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House Churches in the New Testament: Contextual,Theological, and Missiological Perspectives

Introduction

For most of the first century, private dwellings shaped the Christians' community life. Evidence to this phenomenon is found in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul. According to Acts 2:41, the Early Church numbered more than three thousand members after Pentecost. When the synagogues became off limits to them, meeting in private homes became a practical necessity for worship, fellowship, service, and mission (Acts 2:46; 5:42). In four of Paul's epistles, he explicitly references private homes as the gathering places for early Christians (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3-5; Col 4:15; Phil 2). The epistles are better understood from the perspective that they were addressed to Christians in a network of house churches. This article examines the contextual, theological, and missional dimensions of first-century house churches to draw implications for contemporary church life and mission.

Historical and Sociocultural Context

Understanding the rise of house churches requires an overview of the historical and cultural context in which they existed. The cultural background of the Early Church was a combination of Hellenistic civilization, Roman rule, and Jewish faith and culture. The Greek conquest, which was missionary in nature, left a permanent mark on Jewish life. In expanding the Greek empire, Alexander the Great sought more than a mere military conquest. Because he considered the Greek way of life best for all, he

aspired to create a Hellenized world through a multifaceted approach: (1) he brought with him poets, philosophers, and historians to teach the Greek way of life, (2) he encouraged his soldiers to intermarry with native women throughout occupied territories as a way of spreading Greek culture, (3) he made Greek the universal language of the territories he conquered in his aim for cultural integration and homogenization, and (4) he actively encouraged religious syncretism whereby local deities were identified and then merged with the gods of the Greek pantheon (Johnson 1999:24; Bruce, Cohick, and Green 2009:26). This Hellenistic influence had a lasting influence on traditional Jewish culture.

Rome was very preoccupied with political power, which it achieved either by coercion or by extending the right of citizenship to members of military colonies, former soldiers, and local personages (Johnson 1999:26). It had a very hierarchical social structure from the family to the state level. In the family, the father had absolute authority over the material, financial, and religious affairs of the entire household, and also determined whom his children married. Children were expected to obey and honor their parents as one would honor the gods, and as such they continued to be obligated to them even after they moved out of the family home. Harmony, not equality, was perceived as the highest goal in family life and society. To achieve harmony, individuals were expected to stay in their respective place in society (Bruce et al. 2009:90, 91, 345). In this context, personhood was connected to group values. Honor and dishonor were the foundational social values. Their focus on shame and honor meant that "they were particularly oriented toward the approval and disapproval of others. This orientation meant that individuals were likely to strive to embody the qualities and to perform the behaviors that the group held to be honorable and to avoid those acts that brought reproach and caused a person's estimation in the eyes of others to drop" (DeSilva 2000:35).

The multicultural environment of the first century was quite challenging in that each group defined what was honorable or dishonorable according to its own distinctive set of values and beliefs. While these values sometimes overlapped, they also frequently clashed. The same behavior that one group held up and rewarded as honorable could be censured and viewed as an insult or disgraceful by another group, and vice versa. This combination of different cultural mindsets under one political rule shaped the matrix in which the Christian church was formed. Judaism provided the roots of Christianity although it regarded the Christian faith as a pernicious heresy. Hellenism provided the intellectual soil in which Christianity grew although it considered Christian beliefs as philosophical nonsense. Roman imperialism provided the protection that opened the possibility for the growth of Christianity although it regarded it as an impractical weakness (Tenney 2000:67-68).

Because of its Old Testament roots, the Early Church continued to emphasize kinship as a core value. But there was a radical newness to Christianity in that kinship was no more defined in terms of blood lines and ethnicity but rather in terms of shared faith and fellowship with God. The church matured to become an environment of inclusion, acceptance, and open unity without discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or social status (Gal 3:28). Membership was open to all on the basis of professing faith in Christ as Savior and the public demonstration of complete allegiance to Christ through water baptism (Acts 2:37, 38). The Early Church expressed its values of corporate solidarity and kinship through the use of the body of Christ and family motifs to describe the interdependence between its members, and to convey the close bond that enabled them to treat each other as family members (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4; Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 4:17). Their concern was not power but the development of a lasting sense of interdependence and corporate solidarity among believers. This interdependence suggested that each member of the body had a unique role to play, and yet was dependent upon all other members.

Theological Foundation of House Churches

The practice of house churches in the New Testament was not merely a matter of convenience; it had deep theological implications. Household churches provided early Christians a unique environment for the expression of their personal identity as the temple of God and collectively as the people of God. This is best conveyed through the New Testament concept of church and the image of the church as a family.

The New Testament Concept of Church

In order to understand the concept of a first century house church, it is essential to first understand the essence of what constitutes a church. The English word "church" stems from the Greek *ekklesia* and *kuriakon. Ekklesia* is a compound word from *ek* meaning "out" and *kaleo* meaning "to call." Hence, the church can be defined as "the called out people." *Kuriakon* literally means "that which belongs to the Lord" (Bucke 1962:1:607). Thus, the called out people are also called in, called to belong. From this perspective, *ekklesia* and *kuriakon* primarily designate a body of believers in a particular religious and communal reality rather than to a physical building where believers gather for public worship.

The book of Acts portrays the activities of the Early Church in communal terms: "When the day of Pentecost came, they were *all together* in one

place" (Acts 2:1, emphasis mine, NIV used unless otherwise noted); "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42, emphasis mine); "All the believers were *one in heart and mind . . .* , they *shared* everything they had . . . , and it was distributed to anyone as he had need" (Acts 4:32-35, emphasis mine). In this way, *ekklesia* and *kuriakon* emphasize the church's corporate identity. Although salvation is personal, Christianity is not a loner experience. It involves an indispensable communal life (1 Cor 12:12-21; Eph 2:21, 22; 4:16). On the other hand, believers are metaphorically referred to as a spiritual building: "God's building" (1 Cor 3:9), a building undergoing construction "to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:22), "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15), and "living stones" being built into a spiritual house (1 Pet 2:5). Hence, the church is not built with literal stones but with believers. It exists in any setting where God's people gather for worship and mutual edification (see Matt 18:20).

The Familial Concept of the Church

An understanding of the church as a spiritual family requires a theological understanding of the family in Israelite context. In the Old Testament, the covenant between Yahweh and Israel is illustrated in familial terminology. To express the fundamental nature of his covenant with Israel, God revealed himself as a father (Deut 32:6; Hos 11:1; Jer 31:9) and husband (Isa 54:5) and spoke about Israel as his son (Exod 4:22-23; Deut 14:1). Further, God used family structures as an effective medium to express his covenant relationship with Israel. The compelling narrative of prophet Hosea's marriage to Gomer serves as a vivid representation of how Israel lived out its part of the covenant with Yahweh. In this way, the family became an image of God's covenant with his people. The same idea is also expressed in the New Testament where Christ is portrayed as a bridegroom and the church as his bride (Matt 25:1-13). The familial bond is intended to mirror the covenant bond between Christ and the church (Eph 5:28-32). Because God's covenant with his people depended on the continued existence of Abraham's family line in which the promises would be fulfilled, the family functions theologically as the image and carrier of the covenant (Atkinson 2014:133, 134).

With such an understanding of family, the importance of kinship is widely expressed in biblical literature. "X the son of Y" lies as a thread throughout the Old Testament. The use of surnames to identify individuals' links to families is foreign to the Old Testament. The Old Testament way of identifying individuals allowed their family connections to be

established in a more comprehensive fashion (e.g., "… Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite" Esth 2:5). People looked at themselves as part of a family, a clan, a tribe, and a nation. It was of great importance to know who one's relatives were. In the absence of a centrally-organized system to enforce law and order and to punish wrongdoers, "a person's safety was a function of the group to which he or she belonged, and in terms of war it was the duty of those who were related to each other to stand together" (Rogerson and Davies 1989:46). People lived with a deep sense of solidarity between individuals and their social group, in which the group had obligations to protect individual members from harm, injustice, and poverty (e.g., Gen 35; Lev 25:14-31, 35-43, 47-55).

Because priests were thought to be defiled by contact with death (Lev 10:6; 21:1, 10-12; Ezek 44:25), funerary matters were not part of their duties. Thus, care for the dead was the duty of the family and clan. Israelites therefore turned to their kinship networks, not temples or priests, as their source of comfort, security, and hope after life (Cook 2009:111). This kinship-consciousness transcended even death as "internment in a family tomb on family-owned land was of the utmost urgency (see 2 Kgs 9:10; Jer 8:2; 16:4 22:19; 25:33). Kin should lie buried together, traditional Israelites believed, especially closely related kin (see, e.g., 2 Sam 17:23; 19:37; 21:14; 1 Kgs 13:22). This insured that after death family members would not be alienated from the insulating ties of communion with their kin" (Cook 2009:112). Thus, even in death a kin-group longed to remain interconnected according to the same family and lineage ties that bound them in life. Such was probably why Jacob, while in Egypt, desired to be buried with his fathers in the cave in the field of Machpelah where Abraham and Isaac were buried (Gen 49:29-33; 50:1-10), or for Joseph making the sons of Israel swear an oath that they would carry his bones out of Egypt to the promised land when God delivered them, which they did (Gen 50:24, 25; Exod 13:19).

It is therefore not surprising that the concept of church as a family was adopted by early christians. Long before official buildings were dedicated to public worship, the family (Greek *oikos/oikia*, house or household) was the setting for many activities of the Early Church. The references to church in the New Testament should not conjure up images of large buildings with stained-glass windows, altars, and pews but rather a network of house gathering of believers. In most cases, these gatherings were composed of a host family joined by other individuals and families. This household setting was referred to as "the household of God" (1 Tim 3:15; Eph 2:19), "house of God" (Heb 3:6; 1 Pet 4:17), or "the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). As a result, family terminology such as brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers is used in the New Testament to describe believers'

interpersonal relationships. For example, Paul advises Timothy to relate to all the members of the church as if they were part of an extended family: "Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort *him* as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity" (1 Tim 5:1-2).

The household image of the church is an acknowledgement that all believers, irrespective of their ethnicities, gender, social backgrounds, are one family by creation and redemption. They also believed that in Christ the covenant with Abraham had reached its teleological conclusion. The recognition that all believers are equal members of God's family might have played a role in the breaking down of ethnic barriers and fostered table fellowships among early Christians (cf. Gal 2:11-14). It was through such fellowship that Jews and Gentiles were able to be the church Jesus prayed for in John 17:6-19.

House Churches and Mission

Through the transforming and enabling power of the Holy Spirit, house churches became very instrumental in the growth of the Early Church through their mission-oriented discipleship. The gospel permeated communities through interconnected networks of homes, family ties, and various social bonds, leading to instances where entire households embraced the gospel collectively (Acts 16:15, 34). From that perspective, it is important to interpret the following two case studies of mission in the New Testament as conducted within house churches and by members of such congregations.

A Case for Mission in the Book of Acts

Although the book of Acts contains important historical narratives, solid theology, and brilliant apologetics, mission is the driving force behind all of that. To be specific, the theology found in Acts was done in the context of the *missio Dei* as humans reflected on divine revelations and the missional questions those revelations often raised. From this perspective, it is *à propos* to say for example that as a whole, the book of Acts is the narrative of a church, which because of its missionary encounters outside the Jewish context, reshaped its theology and approach to witnessing in order to reach different contexts. The Early Church's theology and apologetics were to a greater degree fertilized, driven, and necessitated by mission (Chung 2012:260; Sanou 2018:301-316).

The first indication that mission is the central theme in the book of Acts is found in chapter one verse eight. "You shall receive power when

the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" distinctly indicates that witnessing about Jesus to all nations was the dominant agenda of early Christians. The evidence that Christ's disciples took seriously the idea of being his witnesses is notably featured in their preaching throughout Acts (2:32, 3:15, 5:32, 10:39, 41, 43, 13:31, 15:8, 22:15, 20, 23:11, 26:16). Reading the book of Acts as an apologetic or theological treaty cannot effectively be done apart from reading it as an expression of mission in light of Jesus' recommissioning of his disciples in Acts 1:8.

To highlight the centrality of mission in Acts, Craig Keener succinctly notes that "although we may view mission and apologetic as distinct purposes, for Luke they were closely intertwined. Luke's apologetic was a concrete expression of mission in his own context, and it was often mission that generated the need for the apologetic" (2012:1:438). Also, while the theological character of Luke's historiography should be recognized, Ward Gasque observes that "the theology of Acts is a mission centered theology: the church exists not for itself but for the world, to bear bold testimony to what God has done and is doing in Jesus" (1988:127). Undoubtedly, the prophetic mission of Jesus and its continuation through the ministry of his followers in house churches constitutes the leading agenda in the book of Acts. Acts was written with a clear missional intent in the context of the Early Church's missionary endeavors. In various ways throughout its narrative, Luke portrays the continuation of God's universal salvific will. After discussing other possible purposes of Acts, William Barclay concludes that "these are merely secondary aims. Luke's chief purpose is set out in the words of the Risen Christ in Acts 1:8, 'You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth'" (2003:5). Concurring with Barclay, Nicolas Wright and Michael Bird succinctly add that Acts 1:8 "functions as a 'virtual table of contents' for Luke's second volume" (2019:628). As a model for Christian mission, Acts is both an account of the missionary expansion of the Early Church and an account of why and how that missionary expansion was undertaken. As such, the book provides a paradigm of how the gospel of the kingdom of God can be spread to all nations in anticipation of Jesus' second coming. Without the missionary zeal and vibrancy of the network of early Christian house churches and their members, the narrative in the book of Acts would be different.

A Case for Mission in 1 Peter

The first epistle of Peter was written during a critical time in the Early Church's history. The majority of Petrine scholars are of the view that much internal evidence supports the suggestion that the addressees of 1 Peter,

though racially mixed, were from a predominantly Gentile background (e.g., Flemming 2015:91; Schnabel 2004:1521; Papaioannou 2022:1875-1876). As the church experienced rapid growth, the opposition faced by believers expanded beyond zealous Jews who perceived the nascent faith as a threat. The growing number of Gentiles converting to Christianity also raised concerns throughout the Roman empire for several reasons. First, upon embracing their newfound faith, Gentile converts refrained from participating in pagan temple rituals and gatherings (1 Pet 4:3-4). In a context where "those who abstained from worshipping local gods were suspected of wishing trouble upon their city or regions" (Wright and Bird 2019:762), this shift in behavior of Gentile converts greatly worried their contemporaries. The fear was that the abandonment of ancestral practices by converts to Christianity would anger the gods and lead to retributive consequences for their communities. As a result, Christians were treated with reproach and contempt (3:9; 4:4, 14-15). Second, the practice of social equality among Christians, regardless of differences in ethnicity, social status, and gender, posed a direct challenge to the established social order of the Roman empire. Their choice to live out an alternative to Roman norms set them apart and led to exclusion and contempt (Carson 2007:1032-1033; Papaioannou 2022:1875-1876; Flemming 2015:97).

Peter exhorts his socially marginalized audience scattered across Asia Minor to live steadfast and faithful lives to God in spite of the social scorn, calumny, humiliation, and persecution that such a lifestyle could lead to (5:12). To help his readers stay the course and fulfill their calling in the face of adversity and social hostility, Peter seeks to firmly establish them in the awareness that they are God's special people, the recipients of remarkable grace (1:2; 5:12). Or as Scot McKnight puts it, "Peter intends his readers to understand who they are before God so that they can be who they are in society" (1996:36). He assures them that their true identity is determined by God's verdict rather than that of their social location or life circumstances. Even though they are disparaged by their communities because of their faith, in God's eyes they are a precious, royal, and holy people (2:5, 9-10), called to live missionally with anticipation for the realization of their promised hope—salvation with an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance (1:4-5, 7-12, 18-19, 22-23).

Peter begins his epistle with a distinct emphasis on identity to cast his vision of the church and its mission. He addresses his readers both as exiles and sojourners (1:1; 2:11) and as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's own people and special possession (2:9-10) in his desire for his readers to conceive of themselves as the Israel of God. He conveys the privilege Gentile converts have to belong to God's people by using the language of election to ascribe to them key Old Testament

allusions to Israel as a nation. That Peter uses these honorifics to incorporate Gentile converts into the narrative of Israel is noteworthy. As the primary human custodians of God's mission in their contexts, Peter is eager for his readers to understand that more significant than what they do, their mission is first and foremost centered on their identity. Because their mission is anchored in who they are, understanding and fully embracing their new status in Christ constitutes a key component of their pursuit of God and witness for him.

The believers' new identity as exiles and a holy priesthood carried significant implications for how they were to live and witness in the world. Each of the honorifics Peter uses to illustrate the new identity of converts is a metaphor of the church in mission, a picture of it living out its witness in the world (Van Engen 2000:193). Although they are alienated in their own social world, they are called to actively engage it with the gospel. By identifying the church as a "holy, royal priesthood," "holy nation," and "a people belonging to God" (2:5, 9), Peter invites his audience to a faithful participation in the mission of God both by means of verbal proclamation, but mostly through an ethical lifestyle given their current circumstances (1:13-16; 2:11-12). The believers' ethical lives are of utmost importance to Peter. For him, it is an eloquent way of witnessing to the transformative power of the gospel. Six of the thirteen New Testament references to ἀναστροφή (*anastrophē*)—conduct, behavior, way of life—are found in 1 Peter alone (1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16). Peter wants their conduct to be honorable (2:12), chaste (3:2), and good (3:16). He connects correct ethical behavior to "doing good" (2:15, 20; 3:6, 13, 17; 4:19). He grounds his call for ethical living (holiness) on the fact that God who called them is holy (1:13-16) and on its potential missional effect on the onlooking Gentiles (e.g. 2:12-15; 3:2, 16; 4:4). Mission and ethics are so powerfully linked in 1 Peter 2:9-10 that it becomes impossible to detach one from the other. As such, rather than withdrawing from the world into a state of secluded piety that holds little relevance to outsiders or undermining the social structure, Peter calls the church to be radically different from the world but fully missionally engaged in it. For him,

> The church is not against the world in that it does not express holiness by reciprocating the world's animosity toward it, and neither does the church demonstrate holiness by condemning the ways of the world with self-righteous living and rhetoric. Instead the church is to be different because it is in relationship with a God who is different, and it is simply trying to stay in step with his ways in the world. (Beach 2015:130)

In 1 Peter, ethical living includes believers being self-controlled (1:13), staying away from all forms of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander (2:1), abstaining "from the passions of the flesh" and keeping their "conduct among the Gentiles honorable" (2:11-12). Correct ethical behavior is also demonstrated in the way believers submit to civil leaders (2:13-17), in the way servants submit to their masters (2:18), in the way believing wives submit even to husbands who are hostile to their faith (3:1-6), in the way believers extend sincere love and hospitality to each other in the Christian community (1:22; 3:8; 4:9), and in the way Christians "honor all people" (2:17). Two readings of Peter's repeated calls to submission are possible. First, it is imaginable that Peter's counsel aims to refute the accusations of outsiders by demonstrating that Christians lead disciplined lives, adhering to what is deemed as virtuous and acceptable conduct in Roman society (Edwards 2017:106; McKnight 1996:166). Second, considering his exhortation to emulate Jesus' submissiveness in his endurance of unjust suffering (2:21-23), Peter's reiterated calls for submission are best understood as a "Christological basis for missional living"—a call for believers to engage their world with a Christ-like distinction (Flemming 2015:102).

Clearly, Peter's view of holiness and the ethical lifestyle that is linked to it is not the type of holiness that would lead believers to withdrawal from society but one that is an integral part of the end imagined by God for them. He is of the view that Christian witness is strengthened by the ethical conduct exhibited by the Christian community. Living ethically and honorably in the midst of hardship has the potential of leading others to inquire about the hope that Christians have (2:12; 3:15).

Embracing the Missionary Zeal of House Churches Today

The books of Acts and 1 Peter have a universal appeal. Because of the themes they address (e.g., suffering, hope, promise, ethical living, perseverance, and divine care), their messages remains highly relevant to the circumstances of numerous contemporary Christians who encounter adverse reaction to their faith, live in constant danger of social alienation, or simply live in peril because of their faith.

Reflecting on the contemporary approach to Christian ministry, church health scholar Greg Ogden compares it to "a football game with twenty-two people on the field in desperate need of rest, and fifty thousand people in the stands in desperate need of exercise" (2016:25). This is a tragic departure from the strong emphasis of the New Testament on ministry as the function of the total church membership. The priestly ministry of every church member advocated in Acts and 1 Peter has important implications for its missionary enterprise (Acts 1:8; 2:17-18; 8:4; 1 Pet 2:5, 9). Offering

sacrifices acceptable to God as a priest involves serving both God and others by faithfully and responsibly fulfilling one's vocation in society in accordance with the gifts of the Spirit (1 Pet 4:10). As such, whatever work to which God has called a believer—even the simplest, everyday tasks—should be seen as an opportunity to live out his or her priestly calling in the world (Allison 2000:786-787). From that perspective, Christ's commission to make disciples in Matthew 28:19-20 could be paraphrased, "As you go about your daily lives, make disciples of the people you interact with." Therefore, the church's holy priestly calling is an invitation to let one's faith in Christ permeate all dealings—family, school, business, and so on. By virtue of this commission and the enabling gifts of the Spirit bestowed on each believer (Acts 2: 17-18; 1 Pet 4:10), all Christians are called and commissioned, whatever their walk of life, to share their faith. God has intentionally placed each believer in their neighborhood, job, school, or other locations for the strategic purpose of being outposts for his kingdom. They are the only missionaries some may ever meet or meaningfully interact with. Therefore, Christians should regard their work as a calling rather than just an occupation. When believers view their jobs as part of God's calling on their lives, they add new meaning to Christian witness. Thus, it is important for each believer to strive to connect their deeply held professional dreams with their faith in Christ and their missionary mandate.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, Paul uses four distinct terms for the conferral of the Spirit: gifts (*charisma*—verse 4), services (*diakonia*—verse 5), workings (*energema*—verse 6), and manifestation (*phanerōsis*—verse 7). *Charisma* is an inclusive designation of all the gifts of the Spirit. The emphasis is, rather than being based on the receiver's worthiness, spiritual gifts are the outworking of the Spirit's grace. *Diakonia* emphasizes the purpose of spiritual gifts: a Christlike attitude of servanthood for the common good of the community of God's people. It excludes any preoccupation for special status in the body of Christ on the part of the one who serves. *Energema* directs the attention to God's energy as the source of all gifts. *Phanerōsis* stresses that every believer has at least one spiritual gift for the common good. In view of such an understanding of spiritual gifts, Christians are to consider spiritual gifts as given to them to be stewarded in the work of the gospel ministry. Whole-church ministry calls for a complete exercise of the full range of available spiritual gifts. Thus, the architect, landscaper, computer software engineer, banker, garbage collector, shopkeeper, plumber, builder, or nurse—all have been given special gifts by God to be used for him. By embracing their profession as a vocation, every believer becomes a full-time minister in whatever walk of life God has intentionally placed them for the strategic purpose of being an outpost of his kingdom.

Further, in house churches, where a formal distinction between clergy and laity is absent, all members have the opportunity for equal participation and mutual edification.

Conclusion

The contextual, theological, and missiological dimensions of house churches in the New Testament provide valuable insights into the dynamics of early Christian communities. The sense of community, fellowship, worship, and mission zeal cultivated within these house churches holds lasting significance for present-day church life. Since the social challenges faced by early Christians resonate with the experiences of many contemporary believers, drawing inspiration from their steadfast dedication, missional fervor, and strategic approaches in the face of societal and existential challenges is not just advisable but imperative for believers in the present era. Similar to the Early Church (cf. Act 6:1-7), contemporary Christians should be open to exploring ways to improve the organizational structure of their congregations in order to discern effective methods for enriching their fellowship, worship, and discipleship.

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