

Shalom!

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We Value All Human Life

THE FIRST WORDS of the Brethren in Christ “pursuing peace” core value are among the most challenging in the whole set of ten core values: “We value all human life.” When I wrote the chapter on “Pursuing Peace” for the book, *Focusing Our Faith*, I described the challenge this way:

Do we really mean all human life—the murderer on death row; the ruthless dictator who massacres his own citizens while amassing great personal wealth; the unborn baby conceived by a rape; the homeless alcoholic who won’t accept help; the nasty co-worker who is always criticizing? Surely there are limits! We haven’t allowed ourselves any escape clauses, however.

We know that God created all human beings in God’s own image, and we believe that humans are special in a way that other parts of God’s creation are not (Gen. 1:26-17). Now we have to figure out what it means to have the image of God in us, and what that implies about how we treat other people, regardless of how they may have perverted that image within themselves. . . .

[T]his means that as a Christian I can’t support the death penalty. I can’t participate in activities that demonize people for bad things they’ve done or choices they’ve made, or because of their race, the country in which they live or their religion. I can’t participate in war on the one hand, and I can’t condone abortion, infanticide or euthanasia on the other hand. I can’t do these things because I value *all* human life (pp. 133-134).

More than 17 years after I wrote those words, I wonder how well I live up to them. It’s easy to say, almost as though we’re reciting a creed, that “we value all human life,” but not so easy to always live and act and think as though we do. I confess to failing repeatedly to meet the high standard of this core value, even though I deeply believe in it.

Part of the reason for the failure to meet the high standard is the scope of the matter of valuing human life, and all the complex questions that we can’t stop asking ourselves. When does human life begin, and when does it end? Who decides and how? Are the lives of thousands of innocent people more important than the life of one person intent on doing despicable harm? Can we call ourselves pro-life if we limit the meaning of the term to being against abortion; on the other hand, can we call ourselves pro-life if we tend to minimize or hold as less important the lives of unborn babies? How can we find common ground on what have become some of the most intractable issues of our day?

This edition of *Shalom!* addresses some of the scope of what it means to value all human life. From the unborn baby to the person on death row, to those who require controversial medical interventions, need friendship rather than condemnation, or may become casualties of war and violence—all are of infinite value and worth to God.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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We Value It All

by Kurt Willems

DO WE REALLY mean that? As Brethren in Christ folks, we have this value—pursuing peace—that our world most desperately needs to see in real life. When applied consistently, it confounds the ideologies of any political party. This value pushes us to take the “all” with utter seriousness. Or, as my friend Harriet Bicksler says in *Focusing our Faith*, the “all” is an adjective of “challenge.” The challenge in front of us is to determine just how far we are willing to take our adjectival “all.” Without it in the statement, we have an out. We don’t need to value certain forms of human life that fail to meet our conventions.

Our greatest temptation in the history of the Church has been to line up as many qualifiers as we could to justify vengeance and

political ends. As Anabaptists, although each generation is tempted to negotiate this “all,” we call upon each other to stretch this “all” as far as Christ himself does—as wide open as a Roman cross, willingly dying at the hands of enemies to liberate them from the darkness that compelled these men to put Jesus on the cross in the first place! In our day, we struggle with the wideness of Calvary, and much of this is understandable.

News broke that Osama Bin Laden had been killed when I was leaving a seminary class meeting. I had been part of an engaging final discussion on modern spiritual memoirs (a spiritual formation class) and was about to begin a 40-minute commute when my wife called me to give me the news. My first reaction was to smile. Yes, I admit it: I smiled. There I was at Chevron, pumping the gas so generously provided by Middle Eastern oil fields grinning about the death of America’s number one enemy. Catching myself, I named that it was an understandable reaction.

I was a senior in high school when the planes hit the towers. 9/11 defines my generation. The world changed on that day. Our so-called invincibility was suspect. Our resolve for peace through vengeance multiplied. Our myths of progress were exposed and naked.

It is likely that most Americans had an initial reaction of this sort—a feeling of cultural catharsis is a natural response. As I drove home, listening to the news coverage of Bin Laden’s death, interviews with people could be summed up with joy: “We got ‘em!” And of course, if we believe that vengeance is sometimes needed in a world of chaos, this makes sense. But as followers of Jesus, we have no room for such a judgement. Vengeance is not for Christians. It belongs to God’s own wisdom and is delegated to the rulers and authorities with limits (Rom. 12-13). Simply put, we should do a double-take any time we find ourselves rejoicing in the loss of human life—any human life. We value all of it.

Even the Hebrew Scriptures, which con-

done certain forms of human violence (which the New Testament does not do), display God’s own lament about the death of any person: “Say to them, This is what the Lord God says: As surely as I live, do I take pleasure in the death of the wicked? If the wicked turn from their ways, they will live” (Ezek. 33:11 CEB). Then, of course by the time Jesus arrives on the scene, he upholds the value of the Torah and prophets by interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures in fresh and compelling ways: “You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well” (Matt. 5:38-39 CEB). Jesus takes what was always the heart of God for all of human life and invites his followers to take it to its logical conclusion: nonviolence. And in the same section, Jesus clarifies what this looks like: love for enemies (Matt. 5:44). For Jesus, “all” means “all.”

In our culture, we struggle to navigate the expansive love of “all” humans. For the 9/11 generation, many of us grew up around a politicized evangelical culture that replaced “all” with “unborn.” And there should be no doubt that we are called to value unborn life. Our methods have often been co-opted by the anti-abortion focus so much so that we often can’t extend our “all” to the needs of the poor. Studies continue to show a strong correlation between poverty and abortion rates. Thus, a middle ground between pro-life Christians and pro-choice politics exists: reduce poverty and thus, reduce abortion rates. Yet, the pro-life agenda is usually tied with a specific stream of economics that neglects the struggles of those at the margins while giving an overabundance of tax money to militarism. This is a contradiction at best. At worst, it is an ethical inconsistency. “All” means unborn babies, but not the single moms who can’t afford them or the Iraqi mom who might get in the way of our bombs? The way of Jesus includes “all” of these.



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In a post-9/11 world, many of us started wondering: Why is abortion our only issue? Why do we take on the militarism of the so-called “war on terror” while not noticing the terror that fills our impoverished streets? Where else have our political imaginations been co-opted? These sorts of questions eventually led me to embrace the Anabaptist theology I had resisted in my Mennonite Brethren upbringing. As Jim Wallis and Shane Claiborne have often said, I became convinced that Jesus invites us to be pro-life from the womb to the tomb. Jesus followers extend the “all” to enemy nations, convicted murderers on death row, babies that incubate in wombs, children without adequate health coverage, Palestinians without access to resources, persons of color plagued by inequity, and so many other life issues of our day. A broader vision of “all” life has consistently pushed many of my peers to expand their definition of pro-life in similar ways.

The inequity we see between white folks and persons of color also challenges our “all.” The “all” challenges us to see how the powers and principalities blind us (who are white) to our privilege. But here’s where “all” gets interesting: Some of us like the word “all”

when it serves to tell our black neighbors that they are being neglectful in saying #BlackLivesMatter. So, some of my friends decided that we needed the “corrective” of #AllLivesMatter. However, the modifier switch from black to all actually rendered the “all” to “some” (and yes, this sort of correction is actually an attitude of privilege, even if usually unintended). In reality, the prophetic cry that black lives matter always had an implicit “too” at the end of it. They are saying: We are being disproportionately incarcerated, terrorized, and killed by the so-called justice system. Will you notice our plight, white sisters and brothers? As soon as “all” is applied there, we’ve actually changed our slogan to “We value white human life.” My point here is that we need to be nuanced in how we, in a post-#BlackLivesMatter world, discern what the word “all” serves to communicate. Being pro-life, being committed to pursuing peace in the way of Jesus, means that consistency is central and marginalized voices at the conversation table are a gift. We need our blind spots exposed so we can become more effective at valuing all human life, just as Jesus does.

I believe that we are in a moment of

prophetic opportunity. Will we place pursuing peace—the very thing that attracts several of our millennial-aged leaders to the Brethren in Christ—back into the center of our ethos as a church body? Paired with the resources we have in our other core values, we have the opportunity to be transformed into further Christlikeness as Jesus softens our hearts to those “alls” we’d rather modify as “some.” May we celebrate this “all” and may we encourage ourselves to expand our understanding of it to include those we are tempted to ignore. Thanks be to God that our Creator values all human life, so much so that Christ died to reconcile even his enemies—which once included each of us (Rom. 5:6-11). Since God values it all, may we go and do likewise.

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Completely Pro-Life: What the Early Church Said

By Ronald J. Sider

THE STRONGEST REASON for endorsing a completely pro-life agenda is that the Bible tells us that God cares about all these things. But early church history provides a second strong support. In my book, *The Early Church on Killing*, I collected every document and artifact I could find on the teaching and practice of the early church on killing up to the time of Constantine’s edict of toleration in 313.

Whether the issue is abortion, capital punishment, infanticide, or killing in war, every extant statement by Christian authors before Constantine says that Christians should never kill. Writing in the early fourth century during the severe empire-wide persecution of Emperor Diocletian, Christian writer Lactantius said:

For when God forbids us to kill, He not

only prohibits us from open violence, which is not even allowed by the public laws, but He warns us against the commission of those things which are esteemed lawful among people. Thus it will be neither lawful for a just man [a Christian] to engage in military service, since his military service is justice itself, nor to accuse anyone of a capital charge, because it makes no difference whether you put a person to death by word, or rather by the sword, since it is the act of putting to death itself which is prohibited. Therefore, with regard to this precept of God, there ought to be no exception at all but that it is always unlawful to put to death a person, whom God willed to be a sacred creature (*Divine Institutes*, 6,20).

The early Christian writers unanimously

reject Christian participation in capital punishment and war.

Eight different authors in 11 different writings mention abortion. In every instance, the writing unequivocally rejects abortion. The blunt condemnation of the Didache is typically: “You shall not murder a child by abortion.” In most instances, the writers condemn abortion either because the unborn child has a soul from the moment of conception or because abortion is killing and Christians do no do that.

Tertullian condemns abortion because Christians believe that all murder is wrong: “In our case, murder being once for all forbidden, we may not destroy even the fetus in the womb” (*Apology*, 9).

Four different writers say that Christians must not participate in capital punishment.

In his response to Celsus, Origen distinguishes sharply between the “constitution” given to the Jews by Moses and that given to Christians by Christ. Under Moses’ law, the Jews could kill enemies and use capital punishment. But Christ’s Gospel is very different: Christians cannot “slay their enemies or condemn to be burned or stoned” (*Against Celsus*, VII, 26). Christians must not use capital punishment.

And the Apostolic Tradition (a church order probably from the late second or early third century) explicitly says that if a prominent government official (one who “wears red”) who can order capital punishment seeks catechetical training to become a Christian, he must abandon his government position if he wants to receive Christian training and move toward baptism: “One who has the power of the sword or the head of a city and wears red, let him stop or be excluded” (16).

The texts prohibiting killing in war are even more frequent. Up until the time of Constantine, there is not a single Christian writer known to us who says that it is legitimate for Christians to kill or join the military. There are a substantial number of passages written over a period of many years that explicitly say that Christians must not and/or do not kill or join the military. Nine different Christian writers in 16 different

treatises explicitly say that killing is wrong. Four writers in five treatises clearly argue that Christians do not and should not join the military. In addition four writers in eight different works strongly imply that Christians should not join the military. At least eight times, five different authors apply the Messianic prophecy about swords being beaten into ploughshares (Isaiah 2:4) to Christ and his teaching. Ten different authors in at least 28 different places cite or allude to Jesus’ teaching to love their enemies and in at least nine of these places, they connect that teaching to some statement about Christians being peaceful, ignorant of war, opposed to attacking others, etc.

It is also true that the documents show that by 173 AD, there were a few Christians in the Roman army. And their numbers increased substantially in the late third and early fourth centuries. But they were doing what all extant statements on the topic by Christian authors clearly condemned.

Early church history confirms what a biblically balanced approach urges: a “completely pro-life” agenda.

How do we do that concretely? To some extent, our particular historical context shapes how in practice we implement this framework.

The first and most important political act is to be the church—to live out in concrete

community the full implementation of Jesus’ kingdom teaching. That is what the early church sought to do and they did it even though very few Christians were even Roman citizens and the empire frequently persecuted and sometimes killed them. No matter what the external political setting, the Church should be the Church.

Being the church does impact society. The early church lived out their refusal to kill in striking ways. Abortion and infanticide were widespread but the early church rejected both. Gladiatorial contests where human gladiators fought to the death were the favorite “sports” event of the day but Christians not only refused to allow gladiators to prepare for baptism (unless they stopped being gladiators) but also refused to even attend this popular “sport.” And slowly a different vision and model affected the larger society. Again and again throughout history, when Christians simply modeled a new way of living in the church, society was impacted.

Ronald J. Sider is president emeritus of *Evangelicals for Social Action*. He grew up in the *Brethren in Christ Church*. This article is condensed and adapted from “*Being Completely Pro-Life in Politics*,” which first appeared in *Plough Quarterly’s* Autumn 2016 issue (www.plough.com). It is used with permission.

From Man of War to Man of Peace

by Ron Kramer

I WAS BORN to be a soldier. Unknowingly trained from birth by my dysfunctional family, I adapted to conflict, chaos, and pain. To protect myself, I ignored and stuffed painful emotions. The benefits were that I appreciated order, functioned well in crisis, and became very resourceful at accomplishing whatever was needed. The downside was starting life with a hard heart and buried anger looking for a socially acceptable way to be released.

I grew up loving the nobility, bravery, and fighting in the stories of King Arthur, Robin Hood, and the Alamo. Post-World War II movies like “Sands of Iwo Jima,” “Battle of the Bulge,” and “The Guns of Navarone”

were my Saturday movie fare at the Fox Theatre. Playing “army” with toy guns and setting up plastic army men battle fields in the backyard to be shot with BB guns was a favorite activity for my friends and me. As I matured, I enjoyed hunting, martial arts, and varsity football and wrestling. Even as an Eagle Boy Scout, my honorary Indian name was “Battling Warrior.”

In 1972, at 17, I enlisted in the Marine Corps and left for boot camp three days after high school graduation, hoping to fight in Vietnam and kill “bad guys” who were opposed to freedom. I was a patriot, endeavoring in the noble task of defending our nation, and the Marines rewarded me with two mer-

itorious promotions and numerous awards. Fortunately, the Vietnam War was winding down and I never had to fight, but I wanted to!

After considering a Marine career, I opted for college and obtained a B.S. in psychology and M.S. in counseling and human development. I think I was drawn to this field to understand myself, others, and the world around me. Religion was not part of our family so I was fascinated when, after college, I became friends with an Episcopal priest. He introduced me to the “church,” eventually “led me to Jesus,” and baptized me in the ocean. Through fledgling faith, which was actually very meaningful at the time, I be-

came saved. Looking back, however, I certainly never developed any spiritual maturity. I don't remember the concepts of obedience or discipleship ever being stressed as important. Generally, I just knew to attend church, confess sin, take communion, be forgiven, go back to living life. The way I lived life wasn't good, and church didn't change it much. When I moved for a different career, I also moved away from God and the church, becoming a prodigal son before ever really knowing my Heavenly Father. I stayed away a long time.

Ten years later, I went back into the military, this time in the Army where I became a nuclear missile officer. I was still a great soldier, and received more awards and accolades along the way as I advanced from second lieutenant to captain in three years. My new career was on the fast-track. Early on, I wrestled with the thought of killing everyone in an entire city with a nuclear blast, justifying it as "just doing my job." I loved being a soldier and served the higher cause of protecting our country. After five years I left the Army to save my marriage, but that didn't work.

My military leadership experience resulted in great success in the corporate world, but I had an emp; I was miserable. Finally, on August 9, 1997, I turned back to God. At 43, I lay in bed, desperate, and prayed, "God, if

you'll fix my life, I'll be your man for the rest of my life." Yes, it was a bargaining prayer, but I was 100 percent committed with a military resolution to follow Christ, if he would prove himself real. He did! The next morning, I awoke with a new clarity. I didn't know exactly what had happened, but I was different. I knew God had done something in me. Acting on my commitment to faithfully serve him, I started attending church, reading the Bible, and joined Alcoholics Anonymous. The Holy Spirit was transforming me!

As a good soldier, I had to take and execute orders from a higher authority, whether I liked them or not. Now, as a servant of God, I had to do the same thing. God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit were now giving me my orders through the Word. Jesus became my Commander, who I must obey. He is loving, strong, wise, just, compassionate; the Perfect Leader, the Perfect Parent, the Perfect Friend that I had been looking for my entire life. Now, as one who loves and obeys the Lord, I made every attempt to emulate Jesus. A paradigm shift occurred within me. As I learned more and more about Jesus, I came to understand that I, too, was to become a man of love and peace, like Him, who is "gentle and humble in heart" as it says in Matthew 11:29.

I was learning that while Jesus had the power to kill and destroy by bringing legions

of angels against the Romans, in his meekness (which is power under control), he chose mercy and sacrifice. He deferred to his greater nature of love to heal and redeem. This was clearly the path that I was also to take. The Lord impressed on me from Romans 12:17-21 to not repay evil with evil, but to try and live at peace with everyone and have compassion for my enemy, not letting them overcome me with evil, but overcoming evil with good. 2 Corinthians 10:3 says, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does." Jesus himself says in Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." I made a free-will decision to change my mind on how I viewed participating in war and what kind of a soldier I'd be.

It seems clear to me that as a Christ-follower I am called to take the gospel to everyone in love, service, and sacrifice; especially to the unsaved, and even to my enemies. It is not consistent that I then consider killing the very people I'm now commanded to try and bring to the Lord. I am no longer a soldier of the world and of its wars. I am a soldier of Jesus and of his peace.

Ron Kramer is associate pastor at CrossRoads, a Brethren in Christ congregation in Salina, KS.

Beyond Billboards and Votes

By Chris Lund

TYLER AND LYDIA Lund are undeniably pro-life, in all the best ways. Life is something that bursts forth from their home and blossoms in their relationships. As Tyler's brother, I've seen them in the mission field—which is wherever they happen to be at the moment. In the first years of their marriage in Washington D.C., some of their closest friends were the homeless men and women living in their neighborhood. When they served in Nairobi, Kenya, they quickly became a staple of the community—a lifeline for vulnerable young adults. Most recently, the rhythmic patterns of life with three kids in central Kansas have, if anything,

pushed them deeper into their mission: "to help make the hungry satisfied and the satisfied hungry." Their home is now a haven for foster children. It's a meeting place for sex-trafficking awareness and anti-racism conversations. It's a place of gathering, counseling, and mentorship.

They have so much life happening, they had to turn down their pastor when he requested they write an article for *Shalom!* Luckily, I have a laptop and a recorder, so they didn't get out of it that easy. What follows is a conversation (edited and consolidated) I had with Tyler and Lydia about what it means to be pro-life. At a time when

more and more Christians are thinking critically about what it means to live a "pro-life" lifestyle—not just vote "pro-life"—I believe Tyler and Lydia can help direct our energies in the right direction.

CL: Is there a difference between an approach to abortion that is truly "pro-life" rather than just "anti-abortion"?

Lydia: Something I have to ask myself constantly is, "Am I more interested in being right, or in loving people?" An approach to abortion that is characterized by signs that say "God Hates Abortion," arguments about how sinful abortion is, or simply checking a

box at the poll fails to love the people who need it most. As a result of defining “pro-life” in terms of who you vote for, we’ve hindered our vision to see the thousands of moments in between elections where we can take pro-life actions. We may need to take about ten steps back and think creatively about what it means to be “pro-life.”

Tyler: As far as I can tell, the anti-abortion approach seeks to save unborn lives by forcing women to keep their babies. It may save lives, but an approach that narrow fails to win people’s hearts with God’s love. If you notice in Jesus’ ministry, he didn’t coerce people to follow him or do the right thing. He was present with them; he showed them another way of being. In the end, people chose him. He won their hearts and minds. We could learn from his approach.

Let me give an example. I was recently asked to be the speaker at a high school baccalaureate service. In one sense, that symbolizes a victory. In the past few decades, Christians have fought to retain the right to hold services like baccalaureate in public school buildings. The sad part is, the baccalaureate service was ultimately canceled because there wasn’t enough interest from the students to get a service organized. We won the right to a baccalaureate service, but lost the most important part—the hearts and minds. Similarly, we may win the abortion battle and force people to do the “right thing,” but will we have really won? What if we were to love our communities so well that pregnant couples need not consider abortion?

CL: Was there an experience that broadened your vision of what it means to be “pro-life”?

Lydia: When we lived in Kenya, we met a woman named Maybel who taught me a lesson in being pro-life. She bashfully told me she was pregnant, and said: “I can’t have this baby. When dad’s around, he beats me and the other children. There’s not food for the baby. There’s not money for school fees for the kids I already have.” She felt there were no other options. That’s when I realized the complexity of why a woman considers abortion.

My Kenyan friends invited her to come to our ladies’ Bible study. We ate food together and became friends. Maybel came for six months. We prayed over her, spoke life

over her, gathered money for her kids’ school fees, and threw her a baby shower. When that baby was born, he came to Bible study, too. No amount of preaching or pressure could have persuaded her to keep the baby. It was the ongoing, tangible support. I think that’s what love is.

Tyler: In college, my favorite professor shared a challenge with the class: If I’m not willing to take in a young, desperate pregnant woman, how can I say I’m pro-life? His point was clear: if my daily actions don’t match my claimed values, I might not actually hold that value. No longer could I simply say, “I have such-and-such value,” while doing nothing about it. It helped me see that God has little interest in our positions on issues and little use for our official stances. What he needs are our hands.

CL: Some people have been waiting 40 years for legislation to ban abortion. Even then, there remain non-medical ways to have one. Is it time to focus on building communities where abortion isn’t needed as an outlet? What would we have to do?

Lydia: It’s helpful to step back to see the years of actions and inactions within a community that led to a crisis pregnancy. If young people don’t have meaningful afterschool opportunities to fill their time, they’ll stumble into bad situations looking for fun. If adults don’t talk about healthy sexuality, young people will reenact what they see in culture. If healing addictions isn’t a community priority, its effects will continue to spread.

It’s a community thing. This isn’t just about a boy and a girl. We all have a responsibility. It’s about all of us working diligently to create an atmosphere where men are taught healthy sexuality, where women are valued unconditionally, where pregnant women have real options and real support, where addictions are addressed with support and resources, and on and on. To me, that’s the Kingdom of God.

Tyler: And that means we—the community—have to be willing to sacrifice. For a pregnant high school girl to have hope for her future, she needs to know there will be childcare so she can finish her degree. Either I need to donate to a childcare fund or be okay with some of my taxes being used for that. For young men to be taught healthy sexuality, that means you and I have to give up

a weeknight to address pornography addiction, or to mentor someone. For addictions to be healed, we have to drive people to meetings, check-in regularly, and consider a restorative approach to criminal justice.

CL: You two are constantly walking with people through the most challenging moments of their lives—those ruptures where violence tends to happen, marriages end, addictions resurface. Many people are not in close contact with people experiencing crisis, or we don’t have a relationship developed in order to be invited into those moments. How do we get there?

Tyler: You have to put yourself in contact with people, people that maybe look different than you, maybe with more challenging backgrounds and current circumstances. At every church in America, there are people who need a relationship, people who need more than the church-hallway “Hello!” There are people whose lives are teetering on the edge of personal crisis. Jesus is pretty clear with his socializing priorities—he put first the marginalized, the outcasts, the ostracized, the hurting. He didn’t just occasionally bump shoulders with people like that. He sought them out.

Lydia: Invite someone over for dinner. If you want to immediately create a relationship, invite someone into your space and feed them—frozen pizza if that’s what you have. Sharing a meal around a table is incredibly life-giving. Table-fellowship is an ancient and cross-cultural practice we seem to be losing. A lot of us have this idea that we don’t want people with messy lives to know where we live. We have a public and a private life in order to protect ourselves. Yes, there’s wisdom in boundaries. But we also need to recognize that it’s going to be hard to have a long-term, transformational relationship with someone who has never eaten at our table or played with our kids. Our life is the main gift we can share with people. We need to invite people into it.

Chris Lund is pursuing a Master’s degree in social transformation at United Theological Seminary of Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN. He interviewed his brother and sister-in-law, Tyler and Lydia Lund. They are foster parents; Tyler is a ministry leader at Revolution, a Brethren in Christ congregation in Salina, KS, and Lydia is a social worker.

Love Like the Sun Shines

By Zach Spidel

THERE IS NO political party and no earthly faction in American public discourse that is uniformly pro-life. One party is open to the abolishment of the death penalty, but opposes virtually any attempt to reduce the massive number of abortions that occur regularly in our country. The other gives lip service to the value of unborn life, but defends, and sadly even seems to champion, the killing of certain criminals. Both parties celebrate killing our enemies in foreign lands while placidly accepting as a “sad necessity” the killing of thousands of innocent people as “collateral damage” in the drone strikes by which those enemies are killed. Everyone seems to agree that some lives deserve help while others deserve punishment, some lives are worth living while others deserve to be ended—we simply disagree about which lives fall into which categories.

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ sees things very differently. God causes the sun to shine upon the good and the wicked alike and sends his rain to bless both the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desires that they turn from evil toward him (Ezek. 33:11). He does not want anyone to be destroyed in the final judgment, but wants all to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9, 1 Tim. 2:4). This God we serve—who loves like the sun shines and the rain falls, who loves all people regardless of age, ability, race, education, gender, sexuality, and moral behavior—has called us to make his remarkable love visible in a world that does not understand and often, frankly, does not want such love.

The world does not want the universal love of God because it appears to fallen, worldly minds that universal love is probably impossible or, if it exists, is utterly self-defeating. To attempt a universal love, so it appears to the world, will lead only to injustice, destruction, and pain. The course of this fallen logic goes like this: A basic feature of life on earth is conflict. It is an unavoidable and irreducible feature of our existence. When two or more lives come into a conflict that cannot be resolved through peaceful reconcilia-

tion and mutual agreement, then any third party to that conflict must choose between them. Thus, for the poor woman facing an unwanted pregnancy, you can either support the baby growing within her, or the woman who, in her fear, desires to abort the pregnancy. Thus, for the murderer on death row, you can either stand with the victim’s family in their desire for retributive justice, or with the killer in his simple desire to live. Thus, in war you can side with one faction or the other, depending on your loyalties, or, in all these cases, you can do nothing, sitting on the sidelines as others sacrifice their time and energy and even their lives for what they believe is right.

This is the logic of the world and I believe all of us default to this view apart from the influence of the Holy Spirit who instills in us a new pattern of thought and life—a pattern drawn from Jesus. Jesus did not, in his earthly ministry, enter into the conflicts of his day, choosing one side over the other, revealing who the “good guys” and the “bad guys” really were. He didn’t side with the Pharisees or the Sadducees, the Zealot revolutionaries or the Roman auxiliaries, the Jews or the Samaritans, the peasants or the tax collectors—he loved them all and he gave them all a third option. Jesus came not to join any of their conflicts, but to summon all people to join the one fight worth fighting—the fight of God against the violence, destruction, and death which sin has sown in the lives and hearts of humanity.

So Jesus called a revolutionary and a bunch of poor fishermen into fellowship with a tax collector whom they all would have naturally hated. He ate with Pharisees and with prostitutes. He spoke in the temple with the teachers, and praised the faith of a Roman soldier tasked with keeping the Jews in their place. He travelled among Gentiles, Samaritans, and Jews and he blessed them all. There was no life he didn’t value, no person he didn’t love, and in every conflict among the broken lives he encountered, his answer was not to pick a side, but offer people on



every side another option. “Repent and believe the good news; the Kingdom of God has drawn near!”

As the church, the body of Christ, we speak this good news to all and we embody it for all in our cruciform love. Like Jesus, we love the unborn baby and the mother who doesn’t want to be pregnant. We love the hurting victims, as well as the criminals who hurt them. We love American soldiers and the insurgents and terrorists they are fighting. We pray for wisdom and power from the Holy Spirit in each concrete instance that our love will be more than rhetoric, but will take tangible and costly form in the midst of the world’s conflicts. We accept that such love will lead us to suffer, and that our patient endurance in suffering, our willingness to offer practical service to all those who need it, and our refusal to pick a side in earthly conflicts will cost us dearly. We will also accept, with joy, the assurance of the Holy Spirit that in loving all lives in this way—valuing all people—we are anticipating the final victory of Jesus at his return. May our love mirror Jesus’ love in its universal scope, its unfathomable depth, its willingness to suffer, and its deep and abiding joy.

Zach Spidel is the pastor of The Shepherd's Table congregation in Dayton, OH.

Redemptive Compassion

By Debby Bentch

FOLLOWING A FAMILY vacation to the beach in July 2011, my daughter Lolly told me she was going to have my not-quite-four-year-old granddaughter Anna tested for autism. My first reaction was shock and disbelief. After all, this child was beautiful, charming, funny and adorable—strange as the day is long, but amazing nonetheless.

PDDNOS (Pervasive Development Disorder Not Otherwise Specified) was the first clinical diagnosis. That put her somewhere on the mystical "autism spectrum." But before long, there were far more disturbing symptoms, including "tics" (odd little movements). A neurologist who witnessed them assured us that the tics were, in fact, seizures. So we added epilepsy to the growing list of diagnoses. However, we are a family with a strong faith and we are determined to trust the LORD.

As the months passed, Anna was subjected to at least 10 different medications with a wide range of ominous side effects. At one point, when I was in tears and barely holding it together, I told Lolly, "Please don't tell me any more side effects." However, despite the plethora of medications, Anna continued to have well over 100 seizures a day and had to have a caregiver in her kindergarten class to keep her safe as "head drop seizures" caused her to crack her head on any surface in front of her.

What would you think if Anna were your daughter or granddaughter and nothing seemed to work—if there were actually discussions about removing her left temporal lobe, and then maybe even removing her frontal lobe (one quarter of her brain!)? What would your reaction be?

We breathed a breath of hope when we watched a CNN broadcast by a doctor telling about a family of six brothers living in Colorado who had developed an oil of a medicinal plant (cannabis) that was helping children with epilepsy. Further investigation revealed that it had also been used successfully to treat children with autism and adults with Crohns Disease, post-traumatic stress disorder, cancer, cerebral palsy, muscular dys-

trophy, asthma, migraines, Tourette's Syndrome, Diabetes, OCD, stuttering, Bell's palsy and much more.

We discovered a wealth of information available on all the tests and research and treatments being done in the United States, Israel, China, and other countries with astounding results. There are any number of online videos showing children before and after receiving cannabis oil and we began to have hope!

But, there was a serious problem. At that time the plant we call medical cannabis (also known as marijuana) was illegal in most states, including Pennsylvania—even for medicinal purposes; even if it might be the difference between life and death; even if it might mean the difference between a whole brain and three-fourths of a brain; even if the side effects are nearly non-existent, especially when compared to the prescription drugs that were not working; even though it won't make a child "high," but instead calms the brain.

Unfortunately, there are far too many people, like me, who in our ignorance have abhorred the thought of "legalizing pot" even for medicinal purposes. Too many people have never heard the truth and make false assumptions. Too many politicians don't understand the process or the purpose. In addition, medical cannabis is probably a great threat to drug companies and those who profit from them. But for my family and for Anna, ignorance was not bliss; it was life threatening! So I found myself asking some serious and hard questions.

I am a pastor. I am a "conservative" pastor in a conservative denomination. I am a conservative pastor employed at a conservative retirement community. However, I am also a mother and a grandmother who has gone to great lengths to protect, support, and raise my five children and equally support them in their marriages and with their own children. What would it cost me to support a change in our laws, one with such steep opposition and a formidable battlefield?

I discovered this: what wouldn't I do to

make sure Anna has every possible chance for health and wellness? The answer became clear and undeniable. I chose to step out in faith by supporting my daughter in the extremely challenging battle of legalizing medical cannabis for Anna.

When the journey began, Lolly and I were in it for Anna's sake, but soon we began to meet other families with children like Anna. We fell in love with other people's sick kids. We began to care about other moms' struggles and daily challenges. We heard their stories. We watched their videos. We added their heartache and grieving to our own. We grew a new family built on compassion.

I began to pray for those other families and their struggles. Not surprisingly, I found myself with a "new" ministry of blessing, encouraging, and praying for desperate and hurting families at every opportunity. I came to believe that, for some of them, I might be the only "pastor" with whom they ever related.

Over the months we added more people to our "new family" who all wanted the same thing we did—access to the medicinal properties of a plant that for thousands of years had been used for its medical properties (until it was outlawed because of the greed of several wealthy, influential and infamous men in the 1940s). This plant, I believe with all my heart, was included in God's proclamation in Genesis 1:29: "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food."

We have had an incredible outpouring of support from friends and family. There were a few who questioned my position, mostly because they had family members or friends who had or were currently abusing marijuana. (My first thought is always the same, "We are not even talking about the same thing!") But that is another topic altogether.) One of these friends gave me such strong challenges that I asked the Lord to help me answer her challenges with grace. Almost immediately, a picture began to unfold in my

mind. I was standing on a hill looking out over all of creation and randomly picking out things that God created for His honor and glory and for the good of His people—music, dance, meditation, motherhood, marriage, and a plant!

I grieved because every one of those things has, in myriad ways, been misused, abused, confused, tainted, and distorted. These things that God created for good have been turned into something that God did not intend. I can't begin to imagine how it grieves my Father, who gave us all good gifts. Everything in all of God's creation has been touched by our sinful nature.

One word stood out in my mind: redemption, or the action of saving or being saved from sin, error or evil. I'm so thankful for God's redemptive plan in my life. But

there's even more to redemption. It is also "the action of regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment." It is synonymous with retrieval, recovery, reclamation and repossession.

I concluded that redemption is where this issue of medical cannabis has brought me. I want to redeem a God-given plant and restore it to the place from which it should never have been removed in the first place. I am reclaiming it for the good.

I can't stop people from misusing cannabis. I can't stop the greedy from profiting from its abuse. But I will do whatever I can to make sure that, in its medicinal form, it is available to those who need it to live, to thrive, to see, to breathe, to walk without pain, to flourish. I will do my part for every man, woman and child who needs it. I be-

lieve God has brought me here "for such a time as this." I am recommitting myself to all of God's redemptive purposes.

Postscript: Finally, on April 17, 2016, a bill was signed legalizing medical cannabis in Pennsylvania and providing "Safe Harbor" letters for children in Pennsylvania. We hope that in early 2018, the program will be up and running successfully for adults as well. And Anna? Since starting to take cannabis, Anna is completely seizure-free and flourishing. Her neurologist hopes that her brain will continue to heal. We are simply blessed to see her living life to the fullest every day.

Debby Bentch is pastor of village ministries at Messiah Lifeways, Mechanicsburg, PA. She has five children and 11 grandchildren.

Will We Allow Grace to Have the Last Word?

By Joshua Grace

WHEN HE STARTED writing *Executing Grace: How the Death Penalty Killed Jesus and Why It's Killing Us*, my friend Shane Claiborne wanted to help the church refocus on a moral issue of state violence having the last word. Since the book release a year ago, the Church in the United States has grown more polarized than united on several moral issues, including which human lives are valuable enough to merit our attention and resources, and which are permitted to fall into the sacrifice zone of American business as usual. I feel a renewed conviction that the Body of Christ can bear witness to the grace of God in situations where grace is often substituted with punitive action; the hope for redemption we offer is stronger than any call for revenge.

With some others from Circle of Hope, I went to Washington, DC in January to visit the Supreme Court with a few dozen other groups. Among us were families of the murdered and of the executed and wrongfully-convicted death row survivors all publicly demanding that the U.S. government "stop the executions." I saw 18 people, several of whom are friends, get slowly arrested for holding a large banner too close to the en-

trance. Their subsequent trial was an attempt to put the death penalty itself on trial. These demonstrations, trials, and learning opportunities are attempts to open doors for Christ's good work in people's lives. Or like Shane said, "Death closes the door to any possibility for redemption. Grace opens up that door."

One of Circle of Hope's compassion teams, Circle Mobilizing Because Black Lives Matter, recently held a learning opportunity about the school-to-prison pipeline with the PA Council of Churches and MCC. During that session, one of the facilitators remarked that "we treat these children like they are prisoners." It made me pause and consider, what does it mean to treat someone like they are a prisoner? If someone gets convicted of a serious crime such as rape or murder, how does that change our attitude toward their humanity? When someone is sentenced to death, do we find that punishment to be consistent with our theology and practice of peace?

State violence and the state's threats of violence are always done in our name for the sake of the public welfare, and Christians have not united to stop it. Shane proclaims

in his book, "The death penalty did not flourish in America in spite of Christians but because of us." I feel a renewed conviction to learn and act according to Christ's love for society's marginalized—specifically those caught up in the prison industrial complex. As Matthew says, it's not just how we feel about the captives but how we relate that needs to be inspired and empowered by the Spirit (see ch. 25). I cannot imagine a gospel where Jesus affirms a state execution with "when I was on death row you allowed them to give me a lethal injection" as kudos to his church. Shane writes, "in one moment, God feels the pain of the victims of unspeakable violence, and God feels the agonizing pain of seeing a beloved child executed at the hands of the state."

The death penalty serves for many as a pillar of society—a symbol of law and order. It has served as the ultimate deterrent for those considering serious crimes, bringing a sense of blind justice for egregious offenders irrespective of one's place in society. It only takes a glance at the so-called justice system to see that we cannot extract the racial and economic factors that go into policing, sentencing, incarcerating, and terminating peo-

ple in our country. The ultimate punishment serves not as a successful deterrent for violent crime, but a limiting factor for God's grace at work in the world.

Last year we held a celebration of the release of *Executing Grace* with half a dozen groups gathering to learn and receive courage. Harold Wilson, born and raised at 18th and South in Philadelphia, shared about the trauma of being on death row for 17 years for crimes he did not commit. He is the 122nd exonerated death row survivor, the sixth in Pennsylvania. During and after his ordeal, his faith in Christ remained steadfast. He said, "God will deliver you from all evil and God will walk with you." Regularly, he repeated the prayer of Jesus dying on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," as he awaited his own state-sponsored execution. Harold encour-

aged us to give Jesus a chance to reach people and touch them before killing them cuts those chances too short. While I believe that just one exoneration from death row shows that the system is flawed, it's important to note that there have been 156 since 1973.

That night Vicki Shieber, director and co-founder of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, told the story of her daughter Shannon, the only known fatality of the Center City rapist (started in 1997). She shared a story of profound loss, how her 24-year-old daughter and Wharton student at UPenn was raped and killed by Troy Graves, who would not be apprehended until nearly five years later after another string of rapes in Colorado. She and her husband had been against the death penalty for their daughter's murderer from the start. The Shiebers saw what kind of "closure" executions brought

other bereaved families and opted for a way to wholeness that included a relationship with Graves' mother and eventually the perpetrator himself. She expressed gratitude for how much profound good has come from something so terrible.

I find strength in the people and from the stories that *Executing Grace* and the anti-death penalty movement have exposed me to. I hope we are inspired to listen, learn, and act with a sense of value for the lives of people caught up with law enforcement, lock up, and especially death row. The executions have still not ceased. Yet, like Shane wrote, "It's not that the law has no meaning; it's just that grace has the last word."

Joshua Grace is pastor at the Frankford Avenue site of Circle of Hope, Philadelphia, PA.

Teachings from Kahriwiio: The Good Way

By Erin Merryweather

GOD CREATED HUMAN beings in his image by breathing life into the dirt of the earth. He calls us as stewards of the land to be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the cattle, and, yes, earth itself. (Gen 1:26, MSG). We can see God's love through his creation if we look.

As a settler and a Christian, I have been taught about God's divinity in the concrete walls of a church. I have been taught by institutions to compartmentalize spirituality, ecology and politics. I have been taught to love my neighbour while being unaware of the sociological, environmental, and systematic footprints my actions leave.

If we step outside of our traditions and see how God's love is illustrated through Indigenous spirituality, we can learn new ways to experience him. To quote Christina Conroy, "We need difference. To think that one person or tradition or culture could represent the totality of divine love is to mistake the part of the whole."

Canadian Indigenous spirituality is rooted in creation. In Mohawk, the good way is "kahriwiio," whereas religion is "kahri-

wiosta," meaning man-made. The good way is a way of being that permeates our relationships with all of life, not a set of rules used to dictate behaviour. To understand the Creator, one must understand that life itself is a gift that is experienced through relationship. This extends to our treatment of the forest, the lakes, and the animals as fellow results of God's creation.

Indigenous teachings share that we are related to all living things as family. Stan Wilson pinpoints that Western culture will use the phrase "Mother Earth," but may not use the terms "Grandfather Rock" or "Brother Bear." Using relational words to describe the earth ensures that humans are accountable for their actions to nature. This is the fundamental principle to Indigenous spirituality: we have a kinship with all living things.

We can see God's imagination and beauty in creation. Think back to the Garden of Eden—a showcase of a river with four heads, plentiful treats, fruits, and animals. One of God's first instructions to Adam was to name each animal. I see this as an act of love and an act of stewardship. To name something

indicates a relationship of identification and longevity. Why name something one doesn't intend to cherish or identify again?

Christian Indigenous scholar Randy Woodley defines shalom as structured love, or the culmination of actions performed harmoniously. Encompassed in this definition is the acknowledgement that God has assigned humans the task of stewarding all living things. To love is to care for and take care of something.

Indigenous groups don't compartmentalize spirituality and ecology. It simply does not make sense to separate environmental protection, the world economy, and faith. If we are to understand our roles as stewards, it is wrong not to let our understanding of creation permeate our decisions. We should be held accountable to our relationship with all living things.

Jesus asserts in the Sermon on the Mount that God provides for the birds in the air and the flowers in the field, and they don't need to be controlled by worry. Jesus tells us that a sparrow will not fall without God knowing. Jesus is illustrating God's vast love for us,

but maybe he is also providing another lesson. Maybe we are to steward God's creation with the same love as his image bearers.

The topic of this edition of *Shalom!* is valuing all human life. Indigenous spirituality would advocate for human life being equally important as all living things. As humans were created last and rely on the life of God's other creations the most, we are to live in humility as we graciously accept their gifts. Probably most Christians would disagree with the notion that all living things are equal. Still, it could be argued that how we interpret our role as stewards and value non-human life is directly related to how we value human life.

How I treat the world has a direct impact on how other human beings live. When I purchase a shirt from a mass clothing retailer, I am supporting the systematic oppression of women in Bangladesh. When I turn on my mini-SUV, I am helping to increase the number of people who will suffer from poverty due to climate change by 2030. Am I being provided with opportunities to steward creation through my daily choices? Yes, and I am certain I am not alone.

It's not new information that how we treat our environment affects human beings around the world. We are flooded with this

fact every day. The question becomes how can we make sure the message of stewardship resonates and is lived out in our daily actions?

The Indigenous principle of relational accountability with all living things is a great starting point. By removing the borders on faith, relationships, ecology, and economy, we can see the interconnectedness of God's creation. To work towards shalom we need to understand the harmonious, relational, reciprocal and connected nature of our earth.

Indigenous theology does not reduce itself to what an individual believes. Indigenous spirituality is centred in one's actions in response to the relational obligations. God assigned us the role of stewardship. Jesus asks us to follow him and love our neighbour. Let us learn from our Indigenous neighbours in valuing all life through serving God's creation.

Erin Merryweather is an intern in the BIC Canada office. She attends The Meetinghouse and will graduate from Windsor Law School next year, specializing in Indigenous law.

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Darwinism from the late nineteenth century, Nazi racist ideology "regarded Jews as 'parasitic vermin' worthy only of eradication" (Holocaust Museum Encyclopedia), which led to the mass murder of millions. We devalue humans whether we take away their humanity or take away their personhood. Our more modern delineations can lead to very old evils.

Looking from a religious perspective, Surjah Homglemdarom writes, "The Buddha tradition, especially the Theravada tradition, clearly states that personhood starts when the process of fertilization takes place." Does Christianity recognize and respect the unity of personhood and humanity from conception to natural death? What should a Christian perspective be on the various issues we face especially in a world of rapidly changing medicine, greater understanding of complex animal life, and the burgeoning of artificial intelligence (AI)?

We already have literature and movies dealing with robots that evolve into persons ("Bicentennial Man," 1999), or robots programmed to love ("A.I.—Artificial Intelligence," 2001) or romantic relationships occurring between a man and his AI computer operating system ("Her," 2013). "Star Trek's" Commander Data wrestled with the question of humanness and personhood in every episode. A dark forerunner into the question of what is human was the 1982 dystopia nightmare of "Bladerunner" where flesh and blood replicants blur the line between AI and human beings.

We should consider carefully and biblically who or what we elevate and whom we devalue when we work through these meanings of "human" and "personhood." If Horton is right and "a person's a person no matter how small," we need to know and not assume we all agree on what a "person" is.

Lois Saylor is a member of the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and serves on the editorial committee for Shalom!

Editor's Notes

2017 subscription renewals

If you haven't yet renewed your subscription for 2017, please do so as soon as possible. Production costs are increasing, and your contributions are important. A special thank you to those who have not only renewed their subscriptions but also contributed an extra amount. The basic subscription rate is currently \$15 per year. Subscription renewals and additional contributions can be sent to the editor at the address on page 2. Checks should be payable to Brethren in Christ Church U.S.

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Horton Hears a Person: What Do You Hear?

By Lois Saylor

MOST OF US know Dr. Seuss and Horton the floppy soft elephant from the Jungle of Nool who listens with great concentration to hear the wee voices of Whoville. He saves their lives three different times at great personal cost and public ridicule from a sour kangaroo, her young one, and a slew of Wickersham relatives. But through his ordeal Horton affirms with great philosophical wisdom and theological grace that “a person’s a person, no matter how small.”

Many people agree with Horton. The pro-life community also believes that size doesn’t matter. A small person is still a person—embryo, fetus, a premature baby, or a newborn. Recently, however, Horton’s adage was used in a new way. A radio show discussed an insect that uses vibration to communicate. Apparently wind turbines were disrupting the messages vibrating back and forth. What to do? How should conflicting interests (clean energy vs. insect life) be resolved? No answer was proffered but the radio commentator said the idea of communication made the insect seem more “like a person.” Endearing sympathy for the little insects he said, “after all ‘a person’s a person, no matter how small.’”

The Brethren in Christ core value, “Pursuing Peace,” begins with the affirmation that

“We value all human life.” To value human life is not to devalue other life forms, but it does draw a line of distinction between human life and all other life on our planet. We are right to be mindful stewards of the earth and life. This was the command in Eden passed down to us. We do not, however, legitimately equate insects with communication abilities to “personhood” as the radio commentator suggested. After all, animal communication is not unusual, but rather a creation norm from singing whales to chirping crickets to all kinds of distinctive mating rituals.

The question that is before us is how we use and define personhood or person. The radio commentator wanted to elevate the interesting insect by equating communication skills with personhood. Others want to use personhood to devalue humans. Humans with disabilities or the wrong age (too young—preborn; too old—near death) or in a state of non-communication are said not to have personhood even though they are human. In this way humanity is not denied, but the value of that particular human’s life is denied. When lacking personhood, individuals may be deemed expendable and then “rightfully” their lives can be terminated whether for their own good, the good of

someone with personhood, or society’s good. Non-persons have no rights, not even the right to life.

Noted philosopher and professor at Princeton University, Peter Singer, divides personhood from being human. He once wrote, “...we should not accept that a potential person should have the rights of a person, unless we can be given some specific reason why this should hold in this particular case” (*Practical Ethics*). In other words you may be human, but you do not necessarily hold personhood; and personhood is the golden ticket to rights. The unborn, defective newborns, and people groups we want to dismiss can all be relegated to non-persons. Even without Singer’s sophistication of thought, humans naturally de-humanize those we dislike or want to take advantage of. A mafia boss in “The Godfather” said it was okay to sell drugs in the ghettos because those “dark people” were “animals.” They were non-persons to him. In another movie example, it has been pointed out that George Lucas’ violence in “Star Wars” was made palatable by the storm troopers’ armor, which rendered them as non-persons. In real life, we know the U.S. legal system did not recognize slaves as full “persons.” Based on German social

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