



Polarization, Conspiracy Thinking, and Attitude Crystallization

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How do we show love and compassion in the face of growing political division and conspiracy thinking? Understanding how very strong attitudes work in our lives is as important for helping others as is understanding the beliefs themselves.

ATTITUDES AND ATTITUDE CRYSTALLIZATION

Beliefs are ideas that a person trusts to be true. Attitudes, on the other hand, are the beliefs *together with* the feelings we hold about those ideas. Attitudes can range from being fairly neutral, like preferences for one soda or another, to being very strong and cherished, as with beliefs about faith or politics. Beliefs and cherished values are a good and important part of faith, as Scripture affirms. When religious beliefs are strengthened by feelings such as love, joy, peace, and other fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), a Christlike attitude bears witness to God's life-giving presence in the world.

Jesus showed a particular attitude—beliefs together with feelings—when he was moved with compassion. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is moved from deep within to heal the sick, feed the crowds, and even raise the dead. His belief in restoration and wholeness, together with his compassion, led him to respond with action.

Like Jesus, people base their actions on attitudes and beliefs. Very strong political beliefs and conspiracy thinking are also based in attitudes and are made stronger by them. You may have noticed that people's cherished beliefs and attitudes are linked together, like super highways. The close relationship between attitudes makes them much stronger and also harder to change.¹ Sometimes an attitude becomes so strong that it becomes rigid and does not respond to important new information. This is known as "crystallization."²

Imagine you always took the same route home from work but one day encountered a "Road Closed" sign and a sign reading "Detour." Crystallization is a bit like ignoring the road signs and taking the old route despite the signs and flashing lights.

God continually seeks to renew and transform humankind in life-giving ways. When our attitudes become crystallized, we may be closing ourselves to the movement of God's Spirit. Attitude crystallization can block us from being transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2).

DID YOU KNOW?

Strong attitudes are different from crystalized attitudes. When a person's attitudes are crystalized, the person may respond to information that doesn't match those attitudes in the following ways:

- The information is seen as not accurate.
- The source is seen as not credible.
- The information is seen as biased against the person's attitude, even when the information is presented in a neutral way.
- The person may feel attacked by the information.
- The person's attitude may be *strengthened*, rather than softened or changed, by information that challenges the person's beliefs.

1. Dolores Alberici and Sharon Shavitz, "Attitudes and Attitude Change," *Annual Review of Psychology* 69 (2018): 299–327; Larry M. Bartels, "Beyond the Running Tally: Partisan Bias in Political Perceptions," *Political Behavior* 24, no. 2 (2002): 117–50.

2. David Raden, "Strength-Related Attitude Dimensions," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1985): 312–30; J. W. Van Proin, A. P. Krouwel, and T. V. Pollet, "Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6, no. 5 (2015): 570–78.

WHO IS VULNERABLE TO ATTITUDE CRYSTALLIZATION?

A number of factors tend to make it more likely that a strong attitude will shift into a crystallized one. Here are a few:

- When the belief is linked to a cherished value, like stability in the face of fear of a changing society
- Holding a lot of knowledge about the attitude (both factual and false information contribute to crystallized strong attitudes)
- Spending a great deal of time thinking about the attitude or belief
- Spending a great deal of time with people who share the same or similar beliefs

HOW TO HELP

Crystallized attitudes related to political beliefs are very hard to change, and our efforts to change people's minds can make matters worse by alienating them or leading to defensiveness.

What to do now:

- **Strengthen connection:** Avoid trying to challenge or change the problematic belief. Instead, connect in an area of shared values, like love or community.
- **Cultivate loving compassion** by understanding that anyone can develop very crystallized attitudes that create barriers to connection.
- Understand that it is very difficult to recognize when our own attitudes are creating barriers to connection or are the source of mistakes in our judgment.
- Understand that while conspiracy theories and political polarization are hurtful, they are often grounded in fears, a desire for justice, or even worry for others.³ Connect to these life-affirming beliefs and values.
- Encourage others to give time and energy to local actionable efforts rather than to online research and private worry.
- Nurture Christlike attitudes such as humility and the fruits of the Spirit. In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul calls for Jesus-followers to take on an attitude like that of Jesus, serving and caring for others instead of being preoccupied with self-preservation.

What to do in the long term:

- *Make connection and inclusion your priority.* Remember that being deeply steeped in conspiracy thinking is time-consuming and isolating. Outreach to parishioners and family members who are apt to otherwise spend a great deal of time on the Internet or other media is important. Identify avenues to value and highlight their areas of knowledge and skills so that you can tap into their desire to contribute to a better world.
- *Emphasize a culture of love of people and community over political views.* Help generate a community that welcomes all people. Remember that Jesus welcomed people who held different views from his, sharing fellowship by eating in their homes and showing them love and compassion.
- *Highlight the importance of mental health.* Anecdotal evidence suggests that conspiracy thinking, polarized attitudes, and their consequences may have a two-way relationship with mental health. These beliefs seem to attract those who are more likely to feel anxious and depressed. Endorsing these views seems to also create depression and anxiety (or make them worse). Help parishioners find skilled mental health services when they become isolated, depressed, or anxious, and cultivate a culture of understanding and acceptance of mental health needs.



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3. C. M. Federico, A. L. Williams, and J. A. Vitriol, "The Role of System Identity Threat in Conspiracy Theory Endorsement," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 7 (2018): 927–38.