

The Identity of the New Testament Church

Christ Set Up His Church

The first thing to establish is that the Lord Jesus set up His church while He was here in person. He did this out of material baptized by John the Baptist. This was prophesied in the Old Testament. Malachi 3:1 says, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple..." This messenger, all commentators agree, is John the Baptist. Isaiah 40:3 says, "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Among several other places in the New Testament we read of the fulfillment of this in Luke 1:17, "And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to **make ready a people prepared for the Lord.**"

These disciples that John baptized Jesus formed into what we today call a "church." The word translated "church" in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia*. It means the "called out," and both before and during the New Testament period had the basic meaning of a "called out assembly." In fact in many translations it is translated "assembly." I do not know the exact time that Jesus formed these disciples into an assembly, but it was definitely while He was still here on earth. Many people today, believe the church was begun on the Day of Pentecost, but that is not correct. There are many proofs that the church existed before Pentecost. She already had the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. She had a business meeting and voted on a very important matter in the 1st chapter of Acts. She was already preaching the gospel. She was having prayer meetings. 120 believers were there on Pentecost and Acts 2:41 says, "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were **added unto them** about three thousand souls." It is made plain who the "them" are in Acts 2:47 where it is said that they were "Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord **added to the church** daily such as should be saved."

The church was in existence before the great Pentecost. On that day the church was baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Promised Perpetuity to His Church

This church that Jesus built He promised perpetuity to. One of the places where He plainly did this was in Matthew 16:18. There He was speaking to Peter and He said, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." There are several things that I would like to notice about this verse. First He was talking about His church as a local assembly. Some have tried to make this verse teach that the word "church" here refers to all the family of God or to some nebulous entity known as the "universal church." It is easy to show that this is not so, by simply looking at the way that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself used the word *ekklesia*, which is translated "church." Jesus Himself used this word 23 times in the New Testament. In 22 of those times there is absolutely no question as to what He meant. He meant a local assembly of saints. He used this word twenty times in the Book of Revelation. In these uses He often spoke of "churches" in the plural. It is obvious that these were local bodies. The other times in this book, He referred to specific churches by their names, such as the church at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, or Laodicea.

The other three times Jesus used this word are in the Gospel of Matthew. Two of these instances are in Matthew 18, and in both instances it is perfectly obvious that the reference has to be to a local body of saints. This passage, which concerns church discipline, is found in Matthew 18:17 and reads, “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” This is very obviously a local body.

This leaves the passage in Matthew 16: 18 the only one in which the meaning can be disputed. It is plain that the Lord used the word *ekklēsia* here with the same meaning He used it elsewhere. To do otherwise would have been to obscure the meaning.

The word “church” here is used in the *institutional* or *generic* or *abstract* sense. To illustrate this usage of a word we read in Ephesians 5:23, “For the husband is the head of the wife...” What this obviously means is that each particular husband is the head of his particular wife. There is not some gigantic “universal husband” who is the head of a huge “universal wife!” Another illustration can be found in 1 Timothy 3:12, “Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife...” Here, the word “wife” is used in the generic sense. This verse plainly teaches that each deacon is to have one wife. It does not mean that all the deacons are married to one “universal” wife!

So when Christ says that He will build His church, He is using this word in the generic or institutional or abstract sense. The church is actualized only in local congregations. The abstract concept of the church only becomes concrete in visible, local congregations. He is saying, “I will build my local congregations and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them.”

Another passage in which Jesus promised perpetuity to His assembly is Matthew 28:18-20, which reads, “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” Here Jesus Christ is commissioning His church to carry on in His physical absence. He promised to be with them to the “end of the world.” The word translated “world” here is *aiōn*. It means “age.” The Lord promised to be with them till the end of this age or the end of time. Who did the Lord promise to be with? He promised to be with His apostles as they were considered in their capacity as **foundation stones** in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is made plain as He speaks to the saints in Ephesus in Ephesians 2:19, 20, “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built **upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets**, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone...” Some people insist that this commission was given to the apostles, but we must remember that the apostles were **in the church**, not separate from it. We learn in 1 Corinthians 12:28 that, “God hath set some in the church, first apostles...”

It is obvious that this commission was given to the church through the apostles. The Lord promised to be “with you” till the end of the age. The apostles died long ago, but the Lord is still with His church as He promised to be. It is very interesting that those who believe that this commission expired on the death of the apostles nevertheless still use the formula for baptism given here. They still baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost...” The only place in the New Testament where that formula is given is in Matthew 28: 19. The question might be asked of those who deny the relevance of this commission in the present day as to which part is inoperable. Are we still to teach (make disciples), baptize, and teach those things the Lord has commanded us to do? If so, in which way is the commission no longer in force today?

Another Scriptural passage that teaches perpetuity concerns the Lord's Supper. Speaking of the Lord's Supper Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." Here he plainly teaches two wonderful truths. He promises that the Lord is coming again. This clearly refers to the Second Coming of Christ. He also teaches that someone is going to be showing forth the Lord's death until that time. The Corinthian saints to whom this was written died about 2000 years ago. It is plain that the "ye" refers to God's church that will be perpetuated until the Second Coming.

The Role of History

Some people may base their doctrine of church perpetuity on uninspired history. There is indeed a great deal of history which shows that a very large number of people have existed down through the centuries who were never in what became the Roman Catholic Church. There is much evidence that various groups of these people had a direct link to each other. However, to be honest, it is impossible to actually trace a chain link between churches all the way from the apostolic era to the present time. For reasons known only to Himself, the Lord has so allowed the historical record to be obscured that this is impossible. Many records of God's churches have been destroyed by their enemies. Often the churches were so grievously persecuted that they had to hide out and deliberately left no records.

The role that uninspired history must play in studying church perpetuity is the same role that Creation Science must play in the Creation/Evolution debate. Bible believing Christians are very thankful for the rise of Creation Science in the last few decades. These scientists provide us with much evidence and with much comfort that the earth was created just like God said it was in the Bible. They show evidence of the great flood that occurred in Noah's time. We thank God for their diligent work that leaves unbelievers and scoffers without excuse.

However, the work of the creation scientists is **not** the reason that Bible believing Christians believe that God created the heavens and the earth in six days, and that a flood covered the earth in the days of Noah. We believe those things simply because the Bible says they happened and, because we are born again, we believe the Bible. We identify with the truth taught in Hebrews 11:3, which says, "**Through faith** we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear." Our God-given faith gives us the ability to believe what the Bible says. The Lord said that He created the universe by the Word of His mouth, so we just believe it. We would believe it even if there were no creation science.

Believing in church perpetuity works the same way. Just as the creation scientists give us much comfort, so does church history give much comfort and encouragement for those of us who believe what the Bible plainly teaches about church perpetuity. Even if all the historical records were destroyed, we would still believe that Christ has preserved unbroken not only the truth, but also the divine institution, which He calls "the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." (1 Tim. 3: 15).

Let me give a homely illustration of how church history is a comfort to those who believe the Bible doctrine of church perpetuity. Let us suppose that we are standing high up on a mountain and watching a blue 1971 Plymouth Valiant (one of the best cars I have ever owned!) going down the mountain on a winding road. Suppose that the little car enters a long tunnel and we don't see it for a while. Now let us

imagine that at the other end of the tunnel we see a blue 1971 Plymouth Valiant emerge. A reasonable assumption would be that we have seen the same automobile enter one end of the tunnel and come out at the other end. We cannot be absolutely sure, but this is a valid assumption.

Applying this illustration to church history, we can find groups of people who taught and practiced the truth of the Bible in various countries of the world. Sometimes they were driven from view by persecution. A period of time elapses and we see a group with another name, but teaching and practicing essentially the same things in a country that is fairly close to the one in which they disappeared from view. It would be a valid assumption to surmise that these were essentially the same people and that truth had been passed from one group to the other. We do not have conclusive proof that the two groups are connected, but this is the most viable assumption.

However, much as this abundant historical evidence comforts us that is not why those of us who believe in the Biblical doctrine of church perpetuity believe in it. We have much surer grounds than this. Since the Bible is our sole rule of faith and practice, we could not use history as a basis for our practice even if that history were conclusive as to our succession.

Church Perpetuity Divinely Demonstrated

The Lord gave us several decades of **inspired history** in the Acts of the Apostles in which He plainly showed us how He perpetuated His church. As one gives the book of Acts a fair reading the inevitable conclusion must be that each of the churches begun there had a connection with another one. There is not a single instance of a church just suddenly coming into existence with no connection with previously baptized believers. We have already seen that the apostles were foundation stones in the New Testament church. Speaking to them in this capacity, He said to them in Acts 1:8, “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” It is true that individual Christians are to be witnesses for the Lord, but here He obviously is giving His commission to them in a corporate church capacity. The apostles as such would not live long enough to spread the gospel to the uttermost part of the earth. Jesus Christ was commissioning His ministers through the church to do this.

In the second chapter of Acts the Holy Spirit came to the church and empowered her to do what she had been commissioned to do. The people that were baptized that day and added to the church were baptized by the ministers of that church. Not just any baptismal administrator would have been acceptable.

The church continued at Jerusalem and many people were added to her. Eventually the church at Jerusalem was persecuted and many of the members were scattered abroad throughout Judaea and Samaria. When they were scattered abroad they preached the word everywhere they went. (Acts 8: 1, 4). When we next hear of these scattered saints they had been formed into churches as we can see from Acts 9:31, “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified...” The connection they had with the church at Jerusalem is obvious.

One of those scattered abroad was Philip who went down to the city of Samaria, preached, and baptized those who believed. There was a connection here with the church at Jerusalem, because Philip came from that church. This connection is also seen in the fact that when the apostles, who had remained in

Jerusalem, heard that that the gospel had been preached in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to investigate the matter. When they had done this they returned to Jerusalem, and “preached the gospel in many of the villages of the Samaritans.” (Acts 8: 25). Any churches formed in Samaria then had a link with the church at Jerusalem through the work of Peter and John. This was obviously a partial fulfillment of Acts 1: 8.

Also in this 8th chapter of Acts we have the account of Philip preaching to the Ethiopian eunuch and baptizing him. The eunuch went on his way to Ethiopia, rejoicing as he went. There is a great likelihood that he started a church in Ethiopia. If so, that church had a link with the church at Jerusalem through Philip.

It is also a certainty that the disciples in Damascus had a knowledge of and no doubt a connection with the church at Jerusalem. Ananias baptized Paul in Damascus. Where would he have learned of the ordinance of baptism except from the apostles or from others who had been under the teaching of the apostles? From Acts 9: 19, 25 it seems certain the disciples, as Christians are often referred to in the Acts, were banded together in a church capacity.

When the Lord opened the door of the gospel to the Gentiles, He sent Peter, who was from the church at Jerusalem, to Caesarea, to baptize Cornelius. The pattern holds true here—a man from an existing church, going and baptizing others. There is a link here between the church at Jerusalem and the believers in Caesarea. Another indication that there was a very close link between the church at Caesarea and the one at Jerusalem is the fact that many in the church at Jerusalem very closely questioned Peter about what had happened at Caesarea. They were satisfied when Peter told them what had happened.

One of the most prominent and evangelistic churches in the entire Acts is the one at Syrian Antioch. This church very definitely had a link with the one at Jerusalem, because it was formed of those who were scattered abroad at the time of the persecution of Stephen. See Acts 11: 19-21. The church at Jerusalem was so interested in hearing of the formation of this church they sent Barnabas to see what had happened. Barnabas was thrilled at what the Lord was doing there and sent to Tarsus for Paul to come and help in the work. It is also interesting to note here that even though the Scriptural teaching is that each church is autonomous before God and that no church can lord it over another, there should be, nevertheless, a close love and cooperation among sister churches. The church at Antioch took up a collection to help the brethren in Judea, who were experiencing difficult times because of impending famine.

When we come to the 13th chapter of Acts we see a great increase in evangelistic activity. The church at Antioch, acting under the control of the Holy Spirit, and under the influence of her leaders, sent Paul and Barnabas on a journey to preach the gospel. It is very interesting that both the expressions “they sent them away,” and “they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost,” are used. The assembly at Antioch was following the directions of the Holy Spirit.

The Case of the Synagogues

Here, we make a very interesting discovery. The first place Paul and his companions always preached in, when one was available, was a synagogue. These religious gatherings of Jews were found

throughout the Mediterranean world. Many times God had caused the Jews to be dispersed among divers places. Almost invariably these dispersed people would organize a synagogue in which to worship. If there had been any place where the conditions were right for a church to just be spontaneously formed without a connection with a previously existing church it would have been in a synagogue. In these assemblies the Old Testament was preserved. These Jews guarded the doctrine of monotheism in the midst of a pagan, polytheistic world. They were looking for the promised Messiah. However, there is **not a single instance** in the entire book of Acts where a church was spontaneously formed from a synagogue. In **every instance** where a synagogue was involved in Acts, preachers from already existing churches preached there and formed churches from those who were gathered out of the synagogues by the preaching of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Paul and Barnabas preached in synagogues on the island of Cyprus. From Cyprus they went to Asia Minor and preached in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. Here “many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas.” (13: 43). They next went to Iconium and spoke to the people there. Then, being driven out by persecution, they went to Lystra. They then preached the gospel in Derbe. They returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, “confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith.”

It is plain that they organized churches in each of these cities, because it is said in Acts 14:23, “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.” They then ended this particular evangelistic journey by returning to Syrian Antioch and told all that the Lord had done through them. How plain it is to see how God perpetuated His churches. Some of those from the church at Jerusalem had been scattered by persecution, and had gone to Antioch and formed a church. Then some from this church went out and formed other churches. In not one instance did a group of people just spontaneously “spring up” and organize a church with no connection to a previously existing church.

When we come to Acts 15 it is clear that the churches had a connection with each other. When a problem arose there was a meeting between members of the churches of Syrian Antioch and Jerusalem. Admittedly this was still the era in which the apostles lived and they had authority that no man or set of men have today. Nevertheless it is very plain that no churches were involved here who had just “sprung up” on their own with no connection with already existing churches.

After the council meeting at Jerusalem Paul and Silas went out from the church at Antioch of Syria to visit the churches that had previously been founded in South Galatia. They attempted to go into the province of Asia, but were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to do so. When they came to the city of Troas on the eastern shoreline of the Aegean Sea Paul had a vision in which he was directed to enter Macedonia, the extreme southern tip of the continent of Europe. They were blessed to gather a church in Philippi. Their next stop was Thessalonica, where they formed a church from Jews whom they had gathered from a synagogue. Through the preaching of the gospel there were believers also in Berea and Athens. Nothing is said for certain about churches being formed in these places.

From Athens Paul traveled overland to Corinth, where he stayed for about eighteen months. Here Paul again gathered believers out of the synagogue and formed a Christian assembly. He then went to Ephesus on his way home to Syrian Antioch, where he shared his good news about his evangelistic work with the church there. Let us note that each of the churches established on this journey had a connection with the church at Antioch, from whence Paul had started and let us also note that no church just began, with no connection with another one. On several occasions churches were formed from

people who had been gathered out of synagogues. The Lord plainly shows from this book of Acts how He has perpetuated His churches.

On Paul's third evangelistic journey he departed again from Antioch. His primary purpose on this journey was to strengthen the churches he had already established. He spent more than two years at Ephesus while on this journey and many of the churches of Asia were formed during this time. It is commonly believed that during this time the church at Colosse was formed by some of Paul's assistants, principally by Epaphras. (Col. 1: 7; 4: 12, 13).

Paul was later arrested, spent some time in prison at Caesarea, and was finally sent to Rome. When Paul arrived in Rome there were believers formed into a church or churches already in existence. In fact, in the epistle to the Romans that Paul had previously written, he had mentioned many of the believers in Rome by name and evidently knew a great deal about them. The Roman saints had heard of Paul and were eager to greet him as he came to their city. A reading of Acts 28: 14, 15 makes this very evident. We do not know for sure how or by whom the church at Rome had been established. However, it is only reasonable to assume that this church had a connection with other churches. These Roman saints had a definite correspondence with the other churches that had been formed by Paul. This is the only viable assumption, since we have incontrovertible proof how the other churches in the book of Acts were founded. The book of Acts shows the establishment of believers into churches from Jerusalem all the way to Rome. There is a definite connection between these churches. These churches all had a baptismal or institutional connection. They were not merely connected in agreement on doctrine and practice.

In Summary

Even though we have much secular history to demonstrate that a very large group of believers existed outside of what became the Roman Catholic Church, we do not rely on this history to establish the doctrine of **Church Perpetuity**. This doctrine is based on the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus Christ promised perpetuity to the church He personally set up during His earthly ministry. The divinely inspired book of the *Acts of the Apostles* shows how this perpetuity occurred. It is plain from this inspired history that as the churches were perpetuated, they had a connection with one another. The truth was perpetuated through a succession of churches.

While much historical evidence does exist that supports this doctrine it is readily admitted that no one can conclusively trace their particular church all the way back to the apostolic era. This doctrine is based on faith. But this is not a blind, subjective "faith." Faith accepts what is taught in the Bible. Faith believes in church perpetuity because this doctrine is both taught and demonstrated in the Bible. All we are obligated to do is to trace our assembly back as far as we can. If we can see our origins were sound, we can assume that we have been perpetuated by the grace of God. If, however, we find that our origins are unsound, by either profoundly significant doctrinal or practical error, we need to find a church that is sound. This is not bigotry; this is trying to be faithful to what is taught in the Scriptures.

Institutional Perpetuity

Some folks will admit to perpetuity of truth, but will not admit to the unbroken perpetuity or succession of the church as an institution. This view of perpetuity is not an adequate interpretation of the Scriptures. We have already seen this by looking at the perpetuation of not only the truth, but also of the

institution of the church as we went through the Book of Acts. The Lord gave His gospel to the church as an institution. This is what He was doing in the commonly called Great Commission in Matt. 28: 18-20. This is also the plain reading of 1 Timothy 3:15, where the apostle Paul says, “But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the **church** of the living God, the **pillar and ground of the truth.**” Here the word “church” is used in the generic, institutional or abstract sense. The church here that Timothy was to behave in found concrete manifestation only in particular local assemblies. To further demonstrate how Paul is using the word translated “church” in this epistle it is only necessary to refer to verse five of this same chapter. Speaking of a bishop or pastor Paul asks, “If a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?” Obviously each pastor is to take care of the particular local assembly over which the Holy Spirit places him.

The institution of the church is to be the “pillar and ground” of the truth. The church is to uphold and support the truth. Of course, there is a real sense in which the truth upholds and supports the church, but here the inspired Word of God emphasizes that the truth is supported in the God-ordained local assemblies that derive from the one Christ personally set up while He was here on earth.

Christ is the ground of the truth in the highest sense. The apostles are foundations in a secondary sense. As we have already seen from Ephesians 2:20 the church is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone...” The ministerial gifts that Christ gave were in His church. The ascended Christ gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers...” (Ephesians 4:11). Where did He place these gifts? Did he give the gifts to individual Christians in their roles as individual believers or did He give the gifts to people to be used in the context of His church? The question is plainly answered in 1 Corinthians 12:28 where it is clearly taught, “God hath set some **in the church**, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers...”

This institutional, physical perpetuity of the church can also be seen in 2 Timothy 2:2 where Paul instructs Timothy, “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” Here we see the truth passed on from generation to generation, from older man to younger men. This is done, however, within the context of the institution of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul and Timothy were both members of the New Testament church. It is obvious that these “faithful men” were gifted members of the church. This very book from which this passage is taken is rightly called one of the Pastoral Epistles. This provides a look at how the Lord set up ministerial training in His churches. There is not even a hint at a seminary for the training of ministers in the New Testament. God’s method for the training of ministers, as shown here, is the **apprenticeship** method of younger men apprenticing under established, older ministers of the Word.

In this day of disrespect for the church, when many so-called “para-church” organizations try to usurp the authority and functions that Jesus Christ personally gave to His church, we should jealously and zealously defend the prerogatives that many well-meaning people try to arrogate to individuals or to organizations that are not authorized by the Lord of the church. Christians should seek out and join themselves to the assembly that not only did Christ set up, but the one of which He and the apostles were members themselves! I want to be in the church that had as her first and best pastor, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself!

The church is entrusted with the business of maintaining the truth, of defending it from the assaults of error, and of transmitting it to future generations.

Post-Apostolic History

Even though those of us who believe that Christ will perpetuate the church He personally set up while on earth and will do this till His Second Coming primarily because we believe the Scriptures teach this, do appreciate the light that is thrown on this subject by historical investigation. Here I will not be detailed nor exhaustive, but will consider the subject by giving a general overview.

Obviously when Christ founded His church she was only one. There were no separate denominations when the church was set up. Gradually corruption entered some of the churches. Over a period of time certain pastors began to usurp authority over other pastors and churches. Some men became influential over large territories and claimed unscriptural authority to themselves. Those who held to the Scriptural pattern resisted this and were often ostracized. Eventually many of the most corrupt churches and ministers evolved into what eventually became the Roman Catholic hierarchy. They ultimately achieved a union with the secular powers and thus formed an unholy alliance between church and state. Those who held to the Biblical pattern were looked on as heretical and were in many cases outlawed and persecuted.

The Catholics were in the seats of power and became the “official” church in most of the Western world. Those who parted ways with the Catholic errors lacked official sanction and often had to hide out to avoid persecution. Historians readily admit that there were hundreds of thousands of these “heretics” who existed outside the Roman Catholic Church. These were sometimes collectively known as the “Anabaptists” because they refused to receive Roman Catholic baptism and “rebaptized” those who came to them from “Mother Rome.” The Catholics hated them because of this.

The Anabaptist movement was a broad and diverse movement. There were many types of doctrine and practice that were advocated among them. Some of them were heretical. It has been common among both Catholics and Protestants to take the very worst elements of the Anabaptists and to extrapolate their errors to all the Anabaptists. This tactic is not fair and does not promote truth. There is **ample historical evidence** that there were many groups among the Anabaptists who essentially held the doctrines and practices advocated by many Primitive Baptists of today. There is also good evidence that many of these groups had connections with one another and it is reasonable to assume that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ was perpetuated without interruption through some of these Anabaptists. We make this assumption because the truth of perpetuity is taught in the Scriptures. To reinforce us in this belief there is much evidence that the perpetuity occurred among these Anabaptists.

The Corruption of the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation

Eventually the corruptions within what had become the Roman Catholic Church became so horrendous and obvious that even many of her adherents were greatly repulsed by them. Several very brave and able men among her ranks began to **protest** these abuses. They wanted to **reform** the Roman Catholic Church, and to rid her of the most flagrant abuses. These men had no intention of leaving the Catholic Church. They believed that she was the true church that had gone into error. By contrast the Anabaptists had long since denounced the terribly corrupt Roman Catholic Church as a false church. Many regarded her as a manifestation of Antichrist.

The men who tried to reform the Roman Catholic Church from within were unable to do so. Instead

they were excommunicated from her and had to leave. In many cases they started their own “churches.” John Calvin is the father of the Reformed Churches. John Knox is the father of the Presbyterians. Henry VIII broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and is the father of the Church of England. These reformers chose rather to start their own “churches” than to seek for a home among the true churches found among some of the Anabaptists.

The reformers did rid themselves of the most flagrant abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. They became purer in their understanding of some Biblical doctrines. However, they did not go far enough. They never broke the unholy union of church and state. They did not repudiate the heresy of baptizing infants and of replacing the obvious Biblical mode of immersion with sprinkling for baptism. At one time the Swiss reformer, Zwingli (1484-1531) came to the correct conclusion that infant baptism had no Biblical warrant. Later, for political reasons, he gave up this correct view and began to persecute the Anabaptists.

The Anabaptists refused to recognize these “Protestant” churches. The only baptism they had was from “Mother Rome.” The Anabaptists, who eventually began to be called Baptists, regarded the Protestant churches as “Daughters of Rome.” Some of them, such as the Methodist Church, which was founded by John Wesley, who was a priest in the Church of England, was regarded as a “grand-daughter of Rome.”

To summarize, there are only two groups which make a claim to antiquity that goes all the way back to Christ and the apostles. Loosely speaking we will refer to these groups as the Catholics and the Baptists. All other denominations were formed long after the close of the apostolic era and know who their **human** founders were. The Baptists claim that the only human founder they had is the God-Man, the Lord Jesus Christ!

True Baptists do not claim to be Protestants. They claim they were never in Mother Rome. Sad to say, many modern-day Baptists have forsaken their Biblical and historical heritage and refer to themselves as Protestants. Historically this is a very recent position.

For many different reasons the Roman Catholic Church for centuries periodically persecuted the Baptists. They tortured, banished, and killed them. They burned their writings and tried to drive them out of existence. The Protestants in many instances also persecuted the Baptists. A sad example is found in Switzerland with Ulrich Zwingli. At first he was very sympathetic to them. However, when intense political pressure was put on him, he became their enemy. In 1526 the council of the city of Zurich decided to punish the advocacy of Anabaptist views by drowning those who held them.

Church Confined to the Baptists

For the above reasons, Baptists have historically claimed that the church of Jesus Christ existed only among them. They have often been vilified and misunderstood because of this honest claim. What they claim has also often been distorted. Some have called them intolerant bigots, but this is not true. Of course there may be a few “bad apples” among the Baptists like there are in all other groups, but the Baptists as a whole are not motivated by bigotry. They are honest contenders for what they fervently believe to be the truth.

The Baptists do not believe that only Baptists are Christians. They believe there are many devout, sincere Christians in many Christian denominations. They believe that all true Christians are in the

kingdom of God. This is not the place for an extensive discussion on the subject of the kingdom of God, but it should suffice to point out that in most cases in the New Testament the words “church” and “kingdom” are not synonymous. Usually the word “kingdom” has a much broader connotation than does the word “church.” The concept of “kingdom” in the Bible is that of “the rule and reign” of God. This rule is manifested in different degrees under different circumstances. In a very real sense, even now, God rules over all. However, in the glorious heavenly kingdom, the rule of God will be consummated and every creature there will do the will of God perfectly and willingly.

All born-again people are in the kingdom of God. This is plain to see from such passages as John 3:3, “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” However not all born-again Christians are in the church of God. Baptists readily acknowledge that they have many Protestant friends who are in the kingdom of God. But they do not acknowledge that they are in the New Testament Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. How could they be? The only authority and baptism their founders had was from the exceeding corrupt and apostate Roman Catholic Church. Moreover the Protestant churches hold to the very unscriptural practice of “baptizing” infants. It is also true that Protestants do not even practice aright the initiatory rite of entrance into the church, which is baptism. Sprinkling and pouring do not constitute baptism. So the Protestants unchurch themselves by a **false origin, false practices**, and in many cases, **false doctrines**.

Yet it is beyond dispute that many Protestants obviously love Jesus Christ and demonstrate in their lives that they have spiritual life. We can and desire to have **Christian fellowship** with them, but it is impossible to have **church fellowship** with them.

Within the Baptist Family

At one time most Baptists were more or less in church fellowship with most other Baptists. This was not altogether true, because there have been some serious doctrinal differences. The old **General Baptists** held to a general atonement. They taught that Christ died for each and every member of the human family to give each of them an opportunity to be saved. On the other hand the old **Particular Baptists** held to the doctrine of Particular Redemption. They taught that Christ made a sure and infallible atonement for a particular people, who were His elect. However, most of the Baptists walked together in church fellowship.

There was a serious challenge to this fellowship both in England and in the United States, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. An English Particular Baptist preacher, Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), began to advocate doctrines that were new to the Particular Baptists. In the view of many of them he began to compromise the doctrine of Particular Redemption. He said that the atoning death of Christ on the cross was sufficient to save every human being, but efficient only to the elect. The staunch old heads among the Particular Baptists rightly saw this as deceitful “double talk.” The real question was concerning those for whom the atonement was designed. The Scriptures made plain that the Lord Jesus did not die for each human being. The Father did not choose or elect the entire human family to be saved from their sins.

There was much agitation on this and related questions. The controversy spilled over into the United States. The two sides gradually grew farther and farther apart on questions of doctrine and related questions of practice. They coexisted uneasily for a few decades. Finally those who followed the ideas

of Andrew Fuller, and who were called “Fullerites” became so unsound in their doctrines and practices that the Baptists who were more in line with the ideas of the distinguished English theologian John Gill and were sometimes called “Gillites,” came to the conclusion that they must part ecclesiastical ways with the Fullerites. They made statements to this effect in 1827 (the Kehukee Declaration) and in 1832 (the Black Rock Address). Those who adhered to historic Particular Baptist doctrines became known as Old School or Primitive Baptists. The ones who adopted the novel doctrines and practices of the Fullerites became known as New School or Missionary Baptists.

The Primitive Baptists were not bigots. They sincerely believed that the New School Baptists, with their view of an atonement that was dependent on the will of the sinner to make it effective, was a gross departure from the gospel. If a church had ceased preaching the gospel, the Primitives simply believed it was wrong to receive their official actions, such as baptism. They regarded many of the New School Baptists as true Christians. They just believed they were in sufficient error to warrant not recognizing their official ecclesiastical actions as valid.

Denominationalism

Sometimes, when Primitive Baptists insist that those who come to them from other religious denominations submit to baptism administered by Primitive Baptists, others look upon this as unscriptural and unwarranted. They point out that “rebaptism” is non-existent or very rare in the New Testament. First, it must be noted that so-called “rebaptism” did take place in the New Testament era. The classic case is recorded in Acts 19: 1-5. This is not the place for an extensive discussion of this incident, but a careful reading will show that Paul did, indeed, “rebaptize” these converts who had been previously immersed while having significant deficiencies in their knowledge of the Word of God.

It is also worth noting that “rebaptism” was a rarity in New Testament times, because there were no Christian denominations then. All the churches taught and practiced essentially the same things. No Christians in those days tried to substitute sprinkling for baptism. No Christians then believed in the baptism of infants. Congregational church government was the rule and there were no presbyterian (rule by elders) or episcopal (rule by bishops) or Catholic (rule by the Pope) churches in those days. There were no churches then who had human founders. The only Founder of His church was the Lord Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the early churches was pure salvation by grace. Works salvation (forms of what later became Arminianism) was denounced by the Apostle Paul as “another gospel: Which is not another...” (Gal. 1: 6, 7).

In subsequent centuries, as Satan has tried to corrupt both the church and the gospel, it has been necessary to make stands based on truth. Denominations have been the inevitable result. It is very sinful to engage in unnecessary division; it is also very sinful to not divide when truth is at stake. Jesus Christ brought division while He was on earth. Speaking of Him John 7:43 records, “So there was a division among the people because of him.”

Coming to a Knowledge of the Truth

Sometimes people who have been steeped in false doctrine and/or practice are blessed to come to a knowledge of the truth. Sometimes this may happen to an entire church body. If this is the case, what

should they do? Should they just reorganize, perhaps call themselves by a different name, and go on? The answer is “no,” they should not do this. If they have been in substantial error, there is a great likelihood that their official acts, such as baptism, have been invalid. After all they were no doubt baptized in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, which Father was this? The one who had a sincere desire for the salvation of all, even though He knows that many will not be saved, or the One Who chose His people in Christ before the world began and will infallibly bring them to salvation? Which Son are we talking about? The one who died to make provision for the salvation of the entire human race without actually securing the salvation of any, or the One Who paid the entire sin debt for each and every one of His elect children, thus assuring them of eternal salvation? Which Holy Spirit are we considering? The one who is wooing each human being and trying to get them to accept Christ or the One Who irresistibly brings salvation to each of the elect? What one believes at baptism is very important.

When individuals or churches who have been in substantial error come to the truth, they should seek out a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ and seek to be joined to her. There have been times when entire church bodies were rebaptized and reorganized. This was the case with the Cincinnati Primitive Baptist Church over 40 years ago. In doing this they showed their respect to the institution that God had preserved down through the ages in fulfillment of His sacred promise.

The Nature of Baptism

There have been many people who were baptized while believing significant error. In many cases they felt a great sense of blessing in their baptism. They then have come to a fuller understanding of the truth of the Scriptures. They realize that the “church” they have been a member of is not preaching the gospel of the Sovereign Grace of God. They discover a Primitive Baptist church which does preach this true gospel and which also strives to adhere to Biblical practices. What should they do? Should they try to join themselves to a Primitive Baptist church without being “rebaptized” or should they submit to baptism administered by Primitive Baptists by one of their ministers. They should willingly and gladly submit to baptism for several sound reasons.

First, it is not surprising that many people who have been “baptized” while in error received a sense of God’s approval when they did so. Presumably they were doing the best they knew to follow the Lord when they were so baptized. We serve a merciful and gracious God. When we walk in what light we have He blesses us. However, when we receive more light He expects us to be obedient to that. I have personally known many people who received a great subjective blessing when they were baptized into “churches” which were in great doctrinal error. As far as feelings were concerned they were “satisfied” with their “first baptism.” However, in a desire to be obedient to God, they were willing to submit to baptism as entrance into the church that was preaching the truth of Sovereign Grace that they had come to believe and love.

Some people, on the other hand, with commendable sincerity, have said something like this: “I refuse to be baptized again. I believed in Jesus Christ when I was baptized. Baptism is a very personal issue between the Lord and me. I would be violating my conscience if I were to submit to baptism.” Admittedly this may be commendable sincerity but it is based on some fundamental misunderstandings of what constitutes true Christian baptism.

Four Necessary Elements

According to the teaching of the New Testament there must be four elements to constitute true Christian baptism. To be valid baptism there must be the proper candidate, the proper mode, the proper design, and the proper administrator. If any of these elements is lacking a true New Testament baptism has not been performed.

Candidate

In the New Testament the only people who were baptized were **believers** in the Lord Jesus Christ. A genuine believer is one who has been born again and has professed a belief in the Lord Jesus. There is not one single instance in the New Testament of an infant or of one too young to know what he was doing being baptized. Infant baptism, which is practiced by the Roman Catholic Church and by her Protestant daughters, was an error that was brought into Christendom long after the death of the apostles. This is not the place for a full discussion of this, but in the so-called “household baptisms” in the New Testament any infants have to be included by inference or guesswork. Infant baptism was an error in practice that was contrived to accommodate the doctrinal error of baptismal regeneration. So-called “churches” which practice infant baptism are not true New Testament churches.

Mode

The only proper mode of baptism in the New Testament is immersion. In fact, the word translated “baptize” in our New Testament means to immerse. This is a well-known fact. The New Testament Greek word translated “baptize” is *baptizō*. To cite only one reference to this word, W. E. Vine in his *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* writes, “to baptize, primarily a frequentative form of *baptō*, to dip, was used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment, or the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another, etc.” A person has to try hard to get around this meaning of baptism. Speaking of John the Baptist, it is recorded, “And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, **because there was much water there**: and they came, and were baptized.” (John 3:23). “Much water” is not needed for sprinkling or pouring! When Philip baptized the Ethiopian Eunuch, “... he commanded the chariot to stand still: and **they went down both into the water**, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.” (Acts 8:38). This would have been totally unnecessary if baptism could have been performed by pouring or sprinkling. Baptism is called a “burial” in Romans 6: 4. A person is not buried by sprinkling or pouring a little dirt over him. In fact, baptism portrays the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a very serious matter to distort this God-ordained picture by changing the mode.

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not a **legislative body**. She does not have the authority to change the laws that Christ gave to His church or to legislate new ones. The church is merely an **executive body**. She only has the authority to execute or practice the directions the Lord gave to His church. The Roman Catholics, the Reformers, and some others violate this sacred principle. For example, John Calvin, the learned and famous father of some of the Reformed churches, acknowledged, “it is evident that the term *baptise* means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the primitive Church.” (Book Four, Chapter 15, Section 19 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.). However, even with this acknowledgment, he said, “Whether the person baptised is to be wholly immersed, and that whether once or thrice, or whether he is only to be sprinkled with water, is not of the least consequence: churches should be at liberty to adopt either...” This is very serious departure from the Word of God.

The false practice of pouring or sprinkling as an alternative to the God-mandated immersion is not baptism and cannot be accepted by a true, Bible-believing, Bible-practicing church. As stated earlier, there are many acknowledged Christians in organizations that sprinkle babies. Primitive Baptist can and should have Christian fellowship with them, but not church fellowship. They have perverted the very initial church ordinance.

Design

We must be correct on what the purpose of baptism is for it to be valid. Many denominations believe in baptismal regeneration. They teach that when a person is baptized that is when they become the actual recipients of salvation. There is no eternal salvation without baptism, they affirm. This is not what the Bible teaches. Salvation is alone by the finished work of Christ on the cross for those who were given Him in covenant by the Father before the foundation of the world. This salvation is brought to them infallibly by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is in no way gained by works or by “sacrament” or by ritual. This is plainly taught in 1 Peter 3:21, “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ...” A. T. Robertson, the eminent American New Testament Greek scholar, comments on this verse as follows: “The saving by baptism which Peter here mentions is only symbolic (a metaphor or picture as in #Ro 6:2-6), not actual as Peter hastens to explain... Peter here expressly denies baptismal remission of sin.”

The design of baptism is to portray the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and to provide the means whereby the recipient of baptism avows belief in this finished work of Christ and publicly identifies his allegiance to Jesus Christ and to His church.

Authority

Not just anyone or just any institution is authorized by God to perform baptism. Some people have such a loose view of baptism that they think that two individuals upon coming to the knowledge of the truth could just “baptize” each other. This is not the case. No one has the right or authority to baptize unless it is given to them from God. Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament church. Believer’s baptism was not practiced under the Jewish theocracy.

The first man who received authority to baptize was, of course, John the Baptist. We have already seen from Mal. 3: 1 and from Isaiah 40: 3 that the Lord sent him “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:17). John said of himself, “And I knew him not: but **he that sent me** to baptize with water...” (John 1:33). John was sent of God to baptize. Jesus Christ recognized this authority and in doing so set a good example for all to recognize God-given authority. If the matter of authority were indifferent, Jesus would no doubt have been baptized by someone in Nazareth. Instead He walked approximately 60 miles, from Galilee to Judea, to be baptized by John. We read of this in Mark 1:9, “And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan.”

A close reading of the gospels will plainly show that Jesus Christ gathered his disciples from those who had been baptized by John. Evidently, as long as he was alive, John continued to have the authority to baptize. It seems plain that John, and the baptized disciples of Jesus were baptizing in the same time

frame. John 3:22, 23 reads, “After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.” It also seems plain that Jesus was not actually performing baptism Himself, but His disciples were doing so under His authority. This is apparent from John 4:1, “When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John,

(Though **Jesus himself baptized not**, but his disciples,)...” The point here is that there was no one just taking the authority on himself to baptize.

As long as Jesus was on earth, He and the disciples under Him had the heaven-given authority to baptize. Who did He give this authority to after He went back to heaven? Did He give it to believers in their capacity as believers? The answer is “no.” As we have seen earlier, the risen Christ, who was about to ascend to the Father, gave the authority to baptize to His apostles as they were considered in their capacity as foundation stones in the New Testament church. We have also seen from the Book of Acts that only authorized representatives from New Testament churches practiced baptism.

So baptism is more than a mere transaction between an individual and his Lord, irrespective of the administrator to whom Christ gave the authority to baptize..

The Identity Question

Considering what has been written above, it should be the paramount aim of pious individuals to carefully identify the institution that God has authorized to perform baptism today. God has given baptism to His church. How are we to identify that church? There seem to be two major identifying marks: the mark of succession, and the mark of truth.

Succession or Perpetuity

We have already examined how God has perpetuated His church over the centuries. He promised perpetuity to her and the inspired book of the Acts of the Apostles shows us how He carried out His promise. We see an actual institutional perpetuity there. The churches in the divinely inspired Acts had actual connections with one another. God perpetuated not only the truth but also the “pillar and ground” of the truth. While the doctrine of church perpetuity or church succession is not very popular today, and many people call adherents of this doctrine anachronistic bigots, it is plainly taught and demonstrated in the New Testament.

Truth

Another identifying mark of the church is whether or not she preaches and practices the truth as set forth in the Word of God. The Roman Catholic Church claims perpetuity, but she has gone so far from the truth, both in doctrine and practice, that she blatantly invalidates her claims.

Baptists have historically claimed perpetuity, but many of them have gone so far a field from both doctrinal and practical truth that they, too, have nullified their claims.

Judgment Calls

In the final analysis, some things are plain and some are not as clear. We all have to make Biblically informed judgment calls. Only God knows for sure whom He considers as true churches. Every denomination that I know anything about draws the line somewhere on the issues we have been discussing. Baptists have not considered the Roman Catholic Church or her Protestant daughters to be true churches. They have serious errors in both doctrine and practice. Some of these, such as baby sprinkling, have been pointed out. Particular Baptists and Primitive Baptists do not consider Arminianism to be the gospel, so they are not willing to acknowledge that institutions that espouse Arminianism to be real churches. Even some churches, which consider themselves to be preaching grace, are not sound enough in the estimation of some to be preaching the pure gospel. Primitive Baptists do not consider the Fullerite errors, which provide a halfway house to Arminianism, to represent the pure gospel of grace. We do not think it wise to fellowship the inconsistent and contradictory “well-meant free offer of the gospel.” We believe we are right in rejecting the error of “gospel regeneration.” We hold to regeneration being a direct and immediate work of the Holy Spirit without the use of any human means. We think it would be an error to receive baptisms from groups that hold to such error.

Every organization calling themselves a church also has to decide how much doctrinal and practical error they will tolerate before they are ready to part ecclesiastical ways.

Everyone makes such judgment calls. For example, each group has some qualifications as to whom can administer baptism. Most denominations will not allow a woman to baptize. I am sure that very few would allow a homosexual to baptize. Even those groups, who receive some into their organizations from other denominations, usually draw some distinctions. Many “Baptistic” groups will not receive the baptisms from the “Church of Christ,” which was established by Alexander Campbell. This is because the followers of Campbell teach the gross error of baptismal regeneration and the “grace” they preach is a thin veneer for works salvation. However, an acquaintance of mine, who pastors an independent sovereign grace group, will accept Campbellite baptism, simply because it is performed by immersion. I think this is greatly in error, and I would not want the church I pastor to receive the baptisms that are performed by the group he pastors.

Receiving Baptism From Others

Considering that baptism is not done in isolation from the assembly that does the baptizing, we must consider an important fact. When one group receives the baptism that has been administered by another group, they are legitimizing and recognizing that group. To be perfectly plain, if a Primitive Baptist church receives the baptism of a Reformed Baptist church, they are recognizing that the Reformed Baptist church is as much a church as they are. Even if a particular Reformed Baptist church was originally Arminian in theology, and had come to a certain knowledge of grace, but had merely reorganized and changed its name, with no regard to the fact that all they had was Arminian baptism.

The Primitive Baptist church would be recognizing that the Reformed Baptist group is indeed a church even if she deviated on some fundamental points from the Primitive Baptists in doctrine. The Primitive Baptists would be recognizing the legitimacy of the other group even if she held to the errors of gospel

regeneration, and the so-called “well-meant, free offer of the gospel.” The Primitive Baptists would be endorsing the Reformed Baptist church even if the latter held to the same “Fullerite” view of the atonement that the forefathers of the Primitive Baptists had roundly rejected approximately two hundred years ago.

Where I Stand

Each Christian is obligated to be obedient to His God the best he can as he diligently studies the Scriptures. He must have some Bible-based convictions. He must be humble as he follows these convictions and he must do so in love. This is what I am trying to do.

Based on what I have written above, I fervently believe that Jesus Christ set His own church up while He was here in His human nature. I believe He promised that church would not be destroyed, but that it would continue as an institution in an unbroken line until He returns again. I believe on examining the Scriptures and secondarily by studying church history, that His church has been continued as far as I can discern in the Baptist family. I believe that since the early 1800s the church at least in the United States has been primarily represented by the Primitive Baptists.

I do not believe that “Mother Rome” is a church of Jesus Christ nor are her Protestant daughters. I acknowledge that there may be some real churches in the Baptist family besides Primitive Baptist churches, but I do not know of any at this time. If I could be shown them, I am ready to be convinced. In the meantime, I believe the only proper course is to receive official work only from Primitive Baptist churches. I agree with the Grace Chapel Primitive Baptist Church *Rules of Decorum*-#6, which states: “A brother or sister who hasn’t been a member of the Primitive Baptist faith must be received into our body by baptism. Others may be received by letter or by other means, so designated by the church.” I will strongly teach and lead the church to follow this principle so long as I am blessed to be her pastor.

If I am not totally deceived I do all this out of a love for God, His truth, and His people, both those who are Primitive Baptists and those who are not. I desire, have, and enjoy Christian fellowship with many for whom I do not have church fellowship. I base my convictions on my understanding of the Scriptures. I know that I am not perfect and may be wrong on some points. I know that I stand where the majority of Primitive Baptists have stood on these matters. I know that I am willing to change my ideas if I can be shown my errors conclusively from the Word of God. However, I would have to be **totally convinced** that I am wrong before I made a change. To my mind, the Scriptures are clear on these issues.

If I did not believe the Primitive Baptists were essentially right on these important matters, I would be looking for a church which is more correct. However I sincerely believe that my dear father in the ministry, Elder Hassell Wallis, who has gone to be with the Lord, was right when he said, “Brother Zack, I realize that the Primitive Baptists are not perfect, and that we must constantly be examining ourselves by the Scriptures. However, I still believe the best place to be on the top side of this old earth, is in a good, Primitive Baptist church!”

I agree with him.

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