

# Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement For The Real World

*"Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."—Ephesians 5:6*

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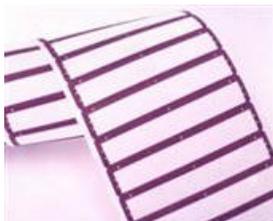


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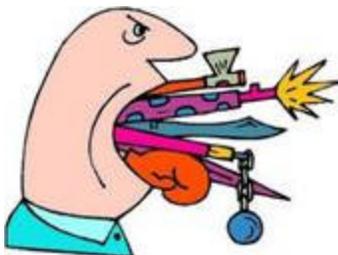


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## Dispelling Myths of Christ's Birth and Childhood

By Mario Seiglie

*How did Dec. 25 come to be celebrated as the date of Christ's birth? Over the years, many legends have sprung up about Christ's birth and childhood. What does the Bible say about these events?*



**W**HAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT Jesus Christ's birth and early childhood? Today, some 2,000 years later, many myths surround the early childhood of Jesus Christ. One fable claims Jesus learned to do miracles from Egyptian magicians when His family fled to Egypt. Another describes the young Jesus making pigeons of clay and impressing other children by making them come to life. Also, millions believe He was born on Dec. 25 and that He never had brothers and sisters.

Jesus Christ embodied truth. Shouldn't His followers, then, also insist on accepting only what is true? Didn't He say: "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. *And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*"? (John 8:31-32, emphasis added throughout).

The Scriptures provide facts that dispel myths and errors that have crept into the history of His childhood. By reviewing biblical prophecies and the four accounts of Jesus' early years, we can separate truth from error.

### **A birth predicted 700 years in advance**

Prophecies predicted the manner, place and approximate date of Jesus' birth. Some 700 years before the birth of Christ, God challenged King Ahaz to ask for a sign or miracle so God could prove His greatness. When Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, the Lord spoke to him, saying:

"Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:11-14).

In the New Testament, this prophecy was fulfilled with the birth of Jesus. "So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us' " (Matthew 1:22-23).

### Time and place of birth predicted

Not only was the manner of His birth predicted, but also the place. Four hundred years before Jesus' birth, God inspired the prophet Micah to announce: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2).

Was it evident that this was a prophecy of the birthplace of the Messiah? When King Herod heard the wise men were searching for the recently born Jesus, he asked the Jewish religious leaders where the Messiah was to be born. The priests and scribes quoted the same verse from the book of Micah and said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet" (Matthew 2:5-6).

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*Even the time of  
Jesus' birth was  
roughly known.*

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Even the *time* of Jesus' birth was roughly known through another prophecy.

God had told Daniel by way of an angel: "Know therefore and understand, that *from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until* [the coming of the] *Messiah the Prince*, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks . . ." (Daniel 9:25).

Therefore there would be 69 prophetic "weeks" from the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem to the appearance of the Messiah.

Actually, in the original Hebrew, the text does not say 70 "weeks" but 70 "sevens", which can mean 70 groups of seven days, weeks or years. John Walvoord discusses this prophecy in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: "Daniel was first informed that God's program would be consummated in 70 'sevens.' Since Daniel had been thinking of God's program in terms of years (v. 1; cf. Jer. 25:11-12; 2 Chron. 36:21), it would be most natural for him to understand these 'sevens' as years. Whereas people today think in units of tens (e.g. decades), Daniel's people thought in terms of sevens (heptads) . . . Seventy 'sevens' then, is a span of 490 years" (*Logos Software*, 1996).

Although there were several decrees issued by Persian kings concerning the rebuilding of Jerusalem, when fitted into this prophecy most would bring us close to the time of the appearance of Jesus Christ, either of His birth or of His ministry. Without going into detail, the main point here is that during Christ's lifetime there was an expectation among the Jews of the coming of the Messiah (Matthew 11:2-3; Luke 3:15; John 1:40-41).

### Expectation of the coming Messiah

Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, mentions the Jews had the belief that "about that time one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth" (*Wars of the Jews*, Book VI, Chapter V, Section 4).

The Bible speaks of this expectation of the Messiah in Christ's time: "And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, *waiting for the*

*Consolation of Israel* [the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophecies about the Messiah], and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God . . ." (Luke 2:25-27).

*There was a firm persuasion... that rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire.*

Even the learned Romans had heard of the Jewish prophecies of the coming Messiah, for they applied them to one of their rulers --a contemporary of Jesus, Caesar Augustus! Suetonius, a Roman historian, tells us how the Romans turned the prophecies upside-down: "There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world. This prophecy, which refers to the emperor of Rome, the Jews applied to themselves" (*Life of Vespasian*, 4: 5). Tacitus, another Roman historian, writes of the same belief that "there was a firm persuasion . . . that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire" (*Histories*, 5: 13).

It was no surprise, then, to note the expectation of some and the dismay of others when a group of wise men came to Jerusalem searching for the newly born Messiah. They asked, "'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, *and all Jerusalem with him*" (Matthew 2:1).

The Jews were filled with hope, but also with apprehension, for they knew of Herod's ruthlessness when he felt any threat to his throne. This is precisely what later occurred with the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16).

## **A prophecy continued**

The Jewish people were well aware that the last Old Testament prophet predicted the coming of the Messiah to the temple (Malachi 3-4). They also knew God would first send a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. "Behold, I will send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1).

It is fitting then, that the first scene of the New Testament, chronologically speaking, opens with the description of that coming "messenger." This first scene is found in Luke 1 and is actually a *continuation* of Malachi 3-4! It begins with the priest Zacharias in that temple being told by an angel that he would father the very "messenger" (John the Baptist), who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. The four Gospels begin where the Old Testament prophecies leave off, continuing and complementing them and showing their fulfillment in the events around Jesus Christ's coming.

## **Importance of genealogies**

Other prophecies concerned the physical lineage of the Messiah. The official genealogies of Jewish ancestry were kept in the temple. These genealogies perished when the temple and the archives in Jerusalem were burned by the Romans in 70 A.D. Since it was prophesied that the Messiah would descend from Abraham and David (Genesis 12:1-7; Jeremiah 33:15), it was necessary for anyone

who claimed to be the Messiah to be able to verify his ancestry through these official genealogical records.

If he was of Abrahamic descent, this confirmed his religious, hereditary and biological rights. If not, he was considered a gentile and wasn't regarded as part of the Israelite nation or of its inheritance.

So in Jesus' time, if one claimed to be the Messiah, he would have to prove through his genealogy that he descended from Abraham and David. To prove this was the case for Jesus, His genealogies are placed at the beginning of Matthew (Joseph's genealogy) and in Luke 3 (Mary's genealogy) for all to see and verify.

*The Bible Knowledge Commentary* points out: "Matthew's genealogy answered the important question a Jew would rightfully ask about anyone who claimed to be King of the Jews. Is He a descendant of David through the rightful line of succession? Matthew answered yes!" (*Logos Software*, 1996).

Once the official genealogical records were destroyed in 70 A.D., there was no way to confirm if one who claimed to be the Messiah was descended from David. Now no Jew can officially prove that he is descended from Abraham and King David.

### **The birth date of Jesus**

It is remarkable that while the manner, place and genealogy of Jesus are carefully described in the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke, none of the Gospel writers mentions the date--or even the month--of His birth. There is no recorded celebration of the birth of Christ for the first four centuries. The first recorded "Christ mass" was not observed until several hundred years after the birth of Christ.

Cambridge historian Henry Chadwick explains when and why Dec. 25 was chosen to celebrate the birth of Jesus: "Moreover, early in the fourth century there begins in the West . . . the celebration of December 25th, the birthday of the Sun-god at the winter solstice, as the date for the nativity of Christ" (*The Early Church*, 1967, p. 126).

Gerard and Patricia del Re explain: ". . . The tradition of celebrating December 25 as Christ's birthday came to the Romans from Persia. Mithra, the Persian god of light and sacred contracts, was born out of a rock on December 25. Rome was famous for its flirtations with strange gods and cults, and in the third century [274] the unchristian emperor Aurelian established the festival of Dies Invicti Solis, the Day of the Invincible Sun, on December 25.

"Mithra was an embodiment of the sun, so this period of its rebirth was a major day in Mithraism, which had become Rome's latest official religion with the patronage of Aurelian. It is believed that the emperor Constantine adhered to Mithraism up to the time of his conversion to Christianity. He was probably instrumental in seeing that the major feast of his old religion was carried over to his new faith" (*The Christmas Almanac*, 1979, p. 17).

The origins of Christmas cannot be traced back to either the teachings or practices of the earliest Christians. The biblical Holy Days of Jesus and the apostles were neglected by later religious leaders who instituted a new set of holidays in their place.

## Jesus not born in December

The Bible records two circumstances relating to Christ's birth that show that December--or any time during the winter season--was a highly unlikely time for Christ's birth. These were the Roman census that took place at the time of His birth and the fact that shepherds were in the fields at night.

The Romans periodically conducted a census for taxation and military recruitment purposes. In the book *Holy-Days and Holidays*, author Cunningham Geikie explains: "This census could hardly have been at that [winter] season, however, for such a time would surely not have been chosen by the authorities for a public enrollment, which necessitated the population traveling from all parts to their natal districts, storms and rain making journeys both unsafe and unpleasant in winter, except in specially favorable years."



Luke, in describing Christ's birth, tells us that shepherds were in their fields at night at the time Christ was born. "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). As the *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* tells us, "The shepherds would take turns watching the flock at night to guard against wolves and thieves. The text does not indicate the time of year, although December would be an unusual time of year to be outside at night" (Logos Ware, 1996).

### Flight to Egypt

Sometime after the birth of Christ, Herod received the disquieting news about the birth from the wise men. Since Herod wanted to destroy Him, he waited impatiently for the men to return so he could find exactly where Jesus lived and have Him killed. But an angel warned the wise men not to return to Herod.

"Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.' When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod..." (Matthew 2:12-14).



From this account, some popular books speculate the young Jesus might have learned His miracles from the Egyptian magicians. Yet a careful reading of the text shows Jesus was only in Egypt a short time during His infancy--"until the death of Herod." A comparison of Roman and Jewish historical records and the Bible shows that Herod died within months or at most a year or two of the birth of Jesus.

What did Joseph do when he heard of Herod's death? The Bible explains: "Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead.' Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel . . . and dwelt in a city called Nazareth" (Matthew 2:19-21, 23).

We see that Christ was only in Egypt for only a short time during the first years of His life, and He could not have learned from any Egyptian magicians.

### Christ's childhood years

Some point out there is little information in the Gospels about the childhood years of Christ. This is perfectly understandable. The focus of the Gospels is primarily on His ministry beginning at 30. Yet, there is more information in the Bible about His youth than first meets the eye.

For instance, we know during His youth Jesus kept Israel's religious feasts every year with His family. "His parents went to Jerusalem *every year at the Feast of the Passover*. And when He was 12 years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast" (Luke 2:41-42).

We also know Jesus lived most of His life up to the age of 30 in the environs of Nazareth. "So He came to Nazareth, *where He had been brought up*. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read" (Luke 4:16).



Besides, He was well known in Nazareth for His profession as a builder and carpenter. When He began His ministry, the people from Nazareth asked, "Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:3). They would be half-brothers and sisters since Jesus had God as His father and Mary as His mother. The brothers and sisters had Joseph as their father and Mary as their mother.

Some have tried to say these brothers and sisters of Jesus were only "cousins" in order to claim that Jesus was an only child and Mary, through a special method of childbirth, remained a perpetual virgin. Yet the Greek term used here is the normal word for "brother," *adelphos*, whereas the Greek term for cousin, *anepsios*, is not used here (though it is used elsewhere in the New Testament, in Colossians 4:10.) The New Testament writers had a specific Greek word for "cousin" if this were the case, but instead they used the term for a physical brother.

Other references to the physical "brethren of the Lord" are: (Matthew 12:46-47; John 2:12; 7:3-5; 1 Corinthians 9:5 and Galatians 1:19).

As for the supposed virginity of Mary after having given birth to Jesus, both Matthew 1:25 and Luke 2:7 call Jesus her "firstborn Son" (*prototokos*). They do not use the term "only child" or "only son" (*monogenes*), although the term for an only son is used elsewhere in the Gospels (Luke 7:12). Clearly, the use of "firstborn Son" to describe Jesus means that other children were later born to Mary.

## Facts or fiction?

Another persistent myth tells of Christ doing miracles as a child. This goes back to legends told of Him during the first centuries. Yet this contradicts the biblical account, for we read in John that the *first* miracle done by Jesus was turning the water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. "This *beginning* of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed Him" (John 2:11).

If Christ would have performed miracles before this time, under the inspiration of God, John could not have written that the miracle at Cana was the *first* sign or miracle performed by Jesus Christ.

There is sufficient information in the Gospels to dispel the myths that have crept into the extra-biblical accounts of Christ's life through the centuries. Most of His life in the Gospels deals with His ministry, because this was the time of His public teaching. His early life is briefly mentioned to confirm how He fulfilled prophecies about the Messiah and to establish the background for His all-important ministry.

One of the responsibilities of a Christian is to believe and faithfully transmit biblical teachings in all their purity and to avoid all falsehoods. It is important to have the record straight about Christ's life. It is the only way we can follow the biblical principle, "no lie is of the truth" (1 John 2:21).

*This article was reprinted from the [December 2002 issue](#) of Virtual Christian Magazine.*

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## Religion: Is It Dead?

By Robert Berendt

*Influential thinkers like Karl Marx and Richard Dawkins teach that God is a man-made delusion believed in only by fools. But is that really the case?*



**A** BOOK BY RICHARD DAWKINS with the title *The God Delusion* would have us believe that humans who are highly intelligent and highly educated come to the understanding that there really is no God — no Creator. Mr. Dawkins would have us believe that we are seeking something that does not exist. Though there may be some support for his views in Canada, England, the United States and Germany, the idea that “religion is the opiate of the people” is the belief of relatively few people. Religion is alive and well — though varied — in the world.



### Touring Egypt

My wife and I went on a tour of Egypt, and everywhere we went we met or saw religious people. This nation of about 77 million people is approximately 80 percent Muslim and 10 percent Christian. Devout adherents of Islam can be recognized by a large callous on the forehead — a result of frequent prayer. Muslims pray five times a day at specific times. They roll out a small rug, get down on hands and knees and place their head on the rug in prayer.

I wanted to tour the temple in the city of Luxor south of Cairo, but when I came to the ticket booth, there was nobody manning the booth. I went towards the entrance and was told I needed a ticket. On returning to the booth, I waited a moment and saw nobody — then the guard began walking toward me, pointing at the booth. I looked inside and there was the attendant on his rug, deep in prayer.



My experience with shopkeepers or salespeople in Cairo was that they are as ubiquitous as flies on meat in the heat of summer — but when

prayer time comes, they are occupied with more important things. I saw very young women wearing very conservative clothing—and some wearing burkas (loose-fitting robes that completely cover a person, leaving only the eyes visible).

### In search of God

In our world of over 6 billion people, those who profess to be religious far outnumber those who say they have no beliefs. The story told by history is one of great monuments and temples built to any number of gods. People have often incorporated religion into their lives and most do so to this day. Paul noted the religion of the ancients of Athens when he passed through and saw their many temples. He said, “I perceive that in all things you are very religious” (Acts 17:22).

It seems God has placed a curiosity in each one of us—one that makes us wonder why we exist and if there is anything after death. Ecclesiastes states that God has “put eternity in their hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). He also informs us that humans of and by themselves cannot find Him, though He really is close to us all (Acts 17:27).

### Climbing Sinai



I had the opportunity to climb Mount Sinai in March of 2007. The idea was to start at 2 a.m. and arrive at the summit at by 5 a.m. to catch the sunrise. Almost everyone carried a flashlight on the winding trail that ascended to a point just below the final 750 steps to the summit. When our group arrived and began the 6-kilometer climb, I could already see flashlights zigzagging high up the trail from our point all the way to the top. When I reached the top and looked back, I could still see a steady stream of flashlights. I made a conservative estimate that there were about 4,000 people climbing to the top of what is thought to be the Mount Sinai of the Bible.

There were church groups and individuals from all over the world—all expressing their “religion” by climbing the mountain where it is believed God spoke to Moses and to Israel. This is a huge tourist attraction and big business for the area. There is nothing on the top of Mount Sinai aside from a small old chapel, but nobody was interested in that. Most people came for the purpose of expressing their respect for God by climbing to the place where they thought Moses had met with God.

### Grasping the spiritual

Many in the field of science have a difficult time accepting God. I recall a discussion with a scientist who explained that although he wanted to believe in a Creator, he could not conceive of anything faster than the speed of light, and if God were that slow, He could not be the Creator and could not exist. His “proof” was not scientific at all—because the absence of evidence does not prove something does not exist, it only proves that there is a lack of evidence. It was obvious that this man wanted to believe. I would call him a religious man—he just had not found a clear path

to the Creator and Designer that he admitted must be there. Our human minds have trouble considering spiritual things (Matthew 13:14-15; Romans 8:7; 1 Corinthians 2:14).

It seems easy for people to make statements against God and His existence when every thing seems to be going right in their lives. At times, they lose their faith and their concept of God when things go wrong. Even when faith is lost, though, it usually recovers. When faced by death or great danger, people who would not consider themselves very religious cry out to God.

During the 9/11 crisis in New York, for example, people everywhere were calling on God to help them. When people are confronted with danger, the most common phrase one hears is, "Oh my God." These people may not attend church anywhere, but they have a form of religion deep in their hearts.

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*In our world, those who profess to be religious far outnumber those who say they have no beliefs.*

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### God can be found

In the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, God is compared to a potter who is able to work with clay and make whatever he desires. Israel was given help and blessings, but they decided that for them God did not exist—at least not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The people of Judah and Jerusalem decided to walk their own paths (Jeremiah 18:12). Each one would decide for himself what was right—and whether there was a God or not. God's response was that He would turn His back on them (verse 17), bringing enemies to them and striking them with calamity. People would seek God and not find Him (Hosea 1:9). Yet God is near and wants to be found. Jeremiah wrote, "You will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:12-13).

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### *God is near and wants to be found.*

We humans are often the foolish ones. We think we know so much when, in fact, we know nothing compared to God. Human beings cannot understand spiritual things until God enables them through His Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:7-14). Many people are more than just ignorant—they are willfully ignorant (2 Peter 3:5).

God is calling only a relatively few people during this age to be able to understand His truth and plans. God has taken the responsibility for drawing people to Him into His hands (John 6:44). None can come to God unless God invites them. It is not that God does not want to invite all people; it is that each person gets only one chance to have his sins forgiven through the suffering of Jesus Christ. God wants to ensure the very best chance at the very best time—so He chooses the moment. He knows that "tasting" of this gift and rejecting it means death (Hebrew 6:4-6).

### Delusions and counterfeits

So, Richard Dawkins is the one with a delusion, thinking that no intelligent person would believe in a Creator God. Many intelligent and well-educated people believe in God—and the zeal of religious people around the world should inspire us to have greater zeal for God.

However, prior to the return of Jesus Christ, God is calling only a relatively few to be a part of His true religion. Even most of so-called "Christianity" is not God's true religion—it is variations of a

great counterfeit (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). False religion is worse in many ways than no religion at all.

The good news is this: After Christ's return, He will offer spiritual understanding to all people so all will have the opportunity to be part of His true religion!

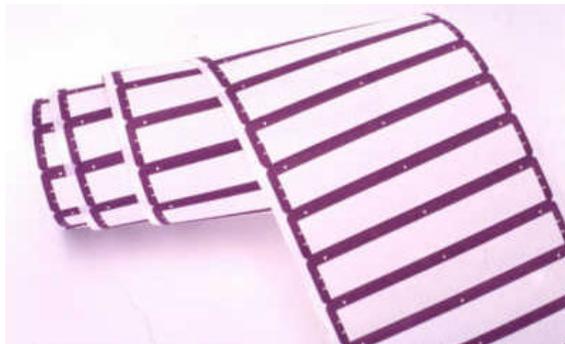
### Further reading:

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## Labels—Part 1

By Lorelei Nettles

*Labels can tell us a lot, and we often stand by a label. But what happens when we label people?*



**W**E ALL RECOGNIZE OUR FAVORITE PRODUCTS by their colors, symbols or packaging labels. If we are accustomed to using a certain product, we may not give it up even when changes are made to it. A very familiar label is that of Coca-Cola. Introduced in 1886, it's a product with worldwide recognition.

When Coca-Cola first arrived on the scene, it was a variation of a popular type of drink called coca wine. It was soon marketed as a patent medicine and was touted to be a "good for your health" cure-all. It was said it could cure diseases, stop migraines and even cure morphine addiction. At that time, it contained 5 ounces of coca leaf per gallon. It was literally loaded with cocaine. At one point, it had a mix of 9 milligrams of cocaine per glass. (Source: [Wikipedia](#), retrieved Nov. 4, 2009.)



## Change

After some debate, Coca-Cola, now under new ownership, changed forever. It would now be made with spent leaves of the Coca plant and would contain only traces of cocaine. Even today, it is flavored with cocaine-free coca leaf extract.

How, we may wonder, did the regular drinkers of Coca-Cola feel about that change? Many were used to sipping this refresher until they were literally buzzed. Now it would merely be a soda pop. While some people did quit drinking the cola, most people stood by the label. They knew this product, had been drinking it for some time and would not turn away from it.



In 1985, the brand now known as Coke decided to try a new recipe called “New Coke.” Though some preferred its taste to original Coke, it was rejected. Why? Long-time consumers didn’t like the change. The label was firmly established in their minds, and the change was not acceptable to them.

## Personal labels

What about the mental labels we create? How are we at letting go of our preset ideas of what or how things should be?

Have you ever labeled someone? Labels are sticky and difficult to remove once placed; we often apply them very quickly without a second thought. We have all been guilty of it: maybe it was someone who was short with you and you labeled them a crab. It could have been a person who worked with you and you labeled them bossy. It’s not always the big labels that stand out. Words like gossip, chatty, egotistical and so on are all labels that can cause friction for a person or persons.

Once labels are placed, how often do we really try to remove them? If we are aware and try to remove the label, are we truly peeling it all away? Labels are glued on pretty well, and as we scrape them off, they often only peel, leaving remnants behind. The remnants can be seemingly impervious to our attempts to remove them, but remove them we must if we want a clean surface to work with. We really want to replace the negative label with a fresh one, one that is positive and welcoming.

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*Labels can become permanent, if we are not careful, and they can potentially prevent us from forming strong relationships with others.*

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## Difficult-to-remove labels

I once knew a little boy who had too much energy for his own good. Because of this, he would often unintentionally play too rough and, because he didn’t know his own strength, other children would sometimes get hurt. The boy was always sorry and really tried to be gentler, but it was too late. Parents of other children became concerned and labeled this little boy a bully. They began to watch more closely when the boy was around and would yell at him if he even looked like he

might cause harm. The boy, in turn, became very touchy and would get upset and hurt. He knew he hadn't done anything and was not even given a chance, but his getting upset only made him look more like a bully. Right or wrong, there it was: a huge "bully" label pasted across the child.

The interesting thing was what happened next. The children, having so often seen their parents' reactions to the boy, began blaming him as well. If they got hurt, it was the boy's fault; if there was some bad behavior by the children, they told their parents it was the boy who started it. The parents always believed their own child—why wouldn't they? It matched the label, after all. The bully label was stuck and not likely to be removed anytime soon. It was sad.

Four years passed and the boy was still full of energy, but no longer having the same issues he had previously had with the children. The children were very forgiving and had no issue with the boy, yet the parents could or would not let it go. They could not remove the label they had put on this boy so many years before. They continued to discuss the boy with disdain, as if it were still four years ago. Even though he had not displayed any of his previous behavior, the label was stuck.

Labels can become permanent, if we are not careful, and they can potentially prevent us from forming strong relationships with others. I remember my first church experience as a married woman. It was a new church for my husband and me, and I was scoping potential friends out. As I did this, I labeled a few couples by only a few of their actions, actually saying I could not become friends with such people. Thankfully, I did not allow those labels to stick, and my husband and I ended up becoming very close friends with those same couples.



### Peeling away the labels

Christ taught us that we are to love one another (John 15:17), and in Ephesians 4:2 we are told to be "with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love." We cannot show that love if we hold on to those negative labels. A negative label placed on another can cause us to retain bad thoughts towards them, even if they have changed.

Labels are easily applied, but it is a bit more difficult to peel them away. But peel we must! Even if we scrape it away a bit at a time, we must keep working on it until it is completely gone. If we do not strip it all away, what we leave behind may cause us to create another label to replace it: not a new one, but the same old one we had on before. Not letting go of preconceived notions can cause festering and we can feel the need to replace the original label. We must take the time to soak that label in love and eventually it will come away to reveal clearly what's underneath.

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*Be the first to start peeling away the labels, even if it is only a strip at a time.*

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Giving a person the time to change or realizing we may have mislabeled them in the first place is a good place to start. And guess what? They may not be the one who changes at all. Often it is ourselves who have to adjust. If we are not forgiving, who knows what kind of label may be placed onto us in the future? No one wants to be negatively labeled, and we have all been guilty of doing it at some point or another.

The goal is to be the example, the one who steps out of the familiar line with the familiar crowd — to be the first to start peeling away the labels, even if it is only a strip at a time. It means saying yes, maybe I'll give this new product (person) a chance. Maybe I have missed what's underneath by only reading the label.

(In part 2 of "Labels," the subject of group and individual labels created by deeds or pasts will be further discussed.)

### Further reading

For more reading on how to change your life, request our free booklet, [\*Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion\*](#).

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## It's Suppertime!

By Hector M. Earle

*Spending time together at dinner is a valuable step in strengthening bonds between family members. What steps can your family take to get the most out of it?*



**W**HEN I HEAR THE SONG "SUPPER TIME," I get that nostalgic feeling of home and childhood. Am I the only one who experiences that, or is it everyone? The words of the opening line, "When I was but a boy in days of childhood," have a way of bringing me back to the sights, sounds and smells that made our house a home. A place where my dad sat as king at the end of the table and where my mom fussed about making sure we all got enough to eat. Yes, it was a time of good food, a lot of chatter and hearty laughter.

### More than a meal

It seems to me now (even though I would give a fortune to taste my mother's home-cooked meals once again) that having family meals was more about building relationships and bonding together than it was about eating.

How different it is for us today in our harried and hurried lives. We see a drastic decline in the amount of time families spend together. Nowadays, with microwave ovens and fast food, not to mention every type of modern media screaming for our attention, family meals are reduced to eating on the go and trying to fit in a quick bite between conflicting schedules. Between the busyness of parents working late, the blaring evening news and trying to juggle between homework, piano lessons and a host of other demands on our time, it is difficult for families to set aside meaningful mealtimes together anymore.

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*Research still shows that family mealtimes are one of the best outlets for good communication and family stability.*

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Despite the competing pressures and priorities that are making family suppertime a thing of the past, research still shows that family mealtimes are one of the best outlets for good communication and family stability.

### **Retaining suppertime**

Keeping in mind that family meals are most effective as a time of bonding, what can families do to make suppertime a more pleasant and rewarding experience?

### **Make suppertime a priority**

Plan to have a home-cooked evening meal at least a couple of times a week (with no interruptions) until it becomes a family tradition. Other weekly or daily tasks can be planned around suppertime. Perhaps families could start with once a week and then increase that number as time goes on.



### **Set the table**

Remember when we all knew our places around the table? Eating supper on trays around the TV does not promote good communication like the dining room table.

### **Invest the time**

Instead of rushing to catch the evening news, invest a few minutes after mealtime reminiscing about each family member's experiences, like:

- ?? Who had the most fun?
- ?? Who felt the most embarrassed?
- ?? Who was so tired that...?
- ?? Who never worked harder...?
- ?? Who felt closest to God?

You'll be amazed how sharing things like this can bond family together and leave memories for years to come.

## Make it positive

Parents can take this opportunity to recall an action of their child's that made them proud. Mealtimes should be a time of pleasant conversing. It's amazing how much better food tastes when we accentuate the positive. After all, Philippians 4:8 tells us to think and meditate on positive things.

## Include the little ones

Meals are a great learning time for younger children. They can practice the alphabet, multiplication tables, or spelling words. Vocabulary can also be reinforced by naming animals, famous people or places of the world. (A good time for this is while waiting for mom's delicious homemade dessert.) Be warned, though, that this practice may make your children smarter.

## Go down memory lane

After eating, have everyone try to recall the events from your family's favorite vacation or outing. Find the old photos taken on the trip and recall the warm memories and laughter as you walk through those excursions once again.

I can still recall the laughter my sister and I shared not long ago around the table as we reminisced about our trips, in our dad's old 1964 station wagon, to the city of Corner Brook back when we were children. We didn't mind the flat tires, the overheated radiator or holes in the gas tank. All we remembered was how much fun we had when, by necessity, we had to get out of the vehicle and walk up the hills to lighten the load because the plugs failed and the old station wagon lost power. My dad, in his frustration and embarrassment, didn't find it very funny until the trip was over and we all arrived safely back home.

## Don't forget the giving of thanks at the table

Don't just quickly recite familiar lines of repetition. Instead, really and sincerely thank our Heavenly Father for all of our blessings. Slow down the prayer so that each thought is emphasized. Better still, have each family member offer a short portion of prayer of things to be thankful for. You might even try singing your prayers or holding hands for variety. Saying a prayer at mealtimes can offer wonderful opportunities for guiding children (and adults too) to pray for specific circumstances in their lives and the lives of others.

Jesus assures us in Luke 11:9 that God promises help to those who ask.



This list for family mealtime bonding serves only as a starting point in suggesting some meaningful ways of rediscovering the lost art of dining together. Perhaps the poet Edgar A. Guest summed it up best when he wrote the following lines regarding the importance of the family meal:

A tablecloth that's slightly soiled  
Where greasy little hands have toiled;  
The napkins kept in silver rings,  
And only ordinary things  
From which to eat, a simple fare,  
And just the wife and kiddies there,  
And while I serve, the clatter glad  
Of little girl and little lad  
Who have so very much to say,  
About the happenings of the day.

Maybe it is once again time to reinvest in togetherness by taking the time to sit down and break bread together, around our own tables. It sure beats eating out in expensive and often noisy restaurants where no bonding takes place, especially now during these tough economic times.

Come on home; it's supptime!

### Further reading

Learn more about family by requesting or reading online our free booklet [Marriage & Family: The Missing Dimension](#).

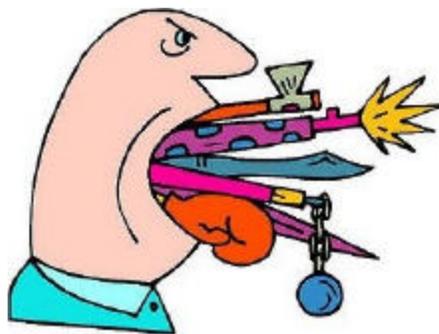
(This article was inspired by the Good News article ["Dinnertime"](#) by Scott Hoefker.)

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## A Word **NOT** Spoken

By Rebecca Sweat

*Our words can cut like a sword or be as comforting as a fluffy blanket, but sometimes its what is not said that can be cutting or comforting.*



“I TOLD YOU WE SHOULD HAVE TAKEN the other freeway,” I snapped at my brother. “I’ll never catch my flight now.”

The tense look on my brother's face turned into anger. "I'm doing the best I can. There's no need to bite my head off," he huffed.

We'd been stuck in rush hour traffic in downtown Detroit, Michigan, for more than an hour, on our way to the airport on the outskirts of the city. Rather than take the freeway bypass around the city, my brother thought the road through the city would be more direct.

My comment made a bad situation worse. Not only was I going to miss my flight, my brother was now upset with me on top of it all. I wished I had just kept quiet and not said anything.

At one time or other, most of us have blurted out words we wish we could take back. Numerous situations could be improved not so much by what we say, but by what we *don't* say. Before you open your mouth to speak, here are six questions you should ask yourself:

### Who am I helping?

Too often we let our emotions take over and speak out of anger or frustration. It may temporarily make us feel good to get our perspectives out and be heard, but it may not help the person who is the recipient of our words.

When my friend Connie suddenly grew distant after years of a close friendship, I tried to get her to talk. After several failed attempts at getting her to open up, I became frustrated with the situation. Connie was no longer the fun, happy friend I wanted her to be. She didn't want to get together and go to lunch or on antiquing outings anymore. When I did see her briefly at church, she seemed preoccupied and barely had anything to say.

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*At one time or other, most of us have blurted out words we wish we could take back.*

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I decided to write Connie a letter and tell her how disappointed I was in her. Then, I don't know why exactly, I put the letter aside. Not many days later Connie called me.

"I was wondering if you'd like to go out for lunch this afternoon?" she asked. "I've been under a lot of pressure lately at the office, but I think things are finally getting back to normal."

Connie had needed her friends to be patient with her. If I would have sent that letter to her and told her how upset I was with her, it would have only added pressure to her already stressful situation and may have permanently hurt our friendship.

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*Before you share your assessment of someone else's situation, it's a good idea to remind yourself that an opinion is just an opinion and not necessarily a fact.*

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Waiting patiently is a strategy too often overlooked in our dealings with others. Too many times we're quick to tell it like it is, bludgeoning a friend with perhaps factual but unkind words to vent our own frustrations. Although we may feel a warped sense of satisfaction for a time, the result is almost always a scarred friendship. Ecclesiastes 7:8-9 says, "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not hasty in your spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools" (King James Version).

Along this same line is telling someone “I told you so.” Oftentimes it’s said between close friends and family members, usually in the heat of a difficult situation when one party obviously made a mistake. Yet this is rarely a helpful thing to say. It’s certainly too late to make the outcome any different. These words only make the other person feel like you are being critical of him and that you are trying to make yourself look superior.

Before you speak, ask yourself: What am I trying to accomplish? Will what I’m planning to say improve a particular situation or help the person I am speaking to? If you honestly feel your words will build up and help another person, it’s probably a good idea to speak. Otherwise, keep your words to yourself.

### **Do I have all the facts?**

Most of us can probably recall a time or two when we’ve gotten upset with others about something they supposedly did or didn’t do, only to find out later that the situation was nothing like we’d originally surmised.

One of my friends has a boss who routinely calls her into his office to reprimand her about the way he’s heard she handled various problems at work. “As soon as I walk in the door, he’ll start yelling at me,” relates my friend. “But once he gives me a chance to talk, it often comes out that it’s a very different situation than what he was told by others—people who weren’t even directly involved with what happened.”

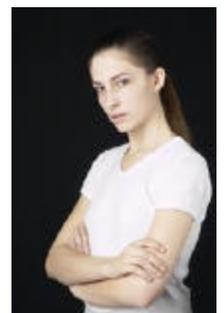


Proverbs 12:19 says, “The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment” (American King James Version). Make sure you have all the facts before you open your mouth. If there’s a chance you may be missing vital information, keep your words to yourself. Nothing is more destructive or embarrassing than flying off the handle about something, only to discover later you repeated what wasn’t true or got upset for nothing.

### **Was I asked for my opinion?**

Some people feel the need to blurt out dogmatic opinions about everything and everyone, even when no one asked them what they thought and even when it comes to inconsequential, everyday matters. Others think they have the answers to everyone else’s problems and can’t resist sharing their advice, even if it’s unwelcome and unsolicited.

I once knew someone who seemed to enjoy being a contrarian. If he was with a group of people at the office or church and everyone was commenting about how they liked a particular movie or restaurant, he would jump right in and tell everyone else how he didn’t agree. He always had very strong, negative opinions, which, once out in the open, always dampened the mood of the group.



Most of us have also known our share of “know -it-alls.” They’re the kind of people who can’t resist telling you what car to buy, what dentist you should go to, how to

cure your child's skin problems or what they believe is going to happen next in the economy and where you should put your money—even when they're not experts in these areas and you aren't asking for advice.

Before you share your assessment of someone else's situation, it's a good idea to remind yourself that an opinion is just that: an opinion, and not necessarily a fact. It won't be the end of the world if others don't get to hear your views of a particular situation.

If your opinion is opposite of everyone else around you, sometimes it's better to keep quiet, particularly when it's not a life-and-death matter. If you insist on making your contrary opinions heard, your ideas may start an argument. Or you may simply come across as a "rebel without a cause."

Before blurting out unsolicited advice, first try to ascertain whether the person really needs or wants your advice. Chances are, the person is doing fine managing the situation on his own, even if he is making a few mistakes along the way. Passing on unsolicited advice may make him feel like you are being critical of how he is handling his situation and make him feel uncomfortable if he is not interested in your advice. If the person does seem like he needs help, ask him if he would be interested in hearing your ideas *before* you share your perspectives. That way you won't come across as too forward or pushy.

### Is it my place to speak?

Often we take it upon ourselves to speak up about a problem when really someone else should be passing on the concerns. I once had an office coworker who thrived on telling me what she heard somebody else say about me. She would say things like:

"Marie says you joke around too much at work."

"Colleen thinks you wear the wrong clothing styles."

"Bob thinks you and your husband are a bad match."

"Several people told me they thought you seemed edgy at the last party."



The only effect those comments had on me was to make me feel bad. I shouldn't have to change my taste in clothes to earn someone else's approval. If Marie was sincerely concerned that I joke around too much, why couldn't she tell me directly? Bob may think my husband and I are a bad match, but he's hardly ever said a word to me and he's only seen my husband in passing. And to be told that "several people" thought I was out of sorts at the last party only made me feel like I was being bad-mouthed behind my back. I wasn't even told specifically who made the comments so I couldn't even approach them about what they said. I just knew I was being discussed in an uncomplimentary way—and that made me feel horrible.

I've made it a personal rule that, if someone tells me about a gripe he has with one of my friends, I don't repeat it. If what the person is saying could contain some truth, I urge him to tell my friend

directly. If the complaint is just a different opinion or a reflection of insensitivity or lack of knowledge about the person or situation, my friend doesn't need to hear it.

God is very aware of our words and we are gauged by what we have to say. "Be not rash with your mouth, and let not your heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and you on earth: therefore let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:2, AKJV).

### **Am I speaking the truth in love?**

You may think another person needs to hear what you have to say, but blasting her with criticism won't get your message across. I once had an acquaintance that prided herself on not "kowtowing" to anybody. She had no problem with confronting people about what she perceived as their faults and shortcomings and "putting them in their place." She would always justify the way she boldly confronted others by quoting Matthew 18 and saying "it was for their own good." Yet the way she approached others was often unnecessarily abrupt, bold, harsh and judgmental. Sometimes I thought her assessment of particular people or situations was way off. Even if she had a point in her gripe about the person, she was not approaching him in a kind manner. I often wondered if she was really concerned about the other person or just wanted to blow off some steam.

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*Watch your timing. Three hours after your friend is involved in a serious automobile accident is no time to tell him how bad his driving habits are.*

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Ephesians 4:15 tells us to speak the truth in love. Strive to share your thoughts in ways that come across as inoffensively as possible. If you take on the role of a human wrecking ball with no regard to other people's feelings, your comments will be taken as a personal assault. Criticism must be combined with a genuine concern to be effective. "Letting it all hang out" is not usually a loving thing to do.

### **Is the other person ready to hear what I have to say?**

Your friend may be upset about a problem and your first impulse may be to open your mouth and tell him or her what you'd do if you were facing such a situation, or what you think he or she did to cause the problem. Maybe you are sure you know the solution to your friend's situation and rather than hear how she feels, you just want to jump right in and tell her what she needs to do to make things right.

In most cases, though, the best thing you can do to help a hurting friend is to just keep silent and listen. Galatians 5:13 says, "For, brothers, you have been called to liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (AKJV).

Oftentimes when people are upset about a difficult situation they just need someone to hear them out. This allows sufferers to work out their own solution by talking through the problem. If as listeners we force our solutions on others, we lose them in the process.

Watch your timing. Three hours after your friend is involved in a serious automobile accident is no time to tell him how bad his driving habits are. The minute you find out someone has fraudulently used your wife's credit card is not the time to tell her how careless she is with her purse. If your friend calls to tell you she just got fired from her job, that's not the time to tell her

why you think her boss didn't like her. Keep quiet and let your friend do the talking. Your friend is dealing with enough just having to endure the pain of the situation. Don't make her have to endure more by hearing correction or criticism from you. Give your friend time to recover from the hurt and to get her emotions back to normal—before you share your perspectives about what happened in her life.

Take time to think about the probable effects of your words before you open your mouth to speak. If I had asked myself these questions, I would have only missed my flight out of Detroit. Instead, I let my nervous emotions get the best of me and that put a damper on my relationship with my brother. Make it a goal to use your words to improve situations and relationships. When your words would only do harm, keep quiet.

### Further reading

For more on the power of the tongue, see our *Vertical Thought* Commentary, "[Stabbed Anyone Lately?](#)"

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## The Whole Church

By William Miller

When God opened our minds we,  
Each of us embraced the Truth with joy!  
Nuggets! Treasures!  
Sought and found  
Became our daily fare.

Years passed for many of us,  
Retreating hairlines, advancing waistlines.  
The mines were still open,  
But the priceless gems  
Became harder to readily scoop up;  
This rarity made them even more valuable.

We have always shared,  
Good times and trials,  
Is this "rushing to conclusion" world  
Really any different—right NOW?

I think not.  
The Father and the Son still reign  
And Their Spirit still energizes  
The whole of God's Church.

