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The heart too crowded



“The things [the gospel writers] tell are just the very things we need to know. Even the slightest items they relate are all significant; the faintest touches bring out effects and meanings in the picture. . . . Yes, when the poor carpenter of Nazareth brought his wife up to the inn at Bethlehem, and they were turned away because the house was crowded with more favored guests, and her Son found His birthplace among ‘the beasts of the stall’ and His cradle in a manger, the crowded house and the rejected applicant take their place in the narrative as true exponents of the earthly lot of Him for whose nativity there was ‘no room in the inn’ – nay, as a significant foreshadowing of the future of His gospel, which has with such difficulty found for itself a place in the overcrowded world. . . . Is not this, His first experience, the experience of all the Saviour’s life both in His flesh and in His Church – that, crowded out of the hospitalities of life, out of the inns and homes and cheerful haunts of men, He has found His resting-place in the world’s sheds and mangers, among the poverty and degradation of our race? What is the aspect of our busy and unbelieving world as you stand and look across it but the repeated picture of that Jewish inn in which there was *no room for Jesus?* . . . Thus daily is the scene of Bethlehem repeated. He comes unto his own; His own receive Him not. The world is too full for Christ, and the heart too crowded for its Saviour.” –Phillips Brooks, *Sermons for the Principal Festivals and Fasts of the Church Year* (E. P. Dutton, 1895)

Church council’s challenge



The mood has been glum around Higgins Road in recent weeks, as the impact of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly’s decisions in August at Minneapolis becomes increasingly apparent. The Church Council gathered for its regular meeting in November (their first since the Churchwide Assembly), and there was no joy in Mudville.

Perhaps the starkest news was the decision to eliminate a good number of positions on the churchwide staff – the ELCA news release said 40.75, though some estimates put it slightly higher than that, and it’s a little unclear as to how many of those positions were already vacant and just won’t be filled. Twenty-three of the positions cut were described as “executive staff,” the rest as “support staff.” Some of those let go had been employed by the ELCA since its inception more than twenty years ago.

Bp. Hanson blamed the tough decisions on several factors: a thirty year downward trend affecting all denominations; the current economic struggles;

oh, and then those congregations withholding money from the ELCA because of the decisions on sexuality. Yes, one would think that probably has something to do with it, maybe even more than thirty year trends and the current economy.

When to build the ark

The bottom line, though, is that the Church Council cut the 2010 spending plan by some 10%. Wyvetta Bullock, the ELCA's executive for administration, tried to put the best spin on it: "We wanted these reductions, despite their impact, to position the churchwide organization for the future," she said. Preparing for the future is a good strategy, of course. The question is always, "How soon before the rain starts do you build the ark?" A 10% cut is serious business, but does anyone really expect this will be the last round of budget cuts for 2010?

For their part, the Council members seemed to think that the solution is better communication and education. "When [members] see 'God's Work. Our Hands.' being lived in this church, it really makes a difference. I urge you to tell people what you know," said Council member John Emery.

Of course the problem may be quite the opposite; it may be that there are Lutherans who see what is being done by "our hands" as something not always clearly "God's work." Despite Bp. Hanson's concern about congregations and members withholding money, many pastors and congregations on the ground see it quite differently. To them it is not a matter of "withholding" but "redirecting" — sending their money to places where they are fully confident that "God's work" is being done. For better or for worse, it seems unlikely at this point that increased education is going to change that perception.

Taking plenty of time

Having chopped away at the churchwide budget, the Council then took up the dicier question handed them by the Churchwide Assembly: how to revise the ELCA's standards for ministry in such a way as to allow for persons in publicly accountable lifelong monogamous same-sex (PALMS, for short) relationships to serve as pastors (and in other "rostered" capacities).

There had already been some grumbling when the bishops told the Council the timeline needed to be slowed down, that they weren't yet

prepared to sign off on the procedures being developed. The grumbling, though, seems largely to have come from the outside; the Council itself saw the wisdom of proceeding carefully. Michael Cooper-White, President of Gettysburg Seminary, worried to the Council about taking too much time; there are those, he said, whose lives are on hold while we debate this. But the Council was not inclined to try to push the process.

Defining the undefinable

One major hang-up seems to be figuring out just what constitutes a PALMS relationship. There is, of course, currently a patchwork of state laws regarding same-sex relationships. In a few states same-sex marriage has been established in law (mostly by court decree). In others, there is provision of some kind for "civil unions" but not marriage. In the majority of states, there is no legal recognition of same-sex relationships, publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous or not.

When a council member asked for a clearer statement of just what constitutes such a relationship, Stan Olson, executive director of Education and Vocation, referred her to a footnote in the proposed revision of *Vision and Expectations*. "What else do you need?" he asked. That footnote helpfully explains that the words in the phrase are "intended to have their common meanings." Oh, OK.

Marital ties

Some council members thought it shouldn't be that hard. In the states that recognize some form of same-sex union, the ELCA should require that couples take advantage of that. One council member even wondered whether we couldn't just require couples to fly off to some state where marriage was legal, get married, and then come home.

Others, perhaps wary of being tied too much to civil law, suggested that the ELCA just adopt some sort of rite. Ah, but there's the rub. The social statement on human sexuality declined to call for such a rite, and indeed made clear "this" church's reluctance to endorse same-sex marriage. Marriage, the statement says, is between one man and one woman — although "some in this church understand the term as being appropriate also for the relationship of a same-gender couple." Some so understand it, but the church officially does not. "We can't de-

mand what we don't recognize," said Stan Olson.

Still, the footnote referenced by Pr. Olson strongly suggests that public accountability "may include a legally recorded civil recognition." So apparently the answer is, "It means one thing in one place, something else in another."

It means whatever anyone says it means

Or really, the answer is that it all depends on what the synodical bishop and the congregation where the person serves decide. And that leads to the other major problem with developing these policies: how, really, to deal with the "bound consciences" of all the parties involved.

In a perceptive analysis, Michael Root of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary argues that "clarifications" made to the original task force report in fact pulled back from the idea that bishops, synods, and candidacy committees might exercise their "bound consciences" by refusing to recommend or ordain candidates who are in PALMS relationships. "The proposed revisions to the relevant policy documents," Root writes, "interpret 'structured flexibility' in the most minimal way possible. No synodical body or official is allowed to act contrary to national policy. Such bodies or officials can try to avoid a direct confrontation with national policy, but national policy trumps conscience, if push comes to shove. This interpretation flies in the face of what is said in the Task Force Report." ("What Was Decided?" at <http://lutheranspersisting.wordpress.com/>)

The limits of bound conscience

Those who are drafting and ultimately approving the new policies are thus faced with an interesting challenge. This change was sold as a package honoring everyone's "bound conscience" – a proposal which, let's be honest, inevitably must lead to some kind of "local option." But now the churchwide staff appears to insist that policies be consistent across the church (not a bad concept, usually), suggesting that individual bishops or synods or candidacy committees must respect the policies of the wider church. This seems to be sort of an ecclesiastical version of the "personally opposed, but" line that some politicians take regarding abortion.

But the Church Council didn't really go very far down this road at their November meeting. The only actual action they took regarding this whole

matter was to revise the process for reinstatement for those who have been removed or have resigned from the clergy/lay professional roster solely because of their PALMS relationship. Normally when one is thus removed from the roster, one cannot apply for reinstatement for five years. In this particular situation, there will now be a "window of opportunity" during 2010/2011 to apply for reinstatement without meeting that five-year requirement. The process for evaluating and approving the request for reinstatement – which can be a lengthy one – still applies; presumably by the time it works its way out, we'll have some standards in place.

No "new normal"

But if the Council left a lot up in the air for now, there was one message that came through: Council members are committed to the idea that all four "approaches" to homosexuality outlined in the social statement are to be respected as valid. This means, as some said, "there is no 'new normal'" – no single position that is normative in the ELCA. Rather the ELCA embraces as "valid" everything from "same-gender sexual behavior is sinful, contrary to biblical teaching and . . . natural law" to "the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience today." All four positions are to be recognized without prejudice.

"I did not expect to hear this at all," said one observer. "But I kept hearing it. If the churchwide staff didn't get this before, they are starting to get it now."

Of course this will make resolving the other issues even more complicated, and I wouldn't bet much on the ELCA's ability to pull it off. It seems clear that a good number of congregations aren't really waiting around to find out; more budget cuts, which seem likely, may complicate things even further. Some clarity on that issue is likely to come sooner than on the ministry standards, since budget season is upon us. Synods – and churchwide – will shortly have a clearer sense of whether the financial hit next year will be a bump or a cataclysm.

But one thing, at least, can be said with some confidence: these will be challenging months for the elected leadership and staff of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

– by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

Ex libris forum



Getting some pressure to produce a Christmas list? Here are some books I've enjoyed lately:

- Edwin O'Connor, *The Edge of Sadness* (Little, Brown, 1961; reissued in 2005 by Loyola Press). O'Connor won a Pulitzer Prize for this novel in 1961, and Loyola Press made a good decision to include it in their classics series. The protagonist, Hugh Kennedy, is a middle-aged Catholic priest, a recovering alcoholic, and a man haunted in many ways by his past. He has been appointed to a run-down old parish in the city in which he grew up. His struggles and reflections are a sobering, profound, and melancholy meditation on the pastoral life and vocation—a calling which, while often joyful, sometimes approaches the edge of sadness as well.
- Thomas C. Oden, ed. *Ancient Christian Devotional: A Year of Weekly Readings* (InterVarsity, 2007). InterVarsity Press has been doing as much as anyone to stimulate interest in and familiarity with the Church Fathers. Their series *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* is a monumental work that gathers reflections from the early church on each book of the canon, passage by passage. This book, part of the same project, is just what it says: a collection of weekly readings. Weekly, I suppose, because some will find patristic thought to be tough going, and one could easily spend a week digesting the readings offered here. The format for each week includes three Scripture readings (more or less connected to the church year), with commentary by several of the Fathers on each; and a couple of patristic era prayers. A good place to start if your acquaintance with the Fathers is not what you wish it would be.
- Rodney Stark, *God's Battalions: The Case for the Crusades* (HarperOne, 2009). Rodney Stark, Baylor University sociologist, is always an interesting writer. In this new book, he sets out to revise the revisionist view of the Crusades. You won't find many defenders of the Crusades today; indeed, most educated people have bought into the idea that they were essentially wars of Christian aggression and economic expansion. Stark thinks otherwise, and he makes a

good case. Not that he is exactly in favor of the Crusades, you know, but he at least wants us to view them in a context a little less colored by the "everything the church has ever done is wrong" school of academic inquiry.

- Philip H. Pfatteicher, *New Book of Festivals & Commemorations: A Proposed Calendar of Saints* (Fortress, 2008). Pfatteicher's 1980 *Festivals and Commemorations* has been a wonderful reference book about the saints on the LBW calendar of commemorations, and this is a worthy replacement—a "complete recasting and rewriting," he calls it. He expands his view to include the new "saints" on the ELW calendar, those on the Episcopal Church's calendar, and some others, to boot. Like the earlier volume, this one is arranged chronologically through the year. It includes brief biographical sketches, an excerpt from the saint's writing where appropriate, and brief bibliographies. It's expensive, but I found my copy online for about half the listed price.
- Brevard Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Eerdmans, 2008). The last book by the late Yale professor who founded the school of "canonical criticism," this is vintage Childs, filled with wonderful insights into Paul's work and its place in the canon that break through many of the usual scholarly impediments. It's not a "guide" in the sense of an epistle-by-epistle exposition, but an overall introduction to recent Pauline studies and how they might profitably interact with the canonical approach. There are some exegetical discussions, however, and as the ELCA struggles with just what the heck "bound conscience" might mean, Childs' discussion of the "strong and the weak" in Paul provides some particularly thoughtful insights.
- Frank C. Senn, *Lutheran Identity: A Classical Understanding* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008). If you're looking for a good introduction for lay people to the classical view of what it means to be Lutheran, look no more. Senn's contribution to the "Lutheran Voices" series is scholarly yet readable. I say "for lay people," but I was astonished at how many new insights and dif-

ferent ways of considering things I gained from this very slender volume. Senn has a way of packing lots of knowledge and wisdom into a sentence or two.

■ Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (HarperCollins, 2009). Don't let the back cover

endorsement and forward by Rick Warren scare you off. This is a thoughtful book, a good review of early church heresies and their continuing relevance today. It is scholarly without being inaccessible.

Thoughtful, scholarly, yes, and also timely.

— by Richard O Johnson, editor

I am not the church

by Eric J. Brown



I tend to be a big supporter of freedom as regards many individual practices in a person's private life. As a pastor, on most personal issues I will take a broader tack: what Scripture does not forbid cannot be forbidden to the individual. I hold this stance without shame or fear, for I believe it is Scriptural—just as I will also say that I cannot command you to show love within your own life in a certain way of my choosing. As Christians and as pastors we may advise, counsel, and suggest, but we cannot bind another when Christ has not bound; we cannot exhort what Christ has not exhorted.

I would argue that to do so even violates the 4th commandment, for it does not respect the personal authority that the individual has in managing his own affairs. A respect for authority, in other words, doesn't just apply to those in authority over you, but also those who are in other "chains of command," as it were.

Mucking around with the church

I know, however, that this "libertine" approach causes great frustration to many, and I think I understand why it does, especially in today's climate within the church. The same language is sometimes used as a defense of tomfoolery in the church. The contemporary worship crowd cries "freedom," the emerging church crowd cries "freedom." On and on the call for freedom goes in order to justify mucking around with the church. "I'm going to do this and that because it's all for the 'sake of the gospel,' and I am free to do so." Let us leave aside the whole "sake of the gospel" idea (which deals with whether or not something is wise—just where the debate ought to be before anything is done). Rather let us focus on one simple fact that people miss when they

abuse the gift of freedom in this way.

Yes, Christ has set me free. But I am not the church.

Personal freedom

In my personal sphere, where my actions are my actions and they deal with me and mine, I am free. If Scripture does not bind, let no one bind me as regards my life, what I eat or drink. If God does not forbid, let no one forbid me as regards my headship over my family. If Scripture does not say "Thou shalt not," let no one tell me "Thou shalt not" as regards my affairs. And likewise, if I assert such false authority upon my own neighbor, let others rightly say *anathema sit!*

But it's not "my church" in the sense that I have ownership over it or control over it; it's the church to which I belong. The church is much larger than the individual member, individual pastor, or individual congregation. As such, we (as members, pastors, or congregations) do not have personal freedom in the church. The church is a corporate entity, not a personal fiefdom; we cannot act outside what the whole has established as proper practice.

The church isn't an individual

Again, consider the parts of Scripture where our Lord or Paul speak to freedom. Freedom is never spoken of corporately. Freedom does not mean you can ignore the government (rather you are to obey, even if it kills you). And it does not mean you are free to do whatever you wish in the church. (Paul instructs quite often on church behavior, which should demonstrate this fact.) Rather, freedom is always focused on the individual.

The church is a body, not an individual. What I do in my house is one thing. To an extent, of

course, it does impact other families, so I should exercise care and caution. But just because “Jenny’s parents let her do whatever” doesn’t mean that I will have to let my daughter do the same. My actions do not bind another.

But this does not hold true in the church. What you do at your congregation affects me, because in reality your congregation is my congregation, and my congregation is your congregation. The church is one. Therefore, what you do directly impacts me and everyone else, and your individual freedom is no excuse to foist tomfoolish tyranny upon me and everybody else.

There’s a distinction

So let us bear the distinction between personal freedom and membership in a body. The latter always curtails individual freedom, and individuals have no right or freedom to impact willy-nilly the body to which they belong on the basis of their own

whims, thoughts or desires.

Let the individual, as regards himself, enjoy the freedom God has given him, without others trying to run his life for him; however, let the body do what the body as a whole confesses to be in accordance with Christ’s Word and to be meet, right, and salutary.

A Christian must act to show love within the bounds of freedom that Christ has established. A catholic church must do catholic practices. Let not freedom be so confused that it is either denied to the individual or foisted upon the body!

Eric Brown is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church (LCMS), Lahoma, OK; this is his first contribution to Forum Letter. An earlier version of this piece appeared on the blog “Four and Twenty Blackbirds,” which you can visit at <<http://four-and-twentysomething.blogspot.com/2009/10/i-am-not-church.html>>.

Omnium gatherum



These things stack up, and I’ve got to clean off my desk top.

Self care for first call pastors • I’ve had three associate pastors in a row who were either in the midst of, or had just completed, their requisite “First Call Theological Education” regimen. For the most part, they didn’t like it, but some of the specific criticisms can’t be printed in a family newsletter. Of course some of this can probably be ascribed to the usual “you know kids, they complain about anything you tell them they have to do” syndrome. I, on the other hand, think that FCTE offers wonderful opportunities, and I’m thinking of applying to be a first call pastor myself. The Region 2 newbies, for instance, recently received word that at their forthcoming retreat in Santa Fe (tough gig, but somebody’s got to do it), the planners have “made arrangements for discounts on spa treatments/massages” at several local establishments. These range from a “no-nonsense health spa” to a “funky smoothie bar/boutique/spa” and a “Deluxe Japanese spa . . . noted for their Hot Baths.” And aren’t we all glad that these fledgling pastors are being taught the importance of self-care right from the git-go?

Lots of firsts • The ELCA News Service tells us that the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) has elected the Rev. Margot Käsmann, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hannover, as its new chair — “the highest representative of German Protestants.” The release goes on to say that Käsmann, 51, is both the first woman and the youngest person to hold this position. It neglected to add that Käsmann is the first sitting German bishop to divorce her spouse — in her case, following a marriage of more than a quarter of a century. Bp. Käsmann has been described as “the pop bishop” (because of her omnipresence on German talk shows) and “a cross between Mother Theresa and Demi Moore.” And you thought Mark Hanson had charisma.

Schmeckenbeckons • I don’t know who this guy is, or if I do, I’m not saying, but he’s uploaded a video to YouTube which is one of the clearest explanations possible for the current state of the ELCA, and if you’ve not seen it yet, run, don’t walk, to <www.youtube.com/user/schmeckenbeckons#p/a/u/1/wpP8svZqR4A>. (Kind of reminds me of the time, years ago, when I was sending out a notice of a meeting at a church in our conference which is, shall

we say, challenging to find. I gave directions to a certain point, and concluded with, "Then just keep driving around until you find it." The church's secretary called and asked if they could use those directions in the future, as they were the clearest anyone had ever devised.)

ELCA task force • Over on Forum Online, Jonathan Hall has theorized that there is an ELCA Task Force on the Agenda to Grow a Contemporary Paradigm for Rostered Leaders Dialoguing, "which has clearly been at work for years. They have one member at every Higgins Road meeting whose task it is to ensure that nothing actually meaningful is said." I think he may be on to something.

Feel better now? • Retired ELCA pastors who annuitized their pensions have received the grim news that they can expect a 9% cut in their pension payments for each of the next three years. The presiding bishop wrote them a letter about this "difficult and challenging" information, expressing his pain and encouraging them to "maintain and renew relationships that can provide encouragement and support" so they can "continue to live with both joy and hope." I'm not a pensioner yet (though I help care for one), but I've heard quite a few retirees discussing this situation; none of them so far has felt any better at all after receiving the PB's missive.

Pez dispensers • I just can't get worked up about the flu panic. There are those in my congregation who can; you know the old concern about drinking from the common cup. (I just about kissed the life-long Lutheran who said to me, "I just figure Jesus wouldn't tell me to do this and then make me sick from it"; of course that would have been unsanitary, so I refrained.) In my opinion, the bigger infection danger comes from distributing the hosts—hand-to-hand contact, and all that. But now there is a solution. Some outfit called "Purity Solutions" is marketing a "Communion Host Dispenser" which looks a lot like the old Pez candy dispensers, except these have a cross on the front. Available in a choice of three colors. They just shoot the host right into the communicant's mouth. As a bonus, they say, this can cut the time of communion distribution in half (which could be true, because people like me would refrain from receiving). If germ-infested communion

hosts are your concern, this may be the answer. On the other hand, if you're more concerned about the chalice, they've got you covered, too. Wine-infused hosts, with "improved taste and texture." A win-win solution—check it out. (No, wait; don't check it out. Please.)

Brand dispute • Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ is a loose federation of congregations, many of whom left the ELCA over unhappiness about the full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church. Part of their "looseness" seems to be the ability of any group of congregations desiring to do so to form a "district" within LCMC. Currently some folks are planning to form an "Augustana District." It's not clear to me why they want to do this, but then I don't much care. Some former Augustana Synod people care a great deal, however. The Augustana Heritage Association has sent a tartly-worded letter to LCMC, asking them to cease and desist. "Augustana persons have been strong advocates for Lutheran unity in North America. . . . The first presiding bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada were persons of Augustana heritage. . . . Persons of Augustana heritage continue to provide leadership in the ELCA and ELCIC. . . . The purpose of creating an 'Augustana District' is transparent, particularly when [LCMC representatives] approach former Augustana congregations, as they have done, seeking to have them join the LCMC. The desire is to give the impression that those congregations will find a home in the LCMC that represents their heritage better than the ELCA does. The AHA board objects strenuously to this false impression." Whether it is a false impression or not, I suppose, depends on who's doing the looking. The AHA board (whose "persons of Augustana heritage," incidentally, include both the "first presiding bishops" referred to above) seems to be under the impression that they own the brand name "Augustana." Perhaps they think it to be a Swedish word. It's actually Latin, of course, as in *Confessio Augustana*, the Latin name for "Augsburg Confession," and as such does not really belong to any particular group of Lutherans any more than, say, the term "Lutheran." One might think the AHA board could find better ways to maintain the noble tradition of the Augustana Synod. Perhaps they could

review the 8th commandment and interpret the use of the name by some members of LCMC more charitably than they have done. Back when the ELCA was formed, there was a teensy tiny little just-barely-holding-on remnant of the old Eielson Synod whose official (but unincorporated) name was the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. They raised a big stink about the merging groups "stealing their name." They appeared a bit silly. So does the AHA board.

Failing grades • It was sort of buried in an article in the November issue of *The Lutheran*, but the U. S. Department of Education has given several Lutheran institutions failing grades in its "test of financial strength." The most precarious grade went to Waldorf College in Forest City, IA, but others on the failing list included two seminaries (Lutheran Seminary at Philadelphia and Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago) and three other colleges (Newberry, Dana and Finlandia). Is it time to ask yet again whether the ELCA needs as many seminaries as it has?

Monkey business • The Arcus Foundation has a mission "to achieve social justice that is inclusive of sexual orientation, gender identity and race, and to ensure conservation and respect of the great apes." (I'm not making that up.) Lutherans Concerned/North America describes itself, on its web page, as "an independent membership organization, supported entirely by donations and member contributions." Technically true, I guess, although the Ar-

cus Foundation's grants in 2008 included one to LC/NA for "\$200,000 over two years to organize and support a grassroots collaborative effort to change existing denominational policy at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America toward the full inclusion of LGBT people of faith." This was a stroke of genius; in one grant, the Arcus foundation could fulfill both its goals: it could support LGBT Lutherans by fostering monkey business at the Churchwide Assembly. But at least we know now how all that "grassroots demand" for a change in policies of the ELCA was generated: donations and member contributions, you betcha. Arcus had "donated" for this purpose prior to the 2007 CWA as well, though only fifty grand that year.

The joy of giving • The American Lutheran Publicity Bureau doesn't have as many fund drives as National Public Radio, but it's kind of a tradition to ask for your generous support at the end of the year. A tax-deductible gift to ALPB helps keep this important ministry going. Gift subscriptions to the *Lutheran Forum/Forum Letter* package, especially to young pastors, may bear wonderful fruit in years to come. The publishing ministry of ALPB has helped enliven and inform theological discussion in American Lutheranism for many decades. If you enjoy the *Forum* package, if you gratefully use *For All the Saints* to guide your praying, if you are entertained by Forum Online and enlightened by the writers at lutheranforum.org, why not express your thanks by sending an offering to ALPB? Do it now, before you forget. – roj

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