

Autonomy of the Local Church

by William MacDonald

The autonomy of the local church is a crucial aspect of the New Testament pattern, allowing for self-government, a reduction of error and governmental control, and a more effective and sustainable mission.

Duration: 1:35:37

Scripture: Ephesians 4:15

Topics: "Local Church"

Description

In this sermon, Mr. McDonald discusses the decline of power and life in religious organizations over time. He emphasizes the importance of following the New Testament pattern, which prevents the perpetuation of organizations after the glory has departed. The sermon also explores the two general methods of missionary strategy used in the book of Acts: personal evangelism and mass evangelism. Mr. McDonald shares a powerful story of personal evangelism, highlighting the concept of grace and how it relates to God's forgiveness and salvation. Overall, the sermon encourages listeners to reflect on the state of the preaching of God's word in today's congregations and the need for a revival of true spiritual power.

Transcript

Soundware State Ministry, Queensland. We continue this study in the Book of Acts with Mr. Macdonald, and this cassette, being cassette number three, commences with Acts chapter 14, verse 21. Mr. Macdonald.

In Acts chapter 14, verse 21. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra and to Iconium and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must, through much tribulation, enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had ordained them elders in every church and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed.

And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia, and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Italia, and thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. When they were come and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles, and there they abode long time with the disciples. Now yesterday, at the close of the message, we were talking about some of the unusual pulpits that are found in the Book of Acts.

We thumbed through the book and found the Christians preaching many times in the open air. We found them preaching in the vicinity of the temple, oftentimes through no choice of their own. They were before the Jewish Sanhedrin, and they used it as an opportunity to preach for the Lord, down by the river, in the marketplace, on Mars Hill, the Apostle Paul gave that wonderful message in Athens, and from the stairs of the fortress of Antonio.

They preached in the synagogues, especially in the early part of the book. As the book goes on, the doors of the synagogues were closed more and more to them. They preached in private homes, and you remember Philip preached in a chariot.

Here they come again, Mr. Walden, they thought you were talking. In the schoolroom of Tyrannus, it says the Christians went everywhere gossiping the gospel, and they preached in civil courts, and we pointed out, we drew from this, that most of the preaching in the book of Acts was what you might call extemporaneous. It wasn't rehearsed.

It was kind of off-the-cuff preaching, and you know, that's a thrilling thing to me as I think of that book, and I just wonder if that isn't God's principle plan for us today. It's a wonderful thing when you meet Christians who have a special gift for this, of turning any occasion into an opportunity for witnessing for Christ, and that's what these people obviously did. It makes me think of that Christian man, and he's in his home, and the telephone rings, and he goes to the phone, and you can't help hearing what's going on.

He lifts up the phone, it's a pause, he says, I'm sorry, you have the wrong number, but don't hang up. You didn't call by chance. I have a message from the Lord for you.

And he went on and witnessed to them about the Lord Jesus. In other words, there are no wrong numbers. We had a student at school one day, and he was driving down a one-way street in Chicago, and had the misfortune of being caught.

A policeman tried to extract a bribe from him quite a long while, and when he found out he wasn't going to be successful, he said to the student, well, I'm going to have to take you in. And so he took the student down to the police station, gave him another opportunity to pay the bribe before he took him in, and bluffed him all the way into the lobby of the police station. And then he said to him, do you know what I'm going to do with you? And the student said, I don't know.

Well, he said, I'm going to let you go. The student said to him, you know, officer, that's grace. He said, I don't deserve to be let go.

He said, I've broken the law. And he said, I deserve to pay the penalty of the law. But he said, you're showing grace to me.

He said, that's exactly what God has done to you and to me. He said, we've broken the law of God, and we deserve to pay the penalty. The Lord Jesus came down and suffered for us and paid the debt that we deserve, and now God shows his unmerited favor to us and saves us for Christ's sake.

When he left, there were tears in the officer's eyes, and he said, well, I'm glad I brought you in anyway. Well, that's typical of what was going on in the book of Acts. The emphasis was not on prepared sermons, but on crises arising in life, experiences, daily experiences arising in life, and people utilizing these as opportunities to witness for the Lord Jesus.

I wish my mind worked faster that way. And I believe that with prayer and cultivation that we can all develop this. Now, I'd just like to say a few words this morning about the autonomy of the local church.

Autonomy means self-government. And we believe that the scripture teaches that every local assembly is an autonomous unit. That is, that it is self-governing.

As I read the book of Acts, I don't find any federation or what you might call denomination. What denomination did these early believers belong to? They didn't belong to any denomination. They didn't belong to any sect.

There was no federation of the churches. It's kind of an argument from silence here in the book of Acts, but if you turn to the book of Revelation, chapter 1, you find the Lord Jesus standing in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. You might picture it like this on the chart.

Here's the Lord. We've got seven churches here. The Lord stands in the midst of the seven churches.

Each one is responsible directly to Him. Notice that there's no denominational headquarters in there. Notice that there's no hierarchy in there.

Every local church looking directly to the head of the church, the Lord Jesus. And so we say here, not only no federation, no centralized authority. No headquarters that these churches are looking to.

Everyone looks to the headquarters in heaven, not any on earth. Now, what is the advantage of this system? In setting forth this wonderful plan for the New Testament church, why did the Lord design it this way? Well, first of all, we can see that this hinders the spread of error. When every local church, local assembly is independent, the Christians in it are studying the word by themselves, for themselves, testing everything according to the scripture, it is more difficult for error to spread.

When you get a vast denominational system with denominational headquarters and seminary, a seminary in which the ministers of this denomination are trained, it's a very easy thing for error to spread. And this has been the history of the decline of evangelical denominations in the United States, that liberalism and modernism makes a frontal attack on the seminaries and on the headquarters. They don't try to come and pick off every individual church.

Their lives wouldn't be long enough to do that. And so they attack the headquarters and they attack the fountain, that is the seminaries from which the teachers and preachers come. And in not too long a time, they have the entire sect, the entire denomination, the entire federation of churches.

And so really it's the wisdom of God that's seen in making every local church self-governing. And not only so, but it hinders governmental control. This is an interesting thing that all over the world governments say, we don't want to deal with many individual churches, we want you to come together and form a central body and have that central body representing you to the government.

When I was in Europe, I was in a certain country, and this is exactly what happened. The government impatiently said to some of the Christians and some of the local independent New Testament churches there, we don't like this arrangement, you appoint a committee and we want that committee to represent all of the churches to the government. And so they fell for the trap.

And yet it was an interesting thing. At first it was understood that the only purpose of this committee was just representation before the government. But when I was there in 1966 by some queer quirk, that committee held the title deeds to all the gospel chapel property in that country.

They held all the ownership to all the chapels, and that wasn't the worst of it, they were going around, the committee was going around telling the Christians in the local assemblies whom they could and could not invite as speakers. That's the way it worked. And it's a very subtle thing.

Because if it isn't a question of government oppression, it's a question of government favors. The government will say to you, look, we'll give you certain favors if you'll do this. For instance, if you will register with us, then you can appoint so many chaplains in the military service.

And so they register with the government, and of course in times of oppression, in times of difficulty, all the government does is have to take over the headquarters, and then they have all the churches. Well, you can see that if every church is independent, every church is autonomous, you can see it's a very difficult thing for the government to seize control. The country was Italy, and they formed a committee called Ente Morali.

I'm glad to say that this situation has been changed. Since then, some of the Christians saw the great error of moving toward any centralization. But it's true in Germany.

If you go to Germany today under Hitler's regime in Germany, that's exactly what happened. And it's true in Poland today. You go to Poland and you'll find that many independent New Testament churches have lost their distinctive character because they yielded to the pressure of the government in this.

And yet there are other assemblies, other New Testament churches that refuse to bow to this. They call themselves free churches, free assemblies. And as far as I'm concerned, they're the ones that have the power.

Now, you say, is this a problem in our own country? It can be a problem in any country. And it's something that we all have to be careful about. Now, somebody might say to me, well, just a minute, what about the Jerusalem Council? In Acts chapter 15, isn't there a situation there where a body in Jerusalem exercised legislative control over the other churches? And the answer to that question is an emphatic no.

A question had come up in the assembly in Antioch and it was taken down to Jerusalem for discussion. But just let's look at how it's worded in the scripture. It says in verse 1 of chapter 15 of Acts, and certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren and said, except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that, that is, they, the brethren in Antioch, determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain other of them should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. Now, the thing you want to notice in that verse is the brethren, the Christians in Jerusalem did not send for these people. It was a voluntary thing on the part of the Christians in Antioch.

They said, well, let's go and get some advice down in Jerusalem about this matter. It was a crucial matter. The whole question of the gospel was involved in it.

And so they went down and the apostles and elders came together to consider the matter. Now, they did not legislate. They did not legislate.

Notice what it says in verse 28, where they're giving kind of an informal decision. They said, it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us to lay upon you, no greater burden than these necessary things that ye abstain from meats offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled and from fornication, from which if you keep yourselves, you shall do well, fare you well. Well, all they did was tell them to go back to the word of God and obey the word of God.

So there was no sense of a legislative body controlling churches in any sense in the book of Acts. And this is a very important principle. Why? Well, because according to the word of God, we're going to have more government oppression in the days ahead.

And the type of churches that survive under oppressive governments are churches that can go underground readily. This was true in China, of course, and it's been true in many other countries. There is an underground church in Russia today.

You know that many of the Iron Curtain countries behind the Bamboo Curtain, an underground church, people meeting secretly in homes. I believe, frankly, it's God's ideal. So let's remember that the autonomy of the local church.

I'd just like to say a word about organizations in the book of Acts. It's a notable thing that the emphasis of the disciples and of the early Christians was to preach the gospel and establish New Testament churches and nothing else. And I think this is worth our spending a few moments on this morning.

Someone has well said, we found missions. They established nothing but local assembly. And that's an interesting thing, because, you know, the local assembly, the church, is the only group on Earth to which the Lord has promised perpetuity.

And interestingly, he said, upon this rock, I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And he didn't say that of any other group. Now, in the day in which we live in Christian circles, and I'm not criticizing this, I'm just pointing it out because I believe these are principles in the word of God.

In the day in which we live, if a Christian gets a good idea, the first thing he does is form an organization. And we have kind of an organizational explosion today. Well, you didn't have that in the book of Acts.

You just had Christians preaching the gospel and local churches being formed. What are some of the advantages of that? Well, first of all, a tremendous conservation of manpower. What do I mean by that? Well, just let me illustrate it.

Last December, I was at a great evangelical conference in Urbana, Illinois. My heart was blessed. It's wonderful.

But you know, at that conference, I would say that practically all of the evangelical mission boards were represented. They had booths all around that vast auditorium. And they had some of the leading missionaries of the world there, really.

It was fantastic. And what were they doing? They were appealing for young people to go out with their mission boards. And it struck me as I was there.

Well, now look, probably some of the finest missionaries in the world are here, held down in administrative jobs. Because that's what most of them were. The men were there were the administrators of the missions.

And I couldn't help feeling if all of those men and women who were there were really out on the mission field, it would solve the very problem, or at least it would go a long way towards solving the problem that they were there trying to solve by recruiting new workers. And this has been so often the case where here's a mission board, and they have missionaries all over the world. They need administrative help.

They go out and pick off the very best that they have out in the foreign field and bring them back home to sit behind desks. Well, I think these are things that we should think of. It seems to me in the book of Acts, they had a centrality of purpose.

They were all working toward this purpose. And I have to say that they got results. And then, of course, tremendous conservation of finances.

I don't think I have to labor this point with you. You've read the magazines. You've heard the stories about every dollar given to evangelical work and what percentage of it goes to overhead.

And what a small percentage of it ever reaches the orphans. I'm just using that as an illustration. But that's the idea.

In other words, we set up these tremendous organizations, and it takes an awful lot of money to support the organization. And a percentage of that really goes into the direct propagation of the gospel. And then thirdly, the New Testament pattern, it seems to me, has resulted in a tremendous concentration of effort.

And this is really important, isn't it? We need this in our local fellowships, a tremendous concentration of purpose, a vision of what we're trying to do, and a working together toward that vision. It's when we dissipate our energies in a million and one other things that the wheels grind heavily. So I just feel it's good for us to think about that.

Remember, in the book of Acts, they founded nothing but New Testament churches. And you know what happened, how the word spread so that Paul could say in his day that the then known world, I suppose he meant the Mediterranean world, had heard the gospel, not bad. Then another interesting thing is that this method results in a reduction of factional strife.

I'm sure you must be aware of this, that once again in the evangelical world, with all of these organizations and all the advertisement, develops an awful lot of jealousy and division among the people of God and an awful lot of strife. I was impressed recently to be with some Christian young people and they were getting indoctrinated to go overseas. And a girl said to one of the leaders, she said, supposing I could get an article in the local newspaper about going overseas.

She said, is it all right? He said, generally speaking, we are opposed to publicity. He said, we find the more publicity the Christian work gets, the more jealousy it generates. And really, I was quite pleased to hear a 27 year old say something like that.

He said, whatever you do, don't use our names in it. He said, if you can get your personal testimony of faith in Christ in the paper, that's all right. But a few additional facts, but wasn't that an interesting thing? He said, the more publicity, the more jealousy in Christian work.

Shouldn't be so. Well, there was a tremendous reduction of factional strife. And then there's a prevention of perpetuating organizations after the glory has departed.

It's so easy to build up organizations in a human way. And perhaps the founders of that organization had a tremendous vision for God. And they were really on fire for God and had a zeal for God.

And then the years go by and, you know, there's a loss of power, a leakage of power. And pretty soon the shell is there, but the life is gone. It's the old story of man, movement, machine and monument.

Starts off with a man of God, filled with the Holy Spirit, develops into a movement. Other people seem to catch the vision and they follow this leader. And then after a while it just becomes a machine and they go mechanically through the motions.

And then finally a monument. Well, the New Testament pattern, it seems to me, prevents the perpetuating of organizations after the glory has departed. I don't know whether you've all copied this or not.

I'd just like to say a word about missionary strategy in the book of Acts. There were two general methods used, personal evangelism and mass evangelism. Personal evangelism and mass evangelism.

And yet I want to go back to what I said before, and I think it's worth repeating. And that is this, that both the personal evangelism and the mass evangelism were unrehearsed. Like they didn't say, and I'm not saying it's wrong to do this either, but they didn't say, well, we're going to have a mass rally at 8 o'clock in the Civic Auditorium.

The mass evangelism they did was probably more through riots that they had incited through their testimony. That's really the way it worked. Or on the day of Pentecost, with the giving of the Holy Spirit and the speaking in tongues, the crowd gathered, an opportunity to preach to a crowd.

And so in that sense, it was rather unrehearsed and extemporaneous. Now, what was their geographical strategy in the book of Acts? You hear a lot about this. And generally speaking, it is taught, and I'd like to talk with some of you brethren about this too.

Generally speaking, it's taught that in the book of Acts, the apostles went into big cities, preached the gospel in those big cities, and then when the churches were formed in those big cities, they radiated out into the surrounding district. But generally speaking, it's taught that they went into strategic areas, planted churches there, and left those churches to evangelize the surrounding area. Well, I'd just like to raise a question mark in your mind about that.

It's so easy to read Roland Allen and his book, *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's and Ours*. But I'd just like to raise a question, is that true? I've tried to go to the book of Acts with an open mind and figure out if that's what they did, and I've come to the conclusion it isn't always true. Sometimes that's what they did.

Sometimes they did go to major cities, but not always. Philip was preaching in Samaria and was getting the crowds. The Lord said, Philip, come here, I've got a man I want you to speak to.

And Philip left the crowds in Samaria, went down and preached to the Ethiopian eunuch. You'd hardly think that was strategic, would you? Going and speaking to one man. But it was strategic because that one man went back to Ethiopia with the gospel.

And Ethiopia is one of the few countries in the world that has had a consistent Christian testimony since those days. And I wonder if it doesn't go back to the evangelizing of the Ethiopian eunuch. So what I'd like to suggest to you is that the strategy in the book of Acts was moment by moment dependence upon the Holy Spirit of God.

The guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the more I read the book of Acts, the more this seems to me to be the way they operate. They didn't say now a million more in 64.

One of the big denominations in this country adopted that slogan. A million more in 64. And Vance Havner, when he heard about it, said, God forbid.

He said, if we get a million more like we've got now, we're sunk. They didn't set those standards. They said, Lord, what do you want us to do? And even they themselves, as they went along, they weren't sure exactly how the Lord was going to lead them.

But they kept themselves available. And in that way, the pattern was worked out. Now, I do see in the book of Acts that the apostles operated from a home base.

They had a home assembly. They went out from this home assembly. They evangelized.

They planted assemblies. I'm not going to labor that point because we've already mentioned it. Later, they went back and revisited the assemblies.

And they appointed elders there. Verse 23, and that's why we read this at the beginning. Verse 23 of chapter 14 says, And when they had ordained them elders in every church and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed.

Now, I think it's quite clear in the book of Acts that elders formed a well-recognized group within the assemblies. They couldn't appoint elders, of course, on their first visit because there hadn't been opportunity then for elders to manifest themselves. But they went back a year or so later.

And in the meantime, the Holy Spirit had raised up men with pastoral hearts and the apostles and their delegates singled out these men. Now, these were a well-recognized group within the assemblies. There was no vagueness about it.

People knew who the elders were in any assembly. Do they know in our assembly? Is there any indefiniteness in the minds of the people? When Paul was at Miletum, he sent to the elders at Ephesus. He told them, he asked them to come down to Miletum.

They came down, they knew who they were and they knew how to respond to an invitation like that. James in his epistle says, is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church. Well, I think a lot of times today we'd be hard put to it to know who to call.

I think those people, if they had had phones, would have had some phone numbers for elders right by their phones. They were a well-recognized group within the churches. And it did not show a lack of modesty on the elders' part to say they were elders.

I think that's a false modesty that has developed in the years since then. Men who are reticent to say, if they really are elders, men who are reticent to say it. Peter in chapter 5 verse 1 of his first epistle.

I'm sure you've noticed that. First Peter chapter 5 verse 1 says, the elders which are among you I exhort. Who are also an elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, but also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed, feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly, not of filthy lucre, but of a ready mind, neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being in samples to the flock.

But the important thing I want to bring out was he said, I am also an elder. He didn't think that was pride to say it. He recognized a simple fact.

Now they were ordained or appointed by the apostles in those days. They didn't have the word of God the way we have today. But they certainly must be recognized by us today.

Christians in a local assembly must know their elders and obey their elders and honor their elders in all things. Then as far as the support of workers and the work of the Lord. Of course, I think it's very, very obvious that sometimes the workers supported themselves.

Even the apostle Paul working as a tent maker. And I think that's a lovely touch. He not only provided for himself, but for those who were working with him.

And then at other times, you know, they were ministered to by local assemblies and by individuals. And then I think another thing in the missionary strategy that we do want to think about is this. They worked in teams.

They went out as groups. Paul and his company. This rather intrigues me and condemns me.

This seems to have been the pattern of the Holy Spirit and the book of Acts. And it seems to be entirely missing today. And I'm condemning myself.

I stand before you and condemn myself today for this. I'm tremendously exercised and praying about the matter right now. After all, Paul went out.

He took Timothy with him. He took younger men with them. Traveled with them.

Preached with them. Visited with them. Established local churches with them.

And we're not doing it today. Do you know anybody who's doing it today? Come and tell me afterwards, please. And I think it's rather a tragedy, and this is not a criticism.

I think it's a tragedy. We're sending young people out to the mission fields today. And expecting them to go out and preach the gospel and establish New Testament churches on the mission field.

And they've never been able to do it at home. And they've never seen it done at home. And it doesn't seem to be right, does it? And so maybe this is something that we should be much in prayer about.

As far as the work of God that he has entrusted to us is concerned. Well, I think we'll just stop there. It comes to a break.

Our time is gone. But I would just commend to you the book of Acts once again. Go to it with an unprejudiced mind.

And just see what's there. And even if it condemns us, which it's going to do, we should still go to the book and see God's pattern there. Because if we don't see that, the Lord will never be able to bring us around to that pattern in the day in which we live.

Thank you. Would you turn in your Bibles, please, to 1 Corinthians 12. 1 Corinthians 12.

We'll just read a verse or two. Verse 12. For as the body is one and hath many members, that all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.

For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free, and have been all made to drink into one spirit. The subject I'd like to speak to you on this morning is to whom or to what should we be loyal? And the first point here is to a particular group of Christians? Now, this is a very common attitude today. You hear people say, well, I was born in such a church, I was raised in such a church, lived all my life in this church, and I'm going to die in this church.

What do you think of that attitude? Well, it's a very easy attitude for all of us to slip in. We become related in a certain way to a fellowship of Christians, and actually in some cases we teach our children to be loyal to that particular fellowship. And I'd like to remind you that that's a very weak position to take, and a very unscriptural position to take.

There are various problems connected with it. All the problems aren't listed here. I'd like to go over them with you.

Now, supposing you teach your children to be loyal to a certain group of Christians. First of all, there's always the danger of liberal or modernistic tendencies coming in. This has happened so much.

It's happening all the time about us today. If you teach people to be loyal to a system, loyal to a denomination, loyal to a cult, well, after all of these tendencies come in and develop, they'll still be loyal to it. This is one of the tragedies today.

Born-again believers in the Lord Jesus Christ breaking their hearts in systems to which they are loyal long after the system has become disloyal to the Lord Jesus Christ. Supposing your fellowship, your teaching people to be loyal to that fellowship, suppose that over the course of years a one-man ministry develops. Supposing a clerical system develops.

Will you still be loyal to that system? At what point do you come when you're willing to step out? This is a question that we must face, and face boldly. Problem number three. Supposing denominationalism develops.

Supposing centralization of authority develops contrary to the word of God. You're loyal to a system. You'll probably go on being loyal to the system no matter what takes place in it.

Then there's another problem. If you teach people to be loyal to a particular fellowship, a particular group, in any particular group of Christians, there are wide variations. There are some, for instance, who are extremely conservative, and there are some who are extremely open and liberal, and in between there are the middle of the road ones.

You say, I'm loyal to the group. Which part of the group are you loyal to? It raises problems. And what about other Christians who might really be meeting in New Testament manner, meeting according to the

teachings of the New Testament, but they're not in, quote, your particular fellowship.

What is going to be your attitude toward them? Or supposing other Christian workers in other parts of the world, and I've met them out in other parts of the world, men out there really preaching the gospel, really planting New Testament churches, and yet they might not be listed on any particular list of names of missionaries, what attitude are you going to take to them? So, just remember that there are real problems in connection with being loyal to a group of Christians. The other alternative is to be loyal to the principles of the Word of God, and that's the attitude that we really should take, and that's what we should teach our young people. I remember Mr. Mace saying to me in Bethany Chapel in Oakland, some years ago, he said, when you get divine principles, stick with them.

And it was a good piece of advice, too. When you get divine principles, stick with them. And what we want to see is a generation of young people raised up who have convictions with regard to the principles of the Word of God, and who are really willing to stand for those principles, to defend those principles, to teach those principles.

It's so easy for a generation raised in some fellowship to accept that because their parents have accepted it. But you know, that'll never do in connection with the teachings of the New Testament. The New Testament pattern requires constant exercise of soul and constant testing everything by the Word of God.

It really does. I remember I had been brought up in a certain fellowship, and I thank God today for that fellowship. But when I reached the age of 20, I had to go to the Word of God and see what the Bible taught.

I would have been just as happy in some other fellowship, frankly. And so out in Honolulu, I remember going to the Word of God and asking the Lord to really reveal to me what the truth of the Word of God was concerning the church. And I believe this has to happen in every life, that a person has to make the truth his own, and what mother believed or what father believed is no longer adequate for you.

You must see it for yourself in the Word of God. And any New Testament fellowship will be stronger if the people know what they believe and know why they believe it, and if they're able to go to the Word of God and defend it. If you adopt that first position of being loyal to a group, being loyal to a fellowship, it supplants the Word of God as your final authority.

It puts something else in place of the Word of God, and it creates all kinds of embarrassment and confusion and inconsistency. There's no question about that. This is the system that's right, and it requires constant diligence and constant waiting upon the Lord.

Some years ago, I was at a camp in Michigan, and I asked the young people why they fellowshipped where they did fellowship, wherever it was, and 95% of them answered honestly, and I appreciated it, too. They answered honestly that the reason they fellowshipped there was because their parents did, and these were teenage, high school, college-age young people. They were just telling the truth, and they're not to be criticized for it.

But what we want to emphasize today is that our loyalty must be to the Word of God, the principles of God's Word. Now, to what church principles should we be loyal? To what principles concerning the New Testament church should we be loyal? Well, I like to make a little list. This isn't complete, but first of all, we should be loyal to the truth of the unity of the body of Christ.

To me, this is one of the most precious truths in connection with this whole subject, the fact that there is one body, the unity of the body of Christ. And I'm going to speak about that just a little in a minute, so I'm going to skip over it right now. I'm going to come back to it.

The second great truth that I think that we want to teach our young people and we want to practice to is the membership of all true believers, that all born-again people are members of the body of Christ. A third magnificent truth that we find in the word of God is the headship of Christ. Christ is the head of the church.

We recognize no other head, no earthly ruler, no earthly potentate, only the Lord Jesus Christ. Then a fourth great principle is the priesthood of all believers, that God in this age doesn't have a special cast of people who are assigned religious duties. For instance, a dear young friend of mine was down in Louisiana in the service, and he was witnessing for the Lord Jesus, and he saw some others saved, and when they got saved, he immediately took them down to the river and baptized them.

And the chaplain in his particular post heard, he got wind of the fact, that Jim was baptizing servicemen down in the river. And of course you know what he did. He called him in, and he rebuked him for doing that.

Just imagine, just imagine any group of men thinking that they have exclusive right to baptize believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. We want to have convictions on this subject and believe that all believers are priests of God, holy priests and royal priests. Then another that we want to think of, number five, is the proper role of gifts, the function of gifts in the church.

And we mentioned this during the week, and we saw it in operation in the book of Acts, that God has given gifts, evangelists, pastors, teachers, to the church for building up the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the edifying of the body of Christ. To me this is one of the key cardinal principles of the truth of God that I want to stand for, the proper role of gifts in the church. That they were not given so that the saints would become perpetually dependent upon them.

They were given so that the saints might be built up to carry on the work of the ministry for the building up of the body of Christ. The next great principle that we should stand for is the autonomy or independence of every assembly, that every assembly stands before the Lord with no hierarchy or no denominational headquarters in between. We went over that too during the week.

The independence, or a better word, is really autonomy, and it means self-government. Why don't we just put that down? The self-government of every assembly. Another great principle is the presidency of the Holy Spirit.

We believe that the head of the church is in heaven, that he sent the Holy Spirit down to earth, and that the Holy Spirit should guide us in the affairs of the church. We don't do things the way we want to do them. We wait upon the Lord to seek his guidance by the Holy Spirit and allow liberty for the Holy Spirit to work in our midst.

We don't want to quench the Holy Spirit by man-made rules and traditions. We don't want to make any believer ashamed because it is testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ. Another great principle is the plurality of elders.

Plurality, that is, that there's more than one elder in a local New Testament church. There's a body of elders who are there as spiritual guides and under-shepherds of the people of God. This is very important.

Not one elder over a church, or not one bishop over many churches, but many bishops in one church. This is what we find in the New Testament. Well, those are some of the principles that we should be willing to be able to go to the Word of God and see in the Word of God, defend in the Word of God, and teach in the Word of God.

Now, I'd like to go back to number one. We won't be able to go over all of these. We have gone over some of them, so we don't want to go over all of them.

But I'd like to go back to number one, the unity of the body of Christ. There is only one body. And I'd like to ask you this question, what do you say when people ask you, what church do you belong to? You get all embarrassed, your lips start to quiver, and you just don't know exactly what to say, and finally you succumb and give the wrong answer.

What do you say when people ask you what church you belong to? Well, we want to be very careful in this because anything in the way of sectarianism or denominationalism denies the truth of the unity of the body of Christ. We have to be very careful what names we take upon ourselves. The truth of the matter is we are nothing and nobody but Christians, disciples, saints, believers, followers of the way.

And the minute you take any other name upon yourself, you've denied the truth of the word of God and have formed a sect. In the unity of the body of Christ we must practice it day by day and we must do nothing by word or act to deny the truth of the unity of the body. Now, people don't like this and when people ask you what church do you belong to, if you give them nothing but scriptural answers they become very uneasy and very uncomfortable.

And they'll try to work you into a corner by asking you questions and if you're at once willing to adopt a distinctive label then they'll start to breathe easily again. They're comfortable then. For instance, if you say, well, I belong to the Plymouth brothers, well, that's fine, then you're no longer a speckled sheep.

They've got you identified, they've got you in a pigeon hole and they begin to breathe easily again. Personally, I hate, loathe, despise and abominate the word Plymouth brethren. And to me it's about the most unscriptural thing you can possibly use.

And you've divided yourself from the body of Christ and taken a name upon yourself that God never intended you to take. Avoid it as you would avoid the plague. The words themselves as well as the initials that stand for the words.

I want to stand here today and tell you I am not a P.V. Maybe that'll make you uncomfortable. Well, there's a movement afoot today that Christians who meet in a certain way should call themselves Christian brethren and register with the government as this. There's no difference.

It's just as bad. I mean, it's a nice expression, Christian brethren, but so what? You just can't adopt that stand. It's a false stand and it isn't the way God sees it.

All kinds of brethren in the world today, aren't there? Open brethren, exclusive brethren, explosive brethren, united brethren, river brethren, you name them. The list is long as your elbow. But it's a practical denial of the truth of the unity of the body of Christ.

You say, well, when people ask me what I am, I say I fellowship with Christians gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Well, Christians should gather to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

But the minute we take that stand and say we are Christians who gather to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone and others don't, we form the sect.

It's perfectly right that we should gather to Christ's name alone. We don't want to gather to a man. We don't want to gather to a system.

We don't want to separate ourselves either from the body of Christ. We don't want to set up fences where God doesn't set up fences. And yet it comes into our language all the time in the most subtle way.

We open a magazine and it says there are so many states in the United States without an assembly. Well, God helped those states. Are there no believers in those states? What does that mean? So many states in the United States without an assembly.

And then we use the expression the Lord's people in a very strange way sometimes. We say, well, I went away on my vacation and when I was on my vacation I attended the services at this independent Bible church but it's so nice to be back with the Lord's people. You know? Well, what does that mean? The Lord's people is a wonderful expression and it encompasses the household of faith.

It really does. And it should never be used in any more restricted sense than that. People say to me, what are you? Well, I'm a Christian.

Well, they start to get uneasy. They say, oh, of course, we're all Christians. You have to be something else.

Well, I am. I hope I'm a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. They say, well, of course, that just means you're a learner.

We're all trying to learn. And I say, well, I'm a saint. Yes, they say.

You can separate it to God from the world but you've got to be something else. Well, I am. I'm a believer in the Lord Jesus.

I'm a Christian. I'm a follower of the way. They say, yeah, but what church do you belong to? You see? They're trying to get you down there.

And you can see that they're very restless. And they know that you're standing on scriptural ground but they don't want you to stand on scriptural ground because they're not on scriptural ground and they want company in their sectarianism. That's really what it amounts to.

Well, I refuse to take any other name than the names that the Bible gives me. A man said to me recently back in New England. He said, you're with the brethren.

Well, I said, I'm with the brethren and so are you if you're saved. And that's true. He's just as much with the brethren as I am spelled with a capital, with a small B not with a capital B if he belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, to me, I think this is important. It's not just a matter of semantics. It's not just a matter of words but it's a matter of the attitude of our hearts.

The unity of the body of Christ. And not only the unity of the body of Christ but the fact that all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are members of the body of Christ. In a very cruel way, fences have been erected in the household of faith today.

And there's a desire to be distinctive, you know. People want to set themselves apart as being superior to other Christians and they largely lose sight of the fact that everyone who has the mark the brand mark of redemption upon him belongs to Christ and is precious to Christ. Now, this doesn't mean that we don't have principles that we don't stand for principles but it means that in our hearts and in our love we take in all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, how can we give practical expression to number two, the fact that all true believers are members of the body of Christ? How can I practically give expression to this? Incidentally, it's a very precious truth. Those fellows who are here who have been in the service who are Christians, who have a testimony for Christ they know something about this. You go off into the service, sometimes you're lonely you're lonely for Christian fellowship you meet a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ you don't go into the tags, you don't go into the names you don't go into the things that divide you're so glad to find a brother in Christ a member of the same body and you don't major on minors at a time like that indeed, you're so glad to have united witness for the Savior.

Well, there are various ways in which we can give practical expression to the truth that all believers are members of the body of Christ. Number one, we should love all genuine believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Have fervent love for one another by this shall all men know that you're my disciples if ye love one another.

Paul writing to the Ephesians said since I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love to all the saints that's a beautiful thing and it's the only consistent attitude that we can take in our hearts' affections we should go out to everyone who has been cleansed by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ they're dear to Him, every one of them. You know, Mr. Walden was speaking the other day about the social register in evangelical Christendom today and especially about those who are down at the bottom as far as economics are concerned. You know, it's all too easy for people to look down their theological noses at those people on the lower scale but I want to tell you, many of those dear people they all are precious, precious Christians and we should go out to them in love.

Then secondly, another way we can do is to pray for all Christians not just those in our own local fellowship our prayers should go out for all Christians. There's a magazine in the East Coast and it's called Help and Food for the Household of Faith and I really like that expression for the household of faith there's nothing sectarian about it it's wide in its outreach we should pray for all Christians God forbid that I should sit against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you then we should seek to share with them the precious truths of the Word of God. Now let me just pause here and say I don't think we should engage in sheep stealing I have never seen in the Word of God where I've been called to go and steal sheep but I do believe that as I'm ministering as I'm fellowshiping with other Christians it is my privilege to open the Word of God and say, have you ever seen this from Ephesians chapter 4 have you ever seen God's wonderful program for the expansion of the church and seek to be of help to them with what truth the Lord has revealed to me.

The Lord said we should be washing one another's feet how do we wash one another's feet by going over the Scriptures with people and that's a wonderful thing wonderful ministry that every one of us can engage in you know I have some very dear brethren and every time you're in their presence they're always

ministering to you from the Word something they got from the Lord that morning in their devotions something that's been very special and precious to them recently and they're always feeding your soul there's a difference between ministering the Word and sharing truths with other Christians and purposely going into a fellowship to divide it and to take from it I don't feel called to that at all myself but then another thing we can do number four is we can learn from all other Christians

and I think this is something we lose sight of pride comes in here and we might think concerning some group of Christians well we can learn nothing from them well I'd like to say standing here this morning that I have never met another Christian that I couldn't learn something from Christians whom I might not think are quite doctrinally accurate in some things can oftentimes teach me an awful lot about zeal for the Lord Jesus Christ and fervency in prayer and I really mean that sincerely with my heart after all it teaches that in 1 Corinthians 12 the chapter we were just reading it says for the body is not one member but many if the foot shall say because I'm not the hand I'm not of the body is it therefore not of the body if the ear shall say because I'm not the eye I'm not of the body

is it therefore not of the body if the whole body were an eye where were the healing where were the hearing if the whole were hearing where were the smelling but now hath God set the members every one of them in the body as it hath pleased him and so when I think of the possibilities of my helping some other Christian I have to think of the possibility too and the likelihood that that other Christian has an awful lot to teach me as well and I want to be open to instruction and to help from every member of the body of Christ well there's something else we can do to signify the fact that all true believers are members of the body of Christ we can refrain from criticism gossiping backbiting or judging these are things that are wrecking the Christian testimony today gossiping criticism

jealousy backbiting and judging one another I must say I like the Apostle Paul's attitude in Philippians chapter 1 you're all acquainted with it but let's just turn to it once again verse 15 of chapter 1 of Philippians he says some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife and some also of good will the one preached Christ of contention not sincerely supposing to add affliction to my bonds but the other of love knowing that I am set for the defense of the gospel what then, notwithstanding every way whether in pretense or in truth Christ is preached and I therein do rejoice yea, and will rejoice isn't that something here there were professing Christians who were really working against the Apostle Paul and he's writing from prison and he says I just rejoice that the lovely name of the

Lord Jesus Christ is going out whatever the motive may be some preaching Christ of contention and strife I don't care just that the name above every names is being sounded forth that's what counts to me so easy for us to look at other Christians and to judge them for what they're doing and every time I'm tempted to do that I hear the words of the Lord Jesus saying to me what is that to thee follow thou me gossip judging criticizing jealousy our enemies seeking to divide the body of Christ today and so we should refrain from these things and rejoice when the Lord Jesus Christ is preached but I just like to say this that doesn't mean that I can go with other Christians and do the things that they do I don't want you to get the impression from anything I said this morning that anything goes

that's not the point the point is I can love all other Christians but I myself have to be obedient to the truth that God shows me in the word of God and as far as other Christians are concerned we draw a wide circle of love to bring all the body of Christ in but as far as our own lives are concerned we have to be obedient and loyal to what we see in the word of God now you show me a local New Testament church of Christians who understand the principles of the word of God and who want to follow the Lord in obedience

and I'll show you a stable New Testament assembly that will go on brightly for the Lord Jesus Christ you show me a group who are followers of a system and I'll show you a group that's going to be wracked and unstable and divided and all the rest and so may the Lord keep these

principles before us and may we seek to teach them to the young people and to teach them to be loyal first and foremost and exclusively to the word of God I'll just go over the list once again and then I'm through the unity of the body of Christ the precious truth and remember this you're nothing but Christians and the minute you take any other stand you become a sect the second group all believers members of the body of Christ the third group one head to this church the head in heaven the Lord Jesus fourthly the priesthood of all true believers every believer in Christ is a holy priest and every believer is a royal priest he's a holy priest offering up sacrifices of praise his person his pocketbook to God royal priest going forth to show forth the excellencies of him who has called us

out of darkness into his marvelous light the proper role of gifts in the church that is the gifts were given to build up the saints for the work of the ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ and I'd just like to mention this in connection with gifts in the book of Acts the gifts in the book of Acts were gifts of the Holy Spirit the men it was a what we call a charismatic gift not professional the men in the book of Acts who had gifts from God were not pros we speak of them as being charismatic gifts that means it was a sovereign work of the spirit of God he'd take a carpenter a plumber an electrician and he'd endow that man with the ability to preach the gospel or teach the word of God it's something the man didn't learn it had nothing to do with his natural talents it was

completely a work of God's Holy Spirit next the autonomy or self-government of every local assembly next the presidency of the Holy Spirit and in our meetings we should allow liberty for the Holy Spirit to work and to speak through the various gifts so that we'll get a well-rounded grasp of the truth and finally the plurality of elders the fact you don't have one elder over an assembly but you have many elders in an assembly may the Lord drive us back to the word of God in these days teach us afresh the great principles of the word of God give us courage to stand for them and to propagate them for his glory thank you Luke chapter 9 and verse 18 and it came to pass as he was alone praying his disciples were with him and he asked them saying whom say the people that I am they answering said

John the Baptist but some said Elias and others say that one of the old prophets is risen again he said unto them but whom say ye that I am Peter answering said the Christ of God and he straightly charged them and commanded them to tell no man that thing saying the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be slain and be raised the third day and he said to them all if any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me for whosoever will save his life shall lose it but whosoever will lose his life for my sake the same shall save it for what is a man advantaged if he gain the whole world and lose himself or be cast away for whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words of him shall the son of

man be ashamed when he shall come in his own glory and in his father's and of the holy angels but I tell you of a truth that there be some standing here which shall not taste of death till they see the kingdom of God I was especially thinking of verses 22 and 23 and the connection between them the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be slain and be raised the third day if any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me in this part of the meeting this afternoon I'd just like to have a quiet meditation with you about the Lord's Supper we've just been remembering the Lord the thoughts of it are fresh in our mind there are two

aspects to the Lord's Supper in the first we speak to him in

the second he speaks to us we emphasize the first we come and speak to the Lord we remember the Lord we show forth his death until he comes again we ponder the mighty stoop that he took from the glory on high he the creator and sustainer of the universe coming and dying for us on a cross of shame and we pour out our hearts affection to him for loving us so wonderful, wonderful Jesus but there's another side to the Lord's Supper and that's the side in which he speaks to us and there's a deep meaning in the Lord's Supper that I think it's all too possible for us to forget for years of our lives we can come and we can remember the Lord and think about his passion for us and yet forget that there's a message in it for us too what is the Lord saying to us in the bread and in the wine well it

strikes me this way he came down to earth and lived the only perfect life that's ever been lived on earth the sinless, spotless son of God he lived his life here among men and these are the emblems of that life this is what it cost him and he says to us tonight do you want a life of fulfillment? do you want to find reality in life? do you want your life to really count? you'll have to be broken bread and out poured wine doesn't it say that? he says to us do you want the crown? you have to go by the road of the cross do you want to sit on the throne of glory? first you have to ascend the altar of sacrifice and in that sense these emblems are tremendously expressive aren't they? just let me put it this way we look upon the bread and we look upon the cup and we know the bread speaks of his

body broken for us and the cup of his blood poured out for us and we can see Christ in those emblems now the question as we move away from the Lord's supper is can I see myself in those emblems? am I willing to think of myself as broken bread? and my life poured out for the redemption of men? rather solemn isn't it? and I think it's especially solemn when we realize that this is a pathway that we choose it's not something that comes to us naturally after all it's a pathway the Lord Jesus deliberately chose he didn't have to do it and now we come and remember him and as we go away he says yes this is the way that I had to walk and I'm calling you to follow me let us think this afternoon of some of the elements that went into that perfect life how did the Lord Jesus find a life of

fulfillment? how did he find a life of reality down here? well first of all it meant leaving a home of elegance for a stable it meant leaving the ivory palaces for Bethlehem has it ever occurred to us as Christians that the Lord might ever want us to do anything like that? for instance that he might want us to leave a land of luxury and affluence to go out to a land of poverty and smells he left the glory for a jungle a jungle of sin and somehow or other we have become accustomed to that has it ever occurred to us that he might want us to leave suburbia for the inner city? he says I found fulfillment in a stoop like that and yet I want to stand here this afternoon and confess to you that many many times in my life when the cross has reared its head I ran and hid have you?

I remember the Lord and the bread and the wine speak expressively to me and yet when it comes right down close to home how the voice of the spirit of God is speaking to you and prodding you and calling you to a life like that well it's something quite different isn't it? if any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me secondly it meant for the Lord Jesus a life of poverty this really amazes me every time I think of it we've already had that scripture quoted in our hearing tonight do you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor that ye through his poverty might be rich wonderful isn't it to think of him wandering as a homeless stranger in the world his hands had made wonderful to hear him

saying foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests but the son of man hath not where to lay his head wonderful to see him coming to the end of his life hanging on the cross that he left no estate and yet wonderful to think of the power that was in that life somehow or other today we equate power with money power with possessions the Lord Jesus became poor that we might be rich and he calls us to deliberately choose a life like that in order that others might be rich once again the temptation is to run and hide isn't it thirdly for the Lord Jesus it meant it meant a life in which he had no settled place to live this is marvelous isn't it to think of the Savior living down here on this planet and he never slept yet in what we would think of as a comfortable bed I mean we have our inner

spring mattresses Jesus never had an inner spring mattress and we don't realize how much our plumbing facilities mean to us either he never knew anything about them and it's hard for us ever to think that the Lord might want us to give up something like that to deliberately choose to give up something like that in order to go forth in service for him we don't really realize how much these things have a grip on us till sometime when the spirit of God is brooding when he is very near we hear the call and have to make a decision again it meant for the Lord Jesus being misunderstood by his own family and to me this must have been one of the bitterest sorrows of his life is it possible that walking a pathway of devotedness to God that your own family is going to misunderstand you well it was

so in his case you might turn to Mark chapter 3 and verse 21 Mark chapter 3 and verse 21 says and when his friends heard of it they went out to lay hold on him for they said he's beside himself and the word their friends really means kinsman really means his relative some of you it will show in the margin of your bible you know several times in the gospel you find that the Lord Jesus was perhaps in a house and then the disciples would come to him and say look your mother and your brothers and your sisters await without they want to see you why do they want to see him well the implication is very strong in those passages of scripture that they wanted to take him away quietly they were embarrassed by him this was part of what the cross meant for him you know and it's just too possible that

even in Christian life today that a life lived in devotedness to God and in the power of the Holy Spirit of God is misunderstood by even those who are closest to us it meant in addition to that being rejected by his own people those are some poignant words in the first chapter of the gospel of John where it says he was in the world and the world was made by him and the world knew him not he came unto his own and his own received him not and that's tremendous when you think that he came doing nothing but good and exhibiting nothing but love and received nothing but hatred in return rejected by the creatures whom his hands had made the way of the cross meant for the Lord Jesus taking a fearless stand for the truth I often think of him going into the house of the Pharisee the Pharisee was

the host in a way and yet the Lord Jesus never held back on the truth he said I came in here Simon you didn't have any water for my feet you didn't have any kiss for me this woman from the time I came in hasn't ceased to kiss me to wash my feet with her tears to wipe them with the hairs of her head he was fearless in speaking the truth to his host and he spoke the truth wherever he went and it strikes me that there was a sorrow in the life of the Lord Jesus because often times speaking the truth really hurt his friends I think these are aspects of his life that sometimes we don't enter into but they're just the same speaking the truth of God often times hurt his friends but he hurt them to their healing and then for the cross his pathway of fulfillment for the Lord Jesus meant a head on

collision with the establishment it was inevitable that the Lord Jesus should come into a collision course with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and you know what makes you wonder too in the 20th century in

which we live can you picture the truth of God in all its fullness being preached in the average congregation in Christendom today very prosperous you know as well as I know that throughout Christendom today that the truth is being shaded and the truth is being toned down because the cost is too great for the Lord Jesus this life meant walking alone one of the sorrows that he knew was the sorrow of loneliness he was alone in the garden he was alone at the cross but more than that there was a loneliness throughout his life and I'm sure you've noticed it that when they were going to

Jerusalem Jesus was walking ahead of the disciples how that speaks to my heart he knew what Jerusalem meant for him he knew what lay ahead of him there in Jerusalem and yet he's striding out ahead of the disciples of the way Peter says to him be it far from thee Lord and we reproach Peter I don't find myself saying that I find myself saying be it far from me Lord a lonely life a life of a man of sorrows lived here on earth it meant for him false accusation raising the false charges that were brought against the son of God they couldn't find anything true that would constitute a valid charge so they trumped up the charges and the most wonderful thing about it to me is that he answered not a word only when he was put under oath by the high priest and was required by the law of Moses to

answer did he answer this life meant for the Lord Jesus a life of shame and that's hard to think of isn't it the one who held the highest place above adored by all the sons of man it's hard to think of him coming down to this world and having to endure shame yet he did and it is written of him they covered his face with shame and with spitting it meant for him suffering in Gethsemane the approaching contact of sin meant for him suffering of Calvary all the way to Calvary he went for me because he loved me so it meant for him death that's marvelous to think of how how the love of the Lord Jesus overcame all his instincts of self preservation and he was willing to offer his life for me how greatly Jesus must have loved us to bear our sins in his body on the tree and then what well he said

and be raised again the third day and then a few verses down he said and just remember there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the son of man coming in his glory we conclude this cassette now with the studies with Mr.

MacDonald and the Book of Acts and they continue on cassette number four

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