



Volume 4 Issue 12

# West Suffolk Epistle

## West Suffolk Baptist Church

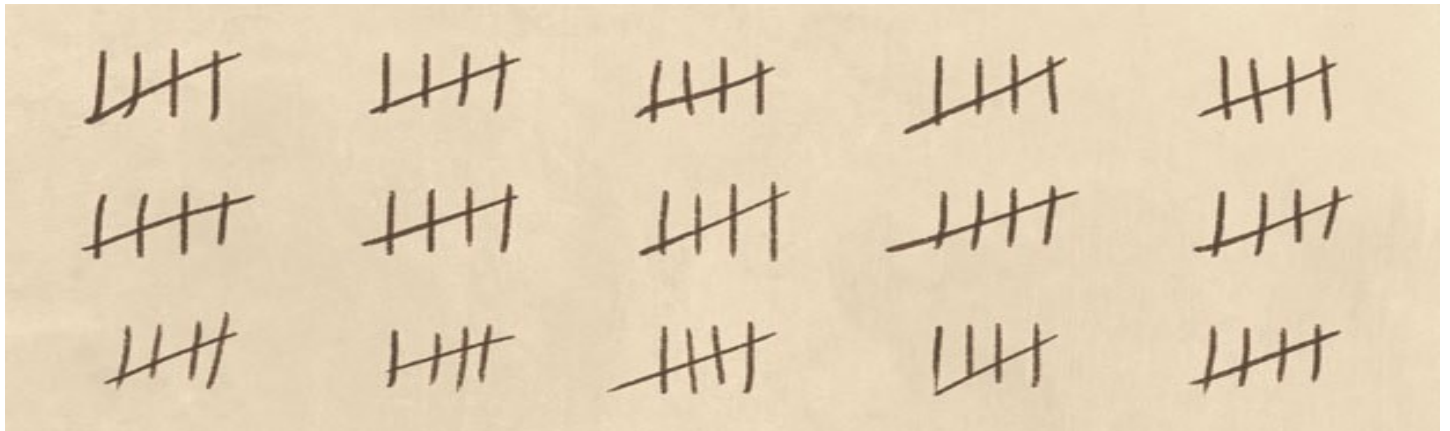
*“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”*



December 2017

*Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America*

### *If the Lord Marks Iniquity, Who Should Stand?*



The Psalmist asked the question: *“If the Lord marks iniquity, who should stand?”* This query is obviously rhetorical. The only answer, indeed the obvious answer is no one.

The question is stated in a conditional form. It merely considers the dire consequences that follow if the Lord marks iniquity. We breathe a sigh of relief saying, *“Thank heavens the Lord does not mark iniquity!”*

Such is a false hope. We have been led to believe by an endless series of lies that we have nothing to fear from God’s scorecard. We can be confident that if He is capable of judgment at all, His judgment will be gentle. If we all fail His test—no fear—He will grade on a curve. After all, it is axiomatic that to err is human and to forgive is divine. This axiom is so set in concrete that we assume that forgiveness is not merely a divine option, but a veritable prerequisite for divinity itself. We think that not only may God be forgiving, but He must be forgiving or He wouldn’t be a good God. How quick we are to forget the divine prerogative: *“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”* (Romans 9:15 ESV)

In our day we have witnessed the eclipse of the gospel. That dark shadow that obscures the light of the gospel is not limited to Rome or liberal Protestantism; it looms heavily within the Evangelical community. The very phrase “preaching the gospel” has come to describe every form of preaching but the preaching of the gospel. The “New” gospel is one that worries not about sin. It feels no great need for justification. It readily dismisses the imputation of Christ’s righteousness as an essential need for salvation. We have substituted the “unconditional love” of God for the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. If God loves us all unconditionally, who needs the righteousness of Christ?

The reality is that God does mark iniquity, and He manifests His wrath against it. Before the Apostle Paul unfolds the riches of the gospel in his epistle to the Romans, he sets the stage for the need of that gospel: *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men ... ”* (Romans 1:18).



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### *If the Lord Marks Iniquity, Who Should Stand - Cont'd*

This text affirms a real revelation of real wrath from a real God against real ungodliness and unrighteousness of real men. No appeal to some invented idea of the unconditional love of God can soften these realities.

The human dilemma is this: God is holy, and we are not. God is righteous, and we are not. To be sure, it is openly admitted in our culture that “No one is perfect.” Even the most sanguine humanist grants that humanity is marred. But, on balance ... ah, there’s the rub. Like Muslims we assume that God will judge us “on balance.” If our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, we will arrive safely in heaven. But, alas, if our evil deeds outweigh our good ones, we will suffer the wrath of God in hell. We may be “marred” by sin but in no wise devastated by it. We still have the ability to balance our sins with our own righteousness. This is the most monstrous lie of all. We not only claim such righteousness; we rely on such righteousness, which righteousness in fact does not exist. Our righteousness is a myth, but by no means a harmless one. Nothing is more perilous than for an unrighteous person to rest his future hope in an illusion.

It was against such an illusion that Paul stressed by citing the Psalmist: *“For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”* (Romans 3:9–12 ESV)

What comprises just under four verses of the New Testament is so radical that if the modern church would come to believe it, we would experience a revival that would make the Reformation pale into insignificance. But the church today does not believe the content of these verses: There is none righteous—not one.

Who believes that apart from Jesus not a single human being, without exception, is righteous. Not a single unregenerate person can be found who understands God.

Seeking God? We have totally revised corporate worship to be sensitive to “seekers.” If worship were to be tailored for seekers, it would be directed exclusively to believers, for no one except believers ever seeks God.

Every person turns aside from God. All become unprofitable in spiritual matters. At rock bottom no one even does good—no, not one.

Good is a relative term. It is defined against some standard. If we establish what that standard is, we can congratulate ourselves and take comfort in our attainment of it. But if God establishes the standard, and His standard includes outward behavior (that our actions conform perfectly to His law) and internal motivation (that all our acts proceed from a heart that loves Him perfectly), then we quickly see that our pretended “goodness” is no goodness at all. We then understand what Augustine was getting at when he said that man’s best works are nothing more than *“splendid vices.”*

So what? The equation is simple. If God requires perfect righteousness and perfect holiness to survive His perfect judgment, then we are left with a serious problem. Either we rest our hope in our own righteousness, which is altogether inadequate, or we flee to another’s righteousness, an alien righteousness, a righteousness not our own inherently. The only place such perfect righteousness can be found is in Christ—that is the good news of the gospel. Subtract this element of alien righteousness that God “counts” or “imputes” for us, and we have no biblical gospel at all. Without imputation, the gospel becomes “another gospel,” and such a “gospel” brings nothing but the anathema of God. With the righteousness of Christ promised to us by faith, we have the hope of our salvation. We become numbered among those blessed to whom the Lord does not impute sin (Romans 4:8). ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



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### *Leaders in the Church*

Jesus has only one plan, and He called it “the church.” Having exclusively talked in terms of building a kingdom, He suddenly announced at Caesarea Philippi, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18).

But what kind of church? And with what structure and organization? These were questions that took time to answer. In the immediate post-Pentecost fledgling church, there appears to have been very little structure, just a community overseen by Apostles and committed to four distinctive features: Apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and “the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Leadership in this early church evolved from house gatherings with little structure to more organized congregations with distinctive offices—deacons and elders. The examination of “office” in the New Testament church is curiously fraught with difficulty. Chief among the points of discussion is the identification of which offices are meant to be permanent and which are merely temporary.

Associated with the issue of office is the equally vexing matter of extraordinary gifts (for example, tongues and prophecy). Are these gifts permanent or temporary? Cessationists (such as me) believe Scripture identifies certain gifts in the New Testament as “signs of a true apostle” (2 Corinthians 12:12) that were given for specific redemptive purposes in a period when the church possessed a relative paucity of New Testament Scripture. These extraordinary gifts were essential for guiding and directing the church in her infancy. However, once the canon of the New Testament was complete and the Apostles (whether defined broadly or narrowly) were deceased, a more normative situation arose that features relatively few offices—deacons, elders, and (for some interpreters) pastors.

The progress in ecclesiastical structure is clearly visible in the way the later epistles to Timothy and Titus do not mention the extraordinary gifts and offices but focus instead upon deacons and elders and Timothy’s role as a preacher of the gospel. It is as though there is an expectation that some things are meant for the age of infancy and not for the age of maturity.

### **Offices in the New Testament are always in the interest of servant leadership.**

#### *Deacons*

Deacons seem to have emerged from a crisis. The growth of the church, particularly in its racial and ethnic variety, caused problems. Widows, for example, were especially vulnerable in the first-century culture. A sense of community required distribution of food to those who were unable to fend for themselves, an issue that seems to have led to a sense of inequity and frustration (Acts 6:1–7). The Hellenist (Greek-speaking) widows felt they were being left out in the distribution in favor of the Aramaic-speaking widows. It was a classic “us and them” problem and one with which the church in our own time is all too familiar. By way of a solution, the Apostles selected seven men to oversee the matter. And the reason for this solution? So that the Apostles could devote themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (v. 4).

While no specific allegation of partiality or mismanagement was alleged against the Apostles, it became clear that the Apostles could not “preach the word” and with equal commitment “serve tables” (v. 2). They needed help to fulfill the role given to them in the growth and nourishment of the church.



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### *Leaders in the Church - Cont'd*

Of interest is the way these seven men were recognized and set apart. They were to demonstrate certain qualities—they were to be “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (v. 3). And, though they were chosen by the local Christian assembly, ultimately they were “appointed” by the Apostles, who “prayed and laid their hands on them” (vv. 3, 6). There appears, therefore, to have been an act of ordination and installation, signaling something of the distinctiveness of the task given to these seven men.

But were these seven men deacons? The Scriptures do not specifically identify them as such, but the Greek term “serve” (diakone) bears a close relationship to the word “deacon.” Though they were not called deacons explicitly, these seven men were to engage in diaconal (service) ministry that required an act of specific ordination to accomplish. It is fair to suggest that they were proto-deacons, an example of how the church makes a distinction between the ministry of the Word and the more practical, material aspects of church life. The communion of saints and the office of deacon therefore address issues of practical import, involving money, food, and basic care.

#### *Servant Leadership*

We should note that certain moral and spiritual requirements were deemed necessary to fulfill the role of serving tables. Offices in the New Testament are always in the interest of servant leadership. Deacons and elders are to be Christlike, serving others rather than themselves. Interestingly, no special quality of godliness is required of one office more than another. In enumerating the list of spiritual qualities necessary in a deacon, Paul mimics the very same qualifications required of elders. Apart from the gift of teaching, deacons must reflect the highest moral and spiritual aspects of godliness (1 Timothy 3:8–12).

The distribution of aid to the widows in Acts 6 serves as a template for the work assigned to deacons in general: deacons are to demonstrate leadership in matters relating to property and money as well as aid. A few decades later, Paul would make some important qualifications in the scope of diaconal ministry, particularly among widows (1 Timothy 5:3–16). In view in 1 Timothy 5 are the church’s widows rather than widows in general. Chief among the issues insisted upon is the responsibility of the family to care for widows. The diaconate must not create a culture of entitlement that abuses the church’s resources. The family is the primary source of such aid. Deacons, therefore, must possess spiritual gifts of discernment and compassion as well as firmness and resolve to make these difficult judgment calls.

#### *Deaconesses?*

Should all deacons be male? Whereas no evidence exists in the New Testament for female elders, the data respecting deacons is a little more ambivalent. Paul commends his “sister Phoebe” to the church in Rome and describes her as “a servant of the church at Cenchreae” (Romans 16:1). The word “servant in Greek is diakonos, a term that can mean nothing more than engagement in diaconal ministry without the additional requirement of ordination to office. Further, in addressing the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3, Paul adds qualifications for deacons’ wives (3:8–13, especially v. 11) but makes no such qualification when addressing elders earlier in the same chapter (3:1–7).



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### *Leaders in the Church - Cont'd*

Some argue that the term for “wives” (Greek *gunaikas*) can bear the meaning “deaconesses” and that such a reading makes more sense in the flow of the chapter. Reformed denominations such as my own (the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church) recognize and ordain female deacons and do so by exegetical conviction without the slightest suggestion that a “slippery slope” argument necessarily follows concerning female elders.

#### *Elders*

Leaving aside the issue as to whether a “minister” (a “teaching elder” in current Presbyterian usage) is a separate office from that of the “elder” (or “ruling elder”)—an issue that would require several pages to address properly—the New Testament makes it very clear that one of the normative offices in the church is that of elder.

The three New Testament titles for this office, which are used interchangeably, are *episkopos* (overseer or bishop), *presbuteros* (elder), and *poimn* (shepherd or pastor). All three terms are used of the same individuals in Acts 20:17 and 20:28, for example. This fact alone ought to be sufficient to dispel hundreds of years of division and tens of thousands of pages written in support of the view that these terms refer to separate offices.

Paul provides a list of moral and spiritual qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. As with deacons, so with elders, leadership without virtue is catastrophic. No amount of giftedness can make up for the lack of integrity.

The one distinctive feature of an elder (as opposed to a deacon) is that he must be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). But what does this mean?

Not all elders “labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17), a point that suggests that those who do may occupy a different office than an elder. Perhaps we should not make too much of this. After all, deacons must hold the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience (1 Timothy 3:9), older women are to teach younger women (Titus 2:4), and entire congregations are to teach one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16). Indeed, every Christian must be ready to give a reason for the hope that lies within (1 Peter 3:15). The ability to teach is not sufficient to qualify someone for the office of elder. But elders must have this ability with abundant clarity.

While the authority of deacons seems to be confined to the local church body to which they belong, there are occasions when the authority of elders transcends the local congregation. For example, the elders who gathered at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6–21) were clearly making decisions that bound the whole of the New Testament church.

Leadership in the New Testament church, therefore, eventually rests in the two offices of deacon and elder. Ensuring that our own churches have both is a commitment to our subservience to the teaching of Scripture. To have godly, well-instructed officers in the church is a basic requirement. All things should be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40), and this applies especially to the bride of Christ. ~ *Dr. Derek Thomas - senior minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C., and Chancellor's Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.*



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### *Faithful Servants*

We have entered a new era of modern history. This era is marked by a gaping void of leadership, but also by an antipathy toward the very notion of leadership. What's more, there is a growing trend that celebrates self-appointed leaders who have demonstrated a lack of integrity and to ignore and dishonor faithful, aged leaders whose integrity has been proven over the course of decades. Leaders of courage and conviction are despised and leaders of compromise and concession are idolized. We now live in a world that applauds Chamberlains and mocks Churchills. If this were true only in the world, it would perhaps be more bearable, but sadly it is also true in the church and in the home.

Some Christians have even gone so far as to insinuate that leadership is not a biblical category, suggesting that servanthood should displace the notion of leadership. However, such a proposition not only creates a false dilemma but undermines Scripture, which teaches us that the role of leader is appointed by God. Leaders ought to lead with diligence, and those who are under leaders ought to obey and submit to them and imitate them (Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Hebrews 13:7–24). Although we have all observed poor leadership and have at times experienced a leader's abuse of power, we must nevertheless recognize that God has appointed leaders in the world, the government, the workplace, the school, the church, and the home. As Christians, we cannot allow ourselves to fall into the trap of cynicism that questions all authority and leaves us wallowing in the mire of our own self-appointed authority. We are all under authority, and we all have leaders to whom we are accountable, just as all leaders are under the authority of God and ultimately accountable to Him.

Leadership and servanthood are not mutually exclusive. Leaders are first and foremost servants of God who serve by leading. The most essential quality of leadership is humility, and authentic humility is manifested by courage, compassion, and conviction. A faithful leader is a humble leader who leads foremost by love, not fear. A faithful leader is not concerned with being liked by everyone. A faithful leader knows how to delegate, trusts his delegates, and isn't concerned with who gets the credit. A faithful leader knows his shortcomings and sins and leads a life of repentance and forgiveness. Ultimately, a faithful leader is a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, who has led us by serving us with humility, sacrifice, and joy. ~ *Dr. Burk Parsons - Editor of **Tabletalk** magazine and copastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla.*

### *Tragedy in Texas: Christian Testimony in the Face of Evil*

All hearts were directed to Texas on Sunday (November 5th) as 26 people were shot and killed when a 26-year-old gunman dressed in black opened fire as a church service was underway at a Baptist church in a small town near San Antonio, Texas. As The New York Times reported:

*“A gunman clad in all black, with a ballistic vest strapped to his chest and a military-style rifle in his hands, opened fire on parishioners at a Sunday service at a small Baptist church in rural Texas, killing at least 26 people and turning this tiny town east of San Antonio into the scene of the country's newest mass horror.”*

At this point the investigation is in the earliest stages, but we already know this is an absolutely horrifying story. It is a tragedy that is only going to unfold in greater tragedy. This attack taking place as a small Baptist church in rural Texas was just beginning its worship service, it is a sign of something far deeper that has gone wrong in our society.



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### *Tragedy in Texas: Christian Testimony in the Face of Evil - Cont'd*

The fact that many of the victims already have been identified as children, including the 14-year-old daughter of the church's pastor, underlines, once again, that so much of the evil in the world is simply beyond our understanding—even our theological understanding. As is so often the case in our experience when headlines like this come at us, the facts themselves seem perplexing and overwhelming. Murder is hard enough for us to understand, mass murder just makes it all the more difficult to understand. But how can we possibly understand the intentional killing of a pregnant woman, little children, a 14-year-old, and of Christians gathered together in worship?

From a Christian worldview, we have to understand that the facts are important. It is not wrong to want to know what the dots are and then to try to connect them. God made us rational and moral creatures and this moral sense reaches out for some rational explanation of the horrifying evil of our world. But our first response should not be to try to understand the crime, but rather, to identify with the community in grief and experiencing heartbreak.

The Christian worldview dignifies the heartbroken. Heartbrokenness is a part of human existence; it will come to every single human being at some time. Jesus himself affirmed this in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

This particular attack in Texas highlights the fact that Christians are not immune from this kind of heartbreak. We cannot understand exactly what that congregation in that community is experiencing, but we do understand heartbreak, and we know that heartbreak is at the very center of their experience at this moment.

The Christian worldview affirms the dignity of human life. According to Scripture, every single human life is of eternal value and inestimable worth. Murder is not, then, merely a crime, it is an assault on the dignity of the human being—an attack upon the image of God.

In one very important dimension, this demonstrates why the Christian worldview is so utterly different than every other worldview. Atheism, for instance, must affirm that, at its base, human life is merely a series of accidents. There is no Creator, so there is no human being made in the Creator's image. Of course atheists would clearly classify this murderous attack in Sutherland Springs, Texas, as evil, but they have no real ability to understand or to embrace the notion of evil with any coherence. Evil is essentially a theological category. Without theism evil becomes simply the strongest word we have to describe something we wish hadn't happened.

Christians also have to acknowledge that our affirmation of an infinitely great and an infinitely good God requires us to answer some questions that atheists don't have to answer. The most urgent of these questions: How could an all-powerful and all-loving God, allow such evil to take place? There are those who have suggested perhaps it's an indication that God really isn't in control of the universe. For instance, Rabbi Harold Kushner famously argued in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* that God is simply doing the best he can with the circumstances—and some circumstances are just too big for God to handle.



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### *Tragedy in Texas: Christian Testimony in the Face of Evil - Cont'd*

This assertion, however, is a subversion of the biblical teaching concerning God. It is a repudiation of the God of the Bible. The Bible is clear: God is in control of the entire universe, there isn't one atom or a molecule outside of his control. If there is, then we are doomed.

Other arguments have been made, suggesting that perhaps we are to understand evil, including moral evil, as having an instrumental value; perhaps God allows this because there is some kind of experience he wants us to have in order to learn some lesson we otherwise would not learn. Yet, even as the Bible indicates that pain, suffering, and mourning are teachers, we have to be very careful about telling others what God is supposedly teaching them in the midst of heartbreak.

Others have suggested that pain, suffering, and evil do not exist; they are abstractions or illusions. That's the official teaching of the religion known as Christian Science, but in direct contradiction to Christian Science, biblical Christianity points to the fact that suffering and pain are real, that sorrow and heartbreak are real, and that, most importantly in terms of the biblical affirmation, death is all too real. It is an absolute insult, morally speaking, and it is a tremendous error, theologically speaking, to imagine addressing this community in Sutherland Springs, Texas, and telling them that death and evil are illusions and that their pain-and-suffering are not real.

Christians have learned that sometimes we have to wait for an answer, and sometimes that wait goes beyond any answer we can get in this life. Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the 19th century in London stated this beautifully: *"When we cannot trace God's hand, we are simply to trust his heart."*

As we're thinking about the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs we are reminded of the testimony of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4: 9, "persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

This throws us back on the deepest resources of biblical Christianity. This pushes us back to understanding the attributes of God as revealed in Scripture, the attributes of his power and the attributes of his morality, his greatness and his goodness, his justice, his righteousness, and his mercy. We are also reminded of the fact that the only answer Christians have is the answer of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the only promise of making sense out of nonsense. The gospel is the only assurance of the victory of good over evil. The gospel of Christ is the only promise of meaning and significance and satisfaction, not only in this life, but in the life to come.

Finally, in the face of this horrific tragedy we must remember the words of the prophet Isaiah as he looked upon the sacrifice of the Messiah: *"surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows . . . But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed"* (Isaiah 53:4-5).

For Christians facing the honest immensity of this challenge of evil, this is really all we have to say. And here's our confidence. It is enough. ~ **Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. - President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary**



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Redemptively Relevant”*

*Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America*

## *Birthday and Anniversary Corner - December 2017*

### Birthdays

*Terrye B. (4)*  
*Katie D. (9)*  
*Jennifer A. (13)*  
*Scott T. (19)*  
*John M. (21)*  
*Cheryl P. (22)*  
*Jessica T. (23)*

### Anniversaries

*John and Teresa H. (1)*  
*Russ and Terrye B. (5)*  
*James and Katie D. (18)*  
*John and LeAnn M. (22)*



Please welcome our new addition to the West Suffolk. She is Althea Marie Fox born on November 21, 2017 at 8:16 am. She was 21.5 inches long and weighed in at 8 lbs. 11 oz. Congratulations to Jonathan and April Fox.



**West Suffolk Leadership**

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Please submit information to Walt Lawrence by the second Sunday of the month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

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