

Reassessing the Frontiers

Measuring Insider Movements? Shifting to a Qualitative Standard

by Kevin Higgins

In the world of mission, the topic of movements is in vogue. Books about movements, training programs to equip people to produce movements, and organizations claiming to catalyze movements are a major growth industry. We might even say we're in the midst of a "movement-movement."

L. Waterman recently inquired into this development when he asked a very appropriate question: do insider movements actually qualify as movements?¹ His inquiry was framed by the descriptions of movements put forth by David Garrison, David Watson and others,² and focused on how we can know if the movement aspect of insider movements was true.

This article is intended as part of the ongoing discussion of that question.

Let me be clear: I am not addressing the insider aspect of such movements, but I'm asking instead just what sort of criteria we should use to evaluate the movement aspect.

I begin with a quick overview of recent thinking about movements to provide some context. Then I want to narrow down the many crucial questions to the two that seem to me to be at the heart of all our measurements of movements. After examining those questions, I conclude with the criteria that I see used in the New Testament, and apply this to my own assessment of insider movements, as movements.

The Movement-Movement

While this appears to be quite a recent development, historically the fascination with movements seems to stem from the work of Donald McGavran and his research in India a generation ago.³ McGavran was a missiologist. He had lived and worked in India, the son and grandson of parents and grandparents who were also missionaries in India. And his concern was for how the gospel might spread throughout the great land of India. He noticed that it did spread in some cases, and not in others and asked, "Why"?

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The initial impact of McGavran's work was felt more deeply in the western church, particularly the North American church, than it seems to have been in the mission world. This impact is evidenced in what came to be known as the church growth movement (that word again). It seems ironic to me that his thinking about movements created a movement, but not the sort he was likely to have imagined.

For critics, there were a number of controversial elements in McGavran's thinking: his heavy reliance on social science-based research, an apparent emphasis on numbers, the homogeneous unit principle,⁴ and his promotion of the idea of focusing mission resources on responsive fields while holding less responsive ground with minimal personnel until a responsive season might emerge.

The church growth movement focused on trying to figure out how to apply some of McGavran's principles to western churches. Almost all of these controversial aspects just outlined made their way into the church growth movement's application of McGavran. In particular, his methodology of asking why some churches grew and others didn't, became a key point of focus.

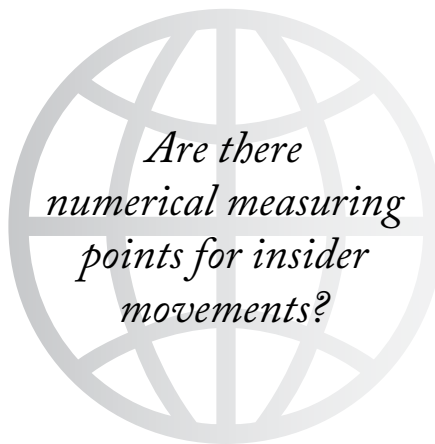
Later, church planting became a priority within the church growth movement. This developed for a very practical reason: more unchurched people came to be "churched" as a result of church planting than through other methods.

More recently the range of how movements are described and defined has multiplied: church planting movements, disciple making movements, house church movements, simple church movements, insider movements, less frequently, mission planting movements, and even more rarely, movement-planting movements.

Most of these recent examples do not trace their lineage intentionally to McGavran, at least not in published

versions of their work. Perhaps some don't even realize that there is a family tree connection between current movement thinking and McGavran, much less the church growth movement.

While I would suggest that there are major differences between current expressions of movement thinking and the former church growth movement, including what I believe is much more sophisticated missiological and cultural reflection, there is at least one major trend in common: the DNA of the earlier church growth movement is evidenced in the present tendency to apply numerical measurement to whether something is or is not a movement.



Numbers and Movements

Church growth analysts in the early days spent a fair bit of time having to justify for critics their use of numbers in measuring the health of a church. Today movement proponents and researchers are asked to explain movements in terms of numbers, or to establish the legitimacy of their research with certain numerical markers.

That last point brings us full circle, back to Waterman's questions about insider movements: given that most other movement descriptions have numerical measuring points, and the ability to unequivocally determine whether there is a movement, is there something akin to this for insider movements? Waterman's

initial survey of insider literature uncovered no examples of such numerical criteria. He states,

We can understand...that in an Insider Movement, the believers remain within their prior socio-religious group. But I couldn't find any numerical criteria for a "movement."⁵

Before assessing things further, I will include here the types of numerical measurements Waterman *did* find in his exploration of other types of movements. Waterman has summarized two of the most widely known. He writes,

For example, David Garrison begins *A Wind in the House of Islam* with this definition [of a movement]: "...at least 100 new church starts or 1,000 baptisms that occur over a two-decade period." (p. 5).⁶

And,

David Watson... "...a minimum of one hundred new locally initiated and led churches, four generations deep, within three years." (p. 4) In both cases, their definition enables them to offer a clear estimate of the number of CPMs in the world at the time of their writing (Garrison: 70 among Muslims; Watson: 68 total).⁷

The two examples cited by Waterman are clear, concise, and numerical. But there is a core question buried inside these statements, and the answer is not universally agreed upon among movement proponents and trainers. In fact, the answer to the buried question has yet to be universally agreed upon between denominations.

Questions Behind the Questions

Clearly one element that both these definitions seek to answer is:

How many churches does it take to know you have a church planting movement?

That question makes sense. These are after all, examples of *church* planting movements. But this begs a question about which the Christian world has

been divided for centuries. Here is how I would phrase it:

How do we know when a given "fellowship" or study group is a church?

This will include a number of factors, just one of which would be how many people need to be in a church before you can count it as a church for the purposes of answering whether there is a church planting movement?

In this article I will not be able to thoroughly explore this crucial question about what it is that enables someone to call this or that group of believers a church. So, for practical reasons, I will reference another article by Waterman on this topic, and will use his conclusion as a working definition:

A biblical church is a significant group of Jesus' followers having an identity as a church (ekklēsia) who gather together regularly on an ongoing basis, with recognized leadership under the headship of Christ, to worship God and encourage one another in obeying all his commands (including, but not limited to baptism and the Lord's Supper).

Several things are worth noting, in my opinion, before moving on. First, there is not a specific numerical criterion other than the statement "significant group." Second, there is an assessment included which is based on the intention of those gathering: "having an identity as a church." Third, and finally, the criteria are essentially qualitative in nature.

As I mentioned above, I will use this as a working definition of "church." This article is not aiming to discuss "church" but rather the criteria for assessing the "movement" aspect of insider movements. This definition is sufficient for accomplishing that purpose.⁸

Before moving further into my main purpose, it seems wise here to pause and address a potential misunderstanding. I have mentioned above that the church growth movement was critiqued for, among other things, its apparent emphasis on numbers. I have here clearly shifted from quantitative to

I see the emphasis of the New Testament to be qualitative in nature. This is the case when evaluating a church or a movement.

qualitative measurements as a working assumption. What about numbers?

Is Counting Wrong?

I am not arguing that counting is always wrong, or that it is an inappropriate exercise. There is a whole book in our canon, after all, which has been titled "Numbers" in English texts. While the census of Israel undertaken by David in the Old Testament receives mixed reviews, there is no question that the numbers Luke provides in his account of the growing Jesus movement in Luke-Acts is an example of counting and reporting. There is nothing wrong with counting, unless—depending on how one reads the census accounts—one's motivation or inspiration is wrong.

Where does that leave us relative to using numbers to measure a movement, or to assess if in fact it is a movement? That aspect of the question is after all the real crux of the matter.

I read the accounts in Luke-Acts as reporting growth, certainly. But I would be hard pressed to assert that Luke's numbers are being used as evaluations or assessments. They are reported almost casually, and I sense no hint of "proofs."

Thus, I don't have a strong objection to counting and measuring, but I do not assign numbers as the essential measurement of a movement. Since I also assume that Waterman, Garrison, and those promoting disciple making movements (DMM) would probably agree with me on this point, an additional word is probably warranted to explain further why I have not emphasized or exercised numerical measurements in the movements I have witnessed (and let me be clear, this includes both insider and non-insider expressions of movements within my organizational sphere and ministry).

First, in my experience there has been a major issue when we have tried to assess a work numerically. In the cultures with which I am the most familiar, it is very difficult to ask about numbers without giving very subtle messages that more numbers are better, and thus that one's success and honor as a leader is tied to the numbers one can report. This can lead to a very subtle pressure to inflate and make things sound good. When this dynamic is added to the very common element of wanting to please others by reporting what will make someone we respect happy, the pressure can become more than subtle.

Another reason for my approach is the principle that if the qualitative measures are healthy, the quantification and numerical growth will take care of itself. I understand the parables of Jesus about the Kingdom to suggest this.

The third element in my thinking about this is that I see the emphasis of the New Testament to be qualitative in nature. This is the case whether we are evaluating whether a disciple is healthy, a church is healthy, or a movement is healthy (more on this assertion below). This brings me back to the main discussion.

Criteria for Assessing Insider Movements

As someone who is known as an advocate for so-called insider movements,⁹ I am often asked questions such as "How do you know these movements are real? How many believers are there? How many churches?" These questions have been indirectly influenced by the history I reviewed earlier: numbers, church growth, assessment.

The survey above has hinted that there has been a parallel emphasis as well. I have already mentioned that I

appreciate Waterman's definition of church as essentially qualitative in nature. I am going to argue for a similar approach in assessing movements.

In fact, even in some of the examples already mentioned, which use numerical measurements for movements, qualitative assessments are included as well. So, for example, in addition to clear quantitative measurements, Garrison also describes qualitative characteristics of movements:

- Effective, reproducing bridges that lead to massive gospel witness
- Effective, reproducing gospel presentations
- Reproducing discipleship that turns new believers into CPM partners
- Rapidly reproducing churches
- Reproducing leadership development¹⁰

Another example of this qualitative trend comes from a more recent articulation of disciple making movements. Note these qualitative descriptors:

Disciple Making movements are supernatural acts of God. They are outside of human control. They are not institutional, tradition-bound, managed, or owned. Disciple Making movements are often characterized by young believers still in a Disciple Making and maturing process themselves, passionately in love with Jesus, who go from their newly established community of believers to make new disciples in a new region from which a new community of believers quickly emerges. This rapid multi-generational self-replication of churches in a given region or population segment defines church planting movements.¹¹

Each of these qualitative lists certainly includes numerical growth assumptions, and thus logic might lead to definitions and thresholds. As we have seen in Garrison, this is what does take place. And for such research to be published, this may be necessary.

But in my case, and the case of how our organization approaches things, we are not primarily assessing the health of

movements in order to report, or prove, or support an argument.¹² Instead we are primarily seeking to help a movement emerge, grow, and then catalyze more movements. So, we look primarily at the dynamics, the qualitative elements that seem to make this happen.

Where do we find those elements?

Looking for Qualitative Criteria

Actually, while I would love to be able to say that our organization bases its assessments of movements completely and only on criteria we have discovered in the New Testament, the reality is a little more messy and less direct. In fact, we had already started using certain criteria and teaching others to use them



before we began to apply what I think is a more fully biblical set of lenses.

We began by modifying a set of criteria based on the "Three Self" criteria developed by both Henry Venn (Anglican) and Rufus Anderson (Presbyterian). Later a fourth "self" was suggested, I believe by Paul Hiebert, and so we in mission began to speak of "Four Self" Movements, which included:

- Self-Propagating
- Self-Governing
- Self-Supporting
- Self-Theologizing

We developed definitions and a tool for assessing progress in movements among the unreached. But over time, a

number of things made my colleagues and me increasingly uneasy about these standards.

First, all of the first three selves were developed in response to the felt need for handing over already functioning mission churches to local leadership. They were primarily used, in other words, to address developments in a relatively established mission situation, instead of a context looking to foster newer movements.

Second, as such, there is a sense in which these selves were in fact not part of the original vision or purpose of the churches they were now trying to encourage to be independent. The selves were never really criteria to measure a movement, but were employed to assist in a hand over.

Third, the emphasis on self created more of a focus on just that, the dimension of self, and not on those dynamics of propagating, governing, supporting and theologizing. The ultimate aim of that thinking was to get younger mission churches to do these things *themselves*.

Fourth, and closely related to this, we became convinced that the implanting and repeating of the word "self" in our day was a not-so-subtle message that smelled of western individualism. This seemed directly counter to the picture of koinonia and partnership so deeply rooted in the New Testament movement(s), which served to connect churches in ways that were interdependent.

Fifth, that fourth self, "self-theologizing," created huge misunderstandings, not only among those outside of our organization, but also among those within our agency. This was so much the case that often we were unable to overcome the resulting static, doubt, and confusion merely by the constant redefining of what we meant by "self" and "theologizing." We concluded a different term was needed.

Finally, the tool we had developed was complicated, wordy, hard to use and

difficult to pass on. One result of this difficulty was a clear resistance to its use, even among our leaders.

Four Signs of Healthy Movements

In addition to these considerations, we as trainers were being affected by our own delivery of our programs. That may sound strange, but allow me to explain. One component of our second level of training is a series of five studies focused on Luke and Acts. In a short period of time we go through those books five times, each time asking questions related to healthy movements. The aim is to help those we train to identify the dynamics that help movements grow and spread and mature and remain healthy.

As a result of these repeated readings, those of us in leadership found that these texts kept speaking to us. The dynamics which we had discovered inductively in Luke and Acts were actually quite different from the four selves we had been telling our trainees to use in applying the training. There was a growing sense of disconnect.

For all of these reasons, we felt a change was needed and decided to try to rethink, simplify, and re-express. We asked several people from different cultures within our organization to suggest changes.

As a result, we came to speak of “Four Signs of Healthy Movements.” Figure 1 is a version of the tool in a simplified format. The statements in italics are the “signs,” and the bullet points are the descriptions. We discuss whether a team is seeing these dynamics, and if so, how developed are they. The sub-sections end with a space for open-ended comments, and there is a space in our form to indicate whether the particular sign is or is not yet indicating strength and health.

There are several important changes here from the previous tool we had developed. But, in the interest of this article, my main point in sharing this tool is to explain the sort of qualitative assessment approach we have elected to take.

Are there *quantitative-numerical* details that could surface in the answers to these qualitative descriptors? Certainly: how many disciples? How many churches? How many leaders? How much funding and resources? And so on. But in our view, if the dynamics are healthy, if we receive positive answers to the descriptors above, then there is a movement, regardless of the size or numerical measurements.

Doubtless, there are many other qualitative dynamics of movements we could have included and perhaps still should. As we continue to grow and develop, perhaps we will do so.

Scriptural Quantitative Criteria?

I will conclude this section with a brief look at some other New Testament passages that might speak to this topic. As I continue to probe the New Testament and seek to understand what makes for a healthy movement, I have come to appreciate Paul more and more in this regard. I offer some citations as examples, but not as a comprehensive list for every topic.

Spreading of the Gospel

1 Thessalonians (the word went forth from you), Colossians (how to treat outsiders, asks for prayer for his own witness), Philippians (sees the Philippians as partners in the gospel as Paul

Figure 1. The “Four Signs of Healthy Movements” Assessment Tool

Sign 1: Multiplication: A movement with the vision to reach others. Matt. 28:16ff.

- Believers share their faith with others regularly (resulting in more disciples and churches).
- At least some believers have begun to reach out to other UPGs.

Comments: _____

Sign 2: Leadership: A movement empowered to lead. 1 Tim. 3:1, 2 Tim. 2:2

- Leaders have been equipped to organize the movement.
- Leaders from within the people group train other leaders.

Comments: _____

Sign 3: Raising Resources: A movement equipped to thrive. 1 Tim. 5:8, Acts 18:1ff.

- Leaders teach believers to be good stewards and generous givers.
- When needed, believers in the movement have started small-scale businesses in order to create local resources and sustain the movement.

Comments: _____

Sign 4: Scriptural Engagement: A movement able to use the Scriptures well, and teach others to do so. 2 Tim. 2:2, 15; John 5:39

- Leaders are able to understand Scripture and apply it to their culture.
- Leaders are able teach these truths to others.

Comments: _____

Summary Assessment:

Overall Status:
 Movement (Yes, or Not Yet):

Overall Comments: _____

shares it in Rome and rejoices in many expressions of others' preaching as well), Romans (Paul's own vision and passion for the gospel in unreached areas)

Leaders

This is seen again in his own practice, his lists of coworkers (Colossians 4 for example) and in commands such as those in 2 Timothy 2:2 and in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Relationships, Unity, and Resolving Conflict

Relationships are probably mentioned in every letter. The most famous examples include the "one another" commands and 1 Corinthians 13. Paul goes to great lengths, as well, to call believers to a high level of unity in diversity: he expects the Romans and Corinthians for example, to be able to truly accept without judgment brothers and sisters who differed in conscience over some significant issues.

Gospel and Sound Teaching

This includes explaining the gospel positively and correcting false expressions, too. Paul lists this as one of his motives for the writing of almost every one of his letters.¹³

Living in Christ, and Christ Living in Us

This is such a frequently mentioned theme in Paul that I cannot even begin to list all the references. There is a deep and profound spiritual mystery behind and beneath the cognitive truths we sometimes associate with truth.

Generosity

For example, see 1 Corinthians 16, 2 Corinthians 8–9, Philippians (one of the first "missionary prayer letters" thanking partners for their giving). There is also the example of him using his own resources.

Partnership/Koinonia

Philippians comes to mind again, especially in the use of koinonia: "in the gospel," "in the Spirit," in "the suffering of Christ," and in "the ministry of giving and receiving." We could add Paul's use of "co-," "with," and "fellow" in compound words describing his

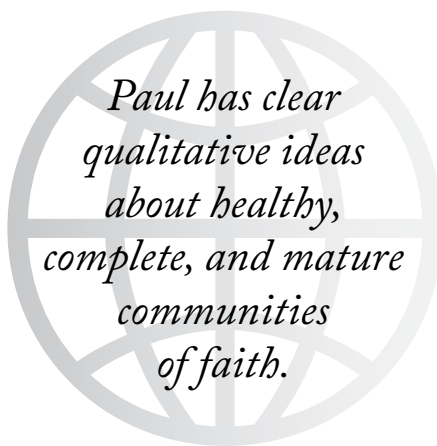
coworkers. And this perhaps suggests as well that for Paul "leadership development" and "partnership" were overlapping elements of his service.

The list could be much longer, but suffice it to say that Paul seems to have clear qualitative ideas about the criteria of healthy, complete, and mature communities of faith.

Before I conclude, two questions might come to mind:

1. Does this mean we are right to apply these to a movement?
2. And if we do, is it inappropriate to suggest more quantitative criteria?

My reply to the first question runs the risk of opening a new controversy—perhaps!



I am convinced that the distinction between "churches" and "movement" is a distinction not really made within the New Testament. This conviction raises implications for the closely related topic of "modality and sodality,"¹⁴ an assumption about two distinct ecclesial structures that is prevalent in modern mission thinking. I do not have space to argue this thesis, but I only wish to observe from Acts and Paul's epistles that what we may distinguish as movement, church, churches, mission structures, sodality, and modality, etc., are actually all just emphases within *one actual reality*: the gospel spreading and bearing fruit in more and more lives, churches, and places (see Colossians 1). And, based on this thesis, I do

conclude that the criteria in the epistles are quite rightly applicable to movements.

What about other criteria, such as numbers, etc.? I think it would be a mistake to argue that the absence of such criteria in the New Testament means we are wrong to develop and use such today. I see why others have done so. I see the value of its place in research. I see the need, when preparing a book about movements, to be able to describe how one decided *what* to look at and *what not* to look at.¹⁵

My point, essentially, is not that it is wrong or inappropriate to use numbers in order to *measure*, but simply that they are not essential *criteria*.

In Conclusion

Initially I introduced the historical context for what today can easily be characterized as a movement-movement, and then focused this article on assessing the "movement" aspect of insider movements. After weighing numerical/quantitative criteria, I have suggested that qualitative measurements are sufficient and, in my opinion, to be preferred as criteria for evaluating movements.

I suggested that quantitative measurements tend to foster inflated reporting and the need to please (and to avoid personal shame as well). I have noted that while the Bible provides examples of counting and numerical measurement, it seems to be more by way of citing examples and giving testimony, as opposed to measuring and assessing. And I have shared both biblical and organizational examples of qualitative measurement.

I will close by returning to Waterman, whose queries prompted this article:

I began wondering: How large is a "small" insider movement? How large would an *average-sized* Insider movement be? How many people, fellowships (*ekklesia*), or *somethings* would be needed for something to properly qualify as an Insider Movement? I couldn't find an answer anywhere in the [*Understanding Insider Movements*] book. (Waterman 2016)

I understand and sympathize with the question. We who advocate for insider movements have not clearly articulated the criteria we use in determining how or when a given movement is in a fact a *movement*. And that criteria must go beyond measuring how large or small it may be.

In my organization, we have studied the qualitative aspects of movement(s) in the New Testament and narrowed our assessment down to four major criteria: more multiplication, more leaders, more generosity and more engagement in scripture. We measure these as best we can via observation, questions, and discussion with those closest to the ground level. I realize that “more” may imply numbers. But the difference is that we have not set some sort of a minimum threshold that enables us to say, “more than this, there’s a movement, but fewer than this, no movement.”

The church (in its local, catholic, and movement expressions) is the Body of Christ. It is a living thing. This suggests an analogy to my mind. We cannot say that prior to this or that “line” a person is or is not human. The fact that human DNA is present means this is a person, a human being, who will grow, develop, and become mature.

In the same way, I am suggesting that if the right DNA is in place, then we have a movement. The primary job description, then, for pioneer church planters is to disciple and coach from day one with the aim of fostering this DNA. Healthy, growing movements flow from the right DNA. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ L. D. Waterman, “When Does a Movement Count as a Movement,” 11 March 2016; <http://btdnetwork.org/when-does-a-movement-count-as-a-movement/>. Accessed August 15, 2016

² As a general reference to the nature of more modern mission movements, one can sample David L. Watson and Paul D. Watson, *Courageous Disciple-Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery* (Thomas Nelson, 2016); David Garrison, *A Wind in*

the House of Islam (WIGTake Resources, LLC, 2014).

³ McGavran acknowledged reliance on the earlier research of J. Waskom Pickett, whose book *Christian Mass Movements in India* (Abingdon Press, New York, 1933) greatly influenced him. See McGavran (1982) and Wilson (2000).

⁴ The Lausanne Occasional Paper 1: Pasadena Consultation: The Homogeneous Unit Principle. <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-1#1>. Accessed January 29, 2018.

⁵ Waterman blog, 11 March 2016.

⁶ Waterman blog, 11 March 2016.

⁷ Waterman blog, 11 March 2016.

⁸ In articles exchanged with Timothy Tennent I explored the nature of church and insider movements more fully. I can’t repeat that discussion here and refer the reader to Tennent 2006 and Higgins 2006.

⁹ I say so-called because I would prefer different terminology. But the term “insider” is firmly entrenched in the literature, including in my own articles, so in spite of my wish that we could find a better term, I see the need to use it. For descriptions and definitions of insider movements, see Higgins 2004 and 2006, as well as a much longer overview from many different disciplines in Talman and Travis 2015.

¹⁰ Cited in *Mission Frontiers*, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/church-planting-movements-what-have-we-learned>. Accessed August 2016.

¹¹ See <http://www.idisciple.com>. Accessed August 2016.

¹² These statements do not imply that those who use more quantitative approaches are trying to prove what they measure exists or that certain approaches are better.

¹³ I find it significant, relative to Paul’s approach to sound teaching and correction, that there seem to be no examples in which he sent a letter that *either* corrected doctrine, *or* focused on relationships and character (ethical concerns). Instead, he wrote letters which did *both*. Every letter we have addresses both doctrinal and relational/ethical concerns. The typical pattern (except in the so-called pastoral letters and the Corinthian letters), is that Paul first addresses what we might call doctrinal themes, and then turns the corner to apply these to relationships, ethics, and so called practical matters. The letters of Ephesians and Colossians exhibit this at about exactly the mid-point (see Ephesians 4:1 and Colossians 3:1ff.). Romans and Galatians each, in very different ways and in different tones, spend longer on the doctrinal issues. But both turn to life issues before closing (see Romans 12:1ff.).

¹⁴ See Ralph Winter’s article “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 2009.

¹⁵ Though even in these cases, more qualitative criteria can be developed and applied in ways that would suit the needs for many of the examples I just cited.

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