

UNDERSTANDING AN ELDER-LED,
DEACON-SERVED,
CONGREGATIONALLY-ACCOUNTABLE
CHURCH

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Central Baptist Church, Marion, Ohio,
transitioned to elder leadership in 2014.

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Effective Church Organization Is Needed

The Church is God's design for communicating the gospel of reconciliation to the world. Just before ascending to heaven at the end of his time on earth, Jesus told his disciples that they were to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The book of Acts records the growth of the church that came as a result of the disciples' work. Wayne Grudem defines the church as "the community of all true believers for all time."¹ So, churches today are bound by the same instructions for the church that are found in Acts and the rest of the New Testament.

Organization is evident in the early church: they seemed to keep a record of their members (Acts 2:41; 4:4); they had set times for worship and prayer gatherings (Acts 2:42,47); they practiced the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, which seemed to have some kind of pattern to them (Acts 2:41-42, 46); they shared property (2:45; 4:32-37); and they received and accounted for offerings (4:32, 36-37; 5:1-11).² This pattern of organization also extended to the government of the church, which was divided in two offices: elders and deacons (Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9).

¹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 853.

²Daniel L. Akin, et al., *Perspectives On Church Government: Five Views Of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 3.

However, churches have disagreed over the proper form of church government. The Roman Catholic Church has a worldwide government under the authority of the Pope while Episcopalian churches have bishops with regional authority and archbishops over them. Presbyterian churches have presbyteries with regional authority and general assemblies with national authority. Baptist churches and nondenominational churches often have little formal governing beyond the local congregation.³ Quakers and Plymouth Brethren deny that the church needs a visible and concrete form of government so they have virtually eliminated governmental structure and try to rely on the leadership of the Holy Spirit.⁴

While flexibility in the finer details of church government is necessary, the Bible's instructions on the offices of the church and the role of the congregation are clear enough to guide the polity of modern local churches. The gospel is too important to be stewarded by worldly methods and scrambled leadership structures. Local churches should be led by a plurality of elders, served by a body of deacons, and remain accountable to the congregation as they glorify God by carrying out his mission in their community and beyond.

The Office Of Elder In the Church

The terms bishop, elder, and pastor are used interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to one and the same office of the church. Some form of all three terms is used in Paul's farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20: elders (verse 17), bishops (translated "overseers" in verse 28), and they are to feed the church of God (feed is the verbal form of the

³Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 904.

⁴Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1002.

word for pastor in verse 28). Elder and bishop are used interchangeably in Titus 1:5-9.⁵ Robert Wring concludes that elder expressed the dignity of the office, bishop denotes the elder's work, and pastor describes the elder's function which involved his role as a shepherd in guiding, feeding, and protecting the church under his charge.⁶ Wring's conclusion is similar to John MacArthur's statement that "the term elder emphasizes who the man is. Bishop speaks of what he does. And pastor ('shepherd') deals with how he ministers. All three terms are used of the same church leaders, identifying those who feed and lead the church, but each has a unique emphasis."⁷

The Greek word translated as elders in Acts 20:17 is πρεσβύτερος (transliterated as *presbúteros*) and bishops or overseers is the Greek word ἐπίσκοπος (transliterated as *epískopos*). In the New Testament, bishop and elder are two names for the same official, implying that the official function of episcopacy or eldership existed since New Testament times (see Acts 20:17, 28).⁸ Three distinct offices of elder, overseer, and deacon do not appear together in the Bible. Therefore, a separation of elders and overseers (or bishops) into a three-tiered church

⁵Jimmy Millikin, *Christian Doctrine For Everyman: An Introduction To Baptist Beliefs* 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Crossbooks, 2010), 124.

⁶Robert A. Wring, "Elder Rule and Southern Baptist Church Polity." *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 193.

⁷John MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1991), 185.

⁸Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), entry 1985.

government system (including deacons) like an Episcopalian system is not a New Testament concept.⁹

The Greek word translated as care for or feed in Acts 20:28 is ποιμαίνω (transliterated as *poimainō*), which literally means to shepherd.¹⁰ The noun form of *poimaino* is *poimen*, which can refer to a literal shepherd as an occupation. *Poimen* is also used to describe Jesus, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Jeramie Rinne summarizes, “So a pastor is a shepherd, and pastoring means caring for a flock. Not surprisingly, our English word *pastor* comes from the Latin word *pastor*, which means . . . *shepherd!*”¹¹

Function of Elders

With the understanding that elders, bishops, and pastor are synonymous, the term *elder* will be used hereon. Acts Six is helpful for determining the main function of elders and deacons as the two offices of the church. Acts Six is set in the early days of the church when it was greatly increasing in number and was mainly led by the apostles.¹² Complaints rose about unfairness in the daily ministry of distribution (possibly financial or food distribution), so the twelve apostles gathered the church to explain their remedy to this problem: “Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,

⁹Benjamin L. Merkle, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide For Church Members* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009), 22.

¹⁰Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, entry 4165.

¹¹Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God’s People Like Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014, Nook), 28.

¹²See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 906 for qualifications of an apostle.

whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:3-4).

The two offices of the church were not fully established at this point, but the basic premise was set: elders lead by being devoted to prayer and teaching the Word of God; deacons lead by serving the people and overseeing the organization and function of various ministries. This arrangement is observed throughout Scripture and it should be present in churches today.

Churches must fight the temptation to stray from biblical requirements and responsibilities for its leadership. Rinne opines that a church can easily be influenced by its culture and develop a leadership structure where the pastor is viewed as a CEO, the staff as vice presidents, the members as shareholders or loyal customers, and visitors as potential customers.¹³ The Bible has no such descriptions! The qualifications for elders set forth in Scripture indicate the character of the men who would hold that office and also indicate to some degree their function.

Biblical qualifications for elders are found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The purpose here is not to examine each qualification but to see how those qualifications shape the function of elders. D.A. Carson says that these lists of qualifications are most notable for being not very notable at all, meaning that the qualifications are elsewhere in Scripture commanded upon all believers with the exception of the ability to teach (1 Tim 3:2).¹⁴ The qualifications show that

¹³Rinne, *Church Elders*, 27.

¹⁴Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory: Basics of Church Structure* (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2001), 21.

elders must be men of high integrity and faithfulness to Jesus. The ability to teach corroborates with the ministry of the Word seen in Acts Six.

Daniel Akin lists eight functions of elders/pastors found in the New Testament. First, they are responsible for the oversight and direction of the church (Heb 13:17). Second, they are responsible to seek in all matters the mind of Christ through the Holy Spirit's guidance and the Scripture (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18; 1 Pet 5:2). Third, they must be able to teach sound doctrine and refute improper doctrine (Eph 4:11; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9). Fourth, they must provide instruction for the maintenance of healthy relationships within the church (Gal 6:1; 1 Thess 5:12; 2 Thess 3:14-15). Fifth, they will have at least general oversight of the church's financial matters (Acts 11:30). Sixth, they will lead in appointing deacons with the congregation's input (Acts 6:1-6). Seventh, they should lead by example (Heb. 13:7; 1 Pet. 5:2-3). Finally, they will lead in church discipline (Gal. 6:1) but not to the exclusion of the church when necessary (Matt 18; 1 Cor 5; 2 Cor 2).¹⁵

Benjamin Merkle summarizes the function of elders into four categories: elders as leaders, shepherds, teachers, and equippers.¹⁶

Elders Are Leaders

Elders are humble leaders of the church. An analogy is made in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 between an elders' leadership of his family and his leadership of the church. If he cannot lead his family well, then how will he be able to lead the church?¹⁷ Just as husbands are spiritual leaders

¹⁵Daniel L. Akin, et al., *Perspectives On Church Government*, 54-55.

¹⁶Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 44-51.

of their families, elders are spiritual leaders of the church. Elders' authority is seen in Hebrews 13:17, where the church is instructed to obey its leaders and submit to them. Two extremes exist here: elders could operate with full control over all matters of the church, appointing officers and exercising church discipline to the point where the congregation is merely expected to agree with all decisions and actions. The other extreme is that the congregation rules in all matters and elders are reduced to being representatives of the church, administrators of the church's desires, and facilitators of discussion.¹⁸ The first extreme leads to a dictatorship that negates the congregation's role and the second extreme leads to an unbiblical functioning of the church that rejects biblical leadership altogether.

Elders Are Shepherds

Exhorting elders, Peter said, "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly" (1 Pet 5:1-2). The imagery of a shepherd gives understanding of the general function of an elder as shepherd. The best example is Jesus, who is called the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). His love for the Church is evident and should be the model for every church elder today. Peter calls Jesus the Chief Shepherd who will one day appear to give the unfading crown of glory to faithful elders (1 Pet 5:4). With Jesus as the Chief Shepherd, elders are often referred to as under-shepherds. Merkle says, "Church leaders are not cowboys who drive the sheep.

¹⁷Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 44.

¹⁸Peter L. Toon, et al. *Who Runs The Church? 4 Views On Church Government*, ed. Steve B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 193.

Rather, they are caring shepherds who lead and protect the sheep. Furthermore, the shepherd's primary task is not to run an organization but to care for people's souls."¹⁹

The shepherd will have to protect the flock. Paul was very clear about this responsibility in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28-29: "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." Wolves come in different forms today and the shepherd will warn his sheep of danger and remove danger when possible.

The shepherd will also assist injured sheep. James Five indicates that elders are to be called on by the sick in the church to pray over the sick and anoint with oil. While this type of ministry may be shared often with deacons, elders are shepherds of a flock God has entrusted to them.

Elders Are Teachers

Elders are faithful teachers of the Word of God. The list of qualifications for elders and deacons in First Timothy Three is very similar but the qualification that sets elders apart from deacons is the ability to teach (1 Tim 3:2). The context of Paul's letter to Timothy shows why this qualification is important in the church. Timothy was commanded to stay in Ephesus to combat the false teaching that was permeating the church (1 Tim 1:3-7). The absence of proper biblical teaching results in spreading false doctrine, causing division in the church and distraction to the mission of God. Therefore, the church needs men who are able to teach the Word of God.

¹⁹Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 46.

Likewise, Titus 1:9 says, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Dever highlights the importance of teaching by saying, “The point of leadership in the church is to bring glory to God by commending the truth to outsiders. This is why Paul was so incensed at the Corinthians for going to secular court against each other and for allowing those living flagrantly ungodly lives to be associated with the church. Both of these things would undermine the witness of the gospel.”²⁰ Erickson adds that education in the church comes in variety and is imperative for its growth. Preaching is one means of teaching that has been used by the church since its beginning. Prophesying probably refers to preaching in 1 Corinthians 14 and Paul clarifies its value in edifying the church.²¹ Therefore, those who are gifted as pastor-teachers (Ephesians 4:11) must be diligent in utilizing their gift.

Being able to teach recognizes that elders must be students of Scripture and knowledgeable of it, not just possessing the ability to communicate Scripture. How will elders be able to correct false doctrine if they are not able to discern it and postulate a biblical response to it? Faithful elders have knowledge of Scripture and wisdom to apply it. Maybe that is why Paul gave this qualification: “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Tim 3:6). The ability to teach is the most unique qualification and responsibility of elders as compared to deacons, therefore it is imperative for elders to be adept in this area.

²⁰Dever, *A Display of God’s Glory*, 21.

²¹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 976.

Elders Are Equippers

Elders should be equipping the body of believers to build up the church. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” The work of elders should motivate and advance the work of the church in God’s mission.

Churches can be tempted to let the “professionals” handle the ministry work. In reality, effective elders will dissipate this notion and motivate church members to serve in their areas of giftedness. Paul expected Timothy to have this effect when he said, “And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Tim. 2:2) In addition to equipping church members to serve, elders should be training and preparing potential elders to eventually serve the church together.

Plurality of Elders

The Bible sets a pattern for a plurality of elders, just like there is a plurality of deacons. The argument for a plurality of elders could come from historical record,²² but Scripture itself is sufficient. The practice in Jewish culture of calling the local town leaders elders finds its roots in Deuteronomy and was continued when the Jews returned from Babylonian exile. The Jewish synagogues that most likely developed during the period of Babylonian exile were also governed by a plurality of leaders.²³ The New Testament language of church leadership is

²²See Samuel Waldron’s summary in Toon, et al., *Who Runs the Church?*, 193-202 and also Mark Dever’s brief explanation in Dever, *A Display of God’s Glory*, 22-23.

²³Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority? Elders In Baptist Life* (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2006), 8.

overwhelmingly supportive of plurality of elders. The pattern of elders (plural) serving in each church (singular) is evident when exploring New Testament verses (Acts 14:23; 15:4,6,22; 20:17; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:1; James 5:14).²⁴ Evidence of plurality of elders is seen even in the work of Polycarp, suggesting continuity of plural leadership from the time of Paul's writing (approximately AD 60) to Polycarp's time (approximately between AD 115-138).²⁵

A few singular references of *elder* do occur in the New Testament usually when referring to one elder within a group, like in First Timothy 5:19 where it addresses an accusation against an elder within the whole group that is mentioned in verse 17 of that chapter. The only reference to the possibility of a single elder occupying the office of elder is to John, who called himself "the elder" in Second John One and Third John One. Though not much evidence exists to be clear, the term possibly refers to his widespread recognition instead of an office in the church.²⁶

Biblical evidence seems to validate the plurality of elders even though other positions oppose the idea. Paige Patterson agrees that it is not unbiblical to have multiple elders in one church. He says that Scripture has clear mandates about plurality and it is practical because of the ministry needs required for growing churches. But he argues that one elder or pastor should

²⁴Rinne, *Church Leaders*, 66.

²⁵Andrew M. Selby, "Bishops, Elders, And Deacons In The Philippian Church: Evidence Of Plurality From Paul And Polycarp." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 39 no. 1 (Spring 2012): 80-81.

²⁶Dever, *By Whose Authority*, 8.

remain the decisive spiritual leader of the flock.²⁷ While there can be elders in churches who are more active and more visible, a danger in Patterson's argument is that it could create a three-tiered church government with an extra position above elders, somewhat like the Episcopalian system.

This ideology is similar to those who believe that multiple elders can only be present if all are paid. The Bible certainly teaches that elders can be paid (1 Tim 5:17-18; 1 Cor 9:3-18), but it does not eliminate elders serving voluntarily (many worked other jobs like Paul, the tent maker). Regardless of financial status (paid or volunteer) or time status (full time or part time), elders' authority and equality in leadership should not be affected.

The practical benefits of having a plurality of elders should be evident: greater accountability for theological and personal integrity, sharing ministry needs, greater opportunity to sharpen one another, and establishing the mindset that men should be aspiring to be leaders in the church.

The Relationship Between Elders and Deacons

The trend in Baptist churches in recent history has been shifting away from a plurality of elders toward having a single pastor serving alongside deacons. The deacons have been expected to act and serve like elders whether they are qualified or desire the office of elder. In this situation, the church is unbalanced and unbiblical in its leadership, which will hinder its ministry altogether. Deacons are not able to be as productive in their deacon ministry when they are expected to be elders at the same time.

²⁷Toon, et al., *Who Runs the Church?*, 134.

Some might think that discord would develop between new elders and existing deacons when a church transitions to having a plurality of elders. However, this is far from the truth! In fact, proper elder ministry will enhance the deacon ministry because deacons will be free to serve as the Bible instructs without having to carry out the role of elders also.

Elders are given the task of shepherding, leading, and teaching the congregation. Deacons are to lead over the physical and logistical needs of the church.²⁸ The two offices are distinct but do have similarities. Both are servants to the church through their leadership, but their tasks differ. Elders are ministers *of* the Word, while deacons are ministers *for* the Word. The elders' ministry of the Word of God and prayer is the most important ministry of the church and would be hindered without the deacons' ministry of overseeing physical and logistical needs. These two groups of leaders strengthen each other when they are faithful in carrying out their specific responsibilities.

Elders and deacons are not competitors. They serve together to see that the church is strengthened and effective in its ministry. When deacons were selected in the early church, "...the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

Elders and deacons should be honored for their leadership in the church (Heb 13:17). Right after listing the qualifications for both offices, Paul wrote, "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim 3:14–15). Emphasis is given to the behavior of the church and its representation of the

²⁸Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 87.

truth of God. Elders and deacons have the authority to oversee the church's behavior and maintenance of the truth. Neither office is inferior. Both must represent Christ and the gospel well.

Dever identifies three primary tasks of deacons from Acts Six. First, they cared for the physical needs of the church.²⁹ In Acts 6:2, the apostles did not think it was right that they would give up preaching the Word of God to “serve tables.” The seven servants were chosen to minister to this need of the “daily distribution” (Acts 6:1). Serving tables could refer to financial or physical ministry. Jesus flipped over tables (Greek: τράπεζα; trapeza) when they were used for improper financial activity (Matt 21:12), and tables were also used to eat upon (Luke 22:30). Interestingly, the English word *bank* in Luke 19:23 and the word *food* in Acts 16:34 are both translated from τράπεζα. This translation corresponds with one of the meanings of τράπεζα: “Metonymically for that which is set on a table, food, a meal, banquet; Specifically the table of a money changer, a broker's bench or counter at which he sat in the market or public place.”³⁰ This daily distribution ministry allowed this first group of servants to meet physical needs in the church.

Second, deacons promoted unity within the church. Acts 6:1 says the seven servants were chosen because a complaint caused division between two different groups in the church. Their work restored unity within the church.³¹

²⁹ Dever, *A Display of God's Glory*, 12-15.

³⁰ Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, entry 5132.

³¹ Dever, *A Display of God's Glory*, 12-15.

Third, deacons supported the ministry of the Word. The church should uphold the Word of God as its foundation and continually find sustenance in it. When deacons serve faithfully, elders are able to serve faithfully, and the church maintains its focus on the Word.³²

It seemed that the apostles viewed the addition of the seven men in Acts Six as a great assistance to the overall ministry to the church. The apostles knew the importance of the ministry of the Word and prayer, along with the importance of meeting physical needs (sometimes deacon ministry is referred to as *mercy ministry*). The practical implication for churches today is that deacons should be given those tasks that would distract elders from their shepherding tasks. Likewise, elders should take on those tasks that would distract deacons from their ministry.

The Bible does not give a list of specific duties for deacons, but possible responsibilities could include overseeing benevolence needs, property, finances, the Lord's Supper, and other support for worship.

Deacons should be advisors to the elders. The qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 are nearly identical to the qualifications for elders. Therefore, deacons are men of great character and reputation, so it would be foolish for elders not to seek their advice in certain matters as it pertains to the church. While both offices work independently, collaboration will naturally occur. For example, elders and deacons might visit a grieving church member together to minister to the members' spiritual and physical needs during that time.

The Relationship Between Elders, Deacons, and the Church

Like elders and deacons, the congregation also has specific biblical responsibilities. First, the congregation selected leaders. The early church proposed two candidates to replace

³²Dever, *A Display of God's Glory*, 12-15.

Judas as an apostle, then they cast lots to rely on the Lord's guidance in selection (Acts 1:23-26). The church chose and ordained the first deacons (Acts 6:5). Both of these processes must have involved some form of voting, though it cannot be known certainly. However, Glasscock voices an opposing opinion when he cites Titus 1:5 and Acts 14:21-23 to say that elders were probably appointed by either apostles, prophets, or teachers instead of being selected by the congregation.³³ If that is true in some cases, it does not nullify the experiences in Acts One and Acts Six. Furthermore, how were elders selected after the time of apostles and prophets? The pattern of congregational selection set forth in Acts One and Acts Six could have continued to be the example for the Church.

The church should recognize elders and deacons who possess the required qualifications, joyfully examine and pray over them (a process typically called ordination, which is most likely patterned after the practice recorded in Acts 6:6), and obey them (Heb 13:17).

Second, the church is the final authority in church dispute and discipline. Matthew 18:15-17 says that the church is the final step in the reconciliation process. Elders will lead through the process of church discipline, but the congregation has the final authority to act toward reconciliation and discipline if necessary. In Acts Six, the distribution ministry dispute was ultimately brought before the entire church for a solution. Paul addressed the entire church in Corinth about dealing with the egregious sin recorded in First Corinthians Five and also admonished them to ensure proper observance of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34).

Third, the church is the final authority for maintaining doctrine. While elders have the responsibility to teach the Word faithfully, the church has the authority and responsibility to

³³ Ed Glasscock, "The Biblical Concept of Elder," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144, no. 573 (1987): 73.

reject false teaching. Paul wrote to “the churches of Galatia” (Gal 1:1), not just the elders. In chapter 1, Paul admonishes them to take a firm stance on proper doctrine. Elders account to each other and the congregation when they teach.

It should be obvious that elders, deacons, and the congregation work together in ministry. The church submits to their leaders (Heb 13:17), but authority should not be abused. Though elders have authority to lead the church, they are not dictators. For this reason, a distinction must be made between elder *leadership* and elder *rule*. The translators of the King James Version chose “rule” in 1 Timothy 5:17, while some modern translations use *direct* or *lead* (NIV, HCSB).

Elder *rule* typically means that elders have final control over all matters of the church, often negating the biblical responsibilities of the congregation. *Elder leadership* would imply that elders lead with authority to equip the congregation to live obediently to Christ.

Conclusion

The Bible is authoritative and should be followed in matters of church polity. Evidence supports a plurality of elders who are to lead, shepherd, teach, and equip the church. Working alongside deacons and in unity with the congregation, a church will glorify God as it carries out the Great Commission.

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