noia? It shows that whether opposition comes because of our faith or because of other reasons—whether our fears are because of real persecution or the fear of possible mistreatment—the way to overcome is have **"conduct"** that is **"honorable"** and characterized by **"good works."** This takes away any basis for legitimate criticism. Paul says it causes the opponent to be **"ashamed"** when they are left with **"nothing evil to say to you"**(Titus 2:8).

2. Overcome evil with good. Paranoia imagines that we can prevent mistreatment by acting defensively to guard against it. If Christians can expect to be hated by others no degree of defensiveness will shield us. The better course is to counter evil with good. Paul taught, **"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"** (Rom. 12:21). The bully, the gossip, the persecutor, or the enemy will only fight so long as he or she has an opponent. Responding with good to those who mistreat us takes away all opportunity for them to truly harm us. This not only has the potential to change the heart of the enemy, but it eliminates the need for paranoia.

3. Forgive wrongs of the past. One reason we often erect walls of defensiveness out of a fear that someone is "out to get us" is because we continue to hang onto resentment over past wrongs. A sobering reality of our relationship with God is the principle taught in Christ that our own forgiveness from God is dependent upon our willingness to forgive others. Jesus said, **"Forgive and you will be forgiven"** (Luke 6:37), warning us, **"if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses"** (Mark 11:26). Paranoia may not always reflect an unwillingness to forgive others, but sometimes it is the very reason we fall prey to paranoia. When people have wronged us it may well be the result of their own sinful behavior. Are we more concerned with defending ourselves or helping them be right with God? If we can find the strength to forgive it robs paranoia of its power to inhibit and restrain us. Forgiveness is what we need, and what we must be willing to offer to others

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BULLETIN OF THE OLSEN PARK CHURCH OF CHRIST

Services
Sunday: 9:00 AM
9:30 AM
10:30 AM
Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:
Patrick Ledbetter
Brady McAlister
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:
Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Walker McAnear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Justin Smiley
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:
Kyle Pope

Paranoia

By Kyle Pope

Many people struggle from time to time with the mindset known in modern times as *paranoia*—a fear that other people are against us, talking bad about us, or trying to hurt us. This can manifest itself in varying degrees of severity depending upon the cause and scope of the paranoia.

In the most severe cases the effects of substance abuse or other types of mental impairment have produced forms of paranoia so intense that people actually lose touch with reality. Delusions develop in their minds that everyone is plotting against them. Noble prize-winning mathematician John Nash, upon whose life the well-known book and movie *A Beautiful Mind* were based, during one his darkest periods of paranoid schizophrenia actually believed that all men who wore red ties were part of a communist conspiracy against him.

For most of us the paranoia we feel never becomes that extreme. Instead, pain we have suffered in the past causes us to lose trust in those who caused the pain. We grow to expect them to hurt us again and live in mistrust and suspicion. These scars may be so deep that we become unwilling to trust anyone out of fear they could hurt us in the future. This type of paranoia, no matter how real the past pain may have been, can become a barrier to ever establishing close relationships.

In the Lord's church this problem is more common than we might imagine. People pull back from involvement with other Christians when they begin to fear how others view them. Those who once served in teaching or leadership roles, step back when they start to think that others look down on them. A perceived "dirty look" across the auditorium or an imagined (or even

real) slight in refusing to speak to or include someone can lead to alienated relationships, hurt feelings, and Christians who hope to spend eternity with one another in heaven refusing to even speak to one another on earth.

Preachers are not immune to paranoia. Given that a preacher's work within a congregation is dependent upon the influence he is able to maintain, many preachers serve out their time with a congregation suspiciously waiting to see who is "out to get them." While it should be that an evangelist serves with a sense of stewardship to God, sadly a paranoid fear of circumstances that could compromise influence can embitter and handicap the sound and capable servant of the Lord.

Should Christians allow such a mindset to go unchecked? Are there dangers it offers to our service in Christ? Does the Bible offer any guidance for those who struggle with this crippling disposition?

The Dangers of Paranoia

While the Bible does not refer to this mindset with the label "paranoia," some of its dangers are clearly revealed in Scripture. Consider a few examples.

1. Paranoia often has no true basis in reality. When David was anointed king he continued as one of king Saul's most loyal subjects (1 Sam. 16:16-23). He had no intention of staging an overthrow of Saul's kingdom. Even so, in envy over the people's praise of David, Saul imagined **"Now what more can he have but the kingdom?"** (1 Sam. 18:8-11). This started Saul on a dark road of paranoia and further alienation from God ultimately leading to his downfall. Sometimes paranoia can lead us to feel the same way. Without real evidence that others have anything against us we imagine in our own minds an entire series of steps they have taken to hurt us. In the process we, like Saul alienate those who could have been loyal friends.

2. Paranoia causes us to assume the worst. As Saul's paranoia moved him to act against David, on one occasion David received food from the priests at Nob to sustain him and his men (1 Sam. 21:1-6). When Saul learned about this, rather than assuming the priests had acted to help David, because he was one of Saul's servants, Saul accused the priests, saying – **"Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse"**(1 Sam. 22:11-15). His false assumption led him to command the sinful execution of eighty-five priests (1 Sam. 22:17-18). Paranoia can lead us to assume the worst possible motives on the part of others. We then, like Saul, may act with defensiveness to protect ourselves against the false motives we have attributed to others. Our defensiveness may not result in murder, but it may lead us to sinful and destructive attitudes.

3. Paranoia destroys hope. When Joseph ruled in Egypt during the famine, unaware that Joseph was still alive his father Jacob had no idea that it was he who held Simeon and demanded that Benjamin be brought to Egypt. Joseph did this to test his brothers who had once sold him into slavery. Upon hearing that Simeon was being held and Benjamin also had to go to Egypt, Jacob cried out in despair, **"All these things are against me"** (Gen. 42:36). Little did he know that these events would ultimately reunite his family. Jacob's grief might not be paranoia as we usually think of it, but it illustrates what can result when pains of the past lead us to abandon hope. Past pain and fear of the future make us imagine there is nothing ahead that could ever bring joy, happiness, or peace. It wasn't true for Jacob, and it doesn't have to be true for us.

4. Paranoia can become self-fulfilling. From the very beginning Jonathan, the son of king Saul, had a close relationship with David (1 Sam. 18:1). As Saul's paranoia grew this did not change. Knowing this Saul hid from Jonathan the fact that he was trying to kill David (1 Sam. 20:1-3). Neither David nor Jonathan wanted to set themselves against Saul, but when Saul's paranoia led him to act so wickedly it forced Jonathan to make a covenant with David (1 Sam. 20:11-17). When Saul said to Jonathan, **"Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame"** (1 Sam. 20:30)—he was in part correct! What he didn't acknowledge was that it was his own paranoia that had caused this situation. When we allow paranoid fears to cause us to view others as our enemies it forces us to mark off allies and adversaries. Some, like Jonathan, may have nothing against us but become forced into a position of alienation from us by their connection with one whom we have marked off as an enemy. In such a case, like Saul we actually cause a situation we imagined in the first place.

5. Paranoia may reflect an exalted view of our own importance. It is almost beyond comprehension how a man like Herod the Great could value his own importance so much that out of fear that a future king had been born (who one day might replace him) he commanded the slaughter of all male children in the region of Bethlehem two years old and under (Matt. 2:16)! A man who had struggled in the past with paranoia told me years ago something that helped him was the realization that he just wasn't that important. Paranoia can make us think that we form the center of other people's thoughts and schemes. We come to imagine that we are so important that others devote their time to our downfall. In most cases, even if others have spoken or acted against us it usually only constituted a very small moment of their time and attention. Most of us are too busy with our own lives, responsibilities, and problems to have the time to focus our efforts on others in the way paranoia leads us to imagine.

Overcoming Paranoia

When pains of the past are the cause of our paranoia, fears of the future may not be delusional. It could be highly possible that those who have hurt us in the past can (and will) do so in the future. How should Christians respond to this?

1. Silence evil speech with good behavior. When Peter charged Christians to **"abstain from fleshly lusts"** living as **"sojourners and pilgrims"** (1 Pet. 2:11), he urged them to keep their **"conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation"** (1 Pet. 2:12). Christians can expect people to **"speak against"** us. Jesus told His disciples, **"they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake"** (Matt. 24:9). Awareness of this is not paranoia. It is recognition of the fact that the world will hate us when we do good. What does this teach us about overcoming para-

