

THE EPISTLE

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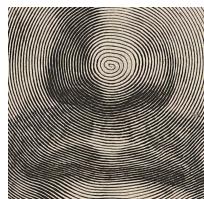
February 2026



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This Month's Cover

Our cover this month is *Sudaire de Sainte Véronique* (Veil of Saint Veronica), by the French artist Claude Mellan (1598-1688). Completed in 1649, it is an engraving on a 19.5"x14.8" copper plate, printed on vellum paper. It depicts the veil with which Saint Veronica wiped Jesus' face as he was on his way to the cross. Not only is it a powerful engraving, but it is particularly remarkable in that the entire engraving is made with one single spiral line. It starts at the tip of the nose and becomes thicker or thinner as necessary to make the dark and light areas in the picture.



The Bible does not mention Saint Veronica, but it is a very early Christian tradition that as Jesus was on his way to the cross, she wiped his face with her veil and an imprint of his face appeared on the veil. Her name in Greek means "true victory." In the Stations of the Cross, the sixth station is Veronica wiping Jesus' face.

Claude Mellan was a French draftsman, engraver, and painter. Little is known of his early life other than that he was born in 1598 in Abbeville, France, and was the son of a customs official. His first print appeared in Paris in 1619. Nothing is known of his first teachers, but his early prints show a distinct influence of the master engraver Léonard Gaultier. In 1624 he went to Rome, where he studied under two masters, Francesco Villamena and Simon Vouet. Vouet encouraged him to draw, as this was essential to good engraving. Mellan made some early engravings of Vouet's work, but during that time, he became increasingly adept at drawing his own works, especially portraits. In 1637 he returned to Paris where he developed a new form of engraving. Traditionally, shading was done by cross-hatching. Mellan started doing shading by using parallel lines that varied in thickness and distance from each other. In Paris, his work was almost exclusively engraving. He became very popular and in great demand, especially for his portraits. It was there that he did the

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engraving of Saint Veronica's Veil. Four hundred of his engravings have been catalogued, and about 100 drawings have survived. Most of the drawings are in the Stockholm National Museum and the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Several paintings have been attributed to him, but most experts believe that they are not actually his work. Mellan died in Paris in 1688.

Richard R. Losch+

A Word from the Editor

In the last few decades our society has completely blurred the distinctions between tolerance, forgiveness, and acceptance, and we have tended to lump all three together as being essentially the same thing. Clearly, tolerance and forgiveness are Christian virtues, but acceptance is not necessarily so. Tolerance is the willingness to allow the existence of opinions or behaviors with which we disagree or of which we disapprove. There are some things which we should never tolerate, such as murder, rape, and theft, but within such reasonable limits, we have no right to force other people to accept our religious, political, social, or even moral opinions. That is tolerance, and it is certainly a Christian virtue. Forgiveness is not only a Christian virtue, but also a Christian mandate. Forgiveness does not mean treating an offense as if it never happened or as if it did not really matter. If it truly was an offense, it mattered, and it could change a relationship permanently. Forgiveness is not a dismissal of the offense. It is a conscious decision not to let it rule our lives or engender lasting anger or hatred. It means repairing the relationship if possible, and if we cannot, putting it behind us and moving on with our lives rather than dwelling on what happened.

One of the critical threats to the Church and to our society is the tendency in the past few years to treat acceptance as a virtue. While tolerance means the willingness to allow what we disagree with, in most cases acceptance means to approve of it or at least to act as if we do. In personal relationships, this is called enabling. In public relationships, it is often called "inclusion." If I see someone doing something that is physically or morally dangerous and know that he is not aware of the danger, I have a moral obligation to try to help him understand the peril that he may be in. If he rejects my help, I have no right to force him to change what he is doing unless it is also a danger to others. That is tolerance, while just standing by and

allowing him to hurt himself is acceptance. The distinction may be subtle, but it is critical. Edmund Burke said 250 years ago, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men should do nothing.” That is acceptance, and its disastrous effect on the Church and society is becoming increasingly evident. Let us pray for the wisdom to be able to recognize and act according to the distinctions between tolerance, forgiveness, and acceptance.

Richard R. Losch +

Be Wordly Wise

The “Meaningless Do”

Although the word “do” in English is very common, it is unique in that no other major language uses it or any equivalent. Except when it means “perform a task,” the word has no meaning and adds nothing to a sentence. For example, why *do* we say, “I *do* not like it,” when “I like it not” says the same thing? The latter is how almost every other language in the world would express the thought. The only other languages that use an equivalent are Welsh and Cornish, two Celtic languages that were contributors to early English and only survive today in two tiny corners of Great Britain. The English language uses the word constantly in such expressions as “*Do* you have the book?” when “Have you the book?” says the same thing.

The “meaningless do” is slowly fading away from our language, but it appears that it will be a very long time before it is completely gone. It is used today mainly in negatives (“I like wine, but I *do* not like beer”) and in questions (“*Do* you drink wine?”). If you go back to the writings of Elizabethan times, you will find them riddled with “do.” The 1549 Book of Common Prayer and the works of Shakespeare are alive with the word and even as recently as the late 18th century, we see it commonly used. The preamble to the Constitution says, “We the people ... *do* ordain and establish this Constitution...” We see it in the current American Book of Common Prayer in many of the Rite I services: “We thine unworthy servants *do* give thee most humble and hearty thanks...”; “We, thy humble servants, *do* celebrate and make here before thy divine majesty...”; “We *do* earnestly repent...” In spoken language, if we put the emphasis on the word “do”, it serves to affirm and strengthen what we are saying. There is a difference between “I hope so,” and “I *do* hope so.” In a situation like that, it is an *emphasizer*, and not meaningless.

The word “do” has value when it is used to mean “perform a task,” as in “Dad will do the yard work, and Mother will do the cooking” (although, “Mother will cook” works just as well). There, the word makes sense and has meaning, but in “Do you like her cooking?” it is meaningless. On the other hand, never look for logic in language because it is very unlikely that you will find it.

Richard R. Losch+

Joseph and Mary’s Marriage

Even though Christmas and the story of the birth of Jesus is a major event in our liturgical cycle, we go through it every year with very little attention paid to what the real marital relationship was between Joseph and Mary. The Bible itself does not tell us a much about it other than that they were engaged but not married when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and Jesus was conceived, and they were still not yet married when they went to Bethlehem from Nazareth (Luke 2:3).¹ To understand this, we need to understand the marital customs of first-century Jews in Galilee and Judea.

In those days, in every culture in the world, marriage was not a matter of love. It was a matter of establishing family ties. Marriages were arranged by the parents of the couple, and in most parts of the world, the couple had very little to say about it. The marriage was a contract between families to firm up family ties and control inheritances. If it turned out that the couple loved each other, that was considered an extra blessing from God. The bride had very little to say about the matter. The Jews were one of the very few peoples in the world who by custom, although not by law, did not require their daughter to marry someone that she really did not want to marry. In most cultures, the bride had no say whatever. Although it was not common, there were many situations where the bride and groom never even met each other until the day of the marriage because they lived a great distance apart. It was not rare that once the bride was married, she lived so far from her birth family that she never saw them again for the rest of her life.

The first step in a marriage was the betrothal. This was

¹ The KJV calls Mary Joseph’s “espoused” wife,” but this is misleading. The Greek says his “betrothed” wife (*emnesteumene*, ἐμνηστευμένη), which means that they were engaged but not yet married.

something like a modern engagement, but in many respects was far different and much more binding. The betrothal started with an oral or written agreement between families. It included several contractual terms, including a “bride price.” This was something like a reverse dowry. It was a large amount of money that the groom or his family promised to pay to the bride or her family if the marriage were dissolved. In those days, a widow or divorcee often had no source of income and could live in extreme poverty. This is why the Jewish law pays so much attention to the care of widows and orphans. The bride price guaranteed that the woman would have something to live on. Many written betrothal contracts from those days still exist. The bride prices could be in the tens of thousands of dollars in modern money. Among poor families, it was much small.

Betrothals could last several years. Sometimes children were betrothed when they were still infants, yet they would not be married until they were of legal marriageable age. In almost every situation, however, the betrothal lasted at least one year. During that time, the couple were considered legally man and wife in every respect, except that they did not live together, and sexual relations were forbidden. This was much more binding than a modern engagement. A betrothal could be dissolved only by legal divorce or death.

By today’s standards, the marriageable age was quite young, usually just after puberty. Most girls married at the age of 13-15, and most boys at 14-17. This was true around the world. It is very likely that when Jesus was born, Mary was a young teenager and Joseph not more than two or three years older. We must also realize that because of health and dietary reasons, children did not mature physically as fast as they do today. Notwithstanding, the societal pressures on them forced them to mature mentally and emotionally much earlier than modern children. A 17- or 18-year-old was considered an adult with all the responsibilities that go with that status.¹

While some ancient cultures allowed and even encouraged incest, it was forbidden in Jewish law. Nonetheless, the laws of con-

¹ Jesus was entering middle age when he began his public ministry at age 30. In Rome, a man had to be at least 35 years old to become a Senator. In Latin, *senator* means “old man.” People would sometimes live into their 80s, although this was not common. Infant mortality, on the other hand, was extremely high. A newborn child had less than a 50% chance of living into adulthood. This greatly reduced the average life expectancy.

sanguinity, while they became increasingly strict over the centuries, were much more lenient than they are today. Marriages were almost always within the same tribe and very frequently between relatives. Marriages between two totally unrelated people were rare. This means that it is likely that Mary and Joseph were somehow related. That could explain what Joseph, a Bethlehemite, was doing in Nazareth of Galilee. We have no biblical explanation of what brought him there, but it is a reasonable conjecture that his parents and Mary's parents had arranged their betrothal, and that Joseph went to Nazareth to meet his bride. That would also explain why the two of them went to Bethlehem. If it were for a census, it is highly unlikely by the custom of the time that Joseph would have brought his wife, betrothed or espoused, with him. However, the custom of the time would have expected him to pick up his betrothed and bring her to his home or his family's home for the wedding.¹

As for the wedding, the Bible tells us nothing about it, not even when or where it took place. Since they were still only betrothed when they left for Bethlehem, however, it is highly likely that the wedding took place in Bethlehem. In ancient Judaism, there was no separation between religion and daily life. Each was considered a part of the other. Weddings, therefore, were not a religious ceremony the way we think of it today. They were considered ordained and blessed by God and protected by Him, but they were still a legal contract and civil ceremonies. They took place in homes, not in synagogues or in the temple. They were usually very festive affairs that involves the entire community. Since Mary was pregnant before the wedding, there was an aura of scandal about their union, and so it is likely that it was quite subdued by the standards of the time. Normally, the groom would go to the bride's home and crown her with a floral wreath. He would then bring her to his own home surrounded by crowds of cheering and congratulating friends. If the bride lived a great distance away, messengers would be sent ahead to let the townspeople know that the wedding procession to the groom's home was arriving. Amid much merriment, the wedding involved a public announcement of the approval of both families, and sometimes a benediction. There was no formal marriage ceremony from a clergyman, but if a priest or teacher happened to be a member or friend

¹ For a much more detailed examination of this, I refer you to my essay, "No Room in the Inn," which is on my web site at www.rlosch.com.

of the family, he might give a blessing along with that of the bride's or groom's father. There was much dancing and drinking, followed by a wedding feast that might last as long as a week. Almost every house had a courtyard, and that is where the wedding would normally take place. If anything went wrong, since this was a community affair, it would be the gossip of the community for a very long time. This is why at the wedding in Cana of Galilee it was a very serious matter when the family ran out of wine.

It is entirely possible that Joseph and Mary never intended to return to Nazareth, but planned to settle down in Bethlehem. That was Joseph's hometown, and it was very rare for a couple to live in the bride's hometown rather than the groom's. When the angel warned them of the threat from Herod they were forced to flee to Egypt. When they planned to return to Bethlehem, they learned that Herod's son Archelaus, who was as vicious as his father, ruled in Judea. Instead of settling in Bethlehem, they returned to Mary's home in Nazareth where they would be out of Herod's reach.¹ That is conjecture, of course, but it is reasonable.

Richard R. Losch+

A Touch of Trivia

According to its state Constitution, New Mexico does not allow idiots to vote. It states,

Every citizen of the United States, who is over the age of twenty-one years, and has resided in New Mexico twelve months, in the county ninety days, and in the precinct in which he offers to vote thirty days, next preceding the election, except idiots, insane persons and persons convicted of a felonious or infamous crime unless restored to political rights, shall be qualified to vote at all elections for public officers.

It does not define "idiot," but it has been suggested that if it were based on most of the contributions to social media, that law would severely reduce the voter list. Although levels of intelligence are no longer labeled, in earlier times psychologists used the clinical terms "moron" to mean someone with an IQ below 70, "imbecile" below 50, and "idiot" below 25. The average IQ is 100.

Richard R. Losch+

¹ Another of Herod's sons, Antipas, ruled in Galilee, but there is no indication that he was a threat at the time.

The Hem of His Garment

Saint Matthew tells about the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment: "Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed'" (Matt. 9:20f, RSV). The King James Version translates it, "the hem of his garment."¹ Neither of these translations transmits to the modern reader the real situation, which was peculiarly Jewish. She did not seek to touch his clothing just anywhere, but rather to touch a very specific part of it. This is an important point because it is the most likely reason that Jesus commended her faith.

The Torah commanded that Israelite men wear a fringe or tassel at each of the four corners of their garment (Num. 15:38ff). It does not describe the garment, but for centuries, Jewish men have worn a rectangular garment with a tassel at each corner. It can take many forms, from a prayer shawl to a thin, rectangular, poncho-like garment. It is usually worn underneath the outer clothes, often with only the tassels showing. To this day, many observant Jewish men wear this garment. The tassel is called a *tsitsit* (תַּיצִּיס, plural *tsitsiyoth*, תַּיצִּיסּוֹת). The word derives from the Hebrew for "lock of hair." The *tsitsit* is usually made from a few strands of thin cord braided or knotted together and ending in a loose tassel, so the name is appropriate. The precise purpose of this is lost in antiquity,² but to this day, if you see those *tsitsiyoth* hanging below a man's outer garments, you know immediately that he is either an observant Jew or an observant Samaritan.³ It also serves as a constant reminder to the man of his blessings and responsibilities



¹ Most garments had no hem. That was a luxury for the rich. In most people's garments, the cloth was just cut off at the appropriate length.

² In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye says that he does not know why the men were the *tsitsit*, but it is very important to them because of tradition. He affirms that it reminds him of who he is and who God is.

³ Samaritans are considered heretics by the Jews (and *vice versa*), but they observe the Law of Torah, even though they reject most of the other books of the Hebrew Bible. To this day, there are many Samaritans in the Middle East, with most of them being around the regions of Galilee.

as a faithful Jew. Jesus, being a faithful Jew, would certainly have worn *tsitsiyoth*. This is what the sick woman would have touched.

Matthew tells us that the woman “was subject to bleeding.” This undoubtedly meant vaginal hemorrhages, which was a serious illness and would have made her ritually unclean (although any continuous bleeding would have rendered her unclean). This means that she was not supposed to be even near other people, let alone touching anyone. It took courage for her to go into the crowd and touch Jesus, because she could be in serious trouble for doing so.

The Prophet Malachi said, “For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings, and you shall go out leaping like calves from the stall” (Mal. 4:2). The rabbinic interpretation of this prophecy was that it foretold the coming of the Messiah, the Light of the World, who would be given the power to heal. The Hebrew word *biknapeha* (בְּכָנָפֶה) that is translated here as “in his wings” is also used in many places in the Old Testament to mean “at the edge” or “at the corner.” Since the *tsitsit* at each corner of the garment was a symbol and reminder of the covenant with God, that would have been considered the channel of God’s power in the Messiah. The woman’s desire to touch Jesus’ *tsitsit* indicated that she knew this prophecy and that she believed him to be the Messiah. A woman would not have been expected to have such an understanding of the ancient prophecies. This faith was undoubtedly what Jesus commended her for, and because of that and his compassion for all who suffer, he healed her.

Richard R. Losch +

A Touch of Trivia

Legend incorrectly has it that the White House was painted white to cover up the scorch marks when the British tried to burn it in the War of 1812. Not so – it has always been white. The outer walls of the “Presidential Palace” were made of porous sandstone. When they were completed in about 1794, they were coated with a lime-based whitewash to fill the pores and protect them from water and freezing. When its first resident, John Adams, moved in in 1801, he called it the Presidential Mansion because the word “palace” was too reminiscent of royalty. A century later, in about 1900, Theodore Roosevelt called it the “White House,” and the name stuck.

Richard R. Losch +

John's Baptism

John the Baptist was widely recognized by the Jews as a great prophet and as the first prophet since Malachi, 400 years earlier. What made him unusual was not that he baptized, but that he baptized Jews. The Jews had an ancient practice of ritual washing called the *mikvah* (מִקְוָה), but it was not a baptism. It was a symbolic washing away of sin as a ritual of purification in preparation for sacrifice in the temple. The language of the New Testament makes it clear that John's baptism was not a mikvah. The Jews also practiced a baptism of repentance and forgiveness, but it was a one-time ritual used only when Gentiles converted to Judaism. It symbolized the washing away of their sin of paganism and ignorance, and the beginning of a new life in the Covenant. After proper instruction and preparation, converts were baptized, and the males were circumcised. Thereafter, while they were not recognized as biological descendants of Abraham, they were considered his spiritual descendants and full recipients of God's promises to the Jews. This was why John's baptism was different. Jews were not baptized. They believed it was unnecessary because they were descendants of Jacob and therefore, if they were circumcised, were already in the Covenant.

We think of Judaism as a non-proselytizing religion, and for the most part in the world today it is. This is more the result of centuries of persecution by Christianity and Islam than by any teaching of Judaism itself. Jews learned that it was far safer to keep to themselves, stay out of notice, and mind their own business than to seek converts. In ancient times, they welcomed and encouraged conversion even though there was not much active missionary endeavor as we think of it today. Wherever there was a Jewish community¹ there were Gentiles known as God-fearers who accepted the moral and ethical teachings of Judaism, even though they did not practice the ceremonial law. Many of these in time converted to the full practice of Judaism. When they did, they would have been baptized.

What makes John's baptism different is that it was aimed

¹ Jews were a very significant portion of the world's population in Jesus's time. Today, about 0.2% of the world's population is Jewish, whereas 2,000 years ago it was 10 times larger, at 2%. Every major city west of the Far East had a large Jewish population. Twenty centuries of Christian and Islamic anti-Semitism and genocide have taken a terrible toll.

particularly at the Jews rather than at Gentiles. This very act carried a message, and if we consider the huge crowds that flocked to him, it was a message that the people were ready to hear. Just as Baptism brought the Gentiles into a whole new phase of life, John preached that his Baptism should do the same for the Jews. Repentance did not mean just saying, “I’m sorry.” It meant turning around and changing one’s whole life. That is still what it means to us today.

After thirty years growing up in Nazareth and working there as a craftsman, Jesus began his public ministry by being baptized by John. Right after that he went to the desert and was tempted by Satan, called his disciples, performed the miracle at Cana of Galilee, and began to preach. Although the Bible does not identify any individual as having been baptized by Jesus, there is no question that he and his died disciples baptized, and probably regularly. John tells us, “Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized” (Jn. 3:22). Some of John’s disciples complained to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him” (3:26). John’s reply was that this was quite acceptable, because he had come to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, and that he was not the Messiah himself. He said that he must decrease and Jesus must increase. The difference between John’s baptism and Jesus’s was that John was bringing the traditional Jewish baptism of Gentile proselytes into the Jewish fold to signify the Jews’ change of life by repentance. Jesus’s baptism, on the other hand, was one of forgiveness of sins and making available of the Kingdom of Heaven. John said that Jesus would baptize with “fire and the Holy Spirit,” but the full understanding of that did not come until the revelation of the Christian faith on Pentecost. This is the baptism that Jesus commanded the apostles thereafter to bring to all nations.

The ancient baptism of the Jews was meant only for Gentile proselytes. John expanded that by including the Jews and focusing it on their repentance. Jesus expanded it further to embrace “all nations,” meaning the whole world, and by focusing it not only on repentance but also on the forgiveness of sin. The Christian Church practices it as one of the two “Dominical” Sacraments, along with the Holy Eucharist, which are the two that Jesus commanded.

Richard R. Losch+
