



Volume 5 Issue 5

West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

The Self-Existent God

When God revealed His name “I AM” to Moses at the burning bush, He was revealing something very important about Himself, namely, that He is self-existent; He has the power of being in and of Himself. He depends on nothing and no one for His existence. This fact has enormous consequences for how we understand the world around us.

Antony Flew was an English philosopher who, though known for his work in philosophy of religion, was a devout atheist for much of his professional career. In fact, in 1968, he published a book titled *Reason and Responsibility*, which contained an argument against the existence of God. His argument became known as “Flew’s Parable.” But at the age of eighty-one, Flew “converted” and became a theist, at one point saying, “I now realize that I have made a fool of myself by believing that there were no presentable theories of the development of inanimate matter up to the first living creature capable of reproduction.” Flew understood that, apart from this view, known as the “God hypothesis,” science itself would be impossible.

The Christian faith is constantly under attack in the secular world, and in recent generations the weapons of criticism have been aimed chiefly at the idea of creation. Secularists understand that if they can refute the biblical concept of creation, they will have dealt a mortal blow against Christianity—and against all religion. Critics are cynical about the idea that the universe was created by God, a personal, transcendent, immutable being, saying that such an idea is unscientific, illogical, and a myth.

To understand the seeds of this skepticism, one must go back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The principal thesis of the Enlightenment was that the God hypothesis was no longer necessary for modern science to account for the origin of human life or the universe. Before the Enlightenment, philosophers, even if they were not believers, had to give obeisance to Christian philosophy because they couldn’t account for the universe apart from some idea of a transcendent being.

With the advent of the Enlightenment, all of this fell away. Scholars said, “*We can explain the universe, and life in its origin, without an appeal to a transcendent deity.*” Some publicly declared themselves the personal enemies of God, saying they had identified the cause of the universe and of life: spontaneous generation. For instance, they would look at a mud puddle. With the naked eye, they could see nothing in the mud puddles, but then all of a sudden, tadpoles were swimming in the mud puddle. These scholars surmised that the tadpoles came into being through their own power. That is, they were self-created. (Today we would know that there were microscopic frogs’ eggs in the puddle.)

There are only three possible explanations for anything that exists now: it is self-created, it is eternal, or it is created by something that is eternal. I gave a presentation at Yale, with faculty philosophers present, where I presented these options; they agreed that it had to be one of these three. Notice that the second two possibilities involve something eternal. If the first possibility can be eliminated, then the thesis that something has always been is proven.



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Of course, the concept of spontaneous generation is simply another term for self-creation; it gets a lot of credibility in modern society, but careful examination of the concept will reveal that the idea is an absurd logical impossibility. Why? Because for something to create itself, it would have to be before it was—it would have to be and not be at the same time and in the same relationship, which violates a fundamental principle of truth and science: the law of noncontradiction.

When the Hubble Space Telescope was sent into space to gather more information on the expanding universe, one of the most famous astrophysicists in America was interviewed on the radio. He said, *“Fifteen to seventeen billion years ago, the universe exploded into being.”* What was it before it exploded into being? The only option was nonbeing—which would mean that a fundamental scientific precept was violated: *ex nihilo nihil fit* - *“out of nothing, nothing comes.”* When an otherwise distinguished astrophysicist declares that you get something out of nothing, he stops being a reputable astrophysicist.

In his book *Being and Nothingness*, John-Paul Sartre argued that if God exists, then morality is impossible—because for morality to be significant, people have to be not only free but autonomous. If God exists, we could not be autonomous; since we can't be autonomous, we can't really be moral. Thus, Sartre claimed, the existence of morality makes the God hypothesis impossible.

In the final analysis, the question of God's existence is really not an intellectual question but a moral one. Fallen human beings will go to every extreme possible to banish God as their judge. The controversy about intelligent design is about the same thing. *“Intelligent design”* is redundant; if something is designed, it had to have been by something intelligent. But we want to have unintelligible design—unintentional intentionality, and the absurdities mount up forever. The idea of self-creation is an attempt to explain the universe that is like pulling a rabbit out of the hat, but there's no rabbit in the hat until the magician waves his magic wand; then, voilà! Out comes the rabbit. But what this idea really posits is a rabbit out of the hat without the rabbit, without the hat, and without the magician.

In contrast to self-creation there is the idea of self-existence, or what is called in theology the concept of aseity. That is an obscure and esoteric term. Yet, that one little word captures all of the glory of the perfection of God's being. What makes God different from people, from the stars, from earthquakes, and from any other creaturely thing is that God—and God alone—has aseity; He alone exists by His own power. No one made Him or caused Him. He exists in and of Himself. This is a quality that no creature shares. People are not self-existent; neither are cars or stars. Only God has the concept of self-existence.

Some people stumble over the idea of God's self-existence—even someone like the brilliant twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell. In his book *Why I Am Not a Christian*, Russell said that when he was eighteen years old, he read an essay by the philosopher John Stuart Mill. Up to that point, he had affirmed the existence of God. But, Russell said, *“At the age of eighteen, I read John Stuart Mill's Autobiography, and I there found this sentence: ‘My father taught me that the question “Who made me?” cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question “Who made god?”’* That very simple sentence showed me, as I still think, the fallacy in the argument of the First Cause. If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause.” Russell had made an elementary error. The law of causality does not say that everything has to have a cause; rather, it says that every effect must have an antecedent cause. An effect is something that is caused by something else.



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A cause can only be a cause if it produces an effect. But God is not an effect, caused by something before Him. He is self-existent. He owes His being to nothing outside of Himself. He has the power of being within Himself.

Someone may ask, "What's the difference between self-creation and self-existence? Aren't they both a challenge to logic?" No—self-creation is illogical and absurd. But consider the idea of something that exists eternally on its own power. Is there anything irrational about that? That's not to say that if something can pass the test of rationality, it must be true. I'm not saying that. But the idea of self-existence violates no law of reason; it's a rational concept. Not only is the idea of a self-existent being possible, but as Thomas Aquinas said, "*God's being, unlike any other thing that exists, is necessary being.*"

A necessary being is a being who cannot not be. It exists by the sheer necessity of its eternal being, of its aseity. A self-existent being is not hypothetical or dependent on another concept; it's necessary. God can't not be. Not only is God's being necessary ontologically, but it's also logically necessary. If anything exists now, something must have aseity. God must have the power of being within Himself that is not derived from something outside of Himself. This is transcendent being.

When we talk about God's transcendence, we mean that way in which God is greater and superior to anything in the finite, created world. Something has to be eternal, and if it is eternal, it is so because it can't stop being. But why can't there be some inanimate thing in the universe from which everything else derives? Why do we have to say that we need a transcendent being?

When we use the word transcendent with respect to God, we are not referring to geography, to where God lives. If God is self-existent, eternal, and pure, then He is, by definition, transcendent. He's a higher order of being. It is for that reason that God calls Himself "I AM." When we consider the transcendence and aseity of our God, we will respond in worship and awe—just as Moses did at the burning bush. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

Building a Leader: The Right Raw Material (Peter)

The twelve apostles included "Simon, who is called Peter" (Matthew 10:2).

Peter is a good illustration of how God builds a spiritual leader. He begins with a person's natural traits and works from there. Natural traits alone don't make a spiritual leader—the person must also be gifted and called by the Holy Spirit to lead in the church and be a model of spiritual virtue. But often God endows future leaders with natural abilities that constitute the raw materials from which He builds spiritual ministries. That was certainly the case with Peter, who demonstrated the leadership qualities of inquisitiveness, initiative, and involvement.

Peter was always asking questions. In fact, the gospel records show he asked more questions than all the other disciples combined! People who aren't inquisitive don't make good leaders because they're not concerned about problems and solutions.

Initiative was another indicator of Peter's leadership potential. He not only asked questions, but also was often the first to respond when Jesus asked the questions (e.g., Matthew 16:15-16; Luke 8:45).



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Building a Leader: The Right Raw Material (Peter)- Cont'd

Also, Peter loved to be in the middle of the action, even when it got him into trouble. For example, we might criticize his lack of faith when he sank after walking on water, but remember, the rest of the disciples never even got out of the boat.

Peter was inquisitive, showed initiative, and sought to be involved. How about you? Are you inquisitive about God's truth? Do you take the initiative to learn about Him? Do you want to be involved in what He is doing? If so, you have the raw material for spiritual leadership. Continue to cultivate those qualities, allowing the Spirit to use you for God's glory.

We are to pray for our spiritual leaders and ask our heavenly Father for opportunities to lead others in the way of righteousness. We must use every opportunity to its fullest. ~ ***Dr. John MacArthur***

Denying Dualism

The Devil-as-myth view is Satan's right-hand punch. If that one doesn't get you, then watch out for his left hook. The left-hand attack moves the disinformation to the opposite extreme. If Satan can't get you to ignore him by denying his very existence, he will cunningly lead you to attribute power to him far beyond what he actually possesses. He will seek to persuade you that he is virtually equal to God.

Dualism, as a philosophy and a religion, has vied with Christianity from the beginning. Dualism affirms that the universe is the staging area, the combat zone, for two equal and opposite beings who struggle with each other eternally.

Satan is falsely described in terms of omniscience, omnipresence, and the power to do actual, not merely counterfeit, miracles. He is given attributes orthodox Christianity labels as the incommunicable attributes of God and he is assigned power over nature that rivals the Creator's.

The Bible teaches that Satan is a finite spiritual being. He is temporal and created. In a word, he is a creature. He is more powerful than we, but he is not omnipotent. He is not immutable, as God is. Indeed, Satan's mutability is profound. His most obvious mutation is his fall. He was created a good angel. He fell from his original righteousness and is now totally malevolent. Have you been attributing power to Satan beyond what the Bible indicates he possesses? Look at 1 John 4:4. ~ ***Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.***

Can Theology Be an Idol?

I have heard it said that some men love theology more than they love God. Do not let it be possible to say that of you. Love theology of course: but love theology for no other reason than that it is THEOLOGY—the knowledge of God—and because it is your meat and drink to know God, to know Him truly, and as far as it is given to mortals, to know Him whole.



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Can Theology Be an Idol? - Cont'd

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851–1921) served as professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary for almost thirty-five years. He was one of the greatest theologians of his era, a polymath who seemed to find time to read everything. In September 1903, he delivered an address to the incoming class at Princeton Seminary titled “*Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary.*” This address was later published in pamphlet form and is now available in volume 2 of his Selected Shorter Writings.

As a professor of theology, Warfield knew, as well as anyone could know, the particular dangers associated with the study of theology. He knew that students of theology could begin to treat God as an object to be dissected on the lab table of theological debate. He knew that after thousands of pages of reading, students could become weary of contemplating the things of God. He also knew that theology itself could become an idol. He knew that our love of talking and thinking about God could replace the love of God Himself. He knew that men could love theology more than they love God.

Warfield’s warning is as relevant today as it was in 1903. It remains especially relevant for Reformed theologians and Reformed theologians in training. As Reformed Christians, we have a reputation as loving to study theology, to talk about theology, and to argue about theology. We love theology. We love theological books, theological journals, theological conferences, and theological theologians.

But do we love theology more than we love God? That was Warfield’s concern, and I do not believe that it is an unwarranted concern. When Christians first encounter the deeper issues of theology and begin for the first time to contemplate them, it is like seeing the ocean for the first time. Its size and beauty are both exhilarating and overwhelming. Many fall in love with it. But many also fail to recognize that there is a hidden danger. Those who do not respect the power of the ocean can be swept away by waves and currents. Something similar can happen when we begin to study theology. We can become so overwhelmed that we forget what theology is. We can love theology and forget God Himself.

Imagine that you are married (some of you will not have to imagine). Now imagine that you tell everyone how great your spouse is. You write articles and even books about various characteristics of your spouse and about what your spouse does for you and your family. You read letters written by your spouse. You argue with people in person and online about what your spouse meant in one of his or her letters. And yet if someone asks you, “*When was the last time you talked to your spouse?*” you cannot remember.

Warfield recognized how easy it is for us to forget that theology is the knowledge of the living triune God, our Creator and Redeemer. Theology is not like the study of any other subject. In theology, we are seeking to grow in our knowledge of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is not merely abstract knowledge. It is personal knowledge of the One whom we love because He first loved us. ~ **Dr. Keith A. Mathison / Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla**



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Keeping the Evangel in Evangelism: Why Evangelicalism Can't Abandon the Old, Old Story

The Great Commission stands at the center of Christianity as the command of the risen Lord Jesus Christ for his church to proclaim the name of God in the world for the sake of all nations and God's glory among them. The church fulfills the commission by making disciples of Christ, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded his church to believe and obey (Matthew 28:18-20). Evangelism that calls sinners to repentance and spreads the fame of God's name, then, is at the very heart of the mission of God's people.

EVANGELISM IN A POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD

Every culture and civilization embraces a certain set of assumptions about life, truth, significance, and what it means to be human. Without these shared assumptions, societal life would be impossible. Individuals within these societies may not give much active thought to these common assumptions, but their decisions, expectations, and general dispositions reflect the presence of these assumptions as what some philosophers call background ideas.

Out of these assumptions an entire way of life emerges. Background ideas move into the foreground as morals, manners, and the culture at large begins to reflect the decisive influence of these ideas. In America, an identifiable "American way" of life rules as an operational worldview for many persons — perhaps even replacing more fundamental convictions.

The "American way" involves, among other things, patriotism, a sense of fair play, equality, personal autonomy, and limitless opportunity. We expect each other to respect these assumptions and ideals. Americans are not sure what to do with ideals of equality and fairness, but we are generally certain that equality and fairness are the right categories to employ, regardless of the idea or context.

Looking at these same issues, Peter Berger, who before his death was one of the most influential sociologists of our day, wrote in *The Heretical Imperative* that the "heretical imperative" of the modern era is the imperative to choose. In Berger's analysis, in the premodern era one did not need to choose one's beliefs. Instead, in the West, virtually everyone was born and baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, identity was externally fixed for individuals. In the modern secular world, however, this is no longer the case. Choice is endemic in every area of life — we simply cannot avoid it. As a result, Berger concludes that in the modern age we must take responsibility for our identity. It is no longer given; it is self-determined.

In our culture, people who think themselves autonomous will claim the right to define all meaning for themselves. Any truth claim they reject or resist is simply ruled out of bounds by society at large. We will make our own world of meaning and dare anyone to violate our autonomy.

This is why evangelism is often perceived as insensitive or even threatening in our culture. Evangelism demands that we press the authority of Scripture and the claims of Christ on sinners as we invite them to the free gift of salvation provided through Christ's atoning work.



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Keeping the Evangel in Evangelism: Why Evangelicalism Can't Abandon the Old, Old Story - Cont'd

In a post-Christian age, evangelism will be met with one of three responses. *First*, evangelism will be met with hostility. This will not necessarily take the form of overt action. But, at least in the immediate future, much of this hostility will look like cultural marginalization. Anyone caught inviting sinners to repent of their sin and turn to Christ will be seen as backwards or even culturally subversive.

Second, evangelism will also often be met with befuddlement. In a world that has lost fundamental Christian presuppositions about the holiness of God and human accountability, the call of the gospel will more often perplex than infuriate. The plausibility structures of society are so different from our own that many people simply cannot understand us.

Finally, we will find that we will not only be met with hostility and befuddlement, but also indifference. Many in our society will not even care enough about our message to spend their energies either in hostility or befuddlement.

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF FAITHFUL EVANGELISM

Historical evangelicalism has always valued both theological principle and vigorous evangelism. Indeed, we cannot be authentically and faithfully evangelical without holding both of these features in tandem. The unity between evangelical theology and evangelism is not forced or fabricated. Our theological convictions should irrevocably give birth to our evangelistic fervor.

Historically, evangelicals have always held to the ultimate authority and divine inspiration of Scripture. We believe Scripture, God's inerrant Word, is the only source of real spiritual authority and power. As a result, our evangelism must be rooted in a rigorous commitment to the Bible.

Too often, Christians fail to appeal to Scripture or employ Scripture in evangelism. But Scripture should be our primary tool for introducing people to Jesus. What better way to let people encounter Jesus than simply to show them Jesus in the pages of the New Testament. As my friend Mark Dever explains in his highly accessible book, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*:

The Bible is God's Word and is inspired by God's Spirit. God's message can go out not just through your words and mine, but through his own inspired words. And we can know that he will take a special delight in showing the power of his Word as he uses it in conversions ... Referring to the clear teaching of the Bible also shows our friends that we are not simply giving them our own private ideas; rather, we are presenting Jesus Christ in his own life and teaching. Just as we want the preaching in our churches to be expositional—preaching in which the point of the message is the point of the Bible passage being preached—we want to see people exposed to God's Word because we believe that God desires to use his Word to bring about conversions. It is God's Word coming to us that his Spirit uses to reshape our lives. In your evangelism, use the Bible.



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Keeping the Evangel in Evangelism: Why Evangelicalism Can't Abandon the Old, Old Story - Cont'd

At the same time, evangelicals have also historically affirmed penal substitutionary atonement as the heart of the gospel and thus the heart of our evangelistic message. As J.I. Packer once wrote, penal substitution is “*a distinguishing mark of the worldwide evangelical fraternity.*” Our ultimate need is not that of a moral guide or a philosophy instructor. We need a Savior.

The message of Scripture is that Christ died as a substitute for us, bearing our guilt and absorbing God's wrath so that we might receive his righteousness. Without that message, we lose the evangel of evangelism.

Fundamentally, the survival of the church in a post-Christian age comes down to a promise and a command given us in Scripture, an indicative and an imperative. **First**, we must remember that Jesus promised, “*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*” (Matthew 16:18).

Next, we must remember that we have been commissioned to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:18-20). We need to remember both of these words from Scripture in order to evangelize faithfully and maintain our evangelical identity.

As we evangelize we must keep the gospel and the person of Christ central and we must unashamedly and winsomely teach our evangelical commitments. We must talk about God's holiness and righteousness, we must talk about sin, and we must talk about our need of a Savior. The core of the good news is the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the one we must talk about most of all — and without fail. ~ **Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.**

Contemplating Our Destiny

John the Revelator's vision provides a glorious picture of what will be in heaven. There will be a high wall with twelve gates and twelve angels at the gates. The wall will have twelve foundations. The gates will be named for the twelve tribes of Israel and the foundations for the twelve apostles.

The city will be foursquare, with walls of jasper. The walls' foundations will be adorned with precious gemstones. The gates will be pearls. The city itself will be made of pure gold and the streets will be paved with transparent gold.

These images of breathtaking beauty and opulence pale into insignificance, however, when we consider the most important presence in the Holy City: “*The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads*” (Revelation 22:3-4, ESV).

Heaven is the place of the unveiled presence of God. Christ, in all His splendor, will be there. We shall see Him. We shall speak to Him. We shall hear His voice. We shall serve Him in unspeakable joy. We don't know exactly what heaven will be. The reality will surely exceed all images or symbols of it. But this we do know—heaven is where Jesus is, and it is our destiny. ~ Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.



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The Blessing of the Third Use of the Law

God's law serves at least *three* purposes, which Calvin wisely expressed. He affirmed that the law *first* serves as a mirror for us. It reveals the perfect character of God, and in so doing, it exposes our sin. This might be called the schoolmaster function. The law instructs us in our need for God's grace. It reveals His perfection, and our failure to measure up. It reveals our need for Christ.

The *second* use is often called the civil use of the law. Here Calvin argued that those outside the kingdom are restrained by the revelation of the law. It doesn't change the heart of the unregenerate, but it can create a sense of fear. As the civil law reflects God's revealed law, and with it, civil sanctions, it restrains the wicked.

The *third* use of the law is likely the most controversial. Calvin argued that the law reveals to us that which is pleasing to God. That is, it tells us what to do. As we obey it we please Him. Some fear that in embracing this third use we muddy up the first use. If we argue with respect to the law, "*This you must do*" are we not at least obscuring the truth that "*This you cannot do.*"?

My fear, however, operates in the other direction. If we obscure the third use of the law we obscure the first use of the law. That is, if we are not called and required to follow the commands of God, our failure to do so doesn't mean we are at enmity with God. The schoolmaster cannot tell us of our need for atonement if we have not failed to do what we are called to do. *Secondly*, however, without the third use of the law we end up worse off than the heathen. We don't know what to do. We are left without direction. If we are not called to do what the law of God says, how will we decide what to do?

Some will say, "*Let love decide.*" Great answer. Trouble is, the Great Commandment, which calls us to love God and our neighbor, is that which binds up all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:40). Which means that "love" is not a new, indistinct, culturally conditioned law, but is instead the law of God. We are not left with what we think love means, by abandoning the law, but are left with what love actually means by keeping the law.

The third use of the law, however, has this other benefit. We could see it as the other side of the second use coin, or as an extension of the third use. The law tells us how to have a good life. It tells us how to be blessed. It tells us how to do what we were made to do. To put it more poetically, the law is the gateway to joy. This is less because, especially for believers, God sends thunderbolts down on us when we disobey Him, or rose petals on us when we obey. It is more because the law is good in itself. Obedience is blessing long before obedience brings blessing. We were made for this.

David certainly needed the law to convict him, to point him to his need for Christ. But he sang, "*Oh how I love your law*" (Psalm 119:97) for the joy that it brings. God's law is not a list of pleasures we are not allowed to have, a list of delights we are not allowed to touch. It is instead pleasure and delight. Having been, while yet unbelievers, restrained, having been at our conversion convicted, having been in our walk instructed, may we be in our hearts, as we will be in eternity, ever joyful. ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Jr.**



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Birthday and Anniversary Corner - May 2018

Birthdays

Elyse T. (1)
Patrick D. (2)
Sarah B. (22)
Mike M. (22)
Jackson T. (22)
Brian R. (26)
John H. (30)

Anniversaries

Tom and Marcie S. (22)
Ben and Charlene S. (25)

“When we understand the character of God, when we grasp something of His holiness, then we begin to understand the radical character of our sin and hopelessness. Helpless sinners can survive only by grace. Our strength is futile in itself; we are spiritually impotent without the assistance of a merciful God. We may dislike giving our attention to God's wrath and justice, but until we incline ourselves to these aspects of God's nature, we will never appreciate what has been wrought for us by grace. Even Edwards's sermon on sinners in God's hands was not designed to stress the flames of hell. The resounding accent falls not on the fiery pit but on the hands of the God who holds us and rescues us from it. The hands of God are gracious hands. They alone have the power to rescue us from certain destruction.” ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr. - The Holiness of God*



West Suffolk Leadership

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Please submit information to Walt Lawrence by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

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