutely destructive. For when everything is called into question and when truth can no longer be identified, how, then, can the claim of Christianity be upheld—the claim that there is a God who created everything and who governs everything in love, the claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and not just a good man, the claim that death does not have the last word and that there is salvation through Jesus and eternal life in communion with God? The lie does not only disintegrate our culture and our coexistence; it also destroys Christianity and the life of every single person. Therefore, lying is dangerous.

In other words, we may have a problem. The commandment against falsehood, lying, and deception cannot simply be ticked off as if it does not concern us. It concerns each and every one of us. We must turn back, confess falsehood, and forsake what is against God's will. We cannot claim truth and proclaim truth if we ourselves do not try to be truthful. That would not be authentic. We are committed to the truth in every form and step in to defend truth—even in the difficult time of COVID-19.

### Conclusion

Yes, there are lies and falsehoods, as Revelation admits. There is even the danger of getting used to lying, of learning to love lying and falsehood, and of being excluded from the city of God. But there are also true believers who have distanced themselves from it. They are committed to the truth in all forms, especially the personified Truth, Jesus our Lord. In the end, the real thing still counts. J. Hamel may be correct when he says, "The issue is not to oppose possibly wrong views. It is much more: through us God wants to bring to the fore his truth and free people from the power of lies."<sup>23</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> See the helpful discussion of conspiracy theories and the dynamics of how they work in Michael Butter, "Nichts ist wie es scheint" *Über Verschwörungstheorien* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Conspiracy Theory," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/conspiracy-theory> (accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. "Conspiracy Theory," last modified June 10, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspiracy\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspiracy_theory) (accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*.

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. "List of Conspiracy Theories," last modified June 10, 2020 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_conspiracy\\_theories](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_conspiracy_theories) (accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Daisuke Wakabayashi, Davey Alba, and Marc Tracy, "Bill Gates, at Odds With Trump on Virus, Becomes a Right-Wing Target," *New York Times*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/technology/bill-gates-virus-conspiracy-theories.html> (accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> On the importance and blessing of fair-mindedness, see Frank M. Hasel, *Living for God: Reclaiming the Joy of Christian Virtue* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2020), 18–20.

<sup>8</sup> When Jesus confronted the Pharisees with their own lifestyle and theology, it was not a conspiracy theory; His accusations were verifiable by His audience. Furthermore, He spoke prophetically, knowing future events ahead of time. Jesus did not guess; He knew. While His foreknowledge sets Jesus apart from His followers, nevertheless, His disciples did not engage in conspiracy theories either. While it is claimed that conspiracy theories are found, for example, in Revelation, we need to keep in mind that Scripture claims divine revelation. Biblical prophecies are not guesswork, which may be true or false, but rather divine revelation of reality.

<sup>9</sup> From emails sent to me and many others on April 3, 2020; April 5, 2020; April 23, 2020; and May 20, 2020. The names of the authors have been withheld.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Schwalbe, "Die Gotteskrise und die Lust zu lügen," *Christ in der Gegenwart* 68 (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Against the Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 146.

<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia, German ed., s.v. "Lüge," <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lüge>, last modified May 15, 2020 (accessed June 10, 2020), translated by Ekkehardt Mueller.

<sup>13</sup> A. Flavelle, "Lie, Lying," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 687.

<sup>14</sup> John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, 3rd ed., Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 38.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Carsten Johnsen, *God, the Situation Ethicist* (Sisteron: Untold Story, n.d.), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Joe E. Trull, "Deception," in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 210.

<sup>17</sup> G. H. Clark, "Truth," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 1114, argues, "One should also bear in mind that moral and spiritual truth is as much truth as mathematical, scientific, and historical truth. It is all equally 'intellectual.' Nonintellectual truth is unthinkable. It is not true that the common conception of truth as a fact or what is real 'has no moral or spiritual significance.' We need only to recall that God gave the Ten Commandments."

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 76.

<sup>20</sup> D. W. Gill, "Lie, Lying," in Elwell, 639.

<sup>21</sup> Carl Zuckmayer, "Ehrlichkeit," in *Lesebuch für den Religionsunterricht für 14–16 Jährige* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag Stuttgart, 1969), 167–170.

<sup>22</sup> Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 140.

<sup>23</sup> J. Hamel, "Von Wahrheit und Lüge," in *Christliche Ethik: Ein Quellenheft*, ed. Heinz-Horst Schrey (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966), 57, translated by Ekkehardt Mueller.