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christian growth ministries

Embracing the Potential of Prayer Teams

By Kel Willis

I am sure that all of us are concerned about the effectiveness of our prayer ministry, both personally and as a church. It is also true that most of us struggle to maintain our regular and personal prayer times and need to see them become more effective and enjoyable. One really productive way to do this is through being accountable to others. This can be done by agreeing with a small number of people, ideally three, to commit to a regular time together for prayer. The concept is a response to the promise of Jesus in Matthew 18:20: 'Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.' There is nothing new in this concept; encouraging believers to be part of a prayer triplet is practised in many churches around the world, however I rarely see the potential of this method capitalised on in the Australian setting.

Be accountable to others.

Praying together helps us more effectively encourage each other and also helps others to see the value of prayer. A small group of three is ideal because it provides the opportunity to build trust and confidence in each other, so that the group quickly develops as a team. In this context relationships can be built and needs can be met as each person contributes and is encouraged in their walk with God. As relationships are strengthened, lasting friendships are formed and this in turn impacts the whole culture and atmosphere of the local church.

Developing an attitude of prayer

When Paul said, 'Pray continuously' (1 Thess. 5:17), he was suggesting developing an attitude of prayer, of always being in an attitude of dependence on the Father, believing him for his purposes. The following verse affirms this: 'Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.' Paul is affirming the confidence we can have in our Father to be our sufficiency in all our circumstances. In our prayers together, it is a good thing to praise him for all his evident blessings and to affirm our absolute confidence in his commitment to us in the midst of difficulties.

In Acts 2:42 we are told that the early Christians were devoted to prayer. For that to be so, they must have been deeply devoted to God and his purposes. I imagine them tapping in to the heart of God, discerning what he wanted to do in their lives and through them to others. I believe

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that God intends our prayer lives to have this same sense of purpose and devotion. He wants us to spend time engaging with him about how we should pray, and what we should be trusting him for. One of my teachers at Bible College encouraged us to

seek the mind of God for his will to be made clear in our prayer times. I remember him saying, 'some people aim at nothing in their prayers and hit it every time!' I am sure that most of you have heard to prayers that seemed to be devoid of real purpose, and sense of really engaging with



God for his purposes to be fulfilled. The reality is that in group prayer meetings, the prayers are predictable, with the same people pray the same generalised requests.

In the book *Clearing the Cobwebs* we tell the story of a new Christian attending his first prayer meeting. He listened as an older man rose and prayed for some ten minutes for the pastor, the missionaries, the lost in the community and finally for the lack of evident spiritual life in the church. He concluded his prayer with the earnest request, 'Lord, sweep away the cobwebs from our hearts.' The new convert, impressed with the intensity and apparent sincerity of the prayer, nevertheless pondered on these last words. When in subsequent prayer meetings the man prayed essentially the same way and ended with the same request, the young man grew increasingly curious and felt there was somehow something wrong. Finally, one evening after the man prayed the usual prayer and yet again pleaded, 'Lord, sweep away the cobwebs from our hearts', the young man suddenly saw the problem. He rose to his feet and exclaimed, 'Lord, please kill that spider!'

Praying can be transformed and transformational.

I wonder how our prayer life is impacted when we read passages like 2 Corinthians 10:4 which declares that 'the weapons we fight with ... have divine power to demolish strongholds' or Ephesians 1:18-20 that encourages us to recognise and embrace the authority and enabling of God as we engage with the spiritual powers that stand against us. How do these passages become relevant to us when we pray for lost people, who we are told have eyes that are spiritually blind and ears that are blocked by Satan so that they cannot hear or see the glorious gospel? Do we then seek to engage with God at this level? Do we believe that the role of the Holy Spirit is to open people's eyes and unblock their ears so that they will see, understand and hear the wonderful truth of the gospel? When a small group of praying people embraces this truth it can transform how they pray for, their non-Christian friends.

When we spend time seeking the mind of God on the things we should be praying for our praying can be transformed and transformational. John wrote, 'This is the confidence we have in approaching God; that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us' (1 John 5:14). The implication here is that the will of God is discernable. This of course presupposes a

walk with God that enables us to engage with him. Jesus said that if we abide in him and continue to embrace his words we can ask what we wish and it will be done. This is not an open invitation to make God a genie or our errand boy who is waiting to short-circuit all the bad things that might happen to us. Rather it is an invitation to have a relationship of dependence on him in which we desire and discern his will and then identify with that in prayer.



An important element in any prayer group is confidentiality.

How do prayer triplets work?

The idea is to find two other like-minded people who are willing to spend time together praying and encouraging one another. You will need to establish a mutually agreeable time and place, on a regular weekly basis. Be sure to be disciplined in the use of time. Set a time-frame so that the period you have together will be used wisely.

Finally an important element in any prayer group like this is confidentiality. Agree together that you will really learn to trust one another to the point of vulnerability; this will enable you as a group to go deeper with God. Affirm the purpose for meeting together. This is important because it gives direction and keeps the group focused and stops it getting sidetracked.

What should we pray for?

This should be established as part of the purpose of the group, but here are a few suggestions. Always begin with praise and thanksgiving; this is fundamental to prayer. Trust God to guide you in knowing what to pray for and how. There are few things less motivating than general prayers that don't really come to grips with the issues, like 'Please bless the missionaries.' In contrast, when you are able to be specific and really pray through to a point of seeing these things become a reality, it is wonderfully encouraging.

This is not an open invitation to make God a genie or our errand boy.

I am involved with a rehab centre for women with life-controlling issues. When I first got involved there were seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The local community was against the concept of a rehab in their neighbourhood, the local council was suggesting all kinds of restrictions and, in the midst of this, the purchase of the property was far from secure and we thought it could be lost. The one thing we had going for us was the deep and growing conviction that God was in this project. So we prayed, together and in private, for each of the insurmountable obstacles to be taken away and turned into a testimony for Jesus' name. Has it been a battle? Absolutely! Have we felt overwhelmed? Many times! Have we been disappointed in people? Frequently! But our ongoing conviction as never wavered and we have seen God turn it all around. We are now financially viable, the local community person most opposed to the project recently spoke at an open meeting of her commitment to supporting the centre, the local council is really on side and, best of all, many people have been touched and transformed through the gospel.

I sometimes find it helpful to read the prayers of Paul and note just how specific his prayers were. They included praise and worship and affirmed the wonder and privilege of being part of God's family, but embodied in most of them were very specific requests (Rom. 15:30-33; Eph. 1:15-21; Eph. 3:14-20; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-12). Paul prayed in the will of God and expected him to respond. I would encourage you to read the chapter on prayer in the book *Clearing the Cobwebs* to help you reflect more on this subject.

Pray for each other in your personal and family lives

Share your journey: What are your encouragements? What issues are you battling? Do you need wisdom for a current situation? Where are you in your faith journey with Jesus? People I pray with and who pray for me are always encouraged to ask God for wisdom for day-to-day ministry, and the promise of God is to give it liberally: 'If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all.' That is a cause for thanksgiving. It's also a great thing to really get to know each other's families. Remember their names and the issues specific to them. Perhaps meet together socially with your families from time to time to cement the connection. Recognise your potential to be a significant part of their lives and not just their mum's or their husband's prayer partner.

See the opportunities and learn how to use them in a non-offensive and relationship-building way.

Pray for the church

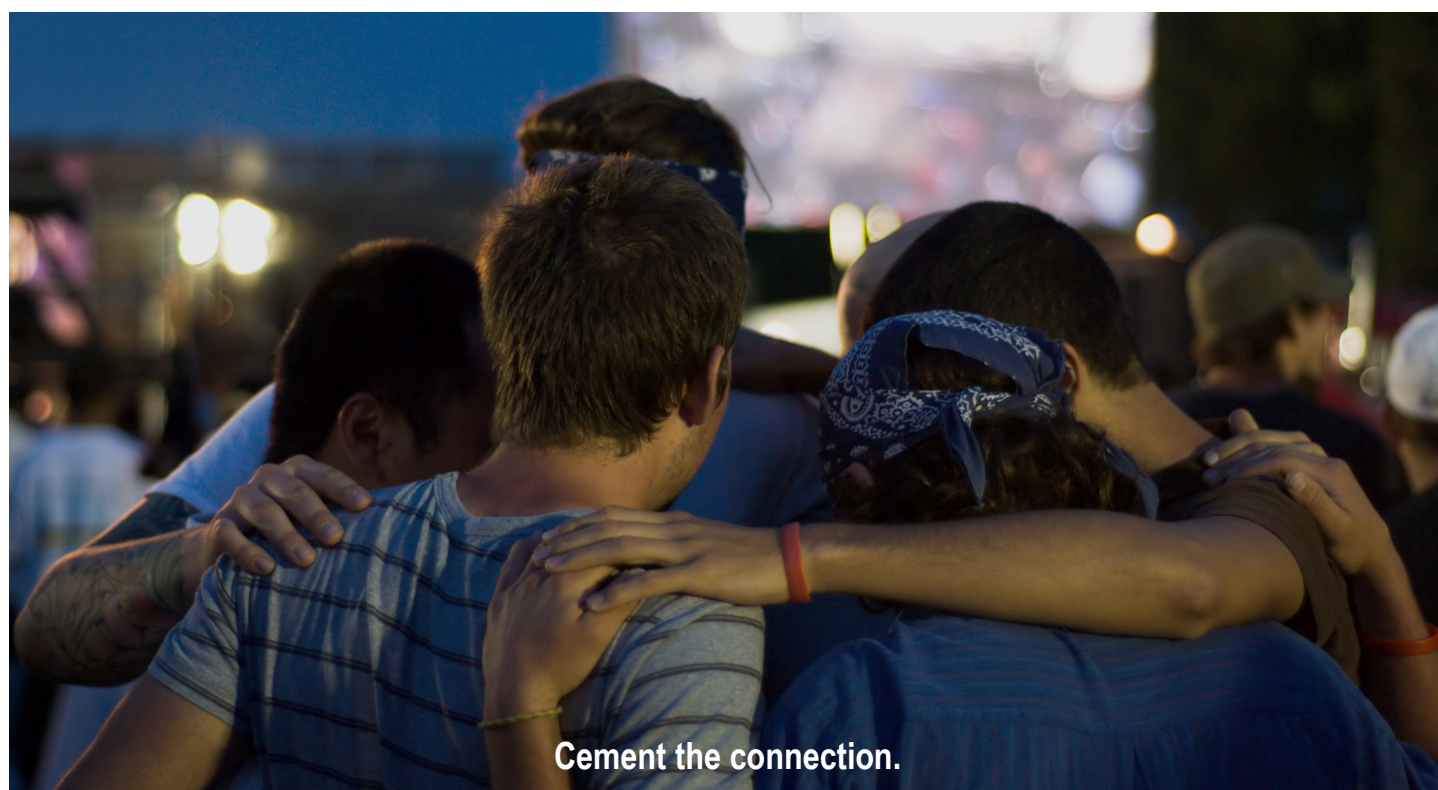
You are a member of the body of Christ, and God wants you to engage with him in what he is seeking to do in your local church. We are encouraged in the Bible to pray for our leaders. Pray especially for those who have the responsibility of teaching and building spiritual principles into the church. Be sensitive to the issues that are being confronted by your church leaders as they seek to edify the congregation and evangelise the lost.

Pray for your non-Christian friends and contacts

This is an opportunity to talk about evangelistic opportunities and to specifically focus on a few friends; ideally each group of three would pray for six people you are seeking to proactively engage with the gospel. If this is a little scary, remember that all of us are somewhat tentative in sharing our faith with others. I pray for wisdom to see the opportunities and to learn how to use them in a non-offensive and relationship-building way. It is helpful to appoint one of the team as the coordinator. This is especially helpful if you are not able to plan the same time each week as your regular meeting time.

Group prayer is powerful and a small number seeking to find the mind of God in their prayer lives and then trusting him to bring it to pass is one of his strategies for growth in the church. The awesome thing about this is that God wants us to engage with him in his purposes!

Clearing the Cobwebs is available through Christian Growth Ministries at the address below for \$10.00 per copy (posted), or through Koorong book stores.



Cement the connection.

The Scandalous Notion of Conflict as an Opportunity

by Bruce Burgess

The scandal laid bare

Sometimes someone puts something in a way that makes you stop and think.

Sometimes it's because a clever person makes something that is backed by centuries of widespread practice, rational belief supported by overwhelming evidence and rich life experience sound ridiculous – even though it is not. Take for example the noted atheist Richard Dawkins' response to a recent question on the ABC's Q&A program as to whether having a belief in God was a symptom of mental illness. Here is Dawkins' strangely seductive, but ultimately shallow, reply:

As to whether religious belief is a mental illness, I don't think it's fair to call it a mental illness because so many people actually do it. On the other hand I think you could say that if you met one person, just one person, who claimed to believe some of the things that religious people as a whole claim to believe, you would think they were suffering from it. I mean it's just because so many of them believe it that we treat it as normal. But if you actually met somebody who said he believed that water could turn into wine, a man could walk on water, that a man could raise somebody else from the dead, you'd say, "Well, put him away." But because so many people believe it, you take it seriously.ⁱ

Thus in one deft sweep Dawkins confines millions of people throughout history to the asylum, conveniently failing to mention the basis for that belief and the fact that practising psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors of all persuasions, whether believers or not, do not actually treat believers in God as having a mental illness.ⁱⁱ

Sometimes, however, someone says something that makes us stop and think, not because it's a 'straw man' notion seductively put, but because it's a 'real man' concept revealed to us in a new way for the first time. So let me stop being cryptic and put the scandalous notion plainly out there – *conflict is an opportunity*. And to add the theological dimension, conflict is not simply an opportunity, but it is a God-ordained one.

The rest of this article will seek to convince you that this scandalous notion is in fact true, and that on recovering from the shock, we will ultimately find great hope in what this tells us about our personal dealings with conflict and about the God who permits conflict to occur.

The nature of the scandal

Before we delve into where the notion came from, let's stop for a minute to consider *why* it's so scandalous. The reason is simply this. Ask most of us what we think about conflict and our immediate gut reaction is essentially the same – conflict is bad! This is not an irrational belief, but rather is typically the result of much unpleasant personal experience with conflict in our own lives. Nor is it a uniquely Christian belief – it is a view of conflict shared across the human condition.

Thus, for example, secular writers Dukes, Pisolish and Stephens affirm that in practice, the unspoken rule is that 'conflict is bad, and conflict or even difference is therefore to be avoided' (2000 p.20). In a similar but even stronger vein, the Christian writer Hugh Halverstadt argues that conflict in a Christian context *can often be worse*. This is because:

Many of us have developed a standard way of dealing with it – and that is by not dealing with it.



- core identities are at stake because spiritual commitments and faith understandings are central to a person's psychological identity
- the very content of the Christian gospel calls for cultural and social change 'while Christian religiosity often operates to preserve the status quo' and
- the structures and processes of Christian churches as voluntary institutions tend to 'permit and even entice unacceptable uses of power' (1991 pp.2-3).

Thus it is that in the church, and therefore for us individually as Christians, conflict can actually be even worse in severity and impact than what we see in other areas of society.

In the church, conflict can actually be even worse.

If our underlying view and experience of conflict is typically negative, so too many of us have developed a standard way of dealing with it – and that is by not dealing with it. This is now so well-recognised as a standard response to conflict that secular writer Deutsch presents it as the common human ‘pathology’ of conflict avoidance (1987 pp.38-9).

It is in this context of an overwhelmingly negative understanding and response to conflict that the scandal arises. Who in their right mind could suggest that conflict was an opportunity? And who, other than the theorists and people who don’t live in the real world, could possibly suggest that in some way God willingly allows people to experience the pain of conflict? This simply runs counter to everything that our intuition and experience tell us is the case, and for some of us who have been particularly hurt, it may even initially appear to border on the offensive.

The origin of the scandal

Whilst it may be difficult to find a definitive answer to the question of where the notion of conflict as an opportunity initially came from within Christian writing, one of the earliest Christian advocates of this view of conflict was Ken Sande in his landmark work on responding biblically to conflict, *The Peacemaker* (2004).ⁱⁱⁱ

It is not possible to do justice here to his expansive presentation of the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, the examples of it found in the Bible connected with conflict, and the implications of this for us in our lives, as the whole first and third chapters of Sande’s book are devoted to this subject. However, the following short excerpt is indicative of the argument:



God’s sovereignty is so complete that he exercises ultimate control even over painful and unjust events (Exod. 4:10-12; Job 1:6-12, 42:11; Ps 71:20-22; Isa. 45:5-7; Lam 3:37-38; Amos 3:6; 1 Peter 3:17). This is difficult for us to understand and accept, because we tend to judge God’s actions according to our notions of what is right ... As the passages cited above indicate, nothing in our lives happens by chance. We will never suffer trials or be involved in disputes unless God allows them and is watching over them (2004 pp.62-3).

Sande’s basic contention is that God is both good and sovereign, and that this extends even to the suffering which comes through situations of conflict. Perhaps in terms of actual biblical language within the Bible itself, Joseph comes closest to voicing something of the concept, when after all of his suffering at the hands of his brothers, having saved Egypt from famine and having given a most public demonstration of the power of forgiveness, he says to them, ‘You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.’ (Gen. 50:20)

That God may be working out good purposes even through suffering is of course not new to Christian theology, being only an extension of the thinking behind the Christian response to the problem of pain generally.^{iv} But what, exactly, are the implications for us of being willing to consider the sovereignty of a loving God sovereignty when it comes to allowing the mess of conflict? What possible good purposes might come from God allowing conflict to take place?

Real life implications of conflict as an opportunity

If conflict represents an opportunity, what kind of opportunity might this be? Sande expounds the notion this way:

...the Bible teaches that we should see conflict neither as an inconvenience nor as an occasion to force our will on others, but rather as an opportunity to demonstrate the love and power of God in our lives. This is what Paul told the Christians in Corinth when religious, legal and dietary disputes threatened to divide their church:

So whether you eat or drink or *whatever you do*, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Cor.10:31 – 11:1)

This passage presents a radical view of conflict. It encourages us to look at conflict as an opportunity to *glorify God, serve others, and grow to be like Christ*. (2004, p.31) (emphasis added)

I would like to use the remainder of this article to blend the unpacking of these concepts with reflections on some of my personal experiences of dealing with people in conflict in which these principles have found rich expression.

Conflict as an opportunity to glorify God

When working with people in conflict, a question which I always ask them is this: How can you please and honour God in this situation? In other words, what is God asking you to do here, and what will be most glorifying to him? This question often has a surprising effect. The notion that we may in some way be *stewards* of a conflict (see Sande 2004 pp.38-41)

has the prospect of giving hope to an otherwise seemingly hopeless situation. I can hear some of you thinking, 'Do you mean to say that God may actually have something that he wants me to do that sits over and above whether or not the conflict gets resolved, or whether the person I am dealing with actually changes or admits their hurtful behaviour, let alone confesses and asks for forgiveness? That perhaps, if I try with all my heart to approach this situation in a godly way, and do my best to actually live that out, then I can leave the outcome of the conflict itself (including changing the other person's behaviour) to him? Now that is the first breath of hope I've heard, because I just can't make this whole awful mess all OK; there's too much I can't control. But if you're talking about seeking to do my best to respond in a God-pleasing way to this conflict, yes, that I can genuinely try to do.'

I have seen time and again situations in which people have lost all hope of a good outcome or resolution to a conflict, but instead have found hope in focusing their energy and intent on seeking to please and honour God. And in humility, this has often led them for the first time to be willing to own their own contribution to the conflict, to be willing to 'get the log out of their own eye', and to be able to repent, confess and ask for forgiveness not for everything which has gone wrong, but for those things which *they* have done which have been hurtful, harmful or sinful. And this has often led to a reciprocal confession and request for forgiveness from the other party, and reconciliation has flowed.

At other times, seeking to glorify God has led people to genuinely try to find a path to peace with those with whom they are in conflict. And even though this has ultimately not been achieved, they have been able to reflect on the situation, knowing that in God's eyes they have done all that was within their power 'to live at peace with everyone' (Rom. 12:18). And this is as much as God requires of us – to do all that is within our power to do, and to ultimately leave the final outcome to him.

Conflict as an opportunity to serve others

A further ray of hope comes in considering that perhaps God's purpose in a conflict is that he may wish to use us to serve another person. We all know difficult people – the ones who seem constantly to be in conflict with others, and who uniformly blame their relational difficulties on everyone except themselves. There are also those who, whilst normally not difficult, are going through times of extreme stress in their lives – perhaps a broken marriage, a pregnant unmarried daughter, financial crisis or the grip of addiction. I have had the joy of witnessing the liberating effect of someone in a conflict beginning to consider that perhaps their role in it was actually an assignment from God to show grace and love to their 'opponent'.



The terminally irascible person may have always felt judged and so have gone on the defensive, so showing them kindness, admitting your own faults and even speaking to them about their difficulties in dealing with others with gentleness and humility, may make them willing to address this broader issue in a way which has never before been possible.

And as for the person in a time of crisis, perhaps the call to serve others in conflict will give us the impetus to show that individual uncommon love – perhaps not treating them as their harshness deserves, but instead extending to them acts of unmerited grace, and in so doing breaking through and perhaps achieving an openness and a restoration that a direct confrontation could never have achieved, and in so doing being able to minister to them in the midst of their pain.

Conflict as an opportunity to grow to be like Christ

In my own life, conflict has been a great refiner of my character flaws. It has been the stage for me to work through struggles I have faced, for example, my struggle with anger in dealing with my two beautiful children who nevertheless have at times been adept at pressing my buttons till I burst. I have learnt to repent and confess to them. I have learnt to be slow(er!) to anger – still a work in progress. I have also learnt to confess to my wife when ministry demands have impacted our family, and especially her personally.

And I have seen others grow in remarkable ways through the cauldron of conflict. In one mediation which I conducted, a party began the process with a mindset of woundedness and resentment, hopeless and bowed down. Through the intense pressure of pleading before God, of seeking to honour him, of trying to pursue peace with a very difficult person, a place of grace and maturity was reached which I am firmly convinced could never have been possible without the conflict having taken place. Was it agonisingly painful? Yes. Was there loss and cost involved, even at a ministry and church level? Yes. Would the person have ever chosen to go through what they did? No. But was God at work in their life, and did they become more Christlike as a result? Yes, indeed, yes!

A FINAL MESSAGE OF HOPE

If you are in the middle of a conflict now, my prayer is that perhaps this article may serve to create some measure of restoration of trust in your loving heavenly father, in his unfailing goodness and in the prospect that even from the pain and loss of your conflict, God still holds you close and is yet at work in your life and in this situation.

If you will be willing to seek to see what God may actually be wanting to achieve through the conflict, and even in you, this in itself may help to bring you hope. It may even prompt you to see the conflict in a new way and to perhaps change the way you have been approaching it and the person your conflict is with.

May the God of all peace be with you.

Bruce Burgess is the National Director of PeaceWise, a Christian ministry organisation dedicated to promoting peace and reconciliation in relationships through biblical principles and the power of Christ. For practical help on responding biblically to conflict, and for details of PeaceWise's extensive national training program in biblical peacemaking running from May to October this year, see www.peacewise.org.au

ⁱ Richard Dawkins on the ABC's Q&A episode *God, Science and Sanity*, aired 8 March 2010 and accessible at <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/txt/s2831712.htm> (Dawkins' answer begins at the 10:02 mark in the tape of the show which is viewable at this link).

ⁱⁱ For a more detailed Christian engagement with the issue of atheism, see the previous issue of *Interact*, *Atheism under Scrutiny*, *Interact* 20.3 is accessible from kelwillis@bigpond.com, through our website www.cgm.org.au or the *Interact* blog site <http://interactmagazine.wordpress.com>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sande's work was first published in 1982, and appears to be the first comprehensive biblical exposition of the argument. Other notable Christian writings that express the same concept in the context of conflict include Flynn (1976), Lowry & Meyers (1991) and Schrock-Shenk (2000).

^{iv} See for example on this topic generally, Dickson (2001), Thompson & Kelshaw (2007) and Yancey (1990).

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