The Christian World View— Postmodernism #1

J. LIGON DUNCAN III, PHD

Exodus 3:10-15

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, chapter three. We're going to be looking at Postmodernism, which in some ways is not even a worldview, but it is a pervasive influence on the thinking of the world in which you live. We'll be looking at it for two weeks. Today we'll look at Postmodernism; next week we'll look at "Postmodernism Goes to College." And if you know folks who have children in college, who have graduate students off in graduate or post-graduate education, perhaps that would be a good session to invite them to, because I want to explore how this



form of thinking has massively impacted the entirety of our educational system for the last thirty-five years or so. It may be the single most significant impact upon the way education is done in the United States.

If you want to read up on this, by the way, in preparation for that, I'd recommend two books. One is called, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College*. It's by James Sire, who wrote the wonderful book *The Universe Next Door*, which we have sort of used as a guide to our study this summer. And it's a story account of a young evangelical Christian who leaves a Bible church and goes off to a fictitious state university called Handsome State University, which is a thinly veiled reference to the University of California at Berkley, otherwise known as "the nut house." And it's a beautiful exercise in what happens to a young evangelical in that kind of a hot-house environment, and he explores some of the impacts of Postmodernism.

The second book I would recommend to you is a book I haven't mentioned before this summer is by Dinesh D'Souza. He was a policy advisor for President Reagan, is now on the campus circuit speaking and writing and such, and his book is *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race & Sex on Campus*. In my view, no parent ought to send a child off to college or university without having read Dinesh D'Souza's, *Illiberal Education*, because it is a

classic exposé of the kind of stuff going on in the universities today. But at any rate, we'll do "Postmodernism Goes to College" next week.

I'm beginning with Genesis 3 tonight for a very specific reason. It seems to me that as the children of Israel had been in bondage for 400 years or more in Egypt, a land dominated by polytheism, and thus by a pluralistic view of reality, that what God tells Moses to say to the children of Israel about Him is very relevant to us in our setting.

People talk about Postmodernism having caused us to lose two things: first, the center. We've lost the center in our culture. There's no common ground any more. You hear people talking about why politics are so rancorous today, and the discussion is so bitter in politics. We've lost the center. There's no common point for a discourse which is genteel and vigorous, to be sure, but nevertheless embracive of certain common ideals. That center has been lost.

And also, the horizon has been lost. You hear people talking about the center being lost, and the horizon being lost. There are no boundaries anymore. You know, everything's been transgressed. For the last forty years, if you're really smart, and you're part of the intelligentsia—whether you're in the media, whether you are making movies, whether you are writing books, whether you're teaching school—the thing that this culture rewards you for is doing what? Transgressing every boundary you can find.

You know, if you had stood up at any political convention in the 1960's and said, "What you are talking about today is going to directly lead to homosexual marriage," you would have been derided as the most mean-spirited, narrow-minded, fire-breathing, fundamentalist, totalitarian, you know, fill in every other lousy word you can think of that had ever come along, and you would have been excluded immediately from being considered seriously about what you were saying. But where are we now? Almost to the point where if you raise a question about that, that you are now excluded from the conversation.

Now what happened? This is forty years, folks! So we have watched, for forty years, every boundary you can think of be transgressed. You know, people today say, "Look, if you legalize same-sex marriage, well, what about pedophilia?" And others would say, "No-o-o! We're not talking about that!!" Yeah? Well, you just wait about ten years. NAMBLA, the National Man-Boy Love Association...I guarantee you, they'll be coming back. Look, if we can define marriage this way, why not a relationship between a 43-year-old man and a twelve-year-old boy? Why not? What if they want to do it? Why don't we call it marriage? So, we've watched every boundary that you can transgress be transgressed. We've lost the center; we've lost the horizon.

And the children of Israel are in that kind of a hot-house culture, themselves, their strong, biblical beliefs under assault from Egyptian polytheism at every turn. And isn't it interesting what happens when God comes to Moses in Exodus 3:10-15. We tend to focus on the really funny story of Moses finding all the excuses about why he shouldn't be the guy to go back to speak to the children of Israel. But, you know, the real story is what God tells Moses to say to the children of Israel about Him. Listen to what the Lord says.

Exodus 3:10 —

"Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" And He [that is, God] said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain. The Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?"

[And it's interesting, isn't it, to look at what looks like Moses' posturing and trying to get out of this task that the Lord has assigned to him, but really, the next statement is the most important statement of the whole passage. God says, 'this is what you tell them when you go back.']

"And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy word. May He add His blessing to it.

It's as if God says, 'Go tell them that the center of everything is who I am. I am the point from which everything else emanates. I am the Being around whom the whole world revolves, and nothing else makes sense apart from Me. You go tell them that's who's sending you to them.' And what a glorious message that is! That's why we sang *Jesus Shall Reign*, and we sang *We Praise You*, *O God*, *Our Redeemer*, *Creator*. That centering truth enables us, in a crazy world, to make sense out of life.

I. Prologue

We're going to look at Postmodernism tonight. I want to read you something written by that prophet of Postmodernism who lived in the nineteenth century. Postmodernism is primarily a late-twentieth century, and now twenty-first century phenomenon, but it had

its roots in the same philosopher who gave us Nihilism, Freiderich Nietzsche. And in his story *The Madman*, he shares this dialogue:

"Whither is God?" the madman cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed Him, you and I. All of us are His murderers." "But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead, and we have killed Him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves?" "I come too early," he said to them. "My time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering. It has not yet reached the ears of man."

Now, that's a synopsis of a longer passage, but here's the framework. The madman comes and announces to the people that God is dead. They look at him, and they call him a madman. He responds by saying, "Ah, the news has not reached you yet. You'll understand later."

And it's a prophetic picture. Nietzsche saw the end of a philosophy that had already taken place in his own time, but the logical end of that philosophy had not come home to most of the people who had already embraced that philosophy in Nietzsche's own time. And he knew that sooner or later, people were going to figure out that by embracing what they had embraced, they were then going to have to embrace the idea of a world without God. And when that happened, he said, the greatest crisis that ever would face mankind would occur. How would man live without God? How would he transcend that loss, the loss of God? And the great adventure of humanity would be in transcending that loss. Postmodernism is, in a real sense, the coalescence and the fruition of this prophecy by Nietzsche.

Now, let me just pause right here, because you may be saying, like perhaps you've been saying quietly to yourself all along, "Now, how, exactly, does all this egg-headed stuff about Nietzsche and the madman and Postmodernism help me in this life?" And that's a fair question. I want to say, my wife is really good about bringing me down to earth. Wives do that, you know?

I love the story that Haley Barbour tells. When he was serving with President Reagan, one day they were on Air Force One, on the way out west somewhere, and as they were crossing the Mississippi River way up in the sky–25, 30, 35,40 thousand feet up in Air Force One–Haley Barbour was with Ronald Reagan, and he said, "Would it be OK if I called Marsha?" And he called Marsha from Air Force One, and with great pride and delight, 40,000 feet in the air, he said to Marsha, "You'll never guess where I am." "Where

are you, Haley?" "I'm in Air Force One. I'm right above you. If I could see that far, I could probably see Yazoo City." She said, "Well, let me tell you where I am, Haley. I'm in the laundry room, and the kids are sick on the stomach, and they've thrown up on all the sheets, and the washing machine needs to be fixed, and I'm here alone." "OK, honey. Talk to you when I'm back!" Click!

I understand that it can be real nice to talk about all this airy-fairy stuff, and you can wonder, "Yeah, but look, my wife's died"; or, "My children are really having trouble in school"; or, "I've got marital problems"; or, "I'd like to really know how to be a better parent or a better husband"; or ... you know. There are all sorts of practical problems that crowd in. Why in the world would we want to spend time talking about something like this?

Well, I think there are actually a lot of good answers to that. Let me just give you two. One is this: if you don't understand Postmodernism, you don't understand the times that you live in. And presumably, that's something that we would want to do. We would want to understand the times that we live in. If we don't understand those times, we're going to have a hard time understanding what people are saying to us, and they're going to have a hard time understanding what we're saying to them. And so, presumably, it would be a good thing to understand the times we live in.

The second reason is this: if a non-Christian believes the things that Postmodernism assumes, it can inoculate you to the gospel. What I mean by that is if you imbibe the myths of Postmodernism, it can keep the gospel from getting through to you. It's like an ingenious strategy of Satan to keep you from listening to the gospel. And if you are a Christian and you imbibe part of the truths of Postmodernism, it can cripple your ability to live the Christian life, because Paul said in Romans 12:1,2 that we are not to be conformed to this world, but we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And he meant transformed by the renewing of our minds in accordance with His word, and not the opinions of the age. So for at least both those reasons, I think it's important for us to spend just a little bit of time tonight on Postmodernism.

II. Postmodernism.

What is Postmodernism? I've already suggested to you that in Postmodernism we have lost the center and the horizon in our culture. When God is excluded from reality, both the substance and the value of everything else goes with Him. So, what do we mean by "Postmodernism" beyond the idea of pluralism of perspectives and a bag full of different philosophies of life? Well, Postmodernism is notoriously hard to define, especially because *one of the tenants of Postmodernism is that there is no such thing as absolute truth.* So how do you define something that says all predication is invalid? You know,

how do you predicate about it, if its fundamental point is that all predication is invalid, that you can't really say anything true about anything? How can you say something true about a theory that says you can't say anything true about anything?

So, it's hard to define. But here's a shorthand attempt. Postmodernism, just for historical information, generally is thought to have arisen first as a term used in reference to architecture, and it's a term that was originally used to refer to a tendency in architects to move away from the sort of simple, unadorned, impersonal boxes of concrete that began to proliferate on the American culture when the dominant ... on the American landscape ... when the dominant idea in architecture was that form ought to follow function. Everything ought to be functional, and therefore you got these huge square and triangular buildings of glass and metal, and they were very big, very large, and they look like blocks sort of stacked up on one another, and they weren't very attractive. But they were designed because of functional concerns. And Postmodernism came along and attempted to personalize some of that impersonal 'form follows function' kind of thinking. But what happened was, that term, Postmodernism, or Postmodern, was picked up by sociologists and philosophers and used in another way.

And here's how they used it. There was a French sociologist named Jean-Francoise Lyotard, who used the term to indicate *a shift in cultural legitimation*. And he defined Postmodern as meaning "incredulity toward metanarratives." That means that Postmodernism doesn't like someone to tell you a comprehensive, explanatory story for the totality of the world as it is. In other words, Postmodernism doesn't like a worldview. It doesn't like a comprehensive story that attempts to make sense of and explain everything else, whether it's Naturalism that says "Hey, there is no God, but this world is a fine-oiled machine, and if you study your science and your math, you can figure it out and have a wonderful life." Postmodernism doesn't like that.

Postmodernism doesn't like Christianity. It doesn't like Christianity to predicate things about reality: that there's a God, He brought this world into being; he controls it under His Providence; one day He's going to bring it to an end and usher in the new heavens and the new earth. They don't like that, what they call a 'metanarrative,' a comprehensive story that overarches everything else and makes sense out of everything that's part of it. So, *Postmodernism doesn't like a single story, a worldview, or a metanarrative that holds a culture together*.

And so, with Postmodernism, no story can have any more credibility than any other story. All stories are equally valid and equally invalid. Perfectly fine for you to believe that story, as long as you don't impose it on anybody else.

Flashback: couple of weeks ago, the Democratic National Convention. Ron Reagan, son of our former President, saying it is fine for a very small minority of people to think that it would be wrong to tamper with the basic elements of life in those cells in a Petrie dish, but it would be wrong for them to impose that on the rest of us, when there are cures to be found for Alzheimer's etcetera, etcetera. Do you see the idea? That metanarrative is fine for them to believe ... that story is fine, but if they want to look at life in that way, perfectly fine, free country. We're in favor of that. That just can have absolutely no impact on anybody else. They cannot force that story on you and me and restrict our freedom. There you have a classic example of Postmodernism.

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III. The prime issue of Postmodernism

Thirdly, to identify the prime issue that Postmodernism is trying to get at. Postmodernism is not concerned with what is there, what is ultimate reality. It is not concerned with how we know ultimate reality. It is concerned with how we construct meaning with language. It is concerned with how we construct meaning with language. Postmodernism believes that we know nothing about ultimate reality, and can know nothing about ultimate reality; and that we construct our own meaning with language.

Let me give you three categories that we'll come back to over and over in the next fifteen minutes or so: Pre-Modern, Modern, and Postmodern. Now, maybe this will give you a helpful grid to think about this.

The *Pre-Modern thinker*, for instance, looked at the world and said, "It's our job as humans to create a just society based on a just God."

The *Modern thinker* came along and said, "No, no, no! We don't need to have a just God to have a just society. What we need is universal human reason, and that can create a just society. In fact, it can create a more just society than those societies that people tried to base on God." So, the Pre-Modern thinker says, "Our job is to create a just society based on a just God." The Modern thinker says, "No, no, no! Our job is to create a just society based on universal human reason."

Then, the *Postmodern thinker* comes along, and he says, "Justice? There is no justice. All you can do is speak justice into being. You create justice out of your own head, and with your own words. What is justice?"

Now, that's exactly where we are today, folks. If you go back to our founding fathers, they believed that you created a just society based on a just God. Then, flip forward to the late nineteenth century, Oliver Wendell Holmes said that you create a just society based on universal human reason. And the Postmodernist comes along, and he says,

"Look, why should we think that universal human reason is able to create something so absolute as a just society? All that we're doing when we talk about just society is using our words to talk about what we want. So there is no universal standard of justice."

Now, let me just pause and give you a couple of illustrations about how this plays out. A lot of times, perhaps, as you've watched political coverage over the last couple of months, you've heard people talking about why are things so nasty now in politics. Well, if you're a student of American politics, my guess is you can find some times that are just as nasty as now. But let me suggest that there's a reason why people are saying that things are more nasty than they've ever been. And I think here's the reason. Because whereas, used to, just about everybody in American politics believed that there was something that we could call transcendent truth, truth that is outside of ourselves, that we didn't invent ourselves. And now, most people in American politics do not believe that. And one of the biggest divides in American politics is between those who do believe that now and who don't believe that. And those who don't believe that there is any ultimate reality believe that politics itself creates reality, and, therefore, politics takes the place that religion used to take.

Have you ever heard the phrase "the politics of meaning"? The idea behind that phrase is that our politics create meaning. Now, whereas two hundred years ago in America nobody would have said 'politics create meaning'—they would have said, "God creates meaning, transcendent truth creates meaning; politics is our job of working out that truth in practical ways, so that we can live in a just society." Now the argument is, "No, no, no! There is no absolute truth, there is no absolute meaning; but you can create it yourself, and the way you do that is, politics." And so, politics becomes far more cut-throat, even than it has been before, because it's the whole shebang. There is nothing beyond it, it is the big show. Lose this show, there's no chance for a reprise. OK? So, I want to suggest that that's one reason, one example of how Postmodernism impacts us in our culture.

Here's another example. I just got this about an hour ago. It's a statement by Robert Reich, the former Labor Secretary for President Clinton. He's just written:

"The great conflict of the 21st century may be between the West and terrorism. But terrorism is a tactic, not a belief. The underlying battle will be between modern civilization and anti-modernist fanatics; between those who believe in the primacy of the individual and those who believe that human beings owe blind allegiance to a higher authority; between those who give priority to life in this world and those who believe that human life is no more than preparation for an existence beyond life; between those who believe that truth is revealed solely through scripture and religious dogma, and those who rely primarily on science, reason,

and logic. Terrorism will disrupt and destroy lives. But terrorism is not the only danger we face."

In other words, you are more dangerous to America than jihadists.

Now, two things about that statement: one is, first of all, it ignores the reality which, thankfully, the 9/11 Commission brought its attention to. Our battle today is not with terrorism, as if there's some abstract thing out there called 'terrorism': our battle is with Islamic terrorists. So, the idea that terrorism is a tactic, not a belief, is one of the stupidest statements that you could ever make. Only a Western, pin-headed liberal could look out and think that Muslims don't care about what you believe. Dr. Jones, do Muslims care about what people believe? They sure do! Talk with Dr. Jones sometime, if you don't believe Muslims care about what people believe. It is very important. Those people are strapping bombs on themselves because they care very much about what people believe, and they think that we have misled the entire world, and they're about the job of correcting it. So, to think that these terrorists are using a tactic that has no belief behind it is a bone-jarringly dumb move.

But the second thing about it is, notice how it poses the battle as between those who believe in transcendent truth and those who don't. And who are the human liberators? The ones who don't believe in transcendent truth. Now you just watch that, when we move on here in just a couple of seconds. I have five minutes and eight points. OK, here we go.

IV. We do not have access to absolute truth - only stories.

Fourth point: Postmodernism argues that we do not have access to absolute truth; the truth about reality is forever hidden from us. *All we can do is tell stories*. Nietzsche put it this way:

"What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms. In short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which, after long use, seem firm, canonical and obligatory to people. *Truths are illusions* about which one has forgotten that this is what they are: metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power. Coins which have lost their pictures now matter only as metal, no longer as coins."

¹ Family Research Council. http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=WU04H03

So, according to Postmodernism, nothing we think we know can be checked against reality as such, and so all we have is stories. That's it. Just stories. **Truth is whatever we can get our community to agree on**. And our story is as true as any other story will ever be. So the only kind of truth there is, is pragmatic truth.

Now, it's easy to see how this notion, when applied to religious claims, triggers a radical relativism. The Pre-Modern man believed that there was a metanarrative; there was a story, and it was true, and it was given by God. Modern man says there is a metanarrative, but it's figured out by human reason, and it all makes sense. Postmodern man says truth is just something that we invent with our words.

V. Language is a power play.

Now, that leads to my fifth point, which is that in Postmodernism language is a power-play. Language is a power-play. All stories, all narratives, all metanarratives, are just a mask for power; and any one narrative used as a metanarrative (as a total explanation of the way things are) is oppression. Francis Bacon once said "Knowledge is power." The Postmodernist says *there is no such thing as knowledge; story is power. Language is power.*

Do you ever wonder why we are arguing now about gender-inclusive language? It's because people have decided that language is all there is—there's no truth behind it—language is the way you impose your worldview. They don't like the old worldview, so they changed the language to bring about a new worldview. That's why we're arguing, for instance, about gender-inclusive language. With Postmodernism, there is no purely objective knowledge, no truth of correspondence; only stories, stories which, when they are believed, give the storyteller power over others.

The Premodern man says the story that explains life was given to us by God, it was revealed in the Scripture. The Modern man comes along and says no, the story of this world is revealed by universal reason yielding truth about reality. The Postmodern man comes along and he says, nope, every story that tries to explain this world is just a power-play by one person trying to dominate other people. So, language is a power-play.

VI. Human beings are whatever we say we are.

What about human beings? What are human beings? Well, the Postmodernist says the human being is simply what we construct about ourselves in language. We make ourselves by what we say about ourselves. Humanity is nothing more than a fiction composed by modern human sciences. The Premodern man said that human beings were created in the image of God, and therefore, had a central dignity. The Modern man said

no, human beings are the product of their DNA template and unplanned sequences of evolution and survival of the fittest. [Postmodern] man says, "No, no, no—it's not that glorious. We're just self-constructed by the language we use to describe ourselves."

VII. Ethics are simply a social contract.

What about ethics? Well, you can imagine. That's my seventh point. In Postmodernism, ethics are simply a social construct. Just like language, social good is whatever society takes it to be. Truth is whatever we decide it is. Morality is whatever we decide it is. And therefore, Postmodernism entails a radical ethical relativism. That's why Michael Foucault, the radical French philosopher, argued that law equals repression. Why? Because it's somebody imposing their ethical metanarrative on somebody else. So what equals freedom? Decriminalization. The more you decriminalize, the freer people are because law is simply the imposition of one person's idea on everybody else. And that is why Foucault—who by the way, thought that the greatest good was the individual's freedom to maximize his or her own pleasure—because he believed that, he agonized for hours on questions like whether rape should be regulated by law, because law is repression, and decriminalization is freedom. Therefore, shouldn't we get rid of rape laws? Now, this guy sat around and thought about this! He was also a flaming homosexual, I might add.

So, the Premodern person says ethics is based on the character of the transcendent God. The Modern person says, "No, you learn what's right and wrong from human reason and experience." The Postmodern man says, "Right and wrong? We make that up as we go along!"

VIII. Linguistic theory.

What is the cutting edge of Postmodernism? Buckle your seatbelts. Linguistic theory. Yeah. This is the stuff that grew out of English departments in the 1960's. You know, in the Middle Ages it was theology that was queen of the sciences. In the Enlightenment, it was philosophy and the hard sciences—whether it be math or physics. *For Postmodernism, the queen of the sciences is literary theory*. So, the kings of the hill are people like Jacques Derrida, and his deconstructionism; or Stanley Fish and his reader response approach to literary theory. These are the cutting edge of Postmodernism. It makes sense, doesn't it? If it's all just about language, that's where the cutting edge of culture is.

IX. Postmodernism's impact on culture.

What has been Postmodernism's impact on history, science, and theology? Since there's no objective thing out there that you can know, history no longer is the job of the historian to show you the past as faithfully as he can, and to help you to appreciate it on its own terms. No. History is to be managed by the historian in order to make the point that the historian wants to make to the present day, whether his history actually relates to the history of the past or not.

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Do you remember the biography that came out—it's within the last seven years—of Ronald Reagan? It was called *Dutch*. Do you remember that the man who wrote it put a story in it about his meeting with President Reagan? He never met President Reagan. Now, this was given as a serous work of history. What happened? Postmodernism says, "Who cares if you make up stuff, because what's the difference whether it happened or it didn't? It's not reality. Reality is what we say it is." And so Postmodernism radically changes history. You can't have a decent discussion now about what's true and false in history, because for the Postmodernist — "Ahh, who cares?" You see why this is relevant to "Postmodernism Goes to College" next week.

Secondly, what kind of impact has Postmodernism made on science itself? Well, you know, it's hard to change 2 + 2 = 4. But the philosophy of science has been profoundly impacted by Postmodernism. Postmodernists have worked very hard to deny that there is any known or knowable connection between what we think and say and what is actually out there in the world. The Postmodernist says there is no proof that the rules of science are good, other than the consensus extended to those rules by the experts. To which one scientist has responded, "Fine. Step out that tenth story window and tell me that when you hit the bottom!" You know, you can't ignore that law of reality, but Postmodernism is even trying to change the way we do science today.

And perhaps you heard in the 1970's, when people were upset about the "new math." Well, now you know there is a movement in education to explain to teachers that if somebody says 2 + 2 = 5, it would be terrible to tell them that they're wrong, and that 2 + 2 = 4. Well, what's happening there? The influence of this kind of relativistic thinking?

Postmodernism has also impacted theology. When you hear theologians talking about "story," that we need to think in terms of "story" today, they may well be buying into aspects of Postmodernism.

Well, I'm going to stop right there, and we'll do "Postmodernism Goes to College" next week, and see how this stuff is going to be working out in the heads and hearts of your collegians. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the patience of these folks to listen and think through these things. We live in a crazy world. When man rejects God, we'll believe anything. And we see that happening all around us. Help us to be aware of that; help us to be biblical in our response to it; help us to think rigorously and biblically, according to your word, and to faithfully proclaim the truth of Christ to a generation that has no center and no horizon. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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