

THE BEACON BEAM

November 2020

TRUTH TO ANCHOR THE SOUL

COVID-19 AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

by Greg Barkman



The current COVID pandemic has affected almost every area of life in America, including normal church activities. Most churches cancelled every meeting initially, with some opening up partially and others completely after awhile, while others continued to remain closed. In many cases, these decisions were made by the churches themselves, but for others, decisions were forced upon churches by governmental edict. Details vary from state to state and the situation highlights the issue of religious freedom with special focus upon the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Many Christians have given more thought to religious freedom this year than perhaps ever before. What has this pandemic taught us about religious freedom in America?

Churches are subject to some government regulations. Contrary to the thinking of some, churches are not entirely exempt from government authority. Building codes, zoning ordinances, and similar requirements affect houses of worship as much as they do businesses and private citi-

zens. Just because a building is used for religious purposes does not exempt it from regulation. Government has a legitimate role in the welfare of all citizens, and churches must comply with the same safety regulations that apply to everyone else. Government has a legitimate role in protecting citizens from dangers such as disease.

Churches are protected with special safeguards. The legitimate authority of government over churches is not unlimited. The First Amendment prohibits government from impeding free exercise of religion, and therefore churches enjoy constitutional safeguards that are not enjoyed by others.

Even more, churches enjoy the very highest level of constitutionally protected freedom. The First Amendment protects free speech, freedom of the press, freedom to peaceably assemble and to address governmental grievances. It also guarantees the free exercise of religion. These are the mostly highly protected freedoms in our nation, and Americans are blessed to live in a

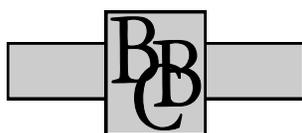
country which guarantees religious freedom. Such freedom was virtually unknown throughout world history. Until the founding of the United States, Christians enjoyed whatever freedoms their government chose to grant. In America, the Constitution prohibits government from curtailing religious freedom. Religious freedom is not a governmentally granted privilege, but a constitutionally enshrined right.

Churches may not be restricted more than other institutions. Within those areas where government has a legitimate right to regulate churches, such as building codes, churches are assured that they may not be singled out for tighter restrictions than others. If restaurants and theatres are granted certain concessions, churches may not be denied those same concessions. The First Amendment insures that churches may not be treated more severely than others. Churches enjoy the highest level of constitutionally protected freedoms. They may enjoy greater concessions than

(Continued on page 2)

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Gregory N. Barkman, *Senior Pastor*
 Michael R. Karns, *Minister of Christian Education*
 Robert F. LaTour, *Minister of Families*
 Gregory L. Phillips, *Minister of Music*

Sunday

Morning Worship...9:30 AM
 Sunday School.....11:10 AM
 Evening Worship.....6:00 PM

Wednesday

Prayer Meeting.....7:00 PM
 IMPACT Clubs.....7:00 PM
 Teen Ministry.....7:00 PM

(Continued from page 1)

others, but never less. With this background in mind, we will now examine how some of these issues have played out in churches across America during the COVID pandemic.

Churches in North Carolina. When the pandemic began, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper issued severe restrictions on gatherings of all kinds. The exact number of people permitted fluctuated several times, but even the highest number was too low to allow most churches to conduct regular meetings. Our church, like nearly all others, suspended all gatherings. We were fortunate to have livestreaming capacity already in place, having invested in cameras and other equipment long ago. We were well established with SermonAudio.com, an excellent streaming service, and have acquired a good number of regular viewers over the years. So when Governor Cooper shut down North Carolina churches, we were well equipped to broadcast into the homes of our members who joined us several times a week on their computers. Many churches were not so well prepared for the crisis.

Before long, several churches took Governor Cooper to court, claiming violation of the First Amendment and the free exercise of religion. The churches won, and the Governor chose not to appeal. I believe that was a wise response on his part. Even if he won on appeal, I think he would have suffered in the court of public opinion. Consequently, churches in North Carolina were removed from restrictions on conducting meetings, and were free to resume gathering at their own discretion. Some, like ourselves, began meeting on a limited basis. We held Sunday morning worship only with careful social distancing, masks, and other safeguards. Why? Because we believed this to be prudent. Most churches followed a course similar to ours, and I am not aware of any ma-

or COVID outbreaks in North Carolina churches. Churches voluntarily made wise decisions best suited to their own situation, and religious freedom was preserved. Churches exercised caution out of due concern for the safety of their congregations. In my opinion, this has worked well, and demonstrates to other states how religious freedom ought to function.

Churches in our national capitol. In Washington, D.C., the situation was significantly different. The Mayor prohibited meetings of all kinds, including churches, forbidding both indoor and outdoor gatherings. Capitol Hill Baptist Church, pastored by Mark Dever, secured a large parking lot outside the city, and began open air meetings with a few hundred worshippers. They also petitioned the Mayor to allow churches to conduct outdoor meetings on their own property in the City, but were denied. They eventually sued on the basis of the First Amendment, and won. One of their arguments related to the city's approval of hundreds of people demonstrating outdoors in political protests. If mass outdoor gatherings must be allowed under the First Amendment, so must church gatherings. Churches enjoy the same constitutional protections as political assemblies, and may not be restricted more severely than those exercising political activities. This argument rests upon a solid Constitutional foundation, and the court ruled in the church's favor. Free exercise of religion is as equally protected as assembling for political grievances. Governments may not allow one and prohibit the other.

Churches in California. A similar situation unfolded in California where the Governor prohibited all church gatherings but allowed large political demonstrations. Several churches balked at this apparent violation of the First Amendment, and began meeting. Grace Community Church, pastored by John MacArthur,

is one of the churches that chose to resume gathering for worship. The government imposed heavy fines, and threatened to put offending pastors in jail. MacArthur's trial is scheduled for November, and Christians are watching intently. Will the court agree with the Governor, or with the churches? Time will tell.

These situations are not all identical, and courts may well render different decisions in different locations. It is even possible that final resolution will remain unsettled until brought to the Supreme Court. The philosophy of Supreme Court nominees looms large in this situation, and becomes an increasingly important consideration in deciding how to vote in the upcoming election.

What have we learned? Religious Freedom is not absolute, but it is one of the most highly protected rights in American law. This is not surprising when we remember that many early colonists came to these shores fleeing religious persecution. Our nation was founded largely for the purpose of protecting religious freedom. We pray that God will be pleased to extend this foundational liberty purchased by our forefathers at great cost.

Sliding into Darkness

by Dr. Erwin W. Lutzer

What Europe has to Teach Us

In May it was my privilege to be in Hungary with the European Leadership Forum, an organization dedicated to strengthening the Gospel witness in Europe. Evangelical scholars from various disciplines gathered to teach and train about 400 church leaders how to live out their faith in a secular world. I also taught a few seminars, but I benefited from those days much more than I contributed.

You must understand that Europe is very secular, very self-assured, and, for the most part, very opposed to the Gospel. These countries that have been influenced by nearly two thousand years of Christianity and gave us the Reformation—these countries have descended into moral and spiritual darkness. And the people appear to be content with their sin and their disdain for Christianity. We are thankful for the leaders and churches that still do proclaim the Gospel, but they are in a minority. Today in Europe, the fastest growing religion is atheism.

Since we in America are headed in a similar direction, we must ask: what caused the light of the Gospel in Europe to be practically extinguished? What lessons can we learn that might slow our own descent into an intolerant secularism?

While in Europe, we learned about three powerful forces that eroded the confidence of European Christians in past generations. First, the 18th century Enlightenment insisted that man, not God, was “the measure of all things.” This turned the attention of people away from God toward their

own achievements and human reason. Second, the universities of Europe led the way in “demythologizing” the Bible by insisting that it was a purely human book. These scholars cut the heart out of the Gospel and left ministers with nothing significant to preach. Finally, Darwinism struck at the very foundation of Christianity. By insisting that the doctrine of creation was unnecessary, evolution made the existence of God superfluous.

So what is the cure? What can we do to stem the tide of secularism? My answer is not profound or novel. But it must be said: unless we are willing and able to train a generation of

“What can we do to stem the tide of secularism? My answer is not profound or novel. But it must be said: unless we are willing and able to train a generation of Christian leaders who can combat secularism both spiritually and intellectually, we will continue to see the Gospel marginalized and Christianity treated with contempt.”

Christian leaders who can combat secularism both spiritually and intellectually, we will continue to see the Gospel marginalized and Christianity treated with contempt. We are in a spiritual and intellectual war that we must be prepared to fight.

We have not done a good job of passing the baton to our children and grandchildren. The statistics indicate that the majority of teenagers from evangelical churches never return to the church once they’ve been to col-

lege. We are losing the next generation to consumerism, eroticism, and personal advancement. In response, we have “dumbed down” the Gospel in an attempt to make it more attractive to Christians and the world at large.

We need to rethink the role of the Church in the world and the role our families play as darkness settles over our own land. Without strong families and strong churches, we can expect that what we see in Europe today will be the profile of America tomorrow.

How Can We Stop the Slide?

Are we truly facing the loss of our religious freedoms? And if so, what can we do to stop it? Pastor Lutzer addresses the causes and cure of our slide towards secularism.

Q: You said that the Enlightenment was the first domino to fall in Europe’s rejection of Christianity. Has the Enlightenment also affected America?

A: We must be careful here. The Enlightenment in Europe had some very good principles in the beginning. It emphasized personal liberties over against the control that the Catholic Church had on its millions of adherents. Some believe that our own Constitution was based on Enlightenment principles. However, as it progressed, it emphasized man to the exclusion of God. But yes, America has been greatly affected by the Enlightenment, both positively and negatively.

Q: Does the separation of Church and state we have in America help the

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

Church maintain its independence and witness?

A: Yes, in this regard we are quite different from Europe. The state church has been one of the causes of the decline of the Church in Europe. Even today the kings and leaders of various countries in Europe appoint the pastors of leading churches, although they generally consult church leadership before they make their decision. But this relationship (which goes back to Constantine) has had a deadening effect.

Q: Even so, you feel that darkness is coming to America?

A: Yes. There are powerful forces that want to take away our freedoms, and more than that, there is a mood of antagonism against Christianity. We are responsible for some of this, but the fact is that political correctness is a powerful cultural current that forces students at our universities to hide their faith; it also silences Christians in the workplace, in government, and in law. We need a courageous band of believers who will represent Christ wherever He has planted them, even at great personal cost.

Q: What is our fault in all of this? Where has the Church failed?

A: I can't give a definitive answer to

this, but let me try. First, we have not taught our families how to model Christian homes and pass their faith to their children. Hence we are losing young people within the church. Second, we have been content with our level of spirituality even though we have "hid their lamps" and have not witnessed to our faith in a winsome, attractive way. Often Christians have harmed the faith through their anger at society, their judgmentalism and general unwillingness to sacrifice for the sake of others.

Third, we have compromised the Gospel message by trimming it to the lowest possible denominator. We have failed to teach a robust faith that is real, impactful and that calls for discipleship no matter the cost. I am reminded of the words of Bonhoeffer, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Unfortunately, we are unwilling to pay such a drastic price for the faith.

Q: As someone who has preached the Gospel at The Moody Church for 30 years, what words of wisdom do you have for the next generation?

A: Well, you have asked a question that deserves a book, not a sentence or two. But the bottom line is this: I would ask that our young people not be satisfied until they have made their faith their own; that they not be satisfied until they have faced honestly

their commitment to purity, generosity, and yieldedness to God. All of that of course, needs explanation and perhaps it is a subject that can be tackled at another time.

Dr. Erwin W. Lutzer

Since 1980, Dr. Erwin W. Lutzer has served as Senior Pastor of The Moody Church in Chicago.

Dr. Lutzer earned his B.Th. from Winnipeg Bible College, a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, an M.A. in Philosophy from Loyola University, and an honorary LL.D. from the Simon Greenleaf School of Law.

A clear expositor of the Bible, he is the featured speaker on three radio programs that are heard on more than 700 outlets in the United States and around the world:

Moody Church Hour—The Moody Church's Sunday morning worship service;

Songs in the Night—an evening program that's been airing since 1943;

Running to Win—a daily Bible-teaching broadcast.

Dr. Lutzer is also an award-winning author of numerous books.

Often we hear statements such as, "If we don't repent, God is going to judge America!" We forget that all sin carries with it some immediate consequences. America is already under judgment, continuous judgment.

The terrible effects of the destruction of the family is one of God's judgments against our nation. Our condoning of immorality, pornography, and even widespread acceptance of homosexual marriages—all of this is proof that God's hand is being removed from us as we plunge headlong into personal and national rebellion. As a result, our children are suffering from predators, from sexual abuse within their own families, and from self-absorbed, uncaring parents.

—Erwin W. Lutzer, *Pandemics, Plagues, and Natural Disasters*

REKINDLING THE GRATITUDE

by John MacArthur

The Thanksgiving season is a wonderful time to heighten your sensitivity to the blessings bestowed by God. Thanksgiving grabs your attention, shakes the cobwebs loose, and reminds you of all God's most precious gifts. That's one reason Thanksgiving has always held such a special place in my heart. It rekindles in me the kind of God-centered gratitude that our Lord demands and deserves—the kind that should readily be on our lips year round.

To help stimulate that kind of deeper gratitude, my family has adopted a Thanksgiving tradition we've found extremely helpful. Each year after our Thanksgiving meal we gather in our living room and simply recite the blessings of God that have touched our lives. One by one we circle the room, each one of us expressing our gratitude to God for His many physical and spiritual blessings.

Allow me to share with you just five blessings that deeply touch me every year and prompt me to thank God.

You're Saved and You Know It

No work of God's is more beyond my comprehension yet closer to my heart and more worthy of gratitude than salvation. Before coming to know Christ, each of us lived in a self-imposed prison. Guilty, condemned, spiritually blind, and with no means to pay our debt, our destiny was one of eternal separation from God.

But Christ not only rescued us from the power and penalty of our sins, He also lifted us to a place of blessing. He delivered us from punishment and brought glory. He took away the threat of hell and gave us the hope of heaven. He dismissed us from divine wrath and brought us a divine benediction. One hymn writer put that unfathomable transaction like this:

In wonder lost, with trembling joy,
We take the pardon of our God;
Pardon for crimes of deepest dye,
A pardon bought with Jesus' blood,
Who is a pard'ning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?

We sing of salvation. We talk of salvation. Salvation is the essence of Christianity. Thanking God for saving us should be the unceasing occupation of our lips—only a stone-cold heart could offer anything less.

The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth

Watch a half hour of news and tell me if the word chaos doesn't

come to mind. The world is gripped by it. Moral, social, and economic problems proliferate but solutions are scarce. The political process is drifting rudderless on a sea of confusion. Life is all questions and no answers. There is no concrete guideline or standard by which to judge good and bad, right and wrong. The suppression of truth exacts a tremendous price.

But thanks to God, you and I have an eternal, objective, incontestable, irrevocable standard we can depend on for all matters of life. From the truth of Scripture we can understand the ebb and flow of life better than all the educators, philosophers, politicians, and social pundits combined. God's Word offers us a window on the real issues people battle. We know how to be good employees, to love our spouses, to raise our families, to truly love our neighbors. I thank God for revealing His truth to us and for allowing me the privilege of studying and teaching it.

Life's Storms

Perhaps the most difficult time to be thankful is when we're in the midst of a setback, a challenge, or a trial. Being thankful for adversity is never easy, but it is always right. From experience I know the difficult times are the ones in which God seems to be most at work in our lives, strengthening our weak spots, comforting our hurts, and drawing us to greater dependence. A well-known businessman offered this perspective: "Good timber does not grow with ease; the stronger the wind, the stronger the trees." Let's not neglect to thank God for the strong winds He allows to blow our direction.

Faithful Churches

I'm sad to say there are some congregations today that seem to be wrestling with who they are and what their mission is—a spiritual identity crisis of sorts. Relentlessly assaulted by doctrinal fads, scandals, divisions, internal and external criticism, and worldly thinking, they've buckled under the pressure. Doctrine is compromised, effectiveness is forfeited, biblical ministry is abandoned, and God's blessing is withdrawn. That grieves me, and I know it grieves you as well.

However, we can thank the Lord

for the many churches that have stayed the course in spite of pressure, and the many others that struggle but have not given up the fight. Large or small, the congregations that remain faithful to God's Word are the ones that are alive, vital, flourishing, reaching their communities with great effectiveness, and advancing the kingdom of God. They've resisted the fads, remained true to God's calling, and are now seeing His blessing. I'm grateful to Him for those churches, and for the encouragement they are to me and to the Body of Christ.

The People Who Make a Difference

Someone once made this wise observation: "Friends in your life are like pillars on your porch. Sometimes they hold you up, and sometimes they lean on you. Sometimes it's just enough to know they're standing by."

That's certainly been true in my life. I thank God daily for the many people who add so much color and warmth to my life. My best friend and wife, Patricia. Loving children and grandchildren. All who labor with me for the sake of the gospel. Each one enriches me greatly and is a very personal gift directly from the hand of God. I'm grateful for the friends—seen and unseen—whom I've been able to lean on, and who, to some small degree, have been able to lean on me.

Let me encourage you not to allow this Thanksgiving to come and go without taking inventory. Biblical gratitude isn't something that should pass from our minds with the passing of a season. It's an attitude, a God-focused response to circumstances that should pervade each moment of each day of each year.

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On The Feminine Side

by Marti Barkman



It was nearly nothing, just a business card for a potter in Michigan. It had gone unnoticed on my desk for more than a year and by now was buried in a stack of long-unattended tasks. I picked it up, intending to throw it away, but my hand paused over the waste basket, I turned it over, and read this sentence on the other side:

Nothingness. A thesaurus amplifies

“We throw clay to shape a pot,
but the utility of the clay pot
is a function of the
nothingness inside it.”

the word for us and begins to paint a mental picture: *oblivion, emptiness, void, vacuum, nonexistence, nihility, nonbeing*. These synonyms create the image of a distant, unreachable horizon stretching before me, with nothing but a gray mist in the space between. A friend, some months after an indescribable loss, described herself in just those terms. “...as if there is nothing inside me.”

We can scarcely have a conversation these days without a reference to ‘what we are going through’. Just last week, after a successful planning session, a long-term client admitted, “I don’t know what is wrong with me. Everything in my life is going ok, but I... I just feel so...I don’t even know how to describe how I feel. It’s just very strange.” I know what she’s talking about and I think it has something to do with an emptiness that comes from our having, quite suddenly, lost life as we’ve known it. It’s not that life in 2019 was all perfection, or that we have nothing of value left to us now, but we were accustomed to who, where, what we were, and there was no reason to think that life wouldn’t continue as is. Regardless of the imperfections of

our lives, there is a certain comfort in having learned to live with the status quo.

But that existing state of affairs changed dramatically, so much so that last year’s assumptions about life are no longer applicable. Strangely, we now must pause to consider the advisability of time with friends and family, of leaving home to go to work, of travelling where and when we want. We don’t even go to the grocery store without a second thought. How many times have you walked back to your car to get a mask? We’ve not been here before and are dealing with a new way of life and the loss of the familiar. The nothingness had created a void, a negative. And since this has continued far longer than we had imagined, we are now asking the question what if this never changes. What if this is the new reality?

But must nothingness always be negative? When visiting the doctor to get the results of a biopsy, ‘it’s nothing’ is what you hope to hear! If I remember correctly from high school Spanish class, ‘you’re welcome’ in Spanish is ‘de nada’...*it is nothing*. That is a sweet sentiment. And then there’s the element of nothingness in that clay pot. The pot...the clay that IS the pot...is where all our attention is placed. The potter creates the pot by ‘throwing’ a lump of clay, using his hands to create the shape he wants. All we see is the clay, but as the pot is created, so is the emptiness inside. You can’t create one without creating the other. And that...the nothingness... is what turns a lump of unusable clay into a functional piece. Without the void, what do you have?

How would you describe yourself? A useful vessel or a lump of clay? Your answer may vary from day to day, but a more important question might be, what do you *desire* to be? It’s not always depression or ‘the blues’ that render us unusable, but more often it is our being filled with self-interest. We become so attentive to self we have no room inside us for anyone else, and in that state, we find we can be quite content. But usable? It’s a question we need to ask. Is it possible that God has created a nothingness in us that is really a cleaning out of self, not to remain empty, but to be filled with something better?

God does what He does in our lives because he loves us. There’s something very good going on here. ‘His purposes ripen fast, unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.’ Rather than mourning the changes thrust upon us, what if we embrace and welcome the nothingness as an opportunity, an open door. The space created by that nothingness may well hold the sweet flower that grows from a bitter bud. “...the (usefulness) of the clay pot is the function of the nothingness inside it.”

Now Thank We All Our God

Now thank we all our God
With hearts, and hands, and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In Whom His world rejoices;
Who, from our mothers' arms,
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us,
And keep us in His grace,
And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills,
In this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God
The Father now be given,
The Son, and Him Who reigns,
With them in highest heaven,
The one eternal God,
Whom earth and heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now,
And shall be, evermore.

Martin Rinkart, 1586-1649

THE BEACON BROADCAST

Monday thru Friday

WITA 1490 AM (Knoxville, TN) 9:30 a.m.
WKBA 1550 AM (Roanoke, VA) 10:00 a.m.
WKPA 1390 AM (Lynchburg, VA) 10:00 a.m.
WBAG 1150 AM (Burlington, NC) 12:15 p.m.
WBAG 105.9 FM (Burlington, NC) 12:15 p.m.
WTRU 830 AM (Winston-Salem, NC) 2:00 p.m.
WDZY 1290 AM (Richmond, VA) 6:15 a.m.
WDZY 103.3 FM (Richmond, VA) 10:00 a.m.
WDZY 103.3 FM (Richmond, VA) 6:15 a.m.
WDZY 103.3 FM (Richmond, VA) 10:00 a.m.
WSKY 1230 AM (Asheville, NC) 7:15 a.m.
WYYC 1250 AM (York, PA) 5:00 p.m.
WYYC 98.1 FM (York, PA) 5:00 p.m.

Sunday

WCRU 960 AM (Charlotte, NC) 9:30 a.m.
WBAG 1150 AM (Burlington, NC) 10:30 a.m.
WTRU 830 AM (Winston-Salem, NC) 10:30 a.m.
WDRU 1030 AM (Raleigh, NC) 10:30 a.m.
WLES 590 AM (Richmond, VA) 10:30 a.m.
Harbour Light of the Windwards 9:30 p.m.
1400 AM/94.5 FM (Caribbean)
WGNQ mixlr.com/wgng-radio (M-F)
8:45-9 a.m. & 4:45-5:00 p.m.
(Internet station based in Greenville/Washington, NC)

Monday thru Sunday

WXTH-LP 101.7 FM (Richwood, WV) 10:05 a.m.
WXTH-LP 101.7 FM (Richwood, WV) 10:05 p.m.

BEACON HIGHLIGHTS FOR NOVEMBER

CALENDAR

- 01 Daylight Saving Time Ends
- 07 Coffee n' Courage-10:00 a.m.
(Saturday morning session)
- 10 Coffee n' Courage-9:15 a.m.
(Tuesday morning session)
Elders/Deacons Meeting
- 17 Coffee n' Courage-9:15 a.m.
(Tuesday morning session)
- 26 Thanksgiving Day

MEMBER BIRTHDAYS

- 01 Carol Shaw
- 08 Mary Sue Wright
- 09 Jane Faucette
- 10 Duane Burns
- 13 Rebecca Griffin
- Laura Warner
- 18 Mary Speight
- 21 Sue Vestal
- 22 Joey Beck
Jeremy Fairchild
- 25 Frieda King
Ann Whittington
- 29 Clara Driver
Todd Wilson

MISSIONARY BIRTHDAYS

- 09 Ruth Bixby
Melanie Webster
- 10 Sillas Campos
- 12 Marc Blackwell
- 23 Judie Blackwell
- 26 Becca Jensen*
- 30 Wanger Campos

*Children of Missionaries

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, our calendar is subject to change. We encourage you to follow our announcements on our Beacon website: www.beaconbaptist.com

We express our heartfelt sympathy to the families of:

Linda Bruner
Noah Foley
David Garner
Herman Hollyfield
Dr. John Johnson
Ray McIntyre
Richard Pahnke, Sr.
Jim Truluck

<p><i>The Beacon Beam</i> Beacon Baptist Church PO Box 159 Alamance, NC 27201</p>	Return Service Requested	PRSRT STD US POSTAGE PAID ALAMANCE, NC PERMIT NO. 3
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