



Volume 9 Issue 1

West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



January 2022

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Did Jesus Forbid Us from Taking Oaths?

Oaths

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil. - *Matthew 5:33-37 (ESV)*

Jesus Teaching

Throughout Matthew 5:21–48, Jesus states God’s commandments, then presses beyond the commands themselves to the righteousness God intends. In verses 21–26, Jesus looks beyond murder to the anger and disdain driving it. In verses 27–32, he explores the lust that motivates adultery and the legal abuse—heedless divorce—that promotes violations of the seventh commandment. In verses 33–37, Jesus’ teaching on oaths exposes another legal subterfuge that circumvents the law and impedes obedience.

The Purpose of Oaths

The concern of these verses is the ninth commandment and the truthfulness that humans find so difficult. The tongue is guilty of false witness, lying, gossip, slander, boasting, flattery, cursing, and more. Jesus focuses on the oath, the convention designed to restrain false assertions and promises. Oaths, promises, and contracts all have the same goal: to induce people to keep their word, especially when it is tempting not to.

God taught the Israelites to guarantee their veracity by swearing, with God as witness, to tell the truth. He commanded, “*You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord*” (Leviticus 19:12). Again, “*If a man vows a vow to the Lord, . . . he shall not break his word*” (Numbers 30:2; cf. Deuteronomy 23:21; 1 Samuel 12:3; Proverbs 29:24). By invoking God as witness, the Israelites called him to judge and avenge if they failed to perform a vow. So, the law at least regulates and mitigates the effects of sin. Laws about divorce, oaths, and property do not describe God’s perfect will; they rein in the effects of sin.

Jesus summarizes the teaching: “*You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform*” your oaths to the Lord (Matthew 5:33). Disciples must keep their word, especially when others depend on them, even if circumstances change or oath keeping brings real loss. No one should break vows unless keeping them requires sin.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Did Jesus Forbid Us from Taking Oaths?

Continued from Page 1

The Twisting of Oaths

In Jesus' day, rabbis concocted a system that defeated the purpose of oaths. They taught that oaths might or might not be binding, depending on how one swore: If one swore by Jerusalem it was not binding, but if one swore toward Jerusalem, it was. If one swore by the temple, it was not binding, but if one swore by the temple's gold, it was. If one swore by the altar of sacrifice, it was not binding, if one swore by the gift on the altar, it was.

This illustrates the way in which certain teachers manipulated God's Word in Jesus' day. When they read a challenging law, they reduced it to something manageable. When they heard, "*Love your neighbor as yourself*," they redefined "*neighbor*" so that not everyone counted as one (Luke 10:29). They refrained from adultery but claimed a right to divorce freely, then take another woman. When they did something similar with oaths, Jesus cut off oaths entirely: "Do not take an oath at all" (Matthew 5:34a).

The rabbinic teaching perverted the purpose of oaths. Instead of calling on God to assure honesty, oaths were phrased so as to avoid God's punishment when speaking dishonestly. Since oaths no longer guaranteed anything, Jesus removed the artificial distinction between vows that invoked God's name, which were binding, and those that did not, and were not binding. Whatever anyone swears by, Jesus says, it refers to God. If someone swears by heaven (Matthew 5:34b), he invokes God, for heaven is his throne. If someone swears by the earth (Matthew 5:35a), he invokes God, for it is his footstool. If someone swears by Jerusalem (Matthew 5:35b), he invokes God, for it is the city of the King. If someone swears by the hair of his head (Matthew 5:36), he invokes God, for he rules our heads. All oaths call God to witness, for he created and sustains all things, even our hair.

Jesus's Expectations for His followers

Disciples should simply tell the truth. The Essenes declared, "*He who cannot be believed without [swearing by] God is already condemned*" (Josephus, Jewish Wars 2.135; brackets original). Jesus teaches that we should be so true to our words that the need for oaths disappears. A simple yes or no should suffice. A disciple should be so reliable that no one asks for more.

This creates a question: If it is best to take no oaths, why did God take oaths? He told Abraham, "*By myself I have sworn, . . . I will surely bless you*" (Genesis 22:16–17; cf. Genesis 9:9–11; Psalm 95:11; 119:106; 132:11; Luke 1:68, 73; Acts 2:27–31; Hebrews 6:17). Why might God do something Jesus prohibits? John Stott explains that it is "not to increase his credibility . . . but to elicit and confirm our faith." That is, God did not take oaths to exhort himself to keep his promises. Nor is his credibility questionable. But humans hear so many lies that we learn to doubt. Because we break our word, and others do the same, we half expect God to be false. So God condescends to guarantee his word, for our sake.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Did Jesus Forbid Us from Taking Oaths?

Continued from Page 2

Further, given that God took oaths, that Jesus once spoke under oath (Matthew 26:63–64), that the law permitted oaths, and that Jesus prohibited oaths, what does Scripture require? Answers vary. Literalists, such as the first Anabaptists, take no vows. As a result, they cannot hold military or civic positions. Furthermore, they adjust their speech, in formal settings, to say “I will” rather than “I swear.”

Luther and Calvin harmonized the testimony of Scripture by distinguishing public and private speech. In private, they said, disciples should tell the truth so completely that the need for oaths disappears. Yet, since Jesus spoke under oath and God took vows for those who did not know his reliability, disciples can take oaths to assure those who do not know them. For similar reasons, Paul put himself under oath, calling God as his witness (Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:10). So, for the sake of people who cannot know they are reliable, disciples may take vows. Similarly, disciples may take vows in courtrooms or to enter military or political service. In commerce, they may enter into contracts, which resemble secularized oaths.

Nonetheless, the very existence of conventions such as oaths shows that lying, deception, and careless speech are both common and destructive. At best, oaths make men pause and speak more carefully. In the kingdom, however, yes must mean yes, period (Matthew 5:37). Disciples should be so truthful that the need for oaths, vows, and promises withers away. Anything more comes “*from evil*,” that is, evil practices, or “*from the evil one*,” Satan himself.

Owning our Words

If God’s oaths reveal that humans are accustomed to hearing lies, then oaths, vows, and promises reveal that we are also accustomed to telling lies. We swear and promise because we are careless, at best. If a child asks a parent for a promise, the parent should hear it as an indictment, since it reveals that the child has learned he cannot quite trust his father’s word. His yes has not always meant yes. Ideally, a parent’s word should be so reliable that the child never thinks of guarantees. Indeed, every disciple should aim to be so reliable that no one asks him for promises.

Alas, if the goal is comprehensive honesty, every reader must face his failure: “*No human being can tame the tongue*” (James 3:8). Even if we never lie or gossip, we speak carelessly. We also remain silent when the truth is needed—or tell the truth so poorly that its power is lost. Because words are sacred, we should be “*slow to speak*” and must carefully weigh each word (James 1:19).

Jesus’ teaching confronts everyone with a tongue. Everyone makes promises they cannot keep, then breaks them. Everyone bends or fractures the truth. Consider when we are most prone to break a promise: We violate words spoken to the powerless—children—much more than we break promises to the powerful. We break invisible commitments (nursery duty) more than visible ones (teaching).

No one masters the tongue, because no one has a pure heart. So this word from Jesus the teacher leads to Jesus the Savior. The one who declared God’s word at the start of his ministry gave his life as an atoning sacrifice for those who disobeyed that word. ~ **Dan Doriani (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) serves as the vice president of strategic academic projects and professor of theology at Covenant Seminary.**



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Genesis 1: Fact or Framework?

One popular view held by many old-earth advocates is known as the "framework hypothesis." This is the belief that the "days" of creation are not even distinct eras, but overlapping stages of a long evolutionary process. According to this view, the six days described in Genesis 1 do not set forth a chronology of any kind, but rather a metaphorical "framework" by which the creative process is described for our finite human minds.

This view was apparently first set forth by liberal German theologians in the nineteenth century, but it has been adopted and propagated in recent years by some leading evangelicals, most notably Dr. Meredith G. Kline of Westminster theological seminary.

The framework hypothesis starts with the view that the "days" of creation in Genesis 1 are symbolic expressions that have nothing to do with time. Framework advocates note the obvious parallelism between days one and four (the creation of light and the placing of lights in the firmament), days two and five (the separation of air and water and the creation of fish and birds to inhabit air and water), and days three and six (the emergence of the dry land and the creation of land animals)—and they suggest that such parallelism is a clue that the structure of the chapter is merely poetic.

Thus, according to this theory, the sequence of creation may essentially be disregarded, as if some literary form in the passage nullified its literal meaning.

Naturally, advocates of this view accept the modern scientific theory that the formation of the earth required several billion years. They claim the biblical account is nothing more than a metaphorical framework that should overlay our scientific understanding of creation. The language and details of Genesis 1 are unimportant, they say; the only truth this passage aims to teach us is that the hand of divine Providence guided the evolutionary process. The Genesis creation account is thus reduced to a literary device—an extended metaphor that is not to be accepted at face value.

But if the Lord wanted to teach us that creation took place in six literal days, how could He have stated it more plainly than Genesis does? The length of the days is defined by periods of day and night that are governed after day four by the sun and moon. The week itself defines the pattern of human labor and rest. The days are marked by the passage of morning and evening. How could these not signify the chronological progression of God's creative work?

The problem with the framework hypothesis is that it employs a destructive method of interpretation. If the plain meaning of Genesis 1 may be written off and the language treated as nothing more than a literary device, why not do the same with Genesis 3? Indeed, most theological liberals do insist that the talking serpent in chapter 3 signals a fable or a metaphor, and therefore they reject that passage as a literal and historical record of how humanity fell into sin.

Where does metaphor ultimately end and history begin? After the flood? After the tower of Babel? And why there? Why not regard all the biblical miracles as literary devices? Why could not the resurrection itself be dismissed as a mere allegory?



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Genesis 1: Fact or Framework?

Continued from Page 4

In the words of E. J. Young, "If the 'framework' hypothesis were applied to the narratives of the virgin birth or the resurrection or Romans 5:12 ff., it could as effectively serve to minimize the importance of the content of those passages as it now does the content of the first chapter of Genesis." [Studies in Genesis One (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, n.d.), 99.]

Young points out the fallacy of the "framework" hypothesis:

The question must be raised, "If a nonchronological view of the days be admitted, what is the purpose of mentioning six days?" For, once we reject the chronological sequence which Genesis gives, we are brought to the point where we can really say very little about the content of Genesis one. It is impossible to hold that there are two trios of days, each paralleling the other. Day four . . . speaks of God's placing the light-bearers in the firmament. The firmament, however, had been made on the second day. If the fourth and the first days are two aspects of the same thing, then the second day also (which speaks of the firmament) must precede days one and four. If this procedure be allowed, with its wholesale disregard of grammar, why may we not be consistent and equate all four of these days with the first verse of Genesis? There is no defense against such a procedure, once we abandon the clear language of the text. In all seriousness it must be asked, Can we believe that the first chapter of Genesis intends to teach that day two preceded days one and four? To ask that question is to answer it. [Ibid.]

The simple, rather obvious, fact is that no one would ever think the time-frame for creation was anything other than a normal week of seven days from reading the Bible and allowing it to interpret itself. The Fourth Commandment makes no sense whatsoever apart from an understanding that the days of God's creative work parallel a normal human work week.

The framework hypothesis is the direct result of making modern scientific theory a hermeneutical guideline by which to interpret Scripture. The basic presupposition behind the framework hypothesis is the notion that science speaks with more authority about origins and the age of the earth than Scripture does. Those who embrace such a view have in effect made science an authority over Scripture. They are permitting scientific hypotheses—mere human opinions that have no divine authority whatsoever—to be the hermeneutical rule by which Scripture is interpreted.

There is no warrant for that. Modern scientific opinion is not a valid hermeneutic for interpreting Genesis (or any other portion of Scripture, for that matter). Scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16)—inspired truth from God. "[Scripture] never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Jesus summed the point up perfectly when He said, "Thy word is truth" (John 17:17, KJV). The Bible is supreme truth, and therefore it is the standard by which scientific theory should be evaluated, not vice versa. ~ *Dr. John MacArthur*



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Life and Liberty

“Life” and “Liberty” are terms that have powerful and positive connotative value to us. We are “pro-life” and “pro-liberty.” Such emotionally-laden terms can be definitionally evasive, however, since they stir our passions as well as our reason. As we consider our expectations of the state and our role therein, it is important to be clear about our understanding of such terms.

“Life” has both a political and a religious definition. In the political arena, “life” is biologically defined; the state defends “life” by protecting people from acts and policies that would injure or take away their lives, biologically considered. The state may wage defensive war, for instance, to defend its citizens’ lives. The state establishes police forces to “protect and serve” our physical well-being, and the state regulates pollutants that could poison the air we breathe. But religiously, “life” has a fuller meaning, such as Paul’s usage when he says that an individual can be dead even while he lives (1 Timothy 5:6). Jesus recognized this distinction between mere biological life and the truest religious life when He cited Moses: *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4). Bread might very well sustain and promote our biological health, but our spiritual and religious life is sustained by the creative and redemptive word of God. No governmental power can promote or protect “life” in this full religious sense, since such life is the result of the Holy Spirit’s blessing on the means of grace.

The civil magistrate, whom Paul called in Romans 13 a terror to evil conduct, was the Roman emperor, whose laws and definition of evil were informed neither by the laws of Moses, nor by the teachings of Christ. Evil, in such a context, was and is public evil—crimes against others or their property. It was not “evil” in its full-blown ethical-religious sense, which would include unbelief, idolatry, blasphemy, covetousness, and so on. The Roman emperor showed no concerns for these realities, yet Paul still considered him *“God’s servant for your good”* (Romans 13:4). The state defends “life” by protecting people from acts and policies that would take away their lives, biologically considered. In the civil arena, then, we expect the government to promote and protect biological life and to permit (but not necessarily to promote) spiritual life.

“Liberty,” similarly, has both a political and a religious definition. Religiously speaking, the truest liberty is freedom from sin, and such freedom can even be described, paradoxically, as its own kind of slavery: *“For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification”* (Romans 6:19). Political freedom, on the other hand, is freedom to be fully human, to be fully responsible for oneself, and therefore to follow one’s conscience without interruption by the state, until or unless the exercise of one’s liberty injures the person, liberty, or property of others.

Political liberty, in other words, includes the political “right” to sin, provided that one’s sin does not harm others. My Baptist friends may consider it sinful, for instance, for me to baptize infants; politically, however, I am free, as a minister, to conduct the rite of baptism in a manner that conforms to my own conscientious study about the matter. It does no political harm to the child or the child’s parents; baptism does not injure anyone’s health, property, or liberty. I defend the political right of my Baptist brothers to conduct the rite as their consciences dictate, and they extend the same political liberty to me.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Life and Liberty *Continued from Page 6*

We do not promote liberty because everyone will exercise it well or wisely, nor as an end in itself. In Christian theology, liberty is promoted as a means to an end: works of obedience offered to God sincerely. No religious act that is done out of mere coercion pleases God; God wishes our obedience to be offered to Him freely, from hearts moved by His remarkable grace: *“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith”* (1 Timothy 1:5). Paul was concerned that love come from right motives, that it be sincere and conscientious. Even when he dealt with the very real and practical issue of famine relief in the churches, he remained as concerned for the motivation as for the act itself: *“Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”* (2 Corinthians 9:7). If the giving is not “cheerful,” God does not love it. Christians, therefore, ought to be the most vocal defenders of political liberty, because such liberty is so consistent with our concern for religious sincerity.

We also promote liberty because of its cultural advantages. Every culture wishes to benefit from the talents, insights, and other contributions of the largest number of individuals. If we create a political climate that suppresses their gifts and contributions, then they either do not make them at all, or they make them elsewhere. Marie Curie was not permitted to pursue her interests in radioactivity in her native Poland, so she moved to Paris to conduct her important work there. Mstislav Rostropovich spent much of his cello career in exile from his native Russia, only returning in his latter years after the fall of the Soviet Union. Albert Einstein departed his native Germany in 1932 to continue his work in the United States. In a free culture, these individuals would not have needed to leave their native homes. In each of their respective cases, their native countries forfeited their contributions. Virginia Presbyterians understood this matter in the late eighteenth century, when, on October 24, 1776, Hanover Presbytery petitioned the Virginia Legislature for religious liberty, arguing in part: “We beg leave farther to represent that religious establishments are highly injurious to the temporal interests of a community . . . such establishments greatly retard population, and consequently the progress of arts, sciences, and manufactories . . .”

Liberty and the So-called “Culture War”

There need be no “culture war.” Secular and religious forces have labored together since John Witherspoon and Thomas Jefferson collaborated in the founding of our Republic. The honest difference between a secular and a religious point of view need not be either a contest or a “war.” Unlike the theocracies of Islam or the Christian Middle Ages, and unlike the state-enforced secularism of contemporary republics such as France (where Muslims are not permitted to wear the hijab to school), our Republic chose a middle ground. In our Republic, religion is permitted and protected by the government (unlike secularist France), but not promoted by the government (unlike Islam or medieval Catholicism).

What’s in a Word?

In warfare, things that would be intolerable in civil society are tolerated, such as killing other human beings, an act that would ordinarily be deemed somewhat uncivil. The language of “war,” therefore, tends towards total war and a lack of restraint. If a person becomes persuaded, whether by a secular or a religious fear-monger, that “our very civilization is at stake,” then all ordinary restraints and civilities are easily put aside for the sake of the great cause of winning the war and preserving the civilization. Ironically, civility is then sacrificed to civilization.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Life and Liberty *Continued from Page 7*

Why We Cannot (and Should Not) Win a Culture War

Christians cannot win a culture war for two reasons: *First*, if we gained a majority and imposed our will on others by means of the coercive power of the sword, we would not have won; we would have lost. We would have lost the remote possibility that others would offer obedience to God sincerely from the heart. If an individual behaves externally according to certain Christian principles only to evade going to jail or being fined, he has not been “converted.” He is still lost, still estranged from God, and the culture has been lost with him.

Second, by embracing coercion as our tool of influence, we reject the two tools by which progress might genuinely be made: moral suasion and example (“that they may see your good works . . .”). That is, we only resort to coercion when we have already failed by moral suasion and example. When we embrace coercion, we embrace the very tool the Apostles refused to employ (The weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, 2 Corinthians 10:4). We thereby concede not that we might lose the so-called culture war, but that we already have lost it. Far from converting others, they have converted us; they have converted us to using their totalitarianism, their coercion, and their disregard for conscientious faith or obedience. ~ *Dr. W. Robert Godfrey*

The Voice of the Church

When Planned Parenthood adopted a strategy to win the debate on abortion and establish the legal right for women to have abortions on demand, it asked a strategic question: “From where will our strongest opposition come?” The organization anticipated that opposition would come most fiercely from the Roman Catholic Church. In order to offset the impact of the Roman community, Planned Parenthood adopted a strategy to encourage Protestant churches to support a woman’s right to abortion on demand. It encouraged the use of the mantras “A woman’s right to choose,” and “A woman’s right over her own body.” A further part of the strategy was to use the slogan “pro-choice” rather than “pro-abortion.” In other words, the effort to legalize abortion on demand was wrapped in the flag of personal liberty.

The Planned Parenthood strategy was eminently successful. For the most part, the mainline liberal churches backed the feminist crusade in favor of “choice.” What was most distressing was the silence of evangelical churches, churches committed to the authority of the Bible and the classical Christian faith. It took many years for the evangelical church to come to a consensus on the evil of abortion but, more tragically, many evangelical churches still refuse to speak out against the destruction of babies made in the image of God.

Several years ago, I produced a series of video lectures, out of which emerged my book on abortion. We made an effort to get these educational materials to evangelical churches, to help them instruct their members concerning this profoundly serious ethical issue. I was saddened to receive the same response over and over again. Innumerable evangelical pastors told me they could not use our materials in their churches because the issue of abortion is so controversial. If they took a stand against abortion on demand, they said, they would divide their churches. What? Divide these churches? What could be a greater evil than such a division? The answer is this: Remaining silent on the most serious ethical issue that the United States has ever faced.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



The Voice of the Church *Continued from Page 8*

If the slaughter of millions of unborn babies is to stop, the church must once again become the church. Those who hide behind the idea that the church should never speak to political issues have missed the scriptural accounts of what we would call prophetic criticism. It may have been politically incorrect for Nathan to confront David over his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah (2 Samuel 12:1–15a). It may have been politically incorrect for Elijah to confront Ahab for his sinful confiscation of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21). It may have been politically incorrect for John the Baptist to challenge Herod the Tetrarch’s illicit marriage (Matthew 14). In these and other examples from sacred Scripture, we see representatives of the church not trying to become the state but offering prophetic criticism to the state—despite the potential consequences. The church is not the state, but it is the conscience of the state, and it is a conscience that cannot afford to become seared and silent.

The state is an instrument ordained by God. It is also governed by God. The church does not need to be the state, but it must remind the state of its God-given duty. The principal reason for the existence of any government is to maintain, sustain, and protect the sanctity of human life. When the state fails to do that, it has become demonized. And it is the sacred duty of the church and of every Christian to voice opposition to it.

The evangelical church’s chief strategies to end abortion have been to put pressure on abortion clinics and on elected officials. There is nothing wrong with these strategies; however, one strategy that has not been used or adopted widely is that of protesting those churches that support the ghastly murder of unborn babies. It is time for Christians to give prophetic criticism to the church, specifically to those churches that support abortion on demand or remain silent on this major issue.

In my own city, one of the largest evangelical churches has publicly welcomed the woman in America who is the most visible and vocal supporter of partial-birth abortions. That’s a scandal to the Christian community. It’s a scandal to the cause of Jesus Christ. That church needs to be called to account.

It is time for churches that see the evil of abortion to stand up and be counted—no matter the risk or the cost. When the church is silent in the midst of a holocaust, she ceases to be a real church. Wherever human dignity is under attack, it is the duty of the church and of the Christian to rise up in protest against it. This is not a political matter, and neither is it a temporary matter. It is not a matter over which Christians may disagree. It is a matter of life and death, the results of which will count forever. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



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 at gwlcf10415@gmail.com.

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner January 2022

Birthdays

Rick G. (1) Jack B. (24)
Marci S. (9) Muriel R. (24)
Cheyenne W. (17) Stephen H. (26)

Anniversaries

None to Report

Excerpt from West Suffolk Epistle - April 2014

Let it be a settled principle in our minds that the first and chief business of the Church of Christ is to preach the Gospel. The words of Paul ought to be constantly remembered – *“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power”* (1 Corinthians 1:17). When the Gospel of Christ is faithfully and fully preached we need not fear that the sacraments will be undervalued. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper will always be most truly revered in those churches where the truth of Jesus is most fully taught and known. ~ *J.C. Ryle [1816-1900] was a prolific writer, vigorous preacher, faithful pastor in England.*



*West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership*

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