

WHAT RELATION DOES CONTRITION BEAR TO REPENTANCE?

It goes without saying that in the above question "repentance" is not taken in the narrower sense, of contrition, but in the wider sense, of conversion.

Dietrich asks in his Catechism (Qu. 136): "How many parts belong to repentance?" and he answers: "Two: contrition and faith." It were a mistake, however, to infer from this that contrition and faith are, according to Dietrich, two *coordinate* parts of repentance. Considered grammatically, "and" is, indeed, a coordinate conjunction. Yet it does not always connect things logically coordinate. That Dietrich does not regard contrition and faith as coordinate parts of repentance is evident from the preceding question in his Catechism (Qu. 135), where repentance is defined as follows: "Repentance is the conversion to God, by faith in Christ Jesus, of a poor sinner, who has a knowledge of his sins by the Law and experiences sorrow for them." Here, evidently, contrition and faith are not coordinated, but contrition is, both grammatically and logically, *subordinated* to faith. The preponderance of faith in repentance—in Dietrich's mind—is indicated still more plainly by the construction of this sentence in the German original, which, if imitated in English, would make the sentence read: "Repentance is a poor sinner's, who has a knowledge of his sins by the Law and experiences sorrow for them, conversion to God by faith in Christ."¹⁾ To remove all doubt in the matter, we call attention to the fact, that this definition is not the first one that Dietrich gives, but the second one. The first one reads thus: "Conversion is nothing more nor less than this, that a poor sinner turn to God through faith in Jesus Christ, after he has, by the Law of God, been led to

1) "Die Busse ist eines armen Sünders, der seine Sünden aus dem göttlichen Gesetz erkannt hat und darüber Leid trägt, Bekehrung zu Gott durch den Glauben an Christum."

know his sins and to grieve over them.”¹⁾ Could the paramount importance of faith in a man’s repentance be asserted more strongly? We fail to see how it could.

In the light of these utterances, it is not difficult to see the true meaning of Qu. 136: “How many parts belong to repentance? Two: contrition and faith.” This does not mean: Contrition and faith are coordinate parts of repentance, are on a perfect level or anything approaching thereto; it simply means: Both contrition and faith are requisite unto true repentance; he that has not contrition is not truly penitent, and he that has not faith is not truly penitent; for it takes both contrition and faith to make a person truly penitent. But why? Why does it take both contrition and faith to make a man penitent? Simply because faith is not possible without contrition. Only a contrite sinner can believe. Faith is the soul of repentance, contrition is a necessary prerequisite of faith.—This is Dietrich’s doctrine.

Now, what saith the Lord? What does the Bible teach regarding this matter? Let us consult the Bible.

The Bible requires all men to repent. Acts 17, 30: “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.” The Bible declares repentance necessary unto our salvation. Acts 3, 19: “Repent ye therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.” 2 Pet. 3, 9: “The Lord . . . is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

The Bible also tells us what repentance is, wherein repentance consists. Luke 15, 1. 2 we read: “Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying: This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.” Hereupon Jesus spoke unto them the parable of the lost sheep and added

1) “Die Busse is nichts anders, als dass sich ein armer Sünder zu Gott bekehrt durch den Glauben an Jesum Christum, nachdem er durch das Gesetz Gottes seine Sünde erkannt und bereut hat.”

(v. 7): "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." So just persons need no repentance, but sinners do. And a sinner's repentance is accomplished when he comes to Jesus, v. 1. To repent is to come to Jesus.

How does a man come to Jesus? Jesus tells us that Himself in unmistakable terms. He says John 5, 40: "Ye will not come to me that ye might have life." Compare with this the parallel statement, v. 38: "Whom He hath sent, *Him ye believe not.*" To come to Jesus is to believe Him, which is tantamount to believing in Him. Compare also vv. 44. 46. 47, and the entire context.—So, then, to come to Jesus is to believe in Him.

Now, before a sinner can come to Jesus, or believe in Him, he must undergo another experience. He must see and acknowledge his sins and experience true sorrow for them. He must realize that he is a sinner, Rom. 3, 23, that he has merited wrath and punishment, that he is, in fact, already under the wrath of God, and that eternal damnation awaits him, Eph. 2, 3 b. John 3, 36 b. Matt. 25, 41. 46 a; that he is a lost and condemned creature, that he has absolutely no power to save himself, that he is utterly helpless, being dead in sins, Eph. 2, 1. And the knowledge of this deplorable condition he is in must alarm him, must frighten, must terrify him, must fill him with sorrow. He must be broken-hearted, he must be contrite. Ps. 51, 17: "The sacrifices of God are a *broken spirit*; a *broken* and a *contrite* heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise." Luke 23, 40: "Dost thou not *fear God*, seeing thou art *in the same condemnation?*" 2 Cor. 7, 8: "For though I made you *sorry*, etc., I perceive that the same epistle hath made you *sorry.*" This experience, we say, the sinner must undergo, before he can come to Jesus. This knowledge of one's sins, fraught with fear of God, in view of His wrath and punishments, this true and sincere sorrow of the heart, is called, Matt.

21, 32, *repentance*—repentance in the narrower sense. In the Greek text it is called *μεταμέλεια*, which denotes a change of mind.—How is this change of mind effected? It is effected by the Law. Rom. 3, 20: “By the Law is the knowledge of sin.” The divine Law, which is not an empty sound, but the voice of the holy and righteous God, discloses to the sinner his sin and the righteous wrath of God and works in him a lively knowledge of these things, a knowledge that affects the heart and makes it tremble. This operation of God’s Law in a sinner’s heart is commonly called *contrition*. “Contrition is the true and sincere sorrow of a heart which, on account of its sins, as disclosed by the divine Law, is terrified and distressed in view of the wrath of God and His righteous punishments.” (Dietrich, Qu. 138.)

Now whereunto is contrition necessary? Is contrition the vehicle that takes a man to heaven? Is it the rope that draws him up to God? Is it the hand wherewith he lays hold upon the rope? By no means. No sinner has ever been saved by contrition. No sinner has ever been brought a hair’s breadth nearer to God by contrition. The vehicle and rope that draws and conveys a sinner to God is Jesus Christ, or, we may say, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The hand that lays hold on this rope is faith, faith alone. Eph. 2, 8: “By grace are ye saved *through faith*.” Mark 16, 16: “He that *believeth* and is baptized shall be saved; he that *believeth not* shall be damned.”

Well, whereunto is contrition necessary? Contrition is necessary that one may believe, that one may have faith. Matt. 21, 22: “For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, *repented not afterward, that ye might believe him*” (οὐδὲ μετεμελήθητε ὕστερον, τοῦ πιστεῦσαι αὐτῷ = ye repented not afterward, to = [in order to] believe him).

To be sure. How shall a person see his Savior, before he has come to see his sin? How shall he desire the help

of that blessed Physician, before he feels distressed? How shall he stretch out his hand for salvation before he has realized his damnation? Before a person can believe in the Savior, he must see and feel his need of Him. That is the purpose of contrition, to show the sinner his need of a Savior, to show the sinner his sin and his lost condition, in order to awaken in him a desire for help and salvation, that he may go to the Savior and believe. Thus saith the Lord Matt. 21, 32. Compare also Gal. 3, 22: "The Scripture hath concluded all under sin, *that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.*" Luther writes in his *Commentary on Galatians*, expounding ch. 3, 19: "Paul answereth therefore to this question: If the Law do not justify, to what end, then, serveth it? Although, saith he, it justify not, yet it is very profitable and necessary. For, first, it civilly restraineth such as are carnal, rebellious, and obstinate. Moreover, it is a glass that showeth unto a man himself, that he is a sinner, guilty of death, and worthy of God's everlasting wrath and indignation. To what end serveth this humbling, this bruising and beating down¹⁾ by this hammer, the Law I mean? To this end, that we may have an entrance into grace. So, then, the Law is a minister that prepareth the way unto grace. For God is the God of the humble, the miserable, the afflicted, the oppressed and the desperate, and of those that are brought even to nothing: and His nature is to exalt the humble, to feed the hungry, to give sight to the blind, to comfort the miserable, the afflicted, the bruised and broken-hearted, to justify sinners, to quicken the dead, and to save the very desperate and damned. For He is an almighty Creator, making all things of nothing. Now that pernicious and pestilent opinion of man's own righteousness, which will not be a sinner, unclean, miserable, and damnable, but righteous and holy, suffereth not God to come to His own natural and proper work. Therefore God

1) Latin: *contritio*.

must needs take this maul in hand (the Law I mean) to drive down, to beat in pieces, and to bring to nothing this beast, with her vain confidence, wisdom, righteousness, and power, that she may so learn at the length by her own misery and mischief, that she is utterly forlorn, lost, and damned. Here, now, when the conscience is thus terrified with the Law, then cometh the doctrine of the Gospel and grace, which raiseth up and comforteth the same again, saying: Christ came into the world, not to break the bruised reed, nor to quench the smoking flax, but to preach the Gospel of glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken and contrite in heart, to preach forgiveness of sins to the captives, etc. (Is. 42, 3. Matt. 12, 20.)" (Luther on the Galatians, London, MDCCLX.)

The same will be seen from the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. Both of these men went up into the temple to pray. But only one of them was justified: the publican, v. 14. How was he justified? By faith. (Rom. 3, 28.) The publican had faith, he trusted in God's mercy, for he prayed, "God be merciful to me." The Pharisee did not trust in God's mercy, he "trusted in himself that he was righteous," as his prayer plainly shows and as the Savior also expressly says, v. 9. Why did the Pharisee trust in himself? Why did he not trust in his God and Savior, as the publican did? Because he had no knowledge of his sins, because he was not contrite, because he did not abase himself, v. 14. (Observe the contents of his prayer.) He was exalted with the pride of self-righteousness, and hence saw no need of a Savior. The publican, however, was contrite: he saw his sins, as disclosed to him by the Law of God, he called himself "a sinner;" he was ashamed of his sins, he "would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven;" he was sorry for his sins, for "he smote upon his breast;" he was broken-hearted in view of the wrath and punishment he had deserved and was subject to. He saw that he was a lost and condemned sinner, that he was utterly helpless, that noth-

ing but sheer mercy could save him. He saw and felt his need of a merciful God and Savior, and thus it was that he could be led by God to desire the Savior's help and to receive it by faith, faith in the heavenly Mercy-seat, the true *ἰλαστήριον*. Thus he was justified by faith, by faith alone; not by contrition, not by faith *and* contrition, but by faith alone, Rom. 3, 28. But his contrition paved the way for his faith. And thus he was truly penitent, thus he was come to Jesus.

This conception of contrition is warranted by the whole plan and structure of Holy Writ. The Bible consists of the Law and the Gospel. The Law works contrition, the Gospel works faith. Now the Law and the Gospel are not coordinate parts of the Bible. The Gospel predominates. The Gospel is the nucleus, the soul of the Scriptures. The real content of the Scriptures is Christ Jesus. John 5, 39. Acts 10, 43. John 5, 46. Acts 26, 22. 23. Now the Law does not breathe a word about Jesus Christ. It leaves that entirely to the Gospel. The Law is not coordinated with, it is subordinated to, the Gospel. The Law serves the Gospel. The Law bruises the sinner's heart, makes it contrite, that the Gospel may bind it up and heal it. Jer. 23, 29, coll. Is. 61, 1. The Law terrifies in order that the Gospel may console. 2 Cor. 7, 8. 9. Gal. 3, 24. Hence they that are come to Christ "are not under the Law but under grace," and the word of grace. Rom. 6, 14. Gal. 3, 25. The Law begets a race of bondsmen, the Gospel transforms these bondsmen into freemen. Gal. 4, 24—26. And this is the very end and aim of the Scriptures, to make us free through faith in Christ Jesus. Gal. 5, 1. (*Finis intermedius.*) From this it follows again: Faith is the soul of repentance, contrition is a necessary prerequisite of faith.

That contrition must not be coordinated, must not be placed on a level, with faith, or anything approaching thereto, is evidenced also by the following: Contrition may exist, and, in fact, it often does exist, in a person all by it-

self, *i. e.*, apart from faith. But in that case contrition is not repentance, nor is it any part thereof, however small. Such contrition is not an actual beginning and first part of repentance, needing only to be supplemented by faith to make the repentance complete, but such a contrite person is utterly impenitent. Look at Judas. Judas "repented himself" (*μεταμεληθεὶς*), when he saw that Jesus was condemned. But was Judas penitent? Did he repent in the wider sense of the word, either in whole or in part? By no means. Judas went and hanged himself out of sheer contrition! Contrition, true contrition, does not become an ingredient of repentance until coupled with faith.

On the other hand, he that has faith has repentance, not a part of repentance but repentance. Concede that a man has faith and you concede his repentance. "*Qua (sc. fide) posita, ponitur conversio.*"

If a man could have faith without contrition, he would be saved without contrition. Contrition is not necessary *per se*, but as a necessary prerequisite of faith. Contrition plows up the hard soil of the human heart, so that the seed of the Gospel can be sown into it and bear the fruit of faith. If a farmer could sow his wheat and raise and reap his crops without plowing his fields, he would surely do so. But under the conditions that generally prevail this cannot be done. Plowing is a necessary prerequisite of sowing and reaping. Even so it is with the *contritio cordis*.

He that would be saved by contrition *per se*, either in whole or in part, seeks to be saved by the Law, for contrition is wrought by the Law. "But that no man is justified by the Law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith," Gal. 3, 11. Even the Gospel, when it makes a person sorry for his sins—and what Christian is not made sorry when he contemplates the suffering and death of his Savior, as described to him in the Gospel?—even the Gospel is then not performing its own peculiar office, its saving work proper, but it is doing the work of

Moses and the Law, preparing the way for itself, "preparing the way unto grace," making ready the heart to receive the seed of faith. (Compare *Formula of Concord*, Part II. Ch. V, § 12. 13. Müller, pp. 635. 636.)

So, then, it is evident from the Scriptures that contrition and faith are not coordinate parts of repentance, but contrition is, and of necessity must be, subordinated to faith. Faith is the *domina*, contrition the *ancilla*. Faith is the soul of repentance, contrition is a necessary prerequisite of faith.

Such is also the teaching of the Lutheran church. Let us glance at our Confessions. In its first and fundamental confession, the so-called *Augustana*, the Lutheran church declares: "Repentance consists properly of these two parts. One is contrition, or terrors stricken into the conscience through the acknowledgment of sin: the other is faith, which is conceived from the Gospel, or absolution, and believes that for Christ's sake sins be forgiven, and comforts the conscience, and frees it from terrors."¹⁾ Note that according to the *Augustana* both contrition and faith are indeed necessary unto true repentance. For "repentance consists properly of these two parts. One is contrition . . . the other is faith." But note furthermore that according to the *Augustana* contrition and faith are not coordinate parts, but contrition is clearly subordinated to faith. For contrition is wrought by the Law. For it is wrought "through the acknowledgment of sin," and "by the Law is the knowledge of sin," Rom. 3, 20. That is the end and aim of the Law, and that is as far as the Law goes. Faith "is conceived from the Gospel." And the purpose of faith, and hence of the Gospel, is, not to increase the sinner's sorrow or to make his contrition real and genuine, but, rather, to "comfort the (troubled) conscience and free it from terrors." The purpose of faith is to obtain for the contrite

1) *Augustana*, XII, 3—5. Decorah Edition.

sinner remission of sins and *thus* to make his contrition salutary. Thus the work of the Law, contrition, is preliminary work and a necessary preparation for faith, the work of the Gospel. Faith is the soul of repentance, contrition is a necessary prerequisite of faith.

The *Apology* says (XII, 2): "This is the proper voice of the Gospel, that by faith we obtain remission of sins."¹⁾ What is the proper voice, or message, of the Gospel? Not that by faith we be made contrite, or our unreal and inadequate contrition be made real and adequate,—the Law is supposed to have finished that work,—but that, having been made truly and genuinely contrite by the Law, we, by faith, obtain the remission of sins: *this* is the proper voice of the Gospel.

Again the *Apology* says: "Here, if one should ask why Saul, Judas, and like persons do not obtain grace, being horribly contrite—here they ought to make reply from faith and from the Gospel: Because Judas did not believe, did not raise himself up on the Gospel and promise of Christ. For faith constitutes the difference²⁾ between the contrition of Judas and that of Peter."³⁾ So Saul and Judas did not lack contrition either in kind or degree; they were "horribly contrite." What they lacked was faith. Hence their contrition, genuine and deep though it was, was of no benefit to them.

Again: "We, therefore, add the other part of repentance, *i. e.*, faith in Christ" (and declare) "that in these terrors" (= contrition, see *Augustana*, XII, 4, quoted above) "the Gospel of Christ must be held before the conscience, wherein forgiveness of sin is promised gratis for Christ's sake. They must, therefore, believe that for Christ's sake their sins are freely forgiven. This faith lifts up, sustains,

1) Translated from the Latin of Müller's Edition.

2) "*Discrimen ostendit.*" Compare the German: "*Der Glaube unterscheidet die Reue Petri und Judae.*"

3) *Apology*, XII, 8. Translated from the Latin.

and vivifies the contrite, according to Rom. 5, 1: "Being justified by faith, we have peace." This faith obtains remission of sins. This faith justifies in the sight of God, as the same passage testifies: "Being justified by faith." This faith shows the difference between the contrition of Judas and that of Peter, between that of Saul and that of David. For this reason Judas' or Saul's contrition is of no benefit (*non prodest*), because it is unattended by this faith (*quia non accedit ad eam haec fides*), which grasps the remission of sins offered (*donatam*) for Christ's sake. For this reason David's or Peter's contrition is salutary (*prodest*), because it is attended by faith, which grasps the remission of sins offered for Christ's sake."¹) According to the *Apology*, the difference between the contrition of Saul and Judas and that of Peter and David was this: David's and Peter's contrition was attended by faith; Saul's and Judas' contrition was unattended by faith. For this reason contrition, in the case of Peter and David, was salutary, while in the case of Saul and Judas it was of no avail—*non proderat*. The difference, in as far as it proved fatal, was not a difference in kind or in degree of intensity, but merely a difference *in concomitantibus*, the contrition being attended in the one case by faith and in the other by despair.

It has been urged by some that contrition, to be genuine and adequate, must proceed from the love of God; that Judas, *e. g.*, was not truly contrite and hence could not believe, because he did not love God. But that is the leaven of Antichrist. Says the *Apology*: "Our adversaries reply from the Law and say that Judas did not love God, but feared the punishment. But when shall a terrified conscience—especially in those great, serious, and genuine terrors that are described in the Psalms and the prophets, and which they experience (*degustant*) who are truly converted (*convertuntur*)—be able to judge whether it love God for His

1) *Apology*, XII, 35—37.

own sake or whether it flee" (German: "fleuhet und hasset") "from the eternal punishments? These great emotions may be distinguished in letters and words; *in praxi* (*re ipsa*) they cannot be thus torn asunder (*divelluntur*), as the easy-going sophists imagine."¹) "From contrition we cut off those idle and endless disputations as to when we grieve out of love for God, and when out of fear of punishment. We say that contrition is genuine terrors of a conscience which feels that God is angry with sin, and which is sorry it has sinned. And this is the way such contrition comes to pass: when our sins are reproved by the Word of God."²) "In these pains and terrors, they" (our adversaries) "say, a man merits grace, if so be that he love God. But how shall a man love God in actual terrors, when he experiences the horrible and ineffable (*inexplicabilem humana voce*) wrath of God?"³) No, neither faith nor love must enter into contrition to make it genuine. Contrition is simply a necessary prerequisite of faith, which is the soul of repentance, while love is a fruit thereof.

Apology (XII, 50 f.): "1 Sam. 2, 6: 'The Lord killeth and maketh alive: He bringeth down to the grave and lifteth up.' The one (dual statement in this passage) signifies contrition, the other signifies faith. And Is. 28, 21: 'The Lord shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that He may do His work, His strange work; and bring to pass His act, His strange act.' (Latin: *Dominus irascetur, ut faciat opus suum. Alienum est opus eius, ut operetur opus suum.*) A strange work of God he calls it, when He terrifies, because God's proper work is to make alive and to comfort. But He terrifies for this reason, says he, that there may be room for consolation and vivification, because to secure hearts, and to such as perceive not the wrath of God, consolation is loathsome." Compare also the following: "In a similar manner, the examples of the saints also show these two parts" (of repentance). "Adam is upbraided, after sin-

1) *Apology*, XII, 8. 9.2) *Ibid.*, XII, 29.3) *Ibid.*, XII, 34.

ning, and terrified; *this was contrition. Thereupon*¹⁾ (*postea*) God promises grace, says a Seed shall come, by which the kingdom of Satan, death, and sin, shall be destroyed; here He offers remission of sin."²⁾ In like manner we read: "Thus David is upbraided by Nathan, and, terrified, he says (2 Sam. 12, 13): 'I have sinned against the Lord.' *This is contrition. Hereupon*³⁾ he hears the absolution: 'The Lord hath put away thy sin, thou shalt not die.' This word lifts David up and sustains him by faith, justifies him, and makes him alive. . . . This is the other part of repentance (German: Das ist nu das andere *fürnehmste* Stück der Busse, nämlich der Glaube), faith, which lifts up and consoles."⁴⁾

Again: "About this special faith we are contending; and we place it over against that opinion which bids us confide, not in the promise of Christ, but in the *opus operatum* of *contrition*, confession, and satisfactions, etc. This faith so follows the terrors that it overcomes them and pacifies the conscience."⁵⁾

Finally we read: "In the second place we reckon our adversaries will confess that the remission of sins is a part, or the end, or to speak after their fashion, the *terminus ad quem*, of repentance. Consequently that by which remission of sins is accepted is rightly added to" (= numbered among) "the parts of repentance. (German: Darum dasjenige, dadurch Vergebung der Sünden erlangt wird, soll und muss je ein *fürnehmest* Stücke der Busse sein.)"⁶⁾ So remission of sins is accepted, not through contrition, but through faith. Through repentance we receive remission of sins, and the remission of sins is the end and aim of repentance, the *terminus ad quem*. Compare Luke 24, 47.⁷⁾ Now if contrition and faith were coordinate parts of repentance, we could hardly escape the inference that remission of sins is obtained, in part at least, through contrition, or

1) Italics our own. 2) *Apology*, XII, 55. 3) Italics our own.

4) *Ibid.*, XII, 56. 57.

5) *Ibid.*, XII, 60.

6) *Ibid.*, XII, 63.

7) *μετάνοιαν εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν.*

for contrition's sake, which the *Apology* regards as equivalent to saying that remission is obtained by our works, or that a man is justified by the Law. See *Apology*, XII, 75. 76: "In the third place, our adversaries say that sin is forgiven in this wise: because attrition or contrition elicits the act of loving God; by this act it deserves to receive remission of sins. This is simply teaching the Law, and destroying the Gospel and abolishing the promise of Christ. For they require nothing but the Law and our works, since the Law demands love. Besides, they teach us to trust that we shall obtain forgiveness of sins on account of our contrition and love. What is that but putting our trust in our works and not in God's Word and promise of Christ? But if the Law be sufficient to obtain remission of sins, what is the need of the Gospel, what is the need of Christ, if for our works' sake we obtain remission of sins? We, contrariwise, call the consciences back from the Law to the Gospel and from trusting in their own works to trusting in the promise and in Christ, because the Gospel exhibits Christ unto us and promises remission of sins freely for Christ's sake. In this promise it bids us trust, that for Christ's sake we are reconciled with the Father, not for our contrition's or love's sake. For there is no other mediator or propitiator than Christ. Neither can we do the Law, except we first be reconciled through Christ. And if we did do aught, yet we must hold that not for such work's sake, but for Christ, the Mediator and Propitiator's, sake we obtain forgiveness of sins."

Enough, enough! Both the Scriptures and our Confessions teach that repentance consists of two parts: contrition and faith. But neither of them regards contrition and faith as coordinate parts of repentance. Clearly and emphatically they declare that faith is the soul of repentance, and that contrition is merely a necessary prerequisite of faith.

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