

KING *before* KINGDOM



Faithful Revival Within The Church
of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

JOHN S. BUSHMAN

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Contents

Section I: Faith, Conversion, and Relationship

- [1. A Faithful Revival](#)
- [2. Christianity Versus Churchianity](#)
- [3. A Renewal of Faith](#)
- [4. An Awakening of Conversion](#)
- [5. Rebirth of Connection and Relationship](#)
- [6. Refreshed in Knowing God's Goodness](#)
- [7. A New Beginning in Knowing God's Love](#)
- [8. Rejuvenation in Knowing Jesus Makes Everything Right](#)
- [9. Restoration by Re-Enthroning Jesus Christ](#)
- [10. A Fresh Start by Understanding Our Salvation](#)
- [11. Renewed by the Ordinances](#)

Section II: Legalism—The Killer of Revival

- [12. Remembering the New Covenant](#)
- [13. Revival in Our Liberty](#)
- [14. Renewed in Christ's Righteousness](#)
- [15. Redeemed from Legalism](#)
- [16. Regeneration Instead of Prohibition](#)

Section III: Renewal in the Kingdom by Small Changes

- [17. Renewed by Small Changes](#)
- [18. Rejuvenated in Worship and Personal Revelation](#)
- [19. Renewed in Praise and Witnessing](#)
- [20. Restored "In the Name Of . . ."](#)
- [21. Refreshed in the Language of Prayer and Scripture](#)
- [22. W/WJW? What Would Jesus Wear?](#)
- [23. Renewed in Our Offerings](#)

Section IV: Revival

- [24. Transformations by King-Centered Missionary Work](#)
- [25. Renewed, Revived, and Awakened](#)

[About the Author](#)

SECTION I

Faith, Conversion,
and Relationship

1

A Faithful Revival

When was Joseph Smith converted? When did he become *all in* with God? When did he decide to be an earnest follower of Jesus Christ?

Joseph Smith and his family lived in a region of the United States where the Second Great Awakening was in full swing. Joseph Smith—History 1:6 says that the revival meetings took place “in order to have everybody converted, as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased.” The primary purpose of the many revival meetings was to convert people to the Lord. After that, priests and pastors pushed and pulled to get people to join their denominations.

George Whitefield was among the most prominent figures in the First and Second Great Awakenings. In trying to break through the denominational boundaries, he often taught the following in sermons:

Father Abraham, who have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians? No! Any Presbyterians? No! Any Independents or Methodist? No, no, no! Whom have you there, then Father Abraham? We don't know those names here! All who are here are Christians—believers in Christ, men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of his testimony. Oh, is that the case? Then God help me, God help us all, to forget having names and to become Christians in deed and in truth!

In his accounts of his feelings prior to the First Vision, Joseph portrays himself as a young man who had made a conscious decision to follow God and to be right with Him by how he would live his life. Joseph said that when he was twelve years old, he was seriously impressed about the issues of his soul. In

his 1832 First Vision account, he muses how, at that age, he marveled at the greatness of God as he observed the beauties of the earth and all that is in the heavens. He also attended as many of the various denominations' meetings as he could. In Joseph's words, he had "intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations."¹

If Joseph were just a teenager who merely believed that God existed, and wanted to be good, then he probably would have joined the Presbyterian church that his mother and siblings joined when Joseph was fourteen. But Joseph was already working on a different level and wanted to do what was right before God and please Him.

I think it is safe to say that Joseph was converted to the Lord during all the revivals and camp meetings he attended. In the spring of 1820, he wanted to know which denomination to join to further follow God's will. Joseph had experienced the King of Glory and now wanted to find God's kingdom on the earth. The preaching of the word awoke something in Joseph that set the stage for the Restoration.

Just as the Second Great Awakening and the various revivals awoke something in Joseph, today we could use some revival in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A renewal—a refreshing. Maybe a better way to think of it would be what Lehi told his sons before his death: "Awake!"² Like Lehi's children, we need an awakening—a spiritual awakening.

Are there any of us who don't have dear friends, family members, siblings, nieces, or nephews who have stepped away from the faith? How many of us have neighbors, former mission companions, and acquaintances who are no longer with our faith? Most of us know scores of people who have walked away from the Church and from God. What is going on?

Some of those people used to marvel at God's majesty and wonder, but now they have lost the sense of God's astonishing goodness. They have forgotten and fallen asleep.

Perhaps others never really knew God's goodness. They enjoyed the culture of the Church and agreed with the idea of "choosing the right" because it just made sense. They went to church and went through the routines and rituals. But they never really knew the wonder of God and Jesus Christ—not in a meaningful way.

It's easy to think it's their problem and they have just been deceived. But maybe we should also look at ourselves. What can we do to reclaim those who have fallen away and to keep more from leaving?

There needs to be an awakening. There needs to be revival within the Church.

One of the most painful discussions I've had was with a close family member. Their reason for wanting to leave was not because of some Church history issue or Church policy they disagreed with. Because of a school assignment, they had attended worship services of other churches. She told me she no longer wanted to go to our church and wanted to participate in another church's services because, as she said, "I just feel closer to God when I go to that other church."

"Ouch!" I thought. "Well, she is just liking it because it is new, and there's a band and hands in the air and worshipping in a different way that's exciting and engaging."

But this makes me think that if they were already feeling close to God in our worship services, would they have ever started down the road that led them away? I think this shows a root problem that many people are experiencing. Yes, there are concerns that might cause people to question. But if they are experiencing closeness with God, and if they are feeling joy in their faith in Christ and in their faith community—connecting to God there—I think most would be able to overcome their concerns, and most would not leave in the first place.

That's why we need a revival. The root of *revival* is *revive*. On one extreme, it can mean to resuscitate one who is dying. To save or bring them back to life. Many may have felt a deadness toward God before experiencing the concerns that caused them to leave. We need a revival from that creeping spiritual death that is moving about out there.

On the other end, *revive* can mean to awaken or recover. *Revive* can mean strengthening. Someone might say, "The cool waters revived us." It can mean to reinvigorate, refresh, rejuvenate, or enliven. We desperately need to reinvigorate and revive, not just individually but as a church. The Reverend Stephen F. Miller often said, "At funerals, we close the eyes of the dead and open the eyes of the living." Many need their eyes opened again to the wonders of God.

But it is not just about helping others. The Apostle Paul said, “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith.”³ How have you been this past year? I’m not asking if you attend church, have a church calling, or do the right things. How is your relationship with God? Are you connecting and communing with Him? Is church a time of renewal, or is it a chore?

So many of us need a time of refreshing.⁴

In many Church history and scripture stories, people had a zeal toward God.⁵ Alma describes a time when “they did worship God with exceeding great joy.”⁶ In Doctrine and Covenants 128:19, Joseph Smith asks, “Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received?” And then he responds, “A voice of gladness!”

Do you hear that voice of gladness or a voice of discouragement? If we don’t have joy in the gospel, we are doing something wrong. I don’t mean that following Jesus Christ is going to be easy. It’s often the hardest thing we choose to do. But even in the difficulty, there is joy and wholeness. Jesus Christ is our joy.⁷ And we are to belong to the church of joy through Christ.⁸

This book is going to make some people uncomfortable.

However, becoming uncomfortable has always been a part of true revivals—true spiritual awakenings.

Alma the Younger’s people were starting to fall asleep spiritually, so he gave a sermon to help revive them and “stir them up.”⁹ He began by pointing out the spiritual awakening of their parents’ generation and said that the Lord “changed their hearts; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God. Behold, they were in the midst of darkness; nevertheless, their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word.”¹⁰

Then Alma asked everyone, “Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?” For those who had fallen back to sleep spiritually, he asked, “If ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?”¹¹ Can we feel that love right now, or do we need that same awakening and to be re-illuminated?

A part of spiritual revival is discovering that it is not about church as much as it is about Jesus Christ. It is not about going to church but going to worship the Lord. It is about connecting and communing with God. We must stop making it about the kingdom and start making it first about the King.

Uniting with the Church is wonderful, but the Church itself cannot get us through all the difficult things. But Jesus can. The Church, with its programs and members, will sometimes fail us. But Jesus will not fail us.

We can “do all things through Christ”¹²—not the Church.

As Nephi said, “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins”¹³—not the Church.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me”¹⁴—not by the church.

Our focus must be on the Person—not the place. When we make the place about the person of Christ, a transformation occurs.

A kingdom can be no greater than how its people see and revere their King. We must see God for all His perfect love, goodness, and perfection. And we must help others see the Lord this way too. This way, the kingdom will naturally grow and become purified, as a bride, ready to meet her bridegroom at the Second Coming.¹⁵

This church is the kingdom of God upon the earth. But if we want the kingdom to be great, above all else, we must focus on our King. The King is what makes the kingdom great in the first place. Without the King in His rightful place, the kingdom will fall apart, or at least its members will. If we want to build the kingdom of God on earth, we must first help people know, love, and adore their incredibly amazing and worthy King.

We often lament because those we love are no longer “part of the Church” or have “left the Church.” Perhaps this is an entire misunderstanding of the problem. The problem is not that they are no longer a member of the Church as much as they are no longer a member of Christ and His body. The problem is not that they have left the Church as much as they have left Christ.

The biggest problem is not that they are missing out on Church meetings and Church culture. The biggest problem is that they are missing out on connecting with the Lord and reconnecting with Him through covenants offered only in His Church. It is Christ that saves, and the Church leads us to Christ. Not the other way around!

* * * *

This next part addresses the question, Is it okay to make suggestions about the Church? If you have already decided that it is okay, the justifications to give suggestions won't mean as much.

Sometimes when my wife and I are at a party, she discreetly points out to me that I have a little bit of food stuck in my teeth. Does she do this to criticize, or because she cares? I've decided it is because she cares and loves me.

Similarly, I love this church and all its members and leaders. My love is my motivation for the suggestions in this book.

In the business world, some leaders and managers welcome suggestions. They even invite ideas, knowing in our competitive world how important it is to continually improve and innovate. Sadly, some leaders and managers feel threatened by others' ideas. They think that any ideas that do not originate from themselves are a challenge to their authority.

Those who lead God's kingdom on the earth today are the first kind of leaders. God leads and guides His kingdom, but almost always, it is the Lord's servants who consider ideas that originate from a variety of sources and then inquire of the Lord before direction is given or affirmed.

In 2000, Elder Bednar became the president of Ricks College during its transition to BYU–Idaho. He was given few guidelines but was still asked to “make it happen.” After press conferences and meetings with faculty and staff, he said, “I have absolutely no idea how we're going to do this. But I can tell you one thing: if you sit in your office . . . waiting for the president's council to tell you how this is going to work, then it won't work.”

Elder Bednar continued:

You do not have permission to just sit there and wait for somebody to tell you how this is going to roll out. You have as much right to receive inspiration in relation to what happens . . . as we do for the entire institution. And we'll put in place the process and the pattern for being able to surface and counsel together about those issues, and ultimately the president's council and the board of trustees will say yes or no. But this is going to take everybody in that pattern of acting and not just sitting and waiting to be acted upon.¹⁶

I believe this pattern of “inspiration being scattered among” members of the Church, and then leaders affirming or correcting it, has been a standing pattern for how great things have happened in the Church.¹⁷

For instance, the Relief Society began with Sarah M. Kimball approaching Margaret A. Cook about creating a sewing society to make clothing for the men working on the Nauvoo Temple. They soon thought of including more women and came up with more ways they could serve their community. This group started the beginnings of a Ladies’ Society. They asked Eliza R. Snow to draft a constitution and bylaws.

After Eliza wrote them, she brought it before the Prophet Joseph Smith. He complimented her, saying that what she had written was “the best he had ever seen” but that the Lord had “something better for them.”¹⁸ With further vision and revelation, the world’s most extraordinary women’s organization was created. It started bottom-up, affirmed by the leaders in the kingdom, and then came top-down to the entire Church.

Likewise, a similar pattern happened at the beginning of the Primary organization. In 1878, Aurelia Spencer Rogers, in Farmington, Utah, was concerned that the young boys in the community had become unruly and mischievous. She approached the local Church leaders, and with their approval, a Primary Association was created for her local congregation. Soon the first meeting was held with 215 children in attendance. By 1880 (two years later and fifty years after the Church was first organized), the Primary organization was implemented churchwide.

What I love about these stories is that these women could have just complained and said, “Why doesn’t the Church have an organization for women so we can . . . ?” or “Why don’t the Lord’s servants have an organization for the teaching of children?” And their husbands could have responded, “If the Lord wanted such an organization, wouldn’t He just tell the prophet to start that?” But instead of complaining about the Lord’s servants, these women realized they were also the Lord’s servants. They started blazing inspired paths that were later added upon by the inspiration of many others. The inspiration started with these women, and it was later affirmed by revelation to the prophet.¹⁹

In the kingdom, it is often bottom-up and then top-down.

M. Russell Ballard taught, “I am a General Authority. But I am not an authority in general.”²⁰ Then he explained that the presiding councils of the Church will seek out learning from many sources.

Much in the Church has come bottom-up and then top-down. Of course, revelation for the whole Church comes top-down. But it often starts bottom-up before it goes top-down.

Many Church publications include the importance of receiving counsel in all our callings from many sources.²¹ I love the story of this with Moses and Jethro.

In Exodus 18, Moses was struggling as a leader. He was worn out by the people coming to him from morning until evening to have him decide on every issue. Jethro (Moses’s father-in-law) saw this and said that it wasn’t good. But in Moses’s limited perspective, there was no other option. Then Jethro opened Moses’s eyes to different and better ways he could handle the situation.

Jethro concluded his advice, saying, “If thou shalt do this thing, *and God command thee so*, then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people shall also go to their place in peace.”²² In other words, Jethro had an idea, but it was Moses’s responsibility to affirm that advice with God. God could have replied, “Moses, don’t change anything,” and that would have ended it.

Yet there is sometimes opposition to this way of thinking or offering advice. Some might say, “If God wanted that change, wouldn’t He just tell His leaders?” or “Don’t try to get ahead of the Brethren.” In other words, “Keep your head down. Don’t speak unless spoken to. Sit back, watch, and wait.”

But this is God’s kingdom; in the scriptures, we are called “fellow citizens.” We are part of His household.²³

We have always been asked to get involved in civil government and participate in the democratic process. God’s kingdom is no different. In the December 1917 *Improvement Era*, President Joseph F. Smith wrote: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the most democratic institution in the world.”

The kingdom of God is not an oligarchy. We are all citizens who are to be involved in the building and the inspiration of the kingdom, as God gives.

In God’s kingdom, we are to be *active agents*, not *passive peasants*. We are to act and not always to wait and be acted upon. We are to engage in the kingdom and “do many things of our own free will and choice.”²⁴

One of the greatest blessings of being a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that our faith is not a “spectator sport.” We don’t have “ministers” like other churches because we all get to minister. We don’t have paid preachers and teachers, for the most part, because we all get to share in the preaching and teaching. We all get to participate in the building up of God’s kingdom here on the earth in so many ways. What we might miss in having professionals fulfilling the various roles is made up in the discipleship and growth we experience.

When President Nelson said that “the Restoration is still happening,”²⁵ I don’t think he meant for us to now just sit back and watch.

Yes, there is hierarchy, organization, and order in God’s kingdom. But that does not mean we can’t respectfully share our thoughts. “Revelation is sprinkled among us,” and the other side of that coin is that Church leaders affirm that revelation.²⁶

The ninth article of faith says, “We believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” Do we believe this? Or do we think that this revealing stopped with Joseph’s death? Do we rely on precedence now instead of continued revelation? Of course not.

The Old Testament has an excellent story about revelation being affirmed or rejected by prophets. In 2 Samuel 7, King David wanted to build a temple to God, so he told the prophet Nathan his desire. Nathan could quickly see this clearly righteous desire and liked the idea. He exclaimed, “Go, do all that is in thine heart; for the Lord is with thee.”²⁷

But that night, God instructed Nathan to tell David that he would not build a temple; David’s son would. David followed as the Lord directed. We should not assume something is correct just because it feels right—just as it felt right to David and Nathan. God affirms by revelation, and He does that through His prophets. Although it may seem obviously good and right to us, as it did to Nathan, we should trust God’s prophets. As in the story above, sometimes it may be an issue of timing.

What should any of us do with new ideas we come across? I love the example of Joseph Smith. The heading of Doctrine and Covenants 49 states that when Leman Copley introduced Joseph to the Shakers’ beliefs, “in order to have a more perfect understanding on the subject, [Joseph] inquired of the Lord, and received the following.” The word *inquired* is found in many of the

headings of the Doctrine and Covenants. When Joseph Smith had questions or came across situations or new ideas, he simply “inquired.”

* * * *

Before there can be a revival, we must see where people are falling asleep or even dying spiritually. We must identify what is wrong before it can be made right.

For the Protestant Reformation, the most identifiable corruption was the giving out of indulgences for money. That is where almost everyone could see things had gone too far, and people were ready for change and to wake up.

With the First Great Awakening, it was the Halfway Covenant where conversion to Jesus Christ became only an option for membership in God’s kingdom. For the Second Great Awakening, it was in response to rationalism, where God was being cast off entirely in society.

If there is a Great Awakening in our future, maybe it will be from many of us having a problem of being religious yet being asleep spiritually. Where we are just going through the motions without feeling and knowing God’s goodness and love. Motions without emotions. Rituals without relationship and connection with God.

There is a problem with legalism where we are better at teaching youth to choose the right but failing to help them to choose Christ. If we are not careful, we might look back and see that we brought our kids up *in the Church* but did not bring them up *in Christ*. We need to put our faith and trust in following Jesus Christ and having a personal relationship with God. We need to understand that we cannot merit anything of ourselves, and so we need to come to Jesus Christ to be saved.²⁸ We need to make it about *regeneration* rather than *prohibitions*.

We try so hard to help investigators and youth gain their own testimonies, but we often haven’t shown them the path to conversion to Jesus Christ as His surrendered followers. We need to teach them to be “all in” and serve Jesus Christ for the rest of their lives.

More than anything, we need to gather Israel. But that only happens as we gather people to Jesus Christ.²⁹ We have inadvertently made barriers to the gathering because of how we think of worship, dress, and appearance, as well

as the kind of close relationship we are to have with God. The kingdom of God will only thrive as we put our focus on our King, Jesus Christ.

We first make it about the King—and then the kingdom.

Here is what's coming in the following chapters:

- What is “Churchianity”? (See chapter 2.)
- Is a testimony the supreme spiritual asset? Will a strong testimony help you get through anything? (See chapter 3.)
- Can you have a testimony without being converted? Can you be converted to the Church or the gospel, but not to the Lord Jesus Christ? (See chapter 4.)
- How close and personal of a relationship does God want to have with us? (See chapter 5.)
- If God is so good, why is life so difficult? How can I put my faith in God when life is so hard? (See chapter 6.)
- How is God's love so vastly different from the way people love? How does God's love change everything? How is God's love the spearhead of revival? (See chapter 7.)
- How will Jesus Christ make everything right? (See chapter 8.)
- Could we inadvertently be “substituting out” the Lord Jesus Christ for concepts like priesthood, gospel, and even atonement? (See chapter 9.)
- What if a friend asked you, “What do I need to do to have eternal life?” Could you give simple answers? Are the answers simple? (See chapter 10.)
- Do you sometimes feel like you are performing rituals without renewal? (See chapter 11.)
- What is the transforming “new covenant” Jesus came to give in the New Testament? (See chapter 12.)
- Agree or disagree: “If I'm good enough, I'll go to heaven.” Also, what can I do to qualify myself for heaven? (See chapter 13.)
- Have you wondered why you never feel “good enough”? (See chapter 14.)
- Why do we tend to make extra commandments (standards), be judgmental, and focus on rules? (See chapter 15.)
- Is your life more about prohibition or regeneration? (See chapter 16.)
- Religion gets a bad rap. Here, there is something that can transform how we think about church and religion. (See chapter 17.)

- What does *worship* actually mean? How do we sometimes miss the point of personal revelation? How do we connect with God? (See chapter 18.)
- Here is something that might rejuvenate your prayers. Here is something that would revive fast and testimony meetings. (See chapter 19.)
- What does it mean when we end a prayer, talk, or blessing with “in the name of Jesus Christ?” (See chapter 20.)
- How is our assigned “prayer language” getting in the way of communicating with God and gathering Israel, and is a misunderstanding of the English language? (See chapter 21.)
- WWJW? What Would Jesus Wear? How do men’s dress and grooming standards hurt the gathering of Israel and how we see God? (See chapter 22.)
- Instead of giving *to* the Church, what if we gave *through* the Church and could see the tremendous good we are doing? (See chapter 23.)
- If missionaries find people uninterested in becoming part of our Church, what if we still helped them come closer to Christ? Things will circle back around. (See chapter 24.)
- How can we have a Great Awakening in the Church today? (See chapter 25.)

In this book, I will approach things at the micro and macro levels. To look at how we can connect better with God and how we, as a Church and as a faith community, can awaken and reawaken.

David O. McKay said, “Spiritual awakening in the hearts of millions of men and women would bring about a changed world. I am hopeful, my brethren and sisters, that the dawning of that day is not far distant.”³⁰

The title of this book isn’t *King Instead of Kingdom*. It is *King Before Kingdom*. I believe if our focus is first riveted on the Lord Jesus Christ, then we will have a remarkable rebirth as a Church—the renewal prophets have been looking forward to.

1. Joseph Smith, History 1832, 1–2; Letter Book 1, 1829–35, Joseph Smith, Collection, Church Archives.

2. See 2 Nephi 1:13–14.

3. 2 Corinthians 13:5.

4. See Acts 3:19.
5. See Alma 27:27.
6. See Alma 45:1; 30:34–35.
7. Russell M. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival,” General Conference (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), October 2016, Gospel Library App.
8. Patrick Kearon, “Welcome to the Church of Joy,” General Conference (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), October 2024, Gospel Library App.
9. See Alma 4:19.
10. Alma 5:17.
11. Alma 5:14, 26.
12. Philippians 4:13.
13. 2 Nephi 25:26.
14. John 14:6.
15. See Revelation 21:2.
16. David A. Bednar, “A Conversion on Leadership,” February 24, 2010, [http://broadcast.lds.org/elearning/hrd/LDSLeader/RESOURCES/Bednar_Script_no%20timecodes\[1\].pdf](http://broadcast.lds.org/elearning/hrd/LDSLeader/RESOURCES/Bednar_Script_no%20timecodes[1].pdf), p. 5.
17. The phrase “revelation is scattered among us” was popularized by President Boyd K. Packer and is frequently used by Elder Neil L. Andersen.
18. Sarah Granger Kimball, “Auto-biography,” *Woman’s Exponent*, Sept. 1, 1883, 51.
19. The Sunday School program started in a similar manner by Richard Ballantyne in 1849. Bottom-up and top-down. Likewise, the welfare program of the Church had its beginnings with a stake president in the Salt Lake Pioneer Stake named Harold B. Lee.
20. M. Russell Ballard, *BYU Speeches*, November 14, 2017.
21. M. Russell Ballard, *Counseling with Our Counsels* (Deseret Book, 2012).
22. Exodus 18:23.
23. See Ephesians 2:19.
24. Doctrine and Covenants 58:27.
25. Russell M. Nelson, in “[Latter-day Saint Prophet, Wife and Apostle Share Insights of Global Ministry](#),” Oct. 30, 2018, newsroom.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
26. Neil L. Andersen, “Align with the Brethren,” (Leadership Enrichment Series, August 15, 2012).
27. 2 Samuel 7:3.
28. See Alma 22:14.
29. See Ephesians 1:10.
30. David O. McKay, “Something Higher Than Self,” Conference Report, April 1958.

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