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Christian Theology and Apologetics

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A Response to “The Oneness of God” by David K. Bernard – Part 13: The Trinity in John

I have already written about the eternity of the Son in [John 1:1](https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2024/12/20/a-response-to-the-oneness-of-god-by-david-k-bernard-part-11-john-11/) (<https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2024/12/20/a-response-to-the-oneness-of-god-by-david-k-bernard-part-11-john-11/>) and how he is *the monogenēs Son of God* (<https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2024/12/27/a-response-to-the-oneness-of-god-by-david-k-bernard-part-12-the-eternal-son-of-god/>). But now I would like to respond to more arguments from Bernard where he claims that John’s Gospel does not support the Trinity.

I think the best thing that a Oneness Pentecostal could do is to carefully read through the entire Gospel of John in one sitting and pay attention to John’s language about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

John’s Gospel teaches that the Son existed before his incarnation (John 1:1, 2, 3, 10, 14, 15, 30; 3:13, 17, 31; 6:37, 38, 39, 46, 51, 62; 8:23, 38, 42, 58; 12:41, 46; 13:3; 16:27, 28; 17:5, 18, 24; 1 John 1:1, 2; 4:9).

And John distinguishes between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (John 1:1, 2, 3, 14, 18, 32; 3:16, 17, 34, 35; 4:34; 5:17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 36, 37, 45; 6:27, 29, 32, 33, 37, 38, 39, 44, 45, 46, 57, 65; 7:16, 18, 28, 29, 33; 8:16, 17, 18, 28, 29, 38, 42, 50, 54; 10:17, 18, 29, 36; 11:41, 42; 12:28, 44, 49, 50; 13:1, 3, 32; 14:1, 6, 10, 12, 16, 23, 24, 26, 28, 31; 15:1, 9, 10, 15, 24, 26; 16:3, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 27, 28, 32; 17:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26; 20:17, 21, 31; 1 John 1:1, 2, 3; 2:1; 4:9, 10, 14, 15; 5:9, 10; 2 John 1:3).

From the beginning of John’s Gospel, we see the Word as the one through whom God made all things (John 1:3). John identifies this Word as the same one who was rejected by the world and walked among us (John 1:10). John speaks of the world being made “through him.” The preposition “through” or *dia* in Greek is being used in the genitive case which is used to describe personal agency.

But Bernard believes that this Word is not the Son and that we should not speak of Jesus as God the Son:

“However, the Bible does not use the phrase ‘God the Son’ even one time. It is not a correct term because the Son of God refers to the humanity of Jesus Christ” (98).

“The Bible does not speak of an eternally existing ‘God the Son,’ for the Son refers only to the Incarnation” (303).

But in fact, the Bible does speak about “God the Son” in John 1:18. I would translate John 1:18 this way:

“No one has ever seen God; the only Son who is God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

The Greek phrase that John uses is *monogenēs theos* which I have translated as “the only Son who is God.” The word *monogenēs* describes an only child or son and *theos* is God which is describing who this *monogenēs* one is. One way to translate *monogenēs theos* is “God the only Son” or “God the only begotten” if Bernard wants to translate *monogenēs* as begotten.

But Bernard believes with the King James Version that the original reading of John 1:18 was *monogenēs huios* which can be translated “only begotten son” rather than *monogenēs theos* “only begotten [who is] God” since there is a textual variant here. Bernard writes:

“These last two versions are based on variant readings in some Greek texts. We do not believe these variant readings are correct” (100).

But there is a good reason why the scholars who work on modern translations of the Bible believe that “God” was the original reading of John 1:18 rather than “Son.” The NET Bible notes explain why:

“The textual problem (*monogenēs theos*, ‘the only God’) versus (*monogenēs huios*, ‘the only son’) is a notoriously difficult one. Only one letter would have differentiated the readings in the MSS, since both words would have been contracted as *nomina sacra*. Externally, there are several variants, but they can be grouped essentially by whether they read *theos* or *huios*. . . . The external evidence thus strongly supports *monogenēs theos*. Internally, although *huios* fits the immediate context more readily, *theos* is much more difficult. As well, *theos* also explains the origin of the other reading (*huios*), because it is difficult to see why a scribe who found *huios* in the text he was copying would alter it to *theos*. Scribes would naturally change the wording to *huios* however, since *monogenēs huios* is a uniquely Johannine christological title (cf. John 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). But *theos* as the older and more difficult reading is preferred.”

The reading *theos* or “God” is found in the four earliest copies of the Gospel of John that we have which are Papyrus 66, Papyrus 75, Codex Vaticanus, and Codex Sinaiticus. And the King James Bible translators did not have access to any of these manuscripts when they were doing their translation.

Then Bernard states that Jesus received his deity at his conception:

“Jesus received His nature of deity as well as the nature of humanity at conception” (63).

Speaking of Jesus receiving his deity at his conception is not how John describes Jesus. John tells us that Jesus is the Word who is eternally God and then he became man in the incarnation (John 1:1, 14). The eternal divine Word became flesh. He is a divine person who took upon himself our humanity. In the incarnation, the nature of humanity was added to his person. Because Jesus is eternally God, he never needed to receive the nature of deity, but only the nature of humanity at his conception.

Bernard interprets John 3:16-17 very differently than the way evangelicals do:

“The doctrine of the Son does not teach that God the Father so loved the world He sent another person, ‘God the Son,’ to die and reconcile the world to the Father. On the contrary, it teaches that God the Father so loved the world that He robed Himself in flesh and gave of Himself as the Son of God to reconcile the world to Himself” (122).

But this is a denial of the gospel message. The gospel is the message that God sent his Son into the world, not that the Father sent himself or became the Son:

1 John 4:10, 14: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. . . . And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world."

So how would Bernard interpret John 3:17 which tells us that God sent his Son into the world?

"The word *sent* does not imply preexistence of the Son or preexistence of the man. John 1:6 states that John the Baptist was a man sent from God, and we know he did not preexist his conception. Instead, the word *sent* indicates that God appointed the Son for a special purpose. God formed a plan, put flesh on that plan, and then put that plan in operation" (184).

Bernard's argument is that if Jesus is pre-existent because he was sent then that would make John the Baptist pre-existent as well because he was sent by God in John 1:6. But there is a world of difference between John 1:6 and how Jesus is described in the Bible. John the Baptist denied that he was pre-existent and affirmed the pre-existence of Jesus:

John 1:30: "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'"

John the Baptist tells us that Jesus is greater than him because Jesus was before him. But John the Baptist was older than Jesus was. If you remember from Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist was conceived in the womb of Elizabeth his mother six months before Jesus was conceived in the womb of his mother Mary. Yet John the Baptist says that Jesus was before me. That can only be true if Jesus existed before his conception while John did not. The Word existed before he became a man. The one who existed with the Father in eternity past was born into our world 2000 years ago.

John's Gospel affirms the pre-existence of Jesus over and over again:

John 3:13: "No one has ascended into heaven except him who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

John 3:31: "He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all."

John 6:38: "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."

John 6:62: "Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

John 8:23: "He said to them, 'You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.'"

John 8:42: "Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.'"

John 13:3: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God."

John 16:27-28: "For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father."

John 17:5: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."

The words of Jesus in John 5:36-37 do not make much sense if Jesus is the Father:

John 5:36-37: "But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen."

Jesus tells these unbelievers that they have never heard the voice of the Father or seen him. But if Jesus is the same person as the Father, how could he say this since they were both hearing and seeing him?

But Bernard believes that Jesus is the Father because they both accomplish the same works:

"Jesus will raise up all believers at the last day (John 6:40), yet God the Father quickens (gives life to) the dead and will raise us up (Romans 4:17; I Corinthians 6:14)" (69).

These verses do not teach modalism, but the doctrine of inseparable operations (<https://carm.org/christianity/what-is-the-doctrine-of-inseparable-operations/>) in the Trinity. The works of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are undivided and cannot be separated from each other. Because there is only one God, whenever one person of the Trinity acts, the other two always act in unison as well. So even though it was the Son alone who died on the cross, the Father and the Holy Spirit were inseparably united to him in this act (Heb 9:14). And the resurrection of Jesus is the action of the triune God. Jesus raised himself from the dead (John 2:19), the Father raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9), and the Spirit raised him from the dead (Rom 8:11).

We see the Trinity most clearly in the work of our redemption. Before the foundation of the world the Father gave to his Son a people to save:

John 6:37-39: "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day."

Another passage where Jesus distinguishes himself from his Father is in John 8:

John 8:16-18: "Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your Law it is written that the testimony of two men is true. I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me."

If God is unitarian in person and Jesus is the same person as the Father, then his statement that "it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me" would not be true. Two witnesses were required for a testimony to be upheld which implies that he and his Father are two persons who bear witness.

How does Bernard explain this passage?

"These two witnesses were the Father (the divine Spirit) and the man Jesus. In other words, both God the Father and the man Jesus could testify that the Father was manifested in flesh" (190).

Bernard must resort to a Nestorian understanding of Jesus in order to explain this passage. Jesus, whom Bernard believes is the Father incarnate, must be viewed as bipersonal or as two persons: the non-incarnate God the Father in heaven who is the divine Spirit and the incarnate Father manifested in the flesh on earth.

Bernard goes on to argue:

“Indeed, if someone holds that the two witnesses were distinct persons in a trinity, he would need to explain why Jesus did not say there were three witnesses. After all, the law required two witnesses but asked for three if possible” (190).

Jesus does not mention the Holy Spirit here because he has not yet spoken about the Spirit’s witness to his ministry. John 14-16 are about the Spirit’s witness to himself while John 8 is solely focused on his relationship to the Father. And Jesus did give us multiple witnesses to himself earlier in John 5. The Father bears witness to him (John 5:31-32, 37), John the Baptist bore witness to him (John 5:33), his own miracles bear witness (John 5:36), and the Scriptures bear witness (John 5:39).

Then Bernard turns this passage into an argument for modalism:

“Jesus Himself taught that He was the Father revealed. Once, when Jesus was talking about the Father, the Pharisees asked, ‘Where is thy Father? Jesus answered, Ye neither know me, nor my Father: if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also’ (John 8:19). Jesus went on to say, ‘I said therefore unto you, if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins’ (John 8:24)” (67).

To see and know the Son is to see and know the Father because the Son is the perfect image of the Father’s nature. I have already written about this truth in my article on [John 14:7-9](https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2024/11/01/a-response-to-the-oneness-of-god-by-david-k-bernard-part-4-john-147-9/) (<https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2024/11/01/a-response-to-the-oneness-of-god-by-david-k-bernard-part-4-john-147-9/>). And the translation “I am he” in John 8:24 is not referring to the Father, but to the divine name Yahweh. “I am he” is a bad translation of *ego eimi* in Greek since the word “he” is not in the Greek text. The word *ego* means “I” and *eimi* means “I am.” Jesus literally says, “Unless you believe that I am you will die in your sins.” This is the exact same phrase that Jesus uses later in John 8:58 when he says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” The translators correctly translate it as “I am” in verse 58 but insert “he” in verse 24 for clarification even though it is not in the text. But by inserting “he” in verse 24 they are obscuring the reference to the divine name of Exodus 3:14-15:

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you.”’ God also said to Moses, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”

Then Bernard continues his argument:

“‘Who art thou?’ Jesus answered, ‘Even the same that I said unto you from the beginning’ (John 8:25). However, ‘they understood not that he spake to them of the Father’ (John 8:27). In other words, Jesus tried to tell them that He was the revelation of the Father” (67).

In order to make this argument, Bernard skips over verse 26 and the immediate context of this passage. In John 8:26 he says, “I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.” Jesus speaks about the one who sent him and who

has spoken to him. So in verse 27 when it says, "They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father" John is referring back to the previous verse where it describes the Father as "he who sent me." The Father is "he who sent me" not Jesus himself. Then in the next two verses Jesus says:

John 8:28-29: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him."

Jesus goes on to distinguish himself from the Father:

John 8:38: "I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

John 8:40: "But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did."

John 8:42: "Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.'"

If Jesus is the Father, how could he say that he came not of his own accord or own initiative?

The passages in the Bible that describe communication between the Father and the Son are a problem for Bernard. One such passage is in John 12 where Jesus speaks:

John 12:28: "'Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'"

Bernard responds to this verse by saying:

"The prayer and voice did not constitute a conversation between two persons in the Godhead; it was communication between Jesus as a man and the eternal God" (194).

Once again, Bernard must adopt a Nestorian understanding of Jesus by divining him into two persons: the man Jesus on earth and the eternal God who is also Jesus rather than viewing this as communication between the Father and the Son since this would be impossible for Bernard because he believes that the Father and the Son are titles or roles for Jesus. But titles and roles do not communicate with each other.

Bernard also believes that the Holy Spirit is Jesus himself according to John 14:16:

"It is clear from the context that the Holy Ghost is simply Jesus in another form or manifestation. In other words, 'another Comforter' means Jesus in the Spirit as opposed to Jesus in the flesh" (195).

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "another helper" in this verse which would be a strange thing to say if Jesus was himself the Spirit. Jesus cannot be the same person as the Spirit because he sends the Spirit from the Father. The language of sending and proceeding implies personal agency and distinction:

John 15:26: "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me."

The Spirit bears witness to Christ just as the Father bears witness to Christ. Persons bear witness about other persons, not roles or titles.

Bernard believes that John 14:18 gives him additional support for his beliefs:

“Jesus made this even clearer when He said in verse 18, ‘I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you’” (196).

Jesus is not saying that he is the Holy Spirit because he will come to them, but his meaning is explained by the very next verse:

John 14:19: “Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.”

Jesus is speaking about his appearances to his disciples after his resurrection from the dead. They would see the risen Jesus with their own eyes. Because he is alive and risen from the dead, they too would be raised from the dead one day as well.

One of the clearest examples of the doctrine of the pre-existence of Jesus is found in John 16:

John 16:27-28: “For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”

Bernard responds by saying:

“In John 16:28 Jesus said, ‘I came forth from the Father.’ This, too, refers to His preexistence as God. The divine nature of Jesus was God the Father, so the dual-natured Christ could say, ‘I came forth from the Father’” (183).

He says that, “The divine nature of Jesus was God the Father.” So God the Father is the divine nature of Jesus. This is another example of how Bernard must speak of Jesus in Nestorian terms by reducing the Father to Jesus’ divine nature. For Bernard, God the Father is not a distinct person from the Son or Jesus, but the divine nature of Jesus. But if that is so, then what does Jesus mean when he says that he is “going to the Father”? Was Jesus going to the divine nature? You do not go to a nature because a nature by itself does not do anything. It is a person that you go to. He is going to the person of the Father who will receive him and bestow upon him the name that is above every name (Phil 2:6-9).

John 17 is a chapter that Oneness Pentecostals have a difficult time explaining. This is especially true when it comes to verse 5:

John 17:5: “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”

How does Bernard explain this verse?

“Again, Jesus spoke of the glory He had as God in the beginning and the glory the Son had in the plan and mind of God. It could not mean that Jesus preexisted with glory as the Son. Jesus was praying, so He was speaking as a man. We know the humanity did not preexist the Incarnation, so Jesus was talking about the glory the Son had in the plan of God from the beginning” (183-184).

So for Bernard the “I” of John 17:5 who was “with” God before the world existed was the plan in the mind of God for the Son. This is idealized pre-existence rather than actual pre-existence.

But this interpretation does not fit with the grammar that John uses. The preposition translated as “with” in Greek is *para* and it is being used in the dative case. When *para* is used with a dative, it describes one person being in the presence of another person. Here are some examples:

John 1:39: He said to them, ‘Come and you will see.’ So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed *with him* that day, for it was about the tenth hour.”

John 4:40: “So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay *with them*, and he stayed there two days.”

John 8:38: “I speak of what I have seen *with my Father*, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

John 14:17: “Even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells *with you* and will be in you.”

John 14:23: “Jesus answered him, ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home *with him*.’”

John 14:25: “These things I have spoken to you while I am still *with you*.”

Revelation 2:13: “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed *among you*, where Satan dwells.”

If this prayer of Jesus is not describing true pre-existence with the Father before the world existed, then could we also pray this prayer since God had a plan for us as well before the foundation of the world? Ephesians 1 speaks about God choosing us before the foundation of the world. Yet we are never described as being with God before creation.

The words of the Christian apologist James White about John 17:5 in [his debate with Roger Perkins](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvxF7Js9mw8&t) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvxF7Js9mw8&t>) on the Trinity are worth sharing:

“Jesus is talking about a period of time where the Father and Son existed together and it’s before the world was. If this is just a human nature speaking, then can human natures request to be glorified with the glory which they had in the presence of the Father before they ever came into existence? This is a truly divine glory. No plan or idealized concept can speak let alone speak like this of clearly divine and personal pre-existence. Jesus prays for full restoration to the pre-incarnate glory and fellowship enjoyed before the incarnation. This is not just ideal pre-existence, but actual and conscious existence at the Father’s side. In Christ’s high priestly prayer we clearly have the distinction between the Father and the Son, and yet the Son knows of a time when in the presence of the Father before the world existed, he shared the very glory of the Father. He was going back into that presence of the Father that was his in eternity past. All of the prayers of the Lord Jesus demonstrate the distinct personhood of the Son and yet they likewise prove the deity of the Son as well. These are not examples of the human side praying to the divine side, but of a divine yet incarnate person, the Son, communicating with a divine yet non-incarnate person, the Father in heaven.”

Jesus goes on to speak about how his Father loved him before the foundation of the world:

John 17:24: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

Bernard understands the words of Jesus this way:

“He loved that future Son just as He loved all of us from the beginning of time” (186).

While it is true that Ephesians 1 speaks about God’s love for us before the foundation of the world, it must be stressed that we are never spoken of as being with God before the foundation of the world as Jesus did in John 17:5 as well as the many other passages in John which speak of his pre-existence. If Bernard’s interpretation is correct, then could we say what Jesus said in John 17:5 or the other passages that speak about his pre-existence?

John’s Gospel emphasizes the love of God. That is why he has been called the Apostle of God’s love. As Bernard writes:

“Love is the essence of God; it is His very nature” (32).

But if love is the essence of God, then was God loving in eternity past when no one else existed besides himself? Did God first begin to love when he created the objects of his love?

Trinitarians have an answer to this question. God is eternally loving because he has eternally loved himself. But love must have an object. Love is relational in nature and involves the giving and receiving of affection. God is eternally loving because the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit eternally love one another.

Bernard asks:

“How does the trinitarian solution avoid polytheism and at the same time avoid saying merely that God loved Himself?” (185).

God did love himself, but love requires an object to love. That is why God cannot be unitarian in person. The Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world. There was perfect love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is only polytheism if one first assumes unitarianism.

Bernard goes on to explain his solution to this problem:

“We cannot limit God to time. He could and did love us from eternity past. Even though we were not then in existence, He foresaw our existence. To His mind we existed and He loved us” (185).

However, this solution makes God’s love contingent on our existence and God’s act of creation. But what if God never chose to create at all? Would he still be love? 1 John 4:16 tells us that “God is love.” Would that still be true apart from creation?

One final comment from Bernard is worth responding to when it comes to God’s love. He says this about those passages which speak about the love between the Father and the Son:

“All of these statements do not mean distinct persons. (Is it not strange that these passages omit the Holy Ghost from the love relationship?)” (185-186).

Love requires a distinction of person and the fact that John does not always mention the Holy Spirit in this relationship does not disprove the Trinity because John’s main focus is on the relationship between the Father and the Son until John 14-16. But Scripture does speak about the Spirit in this relationship and about the love of the Spirit:

2 Corinthians 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Romans 5:5: “And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

Romans 15:30: “I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.”

[Part 14: The Trinity in Paul’s Writings \(https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2025/01/03/a-response-to-the-oneness-of-god-by-david-k-bernard-part-14-the-trinity-in-pauls-writings/\)](https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2025/01/03/a-response-to-the-oneness-of-god-by-david-k-bernard-part-14-the-trinity-in-pauls-writings/)

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