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The Sanctity of Human Life, and Church Chat

Matthew 5:21-26

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[Saturday Night Live clip]:

. . . and now it's time for Church Chat . . .

Church Lady: Hello again, I'm the Church Lady, and this is Church Chat. Now Penn . . . excuse me, *Sean* . . . I'm sorry . . . we all make mistakes. Now let's see, you are married to . . . I'm sorry, what's her name?

Sean Penn: Madonna

Church Lady: Madonna, oh, Madonna. So she's named after the mother of our Lord. But she doesn't quite live up to the same standards, does she? One gave birth to the Savior of all mankind, and the other prances around with a blank teddy to the delight of preteen onlookers.

Visiting Sheik: This is true. I have seen it.

Sean Penn: Shut up!

Visiting Sheik: I will give you 2 million drachma for the dancing woman.

Sean Penn: Shut up!

Well . . . isn't that special? Hold that thought for about ten minutes . . .

Exodus 20:13: "Thou shalt not murder." That's the sixth commandment. Murder is at least killing out of personal passions for private reasons. It is forbidden, for human life is sacred.

Since 1973 there have been an estimated 40 million abortions in the USA. For in 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court established a new right to privacy and ruled that pre-born babies were only potentially human, "not persons in the whole sense."

Modern people tend to define personhood as "that which can reason or make moral decisions," which usually means "that which is reasonable and good *to us*." But before a government can sanction the death of 40 million lives, it must redefine personhood with new words, like all of us do.

A "baby" is a mystery of personhood.

An unwanted baby is a "fetus," just tissue, no mystery.

In Scripture personhood is a mystery defined by God, like breath or spirit from God. Ecclesiastes 11:5: "You do not know how the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child."

Perhaps it's when the seed is implanted in the egg . . . that's what science would point to . . . but it's clear that unborn babies, like Jesus and John, are considered persons in Scripture. Yet there is a *mystery*—God's mystery—to be left to Him. *Sacred*.

But out of fear and anger we attack great mysteries with words, and we justify murder. We look back on Nazi Germany and ask, "How could those law-abiding Germans murder 6 million Jews?" Well, they redefined them . . . "not persons in the whole sense."

I wonder what future generations will say about us and the 40 million?

Well, according to Jesus, there may be an even greater Holocaust occurring now in our midst . . .

Matthew 5:21:

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire."

"Every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment." Judgment for *what?* — murder. So I may not move a muscle; I may not speak a word; I may simply think a thought and harbor a private feeling and be guilty of *murder!* God judges the heart. It's almost as if this entire, physical world is like a laboratory for shaping and creating hearts.

"Thumos" is Greek for anger that flares up like a flame and then dies down. "Orge" is anger that is nurtured. Jesus uses "orge" here as a present passive participle . . . "He who is giving in to angering" . . . an orgy of anger. Have you ever been angry like that?

Perhaps you're sitting in this room feeling ashamed and alone because you've been party to an abortion. Well, I'll tell you what: If you've ever had an abortion *or* have ever been angry in an "unrighteous manner," would you raise your hand?

It looks like we're all in the same boat.

Well, perhaps your orgy of anger reached such a fevered pitch that you *said* something . . . In verse 22 Jesus says, "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

"Raca" meant something like *blockhead* or *butthead* or *ass* . . . someone without much ability to reason. "Moré" is translated *fool*. From "moré" we get our words *moral* and *moron*. A moré was a moral fool incapable of good moral decisions. The Psalmist wrote, "The fool says in his heart there is no God." To call someone a moré was to judge their heart by saying, "You don't really believe in God, and you're morally deficient."

“Raca moré”: stupid moron. With words like that we demystify persons into tissue; we desecrate what’s sacred; we murder in our hearts; we kill other hearts, murdering even in effect.

We could all tell stories of words heard in childhood that have kept us in bondage. Words like that kill hearts, stunt growth, and take potential life and snuff it out. “Raca,” fool, moron, retarded, bastard, pussy, bitch, whore . . . They are words used for cursing.

For the Hebrews and for us, words carry power. “Kakologeó” - malicious words, curses. A curse murders psychologically, but not only psychologically, *spiritually*. Demons ride on curses. Witchcraft isn’t a joke, for curses are empowered by demons.

“Whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to hell,” said Jesus. I remember that when I first read that as a young boy, it really stressed me out . . . because I have a little sister named Rachel. I remember thinking, “Yikes! Be careful . . . mental note: Never call Rachel a fool . . . better stick to *stupid* or *butthead*.”

When one of those Latin guys sings “Amoré,” is he subject to the hell of fire? When a diver says, “Look! A moray eel!” are they cursing the eel?

Obviously cursing is not just a matter of vocabulary. We get all worked up over “cuss words” and “unspeakable words.”

Meanwhile, we curse each other up and down the street, right into the sanctuary!

Jesus spoke the word “Raca”; Matthew records the word “Raca.” I don’t believe Jesus would stress over preschoolers rhyming . . . Daca, Raca, Faca . . . However, Jesus went to Hell and back to break a curse.

My Grandpa Ralph used the phrase “God damn it” more than anyone I’ve ever met. I will not allow my children to invoke that phrase. It’s a curse. In fact, I have a theory that Hell will be absolutely overrun with broken irrigation equipment from central Nebraska, sent there by my grandpa.

But maybe not . . . I don’t think there was much power in those curses, for he didn’t mean what he said. As far as using God’s name for his own vain purposes, I think a lot of church folks do that more than my grandpa. Yet because he said the words, as a good church boy I judged him. I thought, “Grandpa doesn’t know God” (moré). I always kept my Grandpa Ralph at a distance . . . and he loved me.

So who was most guilty of murder?

Many times I’ve wished he was still alive. I’d say, “Oh, hell, Grandpa, I love you too.”

I’ve prayed against some powerful curses and satanic incantations to which demons were attached. In all that weird, demonic world, there were some curses that seemed to carry the most power. Do you want to hear them?

Here's one: "I hate myself."
 Here's another: "I wish I were dead."
 Here's another: "I'll never tell."
 Here's another: "I'll never be free."
 Here's another: "I'm a fool."
 Here's another: "God can't forgive me."

They're curses, agreeing with the curses of the Evil One. *Evil judgments*. I suspect we curse ourselves and others all the time, and although we mean what we say, we don't even *know* it's a curse!

Have you ever said to a person, "You'll never change"? You just denied the Gospel. Have you ever said to a person, "You don't have God's Spirit" or "You don't know God" or "You're a fool" or "You're neurotic"? You don't even have to *say* it; you only have to *think* it in anger, and you're liable to the hell of fire.

Matthew 5:22: "Whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire."

Matthew 23:15-17: "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees Woe to you blind guides!" Jesus says, "You blind fools [moroi]!"

Yikes! Did Jesus sin? No! Was Jesus lying? No! They *were* blind fools, and some *don't* know God and are neurotic. Well, did Jesus know this about them? Yes! He is the judge. Would *you* have known this about them? Probably not. But even so, the apostles said stuff like this. Paul looked at Elymas the Magician, and "full of the spirit" (Acts 13:9) he said, "You son of the Devil!" Paul is the *same guy* who wrote, "Bless and do not curse"!

Well, I'm not sure I understand all that. But when Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, it was *good*. And what made it good? Well, He said He came to fully fill the law. He fills it with Himself. Who is He? He is the Love of God poured out. So what made it good? His love. He rebukes the Pharisees and then dies for them at their hands.

If you really love someone, you will tell them when you think they are being foolish or neurotic, or when they need God. But you will tell them in the pain of sacrificial love. You'll feel nails in your hands and feet.

I don't believe Jesus *cursed* the Pharisees but *blessed* the Pharisees . . . words spoken in the sacrificial, furious love of Christ as blessings. But words spoken from the sinful passion of our own flesh are curses, no matter what language you use. And if it's the language of the Church, I think the curses are doubly evil. The *world* knows that. It's a tragic joke on Saturday Night Live . . .

[Saturday Night Live Clip]:

Church Lady: And who could have been in the back of that cab, Jimmy? Who? Who was behind the wheel of our Lincoln Towne Car when we drove into the hotel? Who could it be? Who could it be? I just can't imagine who. Could it be . . . *Satan*?

Yes, it could be Satan. But, you see, this is the joke: Who's behind Church Chat, church gossip, slander, and hatred? Could it be . . . Satan? Of course! Or are we "ignorant of his designs"?

I've been told that Satanists are assigned to go to churches and curse them. I don't doubt it. But *big whoop!* They have no power unless we give it to them! I'm not worried about *that*; I'm far more concerned about *church chat*. Next verse . . .

"So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

I don't think that means go to everyone who's offended with you before you worship. Thousands were offended with Jesus, yet they had nothing of substance against Him. But if you curse your brother, he has something against you. You need to go to Him and provide atonement for reconciliation.

The picture here is of a worshipper handing a sacrifice to the priest. A Jew would put his hand on the animal and confess his sins. Then the animal would be slain in his place: an atonement to work reconciliation with God.

Jesus says, "Leave it at the altar and go be reconciled to the brother." Where is God anyway? Jesus, the Judge on the throne, says, "Whatever you did to the least of these my brothers, you did to me." It's like they actually *are* His temple . . . and cursing them you curse Him. Your religion cannot be private, for you worship a God who makes His dwelling in temples of flesh. Go to them. Confess and be reconciled. Reconciled for what? Murder. And what's the payment for murder? Death. How can we make atonement and not be killed thousands of times over?

I'm a boss, I'm also a pastor, and I'm a Christian. I'm charged with speaking the truth to the staff, but never in unrighteous anger and always in love. Anything less is murder. I'm convinced I've murdered Aram, Gary, Bill, Gretchen, Bobby, Mike, Duncan, and probably some of you. And Jesus is in you, murdered with you. How do I make atonement for that? There will be an accounting . . .

"Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny."

Well, it's clear that Jesus is talking about more than just a human court. The Father is the Judge, and Jesus is our adversary here, because we have cursed Him and made ourselves the enemy of God. Perhaps the adversary is Satan, and He's taking us to court with a water-tight case. We've cursed Jesus, and Jesus is the *Judge* (Matthew 25)!

Well, no matter what:

- There is a way to settle our accounts before we get to court.
- There is a way through which the accuser will have nothing on us.
- There is a way out here on the road.

This is the Gospel—God’s Word—Good Word—“Eulogeo”—the “Eulogy.” The Father has made Jesus Judge, and to the horror of the adversary (Satan), the Judge has made Himself an atonement for our sins. He died the thousand deaths in our place to reconcile us to Himself, us to each other, and all things to God the Father.

Jesus made Himself the gift, His cross the altar, and us the temple. Jesus absorbed all those curses. Jesus absorbed *the* curse. Galatians 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree.’” Jesus took the curse of death so we could be born of His Spirit into life (the children of God). And this was all according to the Father’s plan. Jesus is the Father’s Word of blessing, and He fully fills the law in us. How?

I can reconcile with my brothers, because the blood of Christ is my atonement, giving me the courage and strength to confess and forgive. I must carry the blood in myself as a weapon against evil. I must come to this table with Aram, Gary, Bill, Bobby, you, and all believers, and claim the blood over us all. For here *every curse* is defeated!

And believing the Father’s blessing, I’m *uncurseable* and entirely *blessable*. I can receive your words as blessings. You could even say, “Peter, you’re acting foolish,” and I could say, “Thanks for the valuable input. I may have been acting foolish. But I am not a fool; I’m a child of God.”

If you don’t believe the Father’s blessing, you won’t be able to receive criticism, and you’ll be stunted in your growth, for every kindhearted rebuke you’ll receive as a curse.

But believing the Father’s blessing, you’ll *become* a blessing. The blessing (Jesus Himself) fulfills the law in us. But apart from Jesus, trying to fulfill the law we’re cursed. In fact, we’re dead . . .

“Raca” - stupid;
 “Moré” - morally insane;
 not fully human;
 truly unborn and yet sacred.

For everyone is God’s mystery.

In the words of Solomon, “As you do not know how the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything,” even the people in this room. *Be careful* not to curse His mysteries. “Bless and do not curse.” “Bless,” and sometimes (although we can’t comprehend it) His Spirit, like a seed, comes to the unborn through us. And we give *the* blessing.

Paul writes, “God has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

Jesus is the Word, and the Word is a seed, and we can speak the seed into another and give birth to eternal life.

The Church Lady ridiculed Madonna, for the Madonna gave birth to our Lord. Well, tragically and ironically, the church lady—Mother Church (Revelation 12)—*that* church lady is now the one called to give birth to our Lord in others . . . by speaking words of blessing—the Good Word (“Eulogos”)—Jesus Himself.

I’ve told you this story and I’ll tell it again . . .

Fred Craddock, professor of preaching at the Chandler School of Theology in Atlanta, was on vacation with his wife in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. It was the last day, and they’d stopped in to a favorite, little café called the Blackberry Inn. He didn’t want to be bothered.

Well, this old, country fellow walked in . . . just talking to everybody (you know the type). Fred thought, “Curses,” and he hid behind the menu. Sure enough, the old guy came to Fred’s table:

“You folks on vacation?”

“Yes”

“Having a good time?”

“I *was*,” thought Fred.

“Gonna be here long?”

“No, not at all.”

“What do you do?”

That was the question Fred had been waiting for, because he could shut people down with his answer: “Well, I’m a professor of Homiletics and Theology.” The old man lit up and said, “You’re a preacher man! Well, I got a preacher story for you!” He pulled up a chair and sat down . . .

“Yeah, I was born back in these mountains. My momma wasn’t married. We lived in a shack outside of town. The other women in town used to spend their time guessing who my daddy was. And I didn’t know who my daddy was. That was a real problem back then.

“My momma worked a lot. Other kids weren’t allowed to play with a boy like me. I would hide in the weeds at recess, and I ate my lunch alone. They said I wasn’t any good and I’d never amount to anything.

“Kids used to call me Ben the Bastard Boy . . . Ben the Bastard Boy . . . I thought Bastard Boy was my last name.”

The old man was weeping now, but he collected himself . . .

“Well anyway, there was a church in Laurel Springs. It had this preacher. His voice was big like God. I knew church wasn’t a place for boys like me.”

(We know at church they wouldn’t call him Bastard Boy; they’d find other ways to say the same thing . . .)

“Sometimes I’d sneak in and sit towards the back, so I could sneak out before the service ended. But this one day I just got lost in what the preacher was saying. Before I knew it, church was over. The aisles got all jammed up. Folks were looking at me. I was making for the back door quick as I could when all at once I felt this big hand on my shoulder.

“This big voice boomed, ‘Boy!’ It was the preacher man himself! He said, ‘Boy!’ I froze. He talked so loud everybody heard as he said, ‘Boy, who’s your daddy? Boy, I *know* who your daddy is.’ That was a knife in my gut, and I wondered did he know who my daddy was. He said, ‘Boy, now let’s see . . . why, you’re a child of . . .’ He paused and everyone listened. ‘Boy, why you’re a child of *God*, and I see a strikin’ resemblance!’ Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, ‘Now you run along and go claim your inheritance.’”

Fred looked at the old guy. He seemed familiar, so Fred asked, “Sir, what’s your name?” The old guy said, “Ben Hooper.” Fred replied, “Ben Hooper . . . Ben Hooper . . . Oh yes! I remember my daddy telling me about you, the illegitimate boy elected twice the Governor of Tennessee.”

Old Governor Hooper looked up at Fred and with tears in his eyes said, “I was born that day.”

And on the night the good Word of God was betrayed, He took bread and He broke it saying, “This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way after supper, He took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the new covenant

in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of me.”

So let me summarize my sermon:

Receive the Father’s Blessing — *Jesus*
Give the Father’s Blessing — *Jesus*

“Lord God, we come to your table. Father, you know our hearts. You know how deeply we live in fear, shame, anxiety, and the flesh. Would you help us through your Spirit now to believe your Gospel? We know that we will spend an eternity singing about it, and maybe we will never even get to the bottom of it. But help us to believe now, enough to come to this table. Help us to desire enough now to come to this table.

“So, Lord, there may be some here who have had an abortion, and they don’t even know for sure what to think of it—what it was and why it was and what it means, yet they just feel this shame over it. Lord Jesus, would you draw them to this table so they could believe the truth?—that you died to make atonement for them. You not only died, you sent your very Spirit to fill them, no longer with fear and shame, but with *love*, because you first loved us.

“Lord God, if there are some sitting here thinking, ‘I’ve murdered,’ Lord would you do the exact same thing to them?—help them to come to this table and believe your grace and love over them.

“Lord, some may be even thinking, ‘Well, aren’t I to first go to my brother?’ Lord Jesus, I think you *are* the gift, you *are* the atonement. So, Lord, I pray that they would come to this table and receive your grace over them and that then they would go to their brother and make atonement. And you *are* the atonement. That is, that they would tell them about you. Maybe that means saying, ‘For what I did I deserve murder, but Jesus died for me. So I confess to you, and I love you.’

“Lord, I don’t know what all you’ll do at this table—actually, you’ll do *everything* at this table—but, Lord, draw us to this table in faith. Thank you that your love is so thorough and so deep and so ravishing. In Jesus, amen.”

I thought of an old story, and it goes something like this:

There was an old gunfighter. His name was Black Bart. His life was consumed with revenge, anger, gun fights, and murder. One day this beautiful woman came to town—Clarabelle. She was absolutely lovely. And for some incredible, mysterious reason, she fell in love with Black Bart.

One afternoon, down by the stream, she took his face in her hands and kissed him. She said, “Black Bart, I love you.” That night, for the first time in his life, Black Bart dropped to his knees by the side of his bed and said, “Dear God, I ain’t got nothin’ against nobody.”

Sometimes being a preacher feels like being a Black Bart. And maybe sometimes you feel like Black Bart. But if you took the body and blood of Christ, do you see what you are? Do you see what *we* are? We are all old murderers who have been entirely and completely *forgiven!* When you see that, you just want to say, “God, I ain’t got nothin’ against nobody!” It gives you strength to confess and forgive.

Feeling like Black Bart, sometimes after preaching I think, “Maybe I shouldn’t have said that,” or “Maybe I should have said that.” It’s easy for me to get a bit out of whack. Then, because I know myself, I go home and say to my wife, “Susan, do I need to get up in front of the church and apologize next Sunday?”

I wrestle with that, thinking, “To *this* person, it was really a negative thing, but to *that* person, it sets them free.” Making atonement for all that becomes an incredible weight. That’s why I have to come to the table saying, “Jesus, I need *your blood* all over me!” And then I can say to

everybody, “I’m sorry,” but sometimes I don’t even know what for. And I can also say this: “I forgive.” Because we’re all a bunch of old murderers who have been forgiven.

So in the name of Jesus, believe the Gospel and offer the Gospel: our Lord Jesus. In His name, amen.

Further Reading

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. . . . You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”

Matthew 5:17, 21-26

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If any one swears by the temple, it is nothing; but if any one swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools!”

Matthew 23:15-17a

We are fools for Christ’s sake

I Corinthians 4:10a

And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

James 3:6-12

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Romans 12:14

To curse is to pray to the devil.

German Proverb

“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you”

Matthew 5:44

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places

Ephesians 1:3

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

I John 3:14-15

Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear.

Ephesians 4:22-29

Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

James 1:19-21

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

II Corinthians 5:16-19



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:1

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. . . . And as for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience. No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a vessel, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, that those who enter may see the light.”

Luke 8:11, 15-16

The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. All our words will be useless unless they come from within. Words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness.

Mother Teresa

Well, isn't that special?

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