***Characteristics of the Church - PH08-02

Advanced Bible Doctrine - Philippians 1:1***

In this session, we are going to look once more at the church invisible. In Philippians 1:1, Paul is writing to the believers not only in a local place in the city of Philippi, but to all the saints who are in Christ Jesus. The natural state of our souls is one of confusion until the Word of God (that is, the Bible) brings us to spiritual sanity. One of the great doctrines necessary to that sanity and which is at issue today is the one dealing with the church. You and I have much personally at stake in this truth.

**Characteristics of the Church Age**

I want to review with you in some detail the characteristics of the church age. Why is this age different than the Old Testament age, or than the millennial age which is going to follow? There are several basic characteristics:

1. **The Union of All Believers in Christ**

The first one is the union of all believers in Christ. All Christians are unified in Jesus Christ. This is called positional sanctification. This is the only basis of unity which exists among believers today. When we talk about Christian unity, this is the only kind of Christian unity that exists today. It is that every believer has been joined to Jesus Christ so that he is part of the body of Christ. There is no such thing as unity among believers in general, in experience. Sometimes we are deceived into thinking that Christians have united on some ground because of mass movements which temporarily promote certain causes. However, those are temporary alliances, and they are mere truces between Christians who have very definite differences of opinions and points of view on the local experience level.

Some unity exists within small groups of believers who have a common goal; a common viewpoint; and, a common understanding of the implications of doctrine, and they can work together and they can move together. However, even that unity in time will have people who fragment off for one reason or another: they change; or, the operation changes under the guidance of the Lord. A living structure is always going to have changes, and certainly as we move to the end of the age, the end of the age is going to bring such rapid changes concerning the lifestyle of people, that within the local church things are going to change as to how things are done, and to what the thrust is, and the methods and the techniques. As the years move by, the emphasis will be different because of the social situations in which we live. The particular truth which is thrust forward will vary from situation to situation now.

If believers cannot move with that flow of the Spirit of God, they will find themselves in disunity even on a local level. The only total unity that we have as believers is this fact that all believers are united in the grace age to Christ. Because we have this unity, believers are commanded to love the brethren. The word "love," without our going into the technical details of that again that I think you understand well, is that love is a mental attitude. It does not include our accepting or associating with Christians who are negative to sound doctrine. It is not loving for you to be tolerant of heretical views. You will be tolerant of the individual who holds those radical views. You will be tolerant of the believer who is not sound in doctrine. However, this does not mean that you must accept what he is doing, or his points of view that are contrary to the Word of God.

Christians today are separated primarily over the Word of God. This is where Christians go their various ways. This is what brought denominations into existence. Christians are divided over the meaning and the implications of God's Word. Very often people try to substitute zeal and enthusiasm for a knowledge of an accurate interpretation of what God has said. They seek to cover up their lack of understanding of the Word of God by saying, "Well, love is the big theme. What we need is to love one another." Yet, the Lord Himself said that we could only love Him if we keep His commandments. Love and truth go together, and they cannot be separated. This side of eternity, you and I are not going to find any Christian unity except that which is ours as a result of our position through salvation and our having been placed in Christ.

1. **The Indwelling of Jesus Christ**

Every Christian, because of this union with Christ, is indwelt by the Lord Jesus Christ. That's a second major characteristic of the age of grace. The Lord Jesus Christ indwells every believer. This is the basis for our Christian fellowship with the Lord. It can only be realized in our experience as we are filled with the Spirit. Christ is in you. He is there within your life for fellowship with you. You cannot enter into fellowship with the Lord except on the basis of the truth of the Word. You must know the Word of God in order to experience that fellowship. Sin must be confessed. The Word must be learned.

For this reason, Jesus Christ is pictured in Revelation 3:20 as standing at the door of a carnal Christian's heart and knocking at that door, seeking entrance into that life. This is not seeking entrance for salvation. Revelation 3:20 refers to this fact that Christ is indwelling the believer, but the believer has closed Him off within his life in some place. Christ is knocking on the door of that room, seeking entrance in order that He may enter into fellowship in that phase of the believer's life. The carnal heart is opened to that knock, not through salvation, but through confession of sin. When we confess sin, we become spiritual believers, and that door which was closed to the Lord is opened. Constantly, you and I are hearing that gentle tapping at the door of some phase of our life which is Jesus Christ saying, "You've closed me off. I am here for fellowship with you. This is not right. I am indwelling you. I should be in every phase of your life." At that point, we make that decision, "Come in Lord Jesus," or we let the door stay locked and bolted against Him.

People are saved by believing the gospel, and then Christ enters the life. At the moment before you believe the gospel, your heart (or, your mind, as that word stands for our thinking in Scripture), is a disaster area of spiritual disorientation. Your mind is way off on spiritual things. It is literally a refuse pile. However, the moment that you believe in Christ as Savior, all of the garbage in your mind is removed with one fell swoop, and now your heart becomes a suitable place for the Savior to enter. So the order is faith in Christ that removes the debris of spiritual disorientation and all the trash that cleans up the life, and the Savior enters to indwell for fellowship. This was never true of people in the Old Testament. They were never indwelt by any person of the Godhead on a permanent basis. You are constantly indwelt by Christ for your personal fellowship with Him.

1. **The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit**

Every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Before the church age, in the Old Testament era, no one was permanently indwelt by the spirit. Some people in the Old Testament were given great power to perform certain tasks, and so the Spirit of God would come upon them; He would empower them; they would do the job; and, He would leave them. But it is not a temporary relationship in the age of grace. Sometimes you hear people praying, "O, Spirit of God, do not leave us." That is a travesty to pray. That is an insult to God. It shows a lack of understanding of the relationships of the Holy Spirit in this age.

God the Holy Spirit will never leave you. It was right for sinners in the Old Testament to pray, "Take not Your Spirit from me," because He could come and go sovereignly. God the Holy Spirit will never leave the believer in the church. He is permanently indwelt. For this reason, every Christian has maximum divine power with which to use his spiritual gift. You have the Savior indwelling for maximum fellowship which brings maximum joy and maximum emotional exhilaration. You do not have a temporary relationship. You also have the Spirit of God indwelling you. He is the maximum fullness of power so that you may exercise your spiritual gift to the production of divine good. If you try using a spiritual gift under the basis of human capacities, dominated by the old sin nature, it will produce much that may be commendable in the eyes of men, but it will not be what God has done.

1. **The Universal Priesthood of the Believer**

The next characteristic of the church age is the universal priesthood of the believers. In the Old Testament, there was a priesthood, but it was restricted to the tribe of Levi. In the millennium in Jerusalem, the Old Testament priesthood will again be re-established and will again function. However, today there is no specialized group of priests. The Roman Catholic idea of clergy and laity is a false concept. Today every Christian is his own priest. This was never true in Old Testament days. It is only true in the age of grace. Jesus Christ is our high priest, and we, as priests before God, worship the Son in various ways. As priests, we are called upon to worship Him primarily through the learning of the Word of God.

So we listen to doctrine, we learn, and we respond. We worship through prayer--private and group prayer. We worship through giving on the grace method. We worship through the Lord's Supper, and through the testimonies that may be shared to the workings of the grace of God. We worship through the exercise of those spiritual gifts and abilities which He has given us. This is the universal priesthood of the believers. This is one of the most magnificent things about the age of grace--that you are your own priest.

That connotes privacy. That connotes that you may live your life as unto the Lord. That connotes that what you do is nobody else's business, but it is certainly God's business. That connotes that God will deal with the worst person you know. The person that you think really needs to be dealt with, you may be sure that in time God will deal with him in one way or another, and the discipline will have a mounting effect. With the universal priesthood of the believer, you cannot function in this priesthood carelessly or indifferently. It is a great privilege, and it is your right to represent yourself before God. You do not represent some other believer. You do not have a pastor-teacher who speaks for you before God. You speak for yourself, and God will never turn to someone else to account for you and your life. He will only turn to you. So be prepared to answer for this priesthood.

1. **Ambassadors for Christ**

Every Christian is an ambassador for Jesus Christ. For this reason, every believer in the church age is in full-time Christian service. This was not the case in the past. There was laity and clergy in the Old Testament. All believers, therefore, are to be witnesses for the Lord. Most Christians, I'm sad to say however, are AWOL primarily because they lack the sustaining power of doctrine in order to enable them to perform the work of witnessing. If you are in full-time Christian service, this brings up the question of: what am I doing out there earning a living all day long?

Everybody is responsible for bringing in his own livelihood. Since we are all ambassadors and, therefore, in full-time Christian service, our livelihood is simply a means to the performing of that service. Whatever employment God gives you is for the purpose of performing service. It is for the purpose of giving you the opportunity to exercise your spiritual gift. For this reason, employment must always be viewed in terms of your ambassadorship. I do this job to earn the income to perform my ambassadorship. That's the order. Sometimes it would be the course of divine wisdom that you should take a job which pays less, and gives you the freedom to perform your ambassadorship more, than for you to take a job that maybe pays a great deal more, and cuts you off from the Lord's service. There isn't anything Satan likes better than to give Christians good paying jobs that preclude the exercise of their spiritual gifts. In that case, that job is not of the Lord. The amount of income is not the primary issue.

The Bible says that Our Lord will feed us; He will clothe us; and, He will shelter us, and that is sufficiency unto this day. We commit ourselves to His righteousness, and all these other things that we need on a day-by-day basis, He will provide. That takes some faith and understanding to accept and to act upon. This fact that you are an ambassador of Jesus Christ gives your life very very great purpose.

1. **The Completed Canon of Scripture**

We have the completed canon of Scripture. Christians possess a full revelation from God in the Bible for their personal guidance. God no longer speaks to us through dreams; through visions; through audible voices; or, through angels. Whatever God has to say to us today is in writing. Understand that. That's doctrine. Whatever God has to say to us today is in writing in the completed canon of Scripture. God is not going to speak to you through any other means except that book which He has given us. He is not going to give you some supernatural direction. He is not going to give somebody else the information for your life personally. Whatever God has to say is in writing now. Obviously, that means that if we do not know what He has written, we cannot be oriented to His thinking, and we will miss the details that He has designed for our lives. We have to know the principles of the Word of God in order to know what He thinks.

For this reason, we have a local church organization, and we have a pastor-teacher who has been provided, one to each local church, whose responsibility it is to explain that Word. That's the primary and basic responsibility that he has to do because we have a completed canon of Scripture that the believers must know if they are to be able to enter into God's plan for them.

This is one of the points that I think we will be shocked at in eternity. We will look back and say, "How sad. How sad. What I could have been and what I could have done if only I had known this and this and this about the Word of God." Some of us will sit and wonder, "Why didn't I know that?" Some of us will even remember, "You know, I used to hear that. It used to make me mad as anything when I heard it. I used to grind my teeth when I heard that. And here it is. It was the key to the richness of God in my life, and I was bucking it and kicking it to death. For here was something that I listened to, and I said, 'That's nice,' and it passed right over me, and I never grabbed onto it. I just did not understand what this meant." Therefore, there will be loss of reward.

1. **A Supernatural Way of Life**

Every Christian is called to live a supernatural way of life. This is a life which is absolutely beyond human capacity to live. Believers in the church age have, therefore, been provided with a means for living a supernatural life. That means is the Word of God with the Holy Spirit to teach that Word to a living human spirit which God has placed within us. This supernatural way of life is not a change in your personality. It is very very sad how much in Christendom and how much among Christians is being distorted by the idea that Christians have to change their personalities. This implies that God made a mistake in making you the way you are, and that there is something that is far greater and a far better improvement usually in the mind of the person sitting next to you that knows how to improve you considerably. So he's going to change your personality, usually to conform to some stereotype image of spirituality or some tradition that has arisen.

This business of changing personality is a major problem within marriage. It is people who will not see other people as they are before they marry them. They will not discover how they really are before they marry them. If you find yourself at the dating stage explaining to your opposite number; trying to change them; and, trying to bring them around to a different attitude, that is a major signal that you have troubles on the line. You better give some reconsideration to whether this is God's leadership in your life. God calls us to a supernatural way of life. He does not call us to change our personalities. He calls us to be what he has made us, and to conform to the principles of His Word. When we do, the worst kind of personality comes out being exactly what that particular point in life in the body of Christ needs. It is not your province to be changing other people's personalities.

So these seven characteristics give us a very magnificent view of something that is true of you and of you only. Only you, of all the saints of all ages have been united to Christ in a permanent union. Only you are indwelt by the second person of the Trinity forever. Only you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit as the source of power in all that you do. Only you are your own priest. Only you are an ambassador for Jesus Christ. Only you have a completed Bible. Only you who live in this age are called to live a life which, if Christ and the Spirit of God through the Word of God did not live it through you, you never could begin to live the Christian life. When people are not taught the Word, and when pastor-teachers are not doing their job of instructing in the Word, the result is that they come up with gimmicks of one kind or another. They come up with rituals; procedures; language; methods; or, something else. We think that when we do these things, this indicates that we are Christian godly people, and the Word of God is not structured upon that kind of cleverness of our own being. It is a supernatural way of life, but if you don't know the Word, you never can live that life, and then you will substitute with secondary things.

Because the church age was so unique; because it was never revealed in the Old Testament; because nobody knew anything about this; because the disciples were completely 100% ignorant of this idea; and, because it was a secret in the plan of God, it had to be explained in a variety of ways. This was because it was a revolutionary thought. Judaism, which held the stage center for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years was suddenly shuttled off into the wings--out. Here was a whole new thing that nobody ever knew about, standing right there in the middle of the stage, and heaven was resounding with the declaration, "This is what I am doing now. This is God's program." That was unbelievable. It was hard to make this transition, and it was very difficult to forget everything that was true about the Old Testament. It was hard to forget all of that legalistic way of life, and all those rituals and all that constituted the works program of the Old Testament, and to come to a completely different concept of relationship to God. It was very very hard to do that.

**Illustrations of the Church Age**

Therefore, the word of God, in trying to clarify to us how you are related to the Lord Jesus Christ, has given us a series of seven illustrations within the Word. These illustrations spell out how you are related to Christ. These are the relationships that exist between us and the Lord. They convey the divine resources that are provided to the believer in order for him to exist in this age of the angelic warfare. Please remember that you are living within the midst of the angelic conflict that Satan and his demons have with God and His angels. This conflict is rising in intensity. Consequently, you are caught up in the middle of this battle. You are right out there on this battlefield. You are at the heart of the whole thing. Satan is out to do you in. He has to do you in in order to save his own hide. Consequently, with Christ in heaven where He cannot be reached, you become the object of every satanic delusion and maneuver. You are in the midst of a great spiritual battle. If you ever forget that, it will be to your regret.

These illustrations are what we need to know in order to fight that conflict.

1. **The Shepherd and His Sheep**

Christ is presented as the shepherd, and the Christians are the sheep. You find this in John 10. Please remember that John 10 is part of the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John was written to the Jewish people, in effect. All of it, except chapters 13 through 17, is directed to the Jews. In the Old Testament, Israel was called the sheep of His pasture (Psalm 74:1, Psalm 79:13, Psalm 100:3). In John 10:9, we have the sheep of Israel being spoken of, who through faith in Christ are being let out of the fold of Judaism into a new flock. John 10:9: "The Lord says, I am the door. By Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.'" He is speaking here of the sheep of Israel who, through faith in Christ, are let out of the fold of Judaism into the new flock of Christianity. Look at verse 16. The Lord says, "And other sheep I have that are not of this fold. They also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice, and there shall be one fold and one shepherd."

We have a translation problem here. Let me clear it up for you. "And other sheep I have" refers to gentiles. He has been speaking here to the Jewish sheep. He says, "I have other sheep who are not of this fold (that is, of Judaism, of the fold of Israel). They also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice, and there shall be (not one fold, but) one flock." The Greek word means "flock"--not "sheepfold." What He is saying is that out of the fold of Israel and out of the whole of the fold of the Gentiles, I will create a whole new flock which will create a totally different group. Jews and gentiles thereby become the Lord's sheep in one new flock.

This new flock is what is called the church. Christ is the door into salvation. Christ is the Good Shepherd who protects the sheep from the wolves while the hirelings flee. The pastor-teachers are under-shepherds of Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd. As the under-shepherd, he does not desert the sheep, though they may stray from him. He does not allow the wolves to get at the sheep without giving the wolves a lot of trouble in the process. Very frequently when he is giving the wolves a lot of trouble, and he's beating the wolves off, the sheep are complaining over how ugly he is being to the wolves who are out there to eat him up. This is because sheep are stupid. Sheep are probably the dumbest animals you can find.

Consequently, in writing the Word of God, the Holy Spirit sat down and He said, "Now let's see. How shall I compare the people of God? What animal would represent them? The golden eagle that floats out there majestically? No. Let's see. The cheetah with his speed and his cunning, and so on? No. The pig? No, that would be too bad." Then he said, "Sheep--dumb stupid sheep. That's the best characteristic I can think of. That's the animal that characterizes the people of God best of all. There is nothing that they love to do like yap at the pastor-teacher while he's beating the brains in of the wolves who are trying to make a lunch out of the sheep." That's going to be one of the things we get in eternity. We're going to look back and say, "God, I can't believe. I can't believe it." And God's going to say, "Believe it. Believe it. That's what you were like."

There is a tender intimacy that exists between Christ and His sheep. We're told that He knows them, and they know Him. He stands by them, and they try to stray off from Him. They will try to make their inroads, and if he was a hireling, He would beat it to another job. However, since He is not a hireling and is not paid for His ministry to care for them, He stands by them. This illustration stresses that Christ came to the sheepfold as Savior through the door (that is, the legitimate way), and He is the true shepherd. The sheep will respond to Him alone. Christ is the door out of the fold of divine condemnation, and into the flock of salvation and security. Salvation and spiritual food for the Christian life are provided by Christ, the Good Shepherd. He intercedes; He defends; and, He provides the Word of God for His sheep. All other saviors are false shepherds who give not their lives for the sheep--they're hirelings. There is only one flock today. That's the flock made up of Jew and gentile. So the whole illustration stresses the shepherding care of Christ, and the helplessness and disorientation of the people of God.

1. **The Vine and the Branches**

A second illustration is that Christ is the vine and Christians are the branches. You have this in John 15:1-17. This illustration was addressed to believers in the church age. This is in that portion of the Gospel of John, chapters 13 through 17, which does apply to the church age. In the upper room, where these words were spoken, the Lord Jesus projected himself in His thinking to the point after His death; after His resurrection; after His ascension; and, after the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit had descended. In the upper room, you have pure church truth. So here is a condition of the relationship that you have with Christ which is true of you today, and true of nobody else in the past. This is true as a vine is related to the branch.

Israel in the Old Testament was described as Jehovah's vineyard. You have this in Isaiah 5:1- 7, Jeremiah 2:21, and Luke 20:9-16. In John 15:1, the Lord Jesus says of himself, "I am the true vine," in contrast with Israel which had proved to be a false vine. Christ as the true vine will be faithful while Israel was not. The Lord is the source of all the fruitfulness, consequently, of the branches. Whatever divine good you and I as branches produce, it is because He gives us the power. We have His life. He produces it through us.

**Abiding in Christ**

This condition is described as abiding in Christ. The word "abide" here in John 15 refers to the Christian's fellowship with the Lord. It means that sins are confessed. In this illustration, we have permanent union with Christ. That's the reality. However, the communion (the fellowship day-by-day) is up to the believer. Christ has made the union. You and I maintain the communion. Abiding in Christ has to do with unbroken fellowship. That's the human responsibility. This is the relationship that the Lord has with the Father. John 15:10 speaks about His abiding in the Father. It means that He is in a state of fellowship with the Father.

The results of abiding with Christ (the branch and the vine) in John 15:2 indicate His discipline so that we may grow and be more productive. Verse 7 tells us that the result is prevailing prayer. Confession of sins and positive volition to doctrine accomplish prayers that works. Verse 11 describes to us the personal emotion of joy that stems from a believer who is in this status of fellowship and instructed in the Word. Verse 16 describes the lasting spiritual fruit that comes because we are joined to Christ. All of this is contained in this illustration of the vine and the branches. It speaks of the strength of Christ, and His life imparted to us, without which we could bring no glory to the Lord.

Consequently, your fruitfulness as a believer is the most important factor in God's plan in this age. God's purpose in this age is for you to be fruitful. Your fruitfulness is the result of this relationship to the Lord. Christians are called out to be witnessing members of Christ's body. It is the ministry of these saints (you) which is completing the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12-19). As the vine and branch partake of one common life producing the fruit, so also do you in Christ share one common life. That's why you can be fruitful. This was never true of people in the Old Testament.

1. **The Cornerstone and the Building**

A third illustration is Christ as the chief cornerstone, and Christians as the building (Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:5, 1 Corinthians 3:9). In the Old Testament, we know that Israel had a temple (Exodus 25:8). However, the church is a temple itself (Ephesians 2:21). The church universal is now the place in which God lives on this earth. This temple has been purified and made holy through the death of Christ. You as individual believers are the temple in which God dwells. We together, forming the church universal, are the house in which He lives now.

The Lord Himself is described as a stone, and He has various relationships as a stone to other peoples. For example, to the gentiles, He is the smiting stone when they come to their final judgment. We read about this in Daniel 2:34, Psalm 2:7-9, Isaiah 63:1-6, and Revelation 19:15. To Israel He is described as a stumbling stone and a rock of offense (Isaiah 8:14-15, 1 Corinthians 1:23, and 1 Peter 2:8). To the church, He is the foundation stone (1 Corinthians 3:11), and the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20-27, 1 Peter 2:4-5). Christ as the stone was rejected by the builders of Judaism, and consequently their building collapsed (Psalm 118:22-24, Acts 4:11, Matthew 21:42-44).

There are certain features of the church as a building that this illustration connotes. It indicates to us that every Christian is a living stone because he has a living human spirit (1 Peter 2:5). Christ is the cornerstone of this building, the church (Ephesians 2:20-22, 1 Corinthians 3:11, 1 Peter 2:6). The church is a building. It is the habitation of God through the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:22).

Consequently, this illustration out, there were two major prohibitions upon a priest in the Old Testament. One was that a priest in the Old Testament was never to burn strange incense. Strange incense was a symbol for religion and for man-made rituals. In the New Testament, we too are told to reject religion and to reject the formality of ritual. We are not to burn strange incense. However, Leviticus 10:1 also forbade an Old Testament priest from using strange fire. Strange fire represents the old sin nature controlling the emotions. Strange fire represents zeal uncontrolled by God. The New Testament priest is not to conduct his business where the soul is dominated by the old sin nature rather than being dominated by the understanding of doctrine through his mind.

There are many Christians who have such a love for showmanship; who have such a love for enthusiasm; who have such a love for being challenged and stirred; and, who have such a love for promotion that they don't realize that love for the Lord has been replaced by this showmanship; by this zeal; by this enthusiasm; and, by this promotion. When you find the zealous enthusiast who is not structuring his emotions on the Word of God, you will also find someone who will begin to be tolerant about apostasy (such as the tongues movement), and everything which is associated with pseudo Christianity and pseudo spirituality in our day. He will begin to have reservations whether these things are not really acceptable in our age.

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, in the fourth volume on his theology, has a very excellent quote in which he says that, "Methods are important as to how you do the Lord's work. But the thing which is essential is the truth." There is a lot of being caught up in how we do the lord's work, and negligence of the instruction in the truth which is the thing that counts. The Old Testament priests represented the people of God before God. You as a New Testament priest, of course, represent yourself. It's a private matter. Your fruitfulness as a believer is the most important factor in your life, and it is dependent upon your functioning within this priesthood, properly related to your high priest Jesus Christ. Only the high priests in the Old Testament could enter the holy of holies which was the very presence of God. Yet, you as a New Testament priest can approach and talk to God directly anytime. That's the universal priesthood. You need no one to go through to reach God. This illustration stresses our role as priests under Christ, our high priest, ministering with sacrifices; with worship; and, with intercession.

There are a few more illustrations, and then we want to make one major summary of the doctrine of the church universal before we come into what I think is going to be a very apropos timely examination of the structure within the local church; the lines of what God has established; what He is trying to do; and, what this game is all about. I think you're going to find that the best is yet to come relative to our very practical use of this doctrine. We need this very basic background of knowing what the body of Christ is like with the universal church. That will give us the details to spell out the most confusing area of life among Christians today. That is, what the local church is all about.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1973

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