

"FOUNDED  
ON A  
ROCK"  
A Brief  
History  
of the  
Background  
and  
Founding  
of the  
EVANGELICAL  
LUTHERAN  
SYNOD  
(ELS)

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He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock.

But he that heareth and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great. (Luke 6:48,49)

The founding of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod is a unique event in church history. While a majority of the church bodies of the Norwegian heritage were busy building a city of church fellowship on the shifting sands of religious compromise and doctrinal indifference; the E.L.S. stood firm upon the small but sure rock of Biblical Lutheranism. The complete history of the founding of the E.L.S. is in reality a process of what might be called, 'doctrinal erosion'. Its history as an individual church body finds its origin during two generations of pastors. The wearing away of the broad Biblical foundation is the result of nearly forty years of controversy in the Norwegian Synod and the ensuing efforts of reconciliation between the warring factions. In an attempt to bring the history of the founding of the E.L.S. into sharper focus, this paper shall try to clear away some of the underbrush and leave only the trees in the forest standing.

Much of the founding of the E.L.S. focuses upon the doctrines of election and conversion. I shall first confess to these doctrines as they are presented in the Thorough Declaration and Epitome of Article XI in the Formula of Concord. In brief, all glory for our salvation, election and conversion is given to God and His grace. All duty or responsibility on man's part is totally and completely eliminated.

Before the E.L.S. can be studied further, it is necessary to examine the Norwegian Synod and the events which led up to the

founding of the E.L.S. The Norwegian Synod was founded on the Scriptural basis of "Sola Gratia" and as such this group of Norwegian Lutherans gave all glory to God for their salvation. Complete and unreserved credit was given to God the Holy Ghost as the author and finisher of our faith. Complete recognition of God the Son, as Savior of all mankind was also confessed and any worth or ability of man to contribute or share, even in the smallest degree was denied.

In 1872, this confessional body of Norwegian Lutherans had joined with other confessing Lutherans of the same mind and spirit to form the Synodical Conference. This organization was to promote and further God's church militant<sup>4</sup>. <sup>TRIONPHANT</sup> Such an organization however was bound to have its troubles and as soon as 1877 the storm began to gather. This storm would eventually erode away the foundation of the Norwegian Synod. In all probability, the first signs of the storm went undetected to contemporary theologians, while the white clouds of church harmony overshadowed the Synodical Conference.

Then in 1877, Dr. C.F.W. Walther of the Missouri Synod, presented one of a series of essays. This essay was titled, "Also in Its Doctrine of Election, the Evangelical Lutheran Church Gives God Alone All Glory." It was on the basis of this essay that the storm broke. The assaults which were to follow met firm resistance in the Missouri Synod, but undermined the foundations of the Norwegian Synod.

On the basis of Dr. C.F.W. Walther's essay, Professor F.A. Schmidt accused Dr. Walther of Calvinism and opened doctrinal warfare with Dr. Walther and the Missouri Synod. Prof. Schmidt brought his charges against Dr. Walther out into the open with his publica-

tion, Altes and Neues. Prof. Schmidt had long been recognized as an outstanding theologian and leader in the Norwegian Synod. He had been an avid and enthusiastic supporter and organizer of the Synodical Conference. He had served as a professor at Luther College in Decorah Iowa and at the Seminary in Madison Wisconsin. He had not received the appointment he desired, however; when he was bypassed for an appointment to the Seminary at St. Louis, <sup>in</sup> This personal embitterment may have been aimed at Dr. Walther in the early stages of the controversy, but ~~was~~ definitely a distant second in importance to the doctrinal difficulties.

The issue of the controversy revolved around Prof. Schmidt's contentions that Dr. Walther was teaching Calvinism when he gave all credit to God for man's election to salvation. Prof. Schmidt made the seemingly logical conclusion and insinuated that Dr. Walther was also teaching an election to damnation, which was not the case. Prof. Schmidt had<sup>te</sup> have a reason to explain why some men should be saved and others damned. He therefore staunchly defended the use of the term, election in view of faith (*intuitu fidei*).

This terminology was nothing new to theologians. It had been used after Luther by Aigidius Hunnius and had later been used by John Gerhard to defend against Calvinistic error. In the Norwegian church the '*intuitu fidei*' had been included in Pontopidan's Catechism, Sanhed til Gudgrytighed or Truth unto Godliness. In this catechism, man's election is stated as:

"God has appointed all those to eternal life whom He from eternity has seen would accept the grace proffered them, believe in Jesus and persevere in this faith unto the end. (Rom. 8:28-30)<sup>1</sup>

This was later called the second form of election in Norwegian circles. In itself the wording could have been understood and even taught correctly. For years it had been tolerated and even

taught in the Madison Seminary without any apparent difficulty. The problem arose when Prof. Schmidt introduced synergism into the doctrine of election by saying that God elects certain individuals because he knew that those individuals would in the future believe. Ultimately then, according to Prof. Schmidt, some credit must be given to man for his own salvation. As the controversy progressed, the difficulty with election was transferred to conversion. When Schmidt's opponents questioned, "Why then do some believe and others not believe?" he countered with his reason and said that it is because some men resist more than others. Again the degree of difficulty was not readily apparent to most, but Prof. Schmidt was definitely teaching a synergistic view of election and conversion, thus robbing God of all glory for man's salvation. Prof. Schmidt wanted to credit man or at least some men for not resisting God's grace as hard as others.

By 1881, the controversy was proceeding rapidly. Dr. C.F.W. Walther summarized the whole issue saying:

"It consists simply in the following two-fold question: 1st, whether God from eternity, before the foundations of the world were laid, out of pure mercy and only for the sake of the most holy merit of Christ, elected and ordained the chosen children of God to salvation and whatever pertains to it, consequently also to faith, repentance, and conversion; - or 2nd, whether in His election God took into consideration anything good in man, namely the foreseen conduct of man, the foreseen non-resistance, and the foreseen persevering faith, and thus elected certain persons to salvation in consideration of, with respect to, on account of, or in consequence of their conduct, their non-resistance, and their faith. The first of these questions we affirm, while our opponents deny it, both the second question we deny, while our opponents affirm it.

However our opponents may shuffle, this is and remains the actual and chief controverted point in the present controversy, as long as our opponents do not retract.<sup>2</sup>

Later, in May of 1881, the Missouri Synod in convention adopted thirteen theses to settle the issue. Concerning the problem at hand,

Theses 10 and 11 said:

10. We believe, teach and confess, that the cause which moved God to elect, is alone His grace and the merit of Jesus Christ, and not anything good foreseen by God in the elect, nor even faith foreseen in them by God; and we therefore reject and condemn the opposite doctrines of the Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians and Synergists as blasphemous, dreadful errors which subvert the Gospel and therewith the whole Christian religion.

11. We believe, teach and confess, that election is not the mere divine foresight or prescience of the salvation of the elect, but also a cause of their salvation and of whatever pertains to it; and we therefore reject and condemn the opposite doctrines of the Armenians, Socinians, and of all Synergists with all our heart.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile Prof. Schmidt was neither resting in his attack nor fighting on alone. Prof. F.W. Stellanor of Ft. Wayne, Pastors H.A. Allwardt, (a brother-in-law of Prof. Schmidt), Eirich and Ernst, all sided with Prof. Schmidt against Dr. Walther. In the convention just mentioned above, the Ohio Synod under the leadership of Pres. M. Loy took Prof. Schmidt's side and withdrew from the Synodical Conference.

On the Synodical Conference level, the controversy was nearly ended. Only one more confrontation would ensue and this would be in the convention of 1882, held in Chicago. Here, Prof. Schmidt was sent as one of the Norwegian Synod's six delegates. The Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Synod and the Minnesota Synod all refused to seat Schmidt as a delegate and after some discussion, four of Prof. Schmidt's colleagues also joined in a vote, refusing to recognize Prof. Schmidt as a delegate. These four Norwegian Synod men were Pastors U.V. Koren, T.A. Torgeson, J.A. Thorsen and H.G. Stub. The only person to side with Prof. Schmidt was Pastor B.J. Muus.

By this time, Prof. Schmidt had attracted a large following within the Norwegian Synod. The controversy had not been formally introduced into the Norwegian Synod until their convention

in 1881, held in Spring Grove, Minnesota. Here, B.J. Muus, Th. N. Mohn, J.N. Kildahl, P.A. Rasmussen and M.O. Bøckmann had all sided with Prof. Schmidt against Dr. Walther and the Missouri Synod. Any attempts at consolidation were refused by Prof. Schmidt. Because of the influential position Prof. Schmidt had held for years in the Norwegian Synod and the Synodical Conference, many pastors, seminary students and laymen threw their support to Prof. Schmidt. These supporters of Prof. Schmidt came to be known as the Anti-Missourians.

Just as Prof. Schmidt had attacked Dr. Walther in his publication Altes and Neues, so now he attacked his opponents in the Norwegian Synod with his Lutheran Witness of Old and New. This attack brought forth a reply by Pastor H. Halvorson in 1882 in Necessitated Defense. Concerning this defense Pastor Halvorson wrote:

"Even as it has happened in earlier doctrinal controversies which our Synod has had to carry on, so it has happened in this one: we are drawn into it, not by our accusations against others, but in self-defense, in that we are accused because we confess what we of God's Word are convinced is Truth, and which we as Lutheran pastors cannot yield - in that we word for word follow our Church's public Confession.....It will, in spite of all weakness, with God's help, prove to our church people that we are unjustly accused, that we certainly do not teach any Calvinistic doctrine, or think about introducing such, but that our doctrine is well-founded in God's Word and our Church's Confession and in everything essential also defends the respected teachers in our Church who have used a later form of doctrine concerning election without thereby denouncing the old."<sup>4</sup>

Briefly the controversy within the Norwegian Synod was this:

"The synod's pastors put faith after election, bestowed upon the individual as a result of his election. Prof. Schmidt put faith before election, making it the cause of the individual's election."<sup>5</sup>

By 1883, the Norwegian Synod withdrew from the Synodical Conference, with the hope of settling their differences on election among themselves. The motion to withdraw was presented

by two Anti-Missourians, P.A. Rasmussen and Ole Valdeland. Feeling their muscle, the Anti-Missourians now presented five points in favor of the 'intuitu fidei' to the pastors of the Norwegian Synod. They demanded that all pastors sign this document. The power that the Anti-Missourians wielded is seen at this time, for they were able to depose the President of the Norwegian Synod, H.A. Preuss and his son P.K. Preuss from their congregation when they refused to sign. Erosion was threatening the very rock upon which the church was built.

Action was demanded by the Norwegian Synod and was soon forthcoming. A 'Peace Committee' elected by the synod proposed seventeen points in the general convention of June, 1884. Little happened as a result of these points. Next came the very important document, En Redegjrelse (An Accounting), presented to the General Pastoral Conference in October of the same year. This important doctrine, formulated by Pastor Koren, was comprized of sixty-three theses and dealt with four main divisions of Christian teaching. These teachings were (1) Universal Grace, (2) Conversion, (3) Election and (4) Certainty of Salvation. An Accounting was ecumenical to the Anti-Missourians, but nevertheless presented an ultimatum to them. A complete translation of An Accounting can be found in Grace for Grace, a Brief History of the Norwegian Synod. One particular paragraph in part three on Election sums up the matter of controversy briefly by saying:

"According to Scripture it belongs to the essence of grace to be free; for if grace is not free, ie., undeserved by any kind of merit whatsoever in the one who is favored with it, then "grace is no more grace" (Rom. 11:6), and a man cannot then trust in the grace of God alone. Rom. 3:23-24, 27-28; Eph. 2:8-10.

We reject the synergistic doctrine that the election in Christ has not taken place in accordance with a free purpose of grace by God, and that "salvation in a certain sense does not depend on God alone." Eph. 1:11 (III,21)6



The case had now been clearly stated and Prof. Schmidt was very explicit in his remarks concerning An Accounting, he said:

"If I should want to confess the doctrine that conversion and salvation in every respect depends on God alone and that man's conduct here is entirely an indifferent matter, I would much rather subscribe to a Reformed Confession than to this "Redigjrelse". I reject it therefore with my whole heart as "containing false doctrine" (Lutherske Vidnesbyrd, 3,33 -Nov. 20, 1884-, 541).<sup>7</sup>

About a week later concerning the issue which had been presented he stated:

"I believe and teach now as before, that it is not synergistic error, but a clear teaching of God's Word and our Lutheran Confession; that 'salvation in a certain sense does not depend on God alone.' "(E.L.K., 11, 48 -Nov 28, 1884- 760).<sup>8</sup>

After these frank statements, there was no longer any possibility of misunderstanding the controversy at hand. Both sides of the issue were now extremely clear, even to the casual onlooker.

In retaliation, the Anti-Missourian forces took several drastic steps. First they demanded that any pastor who subscribed to An Accounting should be deposed from office. Secondly they demanded the removal of President B. Harstad of the Minnesota District and President U.V. Koren of the Iowa District. A third form of protest was the founding of St. Olaf's Seminary in Northfield, Minnesota.

The final showdown came at Stoughton, Wisconsin, in 1887. The majority of the Norwegian Synod looked upon the actions of the Anti-Missourians as rebellious and demanded that they dissolve the new school and admit their erroneous teachings. Being unwilling to do this, fifty-seven men joined with Th. Mohn of St. Olaf's and withdrew from the Norwegian Synod. This resulted in the withdrawal of nearly one-third of the pastors and congregations of the Norwegian Synod.

This rebellious group of Anti-Missourians soon found a new alliance. They joined in hands of fellowship with the Norwegian Augustana Synod and the Conference of United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, to form the United Norwegian Lutheran Church. S.C. Ylvisaker says concerning this new synod:

"It is no exaggeration to say that the only bond of union between these three groups was their common hatred of the Norwegian Synod and its uncompromising adherence to the 'Word Alone and Grace Alone'."<sup>9</sup>

All of this only serves to lay the complicated framework of the events which presented the problems which were to eventually lead to the founding of the E.L.S. In summary of the positions held it can be said that in 1887 the Norwegian Synod still held on to its firm Biblical teaching and was still resting upon the sure foundation of God's Word. Those who followed Prof. Schmidt in his attacks on Dr. Walther, the Missouri Synod and the Norwegian Synod had fallen away into an almost unholy alliance. The events which will follow shall show efforts at reconciliation, indifference to previous teachings, and the forming of a United Norwegian Lutheran Church which would forsake much of what it had once stood for and finally result in the founding of the E.L.S.

Within three years, efforts at reconciliation were attempted between the two factions. A series of free conferences began in 1890. The first of these was called by Th. Mohn of the United Church. These conferences were held between the United Church, the Norwegian Synod and the Hauge Synod. After meetings in St. Olaf, Willmar, Lanesboro and Austin, Minnesota, the series was discontinued because of a lack of interest by the Hauge Synod.

In 1900 another effort was made but quickly died because of Prof. Schmidt's unrelenting position.

Still another attempt was made in 1905. This time the

Hauge Synod took the initiative and invited the Lutheran Free Church, the Church of Lutheran Bretheran, the Eilsen Synod, the United Church and the Norwegian Synod. Progress was being made in drawing up a series of doctrinal theses. Agreement had been reached in the doctrines of absolution, lay preaching, the call and conversion when the committees were stifled on election.

Theses 11 dealt with this matter and stated:

"When a person is converted, the glory belongs to God alone, because it is He who throughout, from beginning to end, without any co-operation on the part of man, works conversion in the person who becomes converted; that is acknowledges his sin and believes in Christ...."<sup>9b</sup>

This statement was fine as far as it went, but President Koren demanded an anti-thesis, to reject the error of the former Anti-Missourians. The joint committee struggled with this problem until 1910 when the Norwegian Synod withdrew from the conferences because of a lack of progress.

Soon things began to happen fast. A new committee was appointed by the Norwegian Synod to handle the issue of renewed church fellowship. President Koren became sick and was unable to attend any new meetings, dying late in 1910. Vice-President H.G. Stub, a man with liberal tendencies, took over the reins of control at the new meetings. The result was that the new committee was able to settle in a matter of three months the issues that had been fought over for thirty years. In part this was done with overtones of unChristian conduct. Before his death, President Koren had written a letter to be read at the next convention. This letter was sent with H.G. Stub, but in reading the letter he omitted an important paragraph dealing with the problem of church union. In November, 1911, a subcommittee met to discuss the problems and then in February (14-22), 1912, this committee

reached full agreement on church union.

Final agreement was reached through a statement which is now referred to by either of three names. Officially the document is called the OPGJØR. Commonly it is referred to as The Settlement or the Madison Agreement.

The entire Settlement cannot be presented here but the objectionable statements can. Paragraph one states:

"The Union Committee of the Synod and the United Church, unanimously and without reservation accept that doctrine of election which is set forth in Art. XI of the Formula of Concord, the so-called First Form...and Pontoppidan's Truth unto Godliness... the so-called Second Form of Doctrine."<sup>10</sup>

Where An Accounting had permitted the Second Form, The Settlement accepted it 'without reservation.' In paragraph four, the synergizing error is clearly presented.

"...We have agreed to reject all errors which seek to explain away the mystery of election...either in a synergizing or a Calvinizing manner...every doctrine which...would deprive God of His glory as only Savior or...weaken man's sense of responsibility in relation to the acceptance or rejection of grace."<sup>11</sup>

Here the donkey speaks out of both sides of its mouth. Man is given a responsibility, a wording which was later changed to duty, in accepting grace. This completely ignored the words of St. Paul when he said:

"And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." (Eph. 2:1)

In paragraph five of The Settlement, an acceptable statement is made, saying:

"On the one hand we reject:...

(c) The doctrine that the faith in Christ which is inseparably connected with election is in whole or in part a product of, or depends upon, man's own choice, power, or ability....

(d) Or that this faith is the result of an ability and power imparted by the call of grace, which therefore now dwell within and belong to the unregenerate heart, enabling it to make a decision for grace."<sup>12</sup>

It is apparent from these sections of The Settlement, that in reality it could not even agree within itself, let alone actually settle the whole controversy of election. Prof. E.C. Nelson sums up the impact of The Settlement when he writes:

"The Opgjør itself can best be described as the instrument of an ecclesiastical rapprochement rather than as an astute and flawless display of theological finality with regard to the doctrine of election. Both sides, eager for union and weary of conflict, sought desperately to find a way in which they could be delivered from the clutch of bitterness and each could join the other without giving up his own views. It was a case of the victory of heart over head. . . .<sup>13</sup> Madison was not a meeting of minds but of hearts."

Because of the ambiguity in The Settlement, little was actually settled for the time being. Continued debate prevented any immediate plans to go ahead with union with the other groups.

In 1912, President Stub and Prof. Johannes Ylvisaker attended a meeting of the Synodical Conference to get some advice. Professors Dau and Pieper of St. Louis and Schaller of Wauwatosa were assigned to help. They advised their Norwegian brothers to seek changes in The Settlement. More debate would follow. A minority group organized in the following years was headed by Prof. C.K. Preuss, Rev. I.D. Torrison and Rev. Christian Anderson. They proposed to handle the whole controversy from scratch and start with Scripture. This proposal was rejected. The foundation of Sola Gratia was eroded away.

More meetings were held and then in 1916 the final blow was struck. In December of that year a meeting was held in Austin Minnesota. The results of this meeting can be best summarized by the Austin Settlement statement:

"In said request (A request by Preuss and Torrison to change significant items in the Madison Agreement) nothing is found which contradicts the Scriptures and Confessions, but regards the position expressed in the request as an adequate expression

for unity of faith, wherefore that group of men and congregations (The minority) whose position is declared in the above quoted request are invited...<sup>14</sup>

In effect all doctrinal objection by the minority were overlooked by the majority. Fellowship was unofficially recognized and the minority were told to like it or leave it. In the union which was to follow, the minority's opinions would be simply tolerated. The Austin Settlement served as 'fellowship whitewash' to cover all disagreement and unfortunately trapped the minority into accepting much less than they had fought for.

Little was now left to be done. In June of 1917, the majority and minority met in the auditorium at St. Paul, Minnesota, to officially declare union with the other Norwegian church bodies. The new union would be called "The Norwegian Lutheran Church in America" and would embrace all the errors which had been rejected in the 1880's by the Norwegian Synod. The foundation seemed to be completely undermined and the house swept away. But just as the destruction in the recent California earthquakes received the publicity and not the few houses which remained standing; so it was in St. Paul in 1917.

In contrast to the rejoicing by the majority, a small minority of the minority had quietly gathered in the Hotel Aberdeen in St. Paul. This minority still stood upon the rock, the Bible, the one strong foundation. In a public statement regarding the merger they declared:

1. We cannot for conscience's sake join the new church body on the present basis. 2. We continue to stand on the old confession and organization, which we as Christians have the liberty to defend and under which we may work from now on as heretofore.<sup>15</sup>

This then is the unpretentious founding of the E.L.S. Compared to many of the other events in the previous forty years it was a small event by comparison. This small group elected Pastor Ejug Harstad

as President, Pastor John Moldstad as Vice-President, Pastor C.N. Peterson as secretary and Pastor O.T. Lee (who would die before the next meeting) as Treasurer. These men provided for a church paper the Luthersk Tidende and published their reason for not joining the merger on July 16, 1917. On April 1, 1918 the paper carried this announcement:

"Pastors and members of congregations who desire to continue in the old doctrine and practice of the Norwegian Synod, will, God willing, hold their annual meeting in the Lime Creek congregation, Pastor Henry Ingebritson's charge, June 14 and following days."<sup>16</sup>

In the meetings of June 14-19, 1918, at Lime Creek, this small group of men, 13 pastors and many laymen came together to plan for the future. Their discussions are a part of unsung history, their resolution is stated below:

1. The name of this organization shall be the Norwegian Synod of the 'American Evangelical Lutheran Church.' (See note)
2. The only source and rule of doctrine is the Word of God as revealed in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments.
3. The Norwegian Synod adopts as its confession all the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord.
4. We elect a committee of three to propose the necessary changes in the old constitution of the Synod. The committee's report shall be published as soon as possible, in order that the congregations so wishing may consider and adopt it, the committee's report to be presented for final adoption at the next annual meeting of the Synod."<sup>17</sup>

The second meeting of this small group was held on May 29 to June 4, 1919 in Albert Lea, Minnesota. It was attended by 24 pastors and 27 lay representatives. A small group, but resolute and true to the rock upon which they stood. This group still held God's Word as the only source of truth and still gave God all credit for all facets of their salvation.

Little more remains to be said. The study in the founding (Note: The name was officially changed to Evangelical Lutheran Synod in 1958.)

of the E.L.S. should however alert us to the fact that we must always stand on the firm ground of Scripture. Otherwise, error will serve the same purpose that wind and rain serve on unprotected ground. It constantly works away until nothing is left but worthless dust and clay. Efforts at unionism must find their common ground in Scripture and not in human reasoning or social purpose of work righteousness. Unfortunately, not even friendship can be a ground for union. This is where current union or ecumenical movements are erring. They seek first a common ground of agreement but then leave the differences to be settled later, very similar in effect to the provisions of the Austin Settlement.

We should hold as our example the small group of men who refused to yield under pressure. These men ~~who~~ preferred to stand on Scripture and to start from scratch than deny their Lord and Savior's teachings. These men trusted that God would bless their efforts and he has for over fifty years already.

May we ever rest upon the strong rock and foundation of God's Word and not on the shifting sands, the eroded hillsides and the weak foundations of error and weak fellowship practices.

-END NOTES-

- 1Theodore A. Aaberg, A City Set on a Hill (Lake Mills, Iowa, 1968), p. 17.
- 2Ibid., p. 22.
- 3Ibid., pp. 22-23.
- 4Ibid., p. 26.
- 5Ibid., p. 27.
- 6S.C. Ylvisaker (ed.), Grace for Grace, (Mankato, Minn., 1943), p. 185.
- 7Aaberg, op. cit., p.36.
- 8Ibid., p. 36
- 9Ylvisaker, op. cit., p. 190.
- 10Aaberg, op. cit., p. 46.
- 11Ibid., p. 49.
- 12Ibid., p. 50.



- 13Ibid., p. 51.  
14Ibid., pp. 64,65.  
15Ylvisaker, op. cit., p. 116.  
16Aaberg, op. cit., p. 77.  
17Ylvisaker, op. cit., p. 120.

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