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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?



WHAT 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).

Even the time of Jesus' birth was roughly known.

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 3:41-42).

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.

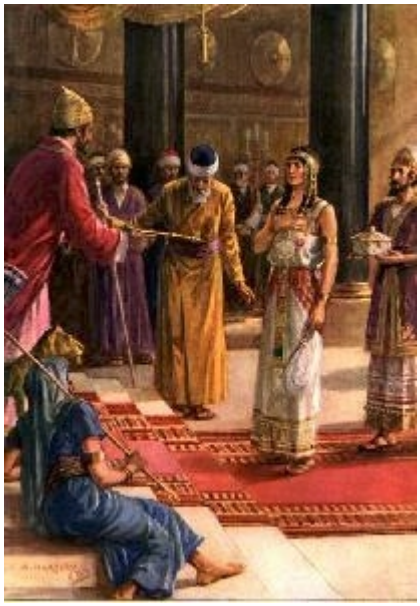
There is sufficient information in the Gospels to dispel the myths that have crept into the extra-biblical accounts of Christ's life through the centuries. Most of His life in the Gospels deals with His ministry, because this was the time of His public teaching. His early life is briefly mentioned to 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).

Gifts We Fail to Use

By Robert Berendt

When we get the wonderful gifts for which we pray, do we really appreciate them... or abuse them?



AS A MINISTER, many people tell me about the things for which they are praying. Jesus taught us to ask for our daily bread. He also said whatever we ask in His name, God will give (John 14:14; Matthew 21:22). God does love to give gifts to His children--precious and wonderful gifts. When we do not have them, we deeply desire them. But when we receive them, it seems we all too often abuse them.

What Solomon did not have

Consider King Solomon. He was a young man when God appointed him to the office of king, and 1 Kings 3:5-13 records the wonderful, humble prayer of Solomon at that time. Instead of riches, he asked for wisdom to serve the people. God not only gave the gift of wisdom that King Solomon had asked for, He also added many other blessings and gifts. However, God did not add the willpower and *character* that would ensure that Solomon would always properly use the gifts God had given. We humans have to develop that character. That is our responsibility, a small way of showing we really do appreciate the gifts.

King Solomon's later life reveals that he did things that showed a complete lack of wisdom at times.

The sad story of King Solomon's later life reveals that he did things that showed a complete lack of wisdom at times. Marrying 1,000 women was one example. Trying to please his wives by allowing their idols to be placed around the temple was another.

Solomon ought to have been working for the betterment of the lives of his people. Instead, huge taxes and demands on the people for his pet construction projects resulted in turning the nation against the king. Solomon's decisions were not wise and godly in many

areas. He turned to the "wisdom" of this world and away from the wisdom that God made available.

God had told Solomon that the blessings were tied in with Solomon's obedience (1 Kings 9:4), yet 1 Kings 11 records some of the wrong choices Solomon made by neglecting the wisdom God gave him. Because of these sins, God took most of the tribes of Israel away from his son, and Solomon lived to experience many problems in his land.

Spiritual gifts

The church in Corinth is another example of abused and neglected gifts. The first 11 verses of 1 Corinthians 12 mention some spiritual gifts God gave to the church in Corinth, such as the "word of wisdom through the Spirit" and "the word of knowledge through the same Spirit." However, throughout the book of 1 Corinthians Paul cited many problems in that congregation. There were divisions, factions and gross misconduct. In chapter 14, we can see the gift of tongues was abused. As a loving parent, God withdraws His gifts when abuse occurs. Those who are parents know this is the right and necessary thing to do--you can't keep giving the car keys to a son who drives recklessly.

Luke 9:1 tells of the time when Jesus gave the gift of healing and the ability to recognize and cast out demons to His 12 disciples, including Judas. Others were also sent out with great gifts in the next chapter. It was an amazing experience for these men. They were to take no spare shoes, no money and no provisions. God made sure they were supplied with everything they needed for the trip.

After all this, after seeing countless blessings and miracles, how could Judas become such a betrayer of his Friend? How is it that humans can receive great and precious gifts from God and yet go so far off track? How can we discredit the Creator of the universe with our errors and petty acts? What is the source of our lack of appreciation? *How can we abuse the gifts God gives?* And yet, many do just that.



Neglecting God's gifts can have a deadly end. One of the greatest gifts is God's Holy Spirit, and 1 Thessalonians 5:19 warns us not to quench it. The warning should indicate that we can, indeed, quench this gift. Hebrews 6:4-6 warns those who fall away that there may be no way back. The awesome gift of God's Holy Spirit that imparts understanding in spiritual matters is all too often ignored or put aside with the passage of time. Therefore, we are told to repent and overcome.

Why is there a constant force we must resist in order to remain on the "straight and narrow"? Why are we tested every day? Why must we be on guard and examine ourselves on a regular basis?

Where the problem began: Lucifer

It may come as a surprise to hear that God also filled Lucifer with wisdom. Ezekiel 28 describes some of the gifts God gave to this wonderful angelic being that He lovingly created.

Verses 12 and 13 explain that Lucifer was full of wisdom and beauty. "Every precious stone" can be thought of as a variety of gifts that were given. A parallel exists with Solomon here. The difference is Lucifer had much more to answer for, because he knew his Creator intimately and saw God every day. Lucifer and the angels with him had no excuse. They could not claim ignorance and human weakness as we so often do.

Satan works to influence us to make the wrong choices too. He wants us to neglect and abuse the gifts of God.

Ezekiel explains in verses 17 to 19 that Lucifer was proud of his own beauty: "You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor." Lucifer allowed vanity and pride to cloud his reason.

The gifts God gives are always good. *He cannot give bad gifts to anyone because He is God.* He lets us decide what to do with these gifts. Since Lucifer made his wrong choice and became Satan, the adversary, he works to influence us to make the wrong choices too. He wants us to neglect and abuse the gifts of God.



Too often we do not keep our guard up, though we are faced with a hateful, angry and powerful enemy. Mankind follows Satan's influence and way. Pride, vanity and the lust for power are the driving forces behind the corruption of ideals and introduction of destructive forces. We all have excuses for not following the Bible carefully. We have excuses for all of our wrong actions including lying, theft and spreading malicious gossip. Power breeds corruption and an even greater need for power and control.

When the focus is on the self, we move away from godliness. Christ's focus was outward--He came to lay down His life for this world. His followers and all who partake of heavenly gifts are to become like Him.

Thankfully, we humans can be forgiven our weaknesses and errors, because of God's greatest gift--His Son who came to die as a Savior for us. But although we have a Savior, we are not freed from fighting sin to show we want to be like our Savior who detests sin. We need to constantly remind ourselves of this wonderful gift. If we should ever lose our sense of appreciation, then we too would have no further gifts from God. Use the gifts God gives wisely and use them to His glory.

Why No Spectacular Miracles Today?

By David J. Sandland

The Bible is full of descriptions of fantastic miracles. Many wonder, why don't we see great public miracles today?



OVER THE YEARS, working in Personal Correspondence for the Church of God, I have been confronted with many stimulating and thought-provoking questions that deserve an answer. One such question recently came into the United Church of God office here in Australia asking the question: "Why are no miracles being performed today?"

The writer went on to ask:

"Why doesn't God speak and interact directly with us today, as He did with the likes of Elijah and Elisha, and others? Why can't we--God's people--make, for example, the head of an axe to float? Why is it that we don't have that power today?

"Nothing spectacular is happening anymore. In the first century, supernatural things were going on all the time. Did the disciples have more of the Holy Spirit than we do or did they just have more faith? Because miracles were taking place on a daily basis.

"I think Jesus expects us to perform miracles, after all that was part of His message and ministry."

Certainly an interesting challenge. Why are there so few miracles, in the sense of *spectacular public displays* of God's power within His Church and by His people? Does God expect us to perform such miracles today, to somehow prove He is "on our side"?

True, many people do know that God *does* perform many miracles today. Many of us have witnessed miracles with practical benefits, such as the miracles of healing, protection, solving problems, etc. And then there's the miracle of conversion, which is the greatest miracle of all.

However, that was not the type of miracle our writer was questioning. He spoke of the public displays of God's hand in the first and earlier centuries.

How would you have answered?

Perhaps a good place to start is over in Hebrews 1:1: "God, who at various times *and in various ways* spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets." Those "various ways" did indeed include unmistakable and public miracles. Witness the life and work of the prophet Elijah and the judge Samson.

However, today He works in another way, as the explanation continues in verse 2. He "has in these last days spoken to us by His Son." Not necessarily through miracles, but through the life, message and teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded for us in the New Testament.

Many people do know that God does perform many miracles today.

The miracles we read about in the Bible were examples of the power and love of God that are important to our understanding. But now that we have the biblical record, there is not the need to continually repeat all the different types of miracles.

Miracles were used at times to attract large audiences, and this was especially important in the founding of the New Testament Church. Today, we have the benefit of mass media technology.

The Bible shows that God doesn't want to force everyone to see His truth and where He is working during this age, so that He doesn't have to hold them fully accountable and they can be extended more mercy (Matthew 13:10-17; Romans 11:7-10, 32). Proving Himself through miracles would make the audience more accountable.

And miracles aren't necessarily good for us. God gave many members of the Corinthian church miraculous spiritual gifts, but they seem to have done more harm than good in that the gifts went to the heads of the members.

Why miracles?

Now let's consider a major question, *What spiritual value are miracles anyway? What value are they in terms of conversion and salvation?* Especially the public miracles that draw attention to God's work and people. Consider, as a first example, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16.

When the rich man begged for a miracle (as our writer seems to be doing), a miracle of a resurrection from the dead, notice Abraham's reply in verse 31:



"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets [many of whom did perform miracles], neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."

Abraham explained that miracles would not necessarily convert the rich man's relatives.

What about the *miracles performed by Christ Himself?* Did they make any real difference? Would they have converted that rich man's family?

Over in Matthew 12:10-13 we read the miracle of Christ healing the man with a withered hand--a dramatic and undeniable miracle. What was the reaction of the unconverted and carnal Pharisees? Verse 14 says, "Then the Pharisees went out and *plotted against* Him, how they might *destroy* Him." So much for any positive effect, even when a miracle was performed by Christ Himself!

Again, back in Matthew 9:1-3, we read of another of Christ's public miracles. This time a paralytic was miraculously healed. The reaction from the scribes? "This Man blasphemes!"

Another equally discouraging example is recorded in Matthew 9:32-34. "He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons," was the pathetic response. The same reaction is recorded in Matthew 12:22-24.

Apart from the mercy and kindness extended to those He healed, Christ would have saved Himself a great deal of opposition, by not performing any miracles at all. But then Christ would have been asked, "Why do you not perform miracles like Elijah? Show yourself to be the Christ by performing a miracle." So would have gone the challenge and criticism.

Incidentally, even being a miracle worker, so-called, does not prove conversion or spirituality. Matthew 7:21-23 gives us the haunting and sobering warning that even those who have "cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name" will be confronted by Christ Himself with the chilling challenge, "I never knew you." Compare also Matthew 16:1-4.

So performing miracles, or witnessing such miracles, doesn't necessarily have lasting or deep effects on those witnessing such miracles. So, why none today? I guess you could say, Why bother?

Deceptive and ineffective miracles

We also need to consider that *miracles can be used to deceive*. Matthew 24:24 warns, "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect." If we are looking for such signs and wonders as some kind of proof as to where God and Christ are working today, then we run the risk of being deceived.

Perhaps one of the *soberest warnings* and examples of just how ineffective a miracle can be in getting people to change, is seen by considering the people alive just before Christ's return, who witness endless miracles as described throughout the book of Revelation. What will be the ultimate reaction of such a godless generation to the divine intervention of God?



"But the rest of mankind...did not repent... And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts" (Revelation 9:20-21). Thus Christ Himself has to return in undeniable power and might to convince that generation of unthankful, unholy and stubbornly resistant people. Miracles, of and by themselves, don't convince or convict people. Only the presence of Christ Himself will gain the permanent attention of that end-time generation. And many people will have to die and be resurrected before their minds are receptive to God's revelation.

Also in the book of Revelation, consider the miracles and wonders performed through the power of God by the two witnesses as recorded in Revelation 11:3, 5 and 6. These two individuals will be given power: fire will proceed out of their mouths; they will have power to shut up the heavens and power over the waters of the earth.

Will men repent in the face of such power? We know otherwise. Verses 7 through 10 show war will be made against them and they will be murdered. The earth will rejoice, not over their miracles and power, but over their death! So much, again, for the power of miracles.

A great denial

Many of you will have been thinking about one of the greatest denials of miracle-working power ever experienced by mankind--the denial by ancient Israel of the God who miraculously bought them out of bondage in Egypt. As you have the time, you might want to read the entirety of Psalm 78. Verse 12 reminds us of the "marvelous things He did in the sight of their fathers," how He "divided the sea," how He "led them with the cloud" and "brought streams out of the rock" (verses 12-16).

Their reaction? Entirely predictable by now: "But they *sinned even more* against Him" (verse 17) to the point God's anger was kindled against them (verse 21).

We could have expected Pharaoh, even in the face of miracle after miracle, to have continually hardened his heart (which, by the way, was hard from the beginning), but Israel? How many more miracles would it have taken to convince them?

Even in the face of undeniable miracles, sin can and does deceitfully harden our hearts. The most important power for softening hard hearts is the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit.

If you wonder how many, read the story of Korah in Numbers 16. A mighty miracle was witnessed by the Israelites--the miracle of the ground literally opening up before their stunned eyes and swallowing Korah and his fellow complainers. Surely that would be enough to convince anyone that God was working through Moses and was a God to be reckoned with. Surely the letter writer would be satisfied if a similar miracle took place today?

What was the reaction? One of humble repentance? Hardly. Read verse 41: "On the *next day* all the congregation of the children of Israel *complained* against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You have killed the people of the Lord.'" Absolutely astonishing. How did they think Moses pulled off such a feat--opening the earth and swallowing them up?

About this time God had had enough: "Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment" (verse 45). (Just as I have no doubt that Christ must have had, on occasions, "enough" when the miracles He performed were continually attributed to the work of the prince of demons.)

In all this, there's not too much evidence that miracles--in the sense of public displays of power--are the answer to the needs of man.

As we draw these considerations to an end, please also consider Hebrews 3:7-12.

Even in the face of undeniable miracles, sin can and does deceitfully harden our hearts. The most important power for softening hard hearts is the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit. God's calling and the gift of the Holy Spirit is what all people ultimately need. Sure, miracles--signs and wonders--gain initial attention. But not always, as we have seen, positive or life-changing attention. The answer to the needs of man is found in scriptures such as Hebrews 10:15-16, which tells of the writing of God's laws in our hearts.

I would like to quote from the answer we sent the letter writer who was looking for miracles to prove God is working in our midst.

"Even when God does speak and interact directly with us as He did with the likes of Elijah and Enoch, man will still not repent. No, miracles are not the answer, at least not the miracles you spoke about in your letter, but rather the miracle of true conversion is what man so desperately needs.

"Were their needs greater than ours, as you posed in your letter? No. All mankind has the same need--the Spirit of the Living God, miraculously dwelling and working in their hearts and minds. Let us be searching for that lasting miracle, not the fleeting, attention-getting, miracles that usually lead no one anywhere.

"As much as miracles are great and wonderful, they never have and never will convert the hard, stony heart of man. Only the miracle of the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit will ever perform that miracle. And that is what God is doing today, through the work of His Church and people, as He offers the opportunity for the miracle of a transformed, Spirit-led life to those who are willing to accept that gift--that miracle."

Does Your Light Shine--or Glare?

By Newton L. Baker

Why aren't "church people" popular in the restaurant where I work? The answer is a key to understanding how to let our Christian light truly shine.



THE WORLD IS WATCHING US. How we Christians act when out in public, be it at a restaurant or other public place, reflects on us, our church and Jesus Christ.

At the restaurant where I work as a host, we see many different types of people: families with small children, young couples, teens, people with rough clothes and covered with tattoos, bikers and "church people."

The servers have to deal with rowdy children, noisy parties, people upset at having to wait for a table and so on. The servers become used to and adept at dealing with these, but there is one group that they really don't like to see come in the restaurant.

But first, let's meet the servers.

The servers

Servers are people who have to do this labor for a living or for college money or for other things. They really need to work. Some are single mothers or abused women. Some are young people whose parents have put them out or demanded they get a job. Some are immigrants who are struggling to support a family here and possibly also back in their home country. They are paid an unlivable wage, about $2 to $2.50 an hour, and often work 12 to 14 hours a day. Their real income is from tips. It is physically hard work, and there can be real stress dealing with the public.

Back to the one group the servers really don't like to see come in. In our restaurant, this group is the "church people."

"Church people"

Twice a week there are groups coming in: on Bible study (or sewing circle or men's meeting, etc.) night and on Sunday. These are the very people you would expect would be the easiest and best to have as customers. They are "Christian"--taught to have love for their neighbor, be kind and outgoing and be an example of their way of life.

I have heard servers say, "If this is what going to church does, then I don't want any part of it."

Yes, one would expect that, and probably the majority are. But the quiet, proper and gentle ones are not noticed because of the others who are such glaring examples. They are the ones who are rude to the servers, treat them more as slaves than equals, are demanding, short tempered and inconsiderate.

Think this is an exaggeration? It is not. They come in groups of eight or more (where the tables are for four or two) on Sunday, which is the busiest day of the week. Then they get upset because they have to wait 30 to 45 minutes for enough adjoining tables to vacate so they can be pushed together to accommodate them.



Then when they are seated, they take it out on the server. Often they leave very little or no tip for the server whose living depends on tips. With checks of over $100, the tip is often just $2 to $5.

At night they will come in 15 minutes before closing and then sit after finishing their meal and visit until 45 minutes or an hour after closing. This leaves the staff standing around, unable to leave because of them. On Sunday this visiting ties up a group of tables while other people are waiting to be seated. The servers can make no money while their tables are not moving.

I have heard servers say, "If this is being a Christian" or "If this is what going to church does, then I don't want any part of it." Sounds extreme, but it is common in our restaurant every week. Most churchgoing people do not fall into this category, but sadly those who do stand out.

As a "city set on a hill," the lights of which are a welcome beacon to a weary traveler, we should be a welcome guest in any public place.

Jesus instructed us to let our light shine. Our light is to be a comforting, warm glow that attracts and guides. As a "city set on a hill," the lights of which are a welcome beacon to a weary traveler, we should be a welcome guest in any public place. By being sensitive to the servers' needs, being kind, cooperative and appreciative, we can avoid the glaring errors and be shining examples instead.

The bikers

Do you wonder who the customers are that the servers most like to welcome? Prepare for a shock. They are the bikers. Yes, when the 20 or 30 motorcyclists--with their leathers, tattoos, hair and so

on--pull up in the parking lot, they are most welcome. They are kind, patient and generous. They are quiet and well behaved. And they tip well. This is the light servers respond to.

When we are out in public, will our light be a welcome, warm, inviting glow--a shining example that makes people want us to return? Or will it be a blinding glare that causes people to turn away to escape it? Will they say of us, "If this is being Christian, I want no part of it"?

Which kind of "church people" will we be?

Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial

Life Is Too Short!

By W. Fred Crow

Untimely deaths of family and friends brought home the truth that time is far too precious to waste.



LIFE IS TOO SHORT! Really! There will never be enough time to do all the things I wish to do, meet all the people I wish to meet, experience all the events I wish to experience. Life is just too short!

In quick succession my dad died after successful triple-bypass heart surgery. Unable to deal with the strain of such intrusive procedures, his basic life supporting systems failed. He was 61.

A little later a college friend of over 20 years, a man in his mid-40s, a man who ran miles every day, watched his diet and cared for his body, died of heart failure.

I have no more time for the negatives that exhaust time without providing value to life.

Then a coworker died having made a mistake in judgment while driving. Following that my brother had a heart attack at age 48. And after that a friend was killed, the victim of a hit-and-run accident. I've attended more funerals and visited more hospitals in the past five years than in the entire 50-plus years prior. I really feel mortal.

While musing on my mortality and viewing life around me, I came to the concrete conclusion that life is just too short. I want more time. It's not that I'm selfish or unreasonable. I just want more time.

I want more time!

I want more time to listen to music. I want more time to listen to children laugh. I want more time to listen to great speakers and gurgling streams. I want more time to hear the sounds of silence as I look over incredible vistas of creation.



I want more time to see the sun set and sip tea with the dawn. I want more time to chase rainbows and butterflies, kittens and puppies, kites and paper planes, and breezes across a field. I want more time with our little people--the owners of tomorrow. I want more time for my family.

I want more time to explore. I want to know about the world around me. I want to understand the microscopic world of minute particles and the infinite expanse of the universe. I want more time to explore humanity, its potential, its failings, its wonders. I want more time to get to know you as society and as individuals. I want more time for art and literature and people and places and sounds and feelings and touchings of mind and spirit.

I want more time to help others. I want more time to lighten the load people carry. I want more time to show others beauty when they're surrounded by ugly. I want more time.

So I went looking for time.

I was disappointed. No store carried packages of time. No salesman offered me a deal on this priceless commodity. No manufacturer had time scheduled in its production line. Time wasn't available. That is, except for the personal allotment doled out to each of us on the day of our birth. And then, not everyone is assigned the same amount.

The dilemma--I want more time and there isn't any more time.

New ground rules

I must make do with what I have been given. So in order to get as much of my wishes and dreams and desires accomplished in my allotted time, I've developed new ground rules.

I want more time to chase rainbows and butterflies, kittens and puppies, kites and paper planes, and breezes across a field.

Today, I have no more time for worrying about things that never happen. I have no more time for fearing what might, could or may happen. I have no more time for negative attitudes that hold and suppress action and enthusiasm. I have no more time for destructive behavior. I have no more time for the caustic, cynical, reproachable, condemning, intolerant, self-motivated, me-only, win-at-all-costs negatives that exhaust time without providing value to life.

Life is too short to live looking backward. It's too short to be distracted by refusing to see beyond myself, beyond the petty and insignificant, beyond the dirt and grease and offending smells to enjoy the world around them. Time is too precious to spend on wasted, valueless activities...

Shhh...I've got to run--I think I hear a newborn crying and some birds singing and waves crashing on the Monterey coastline. I have just enough time to enjoy this unique opportunity.

This life is just too short.

Beyond making positive changes to our lives now, these musings can get us thinking about the future and what is beyond this life. The Bible is the most authoritative source on the afterlife, and if you would like to explore what the Bible says about this important subject, you may be interested in reading What Happens After Death? *Click on this link to read it on-line or to request a free copy be mailed to you. This booklet shows that an endless amount of time--eternity--is available to those who use their time now as God intended.*