

When Rumors Catch Fire

Imagine trying to put out a wind-blown forest fire with a squirt gun!

That's what Gerber Products, the baby-food company, felt it was doing in 1997. Someone somewhere started a false rumor about the company that spread like wildfire.

According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the rumor said Gerber had been involved in a class-action lawsuit and would give a \$500 savings bond to families with children to settle the suit.

Supposedly, all the parents had to do to get the money was send a claim form and copies of their children's birth certificates and social security numbers to a post-office box in Minneapolis by Oct. 1, 1997.

Once the rumor caught fire, it began to spread along channels that gave it an appearance of legitimacy: notices were posted in hospitals and sent home with children by school teachers. One corporation even put the false notice in the envelopes with their employees' paychecks.

Gerber Products tried to stomp out the bogus story, putting a notice on several Internet websites, tracking down sources of the rumor and informing the media. Nevertheless, the company received more than 18,000 phone calls to their toll-free telephone number in the three-week period before Oct. 1 from people requesting the bogus claim form.

The cost to Gerber Products of fighting this rumor was in the millions of dollars, according to the newspaper.

Passing along a rumor may seem harmless, but someone pays an undeserved price if we are not careful about the truth.

In our technological world, the Internet has become a hotbed for spreading rumors, with innuendoes, outright falsehoods or efforts of various sorts to deceive and take advantage of others willfully and wrongfully.

Whether conveyed in spoken word, in print or electronically, rumors can have harmful effects, sully reputations, damaging careers, even leading to deaths.

Never take lightly the power of the tongue to do others harm.

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness (Exodus 23:1 ESV).

