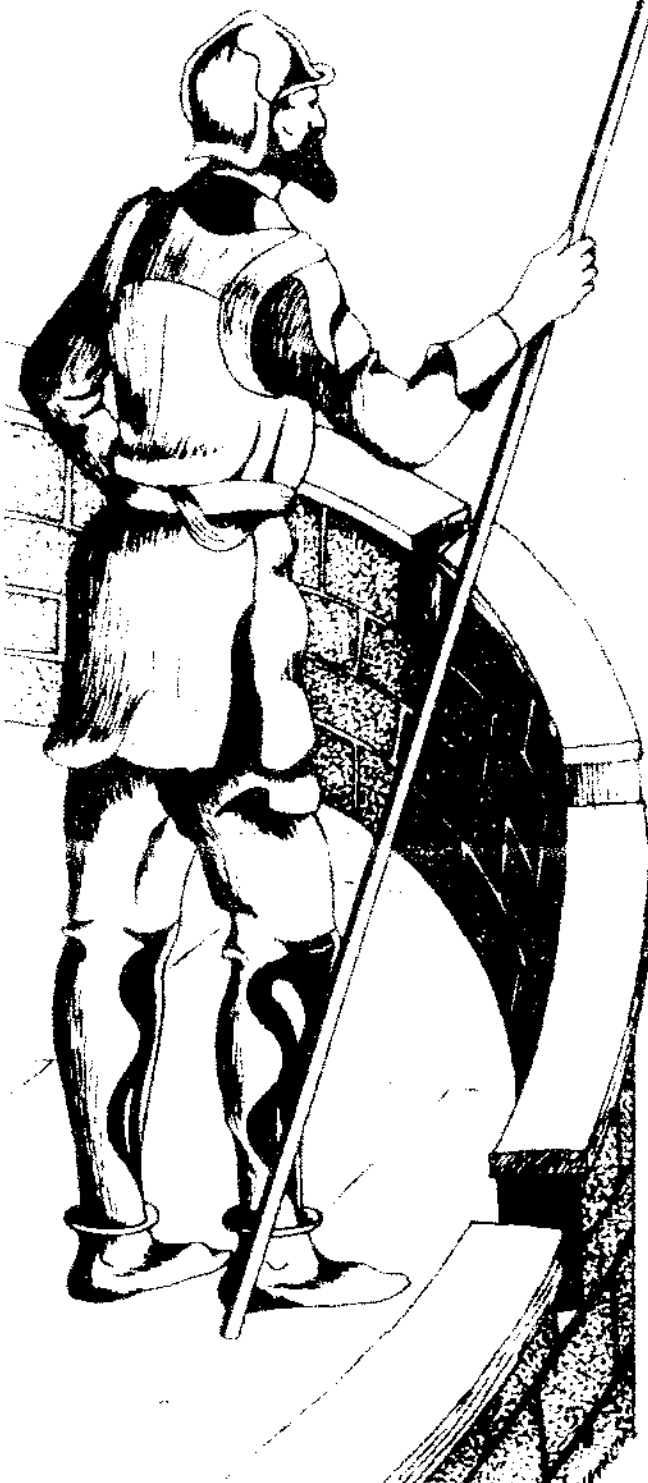


"Watchman, what of the night?"

*"The hour has come, the hour is striking, and striking at you,
the hour and the end!"*

Eze. 7:6 (Moffan)



THE NEW BIRTH

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Editor's Preface

This entire issue of *WMN* is devoted to the night conversation that Nicodemus had with Jesus, and John's illustration of what it means to be born from above. The reason for so doing, is that there is being taught in the community of Adventism that one must be born again before he can be justified. In principle, this is the same concept that was enunciated at the Council of Trent and constitutes the Tridentine Gospel of Rome.

Nicodemus was recognized by Jesus "as a teacher in Israel." He was a "righteous" man by Jewish standards which means that he fasted twice a week, and gave tithes of all that he possessed. See Luke 18:11-12. He could no doubt have confessed as did the Rich Young Ruler, had Jesus given him the same directive for life, "All these have I kept from my youth up, what lack I yet?" (Matt. 19:20). Jesus, in his conversation with Nicodemus, gave the same answer to "what lack I yet?" from a different perspective. Only as the proud Pharisee could see himself as he really was, a sinner, though clothed in his own "righteousnesses" would he cry out for mercy as did the publican. Then the new birth could begin.

The value of the record that John has left for us in this experience of Jesus with Nicodemus is the fact that it is so necessary for us as Laodiceans to recognize that we, too, have a similar attitude as did the Pharisees of Christ's day. We are rich and increased with good works, needing nothing, trusting in our own righteousnesses, knowing not that we are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" needing to be "born from above." Until we can come to the place where we recognize our spiritual poverty, and worthlessness, will we ever cry out, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

The New Birth

A Re-Study of John 3:1-15

In reporting the night conversation that Nicodemus had with Jesus, John for the second time in his gospel makes reference to the Pharisees. There is a connection. It was the Pharisees who sent a deputation from Jerusalem to the Jordan where John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing (John 1:24). Their approach indicated a Messianic implication, for John replied immediately, "I am not the Christ," and when further plied confessed to being neither "that prophet," nor "Elijah" (John 1:20-21). It would appear that the Pharisees at this point were willing to accept him as either the Messiah, or Elijah, if he had so claimed. Jesus reminded them at a later date that they "were willing for a season to rejoice in his light" (5:25).

John told the deputation that there was One standing among them "whom ye know not." That One, he said "is preferred before me" (1:26-27). In less than six months, that One would appear in Jerusalem. He would cleanse the temple - His Father's house - and work undeniable miracles (2:16, 23). Some downgrading of their previous judgment was required. Did they want a Messiah who would wreck havoc on their religious structure? But then there were those "miracles" to take into account. So in council they confessed that Jesus was a "teacher come from God" based solely on His miracles, and not on what He did in the Temple, nor His claim for so doing it; "for no man can do those miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." (3:2).

Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus, with this consultation report, "We know..."? Was it to discuss His actions in the Temple? Or was it to conclude a working arrangement with Jesus as a "teacher" for he, too, was a "teacher in Israel" (3:10). The Gospel record does not tell us. This approach and all that it might involve, Jesus abruptly swept aside, and pointedly told Nicodemus - "Verily, verily, I say unto thee (σοι - singular), "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (3:3). The word translated "again" can also be translated, "above,"

as indicated in the margin of the KJV. The Greek word, *ανωθεν*, is an adverb, and when referring to place or source is translated, "above," but when to time means, "again." Jesus meant place; Nicodemus interpreted it as time and responded, "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (v. 4). Jesus then pointedly stated:

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water, and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born from above" (vs. 5-7).

Too often, we separate these verses when quoting them. They constitute one thought and that thought is vital when studying the "new birth." If a man could be "born again," the result would still be "flesh," with all that that term means in Scripture. He must be born from above by the Spirit so "as to enter into the kingdom of God." Paul pointedly stated it in his letter to the Corinthians: "Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I, 15:50).

Jesus continued to explain to Nicodemus the meaning of the "new birth" from the viewpoint of "from above." He said,

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is everyone that is born of the Spirit. (v. 8, KJV)

In the Greek text the same identical word, *το πνευμα*, is used at the beginning of the verse, as at the end. John knew the proper Greek word for wind, *ανεμος*, and used it in John 6:18. A free translation of this verse could read:

The Spirit breathes where it wills, and thou hearest His voice; but thou dost not know how He is coming and where He will lead. This is the experience of everyone who is born out of the Spirit.

This was the concept understood by those who lived immediately after John penned his gospel. Ignatius in AD 110, as he was being led to martyrdom, said,

"The Spirit knoweth whence it cometh and whither it goeth."

Jesus emphasized that the birth from "above" was a dual experience "out of" (ἐκ) the water, and out of the Spirit. This recalls the first creation when the earth "without form and void" lay entombed in "the waters." Upon that mass, "the Spirit of God moved." (Gen. 1:2). Out of it came forth a perfect creation in its entirety. Some of the mass became trees; some of it beasts of the field, and some of the mud, man in the image of his Maker. It was the Spirit's determination, and to the Spirit's voice all matter yielded to find its place.

The life of man in sin is chaotic, a desolation, with his soul in darkness unable to find peace. Well did Isaiah describe the state of the man in sin:

The wicked are like a troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked. (57:20-21).

I have stood on a rock overlooking the mighty Pacific. The breakers came in, restless and surging. When they receded, there was left filth and dirt. More than water is required - "except a man be born out of the Spirit." The earth in its state of chaos could have existed millenniums, and nothing would have happened. But let the Spirit brood, and there came forth order, form, and beauty. It is the Spirit that can give order and direction to a life of chaos and restlessness.

We must never forget that the first work of the Spirit is to convince us of our sinfulness. (John 16:8) And the why is given: "Because they believe not on Me" (v. 9). When we come to the place when we realize that we can not trust in our own works; and what those "righteousnesses" in which we trust really are, will we cry out, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Isaiah states it clearly - whether saint or sinner - "We are *all* as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (64:6). He is not saying that our "iniquities" are as filthy rags, which they are, but that our "righteousnesses" are likewise such. Man has nothing upon which to rely of himself. The message of John the Baptist was, "Behold the Lamb of God, the One bearing away

(τὸ αἵμα) the sin of the world" (John 1:29 Gr.). He not only takes away my sins and iniquities, but He stands in place of my "righteousnesses." He becomes, "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer. 23:6).

This is the One whom John the Baptist told the delegation from Jerusalem was standing among them Whom they knew not. He is the One who was preferred before him, and the One we too must prefer before ourselves. But the Pharisees didn't wait till the next day to discover who He was when John designated Him as the Lamb of God. Neither they, nor we desire the self renunciation such a recognition demands. But unless we are born out of the water and the Spirit, we can not, nor will we, enter the Kingdom of God.

Isaiah after describing the "righteousnesses" of even "saints" caps his statement with the meaning of the "new birth" as Jesus defined it to Nicodemus that night long ago. He wrote:

But now, O Lord, thou art our father; and we are the clay, and Thou our potter; and we are all the work of Thy hand. (64:8).

To be born from above means simply, we return to the "mud" of the first creation, so God can begin the regeneration required for us to see the eternal kingdom. Because of sin, death is required, a return to dust for God decreed, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19). Actually, the second death is the return to dust ("ashes" - Mal. 4:3) eternally. We have a choice now in life to return to dust to be remolded after the Divine likeness, or to be returned to dust at the end of the age nevermore to be. The way to life has been provided by the Lamb who came to bear away the "sin" (singular) of the world.

At the same time that Jesus reminded "the Jews" (Pharisees) that at one point they were willing "for a season to rejoice in the light" provided by John, He also said to them,

"Ye search the Scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which

bear witness of Me; and ye will not come unto Me, that ye may have life" (John 5:39-40 ARV).

The whole issue of the Gospel is the relationship we have toward the Lord Jesus Christ. Do we believe in Him, or do we not? Or do we believe in ourselves? True, He has become to us an "example" that we should follow in His steps. But that Example clearly stated, "Of mine own self, I can do nothing" (John 5:30). That same total dependence on God evidenced in the life of Jesus, must be revealed in our lives. "The Father that dwelleth in me, He doeth the works" (John 14:10). "Where is boasting then? it is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith" (Rom. 3:27). Faith is the noun in English by which the action of the verb in Greek, "I believe" (πιστευω), is designated. A saving faith is belief, a simple trust, in the Lord Jesus Christ, by which I become willing to become nothing - clay, mud, or dust - however, one wishes to designate it, so that the Spirit of God may once again brood "upon the face of the waters."

The hardest part of this experience could well be that which is defined as "whence [the Spirit] cometh and whither it goeth" - which was quoted by Ignatius on the way to martyrdom. We are not asked how we want the course of our life to be, or to end; it is the Spirit of God who makes that decision. This is to walk by faith and not by sight. This is placing one's self in the Hand of the Potter to be and to serve to His glory where He wills and in the way He indicates. To be doing the Spirit's bidding rather than the way we would like to be doing, is evidence of genuine conversion. This will be the experience of everyone born out of the water and the Spirit.

To have a one to one experience with the Lord Jesus Christ will call forth in us the same response it did in Paul - "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). Then, all my plans and purposes in life will be subordinated to that one objective no matter how humiliating to human pride, that work that may be. We need to realize that in this "new birth" experience from above, God remoulds us to fit His objective for us, not what we may want.

Consider two antediluvians - Enoch and Noah. Of Enoch it was written - "Enoch walked with God"

(Gen. 5:22). Likewise of Noah it is stated, "Noah walked with God" (6:9). In this walk, Noah did "according to all that God commanded him" (6:22). He went through the Flood, and the record simply states, "and he died" (9:29). Of Enoch the same record reads - "Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (6:24). We may ask, why two different ends for two men who walked with God? Enoch has been in "heavenly places" all these millenniums, while Noah rests awaiting the call of the Life Giver at the end of the age. While one "pleased God," the other became an "heir of the righteousness which is by faith" (Heb. 11:5, 7). Does the clay say to the Potter, why have you so moulded me? No! The recognition of the Sovereignty of God is involved. We sing, "Lord of my life, I crown Thee now, Thine shall the glory be." Do we sing just words, or do we mean what we sing? These words are the heart of what it means to be born from above.

Are we willing to trust our lives each day in the hands of the Potter, or are we still thinking that our "righteousnesses" are first required? Or in the broader aspect are we shrinking from the consequences that such a surrender may require? There is no record of any decision that Nicodemus made that night as the result of the conversation, only a parting word from Jesus - "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). That was to follow in progressive steps (7:50-51; 19:39). Birth follows a conception by truth.

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Many who profess to be His followers have an anxious, troubled spirit, because they are afraid to trust themselves with God. They do not make a complete surrender to Him; for they shrink from the consequences that such a surrender may involve. Unless they do make this surrender, they cannot find peace. (The Desire of Ages, p. 330)

Self Renunciation Symbolized

To be born from above as defined by Jesus leads to but one experience, the renunciation of self. Nicodemus, understanding Jesus to mean to be born "again" asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?" The answer is, he can not do so. Neither can a man become again mid-entombed in water, and be thus recreated. However, Jesus with John the Baptist entered into a ceremonial experience that would "fulfil all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). It, like creation, involved water and the Spirit. This ceremony is, too often, lightly regarded and little understood.

First, I cannot baptize myself. Jesus could not do it either, and thus declared to John, "It becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Paul asked the Christians at Rome, "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ, were baptized into His death?" (Rom. 6:3). As Jesus closed His earthly life, besides the "loud voice" declaring, "It is finished," He prayed, "Father into Thy hands, I commend my spirit: and having said thus, He gave up..." (Luke 23:46).

There is something awesome here. A man stands as an ambassador of Christ (II Cor. 5:20), to receive into the water a candidate for the kingdom of God. The candidate places himself wholly in the hands of this minister. He is entombed in water, and is raised up by this "ambassador" - not by his power but by the ambassador's - so to live again, "a newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). The candidate in this act has admitted the justice of the wrath of God against sin, the "old man" is buried in water. The Divine dictum is symbolized - "Dust thou art, and to dust shalt thou return." There is a new creation. (II Cor. 5:17). There is to be a Divine moulding from "above." This "moulding" is a daily experience. "I die daily," declared Paul (I Cor. 15:31).

What will lead one to enter fully into this "death" in life? When one sees himself as he really is, as God

sees him, he voluntarily dies because he is too putrid to live. Well does Isaiah describe our condition:

The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head, there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. (1:5-6).

It is also Isaiah who reminds us that our "righteousnesses" are as "filthy rags" (64:6). Paul summarizing the state of man, drawing from Old Testament references, wrote:

There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. (Rom. 3:10-12).

This represents our condition as "Laodiceans," perceiving ourselves to be what we are not, nor can be of ourselves. Thinking that we are "in need of nothing" while in reality we are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17).

The whole course of life is toward death. We will die. But from the death which comes at the close of a life governed by our desires, there will be no return. When viewed from this perspective, there is not much to renounce for self has little, if any, value. When I come to this realization, the true conviction of what sin is, and has done to me, then by the same Spirit, there is offered to me a new birth. To enter in, I must die. It is a choice of deaths - a death in life, or a death that will end all life forever.

The Divine Dictum - "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" - is never altered. It is a matter of "When." Jesus offers us a choice. I can be "crucified with Him" and live (Gal. 2:20); or I can live, and "be punished with everlasting destruction" (II Thess. 1:9). To live now, so as to never die hereafter, is to have Christ living in me. As He died, placing Himself in the hands of the Father, I also die placing myself in the hands of Jesus Christ. I am "baptized into Jesus Christ" (Rom. 6:3). My life is

hid with Christ in God, so that when Christ, who is my life shall appear, I shall also appear with Him in glory (Col. 3:3-4).

It might be well to carefully consider the words of Paul in Galatians 2:19-20, translated as literally as possible from the Greek text. He wrote:

For I through law to law died in order that to God, I might live. In Christ, I have been crucified. But I live, no longer I, but lives in me Christ. But that which now I live in flesh, in faith I live, the faith of the Son of God, the One who loved me and gave Himself in my behalf.

Note, he writes, "I live, no longer I." The Apostle Paul is no longer Saul the Pharisee. There is a clear, evident difference. The difference came on the way to Damascus, when he asked Jesus, "Lord, what will thou have me to do?" From that point forward it was no longer the "old" self; that had been renounced. Forthwith there came a new creation, a new identity. Neither was the Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night, the same Nicodemus who joined Joseph of Arimathaea in the burial of Jesus. He was willing now to go forth "unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. 13:13) in the light of day, not in the shadows of the night.

Paul declared that "in faith" he lived, but it was not even his own faith. It is the faith which the Son of God authored, a complete trust in God that He would carry out the terms of the Counsel of Peace that had been formulated "between the Two of Them." (See Zech. 6:13.) It could be called "the Faith of the Cross," for in His dying words, as He passed into the "outer darkness" of the second death, Jesus placed Himself in the "hands of the Father." It is well stated:

Christ, in His life on earth, made no plans for Himself. He accepted God's plans for Him, and day by day the Father unfolded His plans. So should we depend upon God, that our lives may be the simple outworking of His will. As we commit our ways to Him, He will direct our steps. (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 479)

A brief altering of Christ's final commitment to the Father must become the basis of our "new birth"

experience. Read the text in Luke 23:46 as your commitment - "Father into Thy hands I commend my life," and having prayed thus, give up. This is the hardest part of the experience of being born from above. You do not know where that commitment will lead you. You live by faith, even the faith which the Son of man authored. He prayed just before crossing the brook into the Garden of Gethsemane: "This is life eternal that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3). To know this God is to know that:

God never leads His children otherwise that they would choose to be led, if they could see the end from the beginning, and discern the glory of the purpose which they are fulfilling as co-workers with Him. (*ibid.*)

God is too wise to err, and too good to withhold from anyone whom He loves and who loves Him, that which is for their best interest. I must be crucified in Christ, but by that death, and the resurrection which follows, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.

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The Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is the objective of the "new birth" from above. We, too often, limit it to the kingdom which shall be inaugurated when Christ shall return the second time sitting upon the "throne of His glory" (Matt. 19:28). In His parable teachings, Jesus spoke, however, of another "kingdom of heaven." See Matthew 13:24, 31, 33, 45, 47. We are encouraged to come boldly to "the throne of grace, that we might obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). That night long ago when Nicodemus conversed with Christ, the kingdom inferred was the eternal kingdom of glory. His last words to Nicodemus concerning the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness were concluded with the statement, "that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (3:15).

However, the conditions for entrance into either kingdom - grace or glory - are the same. As far as

the kingdoms are concerned, one succeeds the other. Our inheritance with the holy ones in light follows our deliverance from "the power of darkness" by the translation "into the kingdom of His dear Son" now, "in Whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:12-14).

Once I have been planted together in the likeness of His death - "Father into Thy hands, I commend my self" and give up - the same mysterious movings of the Spirit begin - "Thou dost not know where He is leading." If we are honest with ourselves, as we review the past years of our lives, be they few or many, we have to admit that every major failure which has brought remorse, and with it regret and guilt, stems from the fact that we did not follow the Spirit's leading, but chose our own way.

Jesus taught His disciples to pray - "Our Father, Who art in heaven ... thy will be done in earth, as it is heaven" (Matt. 6:10). But it cannot be done in earth, unless it is first done in us - dust - "dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." Then the Spirit leads the recreated "dust" - to work in the accomplishment of the wider meaning of "earth." What, and how and where that will be, is not ours to define, but His to choose. "For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left His house, and gave authority unto His servants, and to every man his work" (Mark 13:34).

Not more surely is the place prepared for us in the heavenly mansions than is the special place designated on earth where we are to work for God. (Christ's Object Lessons, p. 327)

In this third chapter of John's gospel, the record of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is followed by an illustration of what Jesus meant when He told Nicodemus - "Ye must be born from above." Commenting briefly (vs. 16-21) on the parting statement of Jesus (v. 15), the gospel narrative returns to the ministry of John the Baptist (vs. 23-30).

A question concerning religious practice was used as an opportunity to plant, if possible, seeds of jealousy between John and Jesus. How did John

respond? He reminded those Jews that he had told them previously that he was "not the Messiah," but was "sent before Him" (vs. 28; 1:20). Then from lips which betokened a life born from above, he declared - "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Here was man of whom Jesus would testify that "among them which are born of women there hath not risen a greater than" he. (Matt. 11:11). He was born to an elderly couple. We are not told how old he was when he laid them to rest. He chose not to follow his father in temple service for he "was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel" (Luke 1:80). His dress and his food was what could be found in the desert. (Matt. 3:4). He never married. There were none to inherit his patrimony. He began to proclaim the message given to Him by God the year he baptized Jesus. In less than two years the "burning and shining light" (John 5:35) would be extinguished in martyrdom. The Spirit leads where it wills, and the one born from above follows, accepting in full assurance that "Voice of gentle stillness" as it "whispers softly, 'Wanderer, come! Follow Me, I'll guide thee home.'"

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