

In 2008, as we were launching the members' journal, we were pleased to publish an in-depth multi-part series about the Bible, believers and the issue of self defense, with a look at the concerns that may cause individual Christians, as well as congregations, to seek out defense strategies and provisions. This lengthy topic was covered over the course of June 2008 to October 2008; we break it up into five chapters here, each chapter representing the columns that we published monthly originally in the membership journal.

by Dr. Richard Seim

Chapter 1

One after another we hear reports of shootings at this school or at this university or at this shopping mall or at this church. Do you remember when churches were considered places of “sanctuary?” They were kept unlocked so you could go in at any time and pray, meditate or just find a quiet place. Even today when talking to someone about a church burglary they often respond in surprise, “they would do that to a church?”

In an article dated March 5, 2008, WorldNetDaily listed the following church shootings:

- (December 9, 2007): After killing two people at a Christian training center in Arvada, Colo., 24-year-old Matthew Murray went to Colorado Springs intending more murder and mayhem. Murray shot and killed two girls in the New Life Church’s parking lot, then headed inside the building where thousands of worshippers were concluding a service.
- Aug. 12, 2007: A lone gunman, Eiken Elam Saimon, opened fire in a Missouri Micronesian church, killing a pastor and two other churchgoers.
- May 20, 2007: A standoff between police and a suspect in the shootings of three people in a Moscow, Idaho, Presbyterian church ended with three dead, including one police officer.
- Although not at a church building, the Oct. 2, 2006, attack in Lancaster County, Pa., by a gunman who killed five girls and then himself at an Amish school targeted a religious site.
- May 21, 2006: Louisiana. Four were killed by a man at Jesus Christ Church.
- Feb. 26, 2006: Michigan. Two people were killed at Zion Hope Missionary Baptist Church by a man who reportedly went to the church looking for his girlfriend.
- April 9, 2005: A 27-year-old airman died after being shot at a church in College Park, Ga., where he had once worked as a security guard.
- March 12, 2005: A man walked into the services of the Living Church of God in Milwaukee and open fired immediately, killing seven people.
- Oct. 5, 2003: A woman opened fire in Turner Monumental AME church in Kirkwood, east of Atlanta, killing the pastor and two others.

- Sept. 16, 1999: Seven young people were killed when a man opened fire during a prayer service for teens at the Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.

So what's a church to do? Many churches today are concerned with their purpose and message being culturally relevant. What about the security of the people who attend? As more and more churches are attacked, will churches become more "culturally relevant" in their approach to security?

One student who attended a handgun class I taught told me the reason she and her husband were there. Early on a Saturday morning (around 2 a.m.) someone began trying to kick their apartment door down to apparently gain entry. She and her husband called 911 and then went to the door and began yelling back. Her husband turned to her and said, "If this guy gets in, what are we going to defend ourselves with, a spoon?" So, my question to a church is this: "If one of those crazies comes to your church, what are you going to defend yourself with, an offering plate?"

For the Church and the church-goer, it becomes foundational to see what the Bible says on the subject.

Central to understanding what approach a church should take is the basic nature of man as revealed in Scripture. There are those in Christendom who espouse the basic goodness of all mankind. This view sees every person as basically good and, given the chance, people will choose what is right and good. But the Scripture teaches that man, although created good, made some bad choices and hence, continues to make bad choices and those bad choices come from his very core, "... there is none righteous, not even one," and "for all have sinned..." (Romans 3:10b, 23a NASB).

For instance, I did all within my power to teach my children to always tell the truth. I never taught or encouraged them to lie. I was even careful to reward them for doing what was right. And yet, from time to time they lied to me without being taught to lie. I am sure you can think of more examples like that, just like I can.

What a church (or an individual Bible-believer) decides to do about security when dealing with a crazed person has much to do with their concept of how mankind is wired. If one goes into this with the idea that man can be talked out of the evil intent of his heart toward those he is getting ready to kill, then the decision is probably to do nothing and hope for the best.

On the other hand if you believe that someone intent on doing evil to you is probably going to do it no matter what you say or do, then your decision is to put some carefully considered plan for security in place. Because of the culture in which we live, to be culturally relevant in this instance, is to have some kind of security in place.

The shooter at the Colorado Springs church was not going to be talked out of his intentions. He killed two people the night before. Church leadership showed wonderful foresight and increased their security. In this case, the increased security was volunteers. For most churches

security will most likely depend on volunteers.

In order to gain a balanced view of what the Bible says, we will look at both the Old and New Testaments. Some might suggest that the Old Testament is no longer relevant. Jesus Christ made it clear that it is, indeed, relevant, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18 NASB). So next, we will explore what the Bible teaches on this issue.

Chapter 2

In order to gain a balanced view of what the Bible says about self defense, let’s look at both the Old and New Testaments. Some might suggest that the Old Testament is no longer relevant. Jesus Christ made it clear that it is, indeed, relevant, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18 NASB). The phrase “the Law or the Prophets” refers to the entire Old Testament.

In the Bible there is a marked difference between murder and using lethal force for self defense or for the defense of others. Both the Old and New Testaments teach that murder is wrong. Most people are familiar with the Ten Commandments. Commandment number six, in the version I use, the New American Standard Bible (NASB), says, “You shall not murder.” (Exodus 20:13). This version makes this verse easier to immediately understand than does the old and yet very good King James Version (KJV) which says, “Thou shalt not kill.”

The proper meaning of this one word is critical to our discussion. For if the word really means “do not ever kill under any circumstances,” then it impacts the direction of our conclusions.

The reason the NASB translators opted for “murder” instead of “kill” is because that is what the word means. Originally, the Old Testament was written in the Hebrew language. According to the book Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory, “The Hebrew language has at least eight different words for killing.”¹ One of the most respected Biblical Hebrew lexicons (similar to a dictionary) is called Brown, Driver, and Briggs (BDB). Their basic meaning for the word in the sixth commandment is, “murder, slay.”

Commenting on this verse in the year 1706 is Matthew Henry, “It does not forbid killing in lawful war, or in our own necessary defense, nor the magistrate’s putting offenders to death, for those things tend to the preserving of life...”² More modern commentators agree, “...What the sixth commandment forbids is the unjust taking of a legally innocent life. It applies to ‘murder in cold blood’... God’s people have always recognized that there are some situations where taking a life is not only permitted but actually warranted.”³

Although this article is not specifically dealing with the death penalty and the government, it does come into play if we want to understand the sixth commandment. In the New Testament, Romans 13 says, “For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want

to have no fear of authority? ... But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.” (Romans 13:3a, 4 NASB). “The sword” is an instrument of death, not a spanking paddle! So, even in the New Testament one of the responsibilities of the government, “the sword” (capital punishment), is clearly maintained.

To summarize, the sixth commandment prohibits the unjust taking of a legally innocent life (murder) but does not prohibit self defense. As Matthew Henry said above, the purpose of the command is “the preserving of life.”

Shortly after the sixth commandment was written a specific law concerning the death of a home invader was given, making the self-defense issue much clearer. “If the thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account. But if the sun has risen on him, there will be bloodguiltiness on his account. He shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.” (Exodus 22:2-3 NASB).

If a home invader broke in at night and the homeowner took the invader’s life, he was not guilty of murder—it was a justifiable homicide. Self defense and defense of family is clearly in view here. We understand that this is at night because the next verse says, “But if the sun has risen...”

Is verse three teaching that we cannot defend ourselves against a violent home invader in daylight? No, it does not suggest that! Both verses identify the motive as burglary. Nowhere else in the Bible is robbery considered a capital offense. At night, no one knows the motive. Verse three assumes the daytime burglar is non-violent. Notice the verse also assumes he is caught because the penalty is “He shall surely make restitution” or “he shall be sold for his theft.”

Exodus 22:2-3 is a very important passage where self defense is concerned. The intent of the passage is not to just reveal history or tell a great Bible story. It is clearly instructive in nature and therefore written so it can be easily understood by the common person reading to determine the commands and instructions of God. It would be impossible for the sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13) to teach that all killing is wrong, when some fifty verses later we are given a very clear example of justifiable homicide.

The passage is also very important to the question of church security. When I walk into a church, does that end my responsibility to defend myself and my family? (What about defending others? We will deal with “others” later.)

How about the person that says, “Well, if you have enough faith in God, He will protect you?” Does that statement not apply at home as well as outside the home? According to the Bible, God has given at least some responsibility to us (enough to justify taking a life if necessary). Exodus 22:2 at the very least infers my responsibility to protect and defend myself and my family. Although it does not immediately deal with outside the home, until and unless the Bible clearly teaches otherwise, we must be prepared to defend ourselves against violent invaders no matter where we are.

1 Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, Exodus: Saved for God's Glory, Includes Bibliographical References (P. [1165]-1202) and Indexes. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005), 616.

2 Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1991), Ex 20:12.

3 Ryken page 616.

Chapter 3

We saw in the second article that the sixth commandment, Exodus 20:13, teaches murder is wrong. Within the context of the whole Bible, the idea that the sixth commandment teaches all killing is wrong was shown to be without merit. Then we found, some fifty verses later, that if someone broke into a home at night and the tenant took the life of the interloper, he was justified to defend his home and family (Exodus 22:2-3).

Let's look at one more passage that points to the defense of home and family and introduces us to the concept of defending others. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall of the city for protection. Those who opposed this, decided to mount terrorist attacks against them, "Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it" (Nehemiah 4:7-8 NASB). Nehemiah had no army. His were simple people who came to rebuild the wall and inhabit Jerusalem. In response to this threat of terrorist attacks, he had his workers defend the unfinished wall in a very interesting way. "Our enemies said, 'They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work.' ... then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears and bows" (4:11-13 NASB). Knowing that defending family would highly motivate the defenders, Nehemiah set the guard according to family groups. He knew that the defense would be much more important if one was defending his family.

"When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work" (4:15 NASB). Notice that when the terrorists realized Nehemiah's people were armed, they chose to leave them alone. This is a very strong passage about trusting in God while placing your sword (handgun) in its scabbard (holster) and carrying your spear (AR15). At least in part, God used the due diligence of the people to thwart the terrorist attack even while they trusted in Him.

In Nehemiah's case above, the possible attack was not an all-out war but a small terrorist activity. That is the way it so often was in the Old Testament. Even Abraham delivered his cousin Lot and others who were kidnapped and taken hostage. He had trained and armed men ready to go after those terrorists at any given moment. When they overtook and overpowered those terrorists, Abraham gave praise to the God he trusted after he wielded sword and spear

(Genesis 14). Even as Abraham and Nehemiah trusted God, trained for defense, and then picked up their arms, the Psalmist penned, “Blessed be the Lord, my rock, Who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle,” (Psalm 144:1 NASB).

By the way, a quick side note here: When the Philistines wanted to subjugate Israel, they disarmed them, “Now no blacksmith could be found in all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, ‘Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears’ ” (1 Samuel 13:19-22).

Those passages point out that self defense and defense of home and family, even to the point of lethal force, is acceptable when justified. Obviously, part of the point of the Nehemiah passage is that we are to defend each other as well. In my opinion, Nehemiah 4 makes a very strong case for diligent church security against terrorists or even one terrorist invading a church gathering.

Biblically, what is our responsibility to each other? Ecclesiastes 4:9a & 12a says, “Two are better than one ...if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him” (NASB). Did you notice verse 12a? “And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him.” At least three concepts are pointed out here.

First, the Bible teaches that it is not good to be overpowered. Rather than being overpowered, it is better to resist the one attempting to overpower you. If you cannot resist so as to overcome, then secondly, it teaches that if you can have a partner wherever it is that you might be overpowered, you should take him with you, that way you have backup. I may in fact come to the defense of another. A third concept is, even though one is to trust the Lord, the Lord here points out that the one trusting Him can be overcome and should defend himself, with help. Again, in the church gathering setting, the application is that we are to aid each other in case someone attempts to overpower us. At the very least, it instructs us to watch each other’s backs.

A very interesting passage dealing with the need to help another in trouble is found in Deuteronomy, “If in the field the man finds the girl who is engaged, and the man forces her and lies with her, then only the man who lies with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the girl; there is no sin in the girl worthy of death, for just as a man rises against his neighbor and murders him, so is this case. When he found her in the field, the engaged girl cried out, but there was no one to save her” (Deuteronomy 22:23-27 NASB). This passages teaches that if a man rapes a woman, he should pay the death penalty. Note that the Old Testament legal system considers rape on the same level as murder (“only the man who lies with her shall die”).

Notice verse twenty-seven, “the engaged girl cried out, but there was no one to save her.” Implied here, unmistakably, is the fact that if a woman is “crying out” because she fears she is about to be raped or is in the process of such an assault, those who hear her are supposed to help her. So, according to the Bible, we do have a right or responsibility to assist others.

So the Scripture tells us that defense of self, family and others is wise and that backup is always a good idea, “two are better than one.” It also teaches us that, if someone is yelling for help because a violent crime, such as rape, is eminent, those who hear the cry should help.

In our next article we will move into the New Testament to determine the meaning of passages such as, “But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matthew 5:39 NASB).

Chapter 4

“The Sunday shooting at a Knoxville, Tenn., Unitarian church ... left two people dead and five injured” (Foxnews.com, Monday, July 28, 2008). “Recently, there were two Christian musicians who were leaving a recording studio and were murdered for two dollars and their car” (U.S. Concealed Carry, Armed American Report July 25, 2008, No Safe Places, Don Myers). The need to establish what the Bible says about church security and self defense grows more and more urgent.

In our first three articles, we established that the Bible prohibits the unjust taking of a legally innocent life (murder) but does not prohibit the use of lethal force for self defense (Exodus 20:13 and 22:2-3). Scripture teaches us that we can defend others and that we should be ready to defend ourselves and others in a corporate setting (Nehemiah 4:11-15, Ecclesiastes 4:9, 12). That we should come to the aid of one who is crying out for help in the midst of a violent attack was inferred in Deuteronomy 22:23-27. We also noted that “God’s deliverance” of Nehemiah included arming themselves and standing guard thus ending the threat. So, part of “trust God and He will take care of you,” is picking up sword (handgun) and spear (AR) and being on our guard.

“But that is the Old Testament,” some will say. “What about the New Testament? Did not Jesus say to ‘turn the other cheek?’ ” Well, yes He did! But what did Jesus mean when He said that? Notice the entire passage of Matthew 5:38-39, “You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.”

There is only one way the meaning of this passage can clearly be established. What was Jesus quoting when He said, “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth?” There are several Old Testament passages that contain these words (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). These Old Testament verses were written to keep a court of law from overstepping its bounds by not placing too great a penalty on the crime. Thus, “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” refers to civil law and courts and judges passing just sentences upon the guilty.

From the rest of the context of Matthew 5:38-42, Jesus is indicating that the “eye for an eye” principle is not to be used for personal retaliation. As William Hendriksen says in his commentary on Matthew’s Gospel, “The Pharisees, however, appealed to this law to justify personal retribution and revenge. They quoted this commandment in order to defeat its very purpose.” Jesus is not talking about a self-defense issue here. He is talking about not exercising personal retaliation for an offense.

Warren Wiersbe summarizes well, “It also kept magistrates from issuing exorbitant sentences that did not fit the offenses. But Jesus asks His people to suffer rather than cause others to

suffer (1 Cor. 6:1–8). Keep in mind that this has to do with private offenses; the courts must still deal with people who break the law and must be punished accordingly.” So, Jesus is not forbidding self defense, He is telling us to leave vengeance in the hands of God and our courts of law.

Even the Apostle Paul interjects in his writings to the Romans that we are not to retaliate but leave vengeance in the hands of the Lord. “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

The Apostle Paul also makes it clear that it is not our personal responsibility but the government’s duty to punish the evildoer. “For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil... But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil” (Romans 12:13a & 14b). Even as Jesus did in Matthew 5:38-39, Paul makes it clear that one of the duties of government is to mete out “vengeance.” Vengeance was not the duty of the individual in the Old Testament nor was it in the New Testament. Again, these verses are not speaking about self defense but retaliation.

Finally, what did Jesus mean when He said, “But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matthew 5:39)? Craig Blomberg explains, “Turn the other cheek” for us, “Resist in v. 39 was often used in a legal context (cf. Isa 50:8) and in light of v. 40 [“If anyone wants to sue you”] is probably to be taken that way here... We must nevertheless definitely resist evil in certain contexts (cf. Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:9). Striking a person on the right cheek suggests a backhanded slap from a typically right-handed aggressor and was a characteristic Jewish form of insult. Jesus tells us not to trade such insults even if it means receiving more. In no sense does v. 39 require Christians to subject themselves or others to physical danger or abuse.”

Self defense against a violent offender when your life is threatened is NOT what Jesus was dealing with in Matthew 5:38 & 39. He instructed us to allow the courts to do their jobs when it comes to civil offenses. Even in our society, an insult is not considered a life-threatening situation requiring lethal force. Jesus’ law of love is to “turn the other cheek” to an insult, not to a violent offender intent on inflicting upon you grave bodily harm or death.

Next month, in our final installment, we will take a look at Jesus’ rebuke to the Apostle Peter in Matthew 26:51-54 and see how that applies to us today.

Chapter 5

“And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?’ ” (Matthew 26:51-54).

So, doesn't Jesus clearly tell us here NOT to use our "swords?" The last sentence (verse 54) is the key. In order for Jesus to fulfill His assignment, he had to be arrested, be hung on the cross, and die (as well as be buried and rise the third day). "How then will the Scripture be fulfilled?" According to the Bible, Jesus was on a very clear mission. The Apostle Paul certainly understood that as he summarized that purpose, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Jesus told Peter to put his sword away because the purpose for which Jesus came to earth was in the process of being accomplished that very night. The context is clear and has nothing to do with self defense. As J. Vernon McGee said while commenting on these verses, "In other words, 'I don't need your little sword, Peter. I haven't come to put up a battle against the religious rulers. I have come to die for the sins of the world.' " 1

Notice that he told Peter to "put your sword back into its place." He did not tell him to throw it away and never pick it up again. In effect He said, "Peter, in order for my Father's will to be accomplished, these fellows must arrest me. Now, put your side arm away—you may legitimately need it another time—but let my Father's will be done now, namely my death, burial, and resurrection." Although Peter did not completely understand, he complied with Jesus' wishes.

Finally, Jesus was very clear to tell his followers the importance of being prepared for self defense. Immediately before he told Peter to put his sword away, Jesus "... said to them, 'But now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one' " (Luke 22:36). Allow me to take the liberty here to do a 2008 cultural paraphrase of this passage, "But now, whoever has a wallet is to take it along, likewise also a backpack, and whoever has no handgun is to sell his coat and buy one."

Rome had quite a highway system in that day. Most people traveled by foot and in small to medium sized groups because of the highway bandits. Jesus even used a hypothetical story of someone wounded by highway bandits in his parable of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus' parables were commonplace stories that the people would immediately be able to identify with. That Jesus used the common problem with bandits along the highways reveals the fact that everyone was familiar with the reality of that kind of situation. The reason Jesus told his disciples even to sell their coat in order to carry a Roman short sword was for the purpose of self defense.

"But now, when Jesus sends out his apostles into all the world after his resurrection They will need even protection and at times so badly that a sword will be worth more to them than their outer robe, the latter being a great necessity, especially as a covering at night when they were camping out in the open. So Jesus tells the apostles to buy a Roman short sword, if necessary, even at the price of their outer robe. It is better to freeze at night than to be killed" (R. C. H. Lenski). 2

As we established in these five articles, the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, clearly teaches that it is our responsibility to protect ourselves and others:

- We are not to murder, but may use lethal force to protect ourselves, our family, and others.
- In a corporate setting, we may defend each other as necessary.
- If possible, we may defend one who is being attacked by a violent person.
- We are to leave vengeance in the hands of God and the court system.
- Jesus instructed His followers about the importance of always carrying a side arm.

We began this series by quoting this report: “(December 9, 2007): After killing two people at a Christian training center in Arvada, Colo., 24-year-old Matthew Murray went to Colorado Springs intending more murder and mayhem. Murray shot and killed two girls in the New Life Church’s parking lot, then headed inside the building where thousands of worshippers were concluding a service” (March 5, 2008, WorldnetDaily.com).

What we have learned from the Bible in this five-part series is that we are, in fact, responsible to defend ourselves and others. It may not be a question of defending oneself against someone intent on taking their life. It may be, like it was for Jeanne Assam on December 9, 2007 at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, whether many others are maimed or killed...

“Investigators have announced this afternoon that Assam’s bullets struck gunman Matthew Murray, identified late Monday as the man responsible for both Sunday shootings in Colorado, several times but that ultimately he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, the El Paso County Coroner’s Office announced today... Regardless, officials have credited Assam for calmly and coolly stopping the massacre before more innocent bystanders were killed” (ABCnews.com, December 11, 2007, emphasis mine).

In this day of terrorists and shooters shooting up churches, it is incumbent upon churches to put reasonable security in place. The Bible teaches that we may defend ourselves and others from those who would inflict upon us grave bodily harm or death. Without a doubt how this responsibility is enacted will be up to each individual as well as to each local congregation.

1 J. Vernon McGee, Thru the Bible Commentary, Based on the Thru the Bible Radio Program., electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1981), 4:142.

2 R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 1067-8.

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