Confronting Religious Plagiarism

From the series, Encountering Jesus: The Gospel of Luke
Luke 20:46-47
By Dr. David H. McKinley

I'm sure at some point in your life you have heard this statement: "Imitation is the greatest form of flattery."

When somebody starts something and other people do it, it's sometimes a great thing—a great movement, if you will—of affirmation of your idea or creative work. Whether we're talking about the "M Tuck" (the Millennial Tuck)—a cultural phenomenon where you tuck in half your shirt tail—or whether it's having the mannerisms of someone who has greatly influenced you, imitation can be a wonderful form of flattery. But that's not true of *all* imitation.

I heard about a wife who looked at her husband one morning and said, "Honey, you are a model husband," and he replied, "Thank you, sweetheart. You've made my day!" But as he went through the day and thought about her statement, "You are a model husband," he looked up the word, model. You know what it said? A small imitation of the real thing.

Well, not all imitation is good, but we understand the concept that imitation is a wonderful form of flattery. Having said that, though, let me turn that statement around and say this as a very definitive statement: Imitation may be a great form of flattery, but plagiarism is the worst form of thievery. There's nothing worse than meeting someone or seeing something you thought to be real, authentic, and original, only to realize it was only fake plagiarism.

The word, *plagiarism*, is a noun:

"Pla·gia·rism $\ n$ 1: the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own."

Of course, there have been many instances of plagiarism in the world of publication, music, and all sorts of other places. It happens in the workplace when someone steals someone else's idea and concept and presents it as their own. However you want to ultimately package and use it, plagiarism is among the worst forms of deceit, and ultimately, of trickery and thievery. That's exactly what we meet in the world of religion when we open the pages of the Bible to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 20.

As you know, we're making our way very quickly toward the end of this book—getting the end in mind first—in order to encounter Jesus before going back to the beginning of the book. Last week we saw how Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51b). He made His way from Galilee down through the Jordan Valley, into the city of Jericho, and met a little man by the name of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who profited off the plight of his own people, met Jesus because Jesus called him

out, called him forth, and said, "I'm going to your house" (see Luke 19:1-10). Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus in and as a result, Zacchaeus' life was changed.

After this, Jesus went up to Jerusalem and entered the city (the triumphal entry) riding on the back of a donkey's colt. Then begins the countdown to the cross—the final week of the life of Jesus.

What we are about to read may have, in fact, been what happened on the final day of Jesus' public ministry before He gathered with the disciples in the upper room, went through the Passover, and on to what would happen and unfold with the cross.

"One day" (Luke 20:1a).

Luke doesn't tell us which day, but it was probably about the third or the fourth day.

"Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel" (Luke 20:1).

Isn't it interesting that Jesus, who is the gospel, was preaching the gospel! The word, gospel, means good news. Jesus was giving people good news! He was telling them about the love of God and the grace of the Father. So Jesus was preaching the gospel when...

"The chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, 'Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.' He answered them, 'I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?'" (Luke 20:1b-4).

Then as we drop down to the end of the chapter, this is how it closes:

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense [look at this word, *pretense*] make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation" (Luke 20:26-27).

Luke opens the chapter by talking about the good news of the gospel. He closes by giving the bad news of condemnation to those who are religious pretenders—people who are the plagiarists of God's truth and present themselves as being something and someone they are not.

These religious pretenders were a select group. In Luke 20:1, we are told they were the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. By virtue of the way this is presented, likely they were some sort of official delegation sent to inquire of Jesus, but more than that, to ensnare Jesus. Why do I say this? Previously Scripture tells us,

"And he [Jesus] was teaching daily in the temple" (Luke 19:47).

The chief priests, scribes, and principal men of the people were seeking to destroy Jesus, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on Jesus' words.

This religious group had an agenda. They knew what they wanted to do. They wanted to take Jesus out. So to do this, an official delegation was sent to meet and speak with Him. They were those who had hijacked the true faith. They had built a religious system based on ritual, commandment, and performance. They had given people all these burdensome rules, and they were the rulers of the rules. Therefore they subjected the people under their religious teachings. They heaped guilt on the lives of people and were constantly working against the grace of God by establishing their own system of religion.

Of course, from the very origin of Judaism, God made a covenant with Abraham. In that covenant, God said that He was going to make Abraham a mighty nation and through Abraham, all the nations of the world would be blessed. The people of Abraham were to provide a light and hope for the future. But this system of religion had become corrupted. This group was caught up in and a part of this corruption. As a result, they were attempting to pass off their own plagiarized version of the will of God—a counterfeit faith—and they were the rulers in it and through it. And so they laid claim to authority. They were the authorities and the establishment. When Jesus came preaching, the people began to flock to Jesus because of His authority in speech, and this group came to Jesus to question His authority.

When the Bible says the chief priests, scribes, and elders *came up* to Jesus (see Luke 20:1-2), the idea of coming up wasn't that they sort of wandered up and said, "Hey, Jesus." No. The idea was that they came to create a disruption as Jesus was speaking and teaching. They got in His face and said,

"Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority" (Luke 20:2).

It was none other than Karl Marx who once said, "If you want to understand the nature of structure, try to change it."

Here Jesus challenged their structure, and suddenly, they began to resist. They were looking for any way they could to take Jesus out. But notice that phrase,

"Who it is that gave you this authority [to do these things]" (Luke 20:2b).

There was a challenge to His authority.

Authority is a critical issue in every one of our lives. Every one of us lives life based upon some means of authority. It affects our decisions and actions in the course of every day. You may be your own authority. You may let social media be your authority. You may let some teaching be your authority. The issue of authority is among the most critical of all issues we deal with today. This group of chief priests, scribes and elders did not like the fact people were responding to the authority of Jesus.

When they said, "Who it is that gave you this authority [to do these things]" (Luke 20:2b), what were they talking about? What were the *things* Jesus was doing that this group was trying to confront and expose? One of the things probably had to do with the way Jesus came into the city. We know of it as *the triumphal entry*—Palm Sunday. Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on the colt, the foal of a donkey. That was significant to this group because they knew the writings of the prophets of the Old Testament. This religious group knew the voices of authority, but they had ultimately replaced the authority of the prophets with their own system and their own means of religious management. Zechariah, one of the prophets of the Old Testament, said this:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9).

Old Testament prophecy said the Messiah, the Promised One, would come into Jerusalem riding a donkey. This religious group thought, "Well, since this one cannot be that One, who does he think he is, presenting himself to the people in this manner."

The Bible also tells us in Luke 19:45-56 that Jesus went into the temple and confronted the money changers who were profiting from the selling of animals for sacrifice, making money off the people. Jesus went in and disrupted all that. I'm sure the religious men were thinking, "Who gave him the authority to do this?" Of course, Jesus said:

"'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers" (Luke 19:46b).

The Bible clearly tells us in Luke 20:1 that Jesus was preaching the gospel. What does that mean? Look in Luke 24. We read an account of what happened when Jesus, after the resurrection, met two men traveling on the road to Emmaus. The Bible says that Jesus came up to them...

"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

Jesus was clearly standing in the temple saying, "Now you know when you read this in the books of Moses and when you read this from the prophets, these things are telling you that I am the One."

When this religious group of men said, "Tell us by what authority you do these things" (Luke 20:2a), they had some very specific things in mind that Jesus had done and spoke. They wanted to do everything they could to turn this not just toward some sense of a greater interpretation or resolution; they wanted to turn it toward a deadly inquisition. Jesus was a threat, and they wanted to take Him out.

When it comes to authority, that's still true today. There's no greater issue in our world today. What is the source the truth? What is the source of authority in life for every one of us? Is there a single truth

source by which we all are to see and understand in our lives? Or does everyone have their own truth source—some mixture or amalgamation of your truth and my truth, this idea and that idea? Whether it be religious or completely irreligious, what is the basis of authority? That was the critical issue in Luke's day, and it is still the issue today. Authority. Authority.

However, when you encounter and meet Jesus, there are some things you discover about authority. The first of those I would point out from this passage of Scripture is simply this:

When you encounter Jesus, you discover:

1. Jesus Speaks with Ultimate Authority

This Jesus, whom they sought to expose, ensnare, and entrap, was the very One they could not get their hands on or get their minds around because they couldn't outwit or outsmart Him. They came to Him, and their first thing was to simply say, "Who gave you this authority?" So Jesus decided to defer the question of authority to another authority, John the Baptist.

"He [Jesus] answered them, 'I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?'" (Luke 20:3).

Before Jesus answered this group of chief priests, scribes and elders, He basically asked, "Was John the Baptist speaking for God or was he just some radical, rebellious prophet? Was his wisdom human or was it divine?"

Suddenly the religious leaders found the tables had been turned from their question about Jesus' authority to a question about their understanding and their authority.

How well the people loved John the Baptist! They believed him to be a prophet of God. The religious leaders knew if they said to Jesus that John was sent by God, then they would have to affirm what John preached. And John the Baptist said:

"Among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1:26b-27).

John the Baptist baptized Jesus, so if these religious leaders affirmed John, they would have to affirm Jesus. But on the other hand, if they said that John was not from God—he was saying and doing his own thing—then that would cause them public scorn with the people who loved and honored John.

Although the religious leaders had the question of authority, Jesus pressed them on the issue of truth source and authority. So the religious leaders responded in somewhat the same way most people do in our world today. They said, "We don't know."

That is a common response. Our world asks the questions, What about this? What about suffering? What about injustice? What about...? What about...? However, when they are pressed

on the issue of truth, they typically default to the same thing: "We don't know. We're agnostic. But whatever it is, we're not going to believe." And that's exactly what this group expressed. It was a tactical retreat, and they continued to act as if the issue for them was a mental issue they could not understand intellectually. But the real issue for them is the real issue in our world today when it comes to authority. It's not intellectual; it's moral. It's an issue of the will. It's an issue of whether you are willing to recognize who Jesus is and His authoritative word. You've got to be willing to respond to Jesus.

So the Bible tells us that Jesus was preaching the gospel—a message of hope, but a hard message that required a response. Let me just quickly point out to you the highlights of the gospel.

What is the Gospel?

Our Purpose

We were made by God and for His glory.

You're not the result of some endless biological process. You are here personally and purposefully because God made you. God created you, and He wants you to live for His purpose and His glory.

It was Blaise Pascal who said, "There's a God-shaped vacuum in every man that only God can fill."

The reality is that what you are looking for through the dissatisfaction, the uncertainty, the hunger of your heart, and the craving of your life is to know the God who made you to know Himself.

Our Problem

We are separated from God by sin.

Sin is a virus that lives in the operating system of our lives. It's what makes us do what we don't want to do and doesn't allow us to do what we want to do. It is sin that corrupts every relationship and sin that affects our attitudes and ambitions. It's sin that affects and impacts our affections. Sin is being separated from God. Sin is being corrupted internally, and the result is that we cannot fix ourselves.

God's Provision

Jesus came on a rescue mission to save us.

The good news of the gospel is the message of God's provision. God sent Jesus, His Son, on a rescue mission to save us. That's the primary verse we looked at last week:

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

Yes, we are lost in sin, but we have a Savior, and He came. It is God's divine initiative, not human effort, that allows a way for us to be saved.

God's Promise

When we look to Jesus and surrender to His authority, we can be saved (see Romans 10:9-10).

God's promise is that when we look to Jesus and surrender to His authority, we can be saved. Here's how the writer, Paul, presents it in the book of Romans:

"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10:9, 13).

Salvation is not in us. It's not in a religious system. It's not in anyone or anything other than the Son of God. Therefore all of life depends on whether you respond to the authority of Jesus and confess Him as Lord, or whether you reject Jesus.

To drive that point home, Jesus told a story, a parable, in Luke 20:9-18. This parable was about a man who planted a vineyard and he leased it to tenants before going to another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants to provide him with some of the fruit.

This first servant was beaten and sent away empty-handed. The next servant was beaten, treated shamefully, and sent away empty-handed. The third servant was wounded and cast out. Then we're told:

"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Luke 20:13-16a).

Jesus tells this story about how the owner of the vineyard kept sending his representatives and the tenants despised, rejected, and beat them until finally, they killed the heir, the son. This was not some random story Jesus told; it's a story that has clear context in the text of Scripture.

"For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!" (Isaiah 5:7).

Don't think these chief priests, scribes, and religiously educated men did not understand. When Jesus was talking about a vineyard and the rejection of those that had been sent, He was implying they had not only despised the prophets and rejected the servants, they would also be the ones who would kill the Son.

Jesus exposed them in this moment; He exposed their hardness because God was the proprietor, the owner of the vineyard, and they were the plagiarists. They were the ones who took everything that

God had said and done, and they co-opted it as their own. They presented it as their own authority only to ultimately have an accountability before God because they rejected His Son. They substituted human effort, human righteousness, and human works for the grace, kindness, and love of God.

On the one hand, Jesus came to declare that God loves us, and His grace and mercy are extended to us. God knows our condition, and He wants to save us. On the other hand, Jesus clearly came to confront every system and every form of authority that raises itself up to be a substitute for the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Therefore in the words of Pastor Adrian Rogers, "The worst form of human badness is human goodness when it becomes a substitute for the new birth."

Jesus was making it clear in this moment that His authority was absolutely linked to His identity, and that identity was that He was the Child of promise, born in Luke 2—the One who came from the house of David, the One who came to live a sinless life, the One who would ultimately be falsely accused, wrongly charged, crucified on a Roman cross, but would then rise on the third day!

God's standard of righteousness is only met by One and in One. His name is Jesus! When you begin to encounter Jesus, you will understand that Jesus is not just one of many optional ways to come to God; He is the only and exclusive way of salvation.

That is not a popular message in a culture that wants to accommodate everyone and affirm everything. But that is the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's not Jesus plus anyone or anything; it's Jesus alone.

While I know I am hammering a message to a group of people who come to church and profess belief in Christ, I want you to know if this is the last sermon I ever preach, I would much rather know I preached a sermon to you about the exclusivity of the gospel and the authority of Jesus than any other subject because this is the subject that matters. It's who Jesus is!

That's not all that happened in this section of Scripture with the religious leaders. They also had to learn another lesson because they continued to try and trick Jesus. They moved from religious talk about religious life to the government and civil life—the issue of taxes with Israel being under Rome rule and the tension between pagan Roman rulers, and, if you will, the religious holiness of the Jewish people.

In a previous message and just a few verses earlier in Luke 19, we read the story about this swindling, indulging Zacchaeus who came to Jesus and became a generous man to pay back the wrongful taxes he had collected. He became a philanthropist and gave it back to the people.

But in our passage today, spies sent by the scribes and chief priests came to Jesus, and as they began to address Him, they asked Him,

"Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" (Luke 20:22).

"Okay, Jesus, you're a smart person. You claim to have authority. Tell us if you're from God. Should we honor God by giving to Caesar? Caesar is a pagan ruler. He takes our money, which we have dedicated to God, and uses it to build pagan temples and to worship false gods and to create a culture that denies the one true God of Israel? So should we be paying for this?"

They were trying to trap Jesus again. They were hoping to get Him to somehow despise the authority of Caesar and to assert His own authority and to appear them and others. But as they began to ask these questions, Jesus made something very clear.

When you encounter Jesus, you will discover:

2. Jesus Demands Whole-Life Integrity (Luke 20:19-26)

The Lordship of Christ applies to the daily activity of life in the society in which we live.

"'Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?' But he [Jesus] perceived their craftiness, and said to them, 'Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?' They said, 'Caesar's.' He said to them, 'Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'" (Luke 20:22-25).



Roman coins, much like our own coins today, bore the emblem of the head of the head of state. Above is an example of an ancient Roman coin with the head of Caesar Augustus. When they held up the denarii, Jesus said, "Well, there's your lesson right there. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Just because I'm the authority doesn't mean I'm here to undermine every authority. You give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and you give to God what is God's. You are to live as a child of God even in a pagan society that does not honor God, and that ultimately lives apart from God."

An authentic encounter with Christ is to choose a path of justice, integrity, and righteousness in citizenship and in societal responsibility. The Apostle Paul would write about this in Romans 13 about how we are to live in relationship to the government as believers. And Peter, who was obviously there and probably heard this conversation, may have had this in mind when he wrote this in 1 Peter:

"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil,

but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Peter 2:13-17).

Peter was writing about holiness and righteousness. Life as a follower of Christ is to be lived with sincerity, humility, and integrity, even in a world that opposes the God we love and serve. That's an important thing for us to understand because we tend to live between two camps:

(1) Dominion Theology—Our purpose is to establish the kingdom of God on earth in the way in which we ultimately take over the government, control the government, and that the government is to ultimately provide God's kingdom.

Now I believe we need to honor God's authority, and I believe in a democracy. We need to speak loudly, clearly, and forcefully to be influencers for good. But I want you to know my hope is not in this world or this government. My hope is in Jesus Christ and His coming Kingdom.

(2) Liberation Theology—Our role is to overthrow the powers that be and to liberate them from the structures of the societal past. When we are free of that, we will establish true justice.

The Bible does not confirm Dominion Theology—that Jesus came to re-establishment the State of Israel in that day—nor Liberation Theology—that we are to overthrow in this day. We live subject to one King and His kingdom, and His name is Jesus. Everything we do is to reflect the integrity of our lives—truth, honesty, justice, righteousness and yes, even support for a civil society—because we want to be difference-makers living to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. Holiness is the internal desire of every true believer, a desire to live a life set apart for the glory and the purposes of God in all aspects of life.

When you encounter Jesus, you're going to find He's the ultimate authority. When you encounter Jesus, you're going to realize His demand is whole-life integrity, not compartmental living. "This belongs to God, and this belongs to me." No. God does not let us compartmentalize. Every part of our life is to be lived out for His glory.

When you encounter Jesus, you discover:

3. Jesus Exposes Religious Hypocrisy

"There came to him [Jesus] some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother'" (Luke 20:27-28).

Then these Sadducees gave an illustration of this happening seven times. How does that happen with one bride and seven brothers?

The Sadducees were an interesting group. While the Pharisees and scribes were the conservatives of the Jewish religion, the Sadducees were the liberals. They didn't really believe anything. They didn't

believe in miracles or the supernatural or the resurrection, and that's why they were "sad-you-see." They had no hope. They were woke with no hope.

Likewise, we have a world full of religious hypocrisy. Never has it been closer and greater to who and where we are today. There is a great battle going on in the world and in the evangelical world of Christianity regarding the authority of Jesus and the implications of a life of integrity and what it means to put away religious hypocrisy. There are many people who stand and preach in churches across America who scatter a little Bible verse here and there but not preach the Bible! They offer a message of affirmation and accommodation, a message guiltless in its response, gutless in its calling, and ultimately, gullible—a message people will believe, but it does not define the truth of God.

Jesus came to expose the hypocrisy of a religion that has no hope because it doesn't change the lives of people! It doesn't call for holiness and righteousness. So Jesus dealt with these Sadducees and what they said, and He exposed the hypocrisy of their heart. Ultimately Jesus brought it back to yet another question about David—how David spoke of bowing at the throne of his son, who is Lord. Who was David talking about?

David was pointing to Jesus, and in this moment, Jesus demonstrated that the faith that has been delivered to us is a faith that is based upon the promises and the prophecies of God, not the pretenses of religious rituals of men. That's why Jesus said,

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces" (Luke 20:46a).

Here they are. They're getting all this honor because they've got this whole system that honors them but denies the truth of God.

"For a pretense make long prayers" (Luke 20:47b).

We're living in a day of pretentious religion. A pretense looks good, sounds good, acts good, but in the end, it is deadly. Jesus says,

"They will receive the greater condemnation" (Luke 20:47c).

Since these religious groups couldn't trap Jesus publicly, they aligned together and began to work behind the scenes. In the next 72 hours, they would come up with a plan, a conspiracy, and gain the alliance of one of the disciples of Jesus named Judas. Ultimately, all this public discourse and conversation would turn to an awful and tragic deception whereby Jesus would be crucified, and that's where we're going in this series.

Today I simply want to end this time with you by saying the most crucial issue in your life is coming to terms with this question: Who and what will be the authority of your life? Will you be your own

authority? Will you let someone else be the authority? Or will you honor, recognize, and bow to the authority of Jesus Christ?

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." —C.S. Lewis

Lord. Liar. Lunatic. You must decide. But know this: Jesus is the ultimate authority and if you decide against Him, your life will be the greatest tragedy it could ever be.

Lord, today I pray we would see and hear the truth of the gospel—who Jesus is, what He has done, why He came, that He lives today, and that, Lord, You rule and you reign! While we don't see You today, Lord, many of us in this room know You and love You. Because we profess You to be the Lord of our lives as our ultimate authority, I pray we would live with a whole life of integrity touching every aspect of who we are and what we do. Strip us of every form of religious hypocrisy, the plagiarism that so often presents one thing as being true, when in reality, it is a fake, pretense, or fraud.

I pray if there's someone here today who has never confessed Jesus is Lord, this would be that moment when they bow at Your throne, confess Jesus, and receive Him today.

Thank you, Lord, that You came to replace religious hypocrisy with authentic reality of a transformed life through the power of Your love and the work of the Holy Spirit. Move and work in these moments of response I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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