



INTRODUCTION

Systematic Theology

Spring 2006

I. Theology Defined

A. Theology Defined

Theology sounds like dry subject in which only seminary professors or studious pastors have an interest. However, in practice everybody is a theologian. We all have beliefs about God and how he relates to the universe. Theology is merely the expression of our beliefs about God in words¹. These expressions may not be well thought out, comprehensive, or systematic. They may be based on individual experience or traditions, or the result of intensive study. But it is all theology, nonetheless.

The Greek word “theos” means God, while the Greek suffix “-ology” means “the study of.” So, quite simply put, theology is literally the study of God. Christian theology looks at God as he has divinely revealed himself in the Christian scriptures.

However, because God is actively involved in his creation, theology must also include a study of God’s creative works and his on-going relationship with His creation². Therefore, theology not only is a study of God himself, but also the nature of God’s revelation, humanity, salvation, and other spiritual beings such as angels and demons. Augustus H. Strong, an early 20th century theologian, defines theology as “the science of God and of the relations between God and the universe.”³

B. Terms of Theological Studies

By definition, God is beyond human understanding (Isaiah 55:8-9). Therefore, some theologians believe we can only conclusively say what God is not rather than what God is⁴. This is a theology by negation rather than affirmation. For example, we can only say that God is incorporeal (i.e. he does not have a body), rather than say he is spirit. This is the primary method of theology employed by the Eastern Orthodox Church. It keeps God a mystery and allows us to dwell in the wonder of God.

However, to the extent that God has revealed things about himself, we can indeed describe the nature of God affirmatively. However, we are still limited by our human understanding and we must recognize that God has made accommodations for our finite understanding. God’s revelation uses analogies, symbols and metaphors in order for us to understand his nature. If theology is to have any positive affirmations about God, then we can only make such affirmations using indirect language⁵.

For example, the bible uses terms such as father, son and spirit to help us understand the mystery of the trinity. This, however, is only an analogy, and we must be careful to not take our understanding of “son” too far or we will understate the divinity of the second person of the trinity.

¹ “Theology.” [book on-line]. *Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2005*. (Redmond WA: Microsoft, 2005); available from CD-ROM.

² Millard J Erickson. *Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2002), 22.

³ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, as quoted in Jerry Solomon. “Why Care About Theology.” [article on-line]. (Richardson TX: Probe Ministries, 1995, accessed April 4, 2006); available from <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/theology.html>; Internet.

⁴ Encarta.

⁵ Ibid.

C. Theology as a Science

Thomas Aquinas called theology the “queen of the sciences.” Aquinas believed theology was preeminent over all other courses of study for two reasons⁶:

1. Most sciences are partly speculative and partly practical. However, theology can be more certain in propositions because it is based on divine knowledge and revelation and not human reason, which can make mistakes.
2. Unlike other sciences, which involve an understanding of temporal things, theology contains the hope of eternal bliss.



Thomas Aquinas

But can we really define theology as a science? In Aquinas’ 13th century definition, science meant “knowledge.” However, by the 18th century, science became more narrowly defined to mean a specific rigid approach to knowledge. Science came to be a method of determining truth through empirical proof, observation, experimentation and strict procedures of inductive logic. This has come to be known as the “scientific method.”

Clearly, under this definition, theology is not considered a “science.” God by definition, cannot be observed, experimented on, and proven empirically. However, neither can many other academic disciplines. Psychology, for example, cannot adequately employ the scientific method to determine the nature of humanity and personality. For this reason, psychology and other academic pursuits have evolved into “behavioral sciences.” Rather than attempt to describe the make-up of the human spirit, psychology merely observes and measures the

behavior of humans.

Given this modern understanding of science, theology faces a dilemma. Either it must relinquish its crown as the “queen of sciences,” or it must redefine itself as a behavioral science and thus fit the modern definition. This dilemma divided the study of theology in the 20th century. Some theologians have attempted to redefine the study of theology, changing to the behavioral approach. Others have reacted strongly against that holding to the autonomy of theology.

So is theology a science? Not in the strict definition of science applied commonly today. But in the broader definition of knowledge, theology is certainly the pursuit of knowledge. Furthermore, theology does employ discipline and standardized methodology. It is not mere speculation or the pursuit of mystical experiences. It has a defined subject matter which it investigates objectively using a defined method for verifying propositions through the use of certain tests of logic.

Using this basis, we can still agree that theology is indeed the “queen of the sciences.”

II. Categories of Theology

A. Branches of Theology

There are four classic categories of theology. These categories build upon one another and each have value for the student.

1. Biblical Theology

Biblical theology uses the scriptures alone as its source. But more than just limiting the source, it also specifies how to approach this source. Biblical theology looks at a given period of history or at a given author within the bible and tries to understand how that author or period of time saw God and

⁶ Erickson, 35-37.

His revelation. Biblical theology emphasizes the historical context into which the author was writing. Biblical theology recognizes that God reveals himself differently at different times in history and seeks to understand specifically how this is demonstrated in the progression of the Bible⁷.

Biblical theology is the basis of all other approaches to theology. We must first understand the intent and purpose of the original author and understand exactly how God revealed himself in specific situations at specific points in history to properly develop our own theology. We must understand the methodology employed by biblical theologians to ensure that we are properly observing, interpreting, and applying God's word. Biblical theology is the approach we take in the Grace Institute in the Survey of the Old Testament and Survey of the New Testament classes.

The only significant danger in biblical theology is to miss the forest for the trees. That is to say, we can narrowly look at what Isaiah says about the Messiah, and miss how that relates to what the Gospel of John says about Jesus Christ. We must constantly compare various scriptures and see how any particular passage relates to the whole of scripture.

2. Systematic Theology

Systematic theology also uses the Bible as its primary source. However, it attempts to compare and relate all of scripture and create a systematized statement on what the whole Bible says about particular issues. While biblical theology sees God reveal himself in a progressive manner in scripture, systematic theology combines this progression and seeks to make a statement about God and his revelation that transcends history. According to Charles Ryrie,

Systematic theology correlates the data of biblical revelation as a whole in order to exhibit systematically the total picture of God's self-revelation⁸.

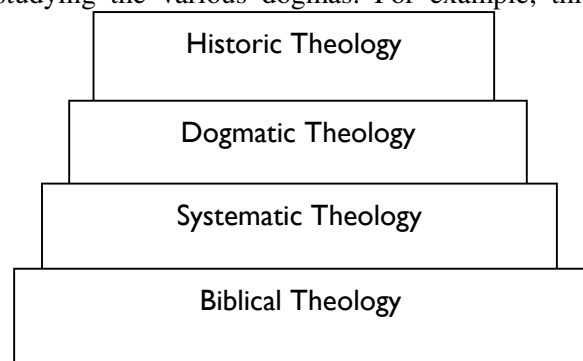
We will define Systematic theology further in this lesson. This is the approach we will be using for this term.

3. Dogmatic Theology

Dogmatic theology uses as its primary sources the creeds or statements of faith (i.e. dogma). Dogmas are formal statements of systematic theology created by a particular denomination or theologian. Dogmatic theology concentrates on studying the various dogmas. For example, this approach would study the creeds of the Roman Catholic Church or the Westminster Confession. Dogmatic theology emphasizes the contrast between movements, like Calvinism and Armenianism, or Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology.

Creeds and statements of faith are usually well thought out consistent approaches to theology in a systematic way. Dogmatic theology helps us test our own beliefs for consistency and rationality. Furthermore, by looking at contrasting viewpoints, we can be challenged in our own thinking and forced to decide for ourselves what we believe on various points.

The danger in dogmatic theology is to argue our personal doctrine using the well-developed



All Christian theology begins with Biblical Theology. As biblical theology is compared and organized it becomes Systematic Theology. Systematic Theology that is esteemed either by edict or through the test of time becomes Dogmatic Theology. The evolution of Dogmatic Theology throughout history becomes Historic Theology.

⁷ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 20.

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Victor Books, 1987), 14.

arguments of the great theologians instead of using scripture. It is easier to prove a particular viewpoint using the definitive answers given by someone like John Calvin or Arminius than to prove a point that is only vaguely discussed in the Bible. But to do so runs the risk of adding to scripture and speaking authoritatively (or dare I say, “dogmatically”) on a subject on which the Bible is relatively silent. Finally, dogmatic theology is hearsay evidence based on second or third hand information. It is like asking your friends how they liked a movie and what the plot of the movie was, but never going to see the movie for yourself. You can gain an interesting perspective and find truthful information in the second hand report, but until you buy a ticket and watch it for yourself, you can't really understand what the movie is all about.

4. Historical Theology

Historical theology uses as its primary sources the traditions and historic statements of the church and other theologians. Historical theology traces the development of theological ideas through the centuries and gleans from these historic creeds, opinions, and treatises a proper understanding of God and his relation to the universe.

There is value in historical theology. The historic traditions of the church cannot be ignored when developing a theological framework. Furthermore, there is significant value in reading the early church fathers and the great theologians through the centuries. We would do well to understand the development of certain theological ideas. For example, examining the events and ideas that led to Martin Luther's break from the Roman church gives us a clearer understanding of such ideas as justification by faith.

However, there is also a great danger in historical theology. The church fathers and theologians throughout the centuries are not inerrant. The fact that theology has changed and developed reveals that historical theology is more subjective and relativistic than other approaches to theology.

B. Sub-categories of Systematic Theology

While the key definition of theology is the study of God, because God has involved himself in His creation, theology also is concerned with God's interaction with His creation. Therefore, Systematic Theology has numerous sub-categories, which investigate various aspects of God's creation and His interaction with creation. The following are some of the major sub-categories of Systematic Theology:

- Theology Proper – The study of the character of God.
- Bibliology – The study of the bible.
- Christology – The study of Christ.
- Pneumatology – The study of the Holy Spirit.
- Soteriology – The study of salvation.
- Anthropology – The study of the nature of humanity.
- Angelology – The study of angels.
- Ecclesiology – The study of the church.
- Eschatology – The study of the end times.

C. Comparing Theology with Other Areas of Study

1. Systematic Theology vs. Apologetics

Systematic theology tries to clearly communicate ones belief about a particular doctrines. The goal of systematic theology is to help the believer clarify and systematize their own beliefs and ensure that those beliefs are consistent and rational.

Apologetics tries to communicate beliefs to non-believers. The goal of apologetics is to defend beliefs to those who do not share them. Apologetics takes note of objections to one's theology and responds to the objections in a manner that will convince the unbeliever⁹.

2. Systematic Theology vs. Philosophy

Philosophy is the examination of fundamental beliefs. Beliefs are examined against tests of logic and other rational thought. Theology is the articulation of beliefs regarding the nature of God and His interaction with creation.

Philosophy can be used to defend or scrutinize theological concepts by providing a rational framework for establishing truth. However, while philosophy serves a useful purpose in providing consistency and logic, it cannot compare to the special revelation of God and must be made a priority, or theology merely becomes a branch of theology¹⁰.

III. Need for Theology

A. Disadvantages to Theology¹¹

So what is the practical need for systematic theology? Why should we study and research this stuff? Isn't just loving Jesus enough?

Indeed, the study of theology does have certain disadvantages:

1. Theology can complicate the Christian message, making it difficult for people to understand the simple gospel.
2. Theology has been used to divide the church rather than unite it. Most denominations have arisen out of disagreements over even the most minor points of theology.
3. Theology can breed arrogance and elitism within the church (1 Corinthians 8:1-3). Those who study theology often incorrectly see themselves as more spiritual because they have greater knowledge about God.

Nonetheless, in spite of these disadvantages, theology is a crucial area of study for the church.

B. Importance of Theology

1. Theology is Essential for Salvation¹²

Correct doctrine is essential to our salvation. Jesus, in Mark 16, asked the disciples, "who do you say that I am?" The answer to this question was not an academic, theological one. It cut to the very core of what it means to be a Christian. All people must answer this basic theological question. It is the very crux of salvation.

If theology is the expression of our beliefs about God, then one must have theology in order to be saved. According to Romans 10:9, one must confess with their mouth Jesus as Lord in order to be saved. To put this in technical theological terms, salvation requires that one must articulate their Christology.

2. Clarifies our Beliefs

While we all have a view of God and how he relates to us, very few have laid out their beliefs in a clear manner. Studying systematic theology helps us to understand what we believe and helps us to

⁹ Encarta.

¹⁰ Erickson, 29.

¹¹ Erickson, 29-30.

¹² Erickson, 30.

communicate those beliefs. It helps us to take our bible study and put some systematic framework to our understanding about God and his relationship to us.

3. Defends our Beliefs

We live in an increasingly relativistic world where the only test for truth is based on experience. This is a trend not only in the world, but increasingly so in the evangelical church. The evangelical church has a long tradition of emphasizing the need for a personal, experiential relationship with God. The danger behind this comes when we make experience the proof of a belief rather than the result of belief¹³.

Systematic theology helps us defend our beliefs by providing an objective singular source that provides a common ground to discuss our beliefs. It also gives us a litmus test for alternate teachings to test their validity. Without this, we are left open to deception.

4. Protects Against False Teaching

The church is constantly being bombarded with false teaching. The secular world's naturalism and humanism has made great inroads into the church. Other world religions, such as Islam and Buddhism, are growing at an increasing rate. Other groups claim to be Christian, but don't hold on to orthodox Christian teaching. The scripture tells us to watch out for false teaching and to test those teachings against right doctrine (1 John 4:1-3).

The correct way to fight against false teaching is not to study the beliefs of all the alternative viewpoints, but to gain a greater understanding of Christian beliefs. The more we understand what the bible teaches, the easier it is for us to discover counterfeits¹⁴.

5. Provides a Basis for Maturity

While knowledge of theology does not guarantee that one will grow spiritually, it is hard to grow in our relationship with God without a fundamental understanding of God and his primary revelation (i.e. the Bible). A good understanding of the Bible is crucial to Christian maturity. However, maturity is more than just knowledge. It is allowing the Holy Spirit to change your life based on this knowledge. Systematic theology provides a starting point for this maturity to happen.

IV. The Theological Method

A. Where Do We Start?¹⁵

Throughout the history of Christian theology, there have been two primary starting points for the study of theology. One begins with theology proper (the study of God). The other begins with Bibliology (the study of the Bible). The first begins with the rational, the second with the revelational.

1. Rational

This approach is the most logically consistent. If God does not exist, then the rest of theology is irrelevant. Therefore proving the existence of God extra biblically is a rational starting point.

Thomas Aquinas was the first theologian to take the rational approach to theology. According to Aquinas, the existence of God could be demonstrated through pure reason without God's special revelation (i.e. the bible). Therefore he began his theology with a five-point proof of the existence of

¹³ Peter J. Leithart, "What's Wrong with Evangelical Theology?" [article on-line]. *First Things*, August/September 1996, 19-21, accessed April 4, 2006; available from <http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9608/leithart.html>; Internet.

¹⁴ Erickson, 31.

¹⁵ Erickson, 31-34.

God. Once he had proven the existence of God, then he showed that God had revealed himself through the scriptures, and therefore the scriptures should then be studied for further understanding.

There are a few difficulties with this approach, however:

1. While one may prove the existence of God, extra-biblical rationality cannot demonstrate that this is the Christian God.
2. Having proven God's existence, it does not necessarily follow that God has specially revealed himself in any way, let alone in the Christian bible.

Many theologians have attempted to address these weaknesses to various degrees of success. However, such arguments often strain rationality or are difficult to follow.

2. Revelational

The alternative starting point is with God's revelation. This was the approach taken by the 20th century theologian, Karl Barth. Barth saw the Word of God the crucial beginning point to all theology. Because the nature of God is so far beyond human understanding, then all we can know about Him is what He has revealed to us. Therefore the natural starting place is to define and understand God's revelation to us.

However, it is difficult to study the revelation of God without some preconceived idea of what the revealing God is like. Furthermore, if God doesn't exist, then what we presume to be revelation is merely myth or human superstition and not worthy of study.



Karl Barth

3. Experiential

A more contemporary approach to theology begins not with God or His revelation, but with the human experience. This approach has its roots in the behavioral sciences and is focused more on the impact of religion on the human condition. This study begins with human problems and then asks how traditional religious beliefs might illuminate a situation or resolve a problem. This is the focus of most secular studies in theology¹⁶.

Unfortunately, the experiential approach is often the most common starting point for many Christians. Too many believers today base their understanding on their own experience with God and do not consider the rational or revelational aspects of theology. For many Christians today, we let our circumstances affect our understanding of God rather than letting God affect our understanding of our circumstances.

4. The Solution?

There is no simple solution to the question of where to start. Both the rational and revelational approaches must make some assumptions as to the nature of God or as to the nature of his revelation. If we start with God's revelation, we must assume the existence of God. If we start with a rational proof of God's existence, we must assume he has provided some special revelation.

For this class, we will begin with the revelational approach to theology. I am presuming that those who are taking this class already believe in the Christian God, and have a basic understanding of God's nature. Therefore, proving the existence of God is better left for our apologetics course. Instead, we will begin by studying the nature of God's revelation, demonstrating the bible as God's Word. From there, we will use the scriptures as the basis of authority for the rest of our theological studies.

¹⁶ Encarta.

B. The Basis of Authority

Once we have our starting point, we must determine what we will use as the basis of authority in our theological studies. Since God cannot be measured and tested in the modern scientific sense, what sources do we use to determine truth about Him? There are three primary authorities used in theology.

1. The Church

In Roman Catholic theology, the church is the primary authority for determining doctrine. While scripture is used as a basis for Roman Catholic theology, only the church has the authority to make a definitive interpretation of that scripture. Where the church has spoken, the matter is settled and no debate is necessary.

There is tremendous advantage to having the church as the basis of authority. By doing so, there is no disunity within the church. You either agree or you are not part of the church. It prevents people from developing their own false interpretations. It is a tremendous tool to prevent false teaching.

In Roman Catholic thought, the church's authority comes through the doctrine of apostolic succession. Even Protestants recognize the authority of the original apostles, for most of the New Testament is written by the apostles. When those apostles appointed bishops and overseers, the power to speak authoritatively was passed on as well. The authority has continued to this present day, so that when the church speaks, it carries the same weight as if an apostle were speaking today.

The sacrament of ordination is the method by which apostolic authority is passed on. When a priest is ordained, they are receiving supernaturally a measure of that authority. As priests move up in the church hierarchy, more apostolic authority is invested. The ultimate authority, then comes to the pope, who, when speaking *ex cathedra*, is speaking as infallibly as scripture itself.

2. Scripture

The problem comes when the church begins teaching doctrines that are contrary to the scripture. By the 16th century the church had created a theology of salvation that focused required participation in the sacraments of the church rather than the grace of God. Martin Luther recognized the disparity between the church's teaching and the teaching of scripture. At first he sought to reform the church from within. However, as he more and more boldly spoke against the teaching of the church, he was excommunicated. Thus began the Protestant Reformation.



Martin Luther

The Reformation led to a change in the basis of theological authority. The battle cry of the reformers was *sola scriptura* (i.e. scripture alone). From this point on, only scripture itself could be authoritative in theological study.

The positive aspect of *sola scriptura* is its requirement that theology be grounded in an objective source of God's special revelation. The disadvantage is that each person's interpretation has created numerous denominations and cults.

However, *sola scriptura* was never intended to allow for people to have their own private interpretation of the bible. There is a proper method for biblical hermeneutics, which we have explored in the Bible Study Methods class.

3. Experience

Increasingly, people are relying more on their own personal experience as the basis of authority for their theology. The experience may be special or general, private or public, but ultimately the experience is self-attesting and verifies truth. Experientialism is very broad because everything boils down to experience. The natural world provides physical experiences, reasoning is a mental experience, and mysticism is a supernatural experience.

There is a place for experience in the development of theology. Experience is the "stuff" out of which all religious truth must be built. Knowledge grows out of awareness, and expressions grow out of experience, not the reverse.

However, an experience cannot be used to support or prove the truth itself. The only truth you can claim is that you actually had the experience. An experience can be interpreted differently depending upon context. As humans we have limited ability to see the full context. Scripture, however, allows us to see a larger context and should therefore take priority over experience.

C. Our Assumptions

It is important, as we develop our systematic theology, to clarify up front our assumptions and doctrinal biases. As we look at various scriptures and doctrines, there are four basic assumptions on which this class is based.

1. Inspiration, and Inerrancy of Scripture

We will assume that all scripture is inspired by God and is inerrant in its original manuscripts. While we will discuss this in detail next week, it is important to state this assumption up front as we define the Bible as our only authority and source in the development of our theology.

2. Proper Interpretation

The proper objective, historical-cultural interpretation of the scriptures is crucial for an authoritative bible to have any relevance.

3. Objectivity

We will approach all theological topics with an open mind. We do not use hypothesis to be proven, but be willing to let the scriptures speak for themselves rather than superimpose a preconceived notion onto the scriptures.

4. Role of the Holy Spirit and Human Limitations

We recognize the limitations of our human reasoning to understand and study subjects that transcend us. We cannot fully understand God, eternity, and other spiritual issues because of our finite mind. Furthermore, we recognize that we are fallen people, with a perspective clouded by our own tendency to be self-serving.

As we develop our theology, we must recognize not only our limitations, but also the role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit teaches us and guides us into truth¹⁷. We must trust the Holy Spirit to do this for us. We must be filled with the Spirit, listening to His voice as he reveals God's truths to us.

Therefore, systematic theology must be studied while being bathed in prayer. To do less would place our own humanity above God.

D. Goals of Systematic Theology

We must keep in mind five distinctions of good systematic theology as we develop our personal statements of faith:¹⁸

1. Biblical

The primary source and basis for authority comes the Bible. While we may use other sources to clarify and test our theology, the ultimate standard is the scriptures.

¹⁷ John 16:13

¹⁸ Enns, 147.

2. Systematic

By definition, systematic theology must draw from all scripture and correlate and organize the various passages with each other. It must be well thought out and laid out in a consistent orderly manner.

3. Relevant

While our theology must remain true to the authoritative scriptures, it must be communicated in a contemporary way. To be relevant we must address the philosophies and prominent worldviews of our day. Sometimes this means we use outside source to corroborate our point or use reason and experience to confirm the scriptures. The fundamental doctrine should not change significantly over time, but the method and presentation will need to.

4. Practical

Theology can easily become a mere academic exercise. Theologians are notorious for debating fine points of doctrine, which have no practical application in the day-to-day living of the Christian life. Good theology must give us insight that changes the way we think and live.

E. The Process of Systematic Theology¹⁹

1. Collection of Biblical Materials

We begin the process by gathering all the relevant biblical passages pertaining to the doctrine being taught. This is not “proof-texting,” which is finding individual verses which support a particular position, but instead pulling all relevant passages, and bearing in mind the historical, grammatical and textual context.

2. Unification of Biblical Materials

We begin with the assumption that the bible presents a unified message and is not self-contradictory. Thus we use the scripture to interpret other scriptures, looking for consistent themes, giving preference to the broad unified message of scripture to obscure, unclear passages as we look for the unified message.

3. Analysis of the Meaning of Biblical Teaching

Next, we boil down the meaning into a summary statement which answers the question, what does the bible really say about the particular issue or topic.

4. Examination of Historical and Cultural Treatments

We research other sources to determine how have others viewed this doctrine throughout history or from the basis of other cultures.

5. Identify the Timeless Essence of the Doctrine

Having researched how theologians in other times and cultures have viewed the passage, we then look to see how our understanding of the doctrine may have been colored by our own cultural baggage. Then we strip away our cultural understanding to identify the timeless essence of the doctrine.

6. Illumination from Extra-Biblical Sources

Having determined the timeless, non-cultural, pure biblical essence of the doctrine, we now begin the process of communicating this doctrine in a manner relevant to our current culture. This begins with gaining an understanding of how contemporary culture thinks about the issue today.

¹⁹ Erickson, 71-82.

Therefore, we research what current science, economics, anthropology, and history say about the topic at hand.

7. Contemporary Expression of the Doctrine

We now seek to communicate the timeless truth of scripture in a format that is relevant and easily understood, taking into account the current issues and thinking of the day.

8. Development of a Central Interpretive Motif

The great theologians all have had an over-riding motif that gives a unique perspective to their theology. This is what makes each individual theologian's scholarship a valuable addition to the body of theological thought. For example, Luther's over-riding motif was "salvation by faith alone;" Calvin, "the sovereignty of God;" Barth's, "the Word of God." This doesn't mean conforming the doctrine to meet a pre-determined message, but is a development of a theme or framework that makes each theologian's work unique.

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