



Queensland
Churches Together

Which Program? What Course?

The Purpose-Driven[®] Life

by Rick Warren -

a case study

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Page references to *The Purpose-Driven® Life* are taken from the following edition:
The Purpose-Driven® Life by Rick Warren, Zondervan 2002, in the Ministry edition printed for Australia and New Zealand by Church Resources Specialties.

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Introduction

These days congregations across the denominational spectrum are searching for new growth and vigour. Many of them turn to a variety of available courses and programs, hoping these will provide the key. *Alpha*, *40 Days of Purpose* and *Living the Questions* are just some examples. Characteristically, programmes of this kind are used not only by one denomination: in some cases, individuals from one church are invited by friends to join a course at a different church, and the courses are used by various denominations.

Recognising the significant influence such programmes are having on church life, the Faith and Unity Commission of Queensland Churches Together (Faith & Unity) decided to examine one of them in more detail. The example chosen by Faith & Unity is Rick Warren's well-known book, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), which forms the backbone of the *40 Days of Purpose* campaign.

Queensland Churches Together aims to provide a tool for clergy and lay leaders ... to help them discern the value of such courses for their congregations.

Through this exercise Queensland Churches Together aims to provide a tool for clergy and lay leaders who are considering embarking on this programme in particular, but also on other programmes of a similar nature, to help them discern the value of courses like this for their congregations.

The Faith and Unity Commission recognises that most courses designed for use in congregations contain devotional and educational material that may be of great benefit to people exploring their faith. They encourage people to engage seriously with scripture, prayer, worship and Christian living, even though their approaches vary greatly. Individual study and reflection, small group work and lecture-style presentations are just some of the methods of involvement that are offered. The focussed learning and questioning usually occurs at the small group level, so that the personal nature of the interaction becomes an attractive feature. Hence at the levels of both content and process, most courses do have something to offer.

On the other hand, each of these courses is written from a particular theological perspective which may differ from, or even contradict, the confessional or denominational teachings of those conducting the course. It goes without saying that confusion may result, not only in the minds of those participating in the programme, but also – should some of the participants hold positions of leadership – in the overall teaching of that congregation.

Faith & Unity feels that an additional note of caution needs to be sounded in relation to the contextual nature of some of the material on offer. If it does not originate from Australia, does it fit the Australian context? Is it introducing presuppositions or practices which go against the culture and traditions of the church in question? Furthermore, while it may not hold true for all such programmes, a number of them pursue quite aggressive marketing strategies in order to distribute their product. It would be wise to undertake a critical examination of the claims made in the marketing

material, along with consideration of the total costs, before beginning the course.

The Purpose Driven Life: a case study

Though it is provided as a group study to change the life of churches, the main thrust of *The Purpose Driven Life* is personal devotion. Much in this book is genuinely inspirational as a series of reflections on the human, spiritual and Christian life. It gives helpful ideas on the importance and place of worship, fellowship, spiritual growth, spiritual service, and evangelical witness. It tries to take human experience seriously as the basis for a genuine gospel-based life. It also uses insights and experiences of ‘spiritual people’ from a variety of Christian traditions. Clearly, the author wants to connect with Christians across the range of Christian churches. He also wants to promote dialogue between the biblical texts and the contemporary human/global context. Such a dialogical approach is commendable.

The Purpose Driven Life is not intended to be a theological treatise but a study which challenges readers to rethink their Christian life. It emphasizes the believer’s relationship with God rather than with the community of believers or with the world.

In its examination of the material Faith & Unity decided to focus on Warren’s treatment of a number of important themes: Scripture, God and Grace, the Church, Worship, and Mission.

Theme One: Scripture

In his book *The Purpose Driven Life* Rick Warren claims to have used nearly 1,000 quotes from scripture. While this sounds impressive, it is in fact a very small selection. Matthew's gospel alone has 1,081 verses.

Warren has a particular message and backs it up with what he believes to be relevant texts. In terms of achieving his purpose – which is to encourage and develop the faith and commitment of individual Christians – the scriptures used are appropriate and helpful. However, this emphasis means that his choice of quotes is quite narrow, even selective. Surprisingly, he cites few texts which refer to God or Jesus – most of them refer to the individual.

That having been said, we must acknowledge that we all use individual texts in order to provide comfort and challenge: No piece of writing or conversation can possibly reflect the whole message of scripture!

Yet some important principles are omitted. These include:

- love of enemies (Matthew 5:43-47). Warren prefers to emphasize the love of fellow believers (pages 56 and 230);
- not being anxious about the future (Matthew 6). Warren claims that the Bible has nothing to say about living in the here and now (48).
- the first being last (Matthew 20:16 et al).

When Warren says that Jesus was a friend of sinners (Matthew 18:9), he implies that this refers to Christian sinners, not prostitutes and other sinners like tax collectors.

There is little reference to suffering and no grappling with the difficult situations which all of us face, whether Christians or not. Pain is seen to be part of God's purpose (84), or it is about testing. Forgiveness does not receive a mention, neither does care for the poor and the outcast.

Warren's insistence on saying: 'the Bible says' is confusing. It implies a monoculture, whereas the Bible is multifaceted and developmental. A broader framework could be created by reading scripture in its context and by providing access to a greater range of material. A careful examination of each text would reveal more, as would some cross-referencing.

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Warren uses a variety of translations – fifteen in fact. This can be misleading or confusing. While it is useful to read a number of versions of scripture in order to enhance our understanding of a passage, it can be bewildering to have the same text quoted in different translations depending on what the author wishes to say. As an example, on page 131, Warren quotes The Message version of Romans 12:4-5. This bears no resemblance to the verse as it is translated in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Which translation tells us what St Paul really meant - The Message or the NRSV? Likewise on page 132 the Living Bible's interpretation of Ephesians 2:19b differs significantly from that of other translations. The use of so many different translations also means that many texts which one could normally recognize sound completely foreign, and their source needs to be identified. One cannot escape the

suspicion that Warren uses whichever translation makes his point, thus enabling him to use more than one translation of a text in different places, employing the same text to support different arguments.

It might be useful to reflect on scriptures that present differing viewpoints.

Warren's method of referencing makes it difficult to check the texts, since the number of texts is overwhelming, and most of them are only referenced in the endnotes at the back of the book.

Of concern is that a number of texts are used out of context. For example, Warren cites Philippians 3:7 to talk about addressing priorities. Paul is actually talking about giving up the importance he placed on his Jewish heritage (38). Sometimes Warren misrepresents the text, where for example he says 'Temptation only becomes a sin if you give in to it' (205). The author of Matthew would probably disagree (Matthew 5:28). Sometimes the passages chosen don't seem to illustrate the point: In the section on church, he is talking about experiencing mutuality, but the text he cites (Romans 14:19) speaks of working towards mutuality (141).

In the context of a study group, it might be valuable to have the participants look up individual texts in order to determine what each one is saying in its context and whether it actually supports Warren's point. It might also be useful to reflect on scriptures that present differing viewpoints.

Theme Two: God and Grace

The Purpose Driven Life presents an engaging vision of the Christian life. Its five ‘purposes’ are valid, yet its doctrine of God and of grace require expansion. The problem lies mainly in what the book leaves out.

The content of the book’s theology of God is not so much grounded in the narrative of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, as in a more generic notion of God which can be found in the inspirational literature of many religions. While Warren’s generic assertions about God are not necessarily contrary to the God Christians proclaim, they lack a full presentation of the God of Jesus Christ. For example, the cross receives little attention in the author’s overall vision of God. Another example of the lack of concrete grounding in the gospels is that Jesus’ teaching about possessions or the narrow way of discipleship find little emphasis in the book’s vision of a life lived in consonance with the will of God, as presented by Jesus. Some may also wish for an explicit elaboration of a trinitarian theology and its implications for the Christian vision of life. For example, the equality of the persons of the Trinity and their mutual relationship of love are the model for understanding the unique dignity of human persons and for understanding human life in community.

The cross receives little attention in the author’s overall vision of God.

Parallel to the book’s understanding of God is its notion of the human response to God: faith. The book does present faith as an individual’s active relationship with God, but is

weak on the communal dimension of faith. A Christian teacher would need to supplement the book's vision with a more thoroughly Christian vision of faith as not only individual but also having a congregational dimension. The notion of covenant as an individual's agreement with God needs to be complemented with the notion of God's covenant with a people. The institutional and public (indeed sacramental) aspects of Christianity are consequently downplayed and even ignored.

While a balanced theology of grace is given in one section, emphasising the role of the Holy Spirit in human transformation and the human cooperation which the Holy Spirit elicits, the overall tone of the book emphasises what we have to do rather than what God does for us. Surely this takes away from the sense of grace as an act of God.

Theme Three: The Church

The Purpose Driven Life is a book that paradoxically begins its first study with the words 'It's not about you,' and then proceeds to primarily explore the individual's relationship with God. In fact these initial words strike a discord with the introduction which indicates that 'By the end of this journey you will know God's purpose for your life and will understand the big picture – how all the pieces of your life fit together.' The tension between the focus on the individual and the assertion that 'it's not about you' runs throughout the book and is reflected in the way that Warren deals with the church.

Despite Warren giving the second priority to the church as one of the purposes of the Christian life, the church is not spoken of except in passing until chapter 15. Warren asserts the church is a place God's glory is revealed and dispels some unhelpful understandings of the church and the meaning of gathered worship (54, 56, 65, 66, 87). Chapter 15 is entitled 'Formed for God's Family' and whilst not explicitly indicated, this chapter is essentially a chapter about the church.

The symbolic language of the church as God's family is helpful and Warren does point to the continuity of God's relationship with this family in a way that transcends time: 'The family of God includes all believers in the past, the present, and the future' (118). In addition, because the spiritual family has 'eternal' significance it takes priority over physical families. In Warren's mind entry into God's family comes from being born again and the condition of being a part of the family is faith in Jesus (118). Baptism is

understood by Warren as showing that we are part of the family, not as something that gives entry into the family (120). This low sacramental view is inconsistent with the belief of many churches. Warren includes a section in this chapter 'Benefits of Being in God's Family' which continues the theme found elsewhere of what the individual believer gets out of it.

'The church is a body, not a building; an organism, not an organisation'

Chapter 17 'A Place to Belong' continues the development of the understanding of the church and has some helpful things to say. Warren asserts that we are created for community and are connected to every other believer (130). Whilst this is not explained in detail, the message is clear: 'The church is a body, not a building; an organism, not an organisation' (131). These are some of the strongest statements that Warren makes in terms of the church and certainly present a stronger picture of the church than, for example, the church as a group of like-minded believers. Having said this Warren is also clear that the church manifests itself in the local visible congregation.

This is not inconsistent with many churches' understanding of the local congregation as the embodiment of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. However, this is reliant in many churches on relationships with other congregations through various structures or authorities. A further strength of this chapter is Warren's emphasis on the place of every member as vital and that as members we are not meant simply to be spectators or consumers. Whilst this is true, the purpose of our participation probably needs further

illumination given the heavy focus on works in relationship to salvation.

There is nothing said by Warren about the relationship with the wider church and Chapter 21, 'Protecting your Church', presents itself as a concern in this respect. The thing that Warren calls people to protect is the unity of the church, that is to say the local congregation. Without some point of reference here for what this might imply for how the local congregation exists towards, with or in other congregations then this chapter could encourage sectarianism. Despite this on a local level this chapter does have some helpful things to say.

Warren's understanding of church needs significant augmenting for use in particular denominations.

Whilst the vision of the church presented in the book is limited, there are some positive aspects to be explored, in particular, the notions of the church as a family and as a way of existence, or as organism. The focus still tends to be on what an individual gets out of it, even though Warren does try to balance this with what the believer puts into it. His understanding of the church needs significant augmenting for use in particular denominations. Some of the greatest concerns would include the low sacramental view and the lack of a discussion as to how local churches are to relate to one another.

Theme Four: Worship

Although Warren does not develop a full theology of worship, he does, as one might expect in a work on the Christian life, list worship as one of a number of pervading themes of the Christian life. 'We bring glory to God by worshipping him' (55) is listed as one of God's five purposes for our life.

Worship is a word used in various ways by and within a number of Christian traditions. Warren recognizes this and accordingly rejects the narrowing of the concept of worship to 'praise and worship songs' which are 'slow and quiet and intimate' (65) or to another specific style of worship.

Most would also welcome Warren's emphasis that worship is not just a part of life, but rather 'it is your life' (66). Indeed, we recognize strains of Luther and others when we read 'work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence' (67).

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Despite Warren's insistence that worship pervades all of life, he almost entirely limits its discussion to the first of the five purposes of the Christian life. Since the chapter on the second purpose, 'You were formed for God's family,' is about the church, it naturally contains some references to worship, but in the ensuing chapters, which make up half the book, such references are very scant indeed. This would seem to betray Warren as not having thought through the full implications of his own assertion that worship is your life.

This broad concept of worship is nevertheless to be welcomed.

Also of note is that there is little attention given to the nature of corporate worship. To be fair, the author does not condone the privatisation of faith to the detriment of the communal gathering. In fact he states quite strongly that ‘the first symptom of spiritual decline is usually inconsistent attendance at worship services and other gatherings’ (131). However, there is no discussion about corporate worship itself. One also senses an aversion to corporate worship which might contain ritual or liturgical elements. Indeed if such worship is ‘perfunctory, careless, mindless’ (103) this is a legitimate concern. However, rituals do have an important role to play in connecting us to God and to one another. Therefore, it is not a matter of abandoning ritual and liturgical rites but a case of transforming them into positive expressions of Christian faith. Properly understood and exercised, liturgical rituals enable us to keep the focus of our worship in the right place.

Attention is focused on the person of the worshipper rather than the object of our worship – who is God.

Warren does emphasise the importance of shifting the focus off ourselves in worship (105). However, his emphasis on worship as our response to God - ‘worship is your spirit responding to God’s Spirit’ (101), and his concern that worship must be genuine and heartfelt (done with the right attitude etc), puts the onus squarely on the worshipper (Chapter 13). Attention is focused on the person of the worshipper rather than the object of our worship—who is

God. Liturgical and sacramental worship are designed precisely to shift the focus from the worshipper to the one who is worshipped.

Thus there is little emphasis in Warren's book that worship contains an aspect of God's action towards us – something that sacramental churches would insist is indeed central and pivotal to our gathering. Interestingly enough, a sacramental understanding of worship fits nicely with Warren's sense of worship as surrender (chapter 10) and as helping us to focus on God (136).

Theme Five: Mission

The book's strength is its emphasis on proclamation of the Word or what is called evangelism, testimony and witness. These are evidently important biblical categories. Yet the interpretation of these categories is so narrow that its ensuing theology of mission is weak.

Warren makes a foundational distinction between 'ministry' as service to *believers* and 'mission' which is service to *unbelievers*. Mission is identified exclusively in terms of the great commission of going to the nations and baptising people in order to bring them into the 'family of God' (Matthew 28: 19f.). There is no awareness of a distinction between God's mission (*missio Dei*) and the Church's mission (*missio ecclesiae*). The author rightly sees Christian mission as a continuation of the mission of Jesus on earth, but there is next to no reflection on what Jesus' mission of the 'reign of God' entails. Mission for Warren is a one-way affair underpinned by a sense of saving one more for Jesus. The role of the Holy Spirit in mission is also less than adequately explored.

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Mission today occurs in the context of a post-colonial world. Only mission carried out in the spirit and practice of dialogue—respecting the other as a subject versus an object to be evangelised—is appropriate. Mission is not just a matter of doing and giving; it is first and foremost a matter

of *being with* people, of *listening* and *sharing* with them. In this regard, the book does not adequately deal with what we may call the ‘method of mission’ demanded of today’s evangeliser. To put this in other terms, the missionary should realise that God was here before our arrival (even if the church wasn’t)—highlighting the importance of *missio Dei* over *missio ecclesiae*.

Absent in Warren’s discourse is any significant sense that mission entails engagement with the world. There is no mention of the struggle for justice, human rights, ecological sustainability, reconciliation among peoples, genuine inculturation of the gospel and interfaith dialogue, which are also dimensions of Christian mission. There can be no dualistic opposition between divine salvation and human liberation since Christ embodies both divinity and humanity in his own person. The disciples of Jesus have particular sensitivity to the way in which God has a preferential option of the poor. Far from being the special objects of the Church’s mission, the poor are the subjects who constantly call Jesus’ disciples to more radical gospel truth and missionary fidelity.

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Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who inspires and directs the *missio Dei* throughout the world as well as being the principal agent of the whole of the Church’s mission. Since the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit continues to draw people to Christ and so has a special relationship with the Church

and her members. It is the same Holy Spirit who is present and active in individuals, society, history, cultures and religions, animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations of the entire human family. The Holy Spirit, fount of love and wisdom, inspirer of peace and justice, and catalyst for truth and reconciliation, empowers the Church, enlightens all peoples and renews the face of the earth. This more profound understanding of mission and evangelization is notably absent from Warren's discussion.

This raises the question of the appropriateness of the book as the basis for parish renewal programs in those churches which emphasize a more holistic approach to mission. If the book is to be used in these churches, it requires significant supplementation. Specifically, its theology of mission needs to be extended to include all aspects of Christian life including liturgy/worship, evangelisation and the triple dialogue with cultures, religions and the poor. It will also be more appropriate to include ministry to believers as an integral component of mission.

Conclusion

In order to develop a means to critique the variety of study material which is available to congregations today, the Faith and Unity Commission of QCT looked at *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. Each member of the commission examined a different theme.

It is striking to note that some common concerns were identified. The most significant one is that while the study is used to revive and build congregations, it is in fact dealing with private spirituality. From the latter vantage point it contains much that is useful. However, it also means that the book focuses on the individual and the individual's relationship with God. In fact, it is so focused on the individual that God seems to come second. The emphasis is on what we do rather than what God does.

This emphasis raises a number of issues. For example, Warren's concentration on the benefits of a relationship with God means that inadequate attention is given to the struggle many experience with the presence of suffering in their own lives or in the world as a whole, especially if the relationship with God is presented as a solution to life's problems. Stressing the benefits of faith – what the individual gets out of it – means ignoring the cost and responsibilities faith brings.

Related to this concentration on the individual's relationship with God is an interpretation of worship as our response to God – the emphasis being on the worshipper rather than the object of worship. The God of Jesus Christ almost appears to be an optional extra in this picture.

Many member churches of Queensland Churches Together have wider concerns relating to this style of study. Some of these concerns arise out of their own apparent lack of confidence and solid grounding in their own faith traditions – a failure to understand what they stand for. This lack of identity can result in a lack of discernment when it comes to teaching from other sources. In the face of declining church numbers there appears to be an eagerness to discover an easy fix and an unwillingness to put in the hard yards to create from the old something which is new but also true to the past. Faith & Unity feels that it is important for the different traditions to rebuild confidence in themselves and to create studies which challenge and encourage both individual and corporate growth.

From an ecumenical point of view Warren fails to consider how local churches might relate to each other. There seems to be a lack of recognition that many different expressions of Christianity exist side-by-side. This is evident in the low sacramental view presented in the study. No thought seems to be given to the fact that this could cause discomfort to people from a number of Christian traditions.

Overall the book emphasises what we as individuals ought to do rather than the concept of grace as an act of God.

As a devotional text, the book challenges us to live a life committed to God and is thus of some value. As study material for larger groups, the book would be improved were its themes presented in greater depth, and were it to explore difficult issues such as suffering, forgiveness and sin in some detail.

Finally, those working with this book need to be aware of its emphasis on the individual rather than the community of faith.

Ecumenical Resources on the Themes

There is a wealth of resources on the website of the World Council of Churches, www.oikumene.org . See also the site of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA): www.ncca.org.au .

The new website of Queensland Churches Together – www.qct.org.au – also contains links and titles of resources. All of these sites have search functions.

See also the website of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church: <http://www.ecupatriarchate.org/> .

Related websites:

- Ecumenical Relations Committee of the Uniting Church, Qld Synod (with many links):

<http://www.ecumenical.ucaweb.com.au/>

- Commission for Ecumenism and Interfaith Relations of the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane:

<http://www.bne.catholic.net.au/ecum/> Here you will also find reference to the series *Christians in Dialogue*, a series of ecumenical study kits for Christians in local areas to use as resources for prayer, study and discussion on a wide range of topics related to the Christian faith.

Theme One: Scripture

A Treasure in Earthen Vessels - on ecumenical hermeneutics (a scholarly paper) published by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches:

<http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=2686> .

Theme Two: God and Grace

http://www.ncca.org.au/departments/faith_and_unity - for links to NCCA studies and WCC studies on theological anthropology.

Theme Three: Church

Called to be the One Church (Final document of WCC General Assembly 2006)

Locate using search function in: <http://www.oikoumene.org> .

Church as Communion

This is a three-week study resource produced by the Melbourne-based AUSTARC [Australian Anglican Roman Catholic dialogue]. The editors were a Brisbane group of Anglicans and Catholics. The study is suitable for use by a wide range of churches.

<http://www.bne.catholic.net.au/ecum/images/churchascommunion.pdf>

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 111, The Lima Document, 1982)

<http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=2638>

The Nature and Mission of the Church (WCC Faith and Order Commission 2005):

<http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=2617>

The following three articles are part of a trilateral dialogue of the Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Churches in Australia. You can find them under:

<http://www.ecumenical.ucaweb.com.au> and click “Dialogues”.

Church, Ministry and Ordination: what Relation?

Presented to an Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Church dialogue group, November 2003, by Christiaan Mostert.

Church, Ministry and Ordination: what Relation? An Anglican response to Rev Prof Christiaan Mostert's paper 'Church, Ministry and Ordination: what Relation?'
By Duncan Reid.

Church, Ministry and Ordination: what Relation? A Lutheran Response to Rev Prof Christiaan Mostert's paper 'Church, Ministry and Ordination: what Relation?'

Theme Four: Worship

So we believe, so we pray: towards koinonia in worship (The Ditchingham Report) – 1994

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/vilemov-06-e.html>

Theme Five: Mission

A Letter from Athens to the Christian Churches, Networks and Communities (2005 Conference on World Mission and Evangelism CWME)

Locate document through search function on

www.oikoumene.org/resources .

Reception as a model for the Church's Unity and Mission

By Duncan Reid, 2005

See www.ecumenical.ucaweb.com.au , click 'Documents'.

There also you can find: *Called to Common Witness* – Bishop Michael Putney

Or search the NCCA website: www.ncca.org.au .

The author of Theme Five: Mission has suggested some additional resources written from a Catholic perspective:

Stephen Bevans & Roger Schroeder: 'We Were Gentle Among You': Christian Mission as Dialogue (2006) in

Australian Ejournal of Theology Issue 7 (Pentecost 2006);
http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_7/svd.htm

Gerard Hall, 'Have We Lost Our Nerve? Changing Theologies of Christian Mission' in *Australian Ejournal of Theology* Issue 8 (October 2006);
http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_8/hall.htm

Peter C. Phan, 'Proclamation of the Mission of the Reign of God as Mission of the Church: What for? To Whom? With Whom? By Whom? And How?' in *Theology@McAuley* 2 (August 2002);
<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/Issue2/issue2.htm>

Timothy Radcliffe, 'Go and Make Disciples of All Nations: Preaching the Kingdom or Religious Imperialism?' in *Australian Ejournal of Theology* Issue 2 (February 2004);
http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_2/timothy_radcliffe.htm

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