The Third Ground of Assurance: The Spirit of Adoption

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[0:00] If you will, turn in your Bible to Romans chapter 8.!

And while you make your way there, I'll remind you that we are continuing our study of the Doctrine! of Assurance. And we're using the 18th chapter of the 1689 Baptist Confession as our guide.
And we're currently in the middle of the second paragraph, which names for us three grounds of true assurance. And let me once again read the paragraph in full.
This certainty is not merely an inconclusive or likely persuasion based on a fallible hope. It is an infallible assurance of faith founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the gospel.
It is also built on the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit about which promises are made. It is further based on the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God.
[1:09] As a fruit of this assurance, our hearts are kept both humble and holy. So we've looked at the first ground, that is, the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the gospel.

Last week, we looked at the second ground, the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit about which promises are made. And today, we will consider the third ground, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption.
Now, that language is taken directly from Romans chapter 8, verses 15 and 16. But let me read the fuller passage, starting at verse 12. Paul writes, So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.
For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.
For you did not receive the Spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba, Father.
[2:18] The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs. Heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.

So, our question today is, what is the testimony of the Spirit of adoption? How does the Spirit witness with our spirits that we are the children of God?
Now, we also want to be careful to distinguish what this is not, because this doctrine can be misunderstood in multiple ways. For example, on the one hand, some Christians might be tempted to reduce assurance to little more than logic or rationality.
You may remember me talking about the Puritan's use of syllogism. This is where we take two propositions and we reach a conclusion from them. In the example I gave, Proposition 1 says, the Bible says, believers are saved.
Proposition 2 says, I believe. So, the conclusion would follow, therefore, I am saved. Now, that's all true, but there is a way to misapply it.
[3:38] So, again, imagine the person who made a profession of faith some 20 years ago, but really has not lived like a Christian ever since. He might use that syllogism to give himself a false sense of hope without any inward evidence of the Spirit.

He might think, I professed faith. I believed. It happened on this date. And the Bible says, all who believe will be saved. Therefore, I must be saved.
Well, the problem is that true justification is always accompanied by sanctification, not to mention the indwelling of the Spirit.

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The Confession names three grounds of assurance, not just one. And the authors of the Confession were very intentional not to present these grounds as either or. However, assurance is founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ and also inward evidence and also the testimony of the Spirit. So, if a person truly believed and was justified through their faith or by their faith, they would also see the fruits of sanctification and some evidence of the indwelling of the Spirit.
[4:54] On the other hand, some tend to think of the Spirit's witness as though it were something like an emotional surge or a spiritual impression that is completely detached from what the Word of God says.

This is the person who says, I know I am saved because I feel it. Do you remember the ignorance character in the Pilgrim's Progress?
The Christian asks him, Why or by what art thou persuaded that thou hast left all for God in heaven? And ignorance replies, My heart tells me so.
So, Christian says, The wise man says, and he's referring to Proverbs, He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool. And ignorance is quick to reply, This is spoken of an evil heart.
But mine is a good one. And from there, Christian does his best to convince ignorance that he should not rely on his heart alone for assurance.
[6:03] And he eventually says to him, Except the Word of God beareth witness in this matter, other testimony is of no value. In other words, the heart may say, I must be saved.

But what happens when we examine ourselves in the light of Scripture? What happens when we put ourselves through the tests that we read about in John's first epistle?
Despite what the heart may say, would we pass the test? My point here is that the Spirit is not going to speak to your heart through a special revelation, or through something that contradicts what the Word of God says.
If we think the Spirit is speaking to us, telling us that we are saved, but we do not believe in the true Christ, or we do not love His commandments, or we do not love His people, or we still love the world, or we are not persevering in the faith, and whatever voice we're hearing is not of God or of His Spirit.
There's a disconnect. As we'll see, the Spirit will not, in fact, cannot contradict the Bible. So, let me provide you with a brief summary to put these things into balance.
[7:25] Here it is. The Spirit of adoption bears witness with the believer's spirits, ordinarily by applying the Word, illuminating Christ, strengthening faith, teaching the soul to cry to God as Father, and confirming the graces He has already worked in the heart.

So, to be clear, the Spirit does not replace Christ. He does not replace Scripture. He does not replace even self-examination.
Rather, the Spirit brings Christ near through the Word and helps believers recognize His own work in their souls, in their hearts, in their lives.
That is, in short, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption. Now, before we go any further, I do want to point out something fundamental, and this is true whenever we are considering the Holy Spirit.
I would say most Christians are very comfortable speaking about God the Father and God the Son, but the Holy Spirit can seem very vague, perhaps impersonal.
[8:40] I think this was probably even worse when we commonly refer to the Spirit as the Holy Ghost. But even the word Spirit may sound less personal to us than Father or Son.

But pay attention as you're reading the Bible, especially here in Romans 8. The Bible does not speak of the Spirit as a force, or an atmosphere, or a mood, or a feeling, or whatever we might imagine.
He is a person. He is a he, not an it. He, as we see here in Romans 8, He knows, He wills, He speaks, He grieves, He helps, He intercedes, He bears witness.
So, when Paul says the Spirit himself bears witness, he's not suggesting that this sense of assurance comes from a religious feeling, or an emotion that rises up inside of us.
No, this is God the Holy Spirit personally acting in the believer. So, it's not a hunch. It's not a mere feeling.
[9:48] This is the Spirit at work within us. He, not it, is at work within us. Well, with that, let's look at Romans 8.

And you'll notice how there is a real emphasis here on the Spirit. I think Paul refers to the Spirit something like 27 times in his letter to the Romans, and at least two-thirds of them are found right

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here in chapter 8.
But before we look at the key verses, 15 and 16, I want to consider some of the context. Obviously, this is a letter. Paul did not intend for a single verse or even a single chapter to stand on its own. So, let's consider what Paul has been saying up to this point. Going all the way back to chapter 1, he exposes the guilt of the Gentile world.
Humanity has suppressed the truth about God. They've exchanged His glory for idols. And they've come under His righteous wrath. And then in chapter 2, he shows that the Jew is really no better, that merely possessing the law does not justify anyone.
[10:55] God judges impartially. Then in Romans 3, he concludes that all have sinned and are under condemnation. And then it's into that hopelessness, Paul announces the good news of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Then in Romans 4, he proves that this has always been God's way of salvation by pointing all the way back to Abraham, who was justified by faith before circumcision, before the law.
Then in chapter 5, he celebrates the blessings of justification. We have peace with God. We have access into His grace, hope of glory, reconciliation through Christ.
Then in Romans chapter 6, Paul answers the charge that says grace, well, that just encourages people to sin. But he says that those who are united to Christ have died to sin, and they have been raised to walk in newness of life.
Then in Romans 7, he explains the believer's relationship to the law. The law is holy. The law is good. But it cannot conquer sin because we cannot keep the law.
[12:14] So all the law can do is condemn us. And because we cannot keep the law, the chapter ends with this tension where Paul cries out, wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?

And what is the answer? He writes, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So up to this point, Paul has dealt with how we can be saved, how we can be justified before God.
And he has spoken extensively about God the Father and God the Son, but he hasn't said all that much about God the Spirit. But that changes drastically as we come into chapter 8.
So chapter 7 ends with the believer's struggle. We've been raised to walk in newness of life, but we still have the flesh to contend with. And when Paul opens chapter 8, he's not ignoring that tension, that struggle.
He's already admitted that we have a problem here. Sin still clings to the believer. The flesh still resists. The law is still exposing our sins. But the conscience, it feels conflict over this.
[13:22] And he's not ignoring any of that leading up or when he comes into chapter 8. But at the same time, it's almost as though for a moment here, he just looks past the struggling believer and fixes his eyes on Christ.

And here's what he says in verse 1. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And at this point, the people of God let out a collective sigh.
So in this letter, Paul spends two and a half chapters showing how guilty we are. And then he lifts us up by showing how we can be justified, we can be reconciled to God, we can have peace with God, believe it or not.
But even more than that, we are now freed from our bondage to sin in this life. But then he comes to chapter 7, and Paul essentially says, yes, you're free, but you will continue to struggle with your sin until your dying day.
So our shoulders slump, and we begin to groan within ourselves. And that's when Paul says, wait a minute, wait a minute, I'm not finished. If you are in Christ Jesus, there is no condemnation.
[14:35] And to be clear, Paul doesn't say less condemnation, or no condemnation, you know, one day, or possibly no condemnation, all depending on how you hold yourself together.

Let's see what you do first. No, it's no condemnation. Zero. None. Ever. Why?
Because God has already done what the law could not do. God sent his own son in the flesh, and he condemned him in the flesh for our sins. So condemnation has already fallen, but it did not fall on believers.
It fell on Christ. In other words, sin was in fact judged. God didn't simply ignore it. It was judged. Condemnation was executed.
But it was executed on Jesus Christ. So when Paul begins this section on the Spirit's role in salvation and the Christian life, he essentially does what paragraph two of the confession does.

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[15:44] In fact, let me go back to the confession here. You see, Paul grounds everything he says in the blood and righteousness of Christ.

That's why the believer is not condemned. But it doesn't stop there. Paul also wants us to see that the Christian life is not merely a forgiven life.
It's a Spirit-indwelt life. It is a life under the reign and power of the Spirit. So in verses 1 through 17 of this chapter, he deals with the implications of salvation.
There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ. There is freedom from the law and from death. He says believers are walking according to the Spirit.
He says the mind is set on the Spirit. He says the Spirit is dwelling in believers. He says the Spirit is putting to death sin in us. Then he calls the Spirit the Spirit of adoption because he bears witness that we are the children of God.
[16:50] Then when we come to verses 18 through 39, he might say widens the lens a bit. He talks about how creation is groaning under the weight of sin's consequences and believers are right there with creation also groaning.

But then he says the Spirit intercedes with our groanings that are too deep for words. And finally, he reminds us that nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
So you see, when we get to verses 15 and 16, Paul is not addressing a secondary, less significant doctrine out here on the periphery somewhere. I mean, it stands right in the middle of Paul's entire argument.
Believers are justified before God through faith in Christ Jesus. We no longer face condemnation. Yes, we still have our ongoing struggles with sin, but we are secure in Christ.
Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. So Paul is teaching that believers have eternal security. But how do we know that on a personal, individual level?
[18:04] Well, the same Spirit who, Paul says, sets us free, indwells us, leads us, mortifies sin in us, helps us in our weaknesses, intercedes for us, and will one day give to our mortal bodies life.

This is the same Spirit who assures us that we are, in fact, children of God saved by His grace.
Now, I think it might be helpful to read some of this in Romans 8, so I'll do that, and we'll start back at verse 1.
There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.
For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.
Now, notice this. Who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh.
[19:16] For those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. So notice how Paul here, without using these exact words, is really pointing to the believer's justification followed by his sanctification.
First, we see that we are set free, where there is no longer any condemnation, but then what happens? The believer walks not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.
They set their minds on the things of the Spirit, not on the things of the flesh. And it's in this way that true living faith works itself out through the way we live.
As James rhetorically asked, what good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can that faith, or that kind of faith, save him?
[20:30] Of course, the answer is no, because that's not genuine faith. Faith by itself, James says, if it does not have works, is dead. It's not a living faith.

It's a dead faith. It's a non-existent faith. Well, Paul continues here, you, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.
Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.
If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

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In short, the Spirit's indwelling in influence throughout the entirety of the Christian life, all the way through to final resurrection, is inevitable.
[21:36] The Spirit is not, as some have suggested, a bonus to Christianity. He is not a second blessing, perhaps reserved for the unusually advanced believer.

He is not given only to the spiritually elite. Every true Christian has the Spirit of Christ. To belong to Christ is to have his Spirit. To be united to Christ is to be indwelt by his Spirit.
There is no such thing as the justified believer who has been left orphaned without the Spirit. Furthermore, if the believer has the Spirit, he will be led by the Spirit to essentially bear what the confession says, the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit about which promises are made. That's the second ground of our assurance. So really, Paul is addressing all three grounds of our assurance in this one chapter. The justified are sanctified, and the sanctified are indwelt by the Spirit, and when all three are combined, we can know that we have eternal life.
And this is what Paul says, starting at verse 12. Actually, let me jump down to verse 14. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.
[22:54] For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but have received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, Abba, Father.

Of course, Paul is not suggesting that believers will never fear. We are often assaulted by doubts and temptations and accusations and seasons of darkness.
Just read the Psalms. Read Psalm 42, or Psalm 77, or Psalm 88. These are prayers that sound as though they are spoken from the bottom of the darkest pits.
We do face fears, but not the kind of fear that an unbeliever should properly have. You see, before we are in Christ, fear actually makes perfect sense.
If a man is still in the flesh, still under sin, still under condemnation, still trying to perhaps establish righteousness by his own obedience, then fear is perfectly reasonable.
[24:01] The law condemns him. His conscience accuses him. Death is waiting for him. Judgment is before him. In short, it should be slavery.

It is slavery to fear. But that's not what the Spirit gives to believers. The Christian life is not meant to be lived as though God were still our enemy.
Rome says that a Christian cannot have assurance of salvation because that would be too presumptuous. It would be the sin of pride to presume you are saved.
And there are many others, despite what their theology might say, who act like they believe the exact same thing. They treat uncertainty as a mark of humility.
They think the safest posture is to never receive God's comfort. If only I'm saved. If only God will let this poor sinner into heaven one day.
[25:03] I believe I've said this. This is what I've heard actual preachers say, and they'll go on for 10 or 15 minutes with this sort of humility, before preaching an entire sermon on the eternal security of God's children.

So what they are effectively saying is, you are eternally secure in Christ, but you're not allowed to know it. You're not allowed to enjoy it. But that runs completely contrary to what Paul says here. Paul is right there with John, who essentially said, I want you to know you have eternal life. Well, Paul says, we have not received the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear.
Fear of what? Fear of God's wrath. Fear of condemnation. Fear of judgment. Instead, he says, we have received the spirit of adoption as sons.
Well, what does that mean exactly? It means that the spirit causes us to know that we are no longer condemned, but that God has fully and completely welcomed us into his family.
[26:17] And will he ever kick us back out? Absolutely not. Read the rest of the chapter. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Or in fact, read the beginning of the chapter again.

There is now no condemnation. So the entire thrust of this chapter is the believer's assurance of salvation. And Paul uses similar language in Galatians chapter 4, verses 4 through 7, when he writes, when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.
And because you are sons, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts crying, Abba, Father. So you are no longer a slave, but a son.
And if a son, then an heir through God. So notice the order. The father sends the son. The son is born under the law.

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The son redeems those under the law. The redeemed then receive adoption. And then the father sends the spirit into their hearts and the spirit teaches them to cry, Father.
[27:36] So the spirit of adoption is not separated from the redeeming work of Christ. The spirit does not say to us, forget the cross, forget the promises, forget the righteousness of Christ.

Pay attention to whether or not, don't pay attention, I should say, to whether or not you are bearing fruit of eternal life, those inward graces. He doesn't say, look for special revelation.
If you're truly saved, you'll see a sign from heaven, you'll see something extraordinary. No, the spirit simply brings the work of Christ home to our hearts.
Our assurance is entirely Trinitarian. The father adopts, the son secures adoption, and the spirit applies adoption and bears witness to it. And when I say the spirit bears witness to our adoption, this is not merely a theoretical understanding of adoption.
This is not the spirit alerting us to the fact that yes, some people are adopted. That's true. This is deeply personal. So much so that the spirit causes us to cry out, Abba, Father.
[28:56] That's not the reading of a doctrinal statement, is it? That's the cry of a child who knows he has a father. And he knows that his father loves him.

The cry may be weak. The cry may come through tears. The cry may come with a trembling voice. But as we heard Pastor John say on Wednesday, it's a cry that knows I must go and tell my father. That child may even know that he's receiving the father's discipline. But he also knows that his father is disciplining him out of love. See Hebrews 12.
Think back to those psalms I mentioned. Psalm 77, groaning in the nighttime. Psalm 88, ends in darkness. And yet, who are these men crying out to?
They're crying out to God, their heavenly father. But how do they know to cry out to God? Why? Why are they doing this?
[30:02] Well, Paul says it here. You have received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry Abba, Father. The spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

Now this is the spirit bearing witness with our spirit. So this is not self-persuasion. This is not someone standing in front of the mirror and repeating over and over again, God accepts me. God accepts me until you know he finally feels better about himself and can go about his day. This is the spirit's testimony joining itself to the believer's renewed understanding and renewed conscience and renewed affections to his faith.
He's not bearing witness against scripture or apart from Christ and he's not bearing witness in contradiction to the very graces he himself has produced in the believer. Paul says the spirit himself bears witness with our spirit.
So there's almost a double testimony here. The believer says I receive Christ. I grieve over sin. I love the Father. I desire holiness.
[31:16] I cannot live without my Lord. And the Holy Spirit comes along by and with the word of God and confirms what he himself has worked in the believer. The spirit comes along and says to that I say amen.

You are a child of God. So when we understand the spirit's role here we avoid two potential errors. The first is in thinking that assurance is merely self-analysis. one can know the right doctrines he can formulate the accurate syllogisms he can know the promises of God in scripture but the very best theologian in the world cannot reason himself into heaven.
The soul needs the spirit to bring the promises home if you will. And the second error is that assurance is some sort of unsupported inward impression.
in other words we can't claim to be children of God no matter how we may feel no matter what the heart says if we refuse the true Christ or we reject repentance or we despise holiness or we neglect the church the spirit is not going to contradict what the word of God says.
[32:35] Again go back to 1 John look at those tests. In other words the spirit is essentially affirming the first two grounds of our assurance as stated in the confession.

He will not operate apart from them. He will not give us a sense of assurance apart from number one faith that is founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ and number two inward evidence of the spirit's graces.
Now we might still wonder how exactly does the spirit bear witness. I've suggested that we do not hear a voice from heaven.

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Surely there has to be some sort of special revelation. How do we know? Well in the next paragraph the confession says with the enabling of the spirit to know the things freely given to them by God they may attain this assurance using ordinary means appropriately without any extraordinary revelation.
well if not extraordinary revelation how does the spirit bear witness? Well to answer that let me read a couple of paragraphs from Sinclair Ferguson's book on the Holy Spirit.
[33:55] He writes through the spirit we enter into the sense of sonship with Jesus experience in the context of our humanity. We therefore have experiential evidence of our adoption.

Knowing this we also come to realize the implications of our new status. We are children of God brethren in Christ see Romans 829 and therefore heirs together with him see verse 17.
All this is set in the quasi legal context of the dual testimony of the believer spirit and the Holy Spirit which according to Old Testament law establishes the truth in the mouth of two witnesses. Deuteronomy 1915. But even more striking than the logical implications is the experiential phenomenon. It is in the cry that God's children utter that the spirit bears witness.
So the believer trusts in Christ for salvation. That's ground number one. Then the believer's spirit recognizes God's spirit at work in them through various graces, faith, repentance, obedience, love, love for the brethren, and so on.
[35:13] That's ground number two. And for ground number three the spirit comes along and gives a hearty amen to the first two grounds. And how does he do this? Well Ferguson says it's in the cry of Abba, Father, itself.

The fact that we turn to God as father, not merely as judge, or not merely as king, or not merely as Lord, yes all of those things, but also as father.
That is the spirit bearing witness with our spirit. Ferguson continues, the fact is that the Christian's own spirit does display an awareness of sonship as the rest of the New Testament makes clear. He cites here 1 John 3, 1. Amazing though this is. The problem is that this awareness is often weakened and God's children may even find themselves doubting their gracious status and privileges.
What Paul is saying, however, is that even in the darkest hour there is a cooperative and affirmative testimony given by the spirit. It is found in the very fact that although he may be broken and bruised, tossed about with fears and doubts, the child of God nevertheless in his need cries out, Father, as instinctively as a child who has fallen and been hurt calls out in similar language, Daddy, help me.
[36:42] Now, if I had time, I would continue expounding this chapter because the spirit's role does not stop at giving us assurance. In verses 2-13, the spirit transforms us.

In verses 14-17, he assures us. But then in verses 18-27, we see how he sustains us as well. And lastly, in verses 28-39, we see how he secures us.
His entire ministry serves God's unbreakable purpose of bringing every child safely to final glorification so that nothing can separate us from Christ.
But let's end where this paragraph of the confession is. It says, as a fruit of this assurance, our hearts are kept both humble and holy.
And it's here that the authors of the confession cite, 1 John chapter 3, verses 1-3, and I'll read it.
See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.
[37:55] And so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know Him.
Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared, but we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is, and everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure.

So, this true assurance humbles the believer, because every ground of assurance is from God. We have nothing to boast of, we have nothing to be proud about.
And true assurance makes us holy, because, as John says, everyone who thus hopes in God purifies himself as He is pure.
Remember, He walks by the Spirit, who is testifying, you are a child of God. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank You that we have not received the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but we have the spirit of adoption.
We confess that our hearts can be weak, our assurance can sometimes be shaken, so we just ask that You would bring us again to Christ over and over again, where there is no condemnation.

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[39:17] Let Your Spirit bear witness with our spirits that we are children of God. Confirm what You have worked in us. But, Lord, keep us humble.

Every ground of assurance is from You, and keep us hopeful, because nothing can separate us from Your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. And it's in His name we pray.
Amen.

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