

Christadelphian Bible Mission

Christ and Protest

The Bible Answer to Revolution and Human Rights

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EVERYONE has heard about protest movements. Some of them, like Greenpeace, are internationally known. Some of them have taken up matters of general concern, but in a particular way -- the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament is a well-known case. Others are pressing for human rights of one kind or another, such as feminist movements or the anti-apartheid groups. Slogans and songs become popular and catch the eye or the ear, and the imagination.

Crusades for peace seem a natural and understandable response on the part of sensitive and concerned people to what they see as the insanity of the arms race. The protesters see life itself as more precious than any ideology; their demonstrations and marches are not so much a protest against one or other superpower, but a plea that *all* nations should disarm before our civilisation is destroyed.

Protest and Violence

But while some of the protest actions are peaceful, others are vigorously political, and some resort to or result in violence. There are even instances where terrorism and protest go hand in hand from the outset.

Protesters are drawn from all walks of life. Though they may differ on other things, they are united in pursuing a common objective as defined by the protest in which they are engaged. United they may be in a mutual cause, but their reasons for protest may be widely different. Sometimes what seem to be purely social movements are used by extreme political activists in order to achieve entirely different ends from those at the root of the protest.

Many of the protest movements and cries for human rights stem from blatant evil. Homosexuals want their "rights" and in some ways are now getting them. There are no *rights* for homosexuals because in God's eyes such wilful self-debasement is a gross evil.

"When they knew God, they glorified him not as God . . . for this cause God gave them up to vile affections . . . the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet" (Romans 1:21,26,27).

It was for this reason that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed; they had sunk to the lowest depravity (see Genesis 19:1-11).

There is agitation for the rights of one-parent families and for fair laws to deal with the financial consequences of divorce. But there is no great outcry against the fact that a large proportion of one-parent families arise from a failure to observe the dignity and permanence of marriage. People believe they have a right to determine when and under what circumstances and for how long they will live with someone else. This is a flagrant breach of the Christian way of life. Similarly, in the vast majority of cases, divorce comes about because people believe they have a right to terminate marriage and, if they so desire, to satisfy themselves with someone new. These are not Christian principles.

Grumbling and Discontent

While many could say they have never actively engaged in protest of any form, the general dissatisfaction prevalent in the world rubs off on us all. Each at some time has probably grumbled about the conditions in which we live or work, and the wages that we earn. The feeling that we all have the right to make our individual views known therefore touches us all.

How should the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ react? Should he, too, take part in those causes which seem to him to reflect some of the things he believes? Supposing violence is involved, should he still crusade when he feels passionately and regards the issue as a matter of conscience? And how is

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he to avoid becoming entangled with what are to him totally undesirable fellow-travellers in the movements he chooses to support?

These considerations require careful thought. Two principles will guide our examination: we shall define the word "Christian" as meaning one who follows Jesus and his apostles in what they taught and practised; and we shall accept that the whole of the Bible is the Word of God.

What was the Message of the Apostles?

After Jesus had ascended to heaven, the numbers of disciples increased rapidly, and they were to be found in many countries in the Roman empire. Society in lands outside the land of Judah was very different from that in which Jesus preached and lived. There was idolatry, widespread immorality, and much evil and corruption. But these factors did not cause the apostles to alter the teaching first given by Christ; they never tried to "adapt" his teaching to make it more "appropriate" to the prevailing circumstances.

Social circumstances were not ideal. There was slavery on a large scale. Many of the disciples were slaves, and some were masters who had slaves. Slaves were not told to agitate for their freedom, whether or not their masters were good. Believing masters were not told to release their slaves. Nor were those who were neither masters nor slaves told to urge the abolition of slavery. Instead, the commands of the apostles, time after time in the letters of the New Testament, were like the commands of the Lord himself: be exemplary slaves and be compassionate masters -- "in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ" (Ephesians 6:5; see also 1 Corinthians 7:22; Colossians 3:22; 1 Timothy 6:1).

Once again, it becomes clear that the believer's behaviour is determined by God and His Son, and not by the circumstances, good or bad, in which he finds himself. Another man's evil is not to make him evil. Another man's violence is not to provoke him to retaliate. He should place himself beyond reproach and bring nothing but good to bear in every circumstance of life. His heart is not to harbour resentment and anger, whatever his friends or his foes might do.

We can go further. He is not to behave as the enemy of any man. The disciple's conduct is to bring good to replace evil; love instead of hate. He is to improve, by the quality of his own life, everything with which he comes into contact. He must never be the cause of injury to his neighbour.

But whilst the Christian should aim to behave impeccably, the world around him is marred by many gross social and political evils. If the disciple is to behave in the manner demanded by Jesus, how can these glaring evils be put right? Is not the course suggested by the Lord a kind of Christian fatalism? If the Christian refuses to agitate for change, how can bad things be eradicated? These are pertinent questions and they must be asked. We believe there is a satisfactory and convincing answer.

The disciple's view is much wider than the panorama of his own time or the circumstances of his own life. He does not regard himself as having the right to seek political change or to agitate for social "justice". Such right has not been given to him by his Master.

Freedom . . . and Bondage

Protest movements were not much heard of before the Second World War, although some of them existed even then. Since that time they have proliferated greatly and the news media have given them considerable prominence. The starting point may perhaps be pin-pointed as the proclamation of the "Four Freedoms" by President F. D. Roosevelt to the United States Congress on 6 January, 1941. These freedoms comprise:

1. Freedom of speech and expression;
2. Freedom of every person to worship God in his own way;
3. Freedom from want;
4. Freedom from fear.

These express what most people would regard as the basic freedoms which every person should enjoy. But the problem is that one man's freedom is another man's bondage. Freedom of speech and expression, for example, involves the right of other persons to propagate political teaching which might result in the destruction of the very freedoms which are being exercised. Freedom of worship might produce cults and pressures which could enslave the minds of unwary people. Freedom is obviously a much more complex subject than a casual examination might suggest.

The root of the matter lies not so much in freedom itself, but rather in the limits within which we allow the choice to be made and the standards by which we make that choice. In the exercise of what might be considered permitted freedoms, serious conflict of ideals can be occasioned. The pursuit of one freedom may be the destruction of another. There are, for example, churches which send financial aid to guerrilla organisations in their efforts to overthrow regimes or systems whose methods are regarded by those concerned as unacceptably evil.

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Social Reforms

Social reforms can similarly be divisive. Those who urge the right for pregnant women, if they so wish, to have an abortion are offensive to those who think that abortion is morally wrong. Additionally, the two opposing views exist amongst people all of whom would claim to be Christian. The same contradiction is to be seen among the peace demonstrators. And whereas many of those who campaigned for nuclear disarmament in the 1950s and 1960s were motivated by political rather than religious convictions, now the marchers are supported by -- even organised by -- the churches, who see it as a Christian's duty to protest. Others, who would also claim to be Christian, fervently believe in the necessity for nuclear defence. When such differences arise, on which side should the true Christian be? Or should he be on neither? The question must be:

What would Jesus do?

Was Jesus an agitator? Was he a revolutionary? Did he form a group bent on bringing about political or social change by pressurising others? Did he seek to enforce his standards (the best standards) on those who did not want to follow him? These are basic questions and the Bible provides clear answers.

Jesus lived in a country which was occupied by a pagan power. There were heathen, Roman, feet in the streets of Jerusalem, the holy city. Some Jews had formed themselves into a terrorist band known as the Zealots and planned to use violence against the Romans when the occasion was ripe. Most Jews despised the Romans and regarded them as "dogs", even though they were powerless to remove them. From time to time, even within the precincts of the temple, there were scenes of violence which the Romans suppressed or quenched by appropriate measures.

What did Jesus do about these things? As the Son of God in God's land, what steps did he urge against the overlordship of the Romans? Absolutely none! There are no words of resentment, no threats, no instruction to his disciples that they must resist the Roman rule or seek to get rid of it. The silence is remarkable. One of the disciples had at one time been a Zealot, but he had to learn that such behaviour was not compatible with the way of Christ.

Jesus and the Authorities

Far from using inflammatory language, Jesus seemed to ignore the whole situation. There is not one instance in the whole of the four Gospel records where Jesus came into conflict with the Roman authorities, except at the time of his final trial when nothing but false charges were laid against him. The Roman governor accordingly pronounced him innocent. Even the occasion when the tense political situation was brought to his attention and his opinion on the sensitive questions was requested, he dealt instead with the root cause of the problem and not its particular manifestation in his own day.

On one occasion he was reminded of an incident of massacre and brutality in the province where he was brought up:

"There were present at that season some that told him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (Luke 13:1).

There could hardly have been a clearer case on which to pronounce a judgement: a group of people quietly worshipping and the ensuing bloodbath as Roman legionaries hacked them to pieces. Jesus made no comment whatsoever on the motivation of the soldiers or their commanders, but instead on the nature of the victims:

"Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things?" (Luke 13:2).

He even linked the massacre with another contemporary disaster in Jerusalem when a stone tower collapsed, killing eighteen people. Both events, he suggested, were the result of the world in which we live which sees violence as an acceptable medium within limits which individuals will set differently in varying circumstances; and which also accepts that certain inventions, while in the main conferring benefits upon man, occasionally turn into objects which can injure, maim and kill.

Because the Gospel Jesus taught concerned the Kingdom of God -- a completely new order of things which God has promised to establish in the world -- Jesus' message was a call to repentance:

"Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3,5).

"Resist not evil"

On another occasion it was the iniquitous Roman taxation which formed the basis of a question to him:

"Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Caesar, or no?" (Luke 20:22).

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Again his answer made no reference to the extent to which a conquering nation should apply taxation to its subjects, but instead spoke about the demands of God upon *His* subjects -- all those of His creation:

"Render . . . unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's and unto God the things which be God's"
(Luke 20:25).

John the Baptist, whose preaching prepared the way for the message of the Lord Jesus Christ, gave very clear advice to the Roman soldiers who approached him: "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:14). This would have been as unpalatable then as it is today.

Rules for Living

We *know* what the principles were which determined the Lord's words and actions at this time of decline in Jewish fortunes. Jesus behaved exactly as, in the Sermon on the Mount, he commanded his disciples to live. Here are some of those spiritual rules:

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away" (Matthew 5:38-42).

The Roman soldier had the right to ask any Jew to carry his pack for one mile. Far from resenting this imposition, Jesus told his followers to volunteer to go a second mile. This would seem outrageous to a patriotic Jew and would be regarded as ridiculous by many people today. Nevertheless there were sound reasons behind these commands, as we shall see.

But Jesus goes further when he says:

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45).

These words are far removed from agitation, retaliation, protest and violence. But note one thing about them: the disciple's behaviour is not determined by the "other man", it is determined by God. The Christian's life is directed, not by prevailing circumstances, but by the commands of his heavenly Father.

It is understandable that, particularly among the young, many who seek to follow Christ will be moved to admiration or even emulation of those whose protest appears to be stimulated by a desire for peace. Even those who accept New Testament teaching that the disciple must not resort to violence may wonder whether there can be objection to the signing of a petition or joining in a passive demonstration. They ask whether there is not a place for those who, after all, are ambassadors for peace and servants of the Prince of Peace, to add their voice to the ground swell of public objection.

The Peace Movement

Clearly the duty of the disciple is to "seek peace, and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14; 1 Peter 3:11); to "follow peace with all men" (Hebrews 12:14; Romans 14:19); "as much as lieth in you, (to) live peaceably with all men" (Romans 12:18). But does the teaching of Jesus Christ suggest active involvement in a *campaign* for peace? Our responsibility to be peacemakers in the home, at work, or among the people we meet does not necessarily give us licence to put pressure on those in authority.

The disciple of the twentieth century must be very cautious in claiming for himself the authority which his master exercised when he rebuked the Scribes and Pharisees, or overturned the tables of the moneychangers. Jesus' action, *as the Son of God*, was directed at abuses *within the religious system*, and in regard to his Father's house. He did not campaign for secular causes.

Should a Christian protest?

We cannot escape the conclusion that the same teaching of Jesus and his apostles which commands abstinence from violence also teaches that we can have no part in protest against authority. It is part of the same logic of our faith. Protest -- in any cause -- is an act of assertiveness: it is incompatible with discipleship. However peaceable one's protest might be, however passive the demonstration, however humble the approach to those in authority, one's stance as a protester is that of a plaintiff who seeks to petition his lords and masters.

Those who petition are claiming the right to make a demand of worldly authority; the disciple, on the other hand, discounts his earthly citizenship (Philippians 3:20) and makes no claim upon those who

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govern him; even less does he *demand* something that those in authority have decided not to allow. Although the disciple of Christ, in common with others, receives the benefits which the state confers and is grateful for these, he neither expects nor demands them.

Preaching the Kingdom

Does the disciple do nothing, then, about the great distress of those around him? Even if he has no interest for himself, does not compassion compel him to raise his voice on behalf of those who have no say? Surely Christ himself would have spoken out? It is to this matter that we must return: it is the Lord's example which again is sufficient reason for our stance.

Certainly Jesus relieved suffering where he saw it. He healed and comforted; so, too, did his followers. *Just* to preach the Gospel, giving no thought to the needs and circumstances of those to whom we preach, cannot be right. We cannot say, "Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled", without giving them "those things which are needful to the body" (James 2:16). But did Jesus or the apostles spend *all* their time ministering to the needy? There were countless sick who were not healed; 4,000 and then 5,000 were fed, but many times that number remained hungry (and even those fed were just as hungry again the next day!). Ultimately, good works have to give way to the preaching of the Gospel, "*for therefore am I sent*" (Luke 4:43).

Yes, Jesus denounced the rulers of his day; he rebuked them for their hypocrisy, for grinding the faces of the poor, for lining their own pockets. But he was denouncing them as *religious* leaders, as shepherds of the flock of Israel -- where plainly they had failed. He did not denounce the *political* leaders, or Roman governors, in such terms. And though the "poor in spirit . . . they that mourn . . . the meek . . . they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (Matthew 5) received words of comfort, Jesus did not rouse them to rebellion, or even suggest passive demonstrations or silent marches for equality of opportunity, or human rights. Rather, his counsel was to accept conditions as they found them: "Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven".

God's "Rights"

Human rights are demanded by everyone, and even by many who consider themselves Christians: human rights have become, so it would seem, a large part of the modern Gospel. But what about the rights of *God*? These seem to be sorely neglected. No account is taken of His will when politicians, social reformers or individuals express what they feel is desirable or undesirable. But the Bible makes it clear that God claims "rights" as Creator of us all. He has a right to our worship and obedience.

The Bible, in fact, has all the answers to man's problems. It is because the vast majority of people ignore it and try to use their own judgement on moral issues that the necessity for and the "rights" of protest movements have arisen. This is clearly a perilous road to travel. It has brought us into an age of promiscuity and violence. There are millions of broken homes throughout the world and even more bewildered children cast upon the sea of their parents' self indulgence. Undoubtedly there are worse things to come. God's rights have been abandoned and human rights have replaced them, disastrously so.

God's laws are being flouted. Will what is good in God's eyes ever prevail?

God is in Control

We might have assumed that the only way in which things can be put right is by political or social means, or even by believing that good morals will finally conquer the bad. But such is not Bible teaching. There is a much more far-reaching principle revealed in the pages of Scripture. Despite appearances, God is in control and is active in the affairs of men and nations. Here is the plain teaching of the Bible:

"Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are his. And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings and setteth up kings" (Daniel 2:20,21).

"The most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men" (Daniel 4:17).

The governments and rulers of men are appointed by God, whether these prove to be good or bad. God is working out His righteous and ultimate purpose using the materials to hand among sinful men. Nothing is beyond or out of His control. It might be objected that this is Old Testament teaching and is purely Jewish and altogether out-moded. It is certainly Old Testament teaching but it is repeated even more emphatically in the New.

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (Romans 13:1,2).

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These words were written to believers in the city of Rome in a pagan empire. The Christian was not to seek to change the government. Protest, agitation and subversion were out of the question. To resist the government is to resist God's appointment. Let it be noted that it is not a question of whether the government is good or bad. Because God is in control, we should not resist His ordinance.

This is even more telling when we remember that it is almost certain that the apostle Paul was executed by the Roman emperor Nero. He lived and died believing that human governments are in God's hand. This is the only note of hope in our violent and perplexed world. If God is not in control, then man is: if man is in control there is no hope. Even so, we are entitled to ask one further question:

When will God put things right?

There is an overall plan behind God's control of nations. Despite their evil and through it, God will so fashion the world to make it plainly known that man is helpless and hopeless. Man expects to solve his problems by his own efforts. God says that man never can and never will; his most sincere and most agonising attempts are doomed to failure. As the Lord Jesus Christ said in another connection, "Without me ye can do nothing".

God has promised that He will send Jesus Christ again and that *Christ will put the world right* when he reigns as King in Jerusalem:

"In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever" (Daniel 2:44). "God hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

"Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him. For he shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper. He shall spare the poor and needy . . . and men shall be blessed in him: all nations shall call him blessed" (Psalm 72:11,13,17).

"At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the Lord, to Jerusalem" (Jeremiah 3:17).

These verses, and there are hundreds more in Scripture, make it plain that God will send Jesus Christ to earth to reign as King and to rid the world of its evils. This is clearly what the Lord Jesus Christ had in mind when he taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

But how far away is this time of blessing?

Signs of the Times

The Bible gives many signs by which faithful believers would be encouraged and would know that the end of the present age was drawing near. It is not our purpose here to deal with these in detail, but the following are the more important signs:

1. Mankind would become self-centred
2. Mankind would become materialistic
3. Home life would be disrupted
4. Arrogance and violence would prevail
5. Pleasure seeking would be a way of life

All of these signs can be read in 2 Timothy 3:1-5

6. There would be distress among nations
7. Mankind would be afraid of world events
8. Jerusalem would once again be in Jewish hands

These signs are to be found in Luke 21:24-26

9. The Jews would return to Israel

This sign is in Jeremiah 30:3; 31:10, and Ezekiel 37:21

10. Signs 7-9 would herald the return of Jesus

Luke 21:27,28 and Jeremiah 33:14,16

These are some of the many signs given in Scripture. Others include famines, pestilences and earthquakes. Above all we learn that men would have become wicked and godless. Whilst some of these circumstances have occurred at one time or another in world history, never before have all of them come together. We are therefore confident that we are now in that period of time which will see

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the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and great glory. In the light of this knowledge we ought to be preparing for the great day of Christ's return.

The disciple's first call is to faith. He must *believe* that what God has promised He is able also to perform (see Romans 4:21). God's guarantees lie in the unfailing truth of His Word, the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the evidence of countless fulfilled prophecies. The true disciple will therefore believe what Jesus taught, namely, that he will return to earth (Matthew 16:27) and be King on earth (25:31).

The disciple will do what his Master asks him to do. He will, of course, in order to enlist in the Master's service, be baptized by immersion in water as Jesus commanded him (John 3:22; Mark 16:16) and he will thereby confess that he believes the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (see Acts 8:12).

Citizens of a Heavenly Kingdom

Because he believes these things and knows that God rules in the kingdoms of men, the true disciple will not engage in politics, protest or war, but humbly and in faith follow his Master in accepting what God has ordained and in countering evil by goodness and obedience to the way of life lived by the Lord himself. He will not protest-yet he will proclaim his faith. He will not *sign* petitions -- yet he will daily petition His Father *in prayer*. He will not join the marchers -- yet he will conduct a lifelong campaign on behalf of his Lord, "ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh him a reason of the hope that is in him with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15).

His obedience will make itself known in his attitude toward the state. He will "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21); he will "pay tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour" (Romans 13:6,7); and he will be "subject to principalities and powers . . . obey magistrates . . . be ready to every good work, speak evil of no man . . . be no brawler . . . but gentle, showing all meekness unto all men" (Titus 3:1,2).

The disciple is primarily a citizen of the coming kingdom of God (Philippians 3:20,21). He knows and believes that there is no solution to the world's problems other than the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. He seeks to live according to the laws of the coming kingdom of God; the disciple is an outpost of the coming kingdom and therefore a "stranger and pilgrim" in his own country (Hebrews 11:13 and 1 Peter 2:11,12). These are principles of the highest order. And they are realistic since they acknowledge the inability of man to govern himself and they confess confidence in the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, the appointed Prince of Peace.

Man is powerless to change the world; even disciples of Christ, who have been taught the will of God, must not presume to change the present order. When Jesus comes, however, he will have this authority, granted to him by his Father: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18).

The Final Question

There can be but one question: Am I prepared to believe these things? The call of Christ demands a complete reappraisal of my life -- not just part of it, but the whole of it. I must surrender my so-called human rights and submit to the right of God in seeking me to serve Him. He is the Lord of heaven and earth, my Maker. His purpose and will are sovereign. I can no more save myself than the world can govern itself in peace. God does not blame us for this inability. He asks for a recognition of it and a faithful acceptance of the divine remedy, salvation in Jesus Christ. The death of Jesus was for our redemption and was a token that man without God is lost. The only way to everlasting life is by faith. Faith in God; faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The way of life described in these pages is one of deep contentment and certainty. No longer need I run the rat-race, or seek by assertion and protest to get the world put right my way. If I cannot unaided put myself right, then can I manage the world?

We have seen that discipleship is the only life with a future. Everlasting life in God's gracious kingdom here on earth is promised to all who believe that Christ is the appointed Saviour and the Coming King. Without doubt he is coming back. We should prepare to meet him joyfully.

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