

What Is Biblical?

by Robert P. Jr Dugan

Christians have a responsibility to pray for leaders and participate in politics in a way that is informed and meaningful.

Scripture: Matthew 5:18

Topics: "Biblical Authority", "Christian Politics"

Description

Robert P. Jr Dugan preaches about the absolute authority and trustworthiness of the Bible, emphasizing Jesus Christ's unwavering commitment to the Scriptures as seen in His responses to the devil's temptations. Evangelical Christians are urged to engage in political duties based on biblical principles, such as praying for leaders as instructed by the Apostle Paul. The sermon highlights the importance of informed involvement in politics, starting with intelligent intercession and progressing to active participation in party and campaign politics. Pastors are encouraged to equip believers for political engagement through prayer, education, and participation, emphasizing the impact Christians can have on the nation's righteousness and morality.

Transcript

Evangelical Christians are committed to the absolute authority and trustworthiness of the Bible. How could they be anything else? Having ascertained how Jesus Christ regards the Scriptures, their minds are convinced and their wills are bound.

Jesus' view is wrapped up in one text: "The Scripture cannot be broken."¹ Each of the three times the devil tempted him in the wilderness, he replied, "It is written . . ." ² followed by a quotation from the Torah. His meaning was clear: since it is written, the issue is settled. "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."³

If the Bible commanded, "Thou shalt not engage in politics," evangelicals would not touch politics with a three-meter pole. On the other hand, there is no eleventh commandment which says "Thou shalt vote." I suspect that large numbers of evangelical Christians could not answer confidently if asked what the Bible says about political involvement. If they ventured an opinion, they would probably be unable to cite biblical support for it.

Many persuasive lines of argument can convince Christians that the Bible assigns them political duties. Let me rest my case on an incident recorded in Luke's Gospel:

The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked

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for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. So the spies questioned him: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

He saw through their duplicity and said to them, "Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

He said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.⁴

Without doing violence to the text, I would like to lift two clear principles that are universally applicable.

In the familiar King James phraseology, these axioms are: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's," and "Render to God what is God's." since God merits the top line, let me treat our responsibility to him first.

The Bible is its own best interpreter, so let's deduce our first biblical political duty -- rendering to God -- from the Apostle Paul's first letter to a young pastor named Timothy:

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone -- for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants

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all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.⁵

Translating "kings" into our political terminology, it is clear that God expects his people to pray for their leaders. In a word, intelligent intercession for politicians is our first responsibility -- what it takes to "render to God what is God's."

It would be easy to pour guilt over sincere believers by telling them that they are responsible, for example, to pray for the United States Congress. To intercede meaningfully for all 435 representatives and for the one hundred senators would be impossible. Who could remember even half of their names, or know enough about them to intercede effectively? True Christian praying is not merely reciting a string of names.

An analogy might help. Does God expect Christian people to pray for all the pastors in the United States? How about in their state, or in their denomination? Of course not. However, it is certain that God expects his people to intercede for their own pastor and staff. As members of a local church they either called or received their pastor by appointment. And that obligates them to pray.

By the same token, surely the Lord does not expect Christians who live in Colorado to pray regularly for the senators who represent New Mexico, Virginia, or Vermont. But Colorado's two senators are theirs, elected to represent them. And it's a lame alibi for a Coloradan to disclaim that responsibility by pleading that he hasn't voted the last few times. Anybody with a conscience would vote for the better of two candidates, so failure to vote was a failure to support the better candidate. Net effect: helping the poorer candidate by the one vote not cast for his opponent. There was one less vote to overcome.

One way or another, all Colorado citizens of voting age are responsible for two seats in the United States Senate. Those who are Christians are responsible to pray for those senators, letting the people of Minnesota pray for theirs.

Who else should be on the prayer list? A minimum of

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seven elected officials represents every citizen in national and state government. It makes a good starting list, one for each day of the week, and can be enlarged easily. Prayer for the president, for example, can be expanded to include his vice president, his cabinet, and his senior advisors. The Supreme Court can be added at any time, as can the mayor and city council and school board in your home town. But I still haven't revealed my basic seven.

I did so in an unorthodox way at the baccalaureate service at Roberts Wesleyan College in the late spring 1990. Not wanting to embarrass the faculty and administration seated in the choir loft behind me, I excused them from participating. Then I asked everyone else to stand.

"I am putting you on your honor," I said. "When I mention a political position for which you have a prayer responsibility, silently determine if you know that official's name. If not, please be seated."

I began with the president. Fortunately no one sat down. But embarrassment colored a few cheeks when I moved on to the governor. Casualties continued to mount when I mentioned "one U.S. Senator from your state." Naming "the other senator from your state" brought real downward movement. By the time I asked about "the Congressperson who represents your district," only about 25 percent of the audience remained standing. Had I named the sixth and seventh who should have been on that prayer list -- their state senator and state representative -- not more than one in twenty would have remained on his or her feet.

It doesn't take a Sherlock Holmes to draw some deductions from this demonstration. If Christian people do not know the names of those whom they elect, it follows that they have not been interceding for them -- and that they are disobeying their Lord.

I had one further point to make with the audience that day at Roberts Wesleyan. As I wrapped up my demonstration, I said softly to those still on their feet: "If you have

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not prayed for each of these at least once since the beginning of this year, please be seated." One man, and one man only, continued to stand. Who can imagine what God might do in response to the knowledgeable intercession of millions of evangelicals for their elected officials? I mean intelligent intercession. If it is not adequate to pray, "Lord, bless everybody in our family, Amen," or "Help all the missionaries supported by our church," then "Bless all the politicians, Amen," is no better.

We need to start reading the newspapers with renewed interest to see how "our" politicians are voting. We will want to hear them speak, perhaps at town meetings where we can meet them and watch them handle tough questions. We may be pleasantly surprised at how close we can get to them, and we'll develop opinions about their personal character and their value systems. Surely we will want to know about their families and even hope to discover whether they share our faith. Paul says that the ultimate end of our prayers is that all would "be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth."

Intercessory prayer for our political officeholders is a clear political responsibility that Christians have overlooked -- to the detriment of the nation. But it's also one that can be remedied as soon as you decide to to it.

Intelligent prayer has a byproduct that leads directly to our second duty. As you pray, you may become aware that you are well served by one officeholder, but that another has a dependably disappointing voting record. The Lord seems to be answering some of your prayers, but not others. Since "faith without deeds is dead," after some months or years of praying, you might surprise yourself by joining a political campaign -- maybe to keep one legislator or to dump the other. And in this way you keep the Lord's command concerning Caesar.

How we "render to Caesar what is Caesar's" depends on how we identify the contemporary equivalent of Caesar. Caesar was the final, unchallenged authority in the

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Roman empire. We can eliminate the president, for his veto can be overridden by the House and Senate. Congress is certainly not Caesar, because the Supreme Court can rule its laws unconstitutional. And the Supreme Court is no Caesar either, for Congress can make exceptions and regulations to its jurisdiction.

Only one "Caesar" remains, and "he" is none of the above. He is the Constitution. This, our final authority controls even the separated powers granted to the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of our government.

The Constitution quite clearly spells out how we are to render to Caesar what is Caesar's. Article I, Section 2, just four lines into the body of the document, says "The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States . . ." Section 3 was amended in April 1913 so that the people, rather than the legislature, would directly elect their senators, and Article II outlines the people's responsibility for electing the president.

Our Lord expects that the normal pattern of Christian living will find his followers giving to Caesar what Caesar expects. Since there is no other way to put leaders into office in a democratic republic than for the people to choose them, we must be involved. Naturally, we would not wish to offend God by doing so irresponsibly, nor would we want to fail our nation by doing so ignorantly. That is why I add a crucial adjective as I define our second biblical duty as informed involvement in politics.

Our Christian political participation will be more effective and less objectionable if it is individual rather than institutional. The church should not try to move politically as a church, but should strive to see that all its members are involved. When that is the pattern, no one can object, not even the Washington Post or an Internal Revenue Service attorney.

This kind of mobilization would make a local congregation a force for righteousness in its community and in the

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nation. What a difference Christians could make if all were politically active at the minimum level, a tithe of its members at the maximum level, and a quarter of its people at a moderate level.

- One hundred percent active at a minimum level -- voting politics.

It would be hard to argue that anything less than being registered and voting knowledgeably would satisfy the minimum, basic demand of Christian citizenship. The ideal church would publicize registration deadlines, hold non-partisan voter registration drives in the church (possible in most places), and provide transportation to the polls for those who need it on Election Day.

Unfortunately, there's some quirky thinking out there that sometimes gets into the heads of evangelicals. On the Sunday after I lost my election, we were worshipping in a large Denver church. As the first note of the organ postlude sounded, a woman gripped my elbow. "You don't know me, but I know you," she said earnestly. "It's just terrible that you lost on Tuesday. We need men like you in Washington." She complimented me for a minute, making a strong ex post facto case for my candidacy. Then, lowering her voice and turning toward Lynne, she confessed, "Of course, I didn't get out and vote for him. But I guess that didn't make any difference after all."

Because I lost by more than one vote, she freely excused herself. But what if the votes of all my supporters who failed to cast a ballot had been added together? Might the outcome have been different?

- Ten percent active at a maximum level -- party politics.

By maximum political participation, I do not refer to elected officials or to people who earn their living as strategists or party staffers. I mean rather those volunteers who accept the responsibility of working in the party of their choice. Many will serve as precinct committeemen and women, whose ultimate job is to deliver the vote in

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their precinct on Election Day. Others will be officers in county, state, or local party organizations.

Not a huge amount of time is required of the party's foot soldiers, but a willingness to work beyond the call of duty will lead to recognition and promotion. Inner city kids who've never drunk anything but homogenized milk may not realize it, but the cream always rises to the top. By virtue of their effectiveness, cooperative spirit, and dependability, some members of the party will move toward leadership. A few, who may have discovered an aptitude and liking for politics that they didn't know they had, will eventually become candidates -- supported by their fellow party workers.

One great advantage to having 10 percent of the church's members involved in the political parties is that they become a marvelous source of information about candidates and issues for the 90 percent who are doing other things. Their enthusiasm will create sufficient interest to guarantee a high-percentage voter turnout among their brothers and sisters in the church.

- Twenty-five percent active at a moderate level -- campaign politics.

Not only will the party activists inspire voter interest, but they will also recruit friends from the church to help in campaigns. Each would only need to enlist one and one-half persons on the average to boost his church to the point where 25 percent are walking the precincts with literature on a couple of evenings or Saturday mornings or giving other tangible help. Some will host a neighborhood coffee where their circle of friends can meet a candidate personally. Others will give volunteer hours in the campaign office, help get out a newsletter or fund-raising mailing, or make telephone bank calls. In addition, it would be a tremendous boost if each could contribute even a modest check to the campaign.

If you believe the professionals, these campaign volunteers, recruited by the most dedicated workers, are the

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people who determine the outcome of the election. Former White house Aide morton Blackwell, now a trainer of political activists, insists that campaigns are not so much contests between Candidate A and Candidate B, or between Party D and Party R, as they are battles between the activists supporting A and those supporting B.

The Friday before Election Day in 1976, a first-time volunteer showed up at our campaign headquarters, wanting to go door-to-door for me. She confided that for months she had intended to give me a hand, but had procrastinated. She didn't know where to phone to volunteer, and she was apprehensive about whether she would take to walking precincts, or quite possibly hate it. Would she have a bunch of doors slammed in her face? It was time to put her anxieties behind her. "If I don't help you this weekend, it will be too late."

When our group gathered for lunch, she was excited. She had loved the contact with people and felt she was making a difference for me. Indeed she was. Undoubtedly there were hundreds who could have done what she did, including most of my Committee of 300, each of whom could have involved a handful more. Imagine 1200 folks going door-to-door. I would have won in a walk.

Under any form of government, a Christian's first political assignment is intelligent intercession for politicians. Under our form of government, their second political responsibility is informed involvement in politics. If our churches resembled the ideal I sketched above, we evangelicals could be a force for the kind of righteousness that "exalts a nation" and against the sin that is "a disgrace to any people."⁶

The beauty of these matched responsibilities is that political success is not left solely to us. When we give it our human best through personal involvement, in an amazing synergy God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, at the same time works in response to our intercession.

The Scriptures affirm and experience attests that God

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works primarily through the body of Christ -- the church -- to accomplish his objectives in the world. And even a cursory reading of the Old Testament will reveal how often he achieved his objectives through kings, lawmakers, or judges. Who, then, could claim that God has no interest in presidential elections, congressional legislation, or Supreme Court decisions in the last decade of the twentieth century? Spiritually aware followers of Christ ought to be thinking through questions about how God may want to use the body of Christ to accomplish his purposes through politics.

Pivotal to the effectiveness of any church is the shepherd -- the pastor -- who serves under the authority of the Chief Shepherd, and who must be an example to the flock.⁷ If the spiritual leader does not encourage, (or better) empower, (or best) enable his people to take an active role in politics, that church may well become almost irrelevant to its community and the nation.

I know that any church that preaches God's truth, even if it confines its activity within the church's walls, cannot be totally irrelevant. Spiritually needy people may find their way in on occasion and be introduced to Christ. But other churches will have to carry the battle to protect that church's religious freedom, to provide the best government possible, and to preserve the nation's morality.

Politicians tend to give evangelical pastors more credence than the pastors give themselves. Politicians correctly perceive pastors as community leaders with a considerable sphere of influence. Those who preach to three thousand on any Sunday may seem more important to them than those with hundred in their congregation, but the smaller church is nothing to be sneezed at.

Any pastor worth his salt reminds himself periodically that he is answerable to the Lord for the wielding of his influence. But that's not unique to ministers: "Each of us will give an account of himself to God."⁸ Having been a pastor myself for eighteen years, I think I can suggest three functions for which pastors are answerable:

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- A prophetic role as expositor of the Scripture.

In the Old Testament era, priests spoke to God on the people's behalf, while prophets spoke to the people on God's behalf. In my view, we have too few twentieth century prophets. When pastors do faithfully speak for God, the collective weight of their proclamation can change a nation's thinking.

In his first formal debate with Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln said:

"In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces [judicial] decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed."⁹

To be effective, preachers must be well informed before they can be informative. An informed prophet must read a daily major city newspaper and at least one national news magazine weekly. He makes a fateful mistake if he secures all his news from the electronic media which, by their time constraints, pre-select what he will see or hear. He must have a reliable source for timely information crucial to the evangelical community.

Early in this century, pastors and teachers were respected as the best educated leaders in their communities. In those pre-television days, people thronged to large Sunday evening services to hear words of wisdom relating the Bible to the times. Today we must earn our hearing, for the public is skeptical about religious leaders. Sheer, hard work in the study is a necessity, we that our preaching is credible and compelling.

Informed pastors will do extensive reading so that they understand historic and religious currents. They must become like the "men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do."¹⁰ Furthermore, they need to understand the political process, periodically

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reread the Constitution, and cut through to the correct meaning of separation of church and state. Pastors should be able to describe the nominating process in their states, with a rough schedule of dates and events, and be able to tell a member of the church how to get started in politics.

Such a high goal isn't out of reach. A case in point is NAE's first president, Harold John Ockenga. His knowledge of history and of current events fleshed out his biblical preaching and invariably made him relevant, so that his Park Street Church pulpit in Boston was respected more than any in New England. How was that possible? Ockenga would explain that preaching was his highest priority, his unique responsibility in the church. Other duties, however important, would have to be assigned to others if they interfered with adequate preparation to preach.

Evangelical preachers who limit their content to a personal, internalized, vertically-oriented message are guilty of shrinking the Bible. God's Word must be related to justice, to conscience, to societal values, to ideological conflicts. Pastoral prayers should reflect awareness and concern about issues and leaders. In the course of evangelizing and expounding the Scriptures, our pastors will be declaring the criteria by which God will judge the world -- including the United States. Christians must then determine how those criteria affect their public duty as citizens.

- A pastoral role as equipper of the believers.

Evangelical preaching is too often long on what people ought to do and short on explaining how. Pastors convinced that Christians are bound by political responsibilities should naturally want to show them how to fulfill those duties.

Equipping for prayer begins by modeling intercession for the president, the governor, and others -- by name, and with some reference to a problem they face. Here's a place to be creative. Once a month, those who wish could skip dinner and come an hour early for prayer meeting, to fast and pray for their government and its leaders. People

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could be assigned, one per week, to prepare background information on a political leader, "introducing" him or her to a Sunday School class for a period of focused group prayer. A bulletin board with pictures of the congregation's political leaders would serve as a great prayer reminder, balancing the church's missionary map on the other wall.

Why have we allowed our members to feel powerless about politics when they could have been tapping the ultimate source of power through prayer? I don't know.

Larger churches could do it alone, or evangelical churches in the community could cooperate in the Saturday prayer breakfast with their mayor, congressperson, or other official as honored guest. One note of caution: Do not allow an evangelistic sermon to be preached to a political audience of one. That would be "using" an otherwise good-faith invitation and unchristianly embarrassing the guest. Evangelism can come later, one-on-one, in conversation between friends. Let the officeholder speak, have questions and answers -- never posed angrily or threateningly, but graciously and firmly. Inquire about family, personal and political concerns, and let the prayer time be an affirming and supportive experience for your guest. You will have built a relationship leading to friendship, and your people will know a great deal more about one of their leaders. That will allow them to pray and vote more wisely.

Equipping for participation may involve special candidate forums to which all candidates are invited. Some years back, the evangelical churches on Staten Island, New York, hosted such an event for a dozen or more candidates. More than three hundred people stayed for over two hours, and the candidates were so impressed that they talked about that Saturday night as being the real beginning of the campaign.

The pastor can announce voter registration deadlines and, as mentioned earlier, even hold a non-partisan registration drive in the church. He may be enthused about building the case for Christian political involvement

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through a sermon, or think it wise to invite a guest speaker for that purpose. Special seminars could teach church members the political ropes, always in a non-partisan way.¹¹ Aim for the goals outlined above: 100 percent, 10 percent, and 25 percent involvement.

Every church should have a governmental affairs or social concerns committee. Alternatively, a number of churches in a community or state could combine to produce educational materials for their churches, whether issues-analysis or candidate questionnaires. Get some good advice if you do. The wrong approach can create resentment and provoke a backlash that will have the opposite effect from what you intend.

- Sermons about political activity by pastors who are politically lethargic will fall on deaf ears. Who would buy a miracle hair-growth restorer from a bald barber? To the extent that preachers or other deeply committed religious people stay out of politics, to that extent our government is less representative than it was designed to be. Like pastor, like people.

If pastors wish to go beyond the bare minimum of voting responsibly, they will need to get active in party politics and in campaign politics. Thinking pastors will set an example by resisting the lure of registering as independents. It is foolish to smugly announce that one is above the fray: "I just vote for the person, not for the party." That may sound good, but it's unconvincing. Independents take themselves straight out of the process by which the candidates are chosen, and thus greatly reduce their influence on the eventual outcome. They simply stand aside and wait, hoping against hope that one party or the other will produce a worthwhile nominee.

Of course, there is no perfect political party. Neither is there a perfect church, a perfect husband, or a perfect pastor. In this imperfect world, choose the party closest to your way of thinking. Volunteer. Go as the Lord did, as a servant. With that kind of attitude, the party will welcome

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you with open arms -- in much the same way that you are thrilled to have a new family come into your church, committed to the Lord, and eager to get to work. How many of those do you send away with "No" for an answer?

Pastors active in a political party will exemplify to their people that that's where the action is. They may also worry about dividing their congregation, but nothing of the kind is necessary. I think of three pastors in particular who became committeemen in my party during my run for Congress. None created problems in his congregation.

One can be politically partisan to the point of actually being active in campaigns, without hurting the spiritual unity of the church. People of both parties must genuinely be encouraged to labor in the political power structures. Neither by clever humor, by innuendo, nor by partisan sermons should a pastor ever imply that his political position is the only option for his congregation. As wrong as it would be to shape a church so that only the rich would be attracted, it would equally be wrong to shape it so that only Republicans would feel comfortable there.

I spoke one Sunday evening in a good church in a community north of New York City along the Hudson River. Afterward, a lovely couple expressed great delight that I had urged Christians to become politically involved. They had heard no such urging in the thirty years they had been members of the church.

They had a personal reason for hoping things would change. Their son, a lawyer and a fine Christian, against great odds had won a seat in the state assembly in Albany. He was reelected with 70 percent of the vote, but now was running for another post at his party's urging. They thought he was the only one who could win it. Sadly, nobody in the church would help in his campaign; nor had anybody done so in the prior two campaigns. In fact, his mother reported that when she sought volunteers from among her friends she would often get a disdainful smile and the pious assurance that she need not worry, for "if the Lord wants him there, the Lord will put him there."

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"Is that the way your church feels about evangelism and world missions," I asked. "Do they suggest that if the Lord wants to convert people here or around the world, he'll take care of it? That there's no need to give sacrificially or to send the church's finest youth to the mission field?" Hardly.

This is a glaring inconsistency all too common in the Church today. When it comes to politics, we often behave as if God acts alone to put his candidates into office. But when it comes to evangelism, God suddenly becomes unable to accomplish his purposes without the sacrificial cooperation of the congregation.

We must not tolerate this illogical, contradictory, unbiblical thinking in the Church. If we do, our nation is in deep trouble.

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3. Matthew 5:18. [BACK]
4. Luke 20:19-26. [BACK]
5. I Timothy 2:1-4. [BACK]
6. Proverbs 14:34. [BACK]
7. I Peter 5:1-4. [BACK]
8. Romans 14:12. [BACK]
9. Political Debates Between Honorable Abraham Lincoln and Honorable Stephen A. Douglas (Columbus, Ohio: Follet, Foster & Co., 1800, 82. [BACK]
10. I Chronicles 12:32. [BACK]
11. Since 1992, the Office for Governmental Affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals has offered materials to help churches do just that. Its Manual for Action, updated every two years, can help launch a Christian Citizenship Ministry in your church. [BACK]

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