

EMS—You Just Might Be **More** “**Emergent**” than You Think!

David Livermore

Consider the following questions:

1. What does it look like for the Church to live out its mission among a particular people in a particular place?

2. How will people in a given culture best understand Jesus?

3. How can we most effectively live and interpret the teachings of Jesus for people today?

If you think the church should continue to wrestle with the subject of what it looks like to culturally interpret the radical message of Jesus, you just might be more “Emergent” than you think! These are the driving questions of those identifying with the so-called “Emergent Conversation.” But throw the word “Emergent Church” into a conversation among American evangelicals these days and you are likely to get everything from rolled eyes, affirming nods, and blank stares. How does the Emergent Church intersect with our world of missiology? That’s the task I’ve been asked to address in this piece.

I have to admit. It is with some sense of dissonance that I even tackle this topic. I feel pretty ambivalent about the whole “Emergent Church” conversation (“EC” from hereon). How do we even begin to get our minds around the

diverse, multi-faceted nature of the EC? Who am I to speak for either the EC or for evangelical missiology? And given the urgent needs of today’s world, is one more article on this topic even good stewardship of time?

My ambivalence stems from my weariness of endless conversations with my fellow Gen Xers that end up being little more than gripe sessions about the church. Oh don’t get me wrong. I have more than my fair share of rants to contribute, and alas—I’m often ranting about some of the very things I’ve perpetuated in my own ministry.

Now that I have conveniently dodged putting myself in one camp or the other, let me try and find my way forward in this malaise. My point in this article is not to describe and examine the EC as a whole. My assignment is to look specifically at how the EC intersects with missiology. At the same time, given the varied levels of familiarity with who and what the EC is about, I have spent a couple paragraphs giving some rough descriptors of the EC, and have then suggested some important themes in the EC that bear our consideration as missiologists.

If you think the church should continue to wrestle with the subject of what it looks like to culturally interpret the radical message of Jesus, **YOU MAY BE MORE “EMERGENT” THAN YOU THINK!**

On the other hand, I grow equally tired of ill-informed critics of the EC who give seminars or write treatises against the movement without ever really sitting down to understand what is at the core of EC. I’ve heard too many anti-EC presentations that merely use fringe anecdotes, broad sweeping generalizations, and out-of-context “proof-texts” to make a case against the EC.

Trying to define the EC is no small feat. Churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback made it much easier to point to exemplary models of the seeker-church movement. EC’s by their very nature are typically smaller, have limited structure, and resist calling themselves “emergent.” In fact, a sure indicator that you’re probably not very emergent is labeling yourself

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“emergent” or “postmodern”.

Wikipedia, the free, online “encyclopedia,” defines the EC as a movement (though its purists prefer to call it a “conversation”), which seeks to deconstruct and reconstruct Christianity for postmodern culture. In other words, the core of being “emergent” comes back to the kinds of questions I raised at the beginning. What does the gospel look like for our generation and culture? What aspects of 20th Century Christianity need to be abandoned and what aspects need to be reclaimed for the 21st Century? What has been added to the gospel as a result of the Enlightenment, Modernity, and American culture? What has been lost? Wikipedia suggests three threads that tie EC’s together: missional living, narrative theology, and Christ-centeredness.

A more reliable and helpful resource is Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger’s long-awaited book, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cul-*

tural activities.

Much could be explored from these descriptions alone but I want to focus on a few of the specific themes within the EC that have tremendous resonance with values we hold dear as missiologists. The themes within the EC to which I want to give attention are: the centrality of mission, the priority of contextualization, and global awareness.

1. Mission Trumps Everything Else

The first thing we can celebrate about the EC is the missiological ethos of the movement. The words missional and church are used side by side by many in the EC. My guess is you’ll find a much higher percentage of EC pastors who know the names of Lesslie Newbigin and Donald Bosch than do the pastors in traditional churches.

For the EC, mission is not a subset, compartmentalized part of the church, outsourced to commit-

FOR THE EC, MISSIONS IS NOT A SUBSET, COMPARTMENTALIZED PART OF THE CHURCH, outsourced to committees and agencies. Instead, it’s the trump card.

ture. Rather than anecdote-based propaganda for or against the EC, Gibbs and Bolger provide the findings from five years of research on ECs in the U.S. and the U.K. Gibbs and Bolger recount the stories, perspectives and practices of 50 leaders within the EC. They identify nine practices of emerging churches: (1) Identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. As a result, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiri-

tees and agencies. Instead, it’s the trump card. Mission is not a geographically defined activity. It is the church reaching out with God’s love in Christ to a fallen world. Every Christian is a missionary and every place is a mission field. Furthermore, the EC calls the seminary to make missiology the primary discipline rather than a subset that is an optional course of study. Theology, many in the EC say, is actually a discipline within Christian mission rather than vice versa.

Making mission part of everything might make some of us a little nervous. Might it be that if ev-

everything is mission and everyone is a missionary, then in reality nothing is mission, and no one is a missionary? We might fear losing the important priority of frontier work among the hidden peoples of the world if everywhere is the mission field. I think those are important cautions, but before we go down the road of critique, let's further celebrate the centrality of mission in the EC.

According to Gibbs, the word "church" to the EC is not a noun, but rather a verb. "Salvation is not a visa for heaven stamped in your passport, but a life to be lived here and now that presents a radical challenge to the materialistic values of our culture." The gospel is not ultimately about special perks for those who "get in". Instead, God's people have been elected and blessed to be a blessing. Brian McLaren, a prominent prophetic voice within the EC describes the mission of the church as "To be and make disciples of Jesus Christ in authentic community for the good of the world".

The EC is pretty united in protesting the slick, marketing ethos that has permeated much of evangelicalism in the last 30 years. Instead of planting churches that attract people with the charisma and personality of a single leader and a full menu of programs, ECs are interested in being a communal apologetic that magnetically calls people to belong with them. "Their commitment is not to fill the church with people through marketing techniques, but to be an authentic and radical presence of God in a countercultural way... The church's mission is to show the world what it looks like when a community of people live under the reign of God."

For the EC, mission is not something people are shamed into doing once they cross the line of conversion. Instead, the very call to fol-

low Jesus includes an invitation to be among the blessed who get to bless others. Effectively living out mission is at the core of the EC.

2. Contextualization is Championed

Because mission is central, EC leaders use questions like, "What does it look like to be the church in this place at this time?" to inform how they actually engage in mission. EC celebrates what we as missiologists have long known about Christianity—it's multicultural diversity. Ever since Christianity spread into the Gentile world, it has never been a mono-cultural, uniform faith. In fact, Christianity

EC have a lot in common.

The EC is convinced that the Christian Church cannot be faithful to its mission without being contextual. The EC believes the Church must relate constantly and dynamically to the gospel and to culture. Therefore there is a high value placed upon understanding the context in which a church finds itself.

One of the things that makes many evangelicals especially nervous about the EC is that it is not simply interested in changing the methods of communicating the gospel. It is also playing around with the message itself. But should not we as missiologists be the first

EC CELEBRATES WHAT WE AS MISSIOLOGISTS HAVE LONG KNOWN ABOUT CHRISTIANITY—it's multicultural diversity. Ever since it spread into the Gentile world, it has never been a mono-cultural faith in the world.

is the most diverse, multicultural faith in the world. Lamin Sanneh reports that more people worship in more languages in Christianity than any other religion.

Contextualization is of little importance to many other faiths. How many versions of the Koran are there? In how many languages? How much diversity is there in the prayers said in a mosque in Detroit from those said in a mosque in Baghdad?

The colorful, multicultural mosaic of Christianity and exploring how to innovatively express the person of Jesus to a particular culture is a lot messier than perpetuating a uniform, never-changing expression of faith. But I wouldn't have it any other way. And I expect you agree. The Church always lives in and among a particular culture. There is no such thing as a cultureless gospel. In this regard, missiologists and the

to acknowledge the essential nature of contextualization in our message as well as our methods? We have been arguing for years that it is not enough to simply translate Western curriculum and principles from one language to another and call that contextualization. Contextualization is so much more than just encouraging an indigenous people to write their own worship songs, though that's a good start. Any good translator of the Bible has wrestled with this issue of contextualizing the message for a specific people in a specific time period.

Surely not all interpretations of the message are equally sound and the EC and missiologists alike must pursue the contextualization process in the context of the redeemed community—both an immediate community of local believers and the community of faith through the ages. But let us cham-

pion the fact that the EC is doing what we call every missionary to do—to translate the gospel so that the surrounding culture can understand it.

By the way, before we're too quick to say the EC champions the value of "cultural relevance", many in the EC are pretty critical about being "too" culturally relevant. One of the greatest critiques voiced against the "modern church" is that both institutionally and as a people, it looks pretty much like the rest of suburban America. Tom Sine writes, "Most American Christianity is just the good life as defined by the American dream (acquire more stuff, scale the corporate ladder, go to the 'in' schools, etc.) with a thin 'Jesus-overlay'". Far too often the name of Jesus has been used to justify and perpetuate cultural forms of church and Christian mission that have far more to do with the enlightenment values of modernity than with the person of Jesus.

Instead, the EC is concerned about being relevantly countercul-

Just as we missiologists have called indigenous leaders and churches to work out what it means to live for Christ in their contexts, so let us allow the varied generations in our own context to do the same. Meanwhile, may we beware of making any indigenous or generational expression of the Church normative for all other cultures and generations.

3. Global Consciousness

One more area where evangelical missiologists are likely to find resonance with the EC is the strong level of global consciousness that exists within the movement. In part, this is a reflection of the changing era in which many EC leaders have grown up. Most of my peers have a passport that's been stamped multiple times. My parents and many of their peers have never been off the continent. Twenty-nine percent of all high school students participate in some type of short-term mission trip. Now I'll be the first one to acknowledge that short-term missions is not without some

ers having been reared in the age of globalization, post-colonialization, and technology all contribute to their natural inclination to be concerned about global affairs. I'm sure you like me, have met 20-somethings in places all over the world who headed out for a two week service trip, only to find themselves E-mailing home that they're going to stay for another six months. While we bemoan the challenge of finding more young leaders willing to be lifers in mission, they think little of dropping everything to serve with Tsunami relief efforts or to spend their two weeks of vacation holding babies in Romanian orphanages.

Furthermore, as an expression of how the EC sees mission as central to everything in the church, their consciousness is probably better expressed as glocal rather than simply global. ECs typically share a strong measure of concern about mission being lived out seamlessly both locally and globally. In other words, if we're going to pursue social justice in the brothels of Thailand, let's pursue social justice in our own city schools. If we're going to minister in Sudan, let's not ignore the Sudanese refugees in our own community.

David Stoner, Lead Global Outreach pastor at Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids writes,

The addition of glocal to our discourse has brought into much clearer focus the potential disconnect and distortion that can so easily cripple a mission-minded church's best intentions. This missional idea not only rebukes our ignorance and neglect of the growing presence of the ethne (nations) in our own backyards. Glocal also critiques the flawed architecture that undermines the integrity of countless missions efforts...The introduction of the glocal concept forces all of us to reexamine our missional grounding, inviting us to realign our local outreach strategies in a way that reflects the same cross-cultural intentionality of our global outreach initiatives.

One of the greatest critiques voiced against the "modern church" is that both institutionally and as a people,
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tural. The concern is finding a way to be conversant in the language and customs of the surrounding culture and living toward the language and ethics of the gospel. The more accurately the church locates the key points of difference between its surrounding culture and the alternative culture of God's people living under the reign of God—the more faithfully it can live a distinctively holy life in culture. So the EC are good missiologists in looking to make the gospel simultaneously relevant and distinctive.

inherent weaknesses. In fact, this April I have a book coming out about this topic entitled *Serving With Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* (Baker Books). Through research I've conducted among majority world church leaders, the book exposes some of the pitfalls of our short-term mission work.

Regardless, clearly the short-term movement has heightened the level of global connection for today's younger generation. Cross-cultural travel combined with EC lead-

As missions “professionals” (not a very EC concept mind-you), we expend a lot of energy considering how to raise American evangelicals’ consciousness to global issues. There’s little convincing needed among the EC that the globe matters.

Mission is central. Contextualization is key. We must be engaged both locally and globally. These are some of the core values shared by EMS and EC alike. I am not suggesting there are no points of difference, but our common ground seems like a good starting point. Let me conclude by sharing a couple of ways EC leaders push back against much of what they’ve seen in evangelical missions over the last fifty years.

For the most part, EC leaders are skeptical of ambitious programs and campaigns to complete the evangelization of the world. In the words of Tipaldy and his cohorts in the post-mission community, “We’ve heard it all before and we expect we’ll hear it again. What we’re looking for is low-key, sustainable, grassroots mission involvement.” Slick marketing campaigns that over-strategize how the kingdom is going to be consummated or over-stated descriptions about what any one organization or leader is accomplishing leave the EC unimpressed. Hierarchy, organizational power, and grand strategies are met with suspicion as are the endless military metaphors of mobilizing beachheads all over the world and waging war against other faiths.

Instead, there is a longing for relationship, deep connection and stories about God working through the underdog. There is a desire for us to be honest about the pitfalls of Western missions. As a result, there are countless stories of EC leaders leaving large, stable evangelical churches and organizations to work in small church-planting ministries in the inner city.

Tipaldy says to Western missions organizations, “Don’t try to bamboozle us with talk of the ‘big picture’. Whatever ‘big picture’ you develop, it will be wrong. The world is too complex, life is too changeable, and God is too mysterious, for us to get fired up by that kind of language.”

Another pushback by EC leaders to traditional missions efforts relates to what has been called the “missionary sausage machine”—linear systems that missions organizations insist their missionaries and candidates abide by. Being forced into a one-size fits all system of missionary preparation, strategy, and furloughs causes many younger leaders to run the other way.

“Many younger workers who do

the least of which are ours, to carry out his redemptive plan. And may our emergent thinking be carried out most by developing new models and wineskins for the Church in the 21st Century rather than merely theorizing and complaining about old wineskins. May we put more effort into reconstructing church for our respective contexts than into deconstructing existing wineskins.

For those who are quick to write off the EC as yet another flash in the pan trend or as simply a group of angry Gen Xers, may I encourage us to start where we can agree. I expect many of the EMS constituency will find areas of EC theology and practice that are unsettling. But missiologists are unusually poised to be sympathetic to the core val-

As missions “professionals,” we expend a lot of energy considering how to raise American evangelicals’ consciousness to global issues. **THERE’S LITTLE CONVINCING NEEDED AMONG THE EC THAT THE GLOBE MATTERS.**

join established organizations find that they just do not fit in, and feel a constant pressure to conform in a way that creates many internal tensions. Some either cannot or will not conform and so leave; others live under the constant strain of pretending to be who they are not in order to fit...and become devoid of freshness and innovative potential.”

Concluding Thoughts

I’ve only scratched the surface of this conversation. For those of us more inclined toward the emergent edge of where the church is and needs to go, may we exercise caution. May we never forget we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. Let us move beyond our whining and criticisms about the ills of the modern church and acknowledge that God uses all kinds of flawed efforts, not

ues giving direction to EC. Rather than parroting what you’ve heard someone else say about the EC, sit down for coffee with an emerging leader in your own context. Commit to listen first and to really seek to understand. It is my hope that we can role model to other evangelical leaders what it looks like to allow leaders and churches to wrestle with the messy, controversial world of mission and contextualization in our own neighborhoods, just as we defend the need for indigenous leaders to contextualize the church for their contexts.

Dave Livermore, Ph.D., is Executive Director of the Global Learning Center at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, where he also teaches Intercultural Studies. He is also Co-Founder of Intersect, a ministry that provides leadership training and consulting to emerging leaders in ministries around the world.

2005 President's Report

Introduction

The purpose of the Evangelical Missiological Society is to advance the cause of world evangelization through study and evaluation of mission concepts and strategies from a biblical perspective with a view to commending sound mission theory and practice to churches, mission agencies and schools of missionary training around the world. As we forge ahead in the coming year and make decisions about where to place our time and effort as a society we will keep our purpose firmly in mind "to advance the cause of world evangelization through the study and evaluation of mission concepts and strategies."

We have a calling to bring missiological principles and practices to God's agents of transformation—churches, mission organizations and schools—to build up the Kingdom of God. As a society we must keep these three in mind to stay faithful to the purpose of our organization.

As I look back over 2005 we can rejoice with thanksgiving for a strong year. We have increased membership and regional participation thanks especially to our three high growth membership regions: Rocky Mt., Dave Diaso (4 to 19); SW, Tim Lewis (21 to 46 and 116 in attendance); North Central, Bob Priest (75 to 88).

The release of our latest EMS series publication has a well designed, attractive cover and meaningful articles thanks to Mike Barnett.

Our web pages are user friendly, and disseminate key informa-

tion thanks to Mark Allison. Our annual program is poised to make a significant contribution to our understanding of Business as Mission (BAM).

Many thanks go to Tom Steffen, Program Director for the 2005 Annual meeting. The program is well conceived and represents a broad spectrum of this expanding topic. In his years as the Executive Vice President for Administration Tom has initiated significant changes including the birth of the Rocky Mountain region now under the capable leadership Dave Diaso. Tom's engagement with the BAM theme in missiology and his book with Steve Rundle, *Great Commission Companies*, coupled with the breakaway growth of BAM and its leap to prominence around the world and in the Lausanne movement, led us to make this the theme for the 2005 annual meeting. He is editing the forthcoming publication of papers on BAM in our EMS series. We are in the process of finding a replacement for Tom and are grateful for his double term, six year service.

There will be other changes this year as Keith Eitel Executive VP for Constituency Relations and Larry Poston, NE Regional VP are leaving their positions after years of faithful service.

Other Highlights of Activities in 2005

1. Regional Meetings. Eight regional meetings were held, over 35 papers were presented, and around 500 people attended.

2. Membership. Total active

membership before the annual meeting is reported at 333. We had a decade high of 350 in 2002 but those included many EMS members who had not paid dues for some time and when we deleted (after several notifications) inactive members, we showed 313 in 2003, and 311 in 2004. This is the start of an exciting upswing in membership. If you want to check your membership, email Elizabeth .Lightbody@moody.edu. She continues to do a tremendous job with EMS membership and finances.

3. Web site. Mark Allison accepted the role, of EMS Webmaster beginning in October 2003 and significant changes have taken place. It has become an important information disseminating device for us. Our pages are housed at www.EMSweb.org and also accessed at www.missiology.org/EMS/.

4. Annual Meeting Access. We have been averaging 50 plus EMS members at our Annual Meeting but historically the attendance has reached as high as 100 when our membership was several hundred higher. The EMS leadership team is looking at ways to create greater access for our membership at the national conference.

5. International Connections. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE) has designated EMS as a cooperating agency. We will be exploring ways in which EMS can be more active in the international missiological scene in this coming year.

6. Missiological Dissertation Series. Thanks to Ken Gill we are signed an agreement with William Carey Library for the publication of a dissertation series at the annual business meeting. The Publication Committee will appoint review readers and select missiological dissertations for publication. This is a happy addition to our annual EMS series!

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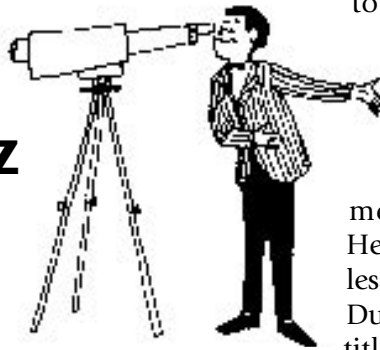
2006 Regional Meetings

(submitted by Enoch Wan - as of Dec. 7, 2005)

REGION	DATE	PLACE	THEME		V.P.
NORTH	2006 April 8	Trinity Evangelical Divinity School	Mission in a world of violence, suffering and death		Robert J. Priest 2065 Half Day Road Deerfield, IL 60015 (847) 317-8137, 317-8128 FAX Email: rpriest@tiu.edu
NORTH-EAST	2006 April 8	Overseas Ministries Study Center New Haven, Connecticut 06511	Mission in the Context of Violence		Dwight Baker 490 Prospect Street (203) 624-6672 Email: Baker@omsc.org
NORTH-WEST	2006 April 7 (Fri) 4-9 PM	WorldView Center 6012 SE Yamhill Portland, OR 97215	Mission in the context of violence		Mikel Neumann 5511 S. E. Hawthorne Blvd. Portland, OR 97215 (503) 517-1894, 517-1801 FAX Email: mneumann@westernseminary.edu
	April 8 (Sat) 8:30 AM to 3:30 PM	WorldView Center 6012 SE Yamhill Portland, OR 97215	Preparing Your Church for Mission in the 21 st Century.		
SOUTH-CENTRAL	2006 April 24-25 (with ETS)	Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Fort Worth, TX	Mission in the Context of Violence		Michael Pocock 3909 Swiss Avenue Dallas, TX 75204 (214) 841-3689, 841-3697 FAX Email: MPocock@dts.edu
SOUTH-EAST	2006 Mar 17-18 (with ETS)	Columbia International University Columbia, SC	Mission in the Context of Violence	Featured: Milliard Erickson & Jerry Rankin	Mike Barnett 7435 Monticello Road Columbia, SC 29230 (803) 754-4100, 333-9397 FAX Email: mcbar@pobox.com
SOUTH-WEST	2006 May 19 (Friday)	Ontario Convention Center) www. missionfestsocal. org	Mission in the Context of Violence	partnership with Missionfest 2006	Tim Lewis 1539 E. Howard St. Pasadena, CA 91104 626.398.2107 Email: tim.lewis@wciu.edu
ROCKY MT.	April 21	Denver Seminary	Mission in the Context of Violence	Dec. 16 th Featured: Stan Nussbaum	David Diaso 3622 East Galley Road Colorado Springs, CO 80909-4301 Email: ddiaso@cmd.org
CANADA			N/A		Glenn A. Flewelling Box 4291 Three Hills AB T0M 2N0 Canada, (403) 443-5835, 443-5540 FAX Email: glenn.flewelling@prairie.edu

Recently, I attended a conference on the Emergent Church in Grand Rapids, Mich. with Brian McLaren as one of the keynote speakers. My good friend and colleague, Dave Livermore was also present at the seminar. Knowing his expertise in missiology, I asked him to give us his perspective on the Missiological aspect of the Emergent Church. That is the basis of this very thought provoking article. Like it or not, these are the churches where the missionaries and short termers are coming from and will be coming from in the future. Many of us have serious questions about the theology of the EC. I personally have negative connotations about the movement, and perhaps, as Dave suggested, need to study their perspectives more carefully. Nevertheless, we need to understand their thinking, lest we miss a golden opportunity to capture the missionary heart of these individuals. Dr. Livermore has done us a great favor in challenging our thinking in the area of similarities between missi-

As seen through the **LENZ**



ology and the Emergent Church. Dave has done his homework (and is still doing it!) in presenting this article. Thanks Dave, for being on the cutting edge of this subject and possibly even shaking up our thinking (please read-my thinking).

Our thanks also to Enoch Wan for his excellent work in getting the summary of the regional meetings. I received information from a couple of regional VP's on meetings planned in their areas, but I thought that the overview of all the regionals in a neat grid, which originated with Enoch's thinking, was a great way to show the activity of our entire EMS community. Perhaps this could be a yearly feature

to give us an overview of meetings, and the possibility of attending these sessions. Some even from other areas may wish to participate.

Finally, in our last *Bulletin*, I mentioned that the title of Dr. Hesselgrave's book was "Changeless Word and Changing Mission". Due to the late printing of *OB*, the title of the book was changed and correctly reviewed by Ralph Winter, i.e. *Paradigms in Conflict*.

2005 President's Report
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Future Activities

"In the coming two years of my tenure as President, in addition to the continuing emphases of membership expansion in our regions and fostering greater communication, I would like to see us consider ways to extend our influence and impact in the international sectors; reshape our constituency relations emphasis; and, adopt strategies to fulfill our purpose of commending sound mission theory and practice to churches, mission agencies, and schools.



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