

## Boasting in the Cross

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Galatians: Free At Last Series

Galatians 6:11-18

Corporations spend enormous amounts of money designing corporate logos that they believe communicate quality and trustworthiness or fun and excitement. These corporate logos are found on their products, their company headquarters, and their letterhead. Many corporate logos and trademarks are recognized almost everywhere on earth.

Of course, many religious symbols are just as widely or even more widely known than any corporate logo. Does anyone need help in figuring out what religion these symbols are associated with? (*Slides of varying religious symbols*)

But of all the logos and trademarks and images and symbols in the world, the one that is at once the most recognized and the most unusual choice for an organizations symbol is the cross.

Christian babies are dedicated or baptized often with the sign of the cross. Churches and other Christian meeting places don't only have a cross in them; many churches are built in the shape of a cross. The graves of Christians are marked with crosses. And the cross as a symbol of Christianity goes back to its earliest days. Despite its popularity, the cross has to be the most unusual choice for a corporate logo.

### The unusual choice of the cross

I mean, can you imagine an organization or a religion which chose as its corporate logo a firing squad or a gas chamber or an electric chair or a hangman's noose? If you looked at an organization that had a hangman's noose or a gas chamber as its symbol you would say, "That group has a morbid obsession with death!" "It's perverted!" "It's sick!" And certainly that was the perspective of Romans in the first few centuries when the word "cross" could not even have been spoken out loud in polite company. It was considered revolting, nauseating, shocking. If you are going to gather people together, why choose a shocking and offensive symbol? Why not choose something more fun or optimistic or happier? Perhaps something like this: (*slide of yellow happy face*).

Lots of critics of Christianity have argued that Christianity would be far more attractive to people if it was packaged without a cross. Certainly much of contemporary Christianity recognizes the offensiveness of this symbol of death and torture and has removed the cross from display in the church. In many seeker-sensitive churches there is no cross on the stage. There are plants, pretty designs, no cross. In Charismatic churches sometimes you'll see huge

banners proclaiming victory or prosperity, but no cross. Yet the Apostle Paul, in the text that we are going to look at today, says that the cross- far from being something that makes us ashamed or a symbol to be hidden or replaced- is rather an object of his boasting and his pride.

### **Galatians 6:14**

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

The Apostle Paul boasts in the cross, he glories in the cross. This is the last message in a series that I have been doing in the book of Galatians. And what we read at the end of Galatians is not just a series of closing greetings, as in some of the letters of Paul. In Galatians, the Apostle Paul sums up and underlines the main themes of his letter. Paul says there is nothing more important, nothing more central, nothing that is the cause more excitement, more comfort, more celebration and more boasting than the cross. I have called this last talk in the series from Galatians “Boasting in the Cross”. Let’s pray:

### **Galatians 6:11 - 18**

<sup>11</sup>See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand! <sup>12</sup>Those who want to impress others by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. <sup>13</sup>Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh. <sup>14</sup>May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. <sup>15</sup>Neither circumcision or uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. <sup>16</sup>Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule— to the Israel of God. <sup>17</sup>From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. <sup>18</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

In verse 11:

### **Galatians 6:11**

See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

Paul’s practice was to dictate his letters to a secretary who would write out the letter. But here it appears that the Apostle Paul seizes the pen himself and he begins to write in very large letters. Now some folks say that this is because either Paul had a vision problem and needed to write in large letters or because he was not really proficient in Greek; he couldn’t write well. I don’t think that’s what’s going on. Paul is saying here what we say what we write a word in all caps, we put it in bold; we underline it or italicize it. The Apostle Paul is saying “what I’m about to tell you is really important. I don’t want you to miss this.” So

Paul concludes this letter by underlining, specially emphasizing his main themes, in particular, the cross. He is underlining the centrality of the cross.

### **The centrality of the cross**

Paul says that there is nothing more important to him than the cross.

#### **Galatians 6:14**

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

The Greek is difficult apparently for translators to accurately communicate in English. The New International Version and the Today's New International Version say "May I never". The Greek here is "me genoito". The New American Standard says, "May it never be". The Old King James version says, "God forbid" that I should glory. In other places it's translated "absolutely not". In super strong language, Paul says, "May I never ever, ever boast in anything other than the cross."

And notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, "May I never boast in anything other than the teaching of Christ." Now if you've read the New Testament you know that the teaching of Christ was amazing. People who heard Jesus speak said that they never heard anyone speak like him. His words were packed with so much insight and wisdom and power. Could anyone ever tell a story better than Jesus? What stories have more stickiness, more staying power, or move the heart more than the story of the prodigal son, or the story of the Good Samaritan. Think of the impact of just one of Jesus' statements. His statement of the so-called "Golden Rule"; "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." But Paul doesn't say, "May I never board except in teaching."

Paul doesn't say "May I never boast, except in the miracles of Jesus." You know, there are incredible miracles that we read about in the Gospels, the stilling of storms, the raising of the dead who are already buried, healing a man born blind. But Paul says that miracles aren't the central thing. Notice, he doesn't even say "May I never boast except in the example of Christ." The bible tells us to walk in the steps of Jesus. The Apostle Paul says in another place, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." Because of Christ's example, husbands and wives for 2,000 years have learned how to forgive each other as Christ forgave them. Countless people have laid down their weapons and have chosen instead to seek peace because of Christ's example. Hungry people are fed and immigrants are welcomed. Countless people serve in unpleasant places around the globe in leper colonies and hospices and tough inner city neighborhoods. Folks combat human trafficking as they try to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world.

The Apostle Paul says that even the example of Christ is not the central thing. The central thing for Paul is the cross. Verse 14:

**Galatians 6:14**

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

You know the Latin word for cross is the word “crux”. And as I said earlier, you would never mention the word crux, cross, in polite Roman society. It was considered incredibly vulgar, revolting. But we today use that Latin word “crux” whenever we want to speak about the central point of an argument. Think about the crux of the matter. You’re getting to the heart of the matter. You are expressing the essence of an argument. When we want to say that something is absolutely central and essential, we talk about the crux. So even 2,000 years later we find hints of the centrality of the cross in common English speech. The cross is the central thing in the Gospels.

**The central thing in the Gospels**

You know we often say to new Christians who are unfamiliar with their New Testaments, “The Gospels are simply a biography of Jesus. We have four biographies of Jesus.” That’s not really quite accurate because if they are biographies, they are very poorly written biographies. They don’t tell us so much of what we really want to know about the life of Jesus. Only two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, even talk to us about Jesus’ birth. We find only a couple of brief references to Jesus’ childhood. There’s a nearly 30 year silence concerning Jesus’ life. There’s so much more that we would want to know about his family, the people he interacted with growing up, his life experiences. A more accurate way to look at the Gospels is to say that the Gospels are essentially passion narratives, stories of Jesus suffering and death, with extended introductions.

And the last week of Jesus’ life occupies nearly half of the Gospel of John. In chapter 12-20 we are talking about one week, and in the first 11 chapters, the rest of this life. Luke structures his Gospel around Jesus going to Jerusalem. In chapter 9, the Gospel takes a turn and for the rest of the Gospel Jesus is heading for Jerusalem to be put to death.

Mark, the turning point takes place in chapter 8. Immediately following Peter’s confession Jesus tells Peter and the other Apostles that he’s going to go to Jerusalem where he is going to suffer, be rejected by the elders and chief priests and teachers of the law, and be killed. Jesus says that the reason why we came was to die on a cross.

**Matthew 20:28**

Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The cross is the central thing in the Gospels.

**The cross is the central thing in Paul’s letters.**

The centrality of the cross. In 1 Corinthians 1, we read this in verses 22 and 23:

**1 Corinthians 1: 22 - 23**

<sup>22</sup>Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

And in 1 Corinthians 2:2 we read:

**1 Corinthians 2:2**

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15:

**1 Timothy 1:15**

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

Why did God take on human flesh? He took on human flesh in order to die on a cross. That is the central thing- that's the main thing. The cross is the central thing in the rest of the New Testament.

**The central thing in the New Testament**

We read in Hebrews 2:9:

**Hebrews 2:9**

But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

This is why Jesus came- to die as our substitute on the cross and to experience the punishment that is due all the rest of us. And the cross is the central thing in the church.

**The central thing in the church**

You know it's interesting in many liberal churches that deny that Christ died on the cross as our substitute and sacrifice to pay for our sins. Churches that say, "Oh, Jesus died" show us an example nonviolent pacifism in the face of violence. Yet even in churches that deny his substitutionary work, they still put the communion service in the center of their worship. Churches that say, "Oh this idea that God requires a blood sacrifice..." are so primitive, such an appalling view of God; nevertheless, they put communion at the center of their worship. Yet week by week they pronounce the words that Jesus gave us in communion as they hold up the bread, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And then in churches that deny the necessity of blood

sacrifice to pay for sins, week by week they hold up the cup and they say, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me.”

I’ve had people over the years come to me and say, “Rich why do you folks in the Vineyard celebrate communion week after week? Aren’t you afraid that it will become rote; just an empty ritual?” We came to the decision as a leadership team to do this, to celebrate communion week after week because there is nothing more important than the cross. Even if it’s for two minutes out of our church service, and even if we’re going to be talking about children or the poor or prayer, every single week a person who attends Vineyard is going to be brought face to face with the cross. What we are saying, as a church, is that we want to put the cross in the center. What we do in our Urban and Mercy Ministry is a good thing but it’s not the center. What we do in our Community Center is all good, helping people find jobs, helping people get off drugs, assisting kids to succeed in school, it’s all good, but it’s not the center. Empowered Life classes, assisting folks to experience the Holy Spirit, Small Groups in which you can be encouraged and supported in your Christian Faith- its great stuff. It’s all good.

But to remain healthy our church must keep first things first and the first thing is the cross. The center of the Christian faith is not all of our human activity. The center of the Christian faith is not all of the good things we do. The center of the Christian faith is what God has done in sending his Son to die for sin on the cross. But we would be missing the core of the Apostle Paul’s statements in the book of Galatians unless we see not only of the centrality of the cross but the offense of the cross.

### **The offense of the cross**

Let’s remember the context of these statements in Galatians 6. The Apostle Paul was a church planter; he went throughout the Roman world starting up churches, preaching the Gospel to Jews and to Gentiles. When he got to this region of Galatia, which is in South Central Turkey, he found a particularly warm reception to his Gospel message, which was simply that you get to be accepted by God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

And the Gentiles in Galatia received this message with joy and gladness. They began to grow in their new Christian faith and then the Apostle Paul left. After he left some Jewish-Christian missionaries came in and said that Paul gave you just half of a message. Yes you need to believe in Jesus. Jesus is very important. But in addition, you men need to be circumcised, you women need to keep a kosher home and all of you need to strictly observe the Sabbath day.

The Apostle Paul says that the motive of the missionaries in adding to the Gospel message was to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Verses 12 and 13:

**Galatians 6:12 - 13**

<sup>12</sup>Those who want to impress others by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. <sup>13</sup>Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh.

Apparently law observant Jewish-Christians were engaged in persecuting non-law observant Christians. It's speculated that perhaps Jewish-Christians were under tremendous pressure from their Jewish-non-Christian brethren in Jerusalem for associating with Gentiles. So to save face, to still be regarded as part of the Jewish community, many Jewish-Christians followed circumcision, and the laws of kashrut, and the Sabbath day. They wanted to somehow avoid the offensiveness of the cross.

Friends, let me say this, if you think that the cross is the neatest thing in the world, you purchased a beautiful cross when you were traveling overseas and you have it hanging in your house. You have a lovely gold cross around your neck. You have one of those cool t-shirts with a big cross on it and some saying about the cross or you have a tattoo of a cross on your body. If you think that the cross is the neatest thing in the world it may be that you've never really understood the cross at all. There is an unavoidable offensiveness in the cross. In fact I think it can be accurately said that unless you have been offended by Christ and His death for you on the cross, unless when you really faced it you were offended, repulsed, every fiber of your being reacted and you were tempted to turn away and say "no way" that that is God's plan to save the world, then it's likely that you don't yet get the cross.

So many of you were raised in Christian families, you've always been around the cross. You may be completely familiar with it, perhaps overly familiar. But that doesn't mean you get it. See, the Apostle Paul often speaks of the cross as an offense. Galatians 5:11:

**Galatians 5:11**

<sup>11</sup>Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.

The Greek word for offense is "skandalon". Jesus talked about His mission to die as an offense as a scandal, even to somebody like the Prophet John the Baptist. When John the Baptist was in prison he sent some folks to ask Jesus if he was in fact the Messiah. And we read these words in Luke 7:22:

**Luke 7:22**

So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."

But then Jesus makes this very odd statement; he tacks on these words that we read in verse 23:

**Luke 7:23**

"Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

Blessed is anyone who is not scandalized by me, who doesn't take offense because of me. You don't get the mission of Christ unless you are deeply tempted to be offended by the cross. The cross is an offense. The cross is offensive to Jews and to Muslims.

**The cross is offensive to Jews and Muslims**

The Apostle Paul says 1 Corinthians 1:23:

**1 Corinthians 1:23**

But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

Even to this day when I talk with Jewish friends and Jewish relatives about Jesus being the Jewish Messiah it's an offense. How could the Messiah, the one who was sent to save the world, die on a cross? It's a contradiction; it's an impossibility. Messiah is going to conquer our enemies not die at the hands of our enemies.

This is offensive to Muslims. Most Muslims believe that it wasn't Jesus who died on a cross because prophets don't die like that. That at the last minute Jesus was taken up to heaven by God and God placed Judas up on the cross. The cross is offensive not only to the religious community; the cross is offensive to liberals.

**The cross is offensive to liberals**

Pastor Tim Keller, from Redeemers Presbyterian Church, recounted a story told to him by one of his seminary professors, trying to explain why Christ came. And then the professor said, "Imagine that your house was burning down and your whole family got out of the house safe and sound, along with your pets and your most precious possessions. You are standing on the sidewalk, watching your house burn, and a neighbor comes running up and says, "Let me show you how much I love you." He leaps into the fire, burning himself alive in this giant funeral pyre. You would stand back in horror. You wouldn't say, "Oh my, see how much

he loved us.” You would say, “How stupid! How awful! How ridiculous! How revolting!”

But if one of your children was trapped in the house and there was no way to get to your son or daughter because the flames were so high and your neighbor came running up and said, “Let me show you how much I love you.” So he runs into the house, fight his way through the flames and the smoke, finds your child under a bed and hands her out a window. And then the house fell on your neighbor. Would you say, “oh how my neighbor loved me.” The reason the cross is so offensive liberals, I don’t mean political liberals, I mean religious liberals, is because the cross says to people: “you are dying and you are lost and you are trapped and unable to rescue yourself. Unless Jesus Christ came for you, you would die in the flames. You are hopelessly and helplessly lost and there is no other way to be rescued other than the cross.”

See you’re faced with two choices really. Either there is no other way to get to God except through the cross or Christ’s death is ridiculous, it’s stupid, and it makes no sense. What you can’t say is, “You know, I think Jesus’ death is the most wonderful thing in the world. I see in it God’s love, but there are certainly other ways for me and other good people in the world to get to God.” Do you see the offensiveness of the cross to liberals? Think about this, friends!

You’re sitting down with your liberal friend talking about Christianity and they say, “You know, I love your version of Christianity because you reach out to the poor and so do we. You’re spiritual and I’m spiritual. We’re not like those secularists who deny that there is something out there beyond what we can see and taste and feel. You and I are exactly the same.” And then you say, “Except this one thing- I believe that no one can get to God except by the cross.” We are all trapped in a burning house and we can’t save ourselves. Only Jesus can rescue us. You think that’s not going to be offensive in polite, liberal, Western culture? It just spits in the face of American pluralism.

Now we must immediately add what the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 6:15:

**Galatians 6:15**

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation.

What he’s saying here is “Yes, maybe the cross is exclusive but I’d rather have Christ’s exclusivity than your exclusivity, Liberal Pluralist. Because what you say is people of good will everywhere ought to be able to get to God.” And what the cross says is something so much better.

The cross says even people who are not of good will, even broken, hypocritical, unpleasant, nasty people like me and like you, can get to God.

Folks who can't read, folks who are in prison, folks who are addicted, folks who have screwed up their lives and have screwed up the lives of everyone around them, even they can get to God. Religious, irreligious, it doesn't matter! When we start saying that, religion, or irreligion or circumcision or uncircumcision, traditional or non-traditional – none of that matters, you are offensive to Conservatives.

### **The cross is offensive to Conservatives and do-gooders**

You see the heart of conservative moralism is that you can't just throw everyone into the same boat and say well we're all just the same. We're not all the same! Some of us really try. We don't sit around for the government to bail us out; we take our own initiative. We don't ask for handouts. We earn our way in the world. Don't lump us together with drug addicts and drunks and all the other parasites on society. I am a good mother; I am a good father. In college I made a decision to work in the inner city, to help poor kids to achieve their dreams. I sacrificed a tremendous amount of income. I gave up great opportunities because I wanted my life to make a difference. Unlike my friend who went to a Wall Street investment bank, and defrauded the American public, played a game of "heads I win, tails you lose", and now is living in some big apartment on the upper east side of New York. I'm not like that." You want to understand the offensiveness of the cross? Listen to what Paul says in Romans 3:22-23:

#### **Romans 3:22-23**

<sup>22</sup>This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

No difference! Are you saying that my mother, my father, who worked like crazy, sacrificed for us kids, always did the right thing in business, paid their taxes to the penny, are you saying that they are not closer to God than the parents who abandoned their kids, and off of handouts and welfare? Paul says, "No difference before God." The only way to get to God is through the cross. Are you offended yet? Because if you're not offended you don't get what the New Testament teaches about the cross.

### **The cross is offensive to everyone**

You see the cross offends human pride, the way we think about how life works and how things are going to be fixed. We think that this world is going to ultimately be repaired by getting the best and brightest people together and by listening to their ideas and following their diagnoses of the problem and their prescription that's how this world's going to be saved – through the best and the brightest. But God says this world won't be saved except through what his Son did for us on the cross. Think with me friends, why did Jesus die? Why did the Son of God die on a cross? He never did anything wrong. He didn't steal anything from anybody. He didn't lie. He died because the Romans were afraid

that he was proclaiming himself King and that threatened Caesar as King. He died because the priests were envious and ambitious and he was a threat to their envy and ambition.

He died because Judas wanted some money; he was greedy. But friend, unless you kneel down and say, “The reason Jesus died was He died for me. Because I’m just as afraid of Jesus being my King as the Romans ever were. I’m just as ambitious and driven and envious as the priests ever were. I’m greedy and unfaithful and disloyal just like Judas.” Unless you can say, “I put you there, Jesus. I might as well have hammered the nails into your hands”, you don’t get the cross.

To understand the cross you have to be offended by it and once you are offended by it you can begin to grasp:

### **The power of the cross**

How does the cross actually make a difference in your life and my life? How does the cross become a power that will change us?

#### **Galatians 6:14**

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Part of the way we grasp the life changing power of the cross has to do with boasting. What do you boast in? What are you most proud of? In verse 13:

#### **Galatians 6:13**

Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision.

The Jewish-Christian missionaries boasted in how many gentiles they were able to convince to get circumcised. What do you boast about? We boast in our kids. We boast in our grandchildren. Listen to Jewish old ladies, down in Florida, sitting around a pool in Miami Beach- what are they going to talk about? They’re going to compare their kids to each other.

“Well my son Marvin is a big doctor on the Upper West Side of New York.”

“Well my daughter Shoshanna, she’s a college professor at Columbia. She recently wrote an article for the New York Times.”

We boast in our kids, we boast in our grandchildren. My grandchild, she is the smartest, she is the cutest, she did the funniest thing the other day. To discover what you boast in, go back to the teaching that I did a few weeks ago on Idols. What is it that if you lost it you’d say, “I am nothing. My life is over. I’m not only sad, I’m shattered. If I lost my girlfriend, I’d be nothing.” Then what you boast in

is your girlfriend. “If I lost my ministry I would be absolutely nothing.” Then what you boast in is your ministry. If you lost one of your kids or your spouse and you said, “If I lose my husband, my life, my son, my daughter then I am nothing. I can’t live!” Then you boast in your spouse or your kids, or your job. Whatever you boast in that is what your identity is rooted in.

On the other hand, if you say, “I boast in the cross; my identity is connected to the cross; my life is rooted in the cross; that’s why the world, with all of its charm doesn’t hook me anymore. That’s why I’m not consumed by my job title, by my salary, by what my boss says on my performance review. I am captured, I am charmed, I am enraptured by the cross because at the cross I see there the only person in the world who has ever loved me enough to die for me. No one else has ever died for me. My boss didn’t die for me. My job won’t die for me. My kids won’t, even my spouse, haven’t died for me.

And even if somebody did die for me, no one has ever died for me knowing what Jesus knows about me. Jesus knows my darkest secrets. He knows what I think, what I feel, all of my ambitions. No one else has ever been treated the way I treat Jesus. I’ve never treated anyone as shabbily as I treat Jesus and yet no one else has absolutely forgiven me the Jesus has forgiven me. No one gives me the power to face death like Jesus does. No one gives me the ability to smile in the face of death, other than Jesus, crucified and risen. No one else, nothing else can make me right with God. Nothing can relieve the guilt of my conscience. No one has the capacity to cleanse me from what I have done and what I have left undone other than Jesus.”

You want the cross to be a power in your life? Make it central. Allow yourself to be offended by its claims and then meditate on the cross, think on the cross. Do what the hymn writers said,

*When I survey the wondrous cross,  
On which the Prince of Glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,  
Save in the death of Christ, my God  
All the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to his blood*

## Boasting in the Cross

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Rich Nathan

June 20, 2010

Galatians: Free At Last Series

Galatians 6: 11-18

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