[AJPS 23.1 (February 2020), pp. 41-56]

Where Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism Part Ways: Towards a Theology of Pentecostal Revelatory Experience Part 2

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The Impact of Evangelical Theology on Pentecostal Revelatory Experience

Here, I will discuss the impact of Evangelical theology on Pentecostal revelatory experience and propose the Catholic approach as a proper alternative.

The adoption of an Evangelical theology to explain Pentecostal revelatory experience has negative consequences for its ongoing practise. Philosopher James K. A. Smith describes how this occurs by contrasting the placement of authority in the oral approach of the Pentecostal community with the textual approach of the Evangelicals. This dynamic has significant implications for both bibliology and epistemology.

The Impact of Textualization on Oral Communities

Smith argues that the first-century church was primarily an oral community, with more emphasis on hearing than reading, prophets than scribes and aurality than textuality. This "oral state of being" reflected the broader Greco-Roman culture that valued oral communication above the written, and where access to written texts was limited to the educated elite. Although early church communities inherited the canonical consciousness of their Judaistic predecessors as the "people of the book," Smith argues that a more appropriate identifier would be the "people of the Spirit" since their primary text was the spoken rather than the written "word."[1] In the church, prophets spoke and were heard. Faith came from

[1]John Walton and Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), Kindle Version, Location 2544. Similarly, in Old Testament usage,

"hearing the Word" (Rom 10:17), but this Word was not only about Christ, but was Christ.[2] Thus the "Word" was recognized as having divine authority, irrespective of whether it was later enshrined in Scripture. This approach did not displace the value or presence of texts in the church, but rather located their status as derivative.[3] Divine authority lay first and foremost with the spoken word.

At the beginning of the second century, a shift occurred whereby literacy began to be favored over orality, and the written word gained authority and credibility over the spoken word. This process of textualization shifted the authority from the people who transmitted the tradition to the words that recorded the tradition.[4] Sacred texts became sites of fact and authority as well as the lens through which life was seen.[5] The result of this process was a growing tension between contemporary prophecies and the canon of Scripture, since "part and parcel of canonical thinking is the restriction of normative revelation to a past period."[6] In Smith's words, "A 'levelling' takes place whereby the writings themselves become 'an ersatz presence of God himself'; it is not only that God can be heard in the Scriptures, but that the writings themselves become divine."[7]

Smith shows how the adoption of a textual approach that locates authority in the written word mitigates against the practise of ongoing revelation. The result is a dilution or even rejection of contemporary revelatory experiences. He argues that this process was evident in the second-century church, and is now being repeated in the adoption of the Evangelical tradition by Pentecostals.[8] As noted by Smith and others,

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Colin Brown, ed., *New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3 (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 1087.

[2]James K. A. Smith, "The Closing of the Book: Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and the Sacred Writings," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology 11* [1997]: 53.

[3]Ibid., 56.

[4]Walton & Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture*, Location 1413.

[5]See also John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Toronto: Clements, 2004), 112.

[6]Smith, "The Closing of the Book," 64.

[7]Ibid., 66.

[8]The work of biblical scholar W. M. Schniedewind has highlighted a similar dynamic in the textualization process of Old Testament communities. Schniedewind's careful analysis reveals a shift in meaning for the "word of God" before and after the exile. Pre-exilic biblical literature indicates the "word of God" to be the living and active word that comes directly from God to the prophet. After the exile, the "word of God" comes to mean the received traditions of Scripture that involved interpretation by inspired teachers and interpreters. This transition saw a replacement of the prophetic office with teachers and scribes and a shift in authority from oral word to the written word (Jer 8:7-9), a move that ultimately favored the literate cultural elites and betrayed the egalitarian nature of the oral tradition. As with Smith, Schniedewind highlights the competing claims or orality and textuality: "Writing locates authority in a text and its reader instead of in a tradition and its community. Writing does not require the living voice," Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 114.

Evangelicalism is a textual community that "organizes its experience against the horizon of the text."[9] Authority is seen to lie in the text rather than in the person, and in the written word rather than in the spoken. Thus, revelatory experience always falls *under* the authority of the Scriptures. Smith warns that this threatens the practise of ongoing revelation in Pentecostal communities, and culminates in a distorted doctrine of Scripture that leads to "bibliolatry", which is defined as a love of the Scriptures more than God.[10]

The tension between textuality and orality described by Smith was evident in my 2016 study among Australian Pentecostals. In a number of cases, conflict existed between the written word of God in Scripture and the spoken word of God in respondents' lives. "Spirit" and "Scripture" became pitted against each other in a competitive dynamic. When the inspired experiences of Scripture were understood to be more reliable than the potential for contemporary experience, this made the latter unnecessary and redundant. This was also evidenced in the history of one church, where there was a shift in emphasis from the "prophetic word" to the "written word" when new leadership came in. This shift appeared to bear itself out in the disparity between the experiences of the older and younger generations. A significant proportion of the younger people struggled to embrace revelatory encounters, while the older generation reported them with ease. It would seem that as people became "Scripture-oriented," they became less "Spirit-oriented."

The conflict was further highlighted in the different meanings subscribed to "the Word of God." As noted, the primary understanding for the "Word of God" in first-century vernacular was the spoken word, and more specifically the person and message of Jesus, later continued by the Spirit. However, in two of the three churches studied, the primary meaning for the "Word of God" was the written Scriptures, and to a lesser degree, preaching from the Scriptures. These descriptors reflect the Evangelical placement of authority within the text, and the corresponding idea that the entire Bible should be taken as "the Word of God."[11]

While the designation of Scripture as the "Word of God" may be somewhat helpful in protecting its priority, the descriptor becomes problematic when applied to the practise of revelatory experience. The use of the same phrase for both individual experience and the entirety of Scripture confuses the particular nature of each object with its varying

[9]Smith, "The Closing of the Book," 58.

[10]The tendency towards "bibliolatry" among Pentecostals has also been observed by Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit*, 246.

[11]For example, Evangelical philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff advocates for this view in *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

mix of human and divine influence.[12] While Scripture makes the claim to divine inspiration as a whole (2 Tim. 3:16), this clearly does not apply to every word and experience within Scripture. For example, biblical scholar John Goldingay suggests that designating "Word of the Lord" for passages such as the agonising of Job, or the questioning of Ecclesiastes, represents a category mistake. This mistake becomes heightened in the context of contemporary experience. Contemporary Pentecostals do not label their agonising ponderings or doubt-filled prayers as "the Word of the Lord." When Pentecostals adopted the experiences of the early church without their accompanying language, the result was confusion around the source of authority.

The scenario whereby the "ersatz presence" of God was believed to rest in the text was also observed in my study. In a somewhat magical approach to Scripture, "words from God" were found through a haphazard encounter with texts that carried no meaningful connection to the original setting. For example, the words "Go to the other side (of the lake)" spoken by Jesus to the disciples (Mk 4:35) were taken to mean "go to another workplace." While the Spirit could be seen to retain the prerogative to select any vehicle of communication, the concern lay in the fact that the experience was unequivocally accepted without a process of discernment simply because it was found "in Scripture."

This problem, characteristic of Pentecostals, has also been observed by the biblical scholar Craig Keener. He laments the "unrestrained practises" of those who are prone to ignoring the variety of genres in the text and treat the Bible as a "game of biblical Russian roulette: randomly seizing on verses isolated from context in a way that we would never do with other texts." [13] In particular, Keener argues that experiential appropriations of Scripture require their own criteria, and must not be disconnected from observing the "designed sense" of Scripture.[14] It may well be the issue of textualization that is the cause of this problem. Pentecostals have mixed the oral and textual approach together, such that as authority moves to the words of the page, encounters with the text become "magical" and are thus accepted without discrimination. The danger lies in the assumption of authority because it is "in Scripture", even when it departs markedly from the original intent of the text. Adopting an Evangelical approach to Pentecostal revelatory experiences is not only counterproductive to the prevalence of the experience, but also to its safe practise.

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[12]John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture.* Toronto: Clements, 2004: 10.

[13]Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 269.

[14]Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, 19, 99.

To address the problem of textualization, Smith proposes a different understanding of Scripture than the one provided by the Evangelical tradition. According to Smith, the dynamic of revelatory experience can still operate successfully in a textual environment, but only when the text functions in a different genre. He proposes that the Scriptures should not be seen to act as "locations of the divine presence" but rather as "testimonies to the power of God present in the church."[15] Thus the authority of the text is derived rather than inherent. Authority is not embedded in the text, but lies with the one "to whom the text points."[16] This resembles the theology of Barth, who advocated for the idea of Scripture as a witness to Christ,[17] (rightly) making an ontological distinction between Scripture and the person of the Word of God.[18] This approach retains the priority of Scripture as the guiding norm, while still allowing for ongoing revelatory experiences that have the potential to be authoritative. It also properly locates authority with the one to whom Scripture points, avoiding the problem of bibliolatry.

This approach allows contemporary testimonies of hearing God speak to play the same role today as they do in the Scriptures. In the same way as testimonies within Scripture point to the power and reality of God, contemporary testimonies continue to affirm the presence of God in the church today.

A Distinctive Pentecostal Epistemology

The locating of authority in the person of the Spirit over the written text has further epistemological and theological consequences. Smith highlights the type of knowledge that arises from spiritual experience in his later work, *Thinking in Tongues*.[19] While Evangelicals have criticized the Pentecostal emphasis on experience, Smith outlines its value for spiritual formation.

Smith shows that Pentecostal experience leads to a form of "narrative knowledge" that enables Pentecostals to "know what they know."[20] Pentecostals use testimony and narrative to make sense of their experience by writing their "micro-story" into God's "macro-story" of redemption. This approach situates truth in the context of story and in relation to a particular "mode of knowing." This narrative knowledge is

[15]Smith, "The Closing of the Book," 67.

[16]Ibid., 69.

[17]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) I/1, 88-124.

[18]Sang-Whan Lee, "Pentecostal Prophecy," *The Spirit and Church* 3.1 (2001):165.

[19]James K. A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 50-72.

[20]Ibid., 50.

"distinct from run-of-the-mill knowledge," which is usually understood (philosophically) as "justified true belief" where "belief" is understood as assent to propositions or at least characterized by a propositional attitude.[21] Pentecostal faith and practise does not yield merely a "thinking thing" but rather an embodied heart that "understands" the world in ways that are irreducible to the categories and propositions of cognitive reason.[22] This does not devalue the place of propositional or "codeable" knowledge, but rather situates it.[23]

The type of narrative knowledge that arises from experience may be contrasted with the knowledge that arises from an Evangelical scholastic approach. Pentecostal theologian Daniel Castelo outlines the distinction in detail, showing how Pentecostal epistemology is incompatible with an Evangelical epistemology that separates theology and spirituality and draws from a framework of biblical inerrancy.[24] Like Smith, Castelo shows how the Evangelical approach places emphasis on cerebral knowledge, abstraction and theorizing in a way that leaves little room for "mystical sensibility."[25] The means to divine knowledge for the Evangelical then comes primarily via the study of Scripture and, in particular, a historical-grammatical approach.[26]

The testimonies in my study among Australian Pentecostals strongly affirmed Smith's observations about the epistemology of Pentecostals. The data revealed that revelatory experiences resulted in a type of experiential knowledge that was "embedded in life" and led to holistic transformation. In the study, narrative knowledge typically preceded propositional knowledge. Reflection on theological themes took place as a result of the experience rather than prior to it. Creeds, propositions and statements became secondary reflections upon the primary stories. For respondents, the primary function of revelatory experiences was their capacity to build "personal relationship" with God. These epistemological processes can be further understood through the work of Pentecostal scholars Jackie Johns and Cheryl Bridges-Johns.[27] They contrast the Hebrew understanding of knowledge that comes via experience (*yada*) to the Greek concept (γινοσκειν), which involves a

[21]Ibid., 64.

[22]Ibid., 62.

[23]Ibid., 64.

[24]Daniel Castelo, *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 83-126.

[25]Ibid., 89.

[26]Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy,* Location 3049. Hence, as Matthew Engelke observes, only a literate Christian can "fully enter faith," *A Problem of Presence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 53.

[27]Jackie David Johns and Cheryl Bridges-Johns, "Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Approach to Group Bible Study," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992): 109–34.

"standing back from something" in order objectively to know it.[28] Unlike the Greek concept, *yada* has relationship at its core and arises from obedience (1 Jn 2:3). Knowledge is contextual rather than abstract and is measured "not by information, but by how one was living in response to God." [29] This understanding of *yada* effectively shifts the epistemological emphasis from cerebral knowledge of a book to relational knowledge of a person. Indeed, several respondents contrasted learning from their experience with the Spirit versus learning from the Bible, with the key distinction being the personalized nature of the message: "I mean you have the Scriptures, and they're awesome, but for me, if I didn't have it [hearing God's voice], I'd be very lost. It makes it personal; it brings you face to face with those encounters; it changes you."

In addition, revelatory experiences were seen to be central to the participants' spiritual growth. Rather than acting as a lightweight spiritual "add-on," revelatory encounters represented pivotal moments that triggered significant learning. Here, the Holy Spirit was seen to actively take the role of teacher in directing the learning process and tailoring it to the individual's particular needs. The individualized nature of learning strengthened its impact. Thus, revelatory experience found its place firmly in the center rather than at the periphery of spiritual formation.

Furthermore, the value and potency of this epistemological process was linked to the authority Pentecostals ascribed to their revelatory experiences. The transformational outcomes of experiences in the study were only effective when accompanied by appropriate responses to them. Participants were keenly aware that their experience carried divine authority and demanded acquiescence to them to be of any value. For the Pentecostal, when God speaks, obedience is required; God's people recognize his voice and they follow (John 10:27). Learning was therefore dependent upon active participation in the process. It was only then that transformation occurred.

Bridges-Johns and Johns highlight the role of obedience in the development of *yada*. The understanding of *yada* is brought into dialogue with "praxis" defined as "reflection-action" that links knowing to doing.[30] Johns and Bridges-Johns show that praxis epistemology is useful for understanding the learning processes encapsulated by the notion of *yada*, but with one essential difference. Without the input of a higher authority, praxis is an insufficient means of knowing God and

[28]Ibid., 112.
[29]Ibid.
[30]Ibid., 119.

achieving human transformation.[31] It is because respondents in the study saw their experiences as divinely authoritative that they were motivated to act. Without this authority, "knowing" the truth may not translate into *yada*.

The attribution of divine authority for revelatory experiences is therefore the key to the development of narrative knowledge and its transformative power. This is in contrast to the Evangelical approach advocated by Grudem, who argues for contemporary prophetic experience to have minimal authority over the recipient, as with other forms of church activity like leadership, counselling and teaching.[32] The textual approach of the Evangelical conflicts with the oral approach of the Pentecostal by its placement of authority.

The Pentecostal emphasis on experiences in the Spirit contributes to a unique theological epistemology, a pattern which Pentecostals see as originating from the Scriptures themselves.[33] The Pentecostal approach positions revelatory experiences at the center of spiritual growth and faith. Participants identified the revelatory experience as the trigger that brought transformation and personal knowledge of God. Because the experience was personal, and embodied in their own life, it tended to foster knowledge of a *person* ahead of knowledge of a *book.* This reorients the mode of learning from the Evangelical emphasis on Bible study, and points to the priority and legitimacy of the revelatory experience. Spiritual formation is related to obedience and action rather than mere belief. The result is narrative knowledge or *yada* that does not reject the value of propositional knowledge, but rather gives it secondary status. As Smith states, this is not "antirational, but antirationalist; it is not a critique or rejection of reason, but rather a commentary on a particularly reductionist model of reason and rationality, a limited and stunted version of what counts as 'knowledge.'"[34]

An Alternative Framework: The Catholic Approach to Revelatory Experience

The Evangelical approach to Pentecostal revelatory experiences has been found to be problematic at the foundational level. Adoption of an Evangelical approach acts to mitigate against the experience, thwart appropriate discernment practises and undermine the value of narrative knowledge that arises from revelatory experience. In order to maintain

[31]Ibid., 122.

[32] Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy,* Location 660-663.

[33]Mark Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 25.

[34]Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 53.

the practise of revelatory experience in Pentecostal churches, a theological approach that reflects the experientially continuous worldview of the Pentecostals is proposed. This can be found in the Catholic tradition.

The Pentecostal emphasis on supernatural experience has led Castelo and others to argue that Pentecostalism finds its place most comfortably in the Catholic mystical tradition. For Castelo, the Pentecostal stress on "encountering God" finds convergence with the Catholic mystical stress on movement towards "union" with God: "What primarily makes Pentecostalism a mystical tradition of the Church catholic is its persistent, passionate, and widespread emphasis on encounter."[35] This form of mysticism is definitively Christian in that experience is seen to be revelatory rather than investigative. Through Pentecostal experience, the God of mystery self-reveals.[36] As for Catholic mystics, this knowledge of God is both relational and intellectual and has transformation as its ultimate goal.[37]

Castelo's perspective has found agreement with several scholars who have linked Pentecostalism to the mystical tradition, or implied it in their work.[38] For example, theologian Simon Chan has sought to establish links between Pentecostalism and Catholic mysticism in the area of prayer practises and spirituality.[39] Coulter has identified parallels with the hermeneutical approaches of Pentecostals and medieval mystical thinkers.[40] Sociologist Poloma labels Pentecostals as "Main Street Mystics."[41] In his review of Castelo's work, theologian Sammy Alfaro suggests that Castelo affirms the theological hunches of several in the Pentecostal academy about the mystical component of Pentecostalism.[42]

Recent ecumenical dialogues between Catholic and Pentecostal theologians focussing on the shared experiences of the Spirit have further revealed the synergy between the two traditions.[43] Five years of

[35]Castelo, *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition*, 80.

[36]Ibid., 54.

[37]Ibid., 44, 55-57, 80-82.

[38]Castelo (ibid., 39) identifies Harvey Cox, Daniel Albrecht, James Smith, Margaret Poloma and Simon Chan.

[39]Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2000).

[40]Dale Coulter, "What Meaneth This? Pentecostals and Theological Inquiry," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 10, no. 1 [2001]: 38–64.

[41]Margaret Poloma, *Main Street Mystics: The Toronto Blessing and Reviving Pentecostalism* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003).

[42]Kyle Smith, Leah Payne and Sammy Alfaro, "Author Meets Critics: Responding to Daniel Castelo's Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 40 [2018]: 547.

[43]Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, "'Do Not Quench the Spirit':

reflection and scholarly discussion on the experiential and theological dimensions of charisms revealed a significant overlap in understandings. Catholic and Pentecostals shared common perspectives on the nature, function and importance of prophecy, discernment criteria and the need for ecclesial and pastoral oversight in the discernment process. Robeck describes the practise of prophetic gifts among Classical Pentecostals and Catholic Charismatics as a place where "bridges may be built."[44]

With a shared emphasis on spiritual experience, the Catholic approach to revelatory experiences acts as an appropriate dialogue partner for Pentecostals seeking to reflect on their experience. As an example, Niels Hvidt's multi-disciplinary study *Christian Prophecy* reflects an experientially continuous approach that is consistent with the Pentecostal paradigm. Hvidt is clear that there is no justification for a different treatment of contemporary and biblical experience from a phenomenological point of view, and that Old Testament prophecy and Christian prophecy share many common traits.[45] Indeed, he argues for a dismissal of the idea of any "end" to revelation.[46] Revelation neither ends with Christ, the apostles or with the canon. Further, Hvidt gives attention to the individual revelatory experience as well as to prophecy, and unlike Grudem, who eschews the value of reflecting on actual experience,[47] Hvidt reflects on insights from the actual experience of prophetic figures in history.[48]

Conclusion

Pentecostal tradition testifies to the power of revelatory encounters to enhance spirituality and to build the church (1 Cor 14:3). In order to maintain such practises, it is essential that Pentecostals reflect adequately on their experience from their own experiential worldview. Attempting to fit a Pentecostal theology into a Protestant Evangelical framework has proven inadequate and ultimately leads to dilution, if not rejection, of the

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Charisms in the Life and Mission of the Church: Report of the Sixth Phase of the International Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue (2011-2015)," http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/pentecostali/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/2015-non-spegnete-lo-spirito/testo-del-documento-in-inglese.html (accessed December 9, 2019), 2016.

[44]Robeck, Cecil M. Jr., "A Pentecostal Perspective on Prophetic Gifts" (The International Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue, Round 6, Sierra Madre, CA, 2014), 30.

[45]Niels C. Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy: The Post-Biblical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6-7.

[46]Ibid., 209-216.

[47]Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, Location 130.

[48]For example, the experiences of Hildegard of Bingen, Birgitta of Sweden and Teresa of Avila.

experience. Multiple scholars have noted this tendency towards the so-called "evangelicalization" of Pentecostalism.[49]

Without a well-developed theology, Pentecostals are in danger of losing the distinctive of the revelatory phenomenon, as either the experience or the theology collapses under the contradiction. Smith describes it well: "The gradual evangelicalization of Pentecostalism is an attempt to adopt a framework that at the same time destroys the foundation. A Pentecostal evangelical theology is a house divided against itself."[50] The Catholic tradition offers an appropriate solution to the theological problem as well as providing historical legitimacy and consistent links to the early church itself.

[49]Matthew S. Clark, "An Investigation into the Nature of a Viable Pentecostal Hermeneutic" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pretoria, 1997), 59; Garry B. McGee, "'More than Evangelical': The Challenge of Evolving Identity in the Assemblies of God", in D. A. Roozen and J. R. Nieman, eds, *Church, Identity and Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, 40-41; Robeck in Scott A. Ellington, "Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 9 [1996]: 19; Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Towards a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and Theology of Mission*, ed. Amos Yong (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002), 7; Paul W. Lewis, "Towards a Pentecostal Epistemology: The Role of Experience in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," *The Spirit and Church* 2, no. 1 (May 2000): 95–125; Angelo U. Cettolin, *Spirit, Freedom and Power* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 45.

[50]Smith, "The Closing of the Book," 59.

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