

The Reformed Pastor - the Oversight of the Flock

by Richard Baxter

A pastor's primary responsibility is to take heed to all the flock, knowing every person by name and laboring to be acquainted with their state, in order to bring them to salvation.

Scripture: Matthew 9:37, Luke 15:4, Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 5:11, 1 Corinthians 9:16, Galatians 6:1, Colossians 1:28, 1 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 2:15, Hebrews 3:13, Hebrews 13:17

Topics: "Pastoral Ministry", "Church Discipline"

Description

Richard Baxter preaches about the importance of oversight in the ministry, emphasizing the need for pastors to take heed to themselves first before taking heed to the flock. He highlights the necessity of pastors knowing their congregation intimately, being aware of their struggles, sins, and temptations. Baxter stresses the importance of pastors being diligent, laborious, and prudent in their ministry, focusing on the most necessary truths and delivering them in a plain and simple manner. He also emphasizes the need for humility, a balance of severity and mildness, and the practice of church discipline for the edification and salvation of souls.

Transcript

1. The NATURE of This Oversight

Having shown you what it is to take heed to ourselves, I am to show you next what it is to take heed to all the flock.

It was first necessary to take into consideration, what we must be, and what we must do for our own souls, before we come to that which must be done for others: "He cannot succeed in healing the wounds of others who is himself unhealed by reason of neglecting himself. He neither benefits his neighbors nor himself. He does not raise up others, but himself falls (1 Tim 4:16)." Yes, lest all his labors come to nothing, because his heart and life are nothing that does perform them. "For some persons there are who, though expert in spiritual ministry, go about it in a headstrong manner, and while acting intelligently, tread underfoot any good they do. They teach too hurriedly what can only be rendered holy by meditation; and what they proclaim in public they impugn by their conduct. Whence it is that as pastors they walk in paths too rugged for the flock to follow." "When we have led them to the living waters, if we muddy it by our filthy lives, we may lose our labor, and they be never the better."

Before we speak of the work itself, we shall notice somewhat that is presupposed in the words before us.

1. It is here implied, that every flock should have its own pastor, and every pastor his own flock. As every troop or company in a regiment of soldiers must have its own captain and other officers, and every soldier knows his own commander and colors; so it is the will of God that every church should have its own pastor, and that all Christ's disciples "should know their teachers that are over them in the Lord" (Heb 13:7). Though a minister is an officer in the Church universal, yet is he in a special manner the overseer of that particular church which is committed to his charge. When we are ordained ministers without a special charge, we are licensed and commanded to do our best for all, as we shall have opportunity for the exercise of our gifts: but when we have undertaken a particular charge, we have restrained the exercise of our gifts so specially to that congregation, that we must allow others no more than it can spare of our time and help, except where the public good requires it, which must, no doubt, be first regarded. From this relation of pastor and flock, arise all the duties which they mutually owe to each other.

2. When we are commanded to take heed to all the flock, it is plainly implied, that flocks must ordinarily be no greater than we are capable of overseeing, or "taking heed to." God will not lay upon us natural impossibilities: he will not bind men to leap up to the moon, to touch the stars, or to number the sands of the sea. If the pastoral office consists in overseeing all the flock, then surely the number of souls under the care of each pastor must not be greater than he is able to take such heed to as is here required. Will God require one bishop to take the charge of a whole county, or of so many parishes or thousands of souls, as he is not able to know or to oversee? Yes, and to take the sole government of them, while the particular teachers of them are free from that undertaking? Will God require the blood of so many parishes at one man's hands, if he do not that which ten, or twenty, or a hundred, or three hundred men can no more do, than I can move a mountain? Then woe to poor prelates! Is it not, then, a most doleful case, that learned, sober men should plead for this as a desirable privilege; that they should willfully draw on themselves such a burden; and that they do not rather tremble at the thoughts of so great an undertaking? O, happy had it been for the Church, and happy for the bishops themselves, if this measure, that is intimated by the apostle here, had still been observed: that the diocese had been no greater than the elders or bishops could oversee and rule, so that they might have taken heed to all the flock: or that pastors had been multiplied as churches increased, and the number of overseers been proportioned to the number of souls, that they might not have let the work be undone, while they assumed the empty titles, and undertook impossibilities! And that They had rather prayed the Lord of the harvest to send forth more laborers, even so many as were proportioned to the work (Mt 9:37-38), and not to have undertaken all themselves. I should scarcely commend the prudence or humility of that laborer, let his parts be ever so great, that would not only undertake to gather in all the harvest in this county himself, and that upon pain of death, yes, of damnation, but would also earnestly contend for this prerogative.

But it may be said, there are others to teach, though one only have the rule.

To this I answer: Blessed be God it is so; and no thanks to some of them. But is not government of great concernment to the good of souls, as well as preaching? If it be not, then what use is there for church governors? If it be, then those who nullify it by undertaking impossibilities, do go about to ruin the churches and themselves. If only preaching be necessary, let us have none but mere preachers; what needs there then such a stir about government? But if discipline, in its place, be necessary too, what is it but enmity to men's salvation to exclude it? And it is unavoidably excluded, when it is made to be his work that is naturally incapable of performing it. The general that will command an army alone, may as well say, Let it be destroyed for want of command. The schoolmaster that will oversee or govern all the schools in

the county alone, may as well say, Let them all be ungoverned. The physician that will undertake the care of all the sick people in a whole nation, or county, when he is not able to visit the hundredth man of them, may as well say, Let them perish.

Yet still it must be acknowledged, that in case of necessity, where there are not more to be had, one man may undertake the charge of more souls than he is well able to oversee particularly. But then he must undertake only to do what he can for them, and not to do all that a pastor ordinarily ought to do. This is the case of some of us, who have greater parishes than we are able to take that special heed to which their state requires. I profess for my own part, I am so far from their boldness that dare venture on the sole government of a county, that I would not, for all England, have undertaken to be one of the two that should do all the pastoral work that God requires in the parish where I live, had I not this to satisfy my conscience, that, through the Church's necessities, more cannot be had. Therefore, I must rather do what I can, than leave all undone because I cannot do all. But cases of unavoidable necessity are not to be the ordinary condition of the Church; or at least, it is not desirable that it should so be. O happy Church of Christ, were the laborers but able and faithful, and proportioned in number to the number of souls; so that the pastors were so many, or the particular churches so small, that we might be able to "take heed to all the flock".

Having noticed these things, which are presupposed, we shall now proceed to consider the duty which is recommended in the text, Take heed to all the flock (Acts 20:28).

It is, you see, all the flock, or every individual member of our charge. To this end it is necessary, that we should know every person that belongs to our charge; for how can we take heed to them, if we do not know them? We must labor to be acquainted, not only with the persons, but with the state of all our people, with their inclinations and conversations; what are the sins of which they are most in danger, and what duties they are most apt to neglect, and what temptations they are most liable to. For if we know not their temperament or disease, we are not likely to prove successful physicians.

Being thus acquainted with all the flock, we must afterward take heed to them. One would imagine that every reasonable man would be satisfied of this, and that it would need no further proof. Does not a careful shepherd look after every individual sheep, and a good schoolmaster after every individual scholar, and a good physician after every particular patient, and a good commander after every individual soldier? Why then should not the shepherds, the teachers, the physicians, the guides of the churches of Christ, take heed to every individual member of their charge? Christ himself, the great and good Shepherd, that has the whole to look after, does yet take care of every individual; like him whom he describes in the parable, who left "ninety and nine sheep in the wilderness, to seek after one that was lost (Luke 15:4)." The prophets were often sent to single men. Ezekiel was made a watchman over individuals, and was commanded to say to the wicked, "You shall surely die (Ezk 3:18)." Paul taught his hearers not only "publicly but from house to house (Acts 20:20):" and in another place he tells us, that he "warned every man, and taught every man, in all wisdom, that he might present every man perfect in Christ Jesus (Col 1:28)". Many other passages of Scripture make it evident that it is our duty to take heed to every individual of our flock; and many passages in the ancient Councils do plainly show that this was the practice of the primitive times. But I shall quote only one from Ignatius: "Let assemblies," says he, "be often gathered; inquire after all by name: despise not servant-men or maids". You see it was then considered as a duty to look after every member of the flock by name, not excepting the lowest servant-man or maid.

But, some one may object, "The congregation that I am set over is so great that it is impossible for me to know them all, much more to take heed to all individually."

To this I answer, Is it necessity or is it not, that has cast you upon such a charge? If it be not, you excuse one sin by another. How dare you undertake that which you knew yourself unable to perform, when you were not forced to it? It would seem you had some other ends in undertaking it, and never intended to be faithful to your trust. But if you think that you were necessitated to undertake it, I would ask you, might you not have procured assistance for so great a charge?

Have you done all that you could with your friends and neighbors, to get maintenance for another to help you? Have you not as much maintenance yourself, as might serve yourself and another? What thought it will not serve to maintain you in fullness? Is it not more reasonable That you should pinch your flesh and family, than undertake a work that you cannot perform, and neglect the souls of so many of your flock? I know that what I say will seem hard to some; but to me it is an unquestionable thing, that, if you have but a hundred pounds a year, it is your duty to live upon part of it, and allow the rest to a competent assistant, rather than that the flock which you are over should be neglected.

If you say, that is a hard measure, and that your wife and children cannot so live; I answer, do not many families in your parish live on less? Have not many able ministers in the prelates' days been glad of less, with liberty to preach the gospel? There are some yet living, as I have heard, who have offered the bishops to enter into bond to preach for nothing, if they might but have liberty to preach the gospel. If you shall still say, that you cannot live so meanly as poor people do, I further ask, can your parishioners better endure damnation, than you can endure want and poverty?

What! do you call yourselves ministers of the gospel, and yet are the souls of men so base in your eyes, that you had rather they should eternally perish, than that you and your family should live in a low and poor condition? No, should you not rather beg your bread, than put so great a matter as men's salvation upon a hazard, or disadvantage; yes, as hazard the damnation of but one soul? O sirs, it is a miserable thing when men study and talk of heaven and hell, and the fewness of the saved, and the difficulty of salvation, and be not all the while in good earnest.

If you were, you could never surely stick at such matters as these, and let your people go down to hell, that you might live in higher style in this world. Remember this, the next time you are preaching to them, that they cannot be saved without knowledge. Harken whether conscience does not tell you, "It is likely they might be brought to knowledge, if they had but diligent instruction and exhortation privately, man by man; and if there were another minister to assist me, this might be done: and if I would live sparingly and deny my flesh, I might have an assistant. Dare I, then, let my people live in that ignorance which I myself have told them is damning, rather than put myself and family to a little want?"

Must I turn to my Bible to show a preacher where it is written, that a man's soul is worth more than a world (Mt 16:26), much more therefore than a hundred pounds a year; much more are many souls more worth? Or That both we and all that we have are God's, and should be employed to the utmost for his service? Or that it is inhuman cruelty to let souls go to hell, for fear my wife and children should fare somewhat the harder, or live at lower rates; when, according to God's ordinary way of working by means, I might do much to prevent their misery, if I would but a little displease my flesh, which all, who are Christ's, have crucified with its lusts? Every man must render to God the things that are God's, and that, let it be remembered, is all he is and all he possesses. How are all things sanctified to us, but in the separation and dedication of them to God? Are they not all his talents, and must be employed in his service? Must not every Christian first ask, In what way may I most honor God with my substance? Do we not preach these things to our people? Are they true as to them, and not as to us? Yes more, is not the church-maintenance

devoted, in a special manner, to the service of God for the church? And should we not then use it for the utmost furtherance of that end? If any minister who has two hundred pounds a year can prove that a hundred pounds of it may do God more service, if it be laid out on himself, or wife and children, than if it maintain one or two suitable assistants to help forward the salvation of The flock, I shall not presume to reprove his expenses; but where this cannot be proved, let not the practice be justified.

And I must further say, that this poverty is not so intolerable and dangerous a thing as it is pretended to be. If you have but food and clothing, must you not therewith be content (I Tim 6:8)? And what would you have more than that which may fit you for the work of God? It is not "being clothed in purple and fine linen, and faring sumptuously every day (Luke 16:19)," that is necessary for this end. "A man's life consists not in the abundance of the things that he possesses (Luke 12:15)" If your clothing be warm, and your food be wholesome, you may be as well supported by it to do God service as if you had the fullest satisfaction to your flesh. A patched coat may be warm, and bread and water are wholesome food. He who lacks not these, has but a poor excuse to make for hazarding men's souls, that he may live on dainties.

But, while it is our duty to take heed to all the flock, we must pay special attention to some classes in particular. By many, this is very imperfectly understood, and therefore I shall dwell a little upon it.

1. We must labor, in a special manner, for the conversion of the unconverted.

The work of conversion is the first and great thing we must drive at; after this we must labor with all our might. Alas! the misery of the unconverted is so great, that it calls loudest to us for compassion. If a truly converted sinner do fall, it will be but into sin which will be pardoned, and he is not in that hazard of damnation by it as others are. Not but that "God hates their sins as well as others", or that he will bring them to heaven, let them live ever so wickedly; but the spirit that is within them will not suffer them to live wickedly, nor to sin as the ungodly do.

But with the unconverted it is far otherwise. They "are in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity (Acts 8:23)", and have yet no part nor fellowship in the pardon of their sins, or the hope of glory. We have, therefore, a work of greater necessity to do for them, even "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God; that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and an inheritance among them that are sanctified (Acts 26:18)."

He who sees one man sick of a mortal disease, and another only pained with the toothache, will be moved more to compassion for the former, than the latter; and will surely make more haste to help him, though he were a stranger, and the other a brother or a son. It is so sad a case to see men in a state of damnation, wherein, if they should die, they are lost forever, that methinks we should not be able to let them alone, either in public or private, whatever other work we may have to do.

I confess, I am frequently forced to neglect that which should tend to the further increase of knowledge in the godly, because of the lamentable necessity of the unconverted. Who is able to talk of controversies, or of nice unnecessary points, or even of truths of a lower degree of necessity, how excellent whatever, while he sees a company of ignorant, carnal, miserable sinners before his eyes, who must be changed or damned? Methinks I even see them entering upon their final woe!

Methinks I hear them crying out for help, for speediest help! Their misery speaks the louder, because they have not hearts to ask for themselves. Many a time have I known, that I had some hearers of higher fancies that looked for rarities and were addicted to despise the ministry, if I told them not somewhat more

than ordinary. Yet I could not find in my heart to turn from the necessities of the impenitent, for the humoring of them; nor even to leave speaking to miserable sinners for their salvation, in order to speak to such novelists; no, nor so much as should otherwise be done, to weak saints for their confirmation and increase in grace.

Methinks, as Paul's "spirit was stirred within him, when he saw the Athenians wholly given to idolatry (Acts 17:16)", so it should cast us into one of his paroxysms, to see so many men in the utmost danger of being everlastingly undone. Methinks, if by faith we did indeed look upon them as within a step of hell, it would more effectually untie our tongues, than Croesus' danger, as they tell us, did his son's. He who will let a sinner go down to hell for want of speaking to him, does set less by souls than did the Redeemer of souls; and less by his neighbor, than common charity will allow him to do by his greatest enemy.

O, therefore, brethren, whomsoever you neglect, neglect not the most miserable! Whatever you pass over, do not forget poor souls that are under the condemnation and curse of the law, and who may look every hour for the infernal execution, if a speedy change does not prevent it. O call after the impenitent and ply this great work of converting souls, whatever else you leave undone.

2. We must be ready to give advice to inquirers, who come to us with cases of conscience; especially the great case which the Jews put to Peter, and the jailer to Paul and Silas, "What must we do to be saved (Acts 16:31)?" A minister is not to be merely a public preacher, but to be known as a counselor for their souls, as the physician is for their bodies, and the lawyer for their estates: so that each man who is in doubts and straits, may bring his case to him for resolution; as Nicodemus came to Christ, and as it was usual with the people of old to go to the priest, "who must keep knowledge, and at whose mouth they must ask the law, because he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts" (Mal 2:7). But as the people have become unacquainted with this office of the ministry, and with their own duty and necessity in this respect, it belongs to US to acquaint them with it, and publicly to press them to come to us for advice about the great concerns of their souls. We must not only be willing to take the trouble, but should draw it upon ourselves, by inviting them to come. What abundance of good might we do, could we but bring them to this! And, doubtless, much might be done in it, if we did our duty. How few have I ever heard of, who have heartily pressed their people to their duty in this way! O! it is a sad case that men's souls should be so injured and hazarded by the total neglect of so great a duty, and that ministers should scarcely ever tell them of it, and awaken them to it. Were your hearers but duly sensible of the need and importance of this, you would have them more frequently knocking at your doors, and making known to you their sad complaints, and begging your advice. I beseech you, then, press them more to this duty for the future; and see that you perform it carefully when they do seek your help. To this end it is very necessary that you be well acquainted with practical cases, and especially that you be acquainted with the nature of saving grace, and able to assist them in trying their state, and in resolving the main question that concerns their everlasting life or death. One word of seasonable, prudent advice, given by a minister to persons in necessity, may be of more use than many sermons. "A word fitly spoken," says Solomon, "how good is it (Prov 25:11)!"

3. We must study to build up those who are already truly converted. In this respect our work is various, according to the various states of Christians.

(1) There are many of our flock that are young and weak, who, though they are of long standing, are yet of small proficiency or strength. This, indeed, is the most common condition of the godly. Most of them content themselves with low degrees of grace, and it is no easy matter to get them higher. To bring them

to higher and stricter opinions is easy, that is, to bring them from the truth into error, on the right hand as well as on the left; but to increase their knowledge and gifts is not easy, and to increase their graces is the hardest of all.

It is a very sad thing for Christians to be weak: it exposes us to dangers; it abates our consolations and delight in God, and takes off the sweetness of wisdom's ways; it makes us less serviceable to God and man, to bring less honor to our Master, and to do less good to all about us. We get small benefit in the use of the means of grace. We too easily play with the serpent's baits, and are ensnared by his wiles. A seducer will easily shake us, and evil may be made to appear to us as good, truth as falsehood, sin as duty, and so on the contrary.

We are less able to resist and stand in an encounter; we sooner fall; we less easily rise; and are more apt to prove a scandal and reproach to our profession. We less know ourselves, and are more apt to be mistaken as to our own estate, not observing corruptions when they have got advantage of us. We are dishonorable to the gospel by our very weakness, and little useful to any about us. In a word, though we live to less profit to ourselves or others, yet are we unwilling and too unready to die.

Now, seeing the case of weakness in the converted is so sad, how diligent should we be to cherish and increase their grace! The strength of Christians is the honor of the Church. When they are inflamed with the love of God, and live by a lively working faith, and set light by the profits and honors of the world, and love one another with a pure heart fervently and can bear and heartily forgive a wrong, and suffer joyfully for the cause of Christ, and study to do good, and walk inoffensively and harmlessly in the world, are ready to be servants to all men for their good, becoming all things to all men in order to win them to Christ, and yet abstaining from the appearance of evil, and seasoning all their actions with a sweet mixture of prudence, humility, zeal, and heavenly-mindedness.

O, what an honor are such to their profession (I Peter 1:22, Eph 4:32, Acts 5:41, I Th 4:11, I Cor 9:22, I Thess 5:22)! What an ornament to the Church; and how serviceable to God and man! Men would sooner believe that the gospel is from heaven, if they saw more such effects of it upon the hearts and lives of those who profess it. The world is better able to read the nature of religion in a man's life than in the Bible. "Those who obey not the word, may be won by the conversation" of such as are thus eminent for godliness (I Peter 3:1). It is, therefore, a most important part of our work, to labor more in the polishing and perfecting of the saints, that they may be strong in the Lord, and fitted for their Master's service.

(2) Another class of converts that need our special help, are those who labor under some particular corruption, which keeps under their graces, and makes them a trouble to others, and a burden to themselves. Alas! there are too many such persons. Some are specially addicted to pride, and others to worldly-mindedness; some to sensual desires, and others to frowardness or other evil passions. Now it is our duty to give assistance to all these; and partly by dissuasions, and clear discoveries of the odiousness of the sin, and partly by suitable directions about the remedy, to help them to a more complete conquest of their corruptions. We are leaders of Christ's army against the powers of hell, and must resist all the works of darkness wherever we find them, even though it should be in the children of light (Eph. 5:6). We must be no more tender of the sins of the godly, than of the ungodly, nor any more befriend them or favor them. By how much more we love their persons, by so much the more must we manifest it, by making opposition to their sins. And yet we must look to meet with some tender persons here, especially when iniquity has got any head, and made a party, and many have fallen in love with it; they will be as pettish and as impatient of reproof as some worse men, and perhaps will interest even piety itself in their faults. But the

ministers of Christ must do their duty, notwithstanding their peevishness; and must not so far hate their brother, as to forbear rebuking him, or suffer sin to lie upon his soul. It must, no doubt, be done with much prudence, yet done it must be.

(3) Another class who demand special help are declining Christians, that are either fallen into some scandalous sin, or else abate their zeal and diligence, and show that they have lost their former love (Rev. 2:4). As the case of backsliders is very sad, so our diligence must be very great for their recovery. It is sad to them to lose so much of their life, and peace, and serviceableness to God; and to become so serviceable to Satan and his cause. It is sad to us to see that all our labor is come to this; and that, when we have taken so much pains with them, and have had so much hopes of them, all should be so far frustrated. It is saddest of all, to think that God should be so dishonored by those whom he has so loved, and for whom he has done so much; and that Christ should be so wounded in the house of his friends. Besides, partial backsliding has a natural tendency to total apostasy, and would effect it, if special grace did not prevent it.

Now, the more sad the case of such Christians is, the more must we exert ourselves for their recovery. We must "restore those that are overtaken in a fault, in the spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1)," and yet see that the sore be thoroughly searched and healed, and the joint be well set again, what pain whatever it may cost. We must look especially to the honor of the gospel, and see that they give such evidence of true repentance, and make such free and full confession of their sin, that some reparation be thereby made to the Church and their holy profession, for the wound they have given to religion. Much skill is required for restoring such a soul.

(4) The last class whom I shall here notice, as requiring our attention, are the strong; for they, also, have need of our assistance: partly to preserve the grace they have; partly to help them in making further progress; and partly to direct them in improving their strength for the service of Christ, and the assistance of their brethren; and, also, to encourage them to persevere, that they may receive the crown.

All these are the objects of the ministerial work, and in respect to each of them, we must "take heed to all the flock".

4. We must have a special eye upon families, to see that they are well ordered, and the duties of each relation performed. The life of religion, and the welfare and glory of both the Church and the State, depend much on family government and duty. If we suffer the neglect of this, we shall undo all. What are we like to do ourselves to the reforming of a congregation, if all the work be cast on us alone; and masters of families neglect that necessary duty of their own, by which they are bound to help us? If any good be begun by the ministry in any soul, a careless, prayerless, worldly family is like to stifle it, or very much hinder it; whereas, if you could but get the rulers of families to do their duty, to take up the work where you left it, and help it on, what abundance of good might be done! I beseech you, therefore, if you desire the reformation and welfare of your people, do all you can to promote family religion. To this end, let me entreat you to attend to the following things:

(1) Get information about how each family is ordered, that you may know how to proceed in your endeavors for their further good.

(2) Go occasionally among them, when they are likely to be most at leisure, and ask the master of the family whether he prays with them, and reads the Scripture, or what he does? Labor to convince such as neglect this, of their sin; and if you have opportunity, pray with them before you go, and give them an

example of what you would have them do. Perhaps, too, it might be well to get a promise from them, that they will make more conscience of their duty for the future.

(3) If you find any, through ignorance and want of practice, unable to pray, persuade them to study their own wants, and to get their hearts affected with them, and, in the meanwhile, advise them to use a form of prayer, rather than not pray at all. Tell them, however, that it is their sin and shame that they have lived so negligently, as to be so unacquainted with their own necessities as not to know how to speak to God in prayer, when every beggar can find words to ask an alms. And, therefore, that a form of prayer is but for necessity, as a crutch to a cripple, while they cannot do well without it; but that they must resolve not to be content with it, but to learn to do better as speedily as possible, seeing that prayer should come from the feelings of the heart, and be varied according to our necessities and circumstances.

(4) See that in every family there are some useful moving books, beside the Bible. If they have none, persuade them to buy some: if they be not able to buy them, give them some if you can. If you are not able yourself, get some gentlemen, or other rich persons, that are ready to good works, to do it. And engage them to read them at night, when they have leisure, and especially on the Lord's day.

(5) Direct them how to spend the Lord's day; how to dispatch their worldly business, so as to prevent encumbrances and distractions; and when they have been at church, how to spend the time in their families. The life of religion depends much on this, because poor people have no other free considerable time; and, therefore, if they lose this, they lose all, and will remain ignorant and brutish. Persuade the master of every family to cause his children and servants to repeat the Catechism to him, every Sabbath evening, and to give him some account of what they have heard at church during the day.

Neglect not, I beseech you, this important part of your work. Get masters of families to do their duty, and they will not only spare you a great deal of labor, but will much further the success of your labors. If a captain can get the officers under him to do their duty, he may rule the soldiers with much less trouble, than if all lay upon his own shoulders. You are not like to see any general reformation, until you procure family reformation. Some little religion there may be, here and there; but while it is confined to single persons, and is not promoted in families, it will not prosper, nor promise much future increase.

5. We must be diligent in visiting the sick, and helping them to prepare either for a fruitful life, or a happy death. Though this should be the business of all our life and theirs, yet does it, at such a season, require extraordinary care both of them and us. When time is almost gone, and they must now or never be reconciled to God, O, how does it concern them to redeem those hours, and to lay hold on eternal life! And when we see that we are like to have but a few days or hours more to speak to them, in order to their everlasting welfare, who, that is not a block or an infidel, would not be much with them, and do all he can for their salvation in that short space?

Will it not awaken us to compassion, to look on a languishing man, and to think that within a few days his soul will be in heaven or in hell? Surely it will try the faith and seriousness of ministers, to be much about dying men! They will thus have opportunity to discern whether they themselves are in good earnest about the matters of the life to come. So great is the change that is made by death, that it should awaken us to the greatest sensibility to see a man so near it, and should excite in us the deepest pangs of compassion, to do the office of inferior angels for the soul, before it departs from the body, that it may be ready for the convoy of superior angels to the "inheritance of the saints in light (Col. 1:12)". When a man is almost at his journey's end, and the next step brings him to heaven or hell, it is time for us, while there is hope, to help

him if we can.

And as their present necessity should move us to embrace that opportunity for their good, so should the advantage that sickness and the prospect of death affords. Even the stoutest sinners will hear us on their death-bed, though they scorned us before. They will then let fall their fury, and be as gentle as lambs, who were before as intractable as lions. I find not one in ten, of the most obstinate scornful wretches in my parish, but when they come to die, will humble themselves, confess their faults, and seem penitent, and promise, if they should recover, to reform their lives. Cyprian says to those in health, " He who everyday reminds himself that he is dying, despises the present and hastens to things to come. Much more he who feels himself to be in the very act of dying." O how resolvedly will the worst of sinners seem to cast away their sins and promise reformation, and cry out of their folly, and of the vanity of this world, when they see that death is in good earnest with them, and away they must without delay! Perhaps you will say, that these forced changes are not cordial, and that, therefore, we have no great hope of doing them any saving good. I confess it is very common for sinners to be frightened into ineffectual purposes, but not so common to be at such a season converted to the Savior. It is a remark of Augustine, " He cannot die badly who lives well; and scarcely shall he die well who lives badly." Yet "scarcely" and "never" are not all one. It should make both them and us the more diligent in the time of health, because it is "scarcely" ; but yet we should bestir us at the last, in the use of the best remedies, because it is not " never" .

But as I do not intend to furnish a directory for the whole ministerial work, I will not stop to tell you particularly what must be done for men in their last extremity; but shall notice only three or four things, as specially worthy of your attention.

(1) Stay not until their strength and understanding are gone, and the time so short that you scarcely know what to do; but go to them as soon as you hear they are sick, whether they send for you or not.

(2) When the time is so short, that there is no opportunity to instruct them in the principles of religion in order, be sure to ply the main points, and to dwell on those truths which are most calculated to promote their conversion, showing them the glory of the life to come, and the way by which it was purchased for us, and the great sin and folly of their having neglected it in time of health; but yet the possibility that remains of their still obtaining it, if they will believe in Christ, the only Savior, and repent of their sins.

(3) If they recover, be sure to remind them of their promises and resolutions in time of sickness. Go to them purposely to set these home to their consciences; and whenever, afterwards, you see them remiss, go to them, and put them in mind of what they said when they were stretched on a sick-bed. And because it is of such use to them who recover, and has been the means of the conversion of many a soul, it is very necessary that you go to them whose sickness is not mortal, as well as to those who are dying, that so you may have some advantage to move them to repentance, and may afterward have this to plead against their sins; as a bishop of Cologne is said to have answered the Emperor Sigismund, when he asked him what was the way to be saved, " He must be what he purposed, or promised to be, when he was last troubled with the stone and the gout."

6. We must reprove and admonish those who live offensively or impenitently. Before we bring such matters before the church, or its rulers, it is ordinarily most fit for the minister to try himself what he can do in private to bow the sinner to repentance, especially if it be not a public crime. Here there is required much skill, and a difference must be made, according to the various tempers of the offenders; but with the most it will be necessary to speak with the greatest plainness and power, to shake their careless hearts,

and make them see what it is to dally with sin; to let them know the evil of it, and its sad effects as regards both God and themselves.

7. The last part of our oversight, which I shall notice, consists in the exercise of Church discipline. This consists, after the aforesaid private reproofs, in more public reproof, combined with exhortation to repentance, in prayer for the offender, in restoring the penitent, and in excluding and avoiding the impenitent.

(1) In the case of public offenses, and even of those of a more private nature, when the offender remains impenitent, he must be reproofed before all, and again invited to repentance. This is not the less our duty, because we have made so little conscience of the practice of it. It is not only Christ's command to tell the church, but Paul's to "rebuke before all (Mt. 18:17, I Tim. 5:20)"; and the Church did constantly practice it, until selfishness and formality caused them to be remiss in this and other duties. There is no room to doubt whether this be our duty, and as little is there any ground to doubt whether we have been unfaithful as to the performance of it. Many of us, who would be ashamed to omit preaching or praying half so much, have little considered what we are doing, while living in the willful neglect of this duty, and other parts of discipline, so long as we have done. We little think how we have drawn the guilt of swearing, and drunkenness, and fornication, and other crimes upon our own heads, by neglecting to use the means which God has appointed for the cure of them.

If any shall say, There is little likelihood that public reproof will do them good, that they will rather be enraged by the shame of it; I answer

[a] It ill becomes a creature to plead the ordinances of God as useless, or to reproach God's service instead of doing it, and to set his wits in opposition to his Maker. God can render useful his own ordinances, or else he would never have appointed them.

[b] The usefulness of discipline is apparent, in the shaming of sin and humbling the sinner, and in manifesting the holiness of Christ, and of his doctrine and Church, before all the world.

[c] What will you do with such sinners? Will you give them up as hopeless? That would be more cruel than administering reproof to them. Will you use other means? Why, it is supposed that all other means have been used without success; for this is the last remedy.

[d] The principal use of this public discipline is not for the offender himself, but for the Church. It tends exceedingly to deter others from the like crimes, and so to keep the congregation and their worship pure. Seneca could say, "He who excuses present evils transmits them to posterity." And elsewhere, "He who spares the guilty harms the good."

(2) With reproof we must join exhortation of the offender to repentance, and to the public profession of it for the satisfaction of the church. As the church is bound to avoid communion with impenitent scandalous sinners, so, when they have had evidence of their sin, they must also have some evidence of their repentance; for we cannot know them to be penitent without evidence; and what evidence can the church have but their profession of repentance, and afterwards their actual reformation?

Much prudence, I confess, is to be exercised in such proceedings, lest we do more hurt than good; but it must be such Christian prudence as orders duties, and suits them to their ends, not such carnal prudence as shall enervate or exclude them. In performing this duty, we should deal humbly, even when we deal

most sharply, and make it appear that it is not from any ill will, nor any lordly disposition, nor from revenge for any injury, but a necessary duty which we cannot conscientiously neglect; and, therefore, it may be meet to show the people the commands of God obliging us to do what we do, in some such words as the following:

'Brethren, sin is so hateful an evil in the eyes of the most holy God, how light whatever impenitent sinners make of it, that he has provided the everlasting torments of hell for the punishment of it; and no lesser means can prevent that punishment than the sacrifice of the Son of God, applied to those who truly repent of and forsake it; and therefore God, who calls all men to repentance, has commanded us to "exhort one another daily, while it is called To-day, lest any be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin," (Heb. 3:13) and that we do not hate our brother in our heart, but in any wise rebuke our neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him, (Lev. 19:17) and that if our brother offend us, we should tell him his fault between him and us; and if he hear us not, we should take two or three more with us; and if he hear not them, we should tell the church; and if he hear not the church, he must be to us as a heathen man and a tax-collector; (Matt. 18:15-17) and those that sin, we must rebuke before all, that others may fear, (1 Tim. 5:20) and rebuke with all authority: (Titus 2:15) yes, were it an apostle of Christ that should sin openly, he must be reproved openly, as Paul did Peter; (Gal. 2:11,14) and if they repent not, we must avoid them, and with such not so much as eat (2 Thess. 3:6,11,12,14; 1 Cor. 5:11-13).'

'Having heard of the scandalous conduct of A.B. of this church, or parish, and having received sufficient proof that he has committed the odious sin of , we have seriously dealt with him to bring him to repentance; but, to the grief of our hearts, we perceive no satisfactory result of our endeavors; but he seems still to remain impenitent (or he still lives in the same sin, though he verbally professes repentance). We therefore judge it our duty to proceed to the use of that further remedy which Christ has commanded us to try; and hence we beseech him, in the name of the Lord, without further delay, to lay to heart the greatness of his sin, the wrong he has done to Christ and to himself, and the scandal and grief that he has caused to others. And I do earnestly beseech him, for the sake of his own soul, that he will consider, what it is that he can gain by his sin and impenitency, and whether it will pay for the loss of everlasting life; and how he thinks to stand before God in judgment, or to appear before the Lord Jesus, when death shall snatch his soul from his body, if he be found in this impenitent state. And I do beseech him, for the sake of his own soul, and, as a messenger of Jesus Christ, require him, as he will answer the contrary at the bar of God, that he lay aside the stoutness and impenitency of his heart, and unfeignedly confess and lament his sin before God and this congregation. And this desire I here publish, not out of any ill will to his person, as The Lord knocks, but in love to his soul, and in obedience to Christ who has made it my duty; desiring that, if it be possible, he may be saved from his sin, and from the power of Satan, and from the everlasting wrath of God, and may be reconciled to God and to his church; and, therefore, that he may be humbled by true contrition, before he be humbled by remediless condemnation.'

To this purpose I conceive our public admonitions should proceed; and, in some cases, where the sinner considers his sin to be small, it may be necessary to point out the aggravations of it, particularly by citing some passages of Scripture which speak of its evil and its danger.

(3) With these reproofs and exhortations, we must join the prayers of the congregation in behalf of the offender. This should be done in every case of discipline, but particularly if the offender will not be present to receive admonition, or gives no evidence of repentance, and shows no desire for the prayers of the congregation. In such cases, especially, it will be meet that we beg the prayers of the congregation for him ourselves, entreating them to consider what a fearful condition the impenitent are in, and to have pity on a

poor soul that is so blinded and hardened by sin and Satan, that he cannot pity himself; and to think what it is for a man to appear before the living God in such a case, and, therefore, that they would join in earnest prayer to God, that he would open his eyes, and soften, and humble his stubborn heart, before he be in hell beyond remedy. And, accordingly, let us be very earnest in prayer for him, that the congregation may be excited affectionately to join with us; and who knows but God may hear our prayers, and the sinner's heart may relent under them, more than under all our exhortations?

It is, in my judgment, a very laudable course of some churches, that use, for the next three days together, to desire the congregation to join in earnest prayer to God for the opening of the sinner's eyes, and the softening of his heart, and the saving of him from impenitency and eternal death.

If ministers would be conscientious in performing this duty entirely and self-denyingly, they might make something of it, and expect a blessing upon it; but when we shrink from all that is dangerous or ungrateful in our work, and shift off all that is costly or troublesome, we cannot expect that any great good should be effected by such a carnal, partial use of means; and though some may here and there be wrought upon, yet we cannot look That the gospel should run and be glorified when we do our duty so lamely and so defectively.

(4) We must restore the penitent to the fellowship of the church. As we must not teach an offender to make light of discipline by too much facility, so neither must we discourage him by too much severity. If he appear to be truly sensible of the sinfulness of his conduct, and penitent on account of it, we must see that he confess his guilt, and that he promise to fly from such sins for the time to come, to watch more narrowly and to walk more warily, to avoid temptation, to distrust his own strength, and to rely on the grace which is in Christ Jesus (Gal. 6:1, 2 Cor. 2:5-11).

We must assure him of the riches of God's love, and the sufficiency of Christ's blood to pardon his sins, if he believe and repent.

We must see that he begs to be restored to the communion of the church, and desires their prayers to God for his pardon and salvation.

We must charge the church That they imitate Christ, in forgiving and in retaining the penitent person; or, if he were cast out, in restoring him to their communion; and that they must never reproach him with his sins, nor cast them in his teeth, but forgive them, even as Christ does.

Finally, we must give God thanks for his recovery, and pray for his confirmation and future preservation.

(5) The last part of discipline is the excluding from the communion of the church those who, after sufficient trial, remain impenitent.

Exclusion from church communion, commonly called excommunication, is of diverse sorts or degrees, which are not to be confounded; but that which is most commonly to be practiced among us, is, only to remove an impenitent sinner from our communion, until it shall please the Lord to give him repentance.

In this exclusion or removal, the minister or governors of the church are authoritatively to charge the people, in the name of the Lord, to have no communion with him, and to pronounce him one whose communion the church is bound to avoid; and it is the people's duty carefully to avoid him, provided the pastor's charge contradict not the Word of God.

Nevertheless, we must pray for the repentance and restoration even of the excommunicated; and if God shall give them repentance, we must gladly receive them again into the communion of the church.

Would we were but so far faithful in the practice of this discipline, as we are satisfied both of the matter and manner of it; and did not dispraise and reproach it by our negligence, while we write and plead for it with the highest commendations! It is worthy of our consideration, who is like to have the heavier charge about this matter at the bar of God whether those who have reproached and hindered discipline by their tongues, because they knew not its nature and necessity; or we who have so vilified it by our constant omission, while with our tongues we have magnified it? If hypocrisy be no sin, or if the knowledge of our Master's will by no aggravation of disobedience, then we may be in a better case than they; but if these be great evils, we must be much worse than the very persons whom we so loudly condemn. I will not advise the zealous maintainers, and obstinate neglecters of discipline, to unsay all that they have said, until they are ready to do as they say; nor to recant their defenses of discipline, until they mean to practice it; nor to burn all the books which they have written for it, and all the records of their cost and hazards for it, lest they rise up in judgment against them, to their confusion. But I would persuade them, without any more delay, to conform their practice to these testimonies which they have given, lest the more they are proved to have commended discipline, the more they are proved to have condemned themselves for neglecting it.

It has somewhat amazed me to hear some, that I took for reverend, godly divines, reproach, as a sect, the Sacramentarians and Disciplinarians. And, when I desired to know whom they meant, they told me they meant them that will not give the sacrament to all the parish, and them that will make distinctions by their discipline. I had thought the tempter had obtained a great victory, if he had got but one godly pastor of a church to neglect discipline, as well as if he had got him to neglect preaching; much more if he had got him to approve of that neglect: but it seems that he has got some to scorn at the performers of the duty which they neglect. Sure I am, if it were well understood how much of the pastoral authority and work consists in church guidance, it would be also discerned, that to be against discipline, is near to being against the ministry; and to be against the ministry is near to being absolutely against the church; and to be against the church, is near to being absolutely against Christ. Blame not the harshness of the inference, until you can avoid it, and free yourselves from the charge of it before the Lord.

2. The MANNER of This Oversight

Having thus considered the nature of this oversight, we shall next speak of the manner; not of each part distinctly, lest we be tedious, but of the whole in general.

1. The ministerial work must be carried on purely for God and the salvation of souls, not for any private ends of our own. A wrong end makes all the work bad as from us, how good whatever it may be in its own nature. It is not serving God, but ourselves, if we do it not for God, but for ourselves. They who engage in this as a common work, to make a trade of it for their worldly livelihood, will find that they have chosen a bad trade, though a good employment. Self-denial is of absolute necessity in every Christian, but it is doubly necessary in a minister, as without it he cannot do God an hour's faithful service. Hard studies, much knowledge, and excellent preaching, if the ends be not right, is but more glorious hypocritical sinning. The saying of Bernard is commonly known: "Some desire to know merely for the sake of knowing, and that is shameful curiosity. Some desire to know that they may sell their knowledge, and that too is shameful. Some desire to know for reputation's sake, and that is shameful vanity. But there are some who desire to know that they may edify others, and that is praiseworthy; and there are some who desire to know that they themselves may be edified, and that is wise."

2. The ministerial work must be carried on diligently and laboriously, as being of such unspeakable consequence to ourselves and others. We are seeking to uphold the world, to save it from the curse of God, to perfect the creation, to attain the ends of Christ's death, to save ourselves and others from damnation, to overcome the devil, and demolish his kingdom, to set up the kingdom of Christ, and to attain and help others to the kingdom of glory. And are these works to be done with a careless mind, or a lazy hand? O see, then, that this work be done with all your might! Study hard, for the well is deep, and our brains are shallow; and, as Cassiodorus says: "Here the common level of knowledge is not to be the limit; here a true ambition is demonstrated; the more a deep knowledge is sought after, the greater the honor in attaining it." But especially be laborious in the practice and exercise of your knowledge. Let Paul's words ring continually in your ears, "Necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel (I Cor. 9:16)!" Ever think with yourselves what lies upon your hands: "If I do not bestir myself, Satan may prevail, and the people everlastingly perish, and their blood be required at my hand. By avoiding labor and suffering, I shall draw on myself a thousand times more than I avoid; whereas, by present diligence, I shall prepare for future blessedness." No man was ever a loser by God.

3. The ministerial work must be carried on prudently and orderly. Milk must go before strong meat; the foundation must be laid before we attempt to raise the superstructure (Heb. 5:14, I Peter 2:1-2). Children must not be dealt with as men of full stature. Men must be brought into a state of grace, before we can expect from them the works of grace. The work of conversion, and repentance from dead works, and faith in Christ, must be first and frequently and thoroughly taught. We must not ordinarily go beyond the capacities of our people, nor teach them the perfection, that have not learned the first principles of religion: for, as Gregory of Nyssa says: "We teach not infants the deep precepts of science, but first letters, and then syllables, etc. So the guides of the Church do first propound to their hearers certain documents, which are as the elements; and so by degrees do open to them the more perfect and mysterious matters." Therefore did the Church take so much pains with their catechumens, before they baptized them, and would not lay unpolished stones into the building.

4. Throughout the whole course of our ministry, we must insist chiefly upon the greatest, most certain, and most necessary truths, and be more seldom and sparing upon the rest. If we can but teach Christ to our people, we shall teach them all. Get them well to heaven, and they will have knowledge enough. The great and commonly acknowledged truths of religion are those that men must live upon, and which are the great instruments of destroying men's sins, and raising the heart to God. We must, therefore, ever have our people's necessities before our eyes. To remember the "one thing needful" will take us off gauds and needless ornaments, and unprofitable controversies (Luke 10:42). Many other things are desirable to be known; but this must be known, or else our people are undone forever. I confess I think NECESSITY should be the great disposer of a minister's course of study and labor. If we were sufficient for everything, we might attempt everything, and take in order the whole Encyclopedia: but life is short, and we are dull, and eternal things are necessary, and the souls that depend on our teaching are precious. I confess, necessity has been the conductor of my studies and life. It chooses what book I shall read, and tells me when, and how long. It chooses my text, and makes my sermon, both for matter and manner, so far as I can keep out my own corruption. Though I know the constant expectation of death has been a great cause of this, yet I know no reason why the most healthy man should not make sure of the most necessary things first, considering the uncertainty and shortness of all men's lives. Xenophon thought, "there was no better teacher than necessity, which teaches all things most diligently." Who can, in studying, preaching, or laboring, be doing other matters, if he do but know that this MUST be done? Who can trifle or delay, you feels the urgent spurs of necessity? As the soldier says, "No lengthy discussing, but speedy and strong

contending is needed where necessity urges on" , so much more must we, as our business is more important. Doubtless this is the best way to redeem time, to see that we lose not an hour, when we spend it only on necessary things. This is the way to be most profitable to others, though not always to be most pleasing and applauded; because, through men's frailty, it is true what Seneca says, that "We are attracted to novelties rather than to great things."

Hence it is, that a preacher must be often upon the same things, because the matters of necessity are few. We must not either feign necessities, or fall much upon unnecessaries, to satisfy them that look for novelties, though we must clothe the same truths with a grateful variety in the manner of our delivery. The great volumes and tedious controversies that so much trouble us and waste our time, are usually made up more of opinions than of necessary verities; for, as Ficinus says, "Necessity is shut up within narrow limits; not so with opinion;" and, as Gregory Nazianzen and Seneca often say, "Necessaries are common and obvious; it is superfluities that we waste our time for, and labor for, and complain that we attain them not." Ministers, therefore, must be observant of the case of their flocks, that they may know what is most necessary for them, both for matter and for manner; and usually the matter is to be first regarded, as being of more importance than the manner. If you are to choose what authors to read yourselves, will you not rather take those that tell you what you know not, and that speak the most necessary truths in the clearest manner, though it be in barbarous or unhandsome language, than those that will most learnedly and elegantly tell you that which is false or vain, and "by a great effort say nothing." I purpose to follow Augustine's counsel: "Give first place to the meaning of the Word, so that the soul is given preference over the body; from which it follows that we seek the more true as much as the more discerning discourses to be met with, just as we seek the more sensible, as much as the more handsome, to be our friends." And surely, as I do in my studies for my own edification, I should do in my teaching for other men's. It is commonly empty, ignorant men who want the matter and substance of true learning, that are over curious and solicitous about words and ornaments, when the old, experienced, and most learned men, abound in substantial verities delivered usually in the plainest dress. As Aristotle makes it the reason why women are more addicted to pride in apparel than men, that, being conscious of little inward worth, they seek to make it up with outward borrowed ornaments; so is it with empty, worthless preachers, who affect to be esteemed that which they are not, and have no other way to procure that esteem.

5. All our teaching must be as plain and simple as possible. This does best suit a teacher's ends. He who would be understood must speak to the capacity of his hearers. Truth loves the light, and is most beautiful when most naked. It is the sign of an envious enemy to hide the truth; and it is the work of a hypocrite to do this under presence of revealing it; and therefore painted obscure sermons (like painted glass in windows which keeps out the light) are too often the marks of painted hypocrites. If you would not teach men, what do you in the pulpit? If you would, why do you not speak so as to be understood? I know the height of the matter may make a man not understood, when he has studied to make it as plain as he can; but that a man should purposely cloud the matter in strange words, and hide his mind from the people, whom he pretends to instruct, is the way to make fools admire his profound learning, and wise men his folly, pride, and hypocrisy. Some men conceal their sentiments, under the presence of necessity, because of men's prejudices, and the unpreparedness of common understandings to receive the truth. But truth overcomes prejudice by the mere light of evidence, and there is no better way to make a good cause prevail, than to make it as plain, and as generally and thoroughly known as we can. It is this light that will dispose an unprepared mind. It is, at best, a sign that a man has not well digested the matter himself, if he is not able to deliver it plainly to others. I mean as plainly as the nature of the matter will bear, in regard of capacities prepared for it by prerequisite truths; for I know that some men cannot at present understand

some truths, if you speak them as plainly as words can express them; as the easiest rules in grammar, most plainly taught, will not be understood by a child that is but learning his alphabet.

6. Our work must be carried on with great humility. We must carry ourselves meekly and condescendingly to all; and so teach others, as to be as ready to learn of any that can teach us, and so both teach and learn at once; not proudly venting our own conceits, and disdaining all that any way contradict them, as if we had attained to the height of knowledge, and were destined for the chair, and other men to sit at our feet. Pride is a vice that ill becomes them that must lead men in such an humble way to heaven: let us, therefore, take heed, lest, when we have brought others there, the gate should prove too strait for ourselves. For, as Grotius says, "Pride is born in heaven, but as if unmindful that the way from that place is closed, it is impossible for it to return afterwards!" God, that thrust out a proud angel, will not entertain there a proud preacher. Methinks we should remember, at least the tide of a Minister, which, though the popish priests disdain, yet so do not we. It is this pride at the root that feeds all the rest of our sins. Hence the envy, the contention, and unpeaceableness of ministers; hence the stops to all reformation; all would lead, and few will follow or concur. Hence, also, is the non-proficiency of too many ministers, because they are too proud to learn. Humility would teach them another lesson. I may say of ministers as Augustine to Jerome, even of the aged among them, "although it is more fitting for the aged to teach than to learn, much more is it fitting to learn than to be ignorant."

7. There must be a prudent mixture of severity and mildness both in our preaching and discipline; each must be predominant, according to the quality or character of the person, or matter, that we have in hand.

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