

LEAVING—WHY MINISTERS LEAVE THE MINISTRY

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Introduction

In Jan., 2001, I was invited to participate in an Advisory group on Why Protestant Ministers Leave the Ministry. Sponsored by the Lilly Foundation and the Catholic University of Washington, D.C., Dr. Dean Hoge of Life Cycle Institute, Catholic University gathered the following persons for the exploration into this phenomenon: Dr. Jackson Carroll, Duke University, and author of *Too Many Pastors?* Dr. Adair Lummis Hartford Seminary, Dr. Ed White, Washington, D.C., Dr Jack Marcum Presbyterian Church USA, Louisville, Dr John Dever, retired professor of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Robert Kohler, United Methodist Church, and me, Brooks Faulkner, LifeWay Christian Resources.

These were the questions foremost in our minds:

Since the premise and evidence proves ministers are leaving---

- What has changed in the ministry?
- Is the profession less attractive than before?
- Is the job harder?
- Have the seminarians changed in their motivations and expectations?
- Have the laity changed?

The following research methods were used:

- Phone survey of those who have left.
- Interviews with random groups for discovery of experiences and feelings.
- Focus groups for interaction.
- Interviews of those in conflict situations, not clergy.
- Gather existing research.

Numerous studies were considered as background historical data:

1. Edgar Mills(1969) discovered a sense of hopelessness in ministry. One third had experienced a serious marital crisis. This was Presbyterian.
2. A second was Jud, Mills, and Burch, of the United Church of Christ. Two factors which surfaced were salary and living conditions.
3. Wiborg and Collier (1997), a Methodist study, saw many ministers dissatisfied with the appointment system.
4. Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang (1998) surveyed almost 5000 men and women and “boundary maintenance” was a major factor(Keeping private life distinct from ministerial duties).
5. Lummis (1996) and Memming (1996), also Methodist studies discovered in a ten year study that the ministers who stayed in ministry were only 58.5% in United Methodist ministries.

6. Research Services of the Presbyterian Church in 1998 researched 3000 ministers ordained between 1990 and 1997. Their results showed 70% of them are still in ministry. Some of the reasons for leaving?

35% stated: "I had a sense of completion of my call."

29% stated: "I felt burned out."

23% stated: "Unrealistic expectations from laity."

27% stated: "I was working too many hours."

7. The most recent study was done in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod by Klass and Klass (1999). Response of ministers for leaving:

First 30% were happy.

30 % were ambivalent.

20% are well on their way to burnout.

20% are in advanced stages of burnout.

Reasons given: too many pressures, little or no support from denomination, no recognition for effective ministry, too much criticism from laity, low pay, and changes in the ministry. Pastors' wives reported loneliness, isolation, irritation at moves, unrealistic expectations and too much stress on their husbands.

A LOOK AT SOUTHERN BAPTISTS' REASONS FOR LEAVING MINISTRY

Some good news from the Southern Baptist Convention is that we've gone from 127 forced terminations in 1984 to only 99 in 2000. These were the findings of three studies, 1984, 1997 and 2000. The other side of that picture is we have gone from one minister per 317 members in 1950 to one for every 112 members in 2000 (Jackson Carroll, *Too Many Pastors?*) It is apparent, or at least possible, that as the ratio increases, the terminations decrease. The more ministers per members, the less chance of termination or so it appears.

Additionally, according to projections, Southern Baptists now have 2.6 ministers per church on the average. A far cry from frontier days of circuit riding ministers who ministered to three and four churches.

In the Highlights of the Findings of the Faulkner/Smith findings of early 1984, 1993, 1997, and 2000, various factors lead to forced termination. The most frequently stated reasons for termination revolved around a lack of unity in the congregation.

- 66% stated: A small but powerful minority of members.
- 41% stated: Factions in the congregation.
- 16% stated: Differed with congregation over leadership style of pastor.
- 12% stated: Been at church too long.
- 12% stated: Too authoritarian or dictatorial.
- 10% stated: Couldn't get along with members.
- 10% stated: Not spending enough time on the job.

In the book, *Forced Termination*, which we released in 1986 as a result of the first research project on forced termination, we had a section of "Subterranean pastors" or lay persons who felt the need to guide the church spiritually, often to the exclusion of the leadership of the pastor. These persons had a tendency to:

- Speak the language of Zion.
- Be involved in the administration work of the church but not necessarily the official elected positions.
- Develop allies among the elected positions of leadership in the church.
- Although not predictably faithful in services on Sunday and Wednesday night, they were particularly faithful during decision making meetings.
- Adept at extortion and bluff. Although these were carefully disguised.
- Verbally concerned about the spiritual welfare and future of the church apparently because it gives them leverage with the naïve and vulnerable members.

In 2001, the Barna Research Institute discovered the average pastor works 55 hours per week, resulting in the fact that the number one cause of marital problems for pastors is a lack of family time. Additionally, the churchgoers expect their pastor to juggle an average of 16 major tasks, and I assume this means daily although the findings are not clear. Seventy (70%) of pastors said their level of financial compensation contributed to marital conflict; 22% feel forced to supplement their income; and 60% of pastors' wives hold full time jobs or are involved in careers. 70% do not have a close friend, and 50% (Focus on the Family survey) do not meet regularly with a prayer partner.

These findings and others contribute to the seven crises suggested in Don Smith's work, "*Clergy in the Crossfire*".

1. CRISIS OF INTEGRITY...feeling of falseness.
2. CRISIS OF POWER...none...too many chiefs; too few Indians.
3. CRISIS OF CAPACITY...can't use the skills you have. 'I went to seminary and was taught theology but I rarely use it.
4. CRISIS OF FAILURE...creativity has been stymied when you get shot down too many times.
5. CRISIS OF DESTINATION...'What is ahead for me?'
6. CRISIS OF ROLE.... Where do I fit?
7. CRISIS OF MEANING....What is this about? Too little mountain time, garden time, boat time, and the result is the sit com malady...we're tired of him.

Maybe it's time we adopted the Five Rules of Whitewater Rafting, as found on the Snake River in Idaho, (and metaphorically appropriate for pastors);

1. Go with the flow, and don't get addled.
2. Lean into the rocks. Rocks are your friends.
3. Feet first, toes out, when you go into the turbulence.
4. If worse comes to worse, let go of everything and eventually you'll come up.
5. You're here because of the danger, so enjoy it.

If there's one thing pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention need help in, it's in "How to make the best out of a bad situation." Moses Malone said it best, "The only reason I led the NBA in offensive rebounding was because I got a lot of help from my teammates—they did a lot of missing."

Ministers' wives and families are influencing factors on why ministers leave the ministry because of expectations of being "mini-pastors." Loneliness and isolation are frequently mentioned as factors for serious dissatisfaction by wives. Lack of support and close friends are also suggested. P.K.'s (Pastor's Kid) seem to grow into a hiding motif, away from the flow of the crowd, in an effort to find some privacy and personal lives spin. Without that needed personal time, the "glass house" factor weighs heavily on the early teen years. "Charisma News Service" carried the thoughts of a 45 year old pastor's daughter, "During my teen-age years, most of my thoughts were of suicide. I saw myself through my parents' eyes. I had no self esteem and had much insecurity. Depression was my constant friend." A 39 year old preacher's son said, "Every time I tried to talk to my dad all I heard was a sermon, even at home he was still preaching."

Fuller Seminary studies showed:

- 90% of pastors work more than 46 hours a week.
- 80% of pastors believe pastoral ministry has affected their families negatively.
- 33% say being in the ministry is an outright hazard to their family.
- 90% feel they were inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands.
- 70% say they have a lower self-image now than when they started.

THERE ARE AT LEAST SEVEN THINGS THAT MAKE THE PASTORATE TOUGHER TODAY THAN IT HAS EVER BEEN BEFORE.

Consequently, these may be influencing factors on why ministers are leaving the ministry, although not exclusive factors.

First, a little tongue in cheek axioms (not to be taken too seriously).

A little advice to the pastors of the twenty-first century:

- "Never hop when you're walking on eggs." Diplomacy will get you out of a lot of hot water.
- "It's not how good you play when you play good; it's how good you play when you play bad, and we can play bad as good as anybody in the Southeastern Conference." (a quote by Hugh Durham, former basketball coach of Georgia Bulldogs)
- How do you respond when you have egg on your face? "Never wrestle with a pig; you both get muddy and the pig likes it."
- Choose your battles carefully. Will the battle contribute to the total winning of the war or lead to defeat prematurely? "A bulldog can whip a skunk but it's not worth it."
- Mark Twain could have been a consultant in the SBC. Consider the aftereffects, and fallout. The big picture is more important than a two point basket.
- "If you're gonna walk on water, better pick a shallow creek." Don't get inebriated with the acclamation of others. It is short lived.
- "Never fight with an ugly church member. They have nothing to lose." To clarify, those who 'act' ugly. The fight is the thing. The fight is their playground. Some deliberately try to goad you into a fight because it is their recreation. Yes, even in churches, you can find some who 'act' ugly.
- "Don't worry if you have egg on your face, it's only the first meal of the day." Learn to say, "I was wrong; you were right." Build from mistakes, but don't let them bury you. A pastor should have the heart of a lion, a hide of a rhinoceros, memory of an elephant, speed of a

gazelle, stature and dignity of an eagle, determination of a stag beetle, and avoid, at all costs, of looking like a chicken or a turkey.

- “Friends come and go..enemies accumulate.” An insult digs deeper into the memory banks than does a compliment. A compliment is a board that can build a wall of self-respect. An insult is a wall that separates potentially kindred spirits. It takes effort and energy to build friendship. It takes little more than neglect and carelessness to make enemies.
- “The more you run over a dead cat, the flatter it gets.” Okay, work that one out for yourself. Don’t obsess over the things that you can’t fix. You can’t fix people. Only God can.
- “All things being equal..weight challenged people use more soap.” In other words, deal with the obvious. Do what you can and don’t sweat the details.

NOW, HERE ARE THE SEVEN:

1. Information Explosion

Every Tom, Dick and Harry has a website. Everyone surfs the net. Everyone has the best translations of the Bible as well as the best illustrations. Fresh preaching is an oxymoron, a contradiction. There is nothing new under the sun except the history you missed.

2. The Inmates Are Packing A Wallop

Larry Brown (coach of 76ers) makes 1/30th the salary of Allen Iverson. Is he less important? I don’t think so. Shaq and Kobe make hundreds of times what Phil Jackson makes. Is it any wonder they have trouble getting their act together. It takes a genius in coaching to overcome the wallops of a church member who has more employees than the church has members. Many church members have been there longer than the pastor. “Hard pressed but not crushed.” II Cor 4.

3. Imaging/Scripting

What has happened to previous pastors scripts how many will respond and react to you, right? Twelve years ago, the pastor ran off with the secretary. What does that tell you about the treatment of the present pastor by members who have become suspicious of all pastors? What about the charges of pedophilia in the Catholic clergy and its affect on all Catholic clergy? Homosexual behavior of one affects dozens of other ministers who display any unusual behavior. Scripting and imaging make the pastorate tougher than ever before.

4. Timing Is Everything

Leadership must be earned. That is a given. But it also must be given. Timing is the ingredient that creates a place for given leadership. You can not take it. It is a gift. You can do your best but it still is not enough. You must know when to hold, when to fold, and when to “play the cards that have been dealt”, (if you will forgive this whimsical gambling metaphor.)

Will Perdue was a seven foot center who played for Vanderbilt in his college days, and later with the Chicago Bulls and Michael Jordon. On the night when Jordon made 63 against the Boston Celtics, and Will made 2, he was being interviewed primarily because the journalist could not get to Michael because of the sheer volume of the other journalists. When asked what it felt like to play with Michael, his response was, “I’ll never forget this night because Michael and I joined to make 65 points to win the game.”

In other words, Timing is perspective. Timing is knowing when to assume responsibility, or blame, depending on the situation. Timing is knowing enough not to retaliate when a neurotic church member falsely accuses you in the presence of other church members; ‘Hard pressed but not a head case.’”

Carl Rogers said, three things make a neurotic:

I am right and you are wrong.

I am strong and you are weak.

I am good and you are bad.

Toby Druin, of Texas Baptist, wrote, ‘Being a pastor is the hardest job a man could have. He is expected to be on intimate terms with the Almighty, an outstanding orator, conversant in most subjects; widely read, including the Bible; gifted in counseling; a model husband and father; possessor of an unfailing memory with total recall of names of everyone, even those members who come only on Easter; a visionary leader with a plan to lead the church into the 21st century, as long as he doesn’t change the worship style; an administrator who can keep tabs on the amount being spent for toilet paper as well as on church literature; a man who never fails to visit you in the hospital but also has the time to prepare for at least three sermons during the week and who is always at the office when you need him.’”

5. Cloudy Expectations

Paul Powell said, ‘Jonah was swallowed by a whale but most pastors get nibbled to death by minnows.’”

A pastor in Tennessee was in a forced three month sabbatical. In the explanation letter he wrote before beginning this sabbatical, he wrote, ‘Words fail to properly express my sorrow for the words and actions, on my part, that have caused disappointment, discouragement, embarrassment, or grief or pain.. Failing those to whom God has given me spiritual responsibility is the last thing I would ever want to do and therefore the source of sorrow too deep for words. If you are one who has felt so wounded, I especially hope and pray that you will allow God to forgive me through you. Please know that I am desperately sorry for any wounds for which I am responsible and that I am committed to seeking God’s purifying Spirit for my spirit.’”

First, this pastor should be commended for his contrite spirit and sensitive compassion. But, at the same time, how can you appease the wrath of a group of people who want to see you gone?

It is not a mystery that the spouse of this pastor is already emotionally packed and ready to go. It is impossible to meet the cloudy expectations of church members who are looking at churches in close proximity to theirs which are growing, and saying in their hearts, ‘We could do better.’ ‘Why aren’t we doing better?’ ‘Well, it must be the pastor!’”

Cloudy expectations are certainly a prelude to feelings of loneliness and isolation. At one point, he said, ‘I don’t know what they want from me!’ And the sad thing is, they don’t know what they want from him either.

6. Inability to Deal with the 3 A's...Anger, Authority, and Accountability

There is a James Bond mentality in many Southern Baptist churches. James Bond has a license to kill. He will not suffer the consequences of an inadvertent bullet. That feeling is prevalent in many Baptist churches. "Fire at will," is the cry. His role is to turn the other cheek. Is it any wonder that the impetuous Simon Peter asked, "How long do we have to take this? How many times do we have to forgive before we retaliate? Three? More?" He had had enough.

"I am accusing you of being a liar!" one deacon accused the pastor in the presence of thirty -two other deacons. What was he to do? Of course, there is no easy answer.

At the back of the auditorium after the worship service, an apparently disgruntled lady said, "How dare you quote Karl Marx in your sermon in front of my children? Don't you know he is not a Christian?"

Yogi Berra left many of his team mates confused after a statement like, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." But no more so than my own exasperation trying to work an intelligent response to this disgruntled lady. Have you ever been angry and amused at the same time? You are caught with the strange feeling of wanting to retaliate in anger, and laugh at the absurdity. However, anger, if not dealt with, becomes intolerance, cynicism, sarcasm, scolding (often disguised as prophecy) short tempered, and criticism.

Authority, and who is in charge, is still the number one reason for terminations in the Southern Baptist Convention. After the second research project on "Forced Termination" I did an interview with Ray Waddle, the religious news editor for The Tennessean. I suggested that many pastors could help themselves by keeping deacons and other responsible persons more informed about their daily schedules. We were discussing the subject of authority. I received a number of letters after the article, among them a seven page letter from one man, who had apparently been a pastor, but was now making a living as a barber.

In it, he wrote, "You obviously don't know deacons in a Southern Baptist church. They can't be trusted. Most of them have horns. I do not apologize for calling them the servants of the devil. I have been terminated three times by these wimps. They have no right to question what the servant of God does with his time. I am accountable to God and not these jerks who think they run the church."

Actually, he is wrong, isn't he? We are not only accountable to God, but we are accountable to our family, and, by all means, those who pay our salary, our church. Accountability is the third A. Deacons, personnel committees, pastor support committees, and/or administrative committees are but a few of the groups to whom a pastor is accountable. Not a few of these pastors resent being accountable to anyone but God. But to survive you must have an operable support system, either formal or informal. And this support system must call out accountability in some form.

The solution for the inability to deal with the 3A's is "Gehenna". Before Gehenna became synonymous with our word for "hell", it was literally the "valley of whining" or the "valley of lamentation", and was the dumping ground for the city of Jerusalem. We need a place to 'dump'. We need a Gehenna. We need a place where we can unload and not fear the consequences of disapproval

or condemnation. If we could have a mentor, and some do, this would be a time to be in his or her presence. Of course, most do not have a mentor.

By the way, you can't teach "mentorism" in spite of the fact that many have tried, and then wrote about it. You either mentor or you don't mentor. You can't create that kind of trust. It is a gift. Mentoring is more an accident than it is a developed technique. The harder people try to mentor others, the more others feel coerced. It is grace that gives people the gift and skill of mentoring others.

Perry Sandiford recognized this need in Mississippi, and formed the very constructive and redemptive Covenant Ministerial Fellowship. It is a way of giving support to ministers. If you love your brother in Christ then challenge his stubbornness, vindictiveness, greed, jealousy, lust and gluttony, for he must certainly confront these himself. But also, help him in Depression, Loneliness, feelings of isolation, helplessness, and even hopelessness.

Buckner Fanning has stayed at Trinity Church in San Antonio for more than 40 years (since 1959) and when asked about his long tenure, replied, "I don't have a rule for success, but I can give you a rule for failure, try to please everybody." Bottom line, Be accountable to your church, but don't waste your energy trying to please everybody.

7. The Humanity Problem

Sometimes we feel like Superman; sometimes the Lone Ranger; sometimes The Terminator; sometimes Captain Kangaroo; and sometime Underdog. Sometimes we feel like all at the same time, and thus confused.

We are sometimes mystic; sometimes mutt.

The padre, he thinks I'm a sinner.

John Bull, he thinks I'm a saint.

Both of them bound to be liars.

I'm neither of them, I ain't.

I'm a man, and a man is a mixture.

Right down from the day of his birth.

Where a part of him come from heaven,

And a part of him comes from earth.

We have considered seven reasons why ministry is harder in the 21st century than it has ever been before. Although other generations might argue these premises, it is an indisputable fact that there are many ministers who are leaving the ministry. Why?

HERE ARE SOME REASONS GIVEN

1. Scandalous reasons

Yes there are a few. This factor, however, was ninth in the last two studies. We have not had the visibility of the Catholic Church and pedophilia, but we have had our share of adulterous affairs of pastors and deacons' wives, of staff members, of pastors' wives and deacons. As disgraceful, scandalous, and alarming as it is, it is not the strongest reason for leaving the ministry. An affinity to pornography may be a predilection to more serious behavior disruptions, and has caused many churches to dismiss some staff members.

Misappropriation of funds, deceit, and downright cruelty, mixed with inappropriate and abusive anger has caused the termination of others, but scandalous behavior is not number one. It could be monitored and communicated much more responsibly and openly, however, than it has been. We have been reluctant to dispense information. Legally, information about criminal behavior of adolescent sexual abuse must be open to the public. As Southern Baptists, we are much more inclined to feel, "Let another church deal with this problem. Let's wash our hands of the whole mess."

2. Hopelessness

When Barney Self, our licensed therapist who handles our LeaderCare Helpline 1-888-789-1911, was asked why, his immediate response was "hopelessness". One pastor of a mega church, who has done well in growing a huge congregation said, "A pastor doesn't have friends, just church members." The pastor is always, he added, "on the outside looking in." That is a lonely and isolated position. It does, indeed, contribute to hopelessness. It dries up the drive, energy, verve, creativity, and social nourishment.

3. Monotony

Some cynical marriage counselors suggest that one reason why partners break their vows is because of the monotony of monogamy. If the analogy is applicable in that the minister is married to the church, then there may be a case for the sameness in ministry. If not seen properly, ministry can be monotonous. The sameness can become boring. These persons lose the excitement of ministry in being exactly who God wants them to be and doing what God wants them to do.

4. Some ministers can not stomach the fight

"This is not what God called me to do, i.e. fight the battles in church warfare." They are warriors of the faith, not referees for the faithful. They waiver in dealing with neurotics who forever criticize, denigrate, and dehumanize the character of the minister himself by questioning his motives, incentives, and even mission in ministry. In Ron Susek's book, FIRESTORM, he suggests objectivity and moderation are viewed by the neurotic church members as weakness. Soft answers that turn away wrath are viewed with suspicion and interpreted as impotence. (See page 51)

5. The P.O.W. Syndrome

Some ministers leave the ministry because they view themselves as prisoners of war. They feel "struck". All the training and preparation of college and seminary are viewed as wasted energy. Like prisoners of war who are helpless to retaliate in the war of words and accusations, they are handcuffed to the walls of discontent of histrionic personalities who feel deprived of the minister's attention, affection, and approval. They feel abused by the cruelty of irresponsibly disturbed and difficult church members who torture them by devaluing the work of the ministry. The spiritual fervor of the minister can not measure up to the entertainment value they see on television where "miracles" are performed and ecstasy is reached in every service by the hounds of heavenly manna, or more accurately the Elmer Gantry's of 2001. Is it any wonder that when the handcuffs are loosened the minister runs for the exits?

6. Hidden Agendas

Everyone has them. Few have the courage to talk about them. What are they? To name a few: Pride, "I deserve more." Bitterness, "They owe me." Ambition, "I could be the next president of LifeWay." Fear, Insecurity, Lust, Bias, or Selfishness, "I should have a bigger church, staff, etc." (p.102 in Susek's book, FIRESTORM)

7. Prophetic License Has a Five Year Waiting Period

It is easy to mistake shepherding liberty for prophetic license. It is a serious misnomer to think that "if you're going to get anything done it must be done within the first year of the pastorate. Wrong. You must build your markers. You must establish your credibility. Prophetic license takes time. "Telling it like it is" didn't work for Howard Cose Ile either. "I must say it" has become a kind of signature for those who think they have a prophetic license. Unbridled candor is inexcusable, and intolerable to most churches. Some ministers leave the ministry because they discover they do not have a prophetic license that entitles them to ignore diplomacy, tact, and considerateness. In most cases it takes about five years. Many pastors stay no longer than three. If you get discouraged within the first five years, you have a choice, go to another church, or stay diligent until you win your markers, and the church gives you permission to be prophetic as well as pastoral. We all know the difference, and how they complement each other, or how they might contradict each other.

WE HAVE A BIG JOB. WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT MINISTERS WHO ARE CONSIDERING LEAVING THE MINISTRY?

1. First, we can encourage those who are obviously not called to find a suitable vocation. One research project shows one in five seminary students do not feel called. "Get out". "Find a suitable occupation to your skills" It is not ministry. Help them deal with their guilt, their home church's guilt, the guilt of those who ordained and/or licensed them, the parents' guilt, and go win the lost as a lawyer, construction worker, computer analyst, or whatever.
2. Encourage them to stand firm who are called. "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love." (I Cor. 16:13) II Cor 4 encourages those in faith, "Do not lose hope" "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." (vs. 17)
3. By all means, Bridle your tongue. (James 1:26). You can be mean and use Godly language in doing it. This is the time to put a bridle on. "You can not appear to be religious" (Threskos). This word is used only once in the New Testament. It is called a Hapax Legomena. Some indications of this "appearance of being religious" are "Jesus revealed this to me." "God has spoken to me..." (implying that He is not speaking to you) Or, "I will pray that God will lead you to another church." You may forget what is said, but you do not forget how people make you feel. The tongue can be a way of making people feel that they are cursed... or blessed, depending on your attitude. Retaliation and Revenge are not luxuries the pastor can afford. Bridle your tongue. James 1:2, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials." The last part of that verse is, "Knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience."

4. No matter what happens, Read, Learn, and Grow. Read *Compassion Fatigue* by Charles Figley, *The Soul in Distress* by Richard Roukema, *Revive Us Again* by Walter C. Kaiser, *Building Blocks for Longer Life and Ministry* by Tommy Yessick, *Safe Places* by Arterburn, Minirth, and Meier, *Dimensions of Forgiveness* by Everett Worthington, *The Pastoral Care of Depression* by Binford Gilbert, and *Getting on Top of Your Work* by Brooks Faulkner to name a few.

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