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Have Become More Comfortable With Women in Power -- With Some Exceptions

The Wired Word for the Week of March 19, 2017

In the News

In general, Americans are more accepting than ever of women in places of influence or power in American Society, though some notable differences that some see as obstacles remain for women in the workplace and in the ministry.

These are among the findings of a just-released study by the Barna Group, a research organization that is "a go-to source for insights about faith and culture, leadership and vocation, and generations," according to its website. It adds, "Barna Group has carefully and strategically tracked the role of faith in America, developing one of the nation's most comprehensive databases of spiritual indicators."

The study, which was conducted on behalf of Pepperdine University, looked at attitudes about women being in the upper echelons of the workplace, politics and the church. In all three areas, the study found a general growing positive acceptance of women in influential roles, though there are differences between the attitudes of men and women, members of generational groups, adherents of political parties and people of different religious persuasions.

Barna found that most Americans are comfortable with women in politics. While Hillary Clinton did not succeed in her run for the U.S. presidency, 85 percent of Americans are open to the possibility of a female in the White House, with 98 percent of Democrats and 65 percent of Republicans supporting that possibility. (It is unclear how respondents interpreted the question. Did they hear it as "deliberately picking a female president because she's female" or as "picking a president who happens to be female"? How respondents interpret questions is important in polls, but is difficult to ascertain.) Support was more unanimous for gender balance in Congress.

Nonetheless, while Barna did not note this, misogyny remains an issue in the political realm. *The New York Times* (see article in links list below) recently observed that both Hillary Clinton and Kellyanne Conway, a counselor to President Trump, though far apart politically, have been criticized for their clothing selection, their hairstyles and appearance, and both have been depicted as haggard and are routinely called "witch" and other derogatory names.

One TWW team member noted that there are instances in which males as well are criticized for hairstyles (has any class member *not* heard a criticism of the president for his hairstyle?), clothing (bow-tie or bolo-tie wearers especially), appearance and are sometimes called nasty names as well.

"The two women are at opposite ideological poles, but they stir up the same lingering cultural discomfort with ambitious, assertive women," the *Times* article said. There are negatives associated with ambitious and assertive men as well, of course.

Regarding the workplace, the study, after noting that the number of women there has grown from 27 percent in 1948 to 47 percent in 2015, found that both men (75 percent) and women (78 percent) are comfortable with the idea that women may outnumber men in the workplace in the future. Younger generations are the most comfortable with that possibility. Of those respondents Barna identified as "evangelicals" only 52 percent indicated comfort with the idea, "perhaps," said the report "due to a more traditional interpretation of women's roles as primary caregivers in the home."



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Barna defines evangelicals as people who fit these nine criteria:

- have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today;
- believe that their faith is very important in their life today;
- believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior;
- strongly believe they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians;
- firmly believe that Satan exists;
- strongly believe that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works;
- strongly agree that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth;
- strongly assert that the Bible is accurate in all the principles it teaches;
- describe God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today.

Barna does not use church attendance or denominational affiliation as criteria for the evangelical classification.

For Christians who don't meet Barna's nine criteria for "evangelical," Barna has a separate category: "practicing Christians." This includes those who attend a religious service at least once a month, who say their faith is very important to their lives and self-identify as a Christian. In the Barna designation, practicing Christians represent a much larger segment of the U.S. Christian population than do evangelicals.

When asked if they'd be comfortable with a female CEO, 94 percent of all adults in the survey said yes (90 percent of men, 97 percent of women, 77 percent of evangelicals, percentage of practicing Christians not reported).

Despite their growing presence in the workplace, however, 59 percent of women surveyed said significant roadblocks still make it harder for women to get ahead. When asked specifically about these hurdles, women identified fair pay (67 percent), equal opportunity for promotion (56 percent) and maintaining a work/life balance (41 percent) as the most important issues facing working women.

No questions were asked of men concerning obstacles they faced in getting ahead in the workplace, so no comparisons are possible.

The realm with the least acceptance of women in top leadership, according to Barna, is the ministry, though 79 percent of Americans are accepting of a female priest or pastor.

"As is the trend, more women than men are comfortable with a female in the pulpit (84 percent versus 75 percent)," the report said. "Evangelicals ... express by far the lowest levels of comfort (39 percent)" said the report, which interpreted this by saying "Evangelicals by definition ... have a more traditional interpretation of the scriptures, particularly concerning female ordination."

In contrast, Barna found that 62 percent of practicing Christians support women in the pulpit. And perhaps surprisingly, Catholics (80 percent) are slightly more comfortable with a female priest or pastor than Protestants (74 percent). "So while the general population are affirming of female priests and pastors," the report said, "there are differences in the various factions of the church."

In Protestant churches today, 9 percent of senior pastors are women. This is triple the percentage of 25 years ago, Barna said. Most of those women lead mainline congregations rather than evangelical churches.

In interpreting the results, Roxanne Stone, editor-in-chief at Barna Group said, "This study -- and the cultural realities it uncovers -- are immanently significant for the church. More than half of most congregations are women. They are increasingly part of the workforce; they are rising in the ranks at work and they are finding immense value in their jobs. Yet, they often feel conflicted when it comes to their work and motherhood." Stone invites church groups to think about how to help women deal with all of this.

We might add that church groups should also be invited to think about how to help men deal with conflicts between work and fatherhood.



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More on this story can be found at these links:

[What Americans Think About Women in Power. *Barna*](#)

[Sexist Political Criticism Finds a New Target: Kellyanne Conway. *The New York Times*](#)

[Breaking the Silence to Build Support. *UMC.org*](#)

[Motherhood in the Bible: A High Calling. *Crosswalk*](#)

['What Is Barna?' *Barna*](#)

The Big Questions

1. Are you comfortable with the idea of women in high positions of leadership in the workplace? in politics? in the church? In each case, explain why or why not. How does your view of scripture and God's will inform your answer?
2. Do you believe that the church should help women get ahead in their chosen non-family fields because they are women? If so, should the church also help men get ahead in their chosen non-family fields because they are men? What is the purpose, as you see it, of the church concerning a person's desire to get ahead in a career, in family, or in other situations? Explain.
3. What might the term "vocational discipleship" mean for you, regardless of your sex?
4. Should the church encourage men to take on more of the household duties and emotional labor associated with family life? Why or why not? Should the church encourage women to do less of the household duties and emotional labor associated with family life? Why or why not?
5. Using Barna's definitions, do you consider yourself an evangelical, a practicing Christian or belonging to some other category of churchgoer? Does such labeling help or hinder Christian fellowship and mission? Explain your answer.

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Judges 4:8-9

Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And [Deborah] said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. (For context read, Judges 4:1-23.)

This text is set against the backdrop of some 20 years of suffering in Israel at the hands of their Canaanite oppressors. God sent this adversity in response to Israel's ongoing rebellion against the rule of law -- divine law.

Now God hears the cries of the people and sends some help in the form of Barak and Deborah. Despite God's assurance that the Israelites will prevail, Barak was not confident they'd succeed, and only agrees to raise and lead an army against the Canaanites if Deborah will confirm her faith in the promised victory by going along on the military campaign. Deborah agrees, but she warns Barak that the road they take will not bring him glory, because God is going to deliver their enemy into the hand of a woman!

Deborah goes against all previous type recorded in scripture to that point. She is a woman. She is a judge, the only female judge in Israel. She is also a prophet, and the only person in the book of Judges who is both a judge and a prophet. Her person and her leadership are treated with respect, as evidenced by Barak's attitude toward her and the references to her in scripture where she is called "a mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7).

Questions: God evidently had no problem turning over the deliverance of the Chosen People to a woman, when cultural, religious and traditional conventions would have normally been opposed to such a venture. What does this say to us about God, and about our need for effective leadership? Having read this story, can we now say that a woman should not ever be considered for a position of leadership over both men and women solely on the basis of sex? Why or why not?



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John 4:9

The Samaritan woman said to [Jesus], "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) (For context, read John 4:4-26.)

Jesus' treatment of women was radical for the times. He routinely conversed not only with women, but with foreign women, as is the case in this text. Whereas Jewish tradition prohibited females from being taught, Jesus accepted women in his entourage and taught them (notably Mary Magdalene). His language betrays his counter-cultural understanding of women as equals of men when he refers to them as the "daughters of Abraham."

Although his disciples are all males, women played a prominent role in his post-resurrection ministry. In fact, God has women as the first and main witnesses of the resurrection, meeting Jesus and attesting to his resurrection before he appears to any male followers. Jesus frequently criticized the way in which widows were treated and he was not too sympathetic with current divorce laws which were weighted heavily in favor of the husband.

Questions: How have cultural biases against women changed in your lifetime? Have all of these changes been good? Why or why not?

Galatians 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (For context, read, 3:26-29.)

This text is the most well known of all biblical texts that speak to the equality of men and women in the eyes of God. The context is a discussion of the Law of Moses where class and gender distinctions were common. Under the new covenant of Grace, brought to us by Jesus Christ, Paul notes that the cultural biases and barriers have been torn down.

Question: "All of you are one in Christ Jesus." Discuss how this is true in an absolute, objective sense, and how it may not be true in actual practice in the church and in the world. What should the church do about this, if anything?

1 Timothy 2:11-12

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. (For context, read 2:9-15.)

Many scholars believe this pastoral letter to Timothy was written by the apostle Paul about A.D. 65. Indeed, that Paul is the author is the traditional view. Some other scholars, however, believe this letter was written much later and attributed to Paul. (The attribution of authorship to well-known historical figures was common in that day. Assigning authorship to a pseudo but highly regarded author was thought to give the document more weight and authority.)

Why is this important? If First Timothy was written later, perhaps even in the first half of the second century, it would show that the developing church was moving toward a gradual reinstatement of the patriarchal attitude that predated Jesus' ministry. Indeed, there is evidence, such as Paul's words in Galatians 3:28, that the early church welcomed full participation by women.

But many argue that, as the church grew and expanded, church leaders advised members to practice the conventional subjection of wife to husband women so as not to appear different from general society in every respect and thus gain wider acceptance of the church. This verse from First Timothy could be an example of such advice, some scholars say.

Whichever the case, it is in the scriptures and needs to be understood in the context of the rest of the epistle, neither dismissed nor taken out of context.

Questions: Some churches use this text in support of not ordaining women to the priesthood or pastoral office. Many churches, however, do not observe the writer's instruction here and other observations about women in the church, such as the head covering required according to 1 Corinthians 11:5. Why do these wide-ranging biblical interpretations exist in the church? How do you regard verses such as these? Why?



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For Further Discussion

1. Agree or disagree: There is no *biblical* reason to prohibit a woman from holding the office of President of the United States. Explain your reasoning.
2. Debate the following statement: God does not hold us to the cultural and social customs and mores of the ancient world in which the Bible was written. How can one differentiate between what is a social custom or more and what is a binding comment on the nature of people or society?
3. Discuss situations in the workplace where you, as a woman, had a number of men who were your employees or over whom you had authority. Or, discuss situations in the workplace where you, as a man, were accountable to a female boss or supervisor. What sort of adjustments did you need to make, if any? Similarly, discuss where you, as a female, had a male supervisor, or where you as a male had female subordinates. How do the sexual differences play out in today's workplace? How should they play out?
4. Many critics of Christianity claim that the Bible is wildly patriarchal -- that is, men play the dominant roles in leadership, government and family. Without a doubt, most of the cultures in the Bible had fairly well-defined and different roles for men and women. Today, some Christian groups believe that God's design for marriage has the husband as "head of the house," each loving his wife as "Christ loved the Church," basing their view in part on biblical texts. Do you think that this perspective explains, at least in part, why it took so long for women to get the right to vote, and to be accepted not only in the political process as well as in arenas outside the house that were considered the domain of men (medicine, law, science, for example)? Why or why not?

Responding to the News

This is [Women's History Month](#), and thus, a good time to look for ways to celebrate the gifts of women in your community of faith, through worship and special recognition ceremonies.

It's also a good time to consider whether there are "bans," spoken or unspoken that prevent women from playing certain roles in the church, and whether they should be lifted or maintained.

It is also a good time to recognize and celebrate the manifold contributions of women as mothers and homemakers.

Prayer

O God, thank you for empowering us all, male and female, with special and unique gifts. Help us to glorify you as we work together for the greater good and for the improvement of life around us. Help us to support each other as we seek to do your will and share your love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

Research Shows Isolation Significant Health Risk for Americans

In the News

As Congress debates how the nation should structure medical care for its citizens, a report surfaced in *The Boston Globe Magazine* regarding the biggest health threat facing middle-age men. And it's not what you might think.

Vivtek Murthy, the surgeon general of the United States, points to increased isolation rather than cancer, heart disease or obesity as the most widespread condition negatively affecting the health of Americans, especially as we age. He described loneliness as "a public health epidemic."

Research presented in February at a conference in Boston indicates that men form meaningful relationships through a shared activity, experience or ordeal, such as school, sports or military service. Once that activity or experience ends, the close relationship may as well.



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The same thing can happen for women as well, of course. But one study of photographs of friends interacting showed that female friends typically converse facing one another, while male friends tend to converse side by side, facing the world together rather than looking at each other. This may indicate that women may tend to spend time with friends for the sake of the relationship while men do so for the sake of a shared task or mission. That may help explain why men may have more trouble maintaining long-term friendships.

Multiple studies from the 1980s on demonstrate that social isolation increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke and Alzheimer's, as well as death.

A 35-year Brigham Young University study of tracking data from 3.5 million people published in 2015 revealed that people who are lonely, isolated, or living alone have a 26-32 percent increased risk of dying prematurely. Nearly one in three persons older than 65 lives alone in America; by age 85, one in two fit that description.

Middle-age men in particular tend to let close friendships lapse as they age. Reasons vary: As demands of work and family increase, less time is available to spend with friends, and fewer projects or experiences are shared with their friends.

There's another explanation for the increase in isolation among men. "Admitting you're lonely feels very much like admitting you're a loser," said psychiatrist Richard S. Schwartz, co-author of *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-First Century*.

"Psychiatry has worked hard to de-stigmatize things like depression, and to a large part it has been successful," Schwartz continued. "People are comfortable saying they're depressed. But they're not comfortable saying they're lonely, because you're the kid sitting alone in the cafeteria."

People of any age and gender may find themselves socially isolated and emotionally lonely for many reasons.

Denis Estimon, a high-school senior at Boca Raton Community High School in Boca Raton, Florida, remembers how isolated he felt as a first grader sitting alone at lunch shortly after he immigrated from Haiti. He noticed that among the 3,400 kids at his school, some were ostracized or simply ignored.

"It's not a good feeling, like you're by yourself," Estimon said. "That's something that I don't want anybody to go through."

So he started a club called *We Dine Together*. Club members make a point of seeking out students who are alone to invite them to join them at the lunch table. Hundreds of friendships, many surprising and unexpected, have formed since the club's inception last fall.

Allie Sealy was one of those who benefited from the offer of hospitality. Two years ago, she left a school where she had friends to transfer to Boca High where she knew no one. Having to sit alone at lunchtime felt "excruciating," she said. "Meeting someone who actually cares and listens to what you have to say, really makes a difference," she added. Now Sealy is one of those who reaches out to new students or others on the fringe of the school community.

Schwartz told *The Boston Globe* that men have more success maintaining friendships when they establish a regular activity or meeting at set times with other men.

TWW team member Joanna Loucky-Ramsey mentioned that as her husband aged, he began to meet regularly at McDonald's for breakfast with other men, and to lunch frequently with other older adults at a local housing complex for seniors. While he calls these meals "his ministry," he also seems to benefit personally from the interaction, Loucky-Ramsey said. "He feels connected to other people socially, which minimizes his isolation and loneliness, and gives him a sense of purpose and meaning. He feels he is making a difference in the lives of others just by showing up and offering friendship to others."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[The Biggest Threat Facing Middle-age Men Isn't Smoking or Obesity. It's Loneliness. *The Boston Globe*](#)
[Most Valuable Lesson at One Florida High School Taught at Lunch. *CBS News*](#)
[Sorry, But If You're a Christian, You Need to Go to Church. Regularly. *Lexington Herald Leader*](#)



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The Big Questions

1. Describe a time when you felt particularly isolated and/or lonely. Have you ever experienced health changes you thought might have been triggered by isolation or loneliness? Explain. What role does your faith play in how you handle isolation or loneliness?
2. In your experience, do men respond differently to isolation than women do? If so, in what ways?
3. Do you think your church might need different strategies to address the friendship needs of men and women? If so, what might those strategies look like? What shared activities, adventures or experiences does your church already provide to help people build friendships? What activities might you provide that are not currently part of your ministry?
4. Where do you see the community of the people of God answering the human need for friendship, love, belonging and affirmation of worth and significance?
5. Who do you know in your community who might be feeling isolated or lonely? How could your church minister most effectively to that person or group?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

1 Kings 19:14-15, 18

[Elijah] answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the LORD said to him, ... Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him." (For context, read 19:11-18.)

After a great spiritual victory at Mount Carmel, Elijah received a message from Jezebel, the queen, threatening to kill him. Elijah fled for his life, feeling that he alone remained among the prophets of the Lord.

When things aren't going well, we sometimes see things in exaggerated ways: NOBODY likes me. EVERYTHING is going wrong. You're the ONLY ONE who understands. I'm the ONLY ONE left. Psychologists call this kind of thinking "catastrophizing."

Questions: Why do you suppose Elijah couldn't imagine that there were in fact seven thousand other prophets in Israel who had remained faithful to God? How can you avoid making poor decisions based on isolation, fear and faulty information?

Luke 6:12-13

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles. (For context, read 6:12-16.)

As Jesus launched his public ministry, he gathered disciples around him, teaching them through the spoken word and by example. One could argue that in some ways those disciples made his job more difficult, and that he might have been better off without them. At times when he needed them most, they failed him. Nonetheless, he intentionally began to build a team that would implement his ministry of reconciliation.

Questions: Why didn't Jesus just "fly solo" when he began his public ministry? What did he expect to gain from building relationships with men? What did he want his disciples to take away from the experience of working together?

Acts 2:44-46

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, (For context, read 2:42-47.)

In the early days of the Jerusalem church, believers spent a lot of time together for purposes of learning the faith, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (v. 42). They provided for one another's needs and shared meals as well as possessions.

Questions: How closely does your church resemble the early church in the practices mentioned in this text? How do these practices strengthen bonds among believers?



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Matthew 11:19

... the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. (For context, read 11:16-19.)

Luke 15:1-2

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (For context, read 15:1-7.)

Jesus was criticized for befriending tax collectors and sinners, with whom he dared to sit at table. He said, in essence, "No one eats alone. We dine together." That means his table was (and is) open to all.

Questions: How important is sharing meals together for your church? What happens when you eat together?

Galatians 2:11-12

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. (For context, read 2:6-12.)

In this chapter, Paul says that the leaders of the early church acknowledged that all people, whether Jew or Gentile, are saved by faith through Christ. That meant that Jews no longer were bound by certain restrictions barring them from sharing a meal with non-Jews. But Cephas (aka Peter) changed his behavior to accommodate hard-liners who objected to such inclusivity. Paul considered this shift hypocritical and against the gospel, and he wasn't afraid to say so.

Questions: What do you suppose happened to Peter's relationship with the Gentile believers after he stopped eating with them? Have you ever shut certain people out of your life or church because you were afraid of what others would say or do if you openly welcomed them? When you see this kind of behavior in other believers, what should you do?

For Further Discussion

1. TWW team member Stan Purdum reflected on his early experience in school: "Because my parents' ministry was in the Salvation Army, a denomination that moves their officers (ministers) a lot, I lived in 16 different places in the first 18 years of my life, in six different states. I attended three high schools in two different states.

"Perhaps oddly, I don't remember much loneliness in school because of all this moving. In the younger grades, it didn't take long to be accepted. High school was different because the cliques were already formed, but I found my friends among the 'leftovers,' who turned out to be pretty interesting people. Raised in an evangelical environment, I sort of expected not to fit in with the 'worldly' kids, so I didn't hanker to belong to their insider groups (and probably was guilty of spiritual pride that I didn't!). All of this is probably atypical, but I wasn't lonely. (I didn't much like it that all the cute girls were already 'taken' however!)"

What was your own early experience in school? Did you experience loneliness or lack of friendship? How did that affect you?

2. Comment on this from Paul Prather, pastor of Bethesda Church near Mount Sterling, Kentucky: "Christianity is a team sport. Permit me a humble analogy. You might see yourself as a terrific baseball pitcher. But if you only throw baseballs in your backyard at a plywood cutout, you won't progress. You're not even really playing baseball. To discover the full extent of your abilities, to understand the true game, you need a catcher, a coach, infielders and outfielders -- and even someone standing in the batter's box ready to swat your best fastball right back at you. Same with being a Christian. You can't do it well by yourself."

3. Discuss this, also from Prather: "Communion is among our faith's central sacraments, a ritual that celebrates Christians as members of a spiritual, God-ordained community. We're many individuals who, joined together with Jesus and each other, form one great cosmic body. It's in our spiritual DNA that we rely on one another; no one stands alone."

Responding to the News

Brainstorm ways your church can provide opportunities to strengthen friendships and minimize isolation and loneliness that could have a negative impact on church and community members. Begin to plan how you could implement just one of the ideas your discussion generated.

Or consider what you individually can do to alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation of a member of your church or community. Then do it!



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Prayer

Lord God who calls us into the beloved community of faith, help us to be mindful that we are not alone as we follow your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. We thank you for the brothers and sisters you have given us to walk together on the journey. May we not neglect our responsibility to love and cherish them, and to build them up, that the family of God may be strengthened to shine the light of Christ in our darkening world. Amen.

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