

The Place of the Confession of Faith in the Local Church

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"A creed, a system of doctrine is a necessity. It is a necessity of thought. It is a necessity of character. It is a necessity of fellowship and co-operation. A cogent system of doctrine is an intellectual and educational necessity. If the Church would edify her people, unify and mobilize them, she must educate them after a thorough manner in her creed. Some are not of this way of thinking, they decry creeds; they demand a creedless Christianity, a religion without theology. This demand had been called pious nonsense. Leave off the pious – call it simply nonsense. To say of a man that he has no creed is tantamount to saying that he has no intelligence and no character." - J. B. Green

"No creed but Christ" is an oft-heard slogan in churches today. Some present-day Christians pride themselves on their total reliance on the Holy Bible alone and consequently, do not attach any importance to creeds and confessions. This attitude is worthy of respect as it recognizes the supreme and unique place of Holy Scripture in the Christian Faith. As stated by John Murray, this attitude is worthy of respect "because it springs from a wholehearted reaction against the exaggerated veneration for humanly-composed creeds and the halo of sanctity placed around them, so that to question any of their statements is esteemed to be presumptuous, if not blasphemous."¹

Does this mean that the creeds and confessions of old have outlived their usefulness and are now outdated? Is there a place for the confession in the local church today? This paper will address these questions and will seek to show that notwithstanding the Holy Bible should be the final authority in every aspect of the Christian Faith, there is, nevertheless, a place for the confession, properly understood and not with exaggerated veneration, in the local church today. In particular, the question of whether the confession does aid, in any way, in the continued existence of a local church will be discussed.

By its very definition, a local church is localized, that is, it refers to a gathering of Christian believers in a certain geographical setting. The local church is a visible expression of the universal glorious Church and it is defined and fixed by locality. In 1 Timothy 3:15, the Church is called to be the "pillar and ground of Truth." The local church is called to preserve God's Truth. Against this definition of a local church, the place of a confession will be examined.

The word "creed" and "confession" have been used interchangeably by many writers. Samuel Miller used the words "creed" and "confession of faith" in his book, Doctrinal Integrity, interchangeably with no distinction. J. N. D. Kelly

used the word "creedal confession" in his book, Early Christian Creeds. However, in the The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, a "creed" is stated to be "something more than a symposium of accepted belief or even an epitome of divinely revealed truth. It involves the existential commitment of the confessor to God."² It goes on to state that a creed is the declaration of confession and gratitude to the glory of God. It further describes a "confession" as being longer than a creed, more detailed and systematic and that the former is designed not so much for recital as for reference.

The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible does not focus on the length, but rather, the time period in which the statement was formulated and promulgated to classify as either a creed or a confession. It states that:

"In general it may be said that creeds were the burden of the fourth and fifth centuries, and the confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The twentieth century sees a revival of the writing of confessions. Speaking in general again, a creed as illustrated by the three classical creeds – Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian – is concerned with the unifying essentials of the universal church in every place and in every age. A confession, on the other hand, is a more comprehensive statement of theology, more denominational than traditional. Whereas in the creed there is a clarification of the fundamentals of the faith, one finds in confessions not only the clarification of the fundamentals of the faith, one finds in confessions not only the clarification but an increase of identification of some branch of the church by a way of a fuller treatment of those specifics over which churches divide."³

At this juncture, instead of getting caught in an entanglement with terminology, it is useful to look at the origins of these two words. The English substantive "creed" stems from the Latin verb credo which is the opening word in the Latin versions of both the Apostles' Creed and Nicene creed. It could be translated as "I place confidence in", "I rely upon" or "I believe". It corresponds to the New Testament Greek verb pisteuw. The phrase, "Credo in unum Deum," implies more than a bare recognition that only one true God exists; it brings the worshipper into a faith-relationship with Him that is expressed in the total unqualified surrender of the self.⁴

The words "to confess" correspond to the Hebrew verb yada. The noun toda means confession, thanksgiving, praise, or it can refer to a company of people singing songs of praise. Confession can lead the believer to pledge himself anew to God, to sing hymns of praise, to offer joyful sacrifice, and can give him a desire to tell others of God's mercy and to identify himself with the worshipping congregation in the house of God. In the New Testament, the Greek word for "confess" is isomologein which has the generic

meaning of acknowledging something to be the case in agreement with others; it is primarily used with reference to faith in Christ. It means more than mental assent. It implies a decision to pledge oneself in loyalty to Jesus Christ as Lord in response to the work of the Holy Spirit.⁵ In the Latin context, the word "confess" comes from the root word confiteour as found in the Vulgate and patristic literature. The intention of Augustine's classic, Confessiones, was not only to acknowledge former transgressions but even more to thank and bless God openly for what He has done for his soul.⁶

The reference to the origin of the two words "creed" and "confession" throws up some similarities between the two. Both involve the believer in a relationship with God, the believer surrendering himself or pledging his loyalty to God. The element of wholehearted worship to God is present in both cases. Hence, if both the creed and confession of faith are reduced to the lowest common denominator, the functions they perform are rather similar. For the purposes of this paper, the two words will be used interchangeably, albeit more discussion will be centered upon the confession of faith.

Christians who sounded the cry "No creed but Christ" usually raise, as one of their objections, the fact that creeds and confessions are not taught in the Holy Bible. This is not accurate as the Scripture itself does exhibit some creedal elements, as early as in the Old Testament. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia states that "In the Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-7; Deuteronomy 5:6-21) are found the rudiments of creedal formulation, and the shema (constructed from Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41) we reach what may legitimately be regarded as the symbol of Old Testament faith and the earliest attempt to enunciate a doctrine."⁷

In Romans 10:9-10 (expounding Deuteronomy 30:14), Paul writes, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Herein lies the Scriptural basis for creeds and confessions. The believer is exhorted to make his confession openly before man. The New Testament is full of creedal formulations. As J. N. D. Kelly observes, in his book, Early Christian Creeds, "The reader of the New Testament is continually coming across creed-like slogans and tags, catchwords which at the time or writing were being consecrated by popular usage."⁸

Proclamation of Christ is the starting point of every Christian confession.⁹ When the Lord Jesus asked the apostles who they thought He was, He was asking them and the Church whom they represented to make confession in their existence. Before He asked that question, Christ asked another question, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" (Matthew 16:13). Christ was

interested to know what people were thinking and saying about Him; not because He was afraid of the words of men but rather, He wanted His disciples to be aware of their calling to confess Him accurately before men.

When the spokesman of the apostles, Peter, answered that He is Christ the Son of the living God, the Church, as represented by Peter, was making a verbal confession which was in direct contrast with what other people around them were saying about Him. This incident illustrates the Scriptural basis of confessions as well as the necessity of having confessions in the Church. Christians who are against the idea of creeds and confessions feel that they are unnecessary as the Holy Bible should be the only authority. However, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself wanted the apostles to make an open confession so as to put them in the right path as well as to refute the wrongful rumors that were being spread against Him.

In fact, as the Church develops and grows in this world, she is going to hear all kinds of things said about God and His kingdom which are not in harmony with what the Word of God states. These are the heresies which the apostle Paul wrote were unavoidable "that they which are approved may be made manifest among you" (1 Corinthians 11:19). The Church may not let heresies go without refuting them. From the useful legacies of past centuries, the Church had formulated her historic written confessions. O. Cullmann has set forth the theory that the formulation of early creeds was controlled partly by the polemical needs of the Church in the pagan world.¹⁰ When arraigned before the magistrates and required to attest their allegiance, the Christian's reply would be "Jesus Christ is Lord"; and thus a creedal form was shaped and systematized.

In addition to the polemic thrust of confessions, confessions were also formulated out of a necessity and desire to maintain the harmony and unity of the Church. Amos 3:3 questions pertinently, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" Samuel Miller further asks:

Can a body of worshippers, composed of Calvinists, Arminians, Pelagians, Arians, and Socinians, all pray, and preach, and commune together profitably and comfortably, each retaining the sentiments, feeling and language appropriate to his denomination? This would indeed make the house of God a miserable Babel. What! Can those who believe the Lord Jesus Christ to be God, equal with the Father, and worship Him accordingly, and those who cordially renounce all dependence on their own works or merit for justification before God, relying entirely on his rich grace, "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," and those who pronounce all such reliance fanatical, and man's own righteousness the sole ground of hope; can persons who cherish these irreconcilably opposite sentiments and feelings on

the most important of all subjects, unite with edification in the same prayers, listen from Sabbath to Sabbath to the same instructions, and sit together in comfort at the same sacramental table? As well might Jews and Christians worship together in the same temple. They must either be perfectly indifferent to the great subjects on which they are thus divided, or all their intercourse must be productive of jarring and distress.¹¹

From the above, one may concede that confessions and creeds do have a scriptural basis and that they are necessary in the interest of the Church. But, as stated in the opening paragraph of this paper, some people might still not view confessions and creeds as biblical or necessary as they feel that the position of the Holy Bible is being usurped. This fear is groundless in view of the fact that confessions are usually stated to be subordinate to and dependent on Scripture. This provides assurance that the unique place occupied by Scripture is not at all challenged by the place assigned to the confession. In fact, John Murray is of the opinion that:

In the acceptance of Scripture as the Word of God and the rule of faith and life, there is the incipient and basic creedal confession. Some statement must be made to this effect and to the exclusion of all other norms of faith and conduct. But why should creedal confession be restricted to the doctrine of Scripture? There are other doctrines just as essential as the doctrine of Scripture.¹²

Norman Shepherd in his essay, Scripture and Confession, further gives three reasons why this fear of the usurping of the Holy Bible by the confession is groundless. The three reasons, in essence, are based on the sufficiency, the authority and the perspicuity of the Holy Bible.

First, rather than undermining the sufficiency of Scripture, the confession, rightly formulated and maintained, affirms it. Norman Shepherd asserts that the confession normally testifies that Scripture is relevant to the needs of the Church and sufficient to reveal what must be known for man's salvation and God's glory.¹³

Second, the authority of the confession is not an authority shared with Scripture, but is an authority that testifies to the final authority of the Word. Norman Shepherd states that the confession is subordinate authority, an application of the authority of Scripture.¹⁴ It has been said that Scripture is norma normans and the confession, norma normata, that is, Scripture has intrinsic authority and the confession, derived authority.

Third, the confession does not function as a commentary on Scripture to provide an authoritative interpretation for what must otherwise remain obscure, but the existence of the confession as a summary of truths taught in the Word testifies that the Word is accessible to every believer.¹⁵ In other words, the confession is only possible because Scripture is perspicuous.

Samuel Miller, in his book, Doctrinal Integrity, is of the same view. He writes:

“Creeds and confessions do not claim to be in themselves laws of Christ’s house, or legislative enactments, by which any set of opinions are constituted truths, and which requires, on that account, to be received as truths among the members of his family. They only profess to be summaries, extracted from the Scriptures, of a few of those great gospel doctrines which are taught by Christ himself; and which those who make the summary in each particular case concur in deeming important, and agree to make the test of their religious union. They have no idea that, in forming this summary, they make anything truth that was not truth before; or that they thereby contract an obligation to believe what they were not bound by the authority of Christ to believe before. But they simply consider it as a list of the leading truths which the Holy Bible teaches, which of course, all men ought to believe, because the Holy Bible does teach them; and which a certain portion of the visible Church catholic agree in considering as a formula, by means of which they may know and understand one another.”¹⁶

The preceding paragraphs deal, at great length, with the “scripturalness” and the necessity of having a confession as well as its subordinate position to the Holy Bible, as demonstrated in the course of church history. In the modern-day context, confessions and creeds still play an important part in the visible church. The arguments for the “scripturalness” and the necessity of having confession apply equally to the local church. The place of the confession in the local church will now be examined in the light of the many functions performed by a local church.

1. A Local Church Exists To Worship God.

The local church continues the tradition of the earliest Church described in Acts 2:46-47 in the gathering of believers to worship God. Worshipping God is the foremost function of every Christian individually and as a church, collectively. John Murray writes that there are two aspects to worship, God’s address to us and our response to this address. The former consists particularly in the reading and preaching of the Word, and the latter in adoration, reception, thanksgiving, and prayer.¹⁷

It is an undeniable fact that a society develops best when it has unity among its members, especially with regards to fundamental issues. In such a society, peace and harmony will reign among the members. Likewise, a local church will function best when it has unity among its members. This is especially important when the church members come together for corporate worship of God.

The confession of faith, properly formulated and based on Scripture, will provide a basis of unity among the church members. Not only will the confession serve as a basis of unity in a particular local church, but it also can facilitate as a basis of unity in a federation of churches. Paul in Ephesians 4:5-6 says "That there is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, on God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." Jesus also prayed that the Church may be one in Him (John 17:21).

To ensure that the church members can be of "one faith", they must have full agreement in the fundamentals of the Christian faith. To refer to the Holy Bible as the standard on which the church members are agreed is not sufficient. The liberals will also point to the Holy Bible as their standard. As Samuel Miller put it, "something recorded, something publicly known, something capable of being referred to when most needed, which not merely this or that private member supposes to have been received, but to which the church as such has agreed to adhere, as a bond of union" is required.¹⁸ Miller went on to say that "a church, in order to maintain the "unity of Spirit in the bond of peace and love must have a creed – a written creed – which she has formally given her assent, and to a conformity to which her ministrations are pledged."¹⁹ Without the confession facilitating the unity in the local church, "all the evils of discord and corruption" may appear. It would be almost impossible to have true worship for God in such a local church wherein notes of discordance are bound to be struck. Conversely, if the members of a local church are collectively agreed on the fundamentals set out in the church confession, the harmonious corporate worship offered will be like sweet strains of music to the Almighty Lord.

At this juncture, it is appropriate to mention that no church can exist without a confession of faith. This also applies to those churches who piously claim that they have "no creed but Christ." At the very least, the members must agree that they believe in Christ. If nothing else, this common faith when preached and maintained is the creed of that church, whether or not she acknowledges it. Even the modernist and liberal churches have their confession of faith in a certain set of beliefs that bind them in fellowship. The question, therefore is not whether a church has a confession, but rather, whether her confession is in a written or verbal form, or both.

With the confession as a basis of unity, the church members know exactly what they have agreed on doctrinally. The two aspects of worship can then be performed. The reading and preaching of the Word of God will be clear and unambiguous to the church members. For example, in a reformed local church which adopts the Westminster Confession of Faith as its standard, the preaching of God's Word will not have an Arminian slant. Likewise, the local church's response, as a corporate body, will be rooted in the tradition of the Reformed Faith. The outpouring of adoration, thanksgiving and prayer offered to God will be as of one, resulting in more meaningful worship to the Almighty God.

A local church cannot exist as an island. Speakers from other local churches are constantly being encouraged and invited to exchange pulpits. This is to be encouraged as it helps in bringing the Body of Christ together. However, it is necessary to exercise great caution as to who is to be invited. As Samuel Miller puts it, "one of the ministers of such a denomination, when invited into the pulpit of an orthodox brother, might give entire satisfaction; while the very next to whom a similar mark of Christian affection and confidence was shown, might preach the most corrupt heresy."²⁰ The danger of inviting someone who is not of like-minded faith is very real indeed as everyone, when questioned, will profess to believe in the Holy Bible. A person who holds the Arian view of the person of Christ may believe the Holy Bible wholeheartedly. John Murray asserts that the most basic contradictions of unbelief may co-exist with a watertight doctrine of Scripture.²¹ One way to avoid this is to examine the confession of the local church in which the speaker to be invited is ministering in. If that confession shows some doctrinal differences, the speaker could still be invited to the pulpit, albeit to share on doctrines which are agreed upon. Samuel Miller writes,

Creeds and confessions, then, so far from having a tendency to "alienate" and "embitter" those Christian denominations which think nearly alike, and ought to maintain fraternal intercourse, really tend to make them acquainted with each other; to lay a foundation for regular and cordial intercourse; to beget mutual confidence; and thus to promote the harmony of the Church of God.²²

2. A Local church Exists To Proclaim The Word Of God To The World.

When the Lord Jesus told His Church in Acts 1:8 that they are to be His witnesses in this world, He certainly meant that they should confess Him before men. In fact, the Lord Jesus asked His disciples to "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost ..." (Matthew 28:19). This is the Great Commission

to the Church as commanded by the Lord Jesus Himself. Through the ages, the different local churches have tried their best to heed this command. Similarly, through the ages, the facilitating document used by the various local churches has been the confession of faith.

The Great Commission requires the local church to reach out to the world and to preach the Gospel. Again, this would require the local church to be united as a whole so as to maintain truth and purity within itself. A united front will aid greatly in sending out labourers committed to bringing in the harvest to the local church. As stated earlier, the confession of faith will help in the evangelistic efforts of the church.

The confession of faith further helps in the evangelistic role of the local church by constantly reminding the church of this all-important function it is called upon to do. John Murray said that "For a confession that does not bear witness to the saving power and claims of the Lord Jesus is one that belies its reality."²³ Donald McGravan asserts in his essay, A Missionary Confession of Faith, that the existing confessions of faith should be updated to show a missionary thrust. In his opening paragraphs, McGravan said that "All creeds and confessions, if they would be fully Christian, should express the overriding intention of God that men, in answer to God's choice of them believe on Christ, repent, and live in him."²⁴ He is of the view that confessions could greatly aid in ensuring that the local church "throb with the passion of Christ for the salvation of the peoples of the world."²⁵

3. A Local Church Exists To Instruct Its Members On The Word Of God.

The Great Commission has two other important aspects – teaching and baptizing the new believer. By teaching, it means the declaration of the whole counsel of God as it bears upon every sphere of human activity.²⁶ The teaching ministry of the church was seen in the biblical example of Ezra in Nehemiah 8:8.

The confession of faith facilitates in the teaching ministry of the local church by providing a compendious statement of Christian truth and a criterion by which error could be exposed. A confession setting forth the fundamentals of the faith of the believing church implies that there are things not to be believed. In fact, confessions and creeds evolved not only because of the need for a negation of heresy. Oftentimes, it was the prevalence of falsehood that determined the presentation of truth. Hence it is inevitable that in instructing the members of the church, the confession of faith will be both apologetic (directed against error outside of the church). The confession has to be both apologetic and polemic in order to instruct the believer not to walk in the

counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scornful (Psalm 1:1).

The confession also aids in the baptism of believers in the local church by providing a basis of instruction for the catechumen. In fact, Kelly is of the view that "the true and original use of creeds, their primary *raison d'être*, was to serve as solemn affirmations of faith in the context of baptismal initiation."²⁷

4. A Local Church Exists To Maintain Discipline and Purity Amongst God's People.

In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul exhorted Timothy "to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." There is therefore a need for good government in the church. Most confessions would have formulated some guidelines for church government. For example, in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Presbyterian form of government was left by the founding fathers to be used as a guide.

Maintaining the purity and discipline of the Body of Christ is an important function of the local church. Only when the local church is pure in its understanding of doctrine and disciplined in its practice of Scriptural truths, can the church perform its other functions.

When a member is unwilling or unable to subscribe to the confession of the church, it could be symptomatic of a more deeply rooted, determined opposition to the Gospel.²⁸ In this case, the confession can assist in exposing the need for pastoral care and, where required, disciplinary action.

John H. Kromminga in his essay, *The Shape of a New Confession*, asserts that a confession is a test of the orthodoxy of the church members, particularly of those entrusted with propagating and defending the beliefs of the church.²⁹ Subscription to the church confession is required of all church office-bearers as an assurance that the understanding of and commitment to the revealed truth of the Word of God is such as to qualify the office-bearer for his office. This is also true for the pastoral office. With the pastoral's subscription and submission to the church confession, the church members will know, with a certainty, the doctrinal stand of the pastor. There is a word of caution here: the confession does not function in isolation from Scripture. Where departure from the teaching of the confession is discerned, it is necessary to demonstrate a departure from the Word of God before disciplinary measures may be applied.³⁰ In such a case, it is timely to check whether the confession needs to be updated.

This paper has attempted to show the “scripturalness” and the necessity of having a church confession. In the context of the local church, the confession is a particularly helpful tool in assisting the local church to carry out its many functions. With the confession as a standard, the local church can maintain purity and unity within itself, bringing it closer to achieving the goals as commanded in the Scripture. The light of Scripture should illumine all of life and the confession should challenge the world. If there is a real need, the confession could be updated, after much prayerful consideration and deliberation among members of the church.

The local church could be viewed as a small warring battalion in the midst of unbelief and hostility. The member of the church could be viewed as soldiers carrying the banner of confession and being bound together by a common bond – faith in the Word of God. The confession should be properly understood and not given exaggerated veneration. It is not the confession per se that is helpful to the local church but the content of the confession. There is a place for the confession in the local church today. In particular the confession does aid in the continued existence of the local church.

1John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner, 1976), p. 280.

2Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 805.

3Merril C. Tenney, ed., The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), p. 1028.

4Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 805.

5J. D. Douglas, ed., The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, (England: IVP, 1980), p. 309.

6Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 805.

7Ibid., p. 25ff.

8J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Creeds, 3rd ed. (New York: David McKay, 1972), p. 13.

9O. Cullman, Earliest Christian Confessions, (1949), p. 39.

1⁰ Ibid., p.25ff.

1¹ Samuel Miller, Doctrinal Integrity, (Dallas: PHP, 1989), p. 11.

1² John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner, 1976), p. 281.

1³ John H. Skilton, Scripture and Confession, (New Jersey: P&R, 1973), p. 29.

1⁴ Ibid.

1⁵ Ibid., p. 30

1⁶ Samuel Miller, Doctrinal Integrity, (Dallas: PHP, 1989), p. 6.

1⁷ John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner, 1976), p. 239.

1⁸ Samuel Miller, Doctrinal Integrity, (Dallas: PHP, 1989), p. 10.

1⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

2⁰ Ibid., p. 15-16.

2¹ John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner, 1976), p. 281.

2² Samuel Miller, Doctrinal Integrity, (Dallas: PHP, 1989), p. 16.

2³ John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner, 1976), p. 240.

2⁴ Donald McGravan, "A Missionary Confession of Faith," Calvin Theological Journal, Vol. 7 (Nov. 1972), p. 133.

2⁵ Ibid., p. 144.

2⁶ John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner, 1976), p. 240.

2⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Creeds, 3rd ed. (New York: David McKay, 1972), p. 31.

2⁸ John H. Skilton, Scripture and Confession, (New Jersey: P&R, 1973), p. 24.

2⁹ John H. Kromminga, "The Shape of a New Confession," Calvin Theological Journal, Vol. 7 (Nov. 1972), p.149

³⁰ John H. Skilton, Scripture and Confession, (New Jersey: P&R, 1973), p. 24.

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