**Conspiracies real or imagined?**

Text: Ephesians 2:1-3

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**Scriptures:** Psalm 53:1-3; Ephesians 2:1-10

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] ‘Behold our God’, 51b, 14, 204, 505, 531+532

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#8; Articles 3:1-3)

**Theme:** The total depravity of mankind

**Proposition:** You must accept the evil within your natural self before you can turn to Christ for healing

**Introduction**

Imagine that you are sitting in a Jewish synagogue in the first century and people start talking about this new and rapidly growing movement called Christianity. Someone says, “Christians follow a false religion, Jesus never came back to life again after his death by crucifixion”. Another asks “how do you know that?” “Oh, that’s obvious. After his death, his disciples came at night-time and stole his body and then they plotted together to spread lies that He was actually alive again. Christianity is just a big conspiracy designed to undermine Judaism”.

This type of conversation is a plausible possibility because we know from Scripture that the soldiers who were guarding the sealed tomb in which the body of Jesus had been laid were given money by the chief priests and elders to spread misinformation/’fake news’ to cover up the reality of his missing body (Matt 28:11-15). This fictitious synagogue goer believed a conspiracy theory about Jesus’ disciples.

A **conspiracy theory** is an explanation for an event or situation that involves a secret plan or agreement between people who plot together with unlawful and/or harmful purposes. Whereas an **actual conspiracy** involves the concealment of evil motives and often involves the spreading of misinformation, a conspiracy theory is lacks evidence to prove or disprove that there is a hidden evil agenda behind a particular event of situation. Popular recent contemporary conspiracy theories include:

* That the US administration, rather than Osama bin Laden, was ultimately behind the Sept 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Towers
* That Princess Diana did not die accidently in a Paris highway tunnel, but was assassinated by British intelligence agencies.
* That the NASA moon landings never actually happened, but were an elaborate hoax to promote belief in the technological superiority of the USA.

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic many conspiracy theories have circulated along with the virus, including:

* That COVID-19 originated from the Chinese Wuhan Institute of Virology either by a wilful or accidental release from the lab into the community.
* That COVID vaccines contain microchips.
* That vaccination mandates are being enforced by civil governments not because they are in the best interests of public health, but because they result in greater control over populations and even larger profits for multi-national pharmaceutical companies.

What can we say to all this? Real conspiracies certainly do exist within the corporate business world where sometimes prices are fixed, adverse product details hidden, and consumers wilfully harmed. Real conspiracies certainly do exist within governments when political agendas and ideologies result in laws and policies that do not serve the best interests of populations. Real conspiracies certainty do exist in churches when crimes such as child abuse have been hidden and/or allowed to continue by those in leadership.

This sermon is actually not mainly about conspiracies or conspiracy theories, but about what lies behind the evil intent of those who plan wickedness whether they be in business, government, or church. This sermon is about the evil that resides naturally within you and me. It is a message that focusses on the topic of ‘Total Depravity”; the ‘T’ of the Calvinist acronym ‘TULIP’ and the subject of the Canons of Dort in articles 3:1-3:3. The Bible explains to any who will listen, why people do, at times, conspire together to plot and to do evil. We’re going to receive the truth from the God who never lies this afternoon in our text from Ephesians 2:1-3 under three points:

1. The source of evil
2. The spread of evil
3. The effect of evil
4. **The source of evil**

There was a conspiracy when Jesus ministered on this earth. I am not speaking of a theory, but the truth as revealed by Scripture. The chief priests and elders ‘*plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him’* (Matt 26:4) Why do people plan, conspire with others and do bad things? Could it be just a lack of a good education? Or perhaps poor role models from parents, peers and others? Or maybe mental health issues leading to bad choices?

Whilst these may be contributing factors in some cases, they are **not** the root cause of evil within people. So whilst education, good role models and a healthy mind are valuable, they do not eradicate evil in human beings. Some very well-informed educated people have committed acts of great evil. Some people who have grown up in godly families have been very wicked. Some people with sharp, intelligent minds have been responsible for atrocious crimes.

To understand where evil comes from in this world, we need to go back to the first human being. The first man was originally perfect in his whole being, in body and soul. In the words of Canons of Dort Art 3:1, he was ‘*adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of his Creator and of all spiritual things; his will and heart were upright, all his affections pure and therefore man was completely holy*’. Being created in the image of God, Adam and Eve shared many of the perfect characteristics of their Creator. They were part of the ‘very good’ creation that God had made (Gen 1:31). Whilst they had no evil within them, they did have the freedom to be able to obey or to disobey God.

Obedience would result in continuing life, disobedience would result in death. This was clearly communicated to our first parents so that there could be no doubt in their minds: “*LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."* (Gen 2:16-17) The Canons of Dort summarise the fall of Adam who rebelled ‘*against God through the institution of the devil and through his own free will, he deprived himself of the excellent gifts that he had received from his Creator*’. When Adam sinned, he became corrupted in every way.

Many years ago I had a small petrol stove which I would take when I went overnight tramping. On one trip this stove leaked into my backpack, and everything inside then smelt of the spilt fuel. My clothes had an unpleasant aroma, and my food was inedible. Everything within that pack was polluted by the petrol. So it was with Adam. Whilst he retained something of the image of God – he was still capable of complex, conceptual thought, he retained language skills, creativity and a moral sense of right and wrong, every part of him was damaged, marred, spoilt, impaired.

He retained human relationships – we know that he had a family with his wife Eve with whom he shared companionship. Yet his relationship with God was severed as a result of his rebellion and he was separated from God – driven from the garden of evil, removed from the tree of life. His family life was greatly marred by the murder of one son by another. His polluted nature spread to his kids. He was a spiritually dead man who would die physically many centuries later. Adam’s will was no longer aligned to God, but instead was bound to evil impulses and desires within his heart. As a result his whole person was infected by the power of sin.

Theologically we say that he became ‘totally depraved’ (the ‘T’ of TULIP). This does not mean that he was as wicked as he could possibly be, but that every part of his being had become corrupt. He was not merely weakened spiritually – in need of a ‘top up’ to get him back to where he had first been. His situation was much more desperate than that; he was ‘*dead in his trespasses and sins*’ (Eph 2:1). Before his fall he could chose not to sin, but after his fall that option was no longer available to him. Now his very nature was to rebel against God. Whilst he likely did many good and kind things for his wife and family, whilst he likely continued to care for plans and animals, hidden within him was an evil heart that he could not change. We are all naturally like fallen Adam because we are all descended from him, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The spread of evil**

In the physical world we know that the COVID-19 virus spreads predominantly via droplets in the air that are breathed out by one person and then breathed in by another. In the spiritual/moral realm, how does evil spread from one person to another? Some say that evil propagates when one person imitates another who is doing wrong. They would say: completely isolate a person and their essentially good human nature would not be corrupted. This idea was taught by Pelagius in the 4th and 5th centuries AD who believed that infants are born perfectly blameless.

It’s quite an attractive thought, but it is not true. Scripture clearly reveals that all people sin because we are all sinners by nature. We are not sinners as a result of how we live, but as a consequence of who are naturally. David recognised this sad truth in Psalm 51 when he declared “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me*” (v5). Just as the petrol in my backpack contaminated all my gear, so it is like that with the rebellion of our common first ancestor Adam, the effect of this has ‘spilt into all of us’. It’s like we are all in the same polluted backpack as him.

This spread of the fallen sinful nature of the first man is described by Paul in Romans 5:21: “*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*”. The Canons of Dort explain it this way: “Since after the fall man became corrupt, he as a corrupt father brought forth corrupt children”. God chose Adam to represent the entire human race. Just as you and I cannot chose our inherited genetics, so also, we cannot select a different past representative. Even if we could, who else apart from Christ can you confidently say would have done a better job at resisting temptation than Adam did back in the garden of Eden?

As a result of the pollution of sin from our common ancestor Adam, we are all conceived in sin. In the words of Ephesians 2, naturally ‘dead in our trespasses and sins”, ‘children of wrath like the rest of mankind’. This is why all human beings are conceived, in the words of Canons of Dort, ‘inclined to evil’ and ‘slaves of sin’. Anyone who has observed the innate naughtiness of a baby or a toddler has seen evidence of this unpleasant truth surfacing in tantrums, naughtiness and defiance.

Scripture reveals a bleak portrait of humanity in many places. We read, for example, from Psalm 53: “*They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one*” (3). Just as the condition of Adam was that of total depravity – he was not as bad as he could be, but every part of him was affected by sin, so all people are naturally totally depraved and incapable of any ‘saving good’ – that is any thought, word or action that is pleasing to God, honouring and glorifying Him above all else.

Imagine that I have some very significant news for you today and this is what I say to you: ‘You are going to have a major operation next week. Surgeons will remove your heart from your body, and you will be given lots of anti-rejection drugs as a transplanted heart will be put into your body. You will spend a long time in hospital, you will have a difficult recovery, and you will struggle for the rest of life as your body continues, at times, to try and reject the new heart that you have received. Would this be good news? Well yes, IF the diagnosis was that you had a chronic heart condition with the prognosis that you were going to die shortly from heart failure.

The doctrine of “Total Depravity” is unpleasant news that nobody wants to hear, but it is a true diagnosis of the human heart condition. Nobody would willingly receive a new heart and go through all the struggle of ongoing rejection issues if they did not understand how desperately, terminally, sick they were. So it is with the gospel. We need to know and personally accept the distressing reality of the bad news before we can realise how good the good news really is.

Our reading from Ephesians 2:1-10 is one of the clearest presentations of the gospel in Scripture. It begins with the bad news of spiritual deadness, of total depravity, of ‘*blindness, horrible darkness, futility, perverseness of judgement, wickedness, rebelliousness and stubbornness of will and heart and impurity in all affections*’ (to use the words of Canons of Dort Art 3:1). It continues with the good news of God’s rich mercy, and love in Christ whereby He kindly saves people like you and me by grace through faith, imputing/crediting the righteousness of Christ to us and changing us from children of wrath to children of God.

Just as evil spread from Adam to all of humanity, so righteousness has spread to many from Christ as Paul explains to the Romans in these words: “*For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous*” (Rom 5:19). How can a person like you or me know whether we have truly been made righteous in Christ? How can we have assurance that our faith is real? One answer is by looking out for conspiracies, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The effect of evil**

I am sure that you don’t need me to inform you that we all live in a changing and confusing world. This has been so since the fall, but all humanity seems especially volatile and perplexing at present. There is no lack of information to access, but with so much ‘fake news’, so many ‘conspiracy theories’ and so much more propaganda than unbiased reporting of facts, what and who should we believe? It’s an important question, not just for our own well-being, but also for our relationships with one another. Differences in the acceptance and interpretation of information can lead to tensions and divisions within families, amongst friends and within church congregations like this. This is especially true at times of rapid change and uncertainty, as at present.

It’s helpful, more than that – essential – that we especially focus first and foremost on what we do know to be right and true. For example, we know that Satan is the ‘Evil One’ (e.g. Matt 13:19). He is a liar and the Father of lies (John 8:44). He is a real conspirator who plots and schemes with anyone who will listen to him. He is a dangerous enemy (e.g. 1 Peter 5:8), but he can be resisted, and he is not all-powerful.

Does being born again by the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit grant us immunity from the risk of Satan’s many conspiracies? No. Because whilst the true disciple of Christ has a new heart, being alive in Him, he or she retains the old nature that at times seeks to reject the new heart. The Christian is no longer totally depraved, but is a mixture of the ‘old self’ which belongs to the former manner of life of a person before they come to Christ (Eph 4:22) and the ‘new self’, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24). Evil still affects each one of us, even though we, who are in Christ, are declared righteous before God.

If we deny the existence of this inner evil, then we are liars like the Devil, as we heard from 1 John 1:8 before: “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*”. We are wise if we are cautious about relying on our own thoughts, opinions and ideas about everything. In Christ, our minds are no longer totally depraved, no longer futile in their thinking (Eph 4:17), yet they are also not fully trustworthy. We are not yet what we shall one day be.

Every person on this earth is therefore affected by evil to a lesser or greater extent. Whilst the Christian is orientated towards the truth of God, we are **not yet** fully healed from the effects of our sin and rebellion. Whilst the non-Christian is **not** orientated towards the revealed truth of God in Scripture, yet some general and helpful truths are observable by non-believers in this creation. So information and advice - both from Christians and non-Christians - is potentially somewhat helpful, but not necessarily 100% reliable. In summary, this world is in a complex and messy state.

There are real conspiracies. There are also conspiracy theories that are untrue and there are conspiracy theories that are true, but as yet unproven. Businesses, large and small offering products (even Christian ones) do not have completely reliable motives and do not always act in the best interests of consumers. Governments, large and small, also do not have completely reliable motives and do not always act in the best interests of their citizens. Church leaders and those who are part of congregations like this also do not always have completely reliable motives and do not always act according to the Scriptural truths they profess.

In light of the truth of God’s revelation about the nature of human beings, both those who are as yet still dead in their trespasses and sins and those who have been made alive in Christ, what can we say? Do not believe that everything you hear from businesses and governments is necessarily true and without evil motivations. Check the teaching, decisions and behaviours of church leaders to see if they are consistent with the truth of God’s Word. Accept that your own ideas and assessments both about yourself, others, and the world around you are influenced by the effects of your old sinful self as Satan potentially conspires with you to lead you astray. You and I are likely wrong in some of our opinions.

In other words, be cautious about fully trusting anyone (including yourself) apart from the Lord who is absolutely trustworthy. Imagine a battlefield. It might be hard at times to see who is on which side. There is likely much chaos, confusion and suffering. The theatre of war is not a pleasant place to be - as we see with the images coming through of the Russian invasion of Ukraine at present. This world is a spiritual battlefield in which we wrestle against the forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12). There is a spiritual conspiracy orchestrated by Satan. This is no theory, it is reality; proven in history, revealed in God’s Word. As a result this world is a complex and messy place (just as battlefields are). Don’t be surprised if you are confused, disorientated and distressed at times.

Many godly saints have been disorientated and distressed in the past, as Scripture repeatedly reveals (e.g. Psalms, 2 Cor 4:7-12). Our hope and ultimate protection does not lie in the products and services of businesses, in the care of human governments, or even in the leadership and community of the church. Supremely our hope and trust must lie in the One who is completely without evil, who has never and will never conspire wickedness and who brings about complete healing from the terminal sickness of total depravity.

Brothers and sisters, fix your eyes on Jesus,the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2). Jesus said, "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*." (John 8:31-32).

AMEN.