

Leadership for a Greater Consensus

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of embracing the fullness and clarity of the central gospel truths, rooted in the whole counsel of God. It highlights the significance of teaching and abiding in the complete doctrines of the Bible, focusing on the saving, sanctifying, liberating, and joy-producing effects of the whole counsel of God. The speaker encourages a passion for God-centered, Christ-exalting, and Bible-saturated unity and awakening, rejecting truncated or ambiguous gospel truths.

Scripture: 2 John 1:9, John 15:11, Acts 20:27, Romans 6:17, 2 Timothy 1:13, Psalm 139:23, Mark 9:24, John 14:1, 1 Timothy 5:17

Topics: "Embracing the Fullness of the Gospel", "The Importance of Biblical Doctrine"

Description

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Transcript

I want to thank you for the blessing that it has been already for me to be among you. As far as I can remember, this is the first time I have ever spoken in the city where I was born 59 years ago. I come to the PCA with a strong desire that God would send a great spiritual awakening in our land marked by a passionate God-centered, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated consensus or unity rooted in the fullness of central gospel truths.

I am less excited, less enthusiastic about a spiritual awakening rooted in truncated, partial, ambiguous gospel truths. The glory of God shines most brightly when His ways and His beauty are most fully and most clearly seen, especially when that sight gives rise to great joy and great unity in the church. It's true, God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him, but it is also true that God is more glorified in us and in our unity when we long to see more and more and more of Him revealed in more and more of His Word and His truth.

I have never understood, nor have I ever empathized with those who say that knowing more and more about God gets in the way of loving God. And yet there are people who build their lives and some who build their ministries around the elevation of doctrinal limits and doctrinal ambiguity and obscurity. It's been

my conviction and my experience for over 40 years that knowing more about God from His inspired and energy-full Word puts more kindling on the altar where the Holy Spirit can make a bigger and bigger conflagration of passion for Christ.

That's been my experience. I don't understand people who want to emphasize don't go for more knowledge of God. That makes no sense experientially to me at all.

There are people who believe that we will marvel at the mountain of the truth of God better if we don't try to climb it, but just keep our distance so that it's shrouded in a great cloud of unknowing and mysterious ambiguity and obscurity and it must be so great. Distance and ignorance can sustain wonder only so long. I have been driven and come to you now with the opposite conviction.

The fullness and the clarity of the doctrines of the Gospel are a source of indomitable and exquisite joy and passionate worship and radical obedience and biblical unity and, in view of tonight's theme, national reformation. My enthusiasm for spiritual awakening and unity, consensus in the body of Christ, increases in direct proportion to the fullness and the clarity of the central gospel truths that drive that awakening. My enthusiasm for spiritual awakening goes down.

It decreases and diminishes in direct proportion as the fullness and the clarity of the central gospel truths driving it, goes down. So when I have a passion, and I do, for awakening and for reviving and for reformation and for unity in the body of Christ, that desire rises as I see God using the fullness and the clarity of the central gospel doctrines to drive that awakening. So before I move into a passage of scripture, I would like to turn this now with you into a prayer.

So let's bow together and let me ask the Lord to use what I'm about to say to advance this. So Father, now here at the beginning, I pray that this denomination, this Presbyterian church in America, which historically has treasured the fullness and the clarity of the doctrines of grace, will see the Spirit of God, will see your Spirit, set that historic kindling ablaze with joy and obedience and unity, so that, as some have already prayed tonight, this little band of churches would be a means of spreading a conflagration of spiritual life and power sustained by the fullness of truth and the clarity of truth even throughout this whole nation and the world beyond anybody's expectation and out of all proportion to the size of this gathering. So come and have mercy upon the days that they have spent together, the truths that they have heard, and this particular message to be a means to that end, I pray in Jesus' powerful name.

Amen. So if you have a Bible, I invite you to open it to Acts chapter 20, and we will read a few of these verses to the Ephesian elders, namely verses 24 to 31, and I don't believe Luke or Paul makes any distinction here between the ruling and the teaching elders, they're all there, and this word lands on all of them, and I'm sure you agree that that distinction between ruling and teaching elder rooted probably most clearly in 1 Timothy 5, 17, that the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and teaching, that especially warrants a distinction in role in the eldership, but you can't draw it very closely. It will not work to divide these guys up real precisely.

There is a common burden that all the elders bear, and it's this chapter, and these verses in particular, so listen up, ruling and teaching elders. Start at verse 24. I do not count my life of any value, nor as precious to myself.

If only I may finish my course in the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. Now behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the

kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

I have five very brief observations to make and one extended reflection upon the term whole counsel of God. Observation number one, testifying to the gospel of the grace of God is more important than staying alive. Verse 24, but I do not regard my life of any value or as precious to myself if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

That's all my life counts for. Number two, Paul's ministry in Ephesus for three years was of such a kind that he is now innocent of any of their blood, the blood of the elders, if they should make shipwreck of their professed faith. He's not responsible.

Verse 26, therefore, I testify to you this day, I am innocent of the blood of all of you. Verse 31, therefore, be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. So he finished his work in three years sufficiently so that if any of them goes to hell, it is not his fault.

Verse observation number three. The reason he is innocent of their blood is that during these three years he imparted to them what he calls the whole counsel of God. Verse 27 or beginning in 26 in the middle, I am innocent of the blood of you all.

And here comes the ground clause for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. That's why I know I'm not guilty. If any of you make shipwreck of your faith, I've done what a human can do to preserve you, namely by imparting to you this reality called the whole counsel of God.

Observation number four. The job of the elders, now his audience, is to pick up where Paul left off and earnestly shepherd the blood-bought flock of God. Verse 28.

Pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers now to care, literally to shepherd the church of God which he obtained with his own blood. That's to make the stakes as high as they can possibly be made. Don't toy with the church.

Shepherd the church. Carry on my ministry. Finally, fifth observation.

The focus of this shepherding in this context, you elders, is protecting the flock from teaching that twists the apostolic doctrine. Now, you know as well as I do, both from reading this unit and the whole New Testament, that the work of an elder is more than that. It's more.

But it, in this text, is not less. And it is central. So verses 29 and 30.

I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, the elders, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after then. So the preeminent elder task in this passage is to so love the people and so teach the people and so shepherd the people that that doesn't happen. So, I conclude that preeminent in the task of the elders is

the impartation and protection of the whole counsel of God, verse 27.

The whole counsel of God, which in view of verse 24, where the gospel of the grace of God is more important than staying alive, must be at the center of the whole counsel of God. And that whole counsel of God is surrounding it, protecting it, is over it with implication, it is under it as foundation, it is all the things necessary to be taught to protect that precious deposit. So, for the remainder of our time, what I would like to do is reflect upon the whole counsel of God.

And I would like to talk about its existence, its nature, and its effect, all with a view to a spiritual awakening in our land and a spiritual unity in the body of Christ rooted in the whole counsel of God. I'm not interested in an awakening or unity that is not bubbling up out of massive gospel truths. So here's the first step then, the existence of the whole counsel of God.

There is such a thing, that's my point, it is, there is such a thing. The first evidence is verse 27, there it is stated, I did not shrink from declaring to you this whole, complete counsel of God. Now there are numerous other passages that refer to this reality in different words.

Let me give you two of them. Romans 6.17 Thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching. Tupon Didakes Type, pattern, pattern of teaching.

It's the word used for the pattern of the tabernacle in heaven that is now reflected in the tabernacle in the Old Testament. That's the gist of the word here. So there is a standard or a pattern or a type of teaching.

And what's so remarkable in Romans 6.17 is that Paul writing to a church he'd never been to assumes they all had been committed to. It's amazing. This was basic discipleship in the early church.

He just praised God that you'd all been handed over to the standard of teaching. Here's the second one. 2 Timothy 1.13-14 It goes like this.

Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me in faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Now verse 14. Another one.

By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. So now we have four terms describing this reality. 1. The whole counsel of God.

Acts 20.27 2. The standard or pattern of teaching. Romans 6.17 3. The pattern of sound words. 2 Timothy 1.13 4. The good deposit entrusted to you.

2 Timothy 1.14 And there are others we could go to that describe this reality that I am insisting exists. So my first point about the whole counsel of God is that there is such a thing. Point number two.

The nature of it. I have two things to say about the nature of it. This is the main thing I have to say tonight.

Two things. First, it is propositional. First piece of evidence.

It's called teaching. Pattern of teaching. It's called sound words.

Healthy words. Clear words. Evidence number two is the way Luke in Acts describes how Paul delivered it for three years.

This is very interesting to me. Really interesting. It says so much about how to plant a church and how to fit a church in a pagan Ephesus to evangelize all of Asia.

Let me read you Acts 19, 9, and 10. After three months, it says, in the synagogue where he had been, quote, reasoning and persuading. Three months in the synagogue, reasoning and persuading, this happened.

When some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily. Just catch your breath. Reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus.

This continued for two years. There's a King James variant reading that says five hours a day. I don't know where that came from, but if it came from an original, I'm gasping all the more.

Every day for two years, plus the three months at the front end, finish the sentence, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks, because one man spent five hours a day, maybe, we know it's every day for two years, doing what? Well, the words are reasoning and persuading, reasoning daily. This is propositional. For two long years, and it had an explosive evangelistic effect on all of Asia.

What an amazing way to plant a church. You just think of that other text in Acts 5, where they're accusing the apostles, you have filled Jerusalem with your what? Tell me. Is this the PCA? Teaching.

You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. Americans don't have a clue what we want them to believe. You can't just, here's a thought, become a Christian.

We must teach, we must find strategies to do this kind of thing. So, my argument here, my argument is that that language of whole counsel, sound words, pattern of teaching, reasoning daily for two years, is a strong argument for the propositional nature of what he spent three years imparting, which absolved his hands from their souls. Yes, he did more.

I know some of you who are not all that propositionally oriented are sitting there saying, there's more to it, there's more to it. I've been in the pastorate for 25 years now. We're going to have a little celebration in a few weeks, and I have buried a lot of people, watched a lot of people die, tried to rescue and failed often many marriages, prayed prodigal's home, my own included, preached when I had no energy left.

I know, I don't want to oversimplify. I don't want to academicize the work of the eldership. And in fact, Paul won't let me, will he? Look at verse 20.

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, teaching you in public and from house to house. He just went after everybody. Then look at verse 31.

For three years, I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. This man got so involved in the pain and the unbelief and the struggles of this people. He said, everywhere I was crying.

Pastors who don't cry don't have a clue what life is about. So yes, I don't want to overstate the case. I just want to say that he chose to focus on delivering the whole counsel of God as that which absolved him of their shipwreck if they make it, and there is enough evidence to see that it exists and that it is propositional.

This is important in our day and needs illustration. So let me illustrate with Athanasius and some people today who might not get along with him. Compare Athanasius and some aspects of the emerging church.

Not all. I mean that aspect, that wing, that part that minimizes doctrine, that wants to say propositions about Christ are not a very helpful way of loving Christ. When I read the story of Athanasius, which I spent most of last year doing, and see that he was banished, exiled five times from his bishopric in Alexandria in Egypt, I see a magnificent testimony to this truth.

Loving Christ includes loving true propositions about Christ. What was clear to Athanasius was that propositions about Christ carried convictions that could send you to heaven or to hell. There were propositions like this that he was dealing with.

Quote, there was a time when the Son of God was not. Here's another one. He was not before he was made.

Another one. The Son of God is created. Those are propositions, and they are strictly damnable.

And if they spread and are believed, they will send the souls of those who embrace them to hell. Therefore, Athanasius labored with all his might and tears, I am sure, to formulate propositions that would conform to reality and lead the soul to faith and to worship and to heaven. I believe Athanasius and the Apostle Paul would have abominated with tears the contemporary call to depropositionalizing that we hear among reformists and some in the emerging church and younger evangelicals and post-evangelicals and post-conservatives.

I think he would have said something like this. Our young people in Alexandria die for the truth of the proposition about Christ. What do you young people die for? And if the answer came back, and it probably would, we die for Christ, not propositions about Christ.

I think he would have said, that's exactly the way Arius talks. His arch heretical opponent. That's exactly the way Arius talks.

To which Athanasius would surely say, which Christ do you die for? And to answer that question, you must make some propositions about him. And if you say, I don't want to make propositions about him, you are saying, all that matters is a word. Christ, you can fill it up with anything you want, which is no honor to him and will save no one.

Words don't save reality. Faithfully captured in proclamation propositions save. The gospel is the power of God, truly and biblically articulated.

I think Athanasius and the Apostle Paul would have grieved over sentences like this. It is Christ who unites us, doctrines divide us. I think they would have wept over that sentence.

Or sentences like, we should ask, whom do you trust, not what do you believe. Sentences like that they would have wept over. They would have seen right to the bottom of where that kind of talk was coming from.

They knew it was the very tactic used by the Arian bishops at the councils to see to it that a fog prevailed in the council. Those who talk like this, Christ unites, doctrine divides, have simply replaced propositions about Christ not with Christ, but with a word, Christ, which nobody knows what it means. Carries no

beautiful reality content and will save no one.

They think, no, you must be so wise. They think that they are saying something fresh, profound, new when they are speaking the language of the 4th century heretics. It is old, it is worn, and it is deadly.

So that's the first thing I want to say about the whole council of God, which I pray will be the energy and the power by the grace of the Holy Spirit to energize a new great awakening and a new consensus. Here's the second thing I want to say about the nature of it. It has about it a fullness, a wholeness, a completeness.

It's called the whole, the whole council of God. And that means that we should be thrilled that it is whole. Thrilled that it is full and complete and not truncated and partial and fragmentary.

And we should want the fullness and want the wholeness and pray for a reformation rooted in the fullness and in the wholeness, not in pieces and not in fragments, even though the Apostle Paul and you are aware. Now we see in a mirror dimly, then face to face. Now we know in part, then we shall know fully, even as we have been fully known.

Don't play that sentence off against Passon Boulayne. Don't play that sentence off against Acts 20, 27, because the meaning is this. The fullness of the council is full not in comparison to what we will know in heaven, but in comparison to what God through His Apostles in His Word has revealed for our good now.

That's what's full about it. It's not full because it's all we'll ever know. It's full because it's the apostolic design for what's good for the church under God's inspiration.

And we ought to care about the wholeness, fullness, and completeness of it. So at this point I have a very concrete, practical, strategic suggestion for the Reformed community. And the Reformed community today, as I read the lay of the land, is an amazingly lively phenomenon.

You're a very small fragment of it. So am I. I wish my denomination were. We're just generic.

But you have a document, you have a document, and it comes pretty close. I love almost all of it. The Reformed community, let's just call it the soteriological Reformed faith, the five points of Calvinism, the doctrines of grace, the communities around the country coming into a zeal and a love for these truths is so diverse and so extensive it would blow your socks off if you knew how God was doing this.

You've got fundamentalistic type Baptists believing these things. And you've got wild-eyed Charismatics believing these things. You've got Presbyterians believing these things.

And you've got pockets in the Wesleyan church believing these things. It is amazing, which is why I feel so, not just biblically driven, but experientially driven to hope and dream and pray that beyond anybody's dream and awakening, not that it just has people laughing, or has people getting healed, or has people speaking in tongues, or has people singing vibrantly, but has people unified around massive, full, gospel truths. It's possible.

Imaginable. So here's my practical suggestion. Let's seize the biblical high ground of fullness.

In other words, all the other kinds of ways you conceive of controversy or difference, let this one become very prominent. That is, we who love the historic, reformed faith, love it because it is fully biblical. It is full.

And everything else is fragmentary. You don't have to say first, it's wrong. It is.

But not entirely. And if you focus on the defect instead of the fragmentary nature, you probably will not be as successful in winning people to the fullness. I'll give you a concrete example in the five points, and then an example in how I pray.

I find that it is possible, believe it or not, to win people to the very point of the five points that most people have the hardest time getting to, namely, particular redemption or limited atonement. If one says, not first, you're wrong to say Christ died for everybody, but rather say, of course he died for everybody. So John 3.16 says, that is, God so loved the world in such a way that he gave his son so that whoever believes will be saved.

That's all the man on the street means by unlimited atonement. So that 99% of the people walking around saying Jesus died for everybody simply means John 3.16 is true, and that if you believe on him, he'll save you. No Reformed person has ever denied that.

Therefore, what you say is, I believe that with all my heart, so the way I preach, I preach indiscriminately. Andrew Fuller taught us to do that over against hyper-Calvinism back in the 1700s. The free offer, the gospel, everybody in this room embraces.

Then you say, but you know what? There's more in the cross. It's Fuller. There's so much more going on.

And they say, what could be more than that he died for everybody? He bought a wife. He paid a dowry. He sealed a covenant.

And you unpack these words. And they just go, and you illustrate with, look, I look out on all you women, and I love you, not like I love Noel. Is that okay? And the women in my church say, it's not just okay.

We really like it that way. It's safe. And you find ways to say, I don't want to deny what you are saying.

Now, you might not be able to say that exactly with sophisticated Armenians, but you can say that with 99% of the people who are stumbling over this truth. You can say, look, I just want you to have the whole ball of wax. I want you to know not just what it is to be loved by God in the way he loves people in hell, or loved people in hell.

I want you to know what it is to be loved by God in the way a husband loves a wife. The sad thing about people who don't embrace that particular point in the doctrines of grace is that they can't enjoy covenant love. They can't live the sweet assurance that I particularly was secured and bought.

So all I'm saying is, let's seize the biblical high ground of fullness and try to distinguish ourselves, not kind of, I don't even want to say what the alternatives would be because I believe in those too, but mainly come at this fullness. Let me illustrate in the way I have been praying. Because I don't know if you elders want to be a part of ecumenical prayer groups in your city, and how do you pray as a person who believes in the sovereignty of God, and his full way of saving so that it doesn't sound like you're preaching to these guys and trying to get them all converted to Calvinism.

Here's the way I do it. Everybody in that prayer meeting, and in every church in this city, of any denomination agrees, Jesus is just, Jesus is loving, Jesus is wise, and Jesus is strong. I don't know of any Christian anywhere who says, no, he's not strong.

No, no, he's not wise. So there's some common ground. And all I want is to have the fullness of his justice, and the fullness of his love, and the fullness of his wisdom, and the fullness of his strength.

So I pray like this. Oh God, grant us, grant us all, in this prayer meeting and in all of our churches, to see the fullness of the justice of Jesus Christ, and how his death in our place absorbed all of your righteous wrath, so that you could justify the ungodly and be just. Grant, oh Lord, that we would see the beauty of how it will be perfectly just for him to cast into everlasting torment those who spurn this offer of reconciliation.

Now there are two or three massive doctrines I just was praying into reality there. And I was praying it in the context of fullness. I don't, people who are truly born again, no matter how defective they are in their thinking, who are truly born again, when they hear somebody longing for more of Christ, they generally don't think that's a bad thing.

And then I pray, Lord, grant us to see and to savor the fullness of Christ's love in his triumphant grace that raised me from the dead into the life of faith. When I was dead, trespasses and sins. Third, grant me, oh God, grant us to see and savor the fullness of the strength and the power of Christ in the marvelous work of his providence over the world by which not one bird falls to the ground apart from his will and so that every lot that is cast in the lap turns out by his design.

Oh, grant us the fullness of love and appreciation for all the strength of Jesus. And then fourthly, grant us to see and to savor as we ought the wisdom, the fullness of the wisdom of our Lord, how unsearchable are his judgments, how inscrutable are his ways. Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has ever given a gift to him that he should be repaid for from him and through him and to him are all things.

Oh, may we see the fullness of the ins and outs of the peculiarities of redemptive history in our own lives so that we never lift an objection against your sovereign wisdom over our lives. I just think if you pray like that in an ecumenical prayer gathering, they might come along. They might say amen, or the Holy Spirit might fall and do a wonderful, wonderful unifying on the basis of truth work.

So, I'm just not interested in spiritual unity or reformation or awakening that isn't growing out of the fullness of biblical truth. That leaves me with just one very brief last third point. We've talked about the existence of the whole counsel of God, the nature of it as propositional and full, and the last one is the effect.

I apologize for the title in the worship folder because I'm going to spend three minutes on what I thought would be my whole sermon when I chose that title. It's this right here. I was going to talk about the saving effects of the whole counsel of God, the sanctifying effects of the whole counsel of God, the liberating effects of the whole counsel of God, then I was going to hold up Ron Sider's new book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, and quote from it, supportively, that evangelicalism is just like the world, except in the last three pages of the book, he quotes statistics that say if you add enough doctrines to the telephone interview that people have to believe their lives are different.

Who would have ever thought that Ron Sider would be making the main case today for the elevation of doctrine in the evangelical church because it seems to be the only thing in the phone interviews that gets people out of bed with their boyfriend or friend or girlfriend. But I'm not going to talk about that. I'm going to talk about one last effect, namely joy and end here.

And I'm going to use two verses in a particular order so that it will be biblically plain that when the whole counsel of God is shown to produce joy, it is joy in God and not a theological system. Oh, how we need to so live, so worship, so rejoice that that indictment does not fall on us. Here's the first verse.

2 John 1.9 Whoever abides in the teaching. There it is again. The teaching.

Like it's a body of something. Whoever abides in the teaching. And then, again, catch your breath for the most amazing result.

Effect. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. He sang a song.

He's my portion. What more glorious statement could be said about a human creature than I have God the Father. I have God the Son.

Not in my back pocket, but as my treasure. My Savior. My Lord.

My all. And how does it happen? Abide in the teaching. Which leaves one last verse.

John 15.11 These things, Jesus says, these things I have spoken to you. Teaching. I've given you a body of teaching.

My apostles will say the climax of it. These things I have spoken to you that my joy might be in you. And your joy might be full.

I've spoken to you. What? The teaching. So that what? You will have me and have my Father.

So that what? Your joy will be indestructible and nevertheless very combustible. That's the marvel of the joy rooted in the fullness of the whole counsel of God. It is combustible with a passion and a joy and a zeal and yet combustible though it is, it is indestructible.

It goes on forever. Indeed, it increases more and more and more. So, my concluding strategy and exhortation is this.

We reformed lovers of the fullness of revealed truth and all that God is for us. Not truncated views, but all that God is for us in Jesus. We lovers of that truth must out rejoice everyone otherwise they will have warrant to think that we don't have as much of the Father and as much of the Son as they have.

That is built in to the way God means to be glorified and the way He means to revive and reform the church. Let's pray. Oh God, as we prepare in song to bow down, I pray that our bowing down and entering in to you and you in to us would be based on, rooted in the whole counsel of God.

That we would not be a people who kicks against biblical and theological propositions which labor in love to hedge the truth in from damnable error. Oh, that we might explode with a passion for your exaltation, Christ, and your centrality, God, so that the world would look and say, these are not people who are rejoicing in their system. These are people who land on their system like a great springboard in to heaven.

Let us live there, Father. Then would that joy spill over in the manifold acts of mission to the world, justice to the ethnicities of the world, and radical risk-taking sacrifice for all the needs of the people in our path. Through Christ I pray.

Amen.

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