

Spirit and Freedom

- life in the Spirit as the source of ethical living

THE WAY OF FREEDOM

The way we are

Ethics are how we 'behave', 'act' and 'live our lives'. Ethics is 'real life'. Ethics are how we are at home, in the office, factory, school or shop. Ethics are how a person acts alone, in a group, in a crowd. Ethics is central to every living person, whether they recognise it or not. It challenges and reveals their values, whatever they are, and whatever philosophy or religion they are committed to.

We are exploring specifically 'Christian ethics'; how the disciple of Jesus should act and behave. We are living in; a 'permissive' age; 'whatever turns you on', 'don't knock it till you've tried it', 'everyone should be free to fulfill their own hypothesis'. How, in this world, as Christians should we act?

The 'Epistle to Diognetus' was written by a now unknown second century Christian to a pagan asking the simple question, "What is a Christian?" The reply makes some challenging observations about the nature of Christian discipleship and ethics:

You cannot identify Christians from other people on the basis of nationality, language or customs.

They do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or adopt some peculiar lifestyle.

Their teaching is not the inventive speculation of inquisitive minds.

They are not propagating mere human teaching as some people do.

They live in Greek or foreign city, wherever chance has placed them.

They follow local customs in clothing, food and other aspects of life.

But at the same time they demonstrate the strangely wonderful form of their own citizenship.

They each live in their native land, but as strangers.

They shoulder all the duties of citizenship, but are made to suffer like aliens.

Every foreign country is to them a homeland, while every homeland is like a foreign country.

They marry and have children just like everyone else; but they do not kill unwanted babies.

They share a common table but not a common bed.

They are present 'in the flesh', but they do not live 'according to the flesh'.

They live upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven.

They obey human laws, but surpass these laws in their personal lives.

They love everyone, but are persecuted by all.

They are unknown, and yet they are condemned.

They are put to death and yet they are more alive than ever.

They are poor and yet make many rich.

They are short of everything and yet they live in abundance.

They are dishonoured and yet their dishonour becomes a glory.

Their names are blackened; nevertheless they stand innocent.



They are mocked and yet they bless in return.
They are treated outrageously and yet behave respectfully to all.
When they do good they are punished as evildoers.
When punished they rejoice as if being given new life.
They are attacked by Jews as aliens and persecuted by the Greeks.
Yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility.
To put it simply - life is to the body as Christians are to the world.
Their life is in the body but is not of the body.
Christians are in the world but not of the world.
Life is locked into the body, yet it holds the body together.
Christians are held like prisoners in the world, yet it is they that hold the world together.

Notice the initial description of 'Christians' contains no theological statement, it is wholly an appeal to how they lived:

- Either, 'what I am is shouting so hard that people can't hear what I am saying
- Or, 'what I am, gets their attention so they want to know what I believe'

It is a tragic fact that within the church 'ethics' is frequently a marginalised subject, for individuals to make up their own minds about. It is often a contentious subject and so it is relegated to the edges. In theological courses it is usually an optional area of study. However, the simple fact is that more than anything else 'the Bible is ethics':

- The Hebrew scriptures are focused on 'covenant' living
- Central to Jesus' teaching is living the life of God's Kingdom
- Each of Paul's letters end with practical teaching on lifestyle

The early Christians called discipleship of Jesus, 'the Way', emphasising Godly actions and behaviour (cf Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14,22). It is therefore a sad legacy of the Reformation, and before, that there has been a much greater stress on 'theology' than 'lifestyle'. Believing right can only ever be authenticated by living right; Jesus makes this clear. Faith is seen in faithfulness that is displayed in the way we live and act. Faith, as mere intellectual assent, has led to ignorance, indifference and intolerance; this was seen even in Martin Luther's lifetime.

What are Christian ethics?

Getting to grips with Christian ethics is not going to be 'easy' or lead to a comfortable lifestyle. It is life situations that drive us forward into God; they certainly are not 'neat' and 'nice'. It is the fact they are often controversial that we leave them alone.

- Ethics is going to 'hurt'; it will cost in its implications
- Ethics will demand much rethinking
- Ethics demand that we desire the 'truth' above all else

Christian ethics have a central and fundamental characteristic, which is their focus on the person of Jesus; they are 'Messianic' and 'Christological'. As a consequence of this they have three further essential characteristics; they are:



- **Prophetic:** our behaviour and lifestyle proclaim the truth about the kingdom of God to the world; my words and actions judge each other respectively, we are a sign to the world
- **Eschatological:** we live out our lives and make our choices in terms of the end, and the age to come; our behaviour seeks to bring the kingdom into the present. This fact distinguishes Christian ethics from the mere pragmatism of most other codes of behaviour, and makes many people [even Christians] believe Christian ethics is simply idealistic. Thielicke has said so well, “Theological ethics are eschatological or it is nothing!”¹
- **Radical:** we live out of deep roots; we believe there are 'absolutes' which are fixed in the foundations of God’s character and from which we draw resources to meet the particular situations life presents. Life situations drive us back to these roots in God. The question 'how should I act?' demands we dig deeper into our roots.

Anarchist dream

In beginning to answer the question, “How should I behave?” “By what principles should I live?” Let us begin with the most important ethical question anyone can ask, “What kind of person do I really want to be?” Answering this question is the key to a Christian understanding of ethics.

This question asks us to reach deep within ourselves and dream. Observing global human behaviour and cultural expression, the most frequently reoccurring dream about how people would like to live is to be free. Deep within every human heart there is a longing for freedom. To live, from within, from the inside out, spontaneously, rather than having our behaviour and actions controlled and dictated to from without.

One group of people who have endeavoured to live this dream are anarchists. They believe that each individual should be free to live their lives out of an inner sense of justice and kindness, and that law, in the way that it imposes others people’s desires upon us and is essentially exploitive. People should be free to do their own thing.

The deep dream of the anarchist is simply too terrifying for most individuals and societies. With no apparent controls and “everyone doing what is right in their own eyes” (Jg 17:6). It seems a mandate for chaos, self-interest, with the weak crushed by the strong and the perversion of power. Added to this most anarchist groups are transient, unsuccessful and fail to provide the sense of security most people long for. It does not lead to a higher way, and usually ends up in 'law making' of some description. Others, frustrated with the status quo, turn to rebellion, violence and destruction.

This may seem to be an unusual point to begin an exploration of Christian ethics, but we are going to argue that this anarchist dream, in fact this universal dream, to be able to live freely, spontaneously, from the inside out, is God given. However, it can only be fully experienced through the life and power of the Holy Spirit.

¹ cf H. Thielicke *‘Theological Ethics’* Eerdmans 1966 px



A Christian understanding of ethics, in a nutshell, is simply to 'live spontaneously in harmony with the character of God'. It is here that we find the foundations to human behaviour and the absolutes and values into which authentic living must be rooted. This is what it means to be a Christian. This is what the incarnation of Jesus proclaims. This understanding is absolutely central to the meaning and experience of Christian ethics:

- “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32)
- “It is for freedom that Christ has set you free” (Gal 5:1)
- “For where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom” (2Cor 3:17)

The term ‘Messianic Anarchist’ needs to be understood as:

- **‘Messianic’** – means ‘one anointed by God’s Spirit’
 - *Remember:* the name ‘Christian’ means ‘little Messiah’
‘You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you ...’
(Acts 1:8)
- **‘Anarchist’** – means ‘one free from the powers’
 - *Remember:* this is what Jesus’ death and resurrection is all about
‘He disarmed the powers and authorities ... triumphing over them’
(Col 2:15)
 - ‘Our of your innermost being shall flow rivers of living water’
(Jn 7:38)

This truth takes us to the very core of the gospel and its proclamation of freedom. We are going to argue that the Christian gospel properly understood is a call to become ‘Messianic Anarchists’, however, before we can really explore what this means a much longer journey must be taken.

Reaching for the law

The deep dream of the anarchist is simply too terrifying for most individuals and societies. Presented with a potential maelstrom of chaos, most people (including the majority of Christians) reach for the law. Here it is believed that safety, control, security and continuity will be found.

It is important to remember that a Christian will understand the word ‘law’ in *three* different ways:

- **Law of the Land** (Legislation) – to *control* human behaviour

Usually decreed by a monarch, agreed by a community, or upon decided by a parliament. It is primarily to do with restraint.

It has value:

- To protect the vulnerable from the worst excesses against them
- To provide a means of establishing very basic justice (putting things right)
- To point towards a broad moral direction



It has weaknesses:

- It can only control and restrain people, it does not change them
 - It is dependent on outside controls; the power of the police and courts
 - It is always changing due to public opinion and those in power
 - It may be quite different in different cultures (relative)
 - It creates **conformists**; most bad law is simply tolerated
- **Law of the Lord** (Torah) – to *develop* human behaviour

Revealed by God, providing signposts that point towards his character.
It is primarily to do with relationship.

It has value:

- To do with **holiness** / uniqueness (Heb: *qadosh*) identifying us as belonging to God and different from others that may appear similar (Lv 11:14)
- To do with **covenant** (Heb: *berith*) bound to God in relationship demonstrated by obedience
- To do with **instruction** (Heb: *torah*) like a loving parent telling a child, “This is the way to live”
- To do with **grace** (Gk: *charis*) God’s law *is* grace, given as a gift and expressed as extravagant goodness

It has weaknesses:

- It is only **instructive**; a tutor for children not a lifestyle for adults (Gal 3:24);
- It is very **provocative**; it stimulates my inner motives and feelings but is unable to change them (Rm 5:20);
- It is clearly **external**; it reveals my condition (like a mirror) but cannot put the issues right;
- It creates **legalists**; religious people who demand and delight in a clear instruction for every situation:
 - Talmudic ethics in orthodox Judaism
 - Sharia legislation in fundamentalist Islam

Sadly, so many Christians opt for living according to the law; this legalism is disguised by phrases like, 'what the Bible says' and arguing for 'accepted Christian practice'. We shall see during the rest of this course, the complexity that is hidden by these phrases. Why Christians so often take the path of legalism is easy to understand; it appears to give them both security and simplicity. However, it does not give them true new covenant living, which as we shall discover is unpredictable, exhilarating, spontaneous and quite beautiful.

The Spirit within

So how is it that the kingdom of God is so different, and what is the unique nature of its life and way? Our whole way of thinking about living is changed because in Jesus. We stand on the foundation laid in the Torah, but we have discovered its source, its epicentre can embrace and experience life and freedom in a unique way.



There is a simple but essential question every Christian must ask:

“Is the Law irrelevant to the Christian?”

The answer is in fact quite simple:

“Yes and No!”

Getting a clear understanding of this answer is critical to our whole approach to Christian ethics. Jesus made it quite clear when he said, 'I have not come to destroy the Law but to give it real meaning' (Mt 5:17). We have already seen that the Law is good because it signposts us towards God's character, but it is inadequate to change us and leave us anything but guilty. Jesus 'gives it real meaning' by setting its spirit, the very character of God free within us. Here we see the third, and most significant, Christian understanding of the word law:

- **Law of the Messiah** (Spirit) – to liberate human behaviour

Given by Jesus, incarnating values and empowering daily lifestyle
Primarily to do with character

The Ten Commandments point beyond themselves. The first nine are external and visible, but the tenth (“You shall not covet”) is internal and to do with attitude and motivation. They are a prophecy towards the future.

Two prophets point into the future:

- **Jeremiah:** “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord; I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord ...” (Jer 31:33-34)
- **Ezekiel:** “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.” (Ezk 36:26-27)

Here is a vision of living Torah spontaneously, from the inside out, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus something totally different happens:

- He fulfils the law, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.” (Mt 5:17)
- He brings the ethics of the Spirit which:
 - Embrace the essence of the law
 - Fulfill the spirit of the law
 - Transcend the limits of the law



What is the relationship between the Torah and the Spirit?

- It is the difference between 'sums' and 'maths'
- A child doing sums / a PhD doing maths
- All the angles of a triangle add to 180 degrees / not on a sphere
- Square root of $-1 = i$ (imaginary numbers)

The ethics of the Spirit are the:

- Law of Christ (Gal 6:2)
- Law of liberty (Ja 1:25)
- Law of the Spirit of life (Rm 8:2)

THE SPIRIT OF FREEDOM

Freedom

We have already seen that a fundamental principle of the new covenant is that 'where the Spirit of God is there is freedom' (2Cor. 3:17). Freedom is our 'birthright' as the children of God.

'Freedom', and the desire to have and experience it, is the heart cry and hallmark of the human race, the desire for it has been one of the most potent forces in shaping the times in which we live. Our age is a 'permissive' age; within reason 'anything goes', the desire and belief in personal freedom lies at the heart of this. The cry has been for:

- National freedom - independence worldwide since 1945
- Social freedom - breaking many 'taboos'
- Personal freedom - pursuit of pleasure

Twenty-first century experience proves beyond any shadow of doubt the fact that freedom is both a complex and elusive concept; meaning different things in different contexts, and just as exasperating in experience. For so many people the pursuit of freedom has become the pursuit of an illusion. Instead of freedom most have found:

- Frustration - no one is perfectly free; limited by time, place, money, ability
- Limitation - every choice excludes the possibility of all other choices
- Uncertainty - what do I choose, how do I decide, no reference points

The truth is that freedom is not a neutral concept. All of us experience certain freedoms, but there is no true freedom outside of God. There are essential 'keys' to a Christian understanding of freedom:

- **Freedom 'to' as well as freedom 'from'**; most Christian teaching on freedom concentrates on 'freedom *from*' (sin, guilt, fear, death etc), 'freedom *to*' is our primary birthright but is seen as challenging and dangerous
- **Freedom is dependent on a relationship with God**; the only other alternatives are legalism or anarchic rebellion
- **Freedom is inseparable from responsibility**; we are 'accountable' for the way in which we act and behave



- **Freedom is limited by our character**; we have got to be able to handle the 'wisdom' and 'power' to choose
- **Freedom is impossible without discipline**; an athlete, gymnast, artist and musician are only 'free' to excel because of the discipline and training they have put into their skills

Freedom is the adventure with God in life. It is living by the Spirit of freedom.

Starting with the Spirit

Every day we find ourselves confronted with any one of a thousand situations that life can throw across our path. What do we do? Where do we begin?

Remember that the single most important ethical question a Christian has to ask is, "What kind of person do I want to be?" This is the true starting point. The answer will condition every other action. The answer should surely be, "a life patterned upon that of Jesus."

Once that question has been answered the questions, 'What do we do?', 'Where do we start?', begin to find their place. How we answer them will decide the whole direction of our action, and each action and response will begin to shape the kind of person we become. When confronted with a life challenge:

- The religious person reaches for a 'law book' of instructions; they want both 'security' and 'simplicity'
- The spiritual person remembers that in the kingdom of God 'ethics are of the Spirit'; and that in the resurrection power of Jesus we can begin to experience the freedom to meet life situations that transcends anything the ordinary person can know

Jesus gave a clear statement that the children of the kingdom are to begin to live according to a different order, within perspectives and parameters that simply confound onlookers:

'The wind blows where it wants to, you hear its sound but you know neither its origin nor its destination; so it is with everyone born of the spirit.'

(Jn 3:8)

Jesus and Freedom

When you look at the life of Jesus you see that this is exactly the way he lived and he is simply calling us to do the same.

Jesus calls us to live by life-giving values not behaviour restricting rules. We shall explore this in much more detail in a later session.

Jesus clearly taught 'situation ethics':²

² The 'situation ethics' of Jesus, however, must not be confused with those of Joseph Fletcher who wrote a book with that title and stated that in any situation the most 'loving' thing was always right; this seems true at first but his interpretation lead to arguments in favour of fornication, euthanasia and much else besides. We are taking the phrase and re-minting it.



- That in every situation in life the decision and choice of action must be freshly mixed; simply the fact that something is safe or worked in the past will not do
- That there is the demand we become 'craftsmen' so skilled with the tools of kingdom living that every choice becomes a 'masterpiece' in life

Living like Jesus allows us:

- The maximum amount of freedom. Augustine said, 'Love God and do what you like'³
- The minimum amount of freedom. Jesus said, 'I only do what the Father tells me'

The starting point in facing every situation is to be driven back to the 'absolutes' of God's character, and to catch the spirit that is flowing to us from there. Digging into the bedrock to release the resources from the subterranean reservoirs of the Spirit.

Notice that in Jesus' teaching on ethics he is simply touching the Spirit all the time:

- Anger is the heart of murder
- Lust is the heart of adultery
- Go two miles when the demand is just one
- Give your shirt as well as your cloak
- When slapped turn the other cheek
- Give expecting nothing in return

It is this inner motivation of our hearts that is the essence of the Christian ethics of the kingdom of God; our spirit harmonises with God's Spirit in facing life's situations.

At the heart of Christian ethics is that inner and unseen relationship between you and God. Only you and God know the real motives and spirit that lies behind any action, this is invisible to the outsider [who can only 'sense' from the spirit conveyed]. Outsiders can see the results, but only you know the true inner motives and attitudes. We must continually expose ourselves to situations that check our spirit and inner attitudes:

- A tramp asks you for money, you refuse because you say they will spend it on alcohol; the real reason is you do not want to share what you have (read Prov 31:6-9!)
- A young person asks to borrow your car, you refuse saying they are not very experienced in driving; the real reason is selfishness rather than kindness

The disturbing and liberating truth is that when Jesus calls us to become his disciples he calls us to become '*messianic anarchists*'! Not lawless rebels, but people who are free to live within the perspectives of the end of the world, for whom the laws of society are no inhibition because the law of love naturally fulfils them and the courage to obey God rather than others if a choice has to be made. People who under the flow and power of the Holy Spirit are beginning to discover how to live as Jesus did displaying God's character through everything.

³ Or as someone else has said, "You can do anything you like but sin!"



Making choices

The 'touchstone' of ethics is 'choosing' and then backing that choice with action. However, if there is no 'rule book' in which to find all the answers how then do we choose? Two pictures will help:

- **Living in the Spirit is like motorway driving:** On the motorway the junctions come up at tremendous speed, but there is always enough time to make your decision, but only if you know where you are going; it is essential that you have planned the journey before hand, so that even sudden diversions can be coped with. There is no time to sit on the hard shoulder and think it out, and a wrong turn will cost a lot of time and frayed tempers. It is well said, 'if you don't know where you are going you will most certainly end up somewhere else'. Living in the Spirit demands that you are clear about your destination

- **Living in the Spirit is like a bird migrating:** A migrating bird displays an incredible sense of freedom as it moves across the landscape, and yet at the same time it demonstrates an overwhelming sense of purpose and direction. How a bird can navigate thousands of miles from one fixed point to another is still one of the mysteries of science. What is becoming clear is that it remains a mystery because so many subtle factors combine within the bird's inner consciousness to make the miracle happen. It seems to be at least a combination of:
 - The pattern of the stars;
 - The angle of the horizon line;
 - The position of the sun;
 - The sound of the sea;
 - The pull of magnetic fields;
 - The location of key landmarks;
 - The currents of prevailing winds ... and probably many other factors as well

These two pictures illustrate some 'keys' to living by the Spirit of freedom. Our first choice is that we must decide where we are going. Then as the junction, diversions and 'contra flows' of life come upon us we can navigate in the right direction. You must have a broad picture of the route in your mind: -

- “What kind of person do I want to be?”
- “What kind of person does God want me to be?”

The answer comes from having a broad grasp of scripture and biblical principles; imbibing the prophetic word, teaching and ministry; soaking in the things of God. This creates an overall sense of direction and provides resources for particular decisions.

Then in the moment-by-moment flow of living more particular factors come into play, much like the migrating bird. The actual situation we must decide about must be weighed in our spirits in the light of 'key' factors:

- The inner witness of the spirit (catching the scent of God on the wind)
- The principle of love (knows nothing but another's well being)



- The principle of truth (cuts to the heart of the matter)
- Broad biblical principles (mapping the currents)
- Particular biblical examples (spotting landmarks)
- Reason and wisdom (God given, God inspired faculties)
- The example and counsel of others (fellowship of the church)
- Weighing the outcome (responsible consideration of effects)

The inner recesses in which this vital 'weighing' takes place is the conscience; that inner 'crucible' where 'spirit' and 'mind' meet. It has the capacity to be attune to God and yet is subject to the human will. The 'heart' is another biblical way of speaking about this faculty. Scripture is clear, the 'conscience', while God given, weighs on the basis of how it is fuelled. It can become 'undisciplined', 'defiled', and 'weakened' (1Cor 8), and yet it can be the seat of the Spirit's 'umpiring', resulting in peace (Col 3:15). In order to 'weigh in the Spirit' to bring 'God approved' results:

- The conscience must be fuelled by the 'stuff' of the life of God, so that the 'balance' reads correctly. If fuelled by the spirit of the age, it will give wrong instrument readings - 'put rubbish in, get rubbish out.' Let God's weights and measures department check you out.
- The conscience must mature; it is an area of growth, learning and discovery. There will be initial mistakes and tumbles. We must not be afraid to fail; yet we must continually desire to be perfect! We all believe in forgiveness, don't we? Do we know how to receive it? The first step to maturity is becoming like a little child.

Choosing is:

- An act of will - deciding what is right
- An act of faith - convinced what is right
- An act of courage - doing what is right

Remember that:

- Often there is variety in choice
- Frequently limited choice
- Sometimes there is no choice ⁴

Key principles

"Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?" Jesus said to him, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Mt 22:36-40).

These remarkable words of Jesus give a simple but sharp focus to the whole subject of Christian and biblical ethics. They provide the essential link between the covenants and

⁴ cf 2Cor 5:14



between the Law and the Spirit. These words provide the framework in which living out the ethics of the Spirit are to take place. The parameters are clear:

- Love God: his character and nature
- Love your neighbour: their needs and concerns
- Love yourself: dignity and self-respect

There are the two 'lode stones' of Christian ethics:

▪ **Love**

'Love does no wrong ... love is the fulfilling of the law' (Rom 13:10):

- Love is to do with the 'will' rather than the emotions' (1Cor 4:4-8)
- Love sets the 'character' for our actions

▪ **Truth**

'You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free' (Jn 8:32):

- Truth is to do with purity of motive not just accuracy of statement
- Truth sets the 'direction' for our actions

The mark of spontaneity

That which characterises kingdom ethics is 'spontaneity' but never compromise. It is not so much 'What Jesus did' that is the amazing thing [other than he was always right], but it was the way that he did it. His responses to situations were never predictable but always breath taking.

When people accused him or tried to trick him:

- Sometimes he refused to answer; silence
- Sometimes he quoted scripture
- Sometimes he gave a wise answer that cut to the root of the issue
- Sometimes he answered one question with another

When people tried to attack him physically:

- Sometimes he just wasn't there, he removed himself
- Sometimes he just walked through them
- At the right time he let them kill him without resisting them

When situations appeared predictable they turned out unexpected:

- The woman taken in adultery left the accusers admitting their guilt and the woman leaving forgiven
- When people appeared to praise him he deliberately provoked their anger to show their real emotions



The problem is we often treat ethics as a two-tier system:

- Idealism: which we can never reach
- Pragmatism: which always involves some sort of compromise

Another problem is we often exercise 'double think':

- Perfection: that we should be living as God wants
- Reality: that we so often fail

But these should not be problems:

We must remember that 'discipleship' means 'learning, and we must recognise that we are growing. Like all children we will fail, but it must be our desire to stand and walk. Christian ethics requires:

- Forgiveness
- Learning
- Maturing

Questions

1. The 'kingdom of God' has been described as a 'kingdom without rules'. Do you agree?
2. What do you think are the major problems that Christians face over the subject of ethics?
3. A Christian has been described as a 'messianic anarchist'. What do think this phrase implies? If this is the case, what do you think must be the distinguishing features of Christian action and behaviour? What is it essential that a Christian maintains about their personal character? What does all this tell us about a Christian understanding of freedom?

Reading & Resources

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