



*Volume 8 Issue 2*

# *West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church*



*February 2021*

*Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant*

## *To Be Blessed*

The blessing of God is not to be taken lightly. But in our day, blessings are thrown around so flippantly and indiscriminately that the word blessing has all but lost its meaning. People speak about feeling blessed and having a blessed day or a blessed life when everything is going well and nothing too severe is bothering them in the moment. We hear blessings after sneezes, at the end of voicemail messages, as hashtags in social media posts, and on bumper stickers.

In these United States, the statement “God bless America” used to be a prayer of humble dependence, but now it is often treated as an arrogant, presumptuous declaration that God will bless us no matter what we do as a nation. God has blessed, and God does bless, and we pray that God will bless, but we must remember that His blessings are serious things, and we are not to treat them frivolously. God takes His blessing seriously, and so should we. God doesn’t bless people flippantly and He doesn’t bless indiscriminately—He blesses His people according to His steadfast covenant love for us. Not everyone is blessed, and God’s blessing shouldn’t simply be assumed. Only those who are in covenant with God are blessed, and only those who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ are blessed, for He met the condition by His perfect life and substitutionary atoning death. Only those united to Christ by faith are blessed. As believers, we are blessed in Christ because Christ took the curse of sin for us and suffered the wrath of God for us. If someone is not in Christ, and never trusts Christ, he will prove that he is condemned already. His apparent blessings will ultimately redound to his condemnation.

If we are truly in Christ, we will strive to bear the fruit of Christ. If we believe the gospel, we will strive to walk worthy of the gospel. If we have the Spirit, we will strive to walk in the Spirit. If we love Christ, we will strive to follow and obey Christ. If we love God, we will strive to keep God’s commandments. If we are blessed, we will strive to possess and pursue the characteristics Jesus speaks of in the Beatitudes, and as we demonstrate them in this world, we will be persecuted. But if we are self-absorbed, self-centered, hard-hearted, unmerciful, divisive, and arrogant, then we not only aren’t blessed, we aren’t saved. But if the conditions and characteristics of the Beatitudes are true of us, we are blessed. We can have assurance that Jesus is ours and we are His, and that nothing can separate us from the present or eternal condition of being blessed as we live *coram Deo*, before our Lord’s shining face with the light of His glorious countenance lifted up upon us. ~ *Dr. Burk Parsons*

## *The Advance of Secularism*

The West’s new cultural and moral environment did not emerge from a vacuum. Massive intellectual changes have shaped and reshaped Western culture since the dawn of the Enlightenment. At the heart of this great intellectual shift is secularization.

*Secular*, in terms of contemporary sociological and intellectual conversation, refers to the absence of any binding theistic authority or belief. It is both an ideology, which is known as secularism, and a result. Secularization, on the other hand, is not an ideology; it is a concept and a sociological process whereby societies become less theistic as they become more modern.



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## *The Advance of Secularism*

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As societies move into conditions of deeper and more progressive modernity, they move out of situations in which there is a binding force of religious belief, and theistic belief in particular. These societies move into conditions in which there is less and less theistic belief and authority until there is hardly even a memory that such a binding authority had ever existed.

The secularization schedule of Europe covered about 150 years, accelerated at certain points by such events as the French Revolution and two World Wars, but for many reasons, America did not track with Europe's secularization. For at least a century, America has been the exception to secularization in Western society. Whereas in some Scandinavian countries, less than 2 percent of the people attend church regularly, an estimated 40 percent of Americans claim to be regular church attendees. The vast majority of Americans at least say they believe in God. Those statistics have led many American Christians to believe that the majority of Americans share the same general beliefs about God.

Yet, there is one sector of American public life that has kept pace with Europe's secularization: American universities. If secularization is ultimately about the evaporation of religious belief and binding authority, then this situation has certainly prevailed in the American university culture. The closer one gets to most American colleges or universities, the closer one gets to a secular public space—an intellectually secular place. As Peter Berger, one of the founding fathers of the modern theory of secularization, reminds us, those who are watching must understand that the engines of the culture are the cultural creatives, the intellectual elites. And where are they gathered in the most concentrated form for optimal influence upon the young? On the college and university campus. The secularization that America has largely avoided in the past is alive in its institutions of higher learning and has finally been unleashed on the nation through the many students who have had their worldview shaped by the secular intellectual elites. Thus, the intellectual conditions of America are quantitatively and qualitatively different from those that prevailed in the culture just fifteen years ago.

But why has secularization not happened at the same rate in other communities in the United States as it has on American college campuses or in Europe? This question has consumed a great deal of discussion on the part of sociologists for the better part of three decades. Yet, the most helpful response to this question came from Berger, who argued that secularization has happened to the same degree across the United States, but it has simply looked quite different than it has on American college campuses and in Europe. Berger has argued that America was and is far more secular than it looks. While America is not characterized by the hardline secularism and open ridicule of religion and theism that often characterize the culture in European nations, the United States is still largely secularized.

As Berger explains, in twentieth-century America, Christianity and religion in general were transformed to something noncognitive and optional. As a result, the binding authority of the Christian moral tradition or of any religious tradition was lost. Consequently, many of our friends and neighbors continued to profess faith in God, but that profession was ultimately devoid of any moral authority or cognitive content. From the outside looking in, America did not appear to be secularizing at the same rate as the European Continent. In reality, however, professions of faith in God had little real theological or spiritual substance.



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## *The Advance of Secularism* *Continued from Page 2*

Berger predicted that this collapse of cognitive religious commitments coupled with the collapse of binding authority would lead to the fact that, in the face of cultural opposition, adherents to believe in God or religious principle quickly would give way to the secular agenda—which is exactly what has happened. Just ten years ago, most polls showed that a majority of Americans opposed same-sex marriage. Yet, in our day, a majority of the very same people polled one decade ago have rendered an opposite moral judgment on the same issue. Just as Berger explained, when the cultural tide turned against our society's empty religious commitments, people were happy to jettison their moral judgment on homosexuality to retain their social capital.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has also carefully traced the influence and effects of secularization on the Western world. As he explains in his important book *The Secular Age*, the way people hold to theological convictions and religious principles in the modern era is fundamentally different from how people believed in the past. Modernity has made religious belief provisional, optional, and far less urgent than it was in the pre-modern world. As Taylor notes, on this side of modernity, when people believe, they are making a choice to believe that previous generations did not make. Belief is now really nothing more than an exercise of personal autonomy.

Taylor also helpfully shows that Western history can be defined by three intellectual epochs: pre-Enlightenment impossibility of unbelief; post-Enlightenment possibility of unbelief; and late-modern impossibility of belief. In the *pre-Enlightenment era*, it was impossible not to believe. One simply could not explain the world without some appeal either to the Bible or to some other form of supernaturalism. No other worldviews were available to members of society other than supernatural worldviews, particularly the Christian worldview in the West. While society had its heretics, there were no atheists among them. Everyone believed in some form of theism, even if it was polytheism.

That all changed with the Enlightenment and the availability of alternative worldviews. These alternative worldviews made it possible for members of society to reject the supernaturalism of Christianity or other theistic systems for a naturalistic worldview. At this point it became possible not to believe. Yet, even in this intellectual climate, it was still unlikely that people would reject the Christian worldview because the theistic explanations for life were simply more pervasive, binding, and persuasive than nontheistic worldviews.

The *third* set of intellectual conditions is identified with late modernity and our own intellectual epoch. For most people living in the context of self-conscious late modernity, it is now the third set of intellectual conditions is identified with late modernity and our own intellectual epoch. For most people living in the context of self-conscious late modernity, it is now impossible to believe. That means, especially in terms of the intellectual elites and the culture formative sectors of society, theism is not an available worldview—if not personally, then at least culturally.

Significantly, Taylor pinpoints this unbelief as a lack of cognitive commitment to a self-existent, self-revealing God. Secularization is not about rejecting all religion. Taylor notes that people in the current hypersecularized culture in America often consider themselves to be religious or spiritual. Secularization, according to Taylor, is about rejecting belief in a personal God, one who holds and exerts authority. He describes the secular age as deeply “cross-pressured” in its personal experience of religion and rejection of the personal authority of God. The issue is binding authority.



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## *The Advance of Secularism* *Continued from Page 3*

In these cultural conditions, Christians are the intellectual outlaws. Entering a discussion on the basis of a theistic or theological claim is to break a cardinal rule of late modernity by moving from a proposition or question to an obligation, or moving from an is to an ought. Some oughts remain, of course, but the language of command and law and authority has been explicitly secularized and carefully reduced in scope. Secularization in America has been attended by a moral revolution without precedent and without endgame. The cultural engines of progress driving toward personal autonomy and fulfillment will not stop until the human being is completely self-defining. This progress requires the explicit rejection of Christian morality for the project of human liberation.

The story of the rise of secularism is a stunning intellectual and moral revolution. It defies exaggeration. We must recognize that it is far more pervasive than we might want to believe, for this intellectual revolution has changed the worldviews of even those who believe themselves to be opposed to it. If nothing else, many religious believers in modern societies now operate as theological and ideological consumers, constantly shopping for new intellectual clothing, even as they believe themselves to be traditional believers.

Christian ministers, theologians, and thinkers who stand on biblical authority break the rules by engaging the culture based on the self-revelation of a self-existent God with ultimate moral authority who has addressed His creatures with oughts and who does and will finally judge according to His laws and commands. This culture grows more and more resistant to a God—any god—who would speak to us with words such as “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.” The fact that Christians enter every conversation as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who are bound by biblical revelation means they cannot begin without breaking the new rules. And we must remember those who break the rules are not welcome by those who make the rules. ~ *Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.*

## *Living under Authority*

As I read the scriptures, particularly the New Testament, there is a theme that recurs again and again regarding the Christian’s willingness to be in submission to various types of authority. Given the rebellious spirit of our age, that frightens me. It’s all too easy for us to get caught up in an attitude that will bring us into open defiance of the authority of God.

Let’s turn our attention to 1 Peter 2:11–16:

*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*



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## *Living under Authority* *Continued from Page 4*

Peter is speaking to people who were subjected to brutal, fierce, and violent persecution—the kind of activity that can incite within us the worst possible responses, including anger, resentment, and hatred. But Peter pleads with those people who were the victims of the hatred of their culture to behave in an honorable manner before the watching world. Paul gives a similar plea time and time again that we're to try to live at peace with all men as much as possible.

The “*therefore*” of verse 13 introduces a key manifestation of living honorably before the watching world. We're to submit ourselves to the ordinances of man. Why? I find the answer startling and fascinating. The Apostle's admonition is that we're to submit for the Lord's sake. But how is obedience to human ordinances done for the Lord's sake? How does my obedience to my professors, my boss, or the government in any way benefit Christ?

To understand this, we have to understand the deeper problem that all of Scripture is dealing with—the problem of sin. At the most fundamental level, sin is an act of rebellion and disobedience to a higher law and Lawgiver. The biggest problem with the world is lawlessness. The reason people are violated, killed, and maimed in battle, the reason there are murders, robberies, and so forth is that we're lawless. We disobey, first of all, the law of God. The root problem in all of creation is disobedience to law, defiance of authority. And the ultimate authority of the universe is God Himself.

But God delegates authority as He reigns and rules over His creation. God raises up human governments. It is God who instituted government in the first place (Romans 13). That's why Christians are called to honor and pray for the king, pay their taxes, and submit as much as possible to the authorities in all things—because the authorities are instituted by God. Moreover, He shares supreme authority with Christ, who said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given [by the Father] to me” (Matthew 28:18). So, no ruler in this world has any authority except that which has been delegated to him by God and by His Christ, who is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Thus, disobedience to the lawful commands of earthly authorities is ultimately disobedience to God and to Christ because they ordained the governing authorities.

The world has gone crazy in lawlessness, but we're to be different. Wherever we find ourselves under authority—and we all find ourselves submitting to various authorities—we're to submit to that authority. Nobody in this world is autonomous. Every one of us has not just one boss, but several bosses. Everyone I know, including me, is accountable not to just one person but to all kinds of authority structures. Throw a brick through a store window, and you'll find out quickly that you're accountable, that you're under authority, that there are laws to be obeyed and law enforcement officers to make sure the laws are obeyed.

Christians are free in Christ, but we aren't to use our liberty as a license for sin, because even though on the one hand we're free, on the other hand we remain indentured servants.

We're bondservants to God. We're slaves of Jesus Christ. So, even if the rest of the world is running on the track of anti-authority and anti-submissiveness, we aren't allowed to join in. We're called to be scrupulous to maintain order. There is such a thing as law and order that God Himself has ordained in the universe. And we're called to bear witness to that, even by suffering through uncomfortable, inconvenient, and sometimes painful submission to the lawful rules of even those authorities who do not recognize God, for even the godless authorities have been established by God.



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## *Living under Authority* *Continued from Page 5*

I think we all have experiences where we bristle and chafe under authority and under mandates with which we vehemently disagree. Let me just suggest as a matter of practical consideration that if we look to these human institutions or these human persons who are tyrannical, unfair, unjust, and all that, and we seek to submit to them individually or even institutionally, considered in and of themselves, we will find it extremely difficult to submit with any kind of good attitude. But if somehow we can look through them, look past them, look over them, and see the One whom the Father has invested with ultimate cosmic authority, namely, Christ Himself, we'll have an easier time submitting. We'll find help with our struggle to submit when we recognize we're submitting ultimately to Christ, because we know He'll never tyrannize or abuse us. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

## *Biblical Success*

What does it mean to succeed? We typically think success involves reaching particular personal and professional goals—prospering financially, being respected by peers, raising a solid family, and so on. We measure success in terms of receiving honor, reaching the top, being admired, getting rich, or being noticed. Meanwhile, failure means being poor or insignificant, being unpopular or disliked, or being the object of shame. Even in ministry, we often rate “success” as a large or rapidly growing congregation, combined with a reputation as a fine pastor or preacher, while “failure” means a small or shrinking flock or having to leave a church because of difficulties or differences over direction.

Different aspects of this definition of success are rated differently by different people, of course. One person may have everything financially yet still feel like a failure because he lacks popularity, the one thing that really matters to him. Another may seem to have nothing and yet feel successful because he has achieved his goals in a different arena. In church life, there are pastors of large churches who don't feel successful because they envy the situations of those whose churches are even more prominent, while some of those who shepherd small flocks feel content in seeking to love well those whom God has placed under them. “Success” and “failure” are highly subjective evaluations of our own status and that of others around us.

Yet, human beings are remarkably poor judges of success and failure. On the one hand, we often use the wrong measuring sticks. The people whom we judge as “success”—the rich, the powerful, the influential, and the attractive—receive no special adulation in God's kingdom. Meanwhile, those we look down on as failures—the poor, the broken, and the unimportant people—are often those for whom it seems God has a special concern. According to Jesus, it is possible to gain the whole world—to succeed against almost every human yardstick—and still fail at life because you lose your soul in the process (Matthew 16:26). At the same time, Jesus declares that it is possible to lose all your possessions, relationships, and status, and yet succeed in what really matters—in your relationship with God (Mark 10:28–30).

In addition, we often make premature judgments. We judge on the basis of present appearances, evaluating people as if we knew the outcome of their story. In reality, the end of the story will not be told in this world but in the world to come, where some who are now first (“successful”) will be last, while others who are now judged to be last (“failures”) will be first in God's kingdom (Mark 10:31). The measures of success in God's upside-down kingdom are not the same as those of this present age.



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## *Biblical Success*

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Of course, biblical wisdom does not simply turn conventional wisdom on its head so that now the poor and lowly are automatically counted successful while anyone with wealth or rank is dismissed out of hand. There are certainly people in the Bible who used their wealth or high position wisely, such as Joseph or Daniel. Even in a pagan environment, these men served the Lord faithfully at the highest level of government. Likewise, Joseph of Arimathea used his wealth to provide a tomb for Jesus after His crucifixion (Matthew 27:57–59). But more than wealth or position, what these men had in common was that they served the Lord and His kingdom first, with the resources He had given them.

This is surely what it means to succeed from a biblical perspective. In place of serving the goals of our own personal kingdoms, whatever they might be—comfort, approval, money, and so on—the successful person puts first God’s kingdom. He is willing to give up any of these things if they get in the way of serving God, or to use them for God as resources over which he is a steward who will one day be called to account (see Matthew 25:14–30). The successful steward is not the one who is entrusted with the most resources, of whatever kind. It is the steward who is faithful with the resources with which he has been entrusted (Matthew 25:21).

Thus, the person who has been entrusted with a large house should be asking how that house can be a resource for the kingdom, perhaps by hosting church events or housing visiting missionaries. The person with business gifts should use them wisely to build a business that benefits his customers and the community as well as himself. The person who can speak should do so in ways that build people up: this may include preaching, for those called to that work, but it can also be a kind word in season to a struggling young mother or a lost teenager. There are many ways to serve God’s kingdom that evade the notice of many around us but nonetheless constitute success.

One aspect of success that easily evades our attention is being rooted and grounded in the Word of God. This, according to Psalm 1, is a key mark of successful (“blessed”) people. These people delight in God’s Word, meditating on it day and night, pondering the wisdom of God’s laws as well as the beauty of the gospel (Psalm 1:2). They will also be wise in their relationships (v. 1). These individuals flourish like a well-watered tree, with green leaves and abundant fruit in season (v. 3). These people will stand in the ultimate test, the day of judgment (vv. 5–6). That doesn’t mean that such people are always easy to spot in this present age. The writer of Psalm 73 almost stumbled over the present prosperity of the wicked, who seemed to be flourishing while godly people struggled (see vv. 2–4). He, too, needed to develop a long-term perspective that perceived the ultimate destiny of the two groups (vv. 17–20).

Of course, none of us can truly measure up to such a standard of success. Which of us truly delights in God’s Word day and night? Most of the time, we are easily distracted by things of much lesser value and significance, whether the Internet, books, movies, or television. Which of us is truly faithful with the gifts we have been given, whether our time, our talents, or our treasure? We fritter away opportunities to do good to others, while spending inordinate amounts of these things on ourselves and our own ease. Judged by the standard of God’s Word, we are all found to be failures, unprofitable servants, deserving of being cast into the outer darkness (Matthew 25:30).



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## *Biblical Success*

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Yet the beauty of God’s kingdom is that success is not required for entry. The doorway is wide open to failures and prodigals, to those who have squandered their resources (which were really God’s resources all along) on feasting and riotous living—or, in some cases, on the miserly hoarding of things with which we could have richly blessed others. This is good news for us, for instead of seeking first God’s kingdom, our hearts have so often treasured earthly things—things that will rust, dent, and spoil—instead of the things that are of eternal value. We have pursued personal reputation and acclaim while ignoring the claims of God’s glory on our lives and our possessions.

For that reason, we desperately need the success that Jesus Christ accomplished on our behalf. It didn’t look like success by the regular logic of this world. He left the halls of heavenly glory and was born in a stable in a back-water community on the edge of the civilized world. He mentored a tiny group of disciples who constantly bickered among themselves as to who was the greatest while failing to grasp His simplest teachings. At the end, they all abandoned Jesus and fled, in some cases denying that they had ever met Him. Then He was crucified on a cross, the punishment reserved for the most heinous and despised criminals. This is not the kind of résumé that the world counts as “success.”

In all of this, however, Jesus sought His Father’s kingdom above His own interests, laying down His life for those who were His. He treasured God’s Word in His heart and delighted in His fellowship with the Father. At the end of His suffering, He commended His spirit into His Father’s hands, confident that the price He paid would accomplish His goals. After three days, He was raised triumphantly, and He ascended into heaven, where His name is now exalted above every name. One day, every knee will bow before Him and acknowledge that He is the true measure of success.

As a result, all those who are united to Christ are linked forever to His glory. The measure of our success cannot be defined by what we accomplish here on earth; it has already been defined by the fact that we are in Christ. It is this that frees us to spend ourselves and everything we have in service to Christ’s kingdom. And it is this that also frees us from crushing guilt over our past and present failures to take up our cross and follow after Him. Whether I “succeed” or “fail”—by whatever standard—ultimately counts for nothing. What counts is the fact that Christ has succeeded for me, in my place. My only hope and boast rest not in my faithfulness but in the fact that whether I am rich or poor, prominent or obscure, weak or strong, my faithful Savior has loved me and given Himself for me. That is all the success I—or anyone else—will ever need. ~ *Dr. Iain Duguid - Professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Glenside, Pa.*





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Jordan Joyner is the daughter of Patrick and Rhonda Joyner who gave us (on Sunday evening January 17th) a brief synopsis of her adventures as a missionary in Southeast Asia. Jordan Joyner is a current missionary candidate with the International Mission Board and a seminary student at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. She recently returned from a two-year stint with the International Mission Board to Southeast Asia and is currently awaiting re-assignment. She currently resides in Texas with her family.

Please welcome our new members to West Suffolk Baptist Church. They are Jack and Rita Becht pictured with our pastor Ben Scofield. On January 31, 2021 they officially became members. It is our tradition that we as a church read our church covenant together to symbolize our unity with the Becht's and a promise as covenant members.



**Left to Right - Pastor Ben Scofield and  
Jack and Rita Becht**



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*Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant*

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

## *Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner February 2021*

*Savanna W. (4)*  
*Ana-Lucia H. (6)*  
*Lavender W. (11)*  
*Tulip W. (11)*

*Rita B. (14)*  
*Andy L. (14)*  
*Jacob David K. (24)*  
*Brodie L. (27)*

*Jonathan and April F. (5)*  
*Daniel and Diana K. (11)*  
*Mike and Rose M. (17)*

From cover to cover, the Bible portrays God as the Almighty, the One who possesses all power over the world. When the Lord exerts His infinite strength, no human resistance can withstand Him. When He unleashes His limitless might, the forces of hell bow before Him. When He faces opposing forces, He reduces them to nothing.

In Psalm 46, the psalmist paints a picture of this awesome power that belongs to God. He writes, "He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariots with fire" (verse 9). Here, God is seen as the all-victorious Warrior, who comes to the defense of His people.

The background of this psalm—a worship song of trust—is a time when the city of Jerusalem was under attack by a foreign invader. Amid this life-threatening situation, the people of God called upon Him, and He dramatically intervened. In the hour of their despair, God gave them the deliverance they desperately needed. The victory belonged to the Lord, who rescued them from certain destruction. ~ **Dr. Steven J. Lawson**



***West Suffolk Baptist Church  
Leadership***

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**Office:** 1001 Kenyon Court, Suffolk, VA 23435

**E-Mail:** pastorscofield@gmail.com

**Website:** www.westsuffolkbcc.com Phone/Fax: 757-539-0363

**Teaching Pastor/Elder:** Pastor Ben Scofield

**Teaching Elders:** Scott Thomas and Mike Prince

**Deacons:** Marlin Halsey, John McPhatter and John Hurst

**Editor:** Walt Lawrence, gwlcfl0415@gmail.com

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