

Permission or pursuing? Women and ministry

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Synopsis

In light of recent discussions, and the author's own experiences, about the place of women in ministry, this article undertakes a brief biblical survey, with comments from the early church and the Reformers, to discuss how our attitude of merely permitting women to serve in church falls far short of the Bible's picture of women's roles in the church. Some recommendations for why women might rather be pursued for ministry, and how they might serve in ministry, instead of passively being permitted by church leadership, are drawn from the conversation between egalitarian and complementarian positions out of the Biblical data.

He had just moved out to pastor a rural church. I joked that I might join him on staff one day, since it was a lovely location. "No," he replied, "I wouldn't employ a woman. I need someone to else to preach and, since a woman can't do that, I don't see the point of employing a woman in my small church."

He was pastoring a small city church. As the song leader, I asked if I could share a personal story from my week that introduced the theme of the service and sermon. "Well, as long as you don't teach," he answered.

"What does that mean?" I enquired.

“I don’t know. Just don’t do anything that teaches,” was his reply.

As the above personal stories demonstrate, the topic of the roles of women in ministry is no mere academic exercise, though academia has certainly spilled much ink concerning this issue. Whether women should be permitted in certain pastoral ministries is the focus of much debate, but there is the danger of reducing the issue to being about merely what a woman cannot do in church. I intend to argue this has become an unhelpful focus; as complementarians, we should rather be actively exploring the many ways in which gifted women can and should contribute their God-given gifts to church life in formal roles. Like a table top, there are certainly edges of this issue we do not wish to fall off of, yet to only look at the edges or limits of the roles not given to women is to ignore the vast area of opportunity, even exhortation, for women to be busy about the work of ministry.

While the motivation for this investigation maybe be anecdotal and personal, it is my hope that this paper will give a compelling theological motivation for those in leadership within Christ’s church to be pursuing, not merely permitting, women for both formal and informal ministry roles. The structure will trace the redemptive mission of God from the start to the end in Scripture, considering first what a theologically dependent anthropology says regarding the roles of women, from the creation account and parts of the Old Testament. Then we will continue through to see the new people of God in Christ’s Church, and examine the purpose of the church and necessity for women serving it, with a view to eschatology, and how this helps us conceive of women’s roles in ministry. The early church’s teaching on women, and the voice of the Reformers of the 15th century will also factor in. This discussion will conclude with some recommendations for how women might serve in church roles. As discussion on this issue tends to originate from either an egalitarian or complementarian viewpoint, I’ll reveal my hand: I identify with the complementarian position as regards men and women, that in God’s good design, men and women are equal in dignity and value under his eye, as well as diversified in roles in the Church.

Let us begin with the start of humanity, God's first people. We must first consider not the "how" of women's ministry, but the "why".

In Genesis 1 and 2 we are presented with humanity as the pinnacle of God's creation. In Genesis 1:26-28 we see God create humanity as his image bearers:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man

in his own image;

he created him in the image of God;

he created them male and female.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth."

It is significant that both men and women are equally God's image bearers here.¹ They require each other for their God-given task of filling the earth by procreation, and exercising dominion over it, together. We witness God proclaiming within himself as a trinity that he will make humanity imaged after himself. Much can be made of this, but let us simply note here that it is significant the Trinity has differentiated roles and tasks, yet is one united God. For humanity is created in the image of this triune God,² though it cannot therefore be implied that women are subordinate to men in any way

¹ Raymond C Ortlund Jr., 'Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3', in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (1st ed.; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1991), 95–112. p 97.

² Andreas J. Köstenberger and Margaret Elizabeth Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-*

comparable to how way Jesus submits and is subordinated to the Father in his actions. While some would make the observational linguistic argument that the use of the term “man” to refer to all humanity in v27 is an early indication of male headship,³ the concern of this passage is not headship but instead to highlight the sameness of men and women in their joint task as God’s image bearers over creation.

The Genesis 1 account subtly contrasts with that in Genesis 2:18-24. The focus of this presentation of creation is the relationship between the man and woman who are expressly different from each other. There is an ordering of the relationship that emerges: Adam has temporal priority, being created first,⁴ and the woman is granted the label *ezer*, helper. By labelling her with the *ezer* or helper role, Genesis 2 differentiates the roles of men and women in their very created design. As helper, woman has a unique role to meet the aloneness of man that was not good (Gen 2:18).⁵ It’s not a term of implicit inferiority either—God is sometimes called Israel’s *ezer* in the Psalms—but it does denote a unilateral ordering of the relationship: man is not women’s helper as she is his.⁶ The least we can say about the nature of this helper role for woman is that she contributes the unique ability to meet man’s aloneness (not to be confused with loneliness), and to bear and birth children. One might venture to say there are observable generalisations in society about the behaviours of women as distinct from men in their tendency towards nurturing and emotional connectedness,⁷ and their abilities to facilitate deeper conversation.⁸ These are, however, sociological observations and outside of the scope of this paper, though no doubt worthy of further research to inform the discussion of the most suitable roles

Theological Survey (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2014). p 29.

³ Ortlund, ‘Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3’. p 98.

⁴ Claire Smith, *God’s Good Design* (ed. Matthias Media; Matthias Media, 2012). pp 171-2.

⁵ Smith, *God’s Good Design*. p 173.

⁶ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God’s Design for Man and Woman*. pp 36-8.

⁷ For more sociological studies on the personality differences between men and women, see Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor, Mich: Servant Books, 1980). pp 375-400.

⁸ Aimee Byrd, *No Little Women: Equipping All Women in the Household of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2016). p 26 footnote.

of women in Christ's church. There is an ordering and complementarity observable in this creation account of Genesis 2, which Andreas and Margaret Köstenberger summarise as "God rules... man leads and cares... and woman *with* man is given charge".⁹ Together man and woman contribute uniquely different ways of representing and imaging God, dependent on each other to fulfil their co-mission on earth.

So right from the beginning men and women both bear God's image and both contribute in different, ordered roles to their God-given joint task. This is the established pattern of men's and women's roles, under God. The Old Testament features multiple examples of this male-female co-mission which demonstrate this pattern from creation as its played out for the good of God's people, Israel. The stories of Miriam the prophetess who leads Israel under Moses (Ex 15:20-21 especially), Deborah the prophetic judge and Jael the enemy-slayer (Judges 4-5), Abigail the rescuer of the reputation of God's chosen King, David (1 Sam 25) and Huldah the prophetess King Josiah sought out (Chr 34) show God-gifted women leading, judging, delivering God's word, saving Kings and even slaying enemies. Each operates within the helper role, and notably none lead all Israel in an official role, yet they are found in all the general realms of state and religion in which a man would be found, operating in both formal and informal roles.

Now let us move to the inauguration of God's new people, the Church, bought with Christ's blood. The New Testament is where the majority of arguments over the place of women in church is found. Again, this is a brief and not exhaustive survey of the relevant Biblical data.

A question for some egalitarian scholars has been whether or not the new covenant under Christ inaugurates new rules and roles for women in his new Kingdom.¹⁰ Certainly Christ's death and resurrection, by which he draws all people to himself, means that God's people have a new mission

⁹ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman*. pp 27-8.

¹⁰ John G. Stackhouse Jr, *Partners in Christ: A Conservative Case for Egalitarianism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015). p 55.

of evangelism, an activity both men and women are recorded as doing throughout the New Testament. The man Jesus himself has been scrutinised for his relationship to women. He is portrayed as befriending women, and many women are counted among his followers and honoured by Jesus.¹¹ John Stackhouse Jr, an egalitarian theologian, writes that Jesus puts “critical and creative pressure against the gender distinctions of his culture” whilst still ultimately accommodating himself to the prevalent patriarchy of society then. This accommodation to patriarchy, Stackhouse states, is only because he prioritised bringing a gospel revolution, not an egalitarian one, and did not wish to provoke people to immediate action on these lesser matters when his Lordship and their salvation was at stake.¹² Jesus’ subversion of patriarchal culture in how he spoke with and respected women, Stackhouse argues in his book, demonstrates the planting of egalitarian “seeds”, the beginning of a trajectory towards identical roles of men and women in the church, to bloom when the culture was more tolerant of this perspective. Christ’s Church continues in this vein after he ascends, with the role of Priscilla in teaching Apollos, the leadership of deacon Phoebe and the arguably apostolic status of Junia¹³ being more ‘seeds’ waiting to be understood as precedents for female leadership, he states. The texts on deaconesses and women prophesying are waiting to be recognised as supporting female preachers and theologians when this point of view would no longer be a disruptive obstacle to gospel proclamation.¹⁴ Indeed, it is suggested that the record of equal leadership of women in the early church has been suppressed.¹⁵ Stackhouse’s argument is an eloquent representation of the case for conservative egalitarianism, and should the complementarian position prove to be wrong, it may well be on the points he makes in his book. However, his hermeneutic of trajectory—from the patriarchal culture inhibiting the Scripture writers through to the opportunity for gospel egalitarianism to bloom

¹¹ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God’s Design for Man and Woman*. An extended discussion on women and Jesus can be found in pp 101-20.

¹² Stackhouse, *Partners in Christ*. p 53.

¹³ Stackhouse, *Partners in Christ*. pp 69-70.

¹⁴ Stackhouse, *Partners in Christ*. See especially p 71.

¹⁵ Rosie Ward and CPAS, *Growing Women Leaders: Nurturing Women’s Leadership in the Church* (Abingdon: BRF, 2008). pp 51, 58-62.

in our age of gender equality—looks suspiciously like shaping one’s reading of scripture by society’s current cultural preferences, a premise which would switch the role of final authority from the word of God to the word of man. This we cannot do.

One other objection is this: if the distinctness and complementarity of men and women’s roles is embedded in creation, as demonstrated previously and as appealed to in 1 Cor 14:33b-36 and 1 Tim 2:13-14, shouldn’t we expect to see a continuity of complementary roles, rather than the discontinuity that sees women emerging in new roles, in the New Testament?

Given that Israel and Adam and Eve, along with the church in the New Testament, are the same inasmuch as they are all God’s people under God’s rule, we should expect to be able to apply theology from our previous discussion of God’s people under the old covenant to God’s people under the new covenant- Christ’s church. Not wishing to engage with the great deal of writings concerning how to define the church, let us consider merely the function of the church.

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Within the church there are many roles and gifts that are shared. The fruit of the Spirit, and the lists of gifts that don’t pertain to specific roles like eldership (2 Tim 3), all are distributed to both men and women. Joel prophesied of the outpouring of God’s spirit on both men and women, and this was witnessed dramatically at Pentecost (Acts 2), and continues to be seen in prophesying in the rest of Acts by both men and women. In fact, Stephen Clark notes, “We cannot distinguish between the roles of men and women in the early Christian community according to the type of activities they performed... In short, men and women engaged in these various activities in different ways, but no activity was closed to women.”¹⁶ Acts records women being involved in teaching (18:24-8), in acts of service (9:36), and in prophesying (21:9)- the same activities of ministry that men participate in.

¹⁶ Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*. p 112.

In the epistles, we find in 1 Cor 11:2-16 a discussion of head coverings and gender roles in church. Thomas Schreiner builds an interesting case for head coverings denoting gender distinctions in this context,¹⁷ which fits with the statement of ordered relationships of v3. Therefore in 1 Cor 11, the command is for the Corinthians to recognise the distinction between genders in how they operate in church.¹⁸ This includes in public praying and prophesying in church public meetings, in all “the churches of God” v16, and not merely private prayer and prophecy, as Calvin suggests in his commentary on this verse.¹⁹ He interprets this passage to say women should only pray privately, yet Carson points out this doesn’t quite fit, as it makes the head covering requirement of v5 seem a little silly- must a woman stop to put a hat on to pray by her bedside each night?²⁰ Paul doesn’t even substantiate his claims for why women are prophesying and praying out loud in church with men- he assumes women are participating in edifying and building up the church in its public meetings by speaking, together with men. Yet as seen in 1 Cor 14:34, it is not in the same role as men. Women are not to pronounce evaluative judgements on the prophecies spoken in a church; this is the role of the teaching elders or overseers in the church.²¹ Here again women operate in the same realms as men, yet in distinct roles, following the pattern of the creation co-mission to fill the earth, this time with disciples rather than physical offspring, and rule it together with men. There is a continuity of the creation pattern of equal value and tasks under God, yet distinct ways of fulfilling the joint task.

¹⁷ Thomas Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity”, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Piper and Grudem [eds.], 1991. Pp 124-39.

¹⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, ‘Head-Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16’, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (1st ed.; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1991), 124–39. pp 130-1.

¹⁹ Jean Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (trans. Rev. John Pringlif; vol. 1; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1848). p 356.

²⁰ An expanded discussion is found in D. A. Carson, “Silent in the Churches: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36”, Piper and Grudem [eds.]. pp 145-6.

²¹ Donald A. Carson, “‘Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36’, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (1st ed.; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1991), 140–53. pp 151-3.

The next important passage to consider is 1 Tim 2:12. In the context of v13, a woman is not to exercise authority over a man, including by teaching, because this overturns creation's good order. In an argument with the papists, Luther confirms the literal reading of this text, that women are not to teach in church meetings, yet "they may pray, sing, praise, and say "Amen" [in the church service]" as well as teach each other at home.²² This passage by no means prohibits women ministering in the church, but rather shapes how they do so, in this case with a prohibition. That Paul has to delineate these two specific tasks a woman cannot participate in—teaching, and having authority over, a man- strongly suggests women, even in the early church, were assumed to be active participants in the life and public meetings of the church.

The last of the select group of passages to examine rather briefly are a couple of passages about women's particular roles. Paul writes to his two protégés, Timothy and Titus, regarding church teaching and leadership. 1 Timothy 3:11, immediately preceded by instructions about elders, addresses a second-tier ministry position: deacons and deaconesses.

¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

The word often translated as wives is, according to both Schreiner and the Köstenbergers best translated instead as women deacons or deaconesses.^{23,24} Largely this has to do with observing a lack of any parallel passages about wives in the elder's qualification list; the deduction is therefore the *γυναῖκας* of v11 is better translated as women deacons. Corroborating this is early church practises.

²² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry II* (ed. Conrad Bergendoff; vol. 40, 78 vols; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958).

²³ Thomas R. Schreiner, 'The Valuable Ministries of Women in the Context of Male Leadership', in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1991), 209–24. pp 213-4.

²⁴ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman*. pp 225-30.

Ambrosiaster and Chrysostom regard Phoebe as serving as deaconess in Romans 16:1,^{25,26} and the Syrian Didache of 230AD²⁷ describes at length the ins and outs of the deaconess's role in teaching scripture and performing works of charity as part of church life.

Titus 2:3-6 exhorts and encourages women to be teaching and discipling younger women, and may well be the basis for the Didache's instruction for deaconesses to teach newly baptised women the faith. Titus 2 speaks of women applying God's word to their lives. These respected and godly women, trained by a faithful life and attention to scriptures, are to teach other women the faith and how to live it in the early church. One does not have to think too hard to imagine how our churches today, which are more than 50 per cent women in the Western world, could enable this ministry by our church structures and ethos.

So Christ's church copies the creation ordering of men and women. The two different genders, with complementary natures, work together according to their roles. Without women's roles in creation, the call to fill the earth would be impossible without the biological complementarity of the genders together, and the command of God to rule together would be disobeyed. Similarly, without women in church, in teaching and appropriate leadership roles, the call to fill the earth with disciples would be deeply dysfunctional. The formal training of women for such teaching and leading roles, the precedents for which are seen throughout scripture, seems the best use of our current resources in line with the Biblical pattern of men and women leading in all the same spheres, in different roles. The Church, locally or globally, that lacks women who teach other women how to be women of God not only weakens all the women, but the men in their circles of influence too, like children and husbands

²⁵ Gerald L. Bray, *Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians: Ambrosiaster* (Ancient Christian Texts; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009). p 114.

²⁶ Jean Laporte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (vol. 7; Studies in women and religion ; Vol. 7.; New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1924). p 119.

²⁷ R. Hugh Connolly, trans., 'Didascalia Apostolorum' (Oxford, 1929). Accessed online at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didascalia.html>. pp 142-56.

and friends. Women as a whole²⁸ tend to be the initiators of informal gatherings and speak considerably more words than men; the content of this increased speech together can be a powerful force for good or for harm.

Katharina Schütz Zell, wife of Matthew Zell, wrote to many women and included in her theological works encouragements to godly women to speak with and encourage and witness to believing husbands as well as family and female friends.²⁹ God made men and women for each other, to work together, to need each other. This is expressed in his creation and therefore in his church.

Women's unique contributions to church continue right through to the new creation too. In Revelation 21, God's people are corporately and gloriously pictured as the bride of Christ. She is prepared and adorned for union with her husband. We know from Ephesians 5:24 and 32 that marriage is modelled off of Christ's relationship with his church. God presents to us in women a visible reminder of submission, not out of inferiority, but out of a loving response to the service of another. Faithful wives in submission to their husbands, and godly women up the front of church in submission to their senior pastor, are irreplaceable parables before our eyes of the relationship of Christ and his church. Women trained in modelling and leading others in this practise teach the church daily of its saviour and its hope for the eschaton.

Having seen the biblical impetus for encouraging women into formal ministry roles in church, now we turn to the question of how we are to implement this.

But first, we briefly revisit those boundaries that, while not being the whole substance of the discussion, nonetheless are important in it: what can a woman do in church? While at one end of the

²⁸ I speak in broad sweeping observational generalisations here about women as a whole group; if there's one thing the current discussion around gender has taught us, it's that judging individuals by narrow definitions of the behaviour of "manly" or "womanly" behaviour is both unrealistic and unhealthy; not every woman is more talkative or more likely to socialise than her male counterparts!

²⁹ Elsie Anne McKee, *Katharina Schütz Zell. 1. The Life and Thought of a Sixteenth-Century Reformer* (vol. 1, 2 vols; Leiden: BRILL, 1999). pp 390-1.

spectrum is a complete denial of the voice of women at all in the meeting of the church, it is possible to extend the Bible's teaching on the role of women too far in the other direction. To say you must have women in formal leadership in your church or parachurch is turning a biblical pattern into a legalistic requirement. The Bible views women ministering to God's people as the norm; it does not however *require* women in any and every ministry. Obviously it is not practicably possible for women to be in active, formal ministry roles in some situations, for financial or lack of education reasons, although I would argue there are far fewer of those situations than we currently think.

The other "too far" error is to insist women and men can occupy identical roles in church life, as many egalitarian brothers and sisters do. From the literature and scripture sampled so far, that seems the less fitting reading of the material on the 'patterned differences working in unity' model we've found above. It is however worth noting this issue is a non salvation-endangering point of contention, one in which intelligent, godly Christians can, and have, differed recently.

Let us finish then by discussing what an application of this biblical model of female leading in ministry looks like in practise. Among the church's chief tasks is to bring glory to God. Expressing his good design for manhood and womanhood, in all its unity with diversity, surely does this. We will consider how women particularly do this at three levels: formal leadership, formal teaching, and formal serving roles.

At a leadership level, the demonstration of a truly complementarian conviction—that men and women are equal in value and both have something different to contribute—is practised by bringing both men and women onto the leadership teams of our ministries. Contrary to some objections that one cannot truly lead in the church while being denied the right of preaching,³⁰ we've seen Miriam and Deborah, Abigail and Esther, Priscilla and Phoebe and countless other women throughout Christian history leading alongside men without the preaching platform, and consequently nations were saved from

³⁰ Ward and CPAS, *Growing Women Leaders*. 21.

extinction, and the gospel proclaimed to sinners dead in sin. Leading cannot always be done from the pulpit or even the front of the room. Theologically trained women contribute as co-image-bearers in filling the earth with disciples, acting as allies to their male counterparts in their God-ordained leadership roles. They contribute their unique perspectives on matters of fair governance to assist the strong and the vulnerable, care for the diverse members of the body, and their nature has been observed to foster deeper and richer relationships on a leadership team. Women as well as men are gifted with unique combinations of gifts by God's Spirit to lead ministries and people.

At a teaching level, I've been greatly encouraged by churches who rethink the traditional roles of the people appearing up the front, and instead shape up front roles around the gifts of their people, including the women in their congregation. Might we not show better our value for women we claim to have, when we hear their voices in prayer, in helping people transition from one thing to the next in the service, in sharing their story of how God has transformed them into more Christlikeness? This is not limited to theologically trained women either, as roles that invite the voices of those without formal theological training, or from countries or cultures different to one's own, demonstrate our value for all people as equally valued under God.

Also under the teaching category, Titus 2 exhorts women to disciple some 50 per cent or more of the church- other women. Byrd also notes in her book that the gifts of nurture and compassion and the emotional connectedness that accompany these gifts are distinguishing marks of the wise counsel women can offer to men, who are also called to be compassionate and nurturing,³¹ especially if they are to pastor a church. Women connect with women, and apply God's word to their lives, in a way I would argue men cannot. Imagine how much richer and fuller sermon applications could be if they included not just a man's point of view, but a woman's as well. Let us tap faithful and godly women

³¹ Byrd, *No Little Women*. p 183.

on the shoulder and ask them to get formally trained to mentor and teach good doctrine and living in our churches, in both formal teaching sessions, and in their life-shaping interactions with others.

At a serving level, the teaching team is finite and incapable of meeting the counselling and care needs of every church member. Even the Apostles recognised this (Acts 6:2). The deaconesses of the early church beautified and promoted the gospel to their pagan neighbours by their works of charity and care- its not too difficult to apply this to our churches fairly directly today. Women hold the unique opportunity to go where men can't, to sick or abused women, or in places where men are generally not trusted around children, and being shaped by a formal training in God's word, can minister to these women, children, and some men, in practical care and with the gospel of healing.

In a world that is increasingly greatly influenced by both the goods and ills of feminism, connecting the Biblical pattern of men and women filling and ruling the earth under God together to our practise is not only biblical, but adorns the gospel to the waiting world that rightly yearns to see women respected and valued. The church has often treated women badly in the past, in a way that does not reflect scriptural ideals, and in parts of the world still does. In an age where women are able to study intensively, why wouldn't we express God's value of women by pursuing them to get involved in formal theological training, to formally and informally lead and teach according to the gifts God has given them? If we truly believe God created man and woman as equal and with different gifts, there is a strong biblical exhortation to reflect that in formal roles within the church. There is a precedent and an impetus for pursuing women for ministry, for God's glory, for the church's witness, and for the growth of the Kingdom.

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