



*Volume 8 Issue 1*

# *West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church*



*January 2021*

*Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant*

## *The People Who Missed Christmas: Herod*

Meet another man who missed the first Christmas: Herod. Matthew 2 tells his story. He was very different from the innkeeper. He wasn't ignorant; he was very well informed:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him." (Matthew 2:1-8)

Herod pretended he wanted to worship Jesus Christ, but he was fearful of this One who was called the King of the Jews. He didn't want any competition for his throne. The phrase "he was troubled" (Matthew 2:3) uses a word that means "agitated, stirred up, shaken up." It conveys the idea of panic. His supremacy was in jeopardy. He had no use for any other king of the Jews.

If the innkeeper's problem was preoccupation, Herod's was fear. Herod was an Idumean; he wasn't even a Jew. His father, Antipater, had done some favors to Rome. As payment, the Herod family was given the right to rule Judea, which was under Roman occupation. Herod was a consummate politician; he continued to do everything he could to gain favor with Rome. In return, the Roman senate gave him an army. Herod was able to extend his empire from Judea to Jordan to Syria to Lebanon. He even called himself "*King of the Jews*," and he was known by that title until his death.

It's no wonder he panicked when he heard someone else had been born who was being called King of the Jews. He was immediately threatened—even though Jesus was a baby and he was an old man.

Herod was ruthless. His chief appeal to Rome was the merciless efficiency with which he was able to extract taxes from the people. He had murdered all the Hasmoneans, the sons of the Maccabeans, who had led a revolution against Greece's rule. He wanted to make sure they didn't do it again, so he simply slaughtered them all. He had ten wives and twelve children. One of his wives, Mariamne, had a brother, Aristobulus, who was the high priest. Herod was afraid of Aristobulus so he murdered him. Then he killed her too.

His paranoia was legendary. He was afraid one of his two sons might take his throne, so he murdered both of them. His entire life was one of plotting and execution. Five days before his death he executed all his descendants who might have laid claim to the throne.



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In one of the final acts of his evil life, he had all the distinguished citizens of Jerusalem put in prison and commanded that they be slaughtered the moment he died. “These people will not weep when I die,” he said, “and I want them weeping, even if they weep over someone else.” So even at his death there was a great slaughter.

Herod was such a brutal, merciless man that it is not difficult to imagine how he would choose to vent his rage when he learned a child had been born who, according to prophecy, was the true King of the Jews. He was furious when he realized the magi were not going to report back to him.

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, “*A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more.*” (Matthew 2:16-2:18)

In his mad effort to wipe out one child, Herod had scores of children slaughtered. God had already warned Joseph and Mary, and they had fled to Egypt with Jesus. So Herod failed. Not only did he miss the first Christmas, but his rebellion also propagated a great tragedy. All this was because of fear—jealous fear.

There are Herod types even in our society. Herod’s fear was that someone else would take his throne. Lots of people are like him. They won’t allow anything to interfere with their career, their position, their power, their ambition, their plans, or their lifestyle. They are not about to let someone else be king of their lives. They see Jesus as a threat, and so they miss Christmas.

People don’t mind taking time off work to commemorate Jesus’ birth. They will even embrace Him as a resource when they get in trouble. They might gladly accept Him as a spiritual benefactor. They are even willing to add Him to their lives and call themselves Christians, but not if He insists on being King. That might be a threat to their lifestyle or career, or whatever else they are hanging on to. They are as fearful and as jealous of losing their own self-determination as Herod was of losing his throne. They will guard at all costs their own priorities, their own values, their own morals. They won’t come to Christ if He threatens to cramp their style. They will not accept His right to rule over them. They want to run the show.

The world is full of people who cry out, “*We do not want this man to reign over us*” (cf. Luke 19:14). People want to determine their own careers, make their own decisions, master their own fates, chart their own destinies. And so we have a world of kings who are not about to bow to Jesus Christ. Such people are governed by the same kind of jealous fear that drove Herod. Like him they miss Christmas. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**



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## *Vaccines and the Christian Worldview*

Americans of my generation remember the incredible sight of the first human footprints on the moon. In 1969, the United States celebrated one of the greatest technological achievements in human history. The Apollo 11 mission took man into space, landed him on the moon, and brought him back safely. Less than a decade before that historic moment in July of 1969, President John F. Kennedy announced that going to the moon ought to be the nation's goal. Declaring it should happen and making it happen, however, are two fundamentally different things—and the United States did it. The achievement is still breathtaking.

Compare that to recent developments in the last several months: Just months after the COVID-19 virus was detected and entered into our vocabulary, a successful vaccine has now been developed. As of late last week, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) provided emergency authorization for the Pfizer vaccine against the coronavirus.

This is an unprecedented event in medical history. In terms of technology, it harkens back to the Apollo moon mission.

The development of this vaccine came under the auspices of Operation Warp Speed. It generally takes years for the development of a successful vaccine, if indeed a vaccine is ever developed. Medical science and development, however, has shattered those typical expectations. Not only was one vaccine completed in record time, but another vaccine produced by *Moderna* is expected to come before the FDA to receive the same emergency authorization that was announced last week for *Pfizer*. Shots in arms could begin as early as today.

This is the first step in bringing an end to the COVID-19 pandemic in America—and it was achieved in an unprecedented time frame with demonstrable results.

But, what should Christians think about vaccines and their use? What ethical and theological questions arise? Do the COVID-19 vaccines bring unique moral questions? What does the Christian worldview have to say about the entire set of questions?

Let me offer seven points for consideration.

**First**, Christians do not believe in medical non-interventionism. Instead, we believe in the moral legitimacy of medical treatment. A Christian worldview authorizes treatment—and we do so as an extension of the doctrine of creation and the dominion God has given to humanity as revealed in the opening chapter of Genesis. Pressing against disease and viruses is part of our mandate. Some might say, “I believe in the sovereignty of God, and if God wants me to have this virus then he will give me the virus. I don't need medical intervention because I trust God.” That kind of logic, if pressed to its logical conclusion, however, is untenable—we wouldn't treat any sickness, cancer, or injury. Medical treatment is an extension of God's common grace and Christians have always understood this. That is why, throughout history, where you found Christians you found hospitals and the church treating the sick.

Thus, it is not wrong for Christians to take measures to avoid getting sick or coming down with the virus. It is not wrong to take the vaccine against COVID-19.



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## *Vaccines and the Christian Worldview*

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There is background to this, of course, in American evangelical history. Consider, for example, Jonathan Edwards, who died on March 27, 1758 of a wrongly administered inoculation. The most important point is that Edwards took the inoculation, demonstrating the legitimacy of inoculations, based in the Christian worldview assertion that science and medicine are predicated on the world as orderly and intelligible – because the Creator made the world this way.

Thankfully, we have come a long way from the medical science of 1758, but the essential point remains: Christians see the prevention and treatment of disease as a biblical mandate.

**Secondly**, we must consider the derivation of the vaccine itself—what kind of technology was involved in the development of a vaccine? As is the case with many vaccines and in the background of medical treatments, many advances come through morally problematic cell lines. This, of course, brings us to the issue of abortion and the issue of human cells as well as tissue taken without consent.

In most of the major COVID-19 vaccines, there was a use of fetal cell lines, which are known as HEK-293. The original cells for that line were taken from tissues derived from an abortion in the Netherlands in the 1960s. The cell line developed around 1972. There is also the HeLa line that goes back to 1951. These cells were taken from an African American woman, Henrietta Lacks, who suffered from terminal cancer. Cells were taken from her body without her consent or knowledge. This makes the use of cells from that line a complicated issue within medical ethics.

How then ought Christians think about all of this? First of all, we must condemn in the strongest of terms the use of any tissues from aborted human babies. That is a nonnegotiable issue for Christians as we consider medical advances and treatments. There are, however, complexities involved as Christians contemplate these incredibly serious moral questions.

Specifically, with the issue of the COVID-19 vaccine, Christians need to understand that no step in producing these vaccines had any direct involvement in an abortion of a single child. There is also the issue of proximity. The further you go in history, the harder it is to keep a clear line of culpability in morally significant events. That said, the good news about the COVID-19 vaccines is that even as these cells (most importantly from HEK-293) were used to create the basic shape of the vaccine, no fetal tissue was used.

At the same time, however, the vaccine's structure relied upon the cell line of HEK-293, which originated with an aborted fetus. This is a tragedy of history. A horrifying wrong was done—but that does not mean that good cannot come from that harm, even as it is a good tainted by the realities of a sinful world. This idea is expressed, for Christians, as the doctrine of double effect. Some actions have more than one effect. For Christians, the primary intention must aim at virtue and good. The intention behind an act must never seek harm or evil or any moral reality and outcome against God's will. We must never be complicit in intending sin, and certainly this applies to every dimension of abortion. But the Christian also acknowledges a potential double effect, for every moral act can lead to consequences not intended, but unavoidable. If the abortion of even a single human baby was required for this vaccine, or if abortion-derived materials were included in the vaccine, Christians would be rightly outraged. This is not the case. The vaccine can be taken by pro-life Christians with legitimacy.



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## *Vaccines and the Christian Worldview*

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The **third** moral principle Christians must consider deals with efficacy and safety of the vaccine. At this point, the medical community demonstrates enormous confidence in the vaccine. In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration does not merely require that a vaccine prove to be safe—it must also prove to be effective. To be sure, some people, especially those who have a specific allergic pattern, might have to carefully consider whether they should take any vaccine. For most, however, the vaccine is both safe and effective. This is certainly not a closed question—when it comes to medical treatment, there are very few closed questions. With any serious sickness or disease, we often have to weight this treatment over that treatment; this surgery over this therapy. Nothing in a fallen world is ever easy. We must, under the circumstances, do that which appears to be the most right, the safest, and the most good.

The **fourth** issue is whether or not a medical treatment is made mandatory by governing authority. Given the political reality and context in the United States, as well as the constitutional limits on the federal government, I think it is doubtful that Americans will face a federally mandated vaccine. That being said, the federal government can utilize certain coercive policies. For instance, the federal government possesses the power to decide who does and does not get to enter the United States. It has the power to decide who (other than citizens) may remain in the country. The federal government has authority over interstate commerce and transportation—including who rides on trains and who flies on a plane. Thus, there are some massive areas where the federal government could effectively enact a mandate for vaccination.

When it comes to state governments, it is doubtful that states will enact an absolute mandate—but much like the federal government, the state does have authority, for example, over who can and cannot attend public schools. The extent of state policies that approximate a mandate will depend upon whether or not you find yourself in a red or a blue state.

Though a universal mandate for a vaccine is unlikely, state by state and sector by sector we may confront what amounts to mandates. Christians will have to judge these policies as they come.

The **fifth** principle for Christians thinking about vaccines deals with the common good—the issue of love of neighbor. Some people might approach the issue of vaccination through self-defined terms. Such a person might say, “If a vaccine is available, then people can take it who want it. I’m not taking it. I pose no threat to anyone. I’ll deal with the consequences of my own actions.”

Here is the problem with this kind of moral equation: There are third parties—people who cannot take the vaccine or do not yet have access to it that could still be infected by those who refuse to take the vaccine.

The common good argument is extremely powerful in the Christian tradition. Indeed, it is the second greatest commandment listed by Jesus Christ: to love our neighbors as ourselves. The general principle of the common good comes down to benevolence, love, care for others, laying down personal priorities for the service of others. Christians thinking about the issue of the vaccine must weigh this key biblical principle as part of their thinking.

The **sixth** principle pertains to the integrity of the family and the authority of parents. We ought to be wary of any government or other intrusion into the family structure—in this case, we should stand against government policies that give vaccines to children and adolescents over and against (or without the knowledge of) the convictions of their parents.



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## *Vaccines and the Christian Worldview*

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Those on the left increasingly advance this notion of an absolute right to moral consent on behalf children, even if those decisions go against the authority of the child’s parents. To be sure, there are cases where the government must intervene, especially in extreme cases when the life of a child is at risk. There is no time to seek parental consent when a child needs blood transfusion or is in an emergency situation. There are extreme cases where authority must intervene—but again, those cases are extreme and must be rare.

Reasonable Christians and Christian parents will differ over whether or not to take the vaccine. But, speaking personally, I will take this vaccine as soon as it is available to me. I will take it not only for what I hope will be the good of my own health, but for others as well. I will seek to encourage others to take the vaccine. Encouragement, however, is very different from coercion.

The *seventh* and final moral principle has to do with access and priority, which is perhaps the easiest of the seven to understand. Those who are at greater risk or serving on the frontlines of this pandemic ought to be the first in line to receive the vaccine.

This is an absolutely historic and crucial moment. This pandemic has wrought untold destruction—and we are, I pray, in the final months of this contagion’s deadly advance. The creation of vaccines in such a short amount of time is something to be celebrated. And as Christians begin to decide whether or not to take the vaccine, it is important to understand the serious moral complexities involved. We must think biblically about this vital issue. That is our first and primary responsibility. ~ *Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. - President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*

## *Some Thoughts on Christian Civil Disobedience*

The current pandemic of COVID-19 has forced many Christians out of their armchairs to consider the real-life implications of how to be a Christian and a citizen. This isn’t a bad thing. It’s easy to lose sight of the fact that on the whole it’s relatively easy to be a Christian and a law-abiding citizen of the United States. But now we’re being pushed a little beyond our comfort zone, and many Christians are struggling to know how to self-consciously live out God’s command: “*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities*” (Romans 13:1).

When I say it’s easy to be a Christian and a citizen I don’t mean that our government is perfect. We have passed and upheld laws that give permission for sin. Tragically, I don’t think everyone is treated fairly under the rule of law. Additionally, I’m suspicious that there’s legislation that violates the Constitution, or creates loopholes to existent laws. Admittedly, there’s also regulations and ordinances that inconvenience my life. But in nearly four decades of living I’ve never had a law forced upon me requiring that I choose between God and man. For that I’m tremendously thankful!

Yet, in the midst of this pandemic many Christians are wondering if we’re living in such a time that may require us to be faithful to God at the expense of obeying the law — we’re living in a time where Christians are examining the subject of civil disobedience.



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## *Some Thoughts on Christian Civil Disobedience*

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That's because many state governments have put restrictions on public worship, and have enforced those restrictions through the threat of civil punishment. What Christians did with ease only weeks ago is now being discouraged through the laws of the land.

Now, I know that this depends in part on context. That's because many of the restrictions being imposed are dependent on state governments — not every Christian is under the same mandates. For instance, until this last week in the state of Kansas the church was exempted from every executive order prohibiting or limiting public gatherings. In a personal correspondence with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment I was assured that religious assemblies were not only legal but essential.

Last week this took a dramatic turn when the Governor issued an executive order that prohibited religious gatherings of more than ten people. The next day this order was revoked by a legislative committee and the Governor filed a suit with the Kansas Supreme Court. This suit — admitted by all parties and the court — wasn't about religious liberty but whether or not a legislative committee could overrule an executive order. It was, for all intents and purposes, a power struggle between branches of government. A week ago the Supreme Court heard that case and late Saturday night delivered their verdict in favor of the Governor.

The consequence of the court's ruling was that the previous executive order was reinstated and enforceable on Sunday morning when churches gathered to worship. In less than a week churches went from having no restrictions to being complicit in criminal activity if more than ten people were present. This has, of course, caused a crisis for many Christians. Echoing through many minds and conversations is the question: can the government lawfully do this?

That's a massively important question and one we need to be very careful in answering. We need to be careful because if what the government is doing is lawful then to resist them is to resist God: *"For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment"* (Romans 13:1-2). Yes, God is that serious about respecting and submitting to our governing authorities. On the other hand, if what the government is doing isn't lawful then as Christians we have no choice: *"We must obey God rather than men"* (Acts 5:29).

So, climbing out of the ivory tower and putting our feet firmly on the ground, what should Christians do? Do we obey our governing authorities, or do we disobey? I am not going to offer a "Yes" or "No" answer. Some may think that's unhelpful. But an answer to that question is going to depend on the biblically informed consciences of individuals. What I do want to offer are some thoughts on how we should be thinking through this question.

**First**, we need to be careful in respecting the limits of church power and authority. Biblically speaking, church and state are distinct but equal and cooperating authorities under the Lord Jesus Christ — the state is not over the church and the church is not over the state. We need to respect that distinction. It's a point that's been confused by American civil-religion but the church isn't a political party, policy maker, lobbyist organization, or an institution of checks-and-balances for the civil government.



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## *Some Thoughts on Christian Civil Disobedience*

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I've often been reminded of Jesus' question to the man who wanted him to settle a legal conflict: "*Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator of you?*" (Luke 12:14). With perfect knowledge Jesus could have decided the dispute better than any civil court. But he deferred to the lawful authorities appointed to make such decisions.

**Second**, we need to be careful in defining "lawful." We're a nation and states that are governed within the parameters of a constitution. It could be that the restrictions on public gatherings as applied to religious assemblies is unconstitutional. Personally, I expect challenges to be made in the judicial courts which is the appropriate place for those challenges to be made (see Acts 25:10-12) — not the court of public opinion. But the unconstitutionality of a law is not the same thing as an unbiblical law. In asking questions about civil disobedience we cannot conflate these two. Civil disobedience is not "*We must obey the constitution rather than men,*" it is "*We must obey God rather than men.*" As Christians we can submit to laws that are unconstitutional but we cannot submit to laws that are unbiblical. This requires that we be absolutely biblically persuaded of our duty.

**Third**, we need to be careful in understanding the legislation. This is a time when narratives are being spun and misinformation spread like wildfire — sensational headlines are so much more exciting than fact! But as Christians we must be concerned about the truth. For instance, I have heard over and over again that the Kansas governor has forbidden Christian worship. Actually, the Governor has only restricted the number of people who can be present in a public facility. That's an important distinction. In Kansas we're not being prohibited from preaching the gospel, reading the Bible, praying together, or singing. We're not even prohibited from having a public gathering. We are only restricted in how many can be present in our church building. I admit that limiting makes for a pastoral head and heartache since our whole congregation cannot legally gather in one place. But my point is simply that as those who serve the Truth we need to avoid sensational and misleading narratives.

**Fourth**, we need to be careful in remembering what does not delegitimize a government's authority. In Kansas last week's showdown wasn't only between branches of government but it quickly (as is most of our government's response) turned political. Political ideologies aren't wrong — I even have my fair share! However, a government's lawful authority doesn't depend on their sharing my political views. The Apostle Peter is able to write with little qualification: "*Fear God. Honor the emperor*" (1 Peter 2:17). The Roman emperor — even if he is the wicked and persecuting Nero — is still to be honored by Christians. Further, inconsistency doesn't delegitimize a government's authority. I'll admit, inconsistency in the application of executive orders is really frustrating. Yesterday, our Governor gave a qualified A-Z list (literally) of who is exempted from her restrictions — the church is not one of those exceptions. But simply because not everyone on the road is ticketed doesn't mean I can now lawfully speed. Our submission to the government doesn't depend on their political commitments, moral character, or consistency. Rather, we submit to all that isn't contrary to the Bible as the free children of God (see Matthew 17:26).

**Fifth**, we need to carefully have a heart-check. There are times when as Christians we need to disobey our governing authorities (see Acts 5:29). But it is only when they require us to be disobedient to God — when the only way we can obey them is to be unfaithful to God. For the Christian, civil disobedience doesn't arise out of patriotic flag waving while holding the Bill of Rights; it doesn't arise out of anti-government sentiment or political leanings; it doesn't arise because we're inconvenienced by the law or draconian measures; it doesn't arise out of some macho sense of being able to stick it to the man.



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## *Some Thoughts on Christian Civil Disobedience*

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For the Christian the only motivation for civil disobedience is a deep biblical conviction that obedience to man would be disobedience to God. And when an informed conscience demands such disobedience we must also receive the consequences counting our loss to be our gain: *“When they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name”* (Acts 5:40-41).

A couple months ago I had the privilege to be guided on a tour of Scotland. There I saw memorials to civil disobedience — the places where Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart were tied to the stake and burned alive, where Margaret Wilson and Margaret Lachlan were drowned in the rising tide, and where the Covenanters were hanged in the Grassmarket. Admittedly, those memorials struck a nostalgic feeling. They were men and women of whom this world was not worthy. But when you stand beside the graves there’s also a sobriety that shatters the romanticism. They didn’t die because they thought their disobedience was exciting or adventurous. Rather, they went to their deaths persuaded that they had to obey God rather than man. It made me extremely thankful for the ease with which I can live as both a Christian and a law abiding citizen. But, if the time comes when Christians in the United States must pick up the cross of civil disobedience it will be heavy, it will be burdensome, and it will be painful. But then our lot will be to carry that cross humbly, to carry it well, and to carry it in the strength of the Holy Spirit. ~ *Kyle Borg - Pastor/Winchester Reformed Presbyterian Church - Winchester, Kansas*



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*Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant*

If you have a January birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error, please e-mail Walt (gwlcfl0415@gmail.com).

## *Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner January 2021*

*Rick G. (1)  
Marcie S. (9)  
Cheyenne W. (17)*

*Jack B. (24)  
Muriel R. (24)  
Stephen H. (26)*

*None to Report*

Please welcome our new members to West Suffolk Baptist Church. They are Andy and Emily Layden. Pictured with them are their children from left to right Hannah, Conley and Brody. It is our tradition that we as a church read our church covenant together to symbolize our unity with the Layden's and a promise as covenant members.



*Andy and Emily Layden  
Hannah, Conley and Brody*



*West Suffolk Baptist Church  
Leadership*

The West Suffolk Epistle is a monthly publication of West Suffolk Baptist Church.

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Please submit information to the editor by the second Sunday of each 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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