



## continuous conversion

### Complaining, or “things just aren’t what they used to be”

If you want to be sure of an agreeable conversation with just about anybody, especially in the US, simply start complaining. The vast array of things you can complain about is tempting in its richness and complexity. From the laziness of today’s generation in school to the corruption of the government in Washington to the lack of courtesy and respect for others found nearly everywhere, things just aren’t they way they used to be.

Why do people love to complain? How does complaining strengthen the social fabric (if indeed it does)? Can complaining ever bring about positive change? And finally, how should a Christian view complaining?

#### THE LOVE OF COMPLAINING

Complaining involves two steps: 1) voicing dissatisfaction or disapproval of what is, and 2) comparison of what is to what *used to be* or *might be* or *should be*.

**problem:**  
**messy**  
**caulking job**



Voicing dissatisfaction is probably healthy and necessary to invoke change. When something isn’t right,

someone has to say so and begin improving or eliminating the “not-right” thing. Forbidding the expression of discontent is one form of censorship (so runs the pro-complaining argument).

On the other hand, complaining can be humiliating, offensive and destructive. Relationships and social institutions function most smoothly with consensus; the “grit in the gears” of complaining impedes or even halts normal social interactions. Too much grit, too often, will wear down the gears and freeze up the machine that constitutes society.

The second part of complaining involves comparing *now* to the *past* or the *future*, or to an independent set of moral standards that exist outside of the given situation. We say “kids used to appreciate their parents’ hard work on their behalf” or “when I was in school, you did your homework and that was that.”

We say “the \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with ‘women,’ ‘teenagers,’ ‘government,’ whatever you please) knew their place and kept to it.” We say “people used to be civilized—they didn’t try to run you off the road/break into line/talk on their cell phones during a concert/bring coffee into church/etc.”

Were the old days better? Maybe yes, but probably no. Human behavior hasn’t change much over the millennia, as the author of Ecclesiastes noted when he said there was nothing new under the sun.

How likely is it that things will suddenly improve? That laziness and rudeness will cease, that greed and crime will disappear, that the world *will be* what it should be?

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Does the Bible indicate that people will get better and better as time goes on? Become more kind, more forgiving and more loving as the end of time draws near? Not at all. We have only “wars and rumors of wars” to expect. And what about that set of moral standards “out there” that prods us into thinking things should be better than they are? A Christian moral code certainly exists, but getting everyone to abide by it is the hard part.

### The good that comes from complaining

Certainly complaining holds many a relationship together. I know people with whom a good number of my conversations are long tirades of complaint from one or both of us. Psychiatrists get paid very good money to listen to complaining (ministers have the same job, but do it for free).

Social bonds are strengthened by a mutual stance against adversity. This happens to good effect in times of emergency, such as hurricanes, invasions by marauding armies and funerals. Every dictator knows that providing an enemy against which all can unite is the best way to amalgamate a group of people. Nothing bonds friends like a good mutual gripe session—not only do they get to air their grievances, but they also now know something about each other that’s potentially powerful and useful. Sharing secrets draws the friends together as they need to guard the confidences shared by maintaining a good relationship with each other.

### Change resulting from complaining

Of course, some complaining has changed the course of history for the better. The complaints of African Americans in the 1960’s that their civil rights were being abused led to massive social change, nearly all of it positive. Complaints by women that they were intelligent enough to vote led to universal suffrage around the world. Public complaints by passengers left sitting in a hot airplane on the runway for eight hours led the president of Jet Blue to publicly apologize and change his company policy.

So if complaining can be good *and* bad, how can the average person discern when to voice a complaint and when to ignore an area of legitimate dissatisfaction? Perhaps a rule of thumb is that a complaint voiced diplomatically or forcefully (depending on the circumstances), delivered

to a person or group with the power to make a change, is likely to be heard and acted upon in time.



**They fixed it! : did someone complain?**

### Christians as complainers

The Bible gives many examples of complaining but doesn’t make a definitive statement as to whether or not one should complain. Most of the Old Testament prophets complained (with complete truthfulness) that the children of Israel had deserted God and become apostate. The children of Israel complained about the manna God gave them to eat. Jesus’ disciples complained about his inscrutable words and about the favoritism they imagined He showed to certain members of their group.

Many of the Psalms are simply the poetry of complaint, with here and there some acknowledgement that God knows better and complaining is fruitless and offensive to God. Yet the Psalms are in the Bible, and illustrate an undeniable aspect of human behavior. I don’t really think you can formulate a “once-and-for-all” biblical Christian stance on complaining.

**“Don’t go to the boss with a complaint without bringing along a solution.”**

Consider the cute office plaque to the left. Corny, but with a grain of truth. The next time you hear yourself complaining, maybe you could try to articulate a solution to the problem. You might just change the world for the better.



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