

# ChalcedonReport

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## Conspiracy Thinking

An abridged and edited version of Episode 34 of the Chalcedon Podcast featuring Mark Rushdoony, Martin Selbrede, and Andrea Schwartz.

**Andrea: Are conspiracies real? And what do you think about the current trend that when one group opposes another, the harshest insult is to say, “Oh, they are conspiracy theorists?”**

**Mark:** Something that marks our times is that people do not really want to discuss things in a civil manner. Many people are unable to discuss things and to find out why others differ from them, so the term “conspiracy” is often used as a pejorative, much like the terms “racist” or “fascist” will be used. “I’ll just label somebody, characterize what they’re saying, and I can leave it at that, because I’ve said all I need to say by saying it’s a conspiracy theory.” And yet, the simple meaning of conspiracy is when two or more individuals act in unison for an evil intent. Well, people are going to act in unison—they act in unison every day—and if you believe that men have evil in their nature, because they’re sinners, you have to concede that men act in unison for evil purposes and dishonest causes, and they use deception to do that. So the idea of conspiracies is a given because men have to act in concert with others. And so yes, conspiracies do exist.

**Andrea: So Martin, Dr. Rushdoony, says that conspiracies work to influence people, because the public in general is ripe for them. Please explain what he means.**

**Martin:** His point is that if a conspiracy is extremely alien to the spirit of the age

of a nation—the general trends that have been accepted as culturally sound—that they go nowhere and are regarded as a joke. There is no way that they can take any form and gain any traction if they don’t already have a hook in the human heart.

Normally, we try to say, “Well, the reason that the conspiracy might be effective is because these are powerful men,” and because they’re doing all this in secret—where we can’t see it—chances are, it’s going to be effective, because we can’t find out what they’re doing. The mystery of it is what seems to cloud our judgment, because we have ruled their act—they’re conspiring together—as more powerful than God. Therefore, what God has to say about conspiracies is set aside, and the fear of man becomes the thing.

The conspiracy would not get any traction if it weren’t already for the fact that the human heart was prepared in advance to sit in these ways, to deviate from God’s law, because when we don’t have the anchor of God’s law, we can be moved in various directions.

**Andrea: Mark, your father wrote about conspiracies before there was an internet or social media, so a conspiracy doesn’t require our current technology to move through a culture, does it?**

**Mark:** No, it requires men to desire certain things, and conspiracies, as Martin was describing, depend upon

the susceptibility of the people to want the ends that are proposed. We live near national forests, and if we tried to conspire with a plan to get the National Forests clear cut, we would not succeed, because the people are, by and large, totally against that. Whatever they might want, as far as forest management, they don’t want a clear cut of an entire National Forest. So conspiracies can only work if they are in line with what people want, and this is what we have to address when we’re talking about conspiracies. We can’t focus on who’s behind this because you can dig in to that endlessly. You can research, you can document who is a proponent of this or that, and it doesn’t really do you any good in the long run even if you can show that to people. The question is why would this conspiracy appeal to people?

We’re familiar with the idea of a con man, which is short for “confidence man.” A con man gets somebody to do something they wouldn’t normally do because he earns their confidence. Very often it’s larceny, such as, “We can split a big pot of money, if you do this.” “I don’t have a bank account, can we use your bank account?” The only reason this can work is because that person is larcenous, they want something for nothing, and so the con appeals to them, no matter how illogical it is. They want that gain without work.

**Andrea: So, as I referenced, there wasn’t an Internet back when your father wrote about such things,**

**and he actually cites cases of conspiracies going back into the 1800s. How did they spread? It's not like conspiracies are a technological advancement.**

**Mark:** No, they're not. Conspiracies have probably always existed because it's just how people operate. People need help accomplishing their ends. We're even told in the gospels that the arrest and execution of Christ was a conspiracy, and that it was orchestrated by the Jewish religious leaders, and the Romans who were brought into it. So men have always operated in terms of trying to accomplish their means, and we're all limited in what any individual could do. Therefore, we try to use others, and the channels of power, to do that. Conspiring together is like the free market, you need others to succeed in anything for good or for ill. I wouldn't call it evil ends or evil intents, but we're trying to accomplish something together called the Kingdom of God, and we're trying to work together towards that end, and we're called to do so.

**Martin:** Mark used a very interesting term by saying "channels of power" have been used to create these desired ends, and this is where the scriptural discussion of conspiracy comes in handy. It's in Isaiah 8 specifically, where we actually have almost a systematic discussion of its impact and how to resist it. But one of the things that's an issue here is the question of God's gentle ways, which are called "the waters of Shiloah that go softly" (Isaiah 8:6), which represent God's government versus these mighty waters of the Euphrates and other big rivers that represent power, as in terms of Assyria, Egypt and other large nations and how they did things. The people were all about these big powers, and that was what put fear into them in terms of conspiracy (v. 12).

**Mark:** I would add that as my father got older, he became increasingly impatient when people brought up conspiracies, because he thought that, as Martin said, people wanted to fall back on conspiracy. They wanted to believe it was someone else's fault, and there is nothing we can

do, and that thinking was the opposite of what my father was trying to propose, which was Christian Reconstruction.

We need to rebuild Christian faith and ideas, so that these conspiracies cannot have their desired effect. My father saw that it often crippled thinking, because if you look at a lot of conspiracy thinking, it's geared around the fact that the problem is in them, and we just need to educate everybody about what they are doing, and the problem will be solved. It doesn't work like that, because my father would say repeatedly, the answer is not education. The answer is Christian faith and understanding things in terms of your faith, and so he became increasingly impatient when people brought up conspiracies because he knew the direction they were going. He knew this was a fruitless way, not because he didn't believe in conspiracies but because they were not the root of the problem. The root was, why do people believe this? Where is this conspiratorial idea headed that appeals to people? What is it about these con men that is getting people to do what they might not otherwise do, and that was the heart of the problem. Mere conspiracy thinking tends not to go in the direction it needs to go.

**Andrea: If you're a student of Scripture, you know that Psalm 2 tells us that there are conspiratorial things taking place; the nations against the Son, but the Father is definitely not worried about it because He laughs (Psalm 2:4). So it seems to me that conspiracies can take root where the doctrine of Providence has either been forgotten, or never really taught. What do you think, Martin?**

**Martin:** There's certainly a lot of truth in that, because if your God is big, then conspiracies are small and laughable. But if your God is small, then the conspiracies loom large, and what's the appeal of that? I think Mark touched on it, because what we have here is an excuse to be irresponsible. If these big forces are at work—these conspiracies operating behind the scenes—then I can't

be responsible. Therefore, my actions aren't going to make a difference in light of how powerful the conspiracies are, so it's a ticket for irresponsibility.

The other reason that people like to think in terms of conspiracy and against Providence is what Dr. Rushdoony called the doctrine of selective depravity, where we can say that the evil in the system is in the conspirators but not in our hearts. Therefore, by dislocating the source of our problems from us to outside us—to them—we've identified this particular group as the evil group, and therefore the evil is not in us. We're the good guys, but we're put upon because we're weak and ineffective, and that's just the way it is. This can naturally lead to a theology of escape; and some have an eschatology of escape, but that's not the calling. It's like Mark said, the task is Christian Reconstruction, and that entails responsible action. That entails using God's law as a tool to undo things because where God's laws are being kept, that is sapping the strength of conspiracies, even at that point.

**Andrea: Mark, my question is, why have so many Christians decided to get in bed with non-Christian conservatives and expose the latest bombshell, but they don't have any appetite for God's law, which would solve the problem if applied?**

**Mark:** Well, part of it is their theology. If you're dispensational, you don't have the law, so the law is not necessary. In fact, we should be happy that we do not have God's law over us anymore, and so our morality is vague, so they don't really have a hard and fast way to serve God. In addition, their eschatology tells them that it all ends in defeat, and you get this attitude that was a common saying in dispensational churches, premillennial churches in the 70s and 80s, "Isn't it wonderful how bad things are? It means Jesus is coming back soon." At the time, I didn't realize it wasn't an isolated comment, but it was actually a saying that was going around in the church, and it revealed a very flawed theology, and theology matters.

Theology can be translated as “God words,” or our words about God, and it’s how we express what we believe about God. When we believe wrong things about God and what God’s doing, then it leads us to false conclusions as you believe God is this great cosmic loser. Then you look at evil in the world, and say, “Of course, that’s a good thing, because it means the resolution is coming.” So they have their optimistic outlook which is that it’ll all dissolve, and Jesus will resolve everything in a positive way miraculously, or in eternity. This is a flawed theology, and what we believe truly does matter. It matters in our perspective of what we’re doing today. Therefore, if we have bad theology, whether we realize it or not, it’s going to lead us to wrong behavior and an improper attitude towards what’s going on in the world around us.

**Andrea: Well, Martin, let me ask you this. Dr. Rushdoony points out in one of the essays that we’re familiar with the fact that ideas have consequences, but he also points out that ideas have roots. So how would you identify the root of this optimistic defeatism?**

It entered the church in England under the work of Darby. The notion was that they saw a decline, which was real enough at the time, and they wanted to account for the decline. Either it was a sign that Christians were in dereliction, which would be our interpretation of the decline, or it is something that is predicted that the church is not going to do well—it’s not going to be part of the Kingdom. The church is a plan B in effect, and therefore the notion when it came out of Calvinistic circles—Darby was a Calvinist—so out of that womb came forth this idea, and it had legs that people could then account for the darkness around them. Now, we would say, “What on earth were they doing walking by sight,” but it was effective, because people were invited to walk by sight. They started with prophecy conferences in Niagara, New York, and those people gathered there and wanted

to hear it because having itching ears they did not endure sound doctrine. The eschatology of the previous centuries before that point was a doctrine that required some endurance because you had to get all your “theological stuff” together. You had to know all the aspects of theology in order to handle eschatology anywhere near competently, maturely, or responsibly. In their case, the invitation was that you can understand the signs of the times because they’re happening right in front of you.

So it’s a big deal whether you’re walking by sight or walking by faith, and I think that’s what the postmillennial notion of the victory the Kingdom of God is. It’s got this very, very long term view. Warfield even said—and he said this in the early 20th century—we’re living in the days of the primitive church, the early church still, and the sands of time have not even started to get out of the hourglass yet. We’re just seeing the first part.

So are we living in the early church, primitive church right now, or the last days church? Well, if you want to shut everything down and go home, then you want the last days church. But if you’re going to be there for the long haul and be a stepping stone to future generations, it’s a whole different ballgame and a whole different faith that’s actually concrete and continent-changing as it happened in the case of the pilgrims who helped launch this nation. We don’t have that faith anymore. It has to be re-inculcated. It starts with a true repentance away from notions that Christ is not King of Kings and Lord of Lords now. Rather we say we establish the crown rights of Christ, the King. One of the most exceptional series of lectures that Dr. Rushdoony gave was *The Crown Rights of Christ, the King*, and one of the final sections was “fear of victory.” Turns out that we don’t want victory, and there’s reason to double down on failure, because failure does not require responsibility.

**Andrea: So Mark, do you think that because of the apostasy of a lot of pulpits, that there are people who are susceptible to conspiracies,**

**because they think nothing can happen to them?**

**Mark:** Well, I think that that’s part of it, and you’re right, that ideas have consequences. Or, as my father has written in a number of different places in his writings, Arminianism versus Calvinism has produced two different kinds of cultures, and its outworkings in society. Ideas do have definite consequences, and if we don’t believe in the sovereignty of God; if we don’t believe that He is really in control of time and eternity, then we think it’s up to man and then we are very susceptible to unbiblical ideas. Our understanding of the evil plans of men is not much different, because if we think they are in charge, then it seems things are falling apart for the Kingdom of God.

This highlights another idea that is not emphasized to the church enough today which is the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. It used to be common to have red letter editions of the Bible, and a lot of Christians didn’t like them for the obvious reason that those aren’t the only important words in the Bible, but if you just read the words of Jesus, you notice how often He refers to the Kingdom of God. It was the theme of His ministry from its beginning to the last week, the week of the crucifixion, He was talking about the Kingdom of God. And yet we don’t talk about the Kingdom of God nearly enough. We sometimes will refer to Him as King largely because it’s in the Christmas carols, but we give the term *King* to Jesus as almost an honorary title that we’ll acknowledge in heaven but under different circumstances. No, if He is King and He has a Kingdom, then He has a law. In fact, He is the ruler, and we should see things in a very different way. This also mean we see the evil designs of men as doomed to failure rather than as the great threat to our lives and the work of Jesus Christ in history.

**Martin:** Mark had used the term that we become *rationalists*, and I think this is a key element in Dr. Rushdoony’s discussion of conspiracy thinking. He

talks about the fact that humanism will divide men into different parts, and the reason humanism does this is to reduce man to some element or piece of himself. It's only the Scripture, and God's counsel, that treats man as a whole—as a unity—and that's why the conspiracies also fall apart, because they're all premised on a false view of man. Dr. Rushdoony says we have to be aware of why these things start off that way, and why they develop the way they do, because they have taken a piecemeal approach to man's nature. We eventually have a false picture of man, and when you live a lie, there are consequences to those lies. So all conspiracies essentially function at that false level. They don't treat man as the creature of God, but rather as something that man molds himself and that has interchangeable parts. This is untrue, and history is full of all the effects: century after century of trying to live this lie, and incurring the ruin and the destruction that results from trying to promote and push a false view of man.

**Andrea: Mark, do you think that these faulty theological views, conspiracy theories, or attempts at political solutions are really an attempt to prop up humanism?**

**Mark:** I think a lot of Christians have no idea on what we really need. They have no concept of building the Kingdom of God, and therefore their ideal is really only the way things were before it was this bad. For that reason, they want to go back a few years to times that seemed a little rosier. For example, I just saw something on Facebook nostalgically mentioning the late 60s, that if you lived in that time you lived in really good times. I had to force myself not to respond to that because those times weren't all that good, and it was those times that got us to these times. Going back a generation or so is only going to put us on the same road leading to where we are today. We need a fundamental change, and a lot of people do not have the theology for such a change. They do not have the big picture of the Kingdom of God, nor the hope of victory of the

Kingdom of God that they should be working for. If your only thought is that my job is to wait for Jesus to come back and fix everything miraculously, you're not doing anything, which makes you an observer. You can then think that you're being pious by pointing out what's bad in the world, but our piety should lead us to positive action towards the Kingdom of God, not simply identifying evil.

My father has said elsewhere that there's no particular virtue in pointing out evil. It's what is your response to evil? What are you doing that's righteous? What is your alternative to the evil? This is what we need to focus on, and conspiracy thinking often appeals to people who really don't want to do anything but talk about the problem.

**Andrea: Martin, when you're out of blame and resort to conspiracies, it doesn't negate valid issues. People may attribute problems to various causes, often seeking popular ideas for validation. But true guidance is found in Scripture, providing practical, mundane instructions often overlooked. We need to return to these scriptural roots, right?**

**Martin:** You said it quite well. We have a job to do, and if we are lazy and indulgent, we're going to want to find excuses. And of course, conspiracy theory often says, "Well, how can we get anywhere? Look at the size of the forces that are arrayed against us."

However, right out of Christ's own mouth, He says—this is in Matthew 15:13—whatsoever thing the Lord hath not planted shall be rooted up, so all these conspiracies will be uprooted and torn out of history by God. They have been all of this time, and they have not been effective. They might be uprooted over a long period of time—longer than we might want—but the guarantee is that they will all be uprooted. Consequently, we need to realize that the Lord is the one who's doing this.

But there's a vision afoot in this nation where people are starting to take back that which they knew that God gave them in the first place. They're

seeing their inheritance, and they're not squandering it like Esau did. They're taking it more seriously, and the beautiful thing is that even though it might seem like a small thing, God is in the small thing as long as we're building straight according to the pattern. Then God's going to have the Capstone raised up. We'll start the foundations here, but the Capstone is promised to be thrown into place, according to Zechariah 4:6, by the power of God's Spirit.

The problem is we have a defective view of the Spirit of God, and we have a defective view of His relationship to the law of God. Because God gives us this wonderful tool, and we spit on it, and we neglect it, and it gathers dust. And what the enemies of God's Kingdom were trying to do in Nehemiah was to derail the work of God by convincing everybody it's not worth it, it's not going to go anywhere. But Nehemiah, he took a stand and even changed history as a consequence, and all it takes is for serious Christians to take that stand, and history will be changed because it's in God's fist to control.

**Andrea: Mark, do you have any closing thoughts?**

**Mark:** Well, we started earlier by saying that conspiracies are only effective because men are ready to believe them, and so we have to guard ourselves lest we be part of these evil designs by buying into them. To the extent that we're socialists, we become revolutionaries against God's order. To the extent that we're humanists, we are working contrary to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. So to the extent that we buy into the myths of the modern age, we are aiding and abetting these evil designs. 🙏

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