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The Gift of Tongues - What Does the Bible Say?

One of the clearest, last-day signs revealed in the Bible is the build-up of spiritual and demonic forces for a final all-out struggle which will settle the destiny of every living soul. God and Satan will meet in the climactic war of Armageddon, and the age-long controversy between good and evil will be resolved for all eternity.

The Bible indicates that Satan will work feverishly through all the artful devices that appeal to the human mind, seeking to deceive the whole planet into his camp. John says that he "is come down ... having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time." Revelation 12:12. In preparation for this encounter, which he has been planning for over 6000 years, the adversary will manipulate both political and religious forces. Centuries of groundwork have been laid in the development of counterfeit ideas and doctrines. The fiendish genius of Satan is aimed at developing a strategy which will keep people from being saved. The ultimate goal of the devil is to make people sin, because sin is the only thing that will keep anyone out of heaven.

The Bible defines sin as "the transgression of the law." 1 John 3:4. Paul further clarifies that it is the breaking of the Ten-Commandment law which constitutes sin. Romans 7:7. It is no wonder at all, then, that the focus of the final contest will be over obedience to God's great moral law. Satan despises the government of heaven and its law. He broke the concord of angels long, long ago by charging God with requiring too much. He accused God of being unjust by demanding obedience to a law that could not be kept. Ever since that time he has tried to make his accusations come true by leading people to break that law. For non-Christians the devil had no problem whatsoever, but how could he unite all the great religious bodies in a program of disobedience?

His grandiose design for the final deception was to lead everyone to transgress against the authority of heaven, even the religious world. Obviously, some scheme would have to be devised which would make Christians comfortable in their transgression, which could be promulgated in the name of Christ, and which would operate across all the boundaries of denomination and creed. Somehow, the plan would have to destroy the traditional view of the Bible as the final authority in matters of faith, and establish some other authority which would still retain a respectable Christian image. In order to encompass all churches and faiths, the program would have to be outside of any doctrine, prophetic interpretation, or standards of living, since these would produce only division and disagreement.

To achieve success, then, in his fantastic goal of harnessing the Christian world in disobedience to God's laws, Satan had to meet four elementary requirements:

Make Christians feel secure in breaking the law.

Lead them to distrust the Word of God as the acid test of truth.

Establish another test besides the Word that would appear genuine and appealing.

Leave out all doctrine, prophetic interpretations, and Christian standards that would prove divisive.

It is not hard to see that all these elements would have to be incorporated into any vast trickery to unite Christians in disobeying the Ten Commandments.

Are Miracle-Workers of God?

Now let's study the actual inspired description of how these conditions will prevail at the end of the age. Incredibly, the deceptive powers of the master counterfeiter will achieve all these objectives.

First, notice that Jesus confirmed how many would lightly disobey His law in the name of religion.

"Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." Matthew 7:21, 22.

Try to understand the alarming significance of those words of our Lord. These people were making great claims of being Christians, even to exercising the extraordinary power of prophesying and casting out devils. They did these miracles in the name of Jesus. But Jesus said He did not even know them; so they were not exercising the apparent spiritual gifts through the power of Christ. Then who gave them the supernatural power to do such miracles? There are only two sources of such power - God and Satan. Since Jesus called them "workers of iniquity," they had to be healing and prophesying in the power of Satan, the author of iniquity.

This establishes that there will be counterfeit manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit in the last days. Outwardly they will appear exactly like the genuine gifts, and will be performed in Jesus' name in the atmosphere of religious fervour. Then how can one tell the difference between the true and the false? Jesus made it very clear. Although they cried, Lord, Lord, they were not doing the will of the Father in heaven. What is the will of God? David answers, "I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart." Psalms 40:8. The people who appealed to Jesus on the basis of their many wonderful miracles were rejected by Him as Satan's workers because they were breaking God's law. They really did not know Jesus, because to know Him is to obey His commandments.

"And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." 1 John 2:3, 4.

They really did not love Jesus either, because to love Him is to keep His commandments, also.

"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous." 1 John 5:3.

Only the Obedient Spirit-Filled

This brings us to another tremendous truth concerning obedience: Only those can be filled with the Spirit who are obedient. This means that the spiritual gifts cannot be demonstrated in the life of one who is breaking God's law. Jesus said, "If ye love me keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever." John 14:15, 16.

The sequence is distinctly set forth in this text. Love leads to obedience, and obedience leads to the filling of the Spirit. No one should overlook the relationship between obedience and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The most basic fact about the Spirit is that He leads into all truth and convicts of sin.

"But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." John 14:26. Again Jesus said, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth." John 16:13.

What is included in "all truth" and "all things" which the Spirit will guide us into? The Sabbath would be there, along with all the other nine commandments. In fact, the very first work of the Holy Spirit is to convict of sin. Christ described that ministry of the Spirit in John 16:8. "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement."

What is sin? "Sin is the transgression of the law." 1 John 3:4. Obviously, one could not be filled with the Holy Spirit without being reprov'd of breaking the law. Lying, stealing, adultery, and Sabbath-breaking will not abide in a Spirit-filled life. The deliberate practice of those sins will effectively frustrate the operation of the Holy Spirit. Wilful sin and the gifts of the Spirit are just as alien to each other as God and Satan. In fact, Jesus taught the startling truth that offending the Holy Spirit leads to the unpardonable sin.

"Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come." Matthew 12:31, 32.

The most serious mistake anyone can make is to reject the guiding, convicting influence of the Spirit as He seeks to lead into obedience to God's law.

The principle was eternally settled by Luke when he wrote under inspiration, "And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him." Acts 5:32. How clearly we can now see why the miracle-workers were turned away by Jesus as "workers of iniquity." Having rejected the will of the Father, His law, they lost access to the power of the Holy Spirit. At that point Satan stepped in to supply a continuation of power by producing the same apparent miracles as the Holy Spirit produced.

Lulled into a fatal blindness by grieving the Spirit which convicted them of disobedience, the professed Christians lost their sensitivity to the violation of God's holy law. Under the exciting emotional stimulus of Satan's spirit they continued to exercise a counterfeit

religious power, based on feeling rather than the authority of the Word of God. Christ taught in Matthew 7:22 that the end time will produce a phenomenon of Christians' claiming the Spirit's power in miracle-ministry, but who are actually manipulated by the devil.

Amazing Fulfilment Today

Are there such people in the world today, and do they meet the four basic requirements for drawing the religious world into a massive scheme of disobedience? To open up that question let me share a recent personal experience involving a group Bible study I had been asked to conduct. The class was made up of six people - three business men and their wives. For many weeks we met every Thursday night to search out the great doctrines of the Bible.

The series was unusual in every respect. In the first place, the three couples appeared to be exceptionally committed Christians. Often during the studies they shared a most fervent testimony concerning their love-experience in Christ. It was very obvious that they had emotional feelings about their personal relationship with Jesus.

The second unusual thing was the eager, open manner in which they accepted truth as it unfolded. As subjects like the Sabbath, state of the dead, and unclean foods were explored, there was wholehearted acceptance. Over and over they exclaimed about the clarity of the issues, and wondered aloud why they had not seen those things before.

On the last night of the Bible studies I extended an invitation to the group to start keeping the Sabbath. To my utter amazement, not one of them had the slightest inclination to obey any of the truths they had so readily believed. My perplexity was compounded when they began to explain why they had no plans to keep the Sabbath. "We have received the baptism of the Holy Ghost, and He tells us everything we do," they explained. "He has not told us to keep the Sabbath. If He does tell us, we will gladly do it. We know it is in the Bible, and we believe it, but the Holy Spirit will have to tell us to keep it before we do it." In vain did I try to show them that the Holy Spirit had already spoken to them through the Word, and that He could not contradict Himself by telling them anything else.

The Word of God is "the sword of the Spirit," says the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:17. That means the Bible is the cutting edge of the Holy Spirit's ministry of conviction. No one can be guided in truth without reference to the Scriptures. Yet these people, in the name of the Lord Jesus Himself, were renouncing the authority of the Bible in favour of their emotional feelings. Indeed, they were setting another test of truth which seemed to them more valid than the Word of God. They were listening to another spirit which comforted them in their violation of God's law, but they were doing it all in the name of Jesus. Professing great love for Christ, they defended their direct revelations as evidence of God's special manifestation in their lives.

What could I say? They looked at me with sorrow and pity because I was not favoured to receive the ecstatic peace and joy which characterised their experience. Suddenly I realised that this was an exact replay of what Jesus had described in Matthew 7:21, 22. These people really believed that their power was coming from God. Yet they were saying Lord, Lord, without doing the will of God. All the gifts of the Spirit which they claimed to possess were parallel to the gifts professed by those who came to Jesus -

casting out devils, prophecy, healing, miracles, etc. Jesus said "many" would come at the end, saying those very words. Are there many who fall into this category today?

All across the land today millions are being attracted by a movement which transcends all barriers of denominationalism. Catholics and Protestants alike are caught up in the exciting phenomenon of being moved by a common spirit. They sincerely believe that the Holy Spirit is endowing them with a new language of the soul and that the power of God is using them to heal, cast out devils, and prophesy.

In the light of Christ's warning, how are we to distinguish between the true gifts and the counterfeit? How can we be certain that miracles are not being worked in the power of Satan? The only way we can recognise the counterfeit is by its failure to obey all the commandments of God. Jesus warned that the great "signs and wonders" of the false prophets in the last days would be so delusive that "even the very elect" would be almost overwhelmed by them. Matthew 24:24. John saw "spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world." Revelation 16:14.

Don't fail to catch the spiritual implications of this demon activity. Miracles are operative only within the context of religion. These end-time evil spirits will work through the garb of churches, in the name of Christ, professing to be ministers of truth. Paul actually speaks of Satan's "ministers ... transformed as the ministers of righteousness." 2 Corinthians 11:15. Writing to the Thessalonians, he further described the work of these false apostles as being "with all power and signs and lying wonders, And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness." 2 Thessalonians 2:9, 10.

The frightening conclusion is that the devil will so closely impersonate the true manifestations of spiritual power that most of the world, including the churches, will be manipulated by him. And according to the Scriptures, only those who obey all of God's commandments out of love will be protected from the deception.

Unfortunately, we live in an age of the spectacular and the bizarre. Because of this climate multitudes are drawn by the promise of healing, miraculous tongues, or demon exorcism. Few pause to ask whether the power is God or Satan. Most are totally unaware of the inspired predictions concerning counterfeit miracles, and how to separate the true from the false. Impressed by the sincerity of those who preach and pray with such obvious power, in the name of Jesus, millions "feel" that it must be from God. Their emotional ecstasy is quickly exalted above the true test of the Scriptures.

In talking to my charismatic Bible study group, I discovered that they had fully conformed to the four essential conditions which Satan requires in order to sweep the religious world into his camp. They felt secure in disobeying the law. They had rejected the Word of God as the final test of truth. They had set up another test - their religious feelings - as the proof of their acceptance with God. They also appealed to the miraculous gifts of the Spirit as evidence of God's approval. Finally, they brushed aside the tremendous doctrinal and prophetic truths we had studied together as being incidental and unimportant in comparison to their charismatic "experience."

Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Episcopalians gladly set aside biblical convictions and denominational stances in order to keep the unity of "the Spirit." But what spirit is it that works equally through those who worship Mary, break the Sabbath, and try to

contact the dead? Certainly not the Spirit of God! The Holy Ghost is given only "to them that obey Him." Acts 5:32.

Now let's take a look at the spiritual gift which has been claimed by more modern Christians than almost any other - speaking in tongues. Since Jesus warned about those in the last days who would prophesy and cast out devils in His name, through the power of Satan, we can be sure that the other spiritual gifts will be counterfeited also. If, indeed, the current epidemic of glossolalia is a perversion of truth, it would be difficult to think of a more perfect plan for Satan to use in getting control of the churches.

No Evidence Needed!

The best way to expose error is to reveal the truth, and the finest way to test the tongues phenomenon is to get the full biblical doctrine of tongues before us. Many believe that speaking in tongues is the evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit. If a person doesn't speak in tongues he is automatically classified as lacking in essential grace and power. This judgmental, mechanistic manner of measuring the Christian experience of other people has produced a large class of spiritual egotists - those who feel themselves to be living on a higher plane than their weaker, unanointed brethren.

Does the baptism of the Holy Spirit require some sign or evidence to confirm its operation? The Bible teaches that it is a gift, and must be received by faith. Paul's doctrine is "that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Galatians 3:14. If it is by faith, then it is not by feeling. In claiming the promise of forgiveness, we do not demand a sign from God that He has fulfilled His word. We know it is done because He said it would be. In the same way, we should claim the promise of the Spirit by faith, not requiring some special evidence from God that He kept His promise. By demanding signs and evidence people are doubting the Word of God.

The fact is that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is just as available to all Christians as is forgiveness of sins. This does not mean, though, that all Christians will receive all the gifts of the Spirit. In fact, Paul states that the gifts, including tongues, will be divided among the Christians. The Holy Spirit Himself decides how the gifts will be distributed, and to whom.

"For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom ... to another faith by the same Spirit ... to another prophecy ... to another divers kinds of tongues ... dividing to every man severally as he will." 1 Corinthians 12:8-11.

Then Paul proceeds to illustrate the different gifts as being parts or members of Christ's body, which is the church. "But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him." 1 Corinthians 12:18. Systematically he points out how impossible it would be for all to receive the same gift. "If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?" Verse 17. Then he dramatises that thought with these questions: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? ... Do all speak with tongues?" 1 Corinthians 12:29, 30. And the answer, of course, is no. The gifts are divided to various members - never the same gift to all members.

Purpose of the Baptism

The most important truth about the baptism of the Holy Spirit is often overlooked, and it has to do with the purpose of the experience. Many have defined it in terms of personal ecstasy, joyful emotions, or inner spiritual happiness. None of these things even touches on the basic reason for the promised outpouring of the Spirit. Some of those things might be included in the subsequent fruits of the experience, but they cannot and should not be mistaken for the baptism itself. Just before His ascension Christ told His disciples to tarry at Jerusalem until the Spirit came upon them "not many days hence." Acts 1:5.

Then He spoke these words: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." Acts 1:8.

Christ emphasised in this promise that the Spirit would give power in their ministry to others. A witness is a person who tells to someone else something which he knows firsthand. The disciples definitely had something to tell, because they had been eye-witnesses of the Messiah. But they were completely unqualified to stand up and effectively communicate what they had seen and heard. The Holy Spirit would come to make them powerful witnesses, so that souls could be won by their preaching. There was no hint from Jesus that the baptism by the Spirit would give them any special feeling. It was not for their personal benefit, but that others through them might be instructed in the way of salvation.

The disciples obeyed the words of their Master and waited in Jerusalem for the promised power, and on the day of Pentecost it happened. While they were all together in a certain house the heavens seemed to open with a rushing sound, and tongues of fire flashed down to rest on each one of them. The promised blessing had arrived just as Jesus had foretold. The witnessing power had descended to fit them for their work of reaching souls; but how did it qualify them and empower them? What did they need in order to witness to all the people in Jerusalem, Judea, and the uttermost parts of the earth? Acts 2:9-11 records sixteen different language groups who were present as the Spirit-filled disciples stepped outside the house to start witnessing.

Let the Scriptures tell us what happened next. "And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." Acts 2:4.

The astonished crowd could not believe their ears "because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed ... saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?" Acts 2:6-8.

Here is a simple description of the true gift of tongues. It is not the uttering of some ecstatic language of heaven. The tongues were real languages that people could understand, and every person of every race was edified and enlightened by hearing the gospel preached in his own mother tongue.

Did this gift of tongues continue to operate in the early church when it was necessary to reach unbelievers? Yes, on certain occasions it was needed in order to overcome the

language barrier and also to confirm the Gentile converts into the largely Jewish-oriented church.

In Acts 10:44-47 we have the experience of Peter, opening up the gospel to the Gentiles for the first time. While Peter spoke to them the Holy Ghost fell upon them. The Jewish converts "were astonished ... because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost." Peter urged that no one oppose their baptism, since they had "received the Holy Ghost as well as we." Here Peter equates the tongues spoken on this occasion with the tongues he had spoken at Pentecost - an actual language. Later, when he gave a report of the experience to the Jerusalem brethren, Peter affirmed that "the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning." Acts 11:15. The reference is unequivocally to the tongues experience on the day of Pentecost. The other Bible account of tongues in Acts 19:5-7 seemed to be for the purpose of confirming the gift of the Spirit upon the struggling little church of twelve members at Corinth, where paganism had threatened to swamp the early efforts of the apostles. There is no reason to doubt that this was also the same gift of languages as that demonstrated at Pentecost.

Subsequently, at Corinth, the gift began to be misused to such a degree that it was creating confusion in the church. Paul had to devote a full chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian church to correcting the problem. Among those spiritually weak Christians, many problems had plagued the apostolic leaders. Corinth had been a hard place to win converts, and the corrupt pagan background had been difficult to erase from the minds of the new believers. Emotional and spiritual immaturity was often the subject of Paul's appeals in his Corinthian letters.

Now let us take a close look at 1 Corinthians 14, in which the tongues problem is brought into focus. Over half of the verses in this chapter mention the words edify, understanding, learning, or teach. It is obvious that the Corinthian church was not using the gift as it was supposed to be used. Over and over Paul urged that tongues be used only to teach the barbarian, unbeliever, or unlearned. Apparently some were creating great confusion by speaking any foreign language they knew, even while others were talking, and also when no one present could understand the language they spoke. The burden of the entire chapter is that no one use the gift of tongues except to edify someone who could not be reached otherwise. Interpreting of tongues was also to be utilised only for instructing those who could not understand without a translation. Almost every verse focuses on the original Pentecost idea of witnessing or communicating:

Verse 4, "edifieth the church."

Verse 5, "except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying."

Verse 6, "except I shall speak to you by knowledge."

Verse 7, "except they give a dis-tinction in the sounds ..."

Verse 8, "if the trumpet give an uncertain sound ..."

Verse 9, "except ye utter words easy to be understood."

Verse 11, "if I know not the meaning of the voice ..."

Verse 12, "seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church."

Verse 13, "pray that he may interpret."

Verse 14, "my understanding is unfruitful."

Verse 15, "Pray with the understanding ..."

Verse 16, "seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest."

Verse 17, "the other is not edified."

Verse 19, "that I might teach others."

Verse 20, "be not children in understanding."
Verse 22, "tongues are for a sign to them that believe not."
Verse 23, "unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?"
Verse 26, "Let all things be done unto edifying."
Verse 27, "And let one interpret."
Verse 28, "If there be no interpreter, let him keep silence."
Verse 30, "Let the first hold his peace."
Verse 31, "that all may learn ..."
Verse 33, "For God is not the author of confusion."
Verse 34, "Let your women keep silence."
Verse 35, "if they will learn anything ..."
Verse 40, "Let all things be done decently and in order."

Those who read this chapter for the purpose of finding ecstatic utterance can locate two or three verses which seem to give them support. But when those verses are studied in the context of all the rest of the chapter, and with an actual foreign language in mind, they all can be seen to harmonise. Paul's discourse here is built around his contention that "tongues are a sign ... to them that believe not." Verse 22.

Now, a few questions: Were the Corinthians not creating disorder and confusion by talking loudly in tongues while others were talking? Were they not obviously speaking in languages which were not being understood, and which were not edifying anyone? Were they not priding themselves in being especially blessed and gifted in speaking their tongues, and using it to exalt self? The answers to all these questions must be Yes. Then could the Holy Spirit have been producing those tongues to the confusion of the church? No, because the Spirit does not operate to such ends.

What must we conclude, then, about the problem in Corinth? Those weak and immature church members had seen the true manifestation of Pentecostal tongues - actual languages. Forgetting that the tongues were bestowed miraculously for the purpose of instructing foreigners in the gospel, they began to think that any words in a foreign language had to be evidence of God's special blessing. The result of such a false premise led to the problem Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14. Many were jumping up in church to speak loudly in whatever smattering of foreign language they might know. At the same time others were trying to drown them out by their "gift" of being able to use another tongue. It was a self-produced scene of indecent disorder. Apparently some of the women, were creating the greatest confusion. Paul wrote, "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints. Let your women keep silence in the churches ... Let all things be done decently and in order." Verses 33-40.

Would Paul have commanded the women to keep silent if their gift had been the ecstatic outburst of the Holy Spirit's power? If so, he would have been guilty of commanding the Holy Spirit to keep silent. The same would have been true of Paul's command in verse 28. He said, "But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church." How could such an order be obeyed if the speaker were breaking forth in some heavenly language under the Spirit's control? How could such a one know that there would be an interpreter to their "unknown" words? Paul speaks of the gift as one that could be controlled by the individual using the tongue. Unless they could ascertain that there was an interpreter to convey the translation clearly, so as to edify the listeners, Paul commanded that they not speak at all.

The modern problem of tongues is similar to the ancient situation, except more confusing. Instead of speaking in actual languages, the air is filled with sounds unrelated to any tongue on earth. Even when someone purports to "interpret" the sounds, no one is edified because the message is often inane or meaningless. And the big question is, Why would the Holy Spirit seek to enlighten or instruct someone in truth by going through all the process of a strange tongue and translation when the listener could understand plain English to begin with? If the gift of tongues is for edifying the unbeliever, how perverse it seems just to talk among believers in a garble of words whose meaning must depend on the absolute veracity of another believer, whose "interpretation" provides no objective test for accuracy.

Our conclusion must be that this last-day phenomenon of tongues does not meet the Bible criteria of truth on two major grounds. First, the baptism of the Holy spirit cannot be given to those who are not obeying all of God's commandments. Second, the true purpose of the gift of tongues - to edify and instruct unbelievers in their own language - is not being served by the gibberish of the modern "tongues" movement. We have found, in fact, that the phenomenon meets all the basic requirements of a vast counterfeit by which Satan can lead millions to disobey God's holy law. Untold numbers of sincere Christians are being led to believe that God's Spirit and approval can rest upon those who transgress His law. Man's flicker has been mistaken for God's flame, and the world is being prepared to make the wrong choice when the Sabbath-obedience issue climaxes the controversy between good and evil. May we be spared from such an error by trusting the Word alone as our infallible guide.

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