

The Sin of Gluttony



And put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite. Pr. 23:2

Mike Atnip

It's the sin we are all afraid to touch. I am not even sure why that is, except maybe it is like the sin of materialism; so many of us are guilty of it we hardly know where to start. Or, simply put, if we speak out we will be incriminating ourselves ... so we conveniently move on to a subject that we feel more comfortable with.

As I ponder the situation, though, it is sort of amazing that in over four decades of church life, I can only remember one sermon that was specifically focused on gluttony as a sin. And I cannot recall one time in my lifetime that a church disciplined any member for gluttony. Is it because we do not have that problem in our midst? Or is it, like the sin of materialism, something we have just grown so used to that there would be a major revolt in our churches if people who obviously do not have their eating under control were barred from the communion cup?

To be sure, my heart sort of trembled—as I started writing this article—like Gideon's probably did when he thought of destroying his father's altar of Baal. To destroy something that family, friends, and fellow believers worship with a passion? I have to wonder just how much Gideon struggled with that command.

Before beginning, let me say that this article is not directed at anyone in particular. People in the past have asked me, after speaking or writing on a topic, "Were you thinking of me when you said that?" Or, "Did you have so-and-so in mind when you wrote that?" I usually refuse to say yes or no, and tell them, "If the shoe fits, wear it."

And so my advice to anyone who wonders if I was thinking of anyone in particular as I write, is this: If this article fits you, wear it.

Gluttony is a sin that historically has been closely associated with wealth. Even Sodom was used as an example, later in history, for "pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness ... neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy." Ez. 16:49 It strikes me that Sodom is remembered for laziness and gluttony rather than the gross immorality which we often think of when we think of Sodom. Sodom was wealthy, proud, and gluttonous, and did not use her extra resources to help the poor. So God let her be destroyed. Doesn't that remind you of our North American society?

Do we have ears to hear?

What is gluttony?

We really do not need to spend a lot of time defining gluttony. We all know that gluttony is uncontrolled eating. And yes, skinny people can be gluttons. Some people simply will have a harder battle with this sin than others.

But let's park here at this point for a moment. It seems our culture has made it taboo to speak against being overweight. There is virtue in not making fun of overweight people; in fact, we should make fun of no one. But we need to overcome our fear of speaking against being overweight, and face reality. And that reality is that most overweight people are overweight because they are gluttons.

Ouch! Do I have proof for such a statement?

In a recent conversation with a Christian Canadian medical doctor, I told him that from my observations, I think the percentage of people who are overweight from a medical condition is quite low; definitely single digit, and probably in the 1-2% range. Then I asked him what he thought of my opinion.

His answer somewhat shocked me. He told me frankly that I was wrong. He said the percentage of people who are overweight from reasons other than overeating was 0%.¹

It is quite simple, he explained. If a person's body is storing fat, then the person is eating more calories than what he/she needs to live. And it really is that simple! The answer to stop the fat-storing process is quite simple: eat less calories, or exercise more. He then told the story of how a lady came to him for advice about her weight gain. She had been to several other doctors, trying to find out what medical condition it might be that was causing her to gain weight. The other doctors could find nothing abnormal with her body, so she came to him.

¹ He did not mention it, but I assume he was referring only to fat buildup, not fluid retention.

He told her in plain words what the answer was: she was eating too much. But she wasn't convinced. So he asked her, "If you stopped eating, do you think you would still gain weight?"

"Yes!" was her convinced reply.

So he told her, "Why don't you go on a two-week fast. This will see whether you gain weight even if you don't eat." She agreed, fasted for two weeks ... and of course lost several pounds of weight.

But the story doesn't end there. The doctor told me that the lady quit coming to see him for advice. He sadly remarked, "I suppose she went seeking for another doctor somewhere who would tell her that she had a medical problem of some sort that was causing her weight gain."

I relate this story because it sums up so well the way we have come to view gluttony. We have convinced ourselves too many times that our sin is indeed an "eating disorder" or a "medical problem," and not a sin. But I do want to be careful. There may well be some cases of people who have a medical condition that causes weight gain, even if a person totally fasted. But from my research, such cases are indeed rare. And, in some cases, weight gain may be from fluid retention, not fat buildup. If you truly have a medical condition that causes weight gain even though you eat nothing or practically nothing, you need feel no conviction. But for the rest of us, it is time we simply face the facts: fat buildup is from gluttony.

The "epidemic"

Our government here in the US is getting concerned. Two out of every three people in the USA are now overweight. One out of three are not overweight by a couple of pounds, but obese, which means seriously over ideal weight. Another recent statistic that I read stated that about 33% of all school-age children in the United States are now considered overweight or obese. In the US, the cost of dealing with obesity is estimated at \$100 billion annually.² Yes, that is billions, not millions; enough to eradicate starvation in the whole world.

There are several reasons for this "epidemic," but it can basically be narrowed down to two words: gluttony and laziness. What can we expect from a generation of children who grow up sitting on the couch watching TV

and stuffing Twinkies down their throats? Obesity rates have tripled in the last three decades. Instead of making the children plant, weed, and harvest the green beans in the garden, and feeding them the beans when they are harvested, many in our society have opted for the "easy," automated life. When children grow up with nothing to do besides eat Twinkies and watch perverted TV programming, can we expect anything but a 33% overweight rate and twisted ideas of morality? This is compared to a 12% overweight rate for children among "Plain" churches.

Twelve percent is still too many, but the difference is the work ethic and a more conscientious approach to controlling eating habits.

Is it not time for the church of God to speak to the issue? Actually, now is not the time ... the time is *way* past in our culture. The last few generations seem to have been too quiet about the sin of gluttony in our land.

Interestingly, up until a century or so ago, the church was not quiet about gluttony, and through the ages men of God have spoken and written about it in plain terms. Let's take a look at some of them.

The early church

"The Shepherd of Hermas" is an early church document from the 1st or 2nd century that was held in high esteem among the early church. It is written in an allegorical style, and could be called "The Pilgrim's Progress of the Early Church." The author had this to say about gluttony:

For some through the abundance of their food produce bodily ailments, and thus damage their bodies. Meanwhile other people are damaging their bodies because they don't have enough nourishment. And their bodies waste away. This intemperance in eating is harmful to you who have abundance and do not share it with those who are needy. Give heed to the judgment that is to come! You who are well-to-do, seek out the hungry [while there is opportunity].

I find it interesting that the author sees two evils in gluttony. First he mentions health reasons. The knowledge that overeating is harmful to a person's physical health has been around a long time. It doesn't take 21st-century medical technology to figure that out. But the other evil of gluttony is that of not sharing when we have more than we need. Woe to the man who has more than he needs, but does not share it. Gluttony is also harmful to a person's

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² <http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/123702-overview>

spiritual health! Paul tells us quite plainly in Romans 8:13, “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die.” In modern “Street English” we could say, “If you keep feeding your face just because it feels good, God will have to depart from you.”

Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria lived during the late 2nd century into the early 3rd century. A prolific writer, he touched many themes. The following are extracts from the first part of Book 2 of “The Instructor,” concerning gluttony. I forewarn you, he minces not his words.

Some men, in truth, live that they may eat, just like the irrational animals do, “whose life is their belly, and nothing else.” But the Instructor enjoins us to eat that we may live ... [Food] is to be simple, truly plain, suiting precisely simple and innocent children—as ministering to life, not to luxury. Our eating should lead us to two things—health and strength ...

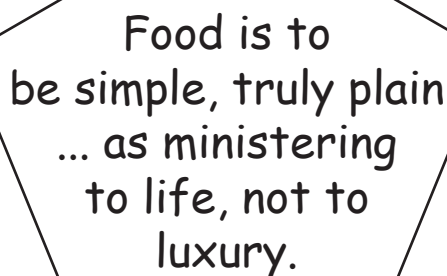
They are not ashamed to sing the praises of their delicacies, giving themselves great trouble to get lampreys in the Straits of Sicily, the eels of the Mæander, and the kids found in Melos, and the mullets in Sciathus, and the mussels of Pelorus, the oysters of Abydos, not omitting the sprats found in Lipara, and the Mantinican turnip; and furthermore, the beetroot that grows among the Ascræans: they seek out the cockles of Methymna, the turbot of Attica, and the thrushes of Daphnis, and the reddish-brown dried figs ... Besides these, they purchase birds from Phasis, the Egyptian snipes, and the Median peafowl.³ Altering these by means of condiments, the gluttons gape for the sauces. “Whatever earth and the depths of the sea, and the unmeasured space of the air produce,” they cater for their gluttony. In their greed, the gluttons seem absolutely to sweep the world with a dragnet to gratify their luxurious tastes. These gluttons, surrounded with the sound of hissing frying-pans, and wearing their whole life away at the pestle and mortar, cling to [material things]. More than that, they render plain food impotent, namely bread, by straining off the nourishing part of the grain,⁴ so

3 His point is that to buy expensive foods shipped in from other countries is a form of gluttony.

4 Quite plainly, white flour. The point is that in those days, making white flour would have been more labor intensive and

that the nourishing part of food becomes matter of reproach to luxury.

There is no limit to Epicurism⁵ among men. For it has driven them to sweetmeats, and honey-cakes, and sugarplums; inventing a multitude of desserts, hunting after all manner of dishes. A man like this seems to me to be all jaw, and nothing else. “Desire not,” says the Scripture, “rich men’s dainties,” (Pr. 23:3) for they belong to a false and base life. They partake of luxurious dishes, which a little after go to the dung-hill.⁶



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But we who seek the heavenly bread must rule the belly, which is beneath heaven, and much more the things which the belly craves, which “God shall destroy,” (1 Co. 6:13) says the apostle, justly condemning gluttonous desires ...

For they have not yet learned that God has provided for man food and drink for sustenance, not for pleasure; since the body derives no advantage from extravagance in foods. For, quite the contrary, those who use the most frugal fare are the strongest and the healthiest, and the noblest; as domestics are healthier and stronger than their masters, and husbandmen than the proprietors; and not only more robust, but wiser, as philosophers are wiser than rich men. For they have not buried the mind beneath food, nor deceived it with pleasures ...

For it were not seemly that we, after the fashion of the rich man’s son in the Gospel, should, as prodigals, abuse the Father’s gifts; but we should use them, without undue attachment to them, as having command over ourselves. For we are enjoined to reign and rule over foods, not to be slaves to them ...

But how totally irrational, futile, and inhuman is it for those that are of the earth, fattening themselves like cattle, to feed themselves up for death; looking downwards on the earth, and bending ever over tables; leading a life of gluttony; burying all the good of existence here in a life that by and by will end;

therefore more expensive. And it was only to please the taste buds.

5 Epicurism was the philosophy that nothing is wrong as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else. This is contrasted with Christianity, which states that nothing is right unless it is holy.

6 Meaning, not long after the fancy food is eaten, it passes out of the intestines and becomes dung.

courting voracity alone, in respect to which cooks are held in higher esteem than husbandmen. For we do not abolish social events, but look with suspicion on the snares of custom, and regard them as a calamity. Wherefore daintiness is to be shunned, and we are to partake of few and necessary things ...

We are not, then, to abstain wholly from various kinds of food, but only are not to be taken up about them. We are to partake of what is set before us, as becomes a Christian, out of respect to him who has invited us, by a harmless and moderate participation in the social meeting; regarding the sumptuousness of what is put on the table as a matter of indifference, despising the dainties ...

Wherefore we must guard against those articles of food which persuade us to eat when we are not hungry, bewitching the appetite. For is there not within a temperate simplicity a wholesome variety of eatables? Bulbs, olives, certain herbs, milk, cheese, fruits, all kinds of cooked food without sauces ...

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The seven deadly sins

Sometime during the first millennium of Christian history, a list of seven “chief” sins was compiled. These seven “deadly sins” were lust (or luxury), greed, wrath, envy, pride, laziness ... and gluttony. My inclusion of this list in this article is not an approval or disapproval of the list or its use. But it is interesting to see that gluttony—and its close relative, laziness—were put right up there with what we usually consider to be among the “bad” sins of lust and anger. Essentially, these seven deadly sins were a list of the fruits of a self-centered life, the “me-first” syndrome. They are the opposites of seven virtues: humility, charity, kindness, patience, chastity, diligence ... and temperance.

Temperance

Temperance is self-control. When applied to gluttony, several aspects come into play. We think of overeating, which indeed is a form of intemperance. However, let’s consider the five ways that Gregory “The Great” spelled out eating intemperance in the late 6th century:

1. *Eating before the time of meals in order to satisfy the taste buds.* In other words, unnecessary snacking. Children easily fall into the habit of wanting a premeal

snack, then they are not hungry when the beans are passed at meal time.

2. *Seeking delicacies* and better quality of food to gratify the “vile sense of taste.”

3. *Seeking after sauces and seasonings* for the enjoyment of the taste.

4. *Exceeding the necessary amount of food.*

5. *Taking food with too much eagerness*, even when eating the proper amount, and even if the food is not luxurious. In other words, making it obvious that the eating is done for pleasure and not for nourishment.

These five forms of gluttony are summed up in the matter of *timing, quality of food, use of stimulants, quantity, and undue eagerness* in eating.⁷

Potatoes, or potato chips?

Gregory’s five ways of being a glutton can perhaps be summarized in the war between eating potatoes and eating potato chips. Say you have the bag of chips lying around. Dinner is still an hour away, and the belly growls a little ... “Give me some food!” So you pop open the bag of barbequed chips. “Ummm, these are really good!” exclaim your small children. They entered the kitchen just as you opened the bag, and of course you didn’t feel good about eating some yourself and telling them to wait for dinner.

The chips cost about \$3/lb. The potatoes cost about 1/10 of that. The barbeque sauce tastes so good that you eat more than you intended. The children can’t stop exclaiming how good barbequed potato chips taste. Now, reread the five ways of being a glutton above, and compare that to the situation just described. Gluttony is more than just overeating.

And, of course, when the potatoes are served an hour later, the children grump about having to eat plain old potatoes, and they are not hungry they say. So they eat a few bites of potato. Then two hours after the meal, the children complain that they are hungry, and want a snack ...

This is not to say that to eat a between-the-meals snack is always gluttony. The point is to show that such habits are setting the stage for eating intemperance. Children who grow up in such an atmosphere are certainly more likely to fall into the 33% “overweight” statistic we looked at earlier. And have not most of us here in North

7 Orby Shipley, *A Theory about Sin in Relation to Some Facts of Daily Life, Lent Lects. On The 7 Deadly Sins*, 1875, 270–271.

America grown up in that very atmosphere, at least to a degree?

A Czech reproof

Moving on in time, we come to the late Middle Ages, in what is now the Czech Republic. Here we find Peter Chelcicky and the beginnings of the Bohemian revival that produced the *Unitas Fratrum*. Peter is rebuking the civil leaders and the authorities of the State Church for their gluttony. I warn you again that, like Clement, he minces not his words:

[They are] ‘honorable’ men, who sit in great houses, these purple men, with their beautiful mantles, their high caps, their fat stomachs. As for love of pleasure, immorality, laziness, greediness, uncharitableness, and cruelty—as for these things, the priests do not hold them as sins when committed by [the upper class]. They do not tell them plainly, ‘You will go to hell if you live on the fat of the poor, and live a bestial life,’ although they know the rich are condemned to eternal death by such behavior.

The [friars] pretend to follow Christ, and have plenty to eat every day. They have fish, spices, brawn, herrings, figs, almonds, Greek wine, and other luxuries. They drink good wine and rich beer in large quantities, and so they go to sleep. When they cannot get luxuries, they fill themselves with vulgar puddings till they nearly burst.⁸

It almost sounds like Peter may have been looking into the future at North America in the 21st century!

The Anabaptists

Many of us are familiar with the Schleithem Confession. However, there is another early Anabaptist document called the “Congregational Order” that circulated widely—sometimes right alongside the Schleithem Confession—among early Anabaptists. Our concern in this article is the sixth point of the Order:

⁸ Mike Atnip, *The Birth, Life, and Death of the Bohemian Revival* (Primitive Christianity Publishers, 2009), 34–35.

6. All gluttony shall be avoided among the brothers who are gathered in the congregation; serve a soup or a minimum of vegetable and meat, for eating and drinking are not the kingdom of heaven.⁹

Compare that with some of our fellowship meals, or times when we have a get-together in our homes with long tables filled with exquisite foods. Imagine a church standard against big, fancy meals! While it is arguable whether the Order constituted a “church standard” as such, one thing is clear: the early Anabaptists considered lavish meals to be gluttony.

Heinrich Bullinger—Zwingli’s successor in the Swiss Protestant Reformation—had said some nasty things about the Anabaptists. But he had this to say about their conduct:

Those who unite with them will by their ministers be received into the church by rebaptism and repentance and newness of life. They henceforth lead lives under a semblance of quite spiritual conduct. They denounce covetousness, pride, profanity, drinking, and gluttony.¹⁰ They “denounced” gluttony. Do we?



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Finney on gluttony

If you are inclined to eat too much, you must deny yourselves those kinds of diet that betray you into gluttony. Whatever those kinds of diet are, of which you are so fond, and that overcome you when placed before you, and lead you to transgress the laws of your being, put them entirely away. Do not suffer them to find a place upon your table.

The exact opposite of this course is generally pursued by mankind. From the general conduct of mankind, it would seem that they fear starvation a thousand times more than they do gluttony, and that the utmost attention must be paid to preparing tempting dishes, or mankind would not have sufficient appetite to meet the demands of their nature. Now glut-

⁹ <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/S345.html#ART13>

¹⁰ Guy F. Hershberger, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold S. Bender* (The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 1957), 44.

tony is one of the most common sins in the world. It is the testimony of the best judges upon this subject, that excessive eating is the most common form of intemperance that prevails among mankind, and is the cause of more disease, especially in this country, than any other form of intemperance. How unwise then, how wicked, what tempting God is it, to continue to prepare and set before yourselves those tempting dishes, instead of furnishing your tables with those wholesome, bland articles of diet of which you will be likely to eat only the necessary quantity.¹¹

Asceticism

When calling men to holiness, there will always arise the cry of “Asceticism!” among certain folks who love this world. And, there is indeed an imbalanced view of eating within asceticism. Let’s look at it ...

Asceticism tends to view any activity that brings bodily pleasure as sin. So if eating good-tasting food brings pleasure, then in asceticism eating that food is sin.

But that is not what this article is promoting. We are lifting up the idea of holiness, which says that whatever we do, we do it with the chief aim being to glorify God. If our glorifying of God also brings bodily pleasure, we accept that pleasure and enjoy it. However, many times the path to glorifying God brings physical pain, or just a lesser pleasure to the body than what could be had if we would just “let loose and live.”

We can sum up three views concerning pleasure in this way:

1. *Carnality* has pleasure as the prime goal in its decisions.
2. *Asceticism* forbids any pleasure.
3. *Holiness* does what is right and joyfully accepts either the pleasure or the pain that accompanies the act.

The following quote, by Alfonso Maria de’ Liguori, says it very well:

However, it is not a fault to feel pleasure in eating: for it is, generally speaking, impossible to eat without ex-

periencing the delight which food naturally produces. But, it is a defect to eat, like beasts, through the sole motive of sensual gratification, and without any reasonable object.¹²

My personal “Battle of the Bulge”

I grew up on a farm and spent most of my life working in construction, farming, and logging. As well, as a youth I was active in hunting and other outdoor activities and sports. In other words, I had lots of physical exercise. We were “middle-class” Americans—which is actually “upper-class” if you consider the whole world—and I cannot recall a single day in my life when I didn’t have enough to eat. I can recall very few days when the opportunity to be a glutton didn’t present itself. There was desert available after most meals, and plenty of bacon and ham and cheese. And ... the ice cream and cake for visitors in the evenings, after supper.

With an active lifestyle and some basic moderation, I never put on any extra weight. That is not to say I was never a glutton, as we have seen that gluttony is more than overeating.

Then came the change in lifestyle. And middle age. Instead of lugging a big chainsaw into the woods and cutting timber, or laying concrete blocks all day, I was sitting at a desk staring at a computer screen. And I started the “battle of the bulge.” Within months I gained maybe 10 pounds of weight.

I knew it was time to cut back on eating. But was it ever difficult! For over 30 years I had developed eating habits and tastes. To stop the gain, I had to cut back on my eating by about one third. And to lose that which I had gained? That was *Hard*, with a capital H. I have had to—and still have to—leave the table many times feeling not quite full. It is a simple fact; for every time a person overeats and gains weight, he/she will need to “undereat” to lose that weight. It is, boiled down, the law of reaping what we sow.

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¹² Alfonso Maria de’ Liguori, *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ*, 1835, 282.

¹¹ The Oberlin Evangelist, Lecture XIX, October 7, 1840.

This battle has made me feel a little more supportive of those whose metabolism makes it hard to keep off the pounds. Those of us who have it easier need to be a support to those whose metabolic rate more easily reveals their intemperance. But let's be honest; even those with a low metabolism (and thus they gain excess weight very easily) are called to temperance.

Some people need more food than others. My parents had a friend who used to visit our house occasionally when I was a boy. He was a thin man, with an extremely high

metabolism or something. I have watched him eat up to a quart of ice cream ... after having a big, full meal. I also watched him jump into a 55-gallon drum, flat-footed, and jump right back out ... when he was 55 years of age.

Very few of us could eat like that and not be gluttonous. But this man needed to eat what seemed to be excessive amounts. Others have to eat less than normal to supply their needs. It doesn't seem fair! The one man can enjoy pints of ice cream, in fact, he *needs* to

eat a lot. But the next man can hardly eat a few spoonfuls of sweets without putting it on as excess body fat.

Each of us has to find what temperance means for our specific situation. The cross is heavier for us in some areas of our life than for others. If taking up your cross means denying yourself foods that others can eat, then take up that cross and recognize it is heavier than your brother's in that area of life. God chose your metabolic rate; learn to live by it, control your eating, and accept it. God does all things very well!

Young man, I warn you!

If you are like me, in your youth you can basically eat until you are full, and then later eat a bowl of ice cream ... without any weight gain. But remember what was said above; gluttony is more than being overweight. Those bad eating habits—aka gluttony—will haunt you in days to come. Learn temperance as a 20-year-old, and when you hit 40 years of age the “middle age spread” will not be nearly as hard to control. Learn to say “No” to the ice cream and chips when you have already had a good meal. In fact, make it a habit not to replace nourishing

foods with junk foods. Learn to drink water instead of soft drinks. Learn to not get excited and start exclaiming about how good the ice cream is while you are still young, and when the time comes that you have to pass it by entirely, it will be easier to say no.

Take care of your beast!

Proverbs 12:10 tells us that “a righteous man regardeth the life of his beast.” This verse tells us that a good man will take care of his animals. He will feed, water, and provide shelter for them. Now let's think about it: is not our body, were it separated from our spirit, basically an animal?

The wisdom in Proverbs 12:10 tells us—beyond the normal application—that we live in a body that God expects us to take care of. It is for this reason that we do not smoke, do not use psychotic drugs ... and avoid gluttony. Wikipedia states that “obesity is a leading preventable cause of death worldwide.”¹³ If obesity is preventable, by temperance, are we not called as Christians to prevent obesity?

In summary

The Bible is clear on the matter of gluttony, so clear that we have not spent much time in this article with the verses that speak on the subject.

We have travelled down through the centuries and looked at a few examples of how the church has spoken on the topic. We have seen that historically gluttony was considered a serious sin.

Gluttony is harmful to our physical health. Therefore it is a sin to overeat, whether our intemperance shows itself in accumulated body fat or whether it doesn't. But more importantly than gluttony being unhealthy, it is also unholy. God has called us to holiness; God cannot dwell in an unholy temple. It is necessary, then, for us to overcome gluttony and control our eating habits.

Let's sanctify our eating. Eat, not for pleasure, but for His glory! ~

¹³ Even though it is arguable whether obesity causes more deaths than, say, smoking, we have to agree that overeating is unhealthy. It is time churches began to look at it as being as sinful as smoking. Is it fair to expect our brethren (or even Social Security) to help pay our hospital bills caused by our intemperate eating?



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