

A Universal Appeal

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Well, over the past couple of weeks or so we have stopped to linger over a critical passage at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew is a Gospel that shows us that Jesus Christ is God's promised King and it is to that King we are to look for our salvation, and in Matthew 28, beginning in verse 18, I invite you to turn there with me, there is a passage that is known as the Great Commission and it's been known by that name for quite a long time, and I felt the urgency and the need to expand on its greatness in a way that hopefully will have a long-lasting impact on the life of our church and upon your approach to the Gospel, and so we are taking our time here. We're not in a hurry. We suddenly find ourselves in the midst of a beautiful garden of God's word with radiant colors everywhere as the blooms attract our attention and we want to linger there, we want to smell its fragrance, we want to touch the texture of it, we want to drink in its beauty understanding that this is the way that Christ has given instruction for us to go forth on his behalf, and even to give understanding to those who do not know Christ, that they would come to a saving knowledge of him. So this is a very important passage that we're taking time for here in this a few week period.

Matthew 28:18, it says,

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

So much packed into those brief words. That's often the case in Scripture, the power and the wisdom and the omniscience of the Holy Spirit in inspiring God's word can pack so much into just a few short words that it takes us time to unfold it and understand some of the implications of it, and what we want to do today is to ask a key question, it might sound like an odd question to ask because the answer might seem obvious, and yet we need to think through the implications of it. Jesus said to go therefore and take the Gospel, as it were, and the question that I want to answer today is this: to whom should we address the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Who should hear the Gospel of Christ?

Now in the fullness of biblical revelation, that might be a little bit more difficult question to answer than you might first suspect. The biblical doctrine of election can make that a hard question to answer. The Bible says that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world in Ephesians 1, and so the reality is that not everyone is going to be saved. Jesus said that few are those who find the gate to eternal life. Not everyone is going to be saved and Scripture makes this plain to us. There is an electing choice by God and some have reasoned from that to say that, "Well, then we should only preach the Gospel to the elect and leave the others to their judgment." We'll address that as we go along here today. But other scriptures confirm the doctrine of election to us, not just that passage in Ephesians 1. You look at the Old Testament and you see that God chose the nation Israel. He didn't choose all of the nations to be his people, he chose merely the descendants of Abraham. In the New Testament, Jesus tells his disciples, "You did not choose Me but I chose you." And the Apostle Paul told Christians in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 that God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation. So you see this idea that God is choosing those who come to him.

Now we've said this in the past but it's a good point for review, what does the doctrine of election actually mean? Let me give you a definition that we've used in the past. Election is the act of God before the foundation of the world in which he chose some individuals in Christ to receive salvation. God chose them based solely on his purpose, not on any merit or foreseen faith in men. What that definition is expressing is the biblical teaching indicating that God is sovereign over salvation, God determines who will come into his kingdom. Salvation is a gift of God, salvation belongs to the Lord, Jonah 2:9 says, and that God chooses people to come into his kingdom not based on anything good that they do. He chooses them not based on anything that he foresees that they will do, any kind of faith that they might have in the future. That is not why God chooses men, he does it according to his wisdom for reasons that are his alone and he does not have to justify that before men at all.

Now people don't like that doctrine, people object to that, people say, "But that's not fair but how can God do that?" Well, whoa, whoa, whoa, time out. Time out. Let's remember who we are and who he is. God is the Creator. God made us. It is God's prerogative to do with us whatever he chooses to do and men and women like you and me who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we who are finite creatures and sinful ones at that, are in absolutely no position whatsoever to call a holy uncreated God who is our Creator and Maker and say, "Why are You doing what You are doing. Justify Yourself to me." What is that? What kind of arrogance and pride is that to think that way and speak that way to a holy God? No, no, God has the prerogative and privilege to do whatever he wants to do and Scripture says that part of his prerogative, part of what he did was that he chose before the foundation of the world those that would become his own. That's important biblical truth and it was important to make that little point in summary here at the start but I want you to understand that that is not the point today, okay? We've affirmed, once again, the doctrine of election, we've done that often from this pulpit, but it's not the point today. Today we need to talk about something else that intersects, in a way, with the doctrine of election but is a completely separate matter. Today the question is not whether God chose some to be saved out of a greater whole, the answer to that

question is, yes, that is exactly what he did, but that's not the question for today, that today's question is who should hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Different question. Stated differently, what are we as Christians, what are we supposed to do with the Gospel? What are we supposed to do with this message that Jesus Christ has given to us? And we frame it in terms of the doctrine of election because this has a way of tripping us up, and I don't mind telling you I think it's tripped me up some in the past.

You could ask some questions this way. If God has chosen who will be saved, then should you and I do nothing? Is there no obligation, no responsibility for us to preach the Gospel because God will save the elect no matter what? He's sovereign, he's chosen, his will will be done, what's there for me to do? What's there for me to concern myself with? I can be silent. I don't have to do anything. Is that a proper response? Our critics would falsely charge us of teaching that. Should we tell men that they can believe in Christ but only if they're elect? Does election forbid everyone else from believing? Now beloved, I want you to know that these are not theoretical questions. These are not the theological speculations of someone who's had too much time on his hands to think about. These questions have profound practical implications for the way that we as a church and the way that you individually think about the Gospel and the way that you think about the people that God brings into your circle of influence, and what you are to do with them, and what your primary responsibility is to them. To think wrongly about the doctrine of election will skew the way that you interact with them. To think rightly about these issues that we've introduced today will help you and embolden you and strengthen you to be the witness that you want to be to those unsaved loved ones in your life.

Let me answer my question in a general way and then we will go back to the text that I read earlier. I'm going to paraphrase from a church document from the seventeenth century, chapter II, article V of the Synod of Dort, which will mean something to those of you familiar with church history. Otherwise, just hear the summary, this paraphrase of mine of that important church history document. Here we go. This is really important, beloved. I'm not wasting my breath and I am not wasting your time by speaking of these things to you this morning. These things are urgent for us to hear and to understand. The promise of the Gospel is that anyone who believes in Christ crucified will not perish but have everlasting life. That's the promise of the Gospel. The Gospel comes to sinful men and women like you and says, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, was crucified at a cross to pay for the sins of people just like you, and if you will repent and believe in him, God will forgive all of your sins and grant you eternal life. It's his promise and what we're saying is that that promise is for anyone who believes in Christ.

Now going, adding a paragraph to that with the building on that, so to speak, into what we're talking about here today, ah, this is so wonderfully important. I can't believe I get to do this. I can't believe that I get to do what I do with you. This is wonderful. This is everything. That promise of the Gospel together with the command to repent and believe – listen now – that promise together with the command to repent and believe should be declared to all men everywhere and without distinction whenever God gives the opportunity. That promise together with the command to repent and believe should be declared to all men everywhere and without distinction whenever God gives the

opportunity. There is no one from whom the Gospel should be withheld. There is no one who by way of prior religion that should not hear about Christ. There is no one who by way of their former sins is excluded from hearing about the promise of eternal life that God offers to them. There is no one based on political affiliation, based on ways that they have wronged you in the past that should be excluded from hearing about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You see, God overrides all of that and sends his church out to declare that Gospel, that if you look to Christ you will live. We are to take that to everyone and to share it with every possible opportunity that we can and the doctrine of election is not contrary to that. It does not squelch that. It does not stop that. And one of the things that we'll see later on but I'm just too eager to say it that I can't wait to the end of it, is that this understanding of what Christ says, "Go and make disciples of all the nations," this authorizes us to do that. This gives us the authority to speak about Christ to anyone because we are not restricted by who they are or by what they say. Our authority comes from Christ himself and that is what authorizes us and gives us a license to speak the Gospel everywhere to everyone without distinction, without restriction. This liberates us and gives us understanding to know why we say and do what we do. Jesus Christ calls us to be proactive and to take initiative with the Gospel. He says it is a message for all men and therefore we speak it freely.

We're authorized that way and let me tell you something else that's very very important, that means that we do not have the prerogative or the responsibility to pick and choose who should hear the Gospel. "That person is too bad. They shouldn't hear about it. No, do you know the crimes that put them in prison for life? They should not hear about the Gospel of Christ." No, no, no, no, no, no, no, that's not right. If God would give us opportunity to go into the super-max prisons and proclaim Christ, we would do that for them because we are to take the Gospel to everyone. It's for everyone. He died for all manner of sinners from what we consider to be the very worst to those who are more respectable sinners, we're all fallen and fall short of the glory of God. Friends, I want to tell you if Jesus Christ brought the Gospel to you, it is entitled to everybody because you're far more guilty than you ever recognized. And so we don't get to make moral judgments about who's qualified to hear the Gospel or not, we're supposed to take it to everyone and to do it freely and to do it gladly.

Well, how can we see that? Let's look first of all at the command of Christ and we're going to do what we did last time in the matter of baptism, we're going to look at this command of Christ in Matthew 28 and then for those of you that are concerned and think about matters of biblical interpretation, we are going to use the progress of revelation and comparing Scripture with Scripture and seeing how those that Jesus sent out immediately in his first century audience, what they did with this command so that we understand what we are to do with the command. You start with the command of Christ, you say, "How did His apostles understand it? What did they do with it? What did they say in response to that command?" And then we say, "Oh, now I understand. This is what I am to do also." And so that's our approach here this morning.

Let's look, first of all, at the command of Christ. Look at Matthew 28 with me again. Again, I just can't believe that God lets me do this. I am so grateful to be able to stand

before people I love and opened the word of God. "Jesus came up and spoke to them," verse 18, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." So Jesus is sovereign. He can say whatever he wants to say and whatever he says will be righteous because he is righteous. And he says there in verse 19, he says, "Go therefore and make disciples, teach people to follow Me as Lord. Teach them to learn from Me. Proclaim Me so that people would come under My kingship," which has been established throughout the prior 27 chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. So you say, "Okay, go and make disciples," of whom, "who comes under this instruction that we are commanded to give?" All the nations. All the nations. He looks out at the world and he says, "Go into all of it." Nations is a term that's used for Gentiles and that's significant. During the earthly life of Jesus, the disciples had focused almost exclusively on the Jews in their ministry while Jesus was on earth, but now Jesus is extending the mission to the nations. He is King over all and therefore the message of the King is to be taken by his ambassadors and announced to all. Jesus Christ is not a King with narrow authority. He has authority over all of the world because he made all of the world. He gives life and breath to everyone within it, and therefore everyone is under the authority of this message that he sends his disciples out to preach. Now other texts confirm this for us from the life of Jesus and from the words of Jesus. The message that we are to understand is, "Go everywhere and tell everyone."

Jesus made that plain elsewhere. Look at the Gospel of Luke 24 with me. Luke 24, beginning in verse 44. What are we as the people of Christ to do with the Gospel? Who are we to tell it to? Is it just our comfortable circle? Is it just the people who are like us? Is it just the people who share our basic sense of morality? Or does the circle expand beyond that? Luke 24:44, Jesus said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day,' here it is, "and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.'" You see, Jesus said it in more than one place. He said, "Go into all of the nations." He says here in Luke, "Proclaim forgiveness of sins, repentance for forgiveness of sins in My name to all the nations." That this is a worldwide mandate that everyone within the world is appropriate audience for this word of the Gospel, this message of the Gospel that we proclaim.

He said it again. He had the same thought that he expressed in the book of Acts 1 immediately prior to his ascension. In Acts 1:7 he tells his disciples, he says, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority." It always amuses me that people want to tell me exactly when Christ is going to return, Jesus says it's not for you to know that. This isn't complicated. "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses," watch it, watch the expanding circle, "both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." Then in verse 9 he ascended up into heaven. He was

giving the disciples their instructions, their marching orders, "This is what you are to do, you are to take My message and it expands out until it's covered all around the earth."

In Colossians 1 you see an indication of this. I'm jumping ahead again but sometimes it's just hard to contain myself. The Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:5 speaking of the hope that is ours, he says, "the hope [that is] laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth." In all of the world constantly increasing. Jesus says, "Go to the remotest part of the earth. Tell all the nations." Beloved, what we want to understand is that the appeal of the Gospel, the message of the Gospel is universal. It is for everyone to hear. Everyone is invited to hear this message of truth. Christ tells us, the church, to go and to speak it to everyone without distinction. You and I, we should not make distinctions in our mind, "I'll share Christ with this person but not with that one." On what basis do you do that when Christ says you go into all of the nations? We'll have more to say about that in coming messages but this appeal is universal.

Theologians call it the general call. The general call. Sinclair Ferguson, whom I respect greatly in his teaching, says this about the general call, he says, "The word of the cross is to be preached to all men. It is the duty of the Christian church in every age and place to proclaim to every person that there is provision for his needs in Christ." We are to take it everywhere, to speak it liberally, to speak it without condition, without putting people through a prequalification test. You know, this isn't like getting a loan from the bank and you have to prequalify for it, and if you meet certain conditions, then we'll talk to you about the loan. No, it doesn't work that way. Christ doesn't want us to do that. Are you a living, breathing, sentient human being? I have a Gospel to share with you. You say you're steeped and you're hostile to Christ? That's okay, I've got a Gospel to share with you. You say you've been burned? That's okay, I've got a Gospel to share with you. You say but you don't know the dark things in my life, no one could forgive me, you don't know how the people I love and depended on me were hurt at my hands. I've got blood on my hands. You say, yes, but I've got a Gospel that's just for you, that's shaped exactly for your needs. That's the general call.

The nineteenth century theologian, Charles Hodge, put it this way in volume II of his systematic theology, speaking of the Gospel he said this and I quote, he said, "It is to be addressed to all men indiscriminately. It is confined to no age, nation or class of men. It is made to Jew and Gentile, to bond and free, to the learned and to the ignorant, to the elect and to the non-elect." You know, we're predominantly a middle, upper-middle-class congregation, right? Let's just be honest, that's who we are. God has blessed us in material ways. But the Gospel is not simply for people like us. The Gospel is for the people in the poverty-stricken areas of the inner city of Cincinnati and every other place like it. We're predominantly a Caucasian church. That's okay, it's who comes, we minister to who comes, but in the language of the children's song, the Gospel is for red and yellow, black and white. The Gospel is to go to everyone without exception. That means that there is no one in your circle of influence, no one in your life from whom the Gospel

should be withheld. Everyone should hear about this. Everyone should have the opportunity to hear about Christ.

Jesus Christ sends his Gospel to all men. Look at the Gospel of John 11:25. This is a text that I have turned to many times at graveside committals. Some of you know that by personal experience. A great message of hope. I want you to hear the breadth of the words with which Jesus speaks in John 11:25. Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" Beloved, Jesus Christ sends the Gospel out to all men. It is a free universal offer that is made to all without restriction.

How do we know that we've understood Christ correctly in this way? Let's look, secondly, at the practice of the disciples. The practice of the disciples. Jesus' apostles constantly said that the Gospel was for everyone. Look at Acts 10. Acts 10:43, it says, "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." Everyone. Chapter 13, verse 38, "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses." The law of Moses could not deliver you from sin, Jesus Christ can. The law of Moses, obedience to the law could not grant you forgiveness, Jesus Christ can. Everyone is to hear this. Perfectly consistent with what exactly Jesus Christ himself said.

Now look at Acts 17:30. Paul is preaching to a pagan audience on Mars Hill in Athens and in Acts 17:30 he says this, "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." All men everywhere.

The Bible itself ends on a universal offer. In Revelation 22, you don't need to turn there, verse 17, it says, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost." If you want it, there it is. It's for you. The Apostle Paul said in Romans 10:13, "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." Do you see, is it starting to settle in upon you how gracious and how wide and how free the offer of the Gospel is? It goes out to everyone. So what do you and I do? In the name of Christ we assure all men that God will forgive their sins when they come to Christ in repentance and faith. Man and woman, boy and girl, we proclaim it to everyone. This message is for you. By the authority of Christ, I tell you this is for you.

Now beloved, let's step back and intersect with the doctrine of election for a moment. I'll probably touch on this again next week. Oh, I can't tell you how important this is, especially for those who share in what the doctrine of our church is. You and I do not evangelize people because we know who is elect. We don't speculate and say, "This person will probably believe, I'll share with him. But oh, that person is hard and cold and

has rejected it. No, I won't say anything to them." It's not for us to prejudge who will respond and who won't. That's not our responsibility. That's not our duty. It's not our prerogative to set conditions on whom we will speak to based on their characteristics or their prior life or sin. No, no, no, the only thing that you and I when it comes to this specific area that we're talking about here, what we're to focus on is what did Christ tell me to do? What Christ told me to do was to tell others. What they do with it is outside of my ability to control, how God uses it in their heart is not for me to say or judge. I can pray, "O God, be merciful to them like You were to me," but I don't control the outcome. I don't manipulate that. That's between them and God now. It's what God does with it in their heart, in their inner man. My responsibility, your responsibility, our responsibility is to speak it as widely and freely as we possibly can.

And I'll just repeat myself simply by saying this, that beloved, if you've received mercy from God in Christ, if God has saved you from your sins and given you new life, caused you to be born again, then the seed is in your heart to understand that everyone else should hear as well because you were not worthy to hear this message of forgiveness in Christ and neither was I, there was nothing about you that obligated God to bring the Gospel to you. You had sinned, you had forfeited any right to hear. You were a child of Adam, you were dead, you were lost, you had no regard for God, you did not give thanks to God, you did not truly pray to God and yet God showed you mercy. Don't you understand that if God showed you mercy in that condition, that people that are in like condition should hear the same message that delivered you? You see, we're under the authority of the command, we're under an obligation of conscience, there's an obligation of love, "Oh, I would not have any one of you perish. I would not have any one of you go to hell for your sins as the righteous judgment of God upon your wickedness. I wouldn't have that happen to anyone. If God delivered me, I would have Him deliver you too. Let me tell you how that can be." You see, this is how we think. This is what Christ calls us to do.

So beloved, we're just going to work out some practical implications of it here. All I can do is just ask the Holy Spirit to help us as we do. Think with me here: Jesus commands us to go. The apostles went out and preached. That's why we evangelize. We're under authority. We've been given instructions. This is what we are to do and, beloved, you and I, we do not use the doctrine of election as an excuse to not speak. We do not reason like, "Well, God has chosen therefore I don't have to worry about it." No, that's the wrong way to think. We ask, "What is God's revealed commandment to me? What's God's revealed commandment to the church?" It is that we speak and he doesn't qualify it by pointing to the doctrine of election as if that lets us off the hook. No, we don't even want to think that way. We want the privilege of being a vessel of grace in someone else's life. I want the privilege of being a vessel of grace in your life, that God would use what I do to bring you to saving faith in Christ if you don't know him. So why would I not want to speak if I could somehow be used by God like that? No, this emboldens us. We are emboldened by the call of Christ. He has sent us with a universal appeal that has no restrictions on it.

What were the phrases that we heard in those passages that I read? All the nations. The remotest part of the earth. Everyone who believes. All people everywhere. All men.

Whoever will call. The one who wishes. And so we tell every kind of man about Christ. We don't exclude some based on their moral, political or religious condition. We don't guess at who is likely to believe and then try to jump in midstream on that. We're not restricted by the fact that they have no interest in it as we start to speak. You know, wasn't that true of you, those of you that were converted a little bit later in life as I was? Isn't it true that when people were first sharing with you, you had no interest in it? You dismissed them as strange or idiots or whatever, you know, you thought about people at that time? I often think back to the open air preacher on the campus of Indiana University that I walked by day after day after day, and how everybody, or almost everybody, just dismissed him as a fool, but his prerogative and authority to speak was not restricted by their rejection, and he made appeal to those that walked by and called them all to Christ.

That's what we do. We tell every kind of man about Christ. We simply declare the Gospel freely as we have opportunity to do, and then what do we do in light of the doctrine of election? What do we do then? What do we do in light of the fact that the Spirit of God must do a work in someone's heart if they are able to believe, that we're speaking to people who don't have the ability in themselves to repent and believe, they need help from outside of themselves to do that? What are we to do with them? What am I to do with you that are in that condition now? Well, we speak the Gospel. We tell them about Christ and then, then we leave it to the purposes of God and the work of the Holy Spirit to apply the message to each heart, and some will reject us and we'll have to leave them without Christ, with tears streaming down our face and even if the tears are only in our heart not literal liquid running down our cheeks, "Oh, he wouldn't hear. I'm so sad about that, but God can come back to you and I pray that He would even as you've told me that you don't want to hear anymore." We leave that to the purposes of God. We realize that God is not limited and constrained by the rejection in time by men, his Spirit has power to turn their hearts, and that's our hope, that's what gives us confidence that there will not be a wasted word that we speak. And what all of this does and what understanding the universal appeal of the Gospel and the command of Christ, here's what it does for us, beloved, it liberates us to speak, to speak in love, to speak with conviction, to speak in confidence, to realize that our capacity and the reason that we speak comes vertically from Christ, and that we are not forbidden to speak by the resistance of men. You see, there are consequences to the universal appeal. There are consequences to the way that we understand these things.

So we tell all men this, what I'm about to say, I tell you this this morning, my unsaved friend, you are a fallen son of Adam and by your daily sin, you have provoked the anger of God and he must punish you if you continue in your rebellion against him. Sin is a serious matter. God does not ignore sin. It must be punished. But God has designed a way for the guilty like you to find mercy. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God has descended from heaven and he was made a man like us. He lived in perfect holiness until he gave himself to die for our sins. All the way up until the cross, he lived in perfect holiness and it was in holiness that he offered himself on the cross, the just for the unjust, the righteous one for unrighteous men and women like you. And he did that to bring us to God, to bring us to a holy God and, my friend, oh, my friend, God now calls upon you to look to his bleeding dying Son and entrust your sinful soul into his hands. God raised him from

the dead to show that he had accepted that sacrifice so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life. The wages of your sin is death. In the resurrection of Christ alone is there life for you. You must come to him. He alone can forgive you and give you eternal life. You have no good work. You do not deserve this message. You have no grace. You have no hope apart from Christ and yet in that miserable condition, Jesus Christ graciously calls you to come. He will receive you, forgive you, and keep you forever and now he commands you in response to that message of grace to repent of your sin and to believe in him for eternal life.

My friend, by the help of the Holy Spirit, please come. Please come to Christ. This message is for you. Christian, friends, that's the message. Will you share it too?

Let's pray together.

O Father, we do not have the power to change a sinner's heart to make them come, and we would not manipulate them to try to evoke an external reaction that did not come from their heart. We simply ask You by Your Holy Spirit to draw men to Christ and we ask You to help us as we proclaim Christ to others. May we speak boldly as we ought to speak. In the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory we pray. Amen.

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