

# Answering the Cessationists' Case against Continuing Spiritual Gifts

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By Jon Ruthven

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In the preceding article, we left our friend, George, the novice charismatic whose excited testimony ran into a wall of biblical-sounding arguments from his pastor, a cessationist.<sup>1</sup> This article offered a kind of pocket guide of “pro” charismatic arguments which George (or you, gentle reader) can photocopy and send to your cessationist friends for comment. We now offer George some responses to a couple of prominent arguments he is likely to hear from his cessationist pastor and others like him.

The most thorough catalog of cessationist arguments—and answers—appears in these pages in Wayne Grudem’s four-part article, a reprint of chapter 2 in an excellent book by Gary Greig and Kevin Springer, editors of *The Kingdom and the Power: Are Healing and the Spiritual Gifts Used by Jesus and the Apostles and the Early Church Meant for the Church Today?* published by Regal Books in 1993.

This present article seeks to supplement that chapter with answers to two prominent objections to continuing spiritual gifts: 1) “History shows that miraculous spiritual gifts have ceased,” or, in a variation of that objection: “If miracles and spiritual gifts have continued, then why don’t we see them as widespread and obvious today as in New Testament times?” 2) “Ephesians 2:20 shows that the ‘foundational gifts’ of apostle and prophet have ceased.” In my experience, these are two of the most common cessationist arguments in use today which are worth examining.

## 1. “History shows that miraculous spiritual gifts have ceased.”

Following Benjamin Warfield’s classic cessationist work, *Counterfeit Miracles* published in 1918, many today appeal to history to show the cessation of miraculous gifts. Warfield insisted that his book stood on “two legs”: biblical and historical proofs. But his “legs” were grossly disproportional: probably 97% of his book stood on the historical leg, while his biblical arguments were haphazardly scattered through his pages, responding only to the biblical arguments of his opponents.

Older Pentecostals and charismatics find this odd, since our critics have often said that we base our “theology” on “experience” rather than on the word of God. Yet an appeal to “history” is actually an appeal to “experiences”—at least to those in the past. These days, the shoe is very much on the other foot: cessationists increasingly appeal to “experience” (history) while charismatics, like Jack Deere, Gordon Fee, Wayne Grudem, Gary Greig, Max Turner and John Wimber are building increasingly sophisticated *biblical* arguments.<sup>2</sup>

Cessationists often cite horror stories in connection with charismatic manifestations, as for example, Hank Hanegraaff in his book, *Counterfeit Revival*<sup>3</sup> or John MacArthur in *Charismatic Chaos*. Certainly the Pentecostal/charismatic movement has had its share of weirdoes. But the cessationists’ *ad hominem* argument (against individuals rather than against the proposition) does not deal with the issue: according to Scripture, are charismatic manifestations a *normative* part of the Christian life today?

We have all heard the story of a Chinese missionary overhearing a Pentecostal person “cursing Christ” while speaking in tongues in Chinese, repeated like an urban legend (the poodle in the microwave; the alligators in the sewer; the disappearing hitch-hiker, *etc.*) for decades. The “Chinese curser” seems to be a story recycled from Alma White, *Demons and Tongues*.<sup>4</sup> Such negative stories can more than be matched, however, by such works as Ralph Harris’s popular paperback, *Spoken by the Spirit: Documented Accounts of “Other Tongues” from Arabic to Zulu* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Pub. House, 1973) or Albert J. Hebert, *Raised from the Dead: True Stories of 400 Resurrection Miracles* (Rockford, IL: TAN Publications, 1986) and numerous others.<sup>5</sup>

*But does in fact an examination of history show that spiritual gifts and miracles ceased in the post-apostolic era?* Recently, a friend of mine who taught in a traditionally cessationist seminary set out to prove that Warfield was right: that the gift of prophecy ceased after the apostles died. When he carefully examined the literature, however, he came to publish exactly the opposite conclusion!<sup>6</sup> At my suggestion, he wrote another excellent piece of research showing that the early church fathers actually used 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 as proof that prophecy *would continue in all the church until the end of the age.*<sup>7</sup> In *no case*, did he find that the fathers *ever* used 1 Cor 13:8-12 as a text to indicate the closing of the canon or the “maturity” of the church as modern cessationists have tried to do. In fact, he shows that it was *the heretics* who tried to use 1 Cor 13 in this way!

Many good books have been produced showing the frequent outbreak of miracles and spiritual gifts throughout church history (See also the excellent series by Richard Riss entitled “Tongues and Other Miraculous Gifts from the 2nd to 19th Centuries” which appeared in the first five issue of the *Pneuma Review*, Fall 1998 (Vol 1 No 1) through Fall 1999 (Vol 2, No 4)). We will offer only three seldom-quoted examples of many hundreds available. Chapter 22 of St. Augustine’s *City of God* is devoted to the story of how Augustine himself became a full blown “charismatic” after being a bit of a theological cessationist. He repudiates his previous position, and provides examples of over seventy miracles he recorded in and around his churches. Augustine complains in section 22,8 that contemporary miracles are relatively unknown not because they no longer occur, but simply because of bad communication and because people are conditioned to disbelieve them.<sup>8</sup> Pope Gregory VI in writing about the successful evangelism of Britain enthused: “...great miracles imitate powers of the apostles in the signs they [perform].”<sup>9</sup> Much later, Luther seems to have undergone a similar conversion to that of Augustine toward the end of his life.

Martin Luther was never a shrinking violet, but at one point he sounds bolder than Kenneth Hagin! After snatching his friend, Melancthon “from death’s arms,” Luther describes his incredibly aggressive prayer: “In this instance our Lord God had to pay *me*; for I threw the bag of concerns before his door and I dinned his ears with all of his promises as to how he desired to favorably hear our prayer—promises which I well knew how to document in Scripture! I put it to him that he had to grant my request if he expected me to continue to trust his promises!”<sup>10</sup>

Until recently, as in Augustine’s time, most Christians in the West have been conditioned, even by church leaders, to disbelieve and discount any contemporary miracle stories. Now, with the advent of primarily charismatic television ministries and a knee-jerk reaction against the sterile Enlightenment rationalism that has dominated Western thought, many more Americans are believing in the power of God. Thirty percent of American adults reported that they had experienced “a remarkable healing” in their lives<sup>11</sup>, while a total of 78% of Americans either “believe” (27%) or ‘strongly believe’ (51%) that “even today miracles are performed by the power of God,” only 15% somewhat disagreed or 6% strongly disagreed!<sup>12</sup>

We turn now to probably the most prominent *biblical* argument used by cessationists today.

## **2. “Ephesians 2:20 shows that the ‘foundational gifts’ of apostle and prophet have ceased.”**

*The argument by analogy based on the metaphor of apostles and prophets as foundational to the church (Eph. 2.20 and 3.5) does not support the cessation of “miraculous” spiritual gifts.* Some cessationists have approached Eph. 2.20 as *the* authoritative flow chart of the universal church. The apostles and prophets serve as a “foundation” in the sense that they collectively represent a kind of oral “interim New Testament,” their gifts and functions being extinguished when normative doctrine is set down in writing within the first generation or two of the church.<sup>13</sup> Generally, this argument is framed against the mindset of Reformation-era polemics and Enlightenment rationalism, with unexamined premises about Popes, apostolic succession and authority, miracles, “ordinary and extraordinary” spiritual gifts, and even the essential nature of the gospel itself. There are at least four premises in this argument.

1. The metaphor of “foundation,” to support cessationism, requires that the *distinctive function* of apostles and prophets is to establish the parameters of *church doctrine*, particularly as it appears in the New Testament. Hence, when their collective function is complete, the gifts of apostleship and prophecy necessarily pass from the scene.

Recent advocates of cessationism are sensitive to charges that this argument is anachronistic, that it reads much later theological ideas back into the New Testament. They also recognize that it is unlikely that the “foundational” apostles and prophets involved were at all aware of their role as an interim New Testament. Nevertheless, the

argument remains essentially unaltered: these “foundational” gifts are strictly limited to this brief, transitional function.

The problem with this view is that not only does the New Testament nowhere explicitly state that this is the *only* role for apostles and prophets, it does not even state that this is *one* of their roles. In Ephesians, the explicit roles given for apostles and prophets are that they are to work in concert with evangelists, pastors and teachers in equipping the saints *until* ultimate unity and Christian maturity is achieved in all. If the duration of the gifts is necessarily connected with their function, as these cessationists argue, then clearly the task of apostles and prophets is not complete until every single member of the church reaches the same level of Christian maturity as Christ himself (Eph. 4.13). Most cessationists would agree with St. Paul (Phil. 3.12) who does not have the audacity to make the claim that he has attained that level. Certainly we have not yet reached “unity of the faith” even on the issue of cessationism. To claim that the *only* function of apostles and prophets in the New Testament is to formulate doctrine for inclusion in the Bible is in itself unbiblical. But if there are other roles for them, then the “foundational” argument fails.

2. *If the charismata were only for “foundational” purposes, then the apostles and prophets were Protestant Popes.* That is, they served as the unique receivers and articulators of Christian revelation, a role that no one may subsequently share. However, it can be argued that the New Testament sees these gifts as first and definitive, but certainly not *un-repeatable*.

These “foundational gifts” actually serve as *prototypes, or as role models for others to follow*. It is true that the original experience of Christ’s revelation is “epochal,” or “pioneering.” It is also true that these experiences are offered as a model for others to follow. Just as Lindberg’s crossing of the Atlantic was “foundational” or “epochal” it was so *only because* other similar flights followed; Lindberg opened a new era of a *repeatable* action.

For the church, then, the apostolic and prophetic gift is “foundational” not only in the sense that the apostles and prophets first announced the gospel in some areas, but that all further revelation about Christ is delineated, articulated, qualified, and offered for *reduplication* by its original receivers. Hence, this passage shows not that the gifts of apostleship and prophecy ceased, but rather that since these people’s experience is “foundational” and archetypal, their experience and functions therefore *must continue*.

Most importantly we must remember that the apostles and prophets only communicated their revelations; they did not create them, *ex cathedra*. They were not, after all, God. Hence their lives, experiences with Christ and ministries are, to the extent that they followed Christ, necessarily exemplary and repeatable, inviting rabbinic pedagogical imitation as do Jesus and Paul.<sup>14</sup>

At least three points support this. First, Paul lays stress on the “connection” of Jews and Gentiles via access to the Father, not simply through a funnel of apostolic authority, but “through [Christ]. . . by *one Spirit*” (the Revealer) in Eph. 2.18. Secondly, just as Paul received by revelation his gospel of reconciliation between God, Jews and Gentiles (3.3), so now the *whole church*, by reading (3.3-4) and by *revelation* by the *power of the Spirit* (3.1-18) is similarly to grasp the scope of God’s love (*inter alia*, the inclusion of the Gentiles). Thirdly, and most explicitly, Christ *gave*<sup>15</sup> these apostles and prophets *until* (*mechri*) ultimate, eschatological goals of Christian upbuilding and maturity are achieved (4.13) “that *we all* attain to the unity of the faith” (this has happened?!); that *we all* attain to the knowledge of the Son of God (but to what extent?) to mature manhood *to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* (has this happened to *all Christians*?). These goals can only be attained in heaven! Until then, apostles and prophets (however the church may have later labeled them) are envisioned to be continuously at work *until* these goals are met—only in heaven.

Two profound ironies on this point appear: 1) despite the insistence on the integrity of the immutable doctrinal “foundation,” conservative Protestants willingly accept the drastic reshaping of doctrines away from their biblical emphases. Oddly enough, this reshaping has happened through the acceptance of now discredited Greek philosophical premises and the evolution of systematic theology over two millennia. For proof of this, contrast the biblical emphases on the doctrines of the Holy Spirit and the kingdom of God against systematic theology of Protestant orthodoxy. Since we have been *raised with* these grotesque distortions of emphasis, we remain comfortable with them.

2) Moreover, conservative Protestants *in practice* hold to a continuing apostleship insofar as they cite as the final authority their denominational and traditional leaders such as Luther, Calvin and Wesley. In many writings, the teachings of these leaders appear with greater frequency and authority than even the apostles of the New Testament itself.

3. To preserve the argument claiming that the “foundation” is the first generation of the Church, Christ as “cornerstone” must lie at the same chronological level as the apostles and prophets. That is, Christ must be part of the first generation “foundation”.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the cessationist argument-by-analogy collapses if Christ is not limited to the “foundation” in Eph. 2.20.

The foundation metaphor probably echoes the tradition of Jesus about Peter’s revelation/confession: “You are Peter (*Petros*) and upon this rock [*petra*] (*the* revelation about Christ) I will build my church” (Mt. 16.18). This “rock” seems to consist of a revelatory process and its content—a revelation of Christ and his significance. Hence in Eph. 2.20 apostles and prophets represent the “foundation” of the church, of which Christ Jesus is the “cornerstone,” “key-stone” or “head of the corner,” who, via the Spirit, continually and individually *reveals* Himself, holds the structure together, both from above and from below (I Cor. 3.11).<sup>17</sup> Since Christ seems to be portrayed not only as a *foundation* stone but also as a *final* stone in the temple of God, Eph. 2.20 argues against the cessationist chronological schema of successive generations of believers (courses of stones) being built on the deposit of doctrine represented by the apostles and prophets.

The death of Christ does not spell the end of his work in the church via the Spirit (and His gifts). If He continues to be “fitted into” each person in the temple who exists “in Him” or “in the Lord,” then the implications for this continuing activity for the other parts of the “foundation” are interesting indeed. Do we not have here the same idea as in Eph. 1.21-22, where Christ permeates the church “not only in the present age, but also in the one to come”? The pattern here suggests that the activity and presence of Christ is not limited to an initiatory period in this age, followed by inactivity, followed by more of His presence in the age to come, as Warfield suggested.<sup>18</sup> Like Christ, the presence and activity of apostles and prophets are continuous in this present age.

4. The most unsettling premise of the “foundational” argument is the notion employed of what ultimately is the “foundation”—the most important element or core value—of the church. Some cessationists appear to be insisting that the “foundation” is the established doctrine of the New Testament documents. As one committed to the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, I would never seek to minimize the central significance of the Bible for faith. Nevertheless, the Bible in general, and Ephesians in particular, does not identify itself as the foundational core of the church. Rather, this “foundational core” is the ongoing series of revelatory encounters with Christ, which open our hearts to the Scriptures. The disclosure experience of Christ, although within its biblical framework, is truly the foundation of the church. St. Paul was concerned that Christians’ faith rested *not* on *words*, but on “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (I Cor. 2.14).

Christian cessationist Fundamentalism lies close to the rabbinic tradition of “it is not in heaven”—meaning that the Torah was given once and for all—and that ultimate religious authority now rests with the interpretive abilities of the scribes, as against any further miraculous or revelatory experience. Cessationists tend to model their salvation-history after the dubious rabbinic doctrine that after the last book in the Tanakh (Old Testament) God would send no more prophets.<sup>19</sup> Cessationists may counter that they still uphold the doctrine of illumination, the view that the Spirit continues its “revelatory” work in the clarification and application of Scripture. This is a sound and biblical position, but one that is often ignored in practice.<sup>20</sup> In any case, the doctrine of illumination is no substitute for the life-changing spiritual encounter with Christ or His continuing revelatory gifts of the Spirit, though they do work together.

A central aspect of the Messiah’s coming was to inaugurate the age of the (prophetic) Spirit,<sup>21</sup> to fulfill the Law; to move the center of perceiving God’s mind and will into the heart (the spiritual center of perception), away from the external coercion of the Law. The scribal suppression of the Spirit’s revelatory presence prompted Jesus to say, “You know [in the sense of “divinely understand”] neither the Scriptures nor the power of God!” The loss of one necessarily indicated the loss of both. It was against this Judaizing tendency among the Galatians that an exasperated Paul asked, “Having begun in the [revelatory, miracle-working] Spirit, will you now be completed in the [Godless human abilities] of the flesh?”

## Conclusion

Our friend George need not fear. Cessationism is an increasingly beleaguered position represented by three concentric circles. Many strongest defenders of cessationism in the inner circle are defecting to more modern “mediator” positions, who can see both sides and respect the arguments of charismatics, but still resist personal change. But this second circle in turn is losing defectors to the outer circle of the “open-but-cautious” position. It may well be that if present trends continue, and we speak the truth in love, that our friend George will one day

discover that cessationism has taken its rightful place in the Museum of Theological Curiosities beside the “gap theory” of creation, the bodily ascension of Mary, and the doctrine that Mussolini is the antichrist.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For our purposes, a “cessationist” is one who believes that miracles or “miraculous” spiritual gifts accredited the new doctrine inscripturated in the New Testament, and therefore they ceased when either the apostles died or the New Testament was written.
- <sup>2</sup> Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Zondervan, 1993), *Surprised by the Voice of God* (Zondervan, 1996); Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson, 1994); Wayne Grudem, *Power and Truth* (Assoc. Vineyard Churches, 1993), *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994); Gary Greig (above); Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* (Hendrickson, 1996); John Wimber (with Kevin Springer) *Power Healing* (Harper, 1987); and my own *On the Cessation of the Charismata* (Sheffield Acad. Pr., 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> See my review article of *Counterfeit Revival*, “Was Jesus also a Heretic?” *Charisma* (July 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> (Zarephath, N.J.: Pillar of Fire Publishers, [1936] 1949), 92. You can see another variation of this on the internet: <http://www.hopeint.org/off/9611-04.htm>.  
<http://www.tebidine.com/bethany/guestbook/guestbook.html>.
- <sup>5</sup> Stanley M. Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions* (formerly titled *The Spirit and the Church: Antiquity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984)), Ronald N. Kydd, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church: An Exploration into the Gifts of the Spirit in the First Three Centuries of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), Johan C. Beker, “Prophecy and the Spirit in the Apostolic Fathers,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1955); George Williams and Edith Waldvogel, “A History of Speaking in Tongues and Related Gifts,” in *The Charismatic Movement*, edited by Michael P. Hamilton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 61-113; Ted A. Campbell, “Charismata in the Christian Communities of the Second Century,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 17 (Fall 1982): 7-25; Darling, Frank C. *Christian healing in the Middle Ages and Beyond* (Boulder, Colo.: Vista Publications, 1990); *idem*, *The Restoration of Christian Healing: New Freedom in the Church since the Reformation* (Boulder Colo.: Vista Publications, 1992); H. M. Evans, “Tertullian: Pentecostal of Carthage,” *Paraclete* 9 (Fall 1975): 17-21; Andrew T. Floris, “Two Fourth Century Witnesses on the Charismata,” *Paraclete* 4 (Fall 1970): 17-22; “Chrysostom and the Charismata,” *Paraclete* 5 (Winter 1971): 17-22; Harold Hunter, “Tongues-speech: A Patristic Analysis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23 (June 1980): 125-37; Morton Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 135-99; Jean LaPorte, “The Holy Spirit, Source of Life and Activity according to the Early Church,” in *Perspectives on Charismatic Renewal*, ed. Edward D. O’Connor (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975): 57-99; Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Visions and Prophecy in the Writings of Cyprian,” *Paraclete* 16 (Summer 1982): 21-25; Hermann Schlingensiepen, *Die Wunder des Neuen Testament: Wege und Abwege bis zur Mitte des fufften Jahrhunderts* (Gttersloh: Verlag I. Bertlesmann, 1933); Hendrik F. Stander, “Miraculous Charisms in Eusebius’s Time,” *Paraclete* 21 (Fall 1982): 11-14; Jacques Serr, “Les charisms dans la vie de l’eglise; temoinages patristiques,” *Foi et Vie* 72, no. 1 (1973): 33-42 and Eusebius A. Stephanou, “The Charismata in the Early Church Fathers,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 21 (Summer 1976): 125-46, among others.
- <sup>6</sup> Gary S. Shogren, “Christian Prophecy and Canon in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century: A Response to B. B. Warfield,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/4 (Dec 1997), 609-26.
- <sup>7</sup> Gary S. Shogren, “When and How Does “the Perfect” Come? 1 Cor 13:8-12 in Patristic Exegesis,” forthcoming in *Journal of Pentecostal Studies*.
- <sup>8</sup> *NPF*, 1st ser., I: 485.
- <sup>9</sup> See note 4, above. Gregory VI? Epistle XXX, *PNF* 12.2, 1163.
- <sup>10</sup> Cited in Th. Jungkuntz, “Charismatic Renewal,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42/1 (1971), 5-23.
- <sup>11</sup> Gallup Religion Data. <http://www.prrc.com/data.html#3> IN 10
- <sup>12</sup> George Gallup, Jr., and Sara Jones, *100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America* (Princeton: Hermitage Press, 1989), 10.
- <sup>13</sup> For example by R. B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg: PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 1979), pp. 93-116; R. L. Thomas, “Prophecy Rediscovered? A Review of *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*,” *BS* 149 (January-March 1922), pp. 83-96; K.I. Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem* (Memphis: Footstool, 1989); R.F. White, “Gaffin and Grudem on Eph. 2:20: In Defense of Gaffin’s Cessationist Exegesis,” *WJT* 54 (1992), pp. 303-20; and F.D. Farnell, “The Gift of Prophecy in the Old and New Testaments,” *BS* 149/596 (October-December 1992), pp. 407-10.

- <sup>14</sup> See my article, "The 'Imitation of Christ' in Christian Tradition: Its Missing Charismatic Emphasis," forthcoming in *The Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, where I argue that a central mission of Jesus was to provide a rabbinic "pattern-to-follow" for his disciples: that Jesus' life was to be duplicated exactly in terms of charismatic ministry.
- <sup>15</sup> "Gave" (*edoken*—aorist tense) need not mean that Christ gave these gifts once and for all never to repeat them in any other generation. Otherwise, today we would have no claim to the gifts given as evangelists, pastors and teachers, which are here listed seamlessly with apostles and prophets. It is reasonable to ascribe to this tense the eternal view of Christ in the same sense that He "chose us before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1.3). In this same context "He lavished [his grace] on us with *all* wisdom and understanding" (1.8).
- <sup>16</sup> For example by Farnell, "Is the Gift of Prophecy for Today?," p. 409.
- <sup>17</sup> I cannot improve on the argument for this by Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* Anchor Bible Commentary, pp. 317-19.
- <sup>18</sup> *Counterfeit Miracles*, 27.
- <sup>19</sup> See Greenspahn, "Why Prophecy Ceased," pp. 37-39.
- <sup>20</sup> C. Pinnock, "The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," *JPT* 2 (1993), pp. 3-23.
- <sup>21</sup> The thesis of Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers* (Sheffield: Sheffield Univ. Acad. Pr, 1999).

*Dr. Jon Mark Ruthven is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Regent University School of Divinity in Virginia Beach, Virginia. His book, On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Post-biblical Miracles (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) continues to contribute to the scholarly discussion on the gifts of the Spirit for today. See the review of this book in this issue. He can be reached via E-mail at: <ruthven@regent.edu>. <http://home.regent.edu/ruthven/ruthhome.html>*

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