

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Church and Last Things, Session 8, Historical Theology of the Church, The Church and Churches, Attributes of the Church.

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This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on Doctrines of the Church and Last Things. This is session 8, Historical Theology of the Church, the Church and Churches, Attributes of the Church.

Continuing our study of the Doctrine of the Church with Historical Theology, but first, let us pray.

Gracious Father, thank you for your truth. Thank you for the Bible's teachings. Encourage us as students of the Church to be lovers, servants, and workers in the Church as well, as we pray.

Through Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Churches, in the name we pray, Amen. Our last Historical Theology signpost, if you will, after the Augsburg Confession, Scotts Confession, and Belgic Confession, is the Westminster Confession of 1646, still the standard of Presbyterian and Believing Churches. Chapter 25 is on the Church.

It has six statements. Number one, the Catholic or Universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect. There's that Augustinian defining the Church as the predestined, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ, the head thereof.

And it's the spouse, the body, and the fullness of Him that fills all in all. Catholic means universal, doesn't mean Roman. It affirms the invisible Church, all the people of God of all ages and everywhere around the world.

It grounds the Church in the election, God's sovereign grace. Shall be gathered into one, gathering speaks of God actually calling people to Himself in the Gospel, using the Gospel of John's language, people coming to Christ. The Father draws people to Christ so they come to Christ or believe in Him.

Under Christ the head and the Church is the spouse, the bride, the body, the fullness of Him that fills all in all from Colossians, from Ephesians, excuse me. The visible Church, so Article 1, invisible Church, the visible Church which is also Catholic or universal under the Gospel, not confined to one nation as before under the law, the visible Church which is also Catholic or universal under the Gospel, consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, there's a content to churchmanship, and of their children, there's a covenantal theology in the family

again as in Scott's confession and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God out of which there's no ordinary possibility of salvation. I would say the Church is not identical to the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is a bigger entity of which the Church is a subset. The kingdom of God is God's rule over everything, and perhaps they mean His rule over His people in that narrower sense. They're closer, but still, I would not take exception to that, I would clarify that the Church is not the same, identical to the kingdom. It's one expression of the kingdom of God, and notice the Cypriots, the references to Cyprian's idea, there's no salvation outside the Church, they qualify, there's no ordinary possibility of salvation out of the Church.

Family of God is another way of describing the Church. The house of God, Westminster 25:3, unto this Catholic visible Church, universal visible Church, Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life to the end of the world, and does by His own presence and spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual their unto. Christ has given three things: the ministry, which is indeed the ministry of the Church, which would include the pastoral ministry, preaching, the cure of souls, and so forth.

Oracles speaks of the very words of God, 1 Peter 4, uses that expression, I'm thankful that the ESV restores that, I don't want to say that to be wrong. Ah, there we are, yes, whoever speaks, 1 Peter 4, do it as one who speaks the oracles of God. It means the very words of God, and that adds great solemnity to the ministry of the word because ministers of the word are handling the very utterances of God Himself. Christ, to this universal visible Church, has given the ministry of the word, and more, the oracles, the word of God, and the ordinances of God, baptism in the Lord's Supper, for two purposes: the gathering and perfecting of the saints.

The gathering is bringing them to Christ; perfecting is like Colossians 1; Paul's goal is to present everyone as perfect and mature in Christ Jesus. In this life, to the end of the world, the Church would go on. And God not only gives these things, but He does by His presence and spirit, according to His promise, make them effective.

So, He gives those gifts, and He works through them to produce His results, of gathering and perfecting. 25, Article 4, this Catholic Church has been sometimes more, sometimes less visible, and particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them. Again, it doesn't use the term mark to the Church, but it implies the doctrine of the gospel being taught, and not only taught, but believed, and the ordinances being administered, and the result is public worship, more or less purely.

Churches are more or less pure. Doctrine, ordinances, and worship occur more or less purely. What are they doing? They're denying any notion of a perfect Church.

Well, the next article makes it plain. Article 5 states that the purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture, and back to St. Augustine, churches are a mixed entity of believers and unbelievers. The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error.

Churches have errors, every church has errors, and every Christian has errors, as we'll see when we talk about the marks of the Church and then ecclesiastical separation. I'll just talk about degrees of error, and one of my two points is to distinguish even big errors in systems from heresies. Heresies damn people.

It just irritates me when my Calvinist friends call Arminians heretics and vice versa. No, they're fellow believers in Christ. Now, they each think the other one is guilty of systemic or systematic error, and that would be true one way or the other, but they're not heretics.

The other point of my discussion of ecclesiastical separation and error is to humble us and recognize that nobody has it all together. Nobody understands every verse in the Bible properly, and to misinterpret a verse is a sin. So, we're all, we all have errors.

The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error, and some have so degenerated as to become not churches of Christ but synagogues of Satan. That's from Revelation 2:9, the letters to the second church. Synagogues of Satan mean no true church at all.

That would not be something we throw around, although in my estimation, churches in our culture today of them are indeed synagogues of Satan. Is that because they disagree with you on baptism? No. Church government? No.

Land estate? No. It's because they don't preach the gospel, or they deliberately don't believe the gospel. Nevertheless, there shall always be a church on earth to worship God according to his will.

I hear an echo; I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Boy, that runs through these reformational documents, even with that deliberate quotation. Jesus guarantees the perpetuity of his church.

And, of course, you got to give the Pope a quick kick in the pants. Article 6, there is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ, nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof. Well, historical theology is not substituted for the Word

of God, but it enriches our understanding of the Word of God, and we are the better for it.

It makes us think through certain issues, and theology should be based upon exegesis, but theology also informs exegesis. We see the ideas that we have in the Bible, and many times, rightly so. A real brief discussion of the church and the churches.

Really just working with the New Testament word for church, ekklesia. The word church, ekklesia in Greek, in the New Testament refers to the church in its many manifestations. That's the whole point of this.

Ekklesia refers to the church in its many manifestations. And I'll just sum it up. I'll give an overview.

It refers to churches, meaning in homes. House churches are churches. It refers to churches, meaning citywide churches.

The sum total of house churches, meaning in a New Testament city, could be called the church in Ephesus, for example. Churches, the sum total of churches in Roman provinces, provincial churches, are also called the same thing. Churches.

The universal church in Acts 15 in Jerusalem County is still a surprise. It's called the church. The church in the New Testament refers to the church in its many manifestations.

As a matter of fact, sometimes it refers to the invisible church. House churches. 1 Corinthians 16, 19, Aquila and Priscilla send you greetings, Paul says, warmly in the Lord, along with the church that meets in their home.

1 Corinthians 16, 19, Aquila and Priscilla had a house church that met in their house. By leaving the house, Paul writes, our dear friend and coworker, to Athia, our sister, to Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home. By leaving, one and two.

By leaving, it had a house church meeting in his home. New Testament writers sometimes use the word church to point to citywide churches and metropolitan churches. So in Acts 8:1 we read, on that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem.

Is that one big entity? Well, in a sense, it is, but no, it's made up of many house churches. But you could refer to them, en toto, as the church in Jerusalem. That is, it's a principle of common identity, not of power.

Whether one particular church is referred to or all the churches, it's all the church. In Acts 20, we read, now from Miletus Paul sent to Ephesus and summoned the elders of the church. That be the house churches in the city of Ephesus.

They are called the church. The churches in a Roman province, called provincial churches if you will, are corporately referred to as the church. Acts 9:31.

So, the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Acts 9:31. 1 Corinthians 16:19, the churches of Asia send you greetings.

That is many churches in many cities. So, we're moving from smaller to larger entities, and the point is that all these entities could be called, and are called, the church. On a few occasions, the word church, ecclesia, refers to the whole ecumenical church.

Acts 15:22. Then the apostles and the elders, with the whole church here it is, decided to select men who were among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, Judas, called Barabbas, and Silas, both leading men among the brothers. Acts 15:22.

The whole church. Sometimes, churches used to depict what we may call the invisible or universal church, which speaks of the unity of all believers everywhere, both living and dead. Listen to Ephesians 1:22.

And God subjected everything under his feet, Jesus' feet, and appointed him as head over everything for the church. He said his churches involve the church militant on earth, the church triumphant, and those who have gone on to their reward. Ephesians 1:22.

Ephesians 3:20 and 21. Now, to him, who's able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:20, 21. Or how about Ephesians 5:27. Christ did this.

He gave himself to his church to sanctify her. He did it to present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless. Ephesians 5:27.

The church, in this sense, is not identical with any one local church denomination or association. It's not entirely visible to human beings and refers to the sum total of all believers from all places and all times. Most of the time in the New Testament, the word church refers to the local, visible church, the gathered community of God's

people who are covenanted together to worship the triune God, love one another, and witness to the world.

Acts 14:23. When they had appointed elders for them in every church when the apostles had. Acts 16:5. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

This is the predominant usage of church and the biblical emphasis. The church is a local group of believers committed to Christ and one another, working together to glorify God and to serve his mission. Local church is the primary locus of fellowship and worship.

It's the primary means God uses for evangelism, disciple-making, and ministry. This is why Paul plants local churches, appoints leaders for them, sends delegates to them, and writes letters to them. Local churches are key in his theology, and they're a key to his mission strategy.

In the local church, we gather together, grow together, minister together, worship together, witness together. That should be seen, of course, in light of the invisible church. So, there are household churches, metropolitan or citywide churches, provincial churches, the whole ecumenical church, and the church invisible as well, including all the believers of all time.

We move now to the important topic of the attributes of the church. Our next two topics are the attributes and the marks. They should be contrasted.

The attributes are a patristic emphasis. They come from the early church. The attributes are patristic.

The marks are reformational. The attributes are definitional. They're defining.

They define the church. The marks are distinguishing, separating the true from the false. The attributes of a church, the four nouns, come from the adjectives from the Council of Constantinople, as we said a number of times.

Historical distinctions. Marks are reformational. Attributes patristic.

Purpose. The marks are polemic, distinguishing true from false churches. Attributes are defining and confessional.

The creed from the Council of Constantinople in 381 said we believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic church. The attributes of the church are thus, from one, we get unity. From holy, we get sanctity or holiness.

From Catholic, we get Catholicity. And from apostolic, we get apostolicity—the unity of the church.

The church is one because believers have been united in the same Lord Jesus Christ and are to promote visibly this eternal spiritual union. In John 17, verses 20 to 23, we have important words of Jesus in this regard. As a matter of fact, I find three of the four attributes of the church in John 17.

Interesting. In Jesus' prayer for his church, he prays for unity, sanctity, and Catholicity; even apostolicity could be implied. Your word is truth.

Fascinating. John 17:20 to 23, I do not ask for these only, Jesus said, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, through the word of the apostles, that they may all be one. Just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory you've given me, I've given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and love them, even as you loved me. The church's unity transcends all earthly distinctions of ethnicity, social status, or gender.

Paul is explicit on the unity of the church in Galatians 3, and that is the focus in Galatians 3, not on the equality of men and women, which the Bible teaches, but the emphasis here is indeed is on unity. Galatians 3:27 and 28, for in Christ Jesus, verse 26, you are all sons of God through faith, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There's neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, there's no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you're Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. Adam's sin brings disorder and disunity, but God's plan is to glorify himself through a full-scale restoration of cosmic unity in Christ.

Ephesians tells us that God will do this by bringing all things together in Christ. God's new creation, including the church, is related to all three spheres of his plan for cosmic unity. First, the church is composed of believers who were alienated from God through Christ's saving work and are united to him by the Holy Spirit.

Second, the church is also the people of God reconciled to one another. The first point was from Ephesians 2, 1 to 10. Second point, Ephesians 2:11 to 22.

Third, the church is a demonstration of God's plan of cosmic reconciliation. Ephesians 3:8 to 11. God creates the church to display and glorify Himself.

Ephesians 2:7 to 10, 3:10. Church unity declares that there is one body and one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who's above all and through all in all. Those are the seven unities of the Christian church.

They are objective. No one can destroy them. No matter how much the church is persecuted or how corrupt it becomes, the Holy Trinity is still the Holy Trinity.

For example, the unity of the church is a reality for God has created one new people. One with Christ and one with one another. Ephesians 2:11 to 22.

Unity marks the whole or universal church. The reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles into one new people is global and thus requires belief in a universal church. Unity also marks the local church.

The reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles showcases God's purposes of cosmic unity and requires the church's visibility and, thus, the local church. The church's unity is both a current reality and a perennial pursuit. This means the unity of the church bears witness to the already and not yet of the kingdom.

Thus Paul urges the church to adopt specific behaviors and grounds these exhortations on the theological realities of the church's identity. Unity is hard to come by. So before Paul gives those seven objective unities of the church, he says the church must live out unity with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain, Ephesians 2, 3, the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Next word, there is one body, one spirit, and so forth. Immediately preceding the seven unities is a call to subjective unity. Be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace because there are seven objective bases of unity that are to be lived out in subjective unity.

Church unity is built on the theological foundations of one God, one Lord, one spirit, and so on, four to six. Paul stresses being united to one another means we must speak the truth, not nurse anger, give generously, we must avoid hurtful words, edify others, and not grieve the spirit, 25 to 30. He urges unity, emphasizing the removal of all bitterness, anger, wrath, shouting, and slander, along with all malice.

Christians are to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another. The church's unity is summed up by love, 5:1 and 2. The unity of the church is an important doctrine and a practical challenge. We often forget that unity is a doctrine.

The Christian church is created in and through the gospel. Unity is broken by those who deny the gospel, the deity of Christ, or other core truths. See Galatians 1:6 to 10.

The doctrine of church unity shapes the church's praxis. Ephesians 4:1 to 6 and 17 to 32. Church unity can exist in the midst of differences of opinion on culture and tradition.

It is striking that Paul never urges the church in Rome to agree on food laws and customs. Rather, he urges them to worship God with one voice despite such differences. Romans 15:5 to 7. The day-to-day practice of church unity is shown in our relationship to the church as a whole and to individual believers.

Paul later shows how the holiness and worship of the church are to display God and church unity. Unity is also displayed in our Christian family household relationships, including those of husband and wife, parents and children, and even master and bond servants. The unity of the church is one of its historic attributes.

The church is one, and we are to be careful to promote unity. This can be difficult on a practical level, especially difficult to combine for some with a fervency of belief. And I used to like to ask seminarians, I am a covenant theologian.

What do I have in common with dispensationalists? The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the Gospel. I have much more in common with them than what I don't have in common. I'm a convinced five-point Calvinist, a rip-roaring reformer.

What do I have with five-point Arminians? The grace of God, faith in the Lord Jesus, the unity of the Spirit, the bond of peace. It doesn't mean those things aren't important to me. They are important to me, and I've written books on them.

But the Bible has a doctrine of the unity of the church. That's a doctrine too and we must live that out even as we emphasize some truths more than others. Again, looking forward to the discussion of theological error.

We don't embrace heresies and heretics as brothers and sisters in Christ, but we do embrace brothers and sisters in Christ as brothers and sisters in Christ. And we can disagree on points, even points that are important to us while not rejecting others. Accept one another, Romans 15, as God has accepted you.

That is an important point. Not only is the church one, but there's also the unity and sanctity of the church. Holiness is another attribute of the church.

Salvation as sanctification or holiness is initial, progressive, and final. There's initial sanctification that produces sainthood. There's progressive or lifelong sanctification, which means God builds practical holiness into the lives of his saints.

And there's final or entire sanctification in which God will confirm his person in perfect holiness. Initial sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in setting apart sinners to God and holiness once and for all. 1 Corinthians 6:11. It is also called definitive sanctification because God defines those initially sanctified as his saints.

1 Corinthians 1:2. The Corinthians are saints with all of their problems and struggles and sins. They're saints. That should encourage us.

Progressive or Christian sanctification is God's working actual holiness into the lives of members of his body, the church, by turning them more and more away from sin and toward him. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5. The Spirit works progressive holiness in believers using the word, the church, and prayer. John 17:17. 2 Thessalonians 2:13. Final sanctification is the Holy Spirit's work of confirming the saints in perfect holiness.

When Jesus comes again, Ephesians 5:27, he will present the church to himself as perfect and holy. Let me get it right. So, he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

It will happen, as certainly as Jesus is the God-man whose atonement was accepted by God and who was alive from the dead. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 emphatically teaches that there will be entire sanctification at the second coming of Christ. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.

May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it.

Sanctification is initial. That's when we become saints when we believe. It's progressive or lifelong and it is final or entire.

The church is holy because God comes to dwell in believers corporately and individually. Viewing the church as a whole, Paul declares, God's temple is holy and that is what you are. 1 Corinthians 3:17. Viewing believers' bodies as temples, Paul says, don't you know your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who's in you, whom you have from God? 1 Corinthians 6:19. Sanctification of the church is the work of all three Trinitarian persons.

It's the work of God the Father, for the Father of spirits disciplines us for our benefit so that we can share his holiness. Hebrews 12:9 and 10. It is the work of the Son, for Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word.

Ephesians 5:25-26. And sanctification is the work, of course, of the Holy Spirit. As Paul teaches when he speaks of, quote, salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 2 Thessalonians 2:13. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus asked the Father to sanctify the church.

Sanctify them by your truth. Your word is truth. John 17:17. In some, the church is holy because we've been set apart to God and constituted as his saints, are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to the service of God, and walk in his ways.

At Christ's return, the church will be perfected in holiness: unity, sanctity, universality, or catholicity. The church is universal or catholic in that it is not confined to any one place or people.

Instead, it's composed of all God's people spread over the whole earth. The roots of the church's universality sink deep into Old Testament soil in God's promises to make Abraham a blessing to all peoples. Genesis 12:3. And Nations 22:18. The prophets foretell the Messiah will minister to the nations.

Isaiah 42:1-9. 49:1-7. 52:15. These promises are hit, and hints are fulfilled in the New Testament. When Jesus comes as the Redeemer of Jews and Gentiles, God directed wise Gentile men from the East to worship him after his birth. Matthew 2:2. Although Jesus comes first to the quote lost sheep of the house of Israel, Matthew 15:24, he also ministers to a Canaanite woman, verses 21-28.

Samaritans, John 4. Greeks, John 12:20-26. Ironically, not Jews but Samaritans confess that Jesus is, quote, the savior of the world, John 4:42. Jesus' great commission leaves no doubt as to his worldwide intentions. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. The apostles obey their Lord and evangelize and disciple all nations.

The gospel is thus preached first to the Jew and then to the Gentile, Romans 1:16. In time, it became a settled principle of church teaching. Quote, the father has sent his son as the world's savior, as the savior of the world, 1 John 4:14. As a result of the worldwide preaching of the gospel and church planting in numerous nations, the church is spread around the globe. Local churches exist in communities in most countries, and the sum total shows the church is global and multinational.

A corollary of the church's Catholicity is the fact that ethnic, racial, or gender discrimination is sinful. I'll say it again because there's one holy and universal church. Ethnic discrimination is sinful.

Racial discrimination is sinful. And gender discrimination is the same. Not only are all human beings made in God's image, but God brings into his family people, quote,

from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, Revelation 5:9. The early Christians confessed one holy Catholic and apostolic church.

Apostolicity is the fourth and final attribute of the church. Roman Catholics believe the description one holy Catholic and apostolic church applies only to their church. The Roman Catholic Church claims it alone is apostolic because of apostolic succession of a continuous line of bishops stretching back to the apostles.

This concerns especially the Church of Rome, whose first bishop Rome regards to have been Peter. Rome holds Christ, makes Peter head of the apostles, and also chooses him as the first pope. Christ's representative on earth, his vicar on earth.

Apostolicity guarantees the Roman Church's valid authority, teaching, and sacraments. Contrary to this, evangelicals maintain the church is apostolic because it is founded on the preaching and teaching of the apostles, including Peter. Apostolicity then is based on fidelity to the gospel as found in the New Testament.

Indeed, the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the cornerstone, Ephesians 2:20. The early church devotes itself to the apostles' teaching, which is in accord with the word of God, Acts 2:42, that is apostolicity. Apostolicity is faithfulness to the apostles' doctrine, not linear descent from the bishop of Rome by virtue of supposed Roman Catholic ordination. Apostolicity is reflected in the apostles' commitment to God's truth.

Second Timothy 3:14-4:4. Paul writes, I'm not ashamed because I know whom I have believed and am persuaded he is able to guard what I've entrusted to him until that day. Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching you've heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 1:12-13. The gospel is true, and God's word is true, so our beliefs, teachings, and lives are grounded in it.

Furthermore, Jesus promises he and the Father will send to the disciples the spirit of truth, who will testify about Jesus and guide them into all the truth, John 15:26 and 16:13. The spirit does this, and as a result, the disciples and the apostles believe and preach the gospel, placing it at the center of their apostolic ministry. First Corinthians 15:3-4. Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures. He was buried.

He was raised again on the third day, according to the scriptures. Christ also suffered for sins once and for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, 1 Peter 3:18. Apostolicity is so serious a matter that according to the New Testament, preaching a different gospel, even if preached by angels or apostles, brings down curses from God on the apostle's head, Galatians 1:8-9. Even if we are angels from heaven, even if we, as apostles, should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we've said before, so now I

say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

As far as the apostle Paul is concerned, he subordinates himself to the gospel. He is only the messenger, and he is to be trusted only as he is faithful to the message the gospel of God revealed to him. God's word has supreme authority even over apostles like Paul.

Indeed, the New Testament binds all teachers and preachers to receive, believe, guard, and pass on the truth of God. They are to preach the word, be ready in season and out of season, rebuke, correct and exhort with great patience and teaching, 2 Timothy 4:1-3. Thus, we confess with the early church that there is one holy catholic and apostolic church understood in an evangelical manner.

In our next lecture, we'll move from the attributes of the church to discussing the reformational matter of the marks of the church. It teaches the doctrines of the church and the last things.

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