

1

A friend of mine told me last week, “I voted early. I don’t want to be anywhere near a place of voting on the actual election day, for I’ve heard rumors about violence that could occur.” News stories have heightened awareness of a new fear in our nation, such as “armed civilians in tactical gear [who] showed up at ballot drop boxes”<sup>1</sup> in Arizona supposedly to monitor voters. In all my years of voting, I don’t ever recall anyone being afraid to vote in our country. Fear of voting sounds like something that could happen somewhere else, but not here. As conspiracy theories continue to plague our nation about stolen votes and electronic fraud, we hear that many states are returning to paper ballots, which can be hand counted if needed.

You’ve probably heard of other conspiracy theories throughout the years, such as the denial of anyone landing on the moon in 1969. Ever seen those white condensation trails that streak in the sky behind airplanes? One conspiracy suggests they are chemicals the government seeds into the atmosphere to control us. Cell phone towers became a recent conspiracy as

some suggested that they made people vulnerable to Covid, which relates to the odd idea that the Covid vaccine includes tracking chips.<sup>2</sup>

It appears that some like to stir up trouble, creating chaos that can spread so quickly in our electronic and social media world, but stirring up rumors is not a new phenomenon. After the emperor Nero died in the year 68, rumors circulated that he had faked his death, was still alive in hiding, and would return to his throne. Others suggested that he really was dead but would return from the dead and rule again.<sup>3</sup>

By reading the letter to the Thessalonians, we get a hint about a conspiracy circulating in the early church. The letter warned its listeners to “Let no one deceive you in any way” and to not be “quickly shaken in mind or alarmed.” It appears the rumor had been spreading that “the day of the Lord is already here.” The writer used the Greek word παρουσία (parousia), which means the arrival or the coming of someone important, often used to refer to an emperor’s triumphant visit to a city. Some in the early church

2

believed that Jesus would return at any moment and would create a better world in their own lifetime. It appears that some people were saying that it had already happened, leaving those in the church confused. Just imagine the conversations in church:

“Did you know Jesus returned this week?”

“What? Really? How did I miss that?”

“I guess you’ve been too busy to notice.”

“I thought when Jesus returned he would make the world better, like rule with peace and get rid of evil. Things seem pretty much the same to me. Are you sure about his return?”

“Well, that’s what I heard.”

“You do know you can’t believe everything you hear, right?”

“But I have a reliable source.”

“Who is your source?”

“I heard it while shopping in the market. That’s the best source of news, isn’t it?”

“Well, I suppose it is if you want to know where to purchase the best olives and figs.”

Rumors and conspiracy theories have been alive for a very long time, but today it's so much easier to spread misinformation. At the touch of a button, one can send out lies through social media or email. Some believe that because they saw it posted online that it must be true, and without thinking, they send it onward without checking the facts. I’ve heard people argue vehemently about things I knew were not true.

The letter to the Thessaolonians suggested that while we wait for the world to become a better place, much struggle will occur, and we see that today in the suffering that exists. So what are we to do in the meantime when misinformation permeates our world and we feel tempted to argue about it?

A recent *Sojourners* article examined a contemporary conspiracy issue and asked pastors how they spoke about it to their congregations. Jeb Barr from First Baptist in Texas replied, “Christians are meant to be agents of hope, to be peacemakers; the Bible says we’re not to be quarrelsome. We’re not to be the ones spreading fear and division and anger.”<sup>4</sup>

3

So what do we do when faced with so many opinions swirling around us? The letter to the Thessalonians offers a suggestion: “brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.”

First, the letter suggests standing firm. Standing firm means that even when some may try to stir up trouble, you don’t need to feel shaken. Standing firm, however, does not give you permission to be belligerent or rude. The church in Philippi heard a similar suggestion when the apostle Paul wrote them: “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”<sup>5</sup> Even when we disagree, we don’t need to be disagreeable.

Second, the letter suggests holding fast to the traditions you were taught. How many of you remember

something you learned from a Sunday school teacher, a pastor, or another member of a congregation who is no longer among us? Maybe someone told you in your childhood a Bible story that has stuck with you. Or someone responded to your challenging question. Or you observed a person’s faith and life and somehow knew that person trusted God. Turn to someone near you and share one brief thing you learned from someone in church who is no longer here.

Through our memories and the traditions passed on to us, we remain connected to those who have gone before us. This past week many celebrated All Saints’ Day or All Souls’ Day, a day to remember those who have died who made an impact on us. For those faithful ones who may have felt stirred up but not shaken, may their example remain among us as we remember how their faith continues to echo here among us.

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.npr.org/2022/11/02/1132822805/election-violence-concerns-voting-threats](http://www.npr.org/2022/11/02/1132822805/election-violence-concerns-voting-threats)

<sup>2</sup> [www.livescience.com/11375-top-ten-conspiracy-theories.html](http://www.livescience.com/11375-top-ten-conspiracy-theories.html)

---

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_conspiracy\\_theories#Death\\_of\\_Nero](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_conspiracy_theories#Death_of_Nero)

<sup>4</sup> K. Khari Brown and Ronald E. Brown, “Christians Are Meant to Be Agents of Hope,” *Sojourners*, June 2022, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 1:27.