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Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: World Religions

(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: Double Predestination and the Trinity: Calvin's Contradiction

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		Achievement level		
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<b>General assessment criteria</b> <i>Refer to the general guidelines.</i>	<b>A</b> Research question	<input style="width: 20px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	2	<input style="width: 20px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>
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**Double Predestination and the Trinity:  
Calvin's Contradiction**

By

Candidate Number-

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With thanks to  
and                      for encouraging  
me to study Calvinism.

**Abstract:**

Is the Trinity that Calvin defines contradictory to the Trinity implied in double-predestination? The paper will start by looking at Calvin's teachings on double-predestination and the nature of the Trinity. It will then attempt to show how the Trinity necessary to carry out double-predestination contradicts the Trinity that Calvin defines in his teachings. This contradiction is the result of an ambiguity between what the true will of God entails and the nature of Christ's power to spread grace through the Gospel. Next, some of Calvin's counter-arguments to this claim are presented, along with other arguments against the doctrine of predestination, to show how the nature of Christianity and Theology lend themselves to everlasting debate, justified by the inability of man to fully understand God.

## **Introduction:**

The concept of the Trinity, or the relationship between God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in Christianity, is one for which many different interpretations exist. Understanding and recognizing this bond is a key component of Christianity. How you interpret the Trinity has ramifications for an individual's association with a particular sect of Christianity, the authority of Christ's words in comparison to those of God, and the classification of Christianity as a religion. This topic's great importance to Christianity, coupled with its range of differing opinions, makes it both thought-provoking and necessary to understand in order to grasp the foundations of the Christian faith.

John Calvin's proposal about the Trinity is particularly notable, especially when looking at the roles of each component of the Trinity in relation to human salvation. Calvin upholds that God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all of the same will. Calvin also claims that God, not people, has total control over whether or not a person will be among the elect, those chosen by God and blessed with true faith so that they may be forgiven for their sins in order to ascend to heaven upon their death, or among the reprobate, those whom God allows to remain with insufficient faith, thereby condemning them to eternal damnation. However, this assertion, known as double-predestination, being the will of God, appears, for some, to come into conflict with Calvin's stance on the role of Christ within the Trinity. This is a problem that cannot be ignored, as in a unified Trinity, God's will cannot be pitted against Christ's actions.

What is the role of each component of the Trinity according to John Calvin, and how do the components come into conflict with one another when their roles are made to fit in with predestination? The clash between the Trinity Calvin defines and the Trinity necessary to carry out predestination exists because of the nature of theology and the inability of man to understand entirely all of the actions and decrees of a god. Biblical interpretation is prone to an array of conclusions and opinions and, even if one truth exists, it is influenced by outside desires and observations; Calvin's thoughts on predestination were no exception. For the sake of this investigation is it important to note that, due to the word limit, it is necessary to leave out some arguments, counterarguments, and evidence for each point, the broader point being that Calvin was able to develop and support two ideas that may oppose one another due to the complexity of theological study.

## Defining Calvin's Trinity

"Unless we grasp [the three persons of God], only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God."<sup>1</sup> John Calvin's words show the importance that he placed on understanding the Trinity and, therefore, due to the nature of Christian theology as the quest to understand the meaning of God's words and actions, to grasping how crucial that understanding is in the works of his life. Calvin was an eternalist, meaning he believed that God existed outside of time or, as he put it, "When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things always were, and perpetually remain, under his eyes, so that to his knowledge there is nothing future or past, but all things are present."<sup>2</sup> Believing this leads to the belief that, from our perspective, God has foreknowledge of all events that will pass in our life, from how rich we are to our salvation or damnation.

Clear definitions of words that have great bearing upon Biblical understanding is a point that Calvin stressed greatly, and he took the utmost care to ensure a minimal amount of misinterpretation was possible. He knew the great importance of understanding theological ideas and the great ease in which theological ideas are open to various interpretations and stances.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore necessary to clearly define what Calvin means when he says "God," as that definition lends insight into the nature and function of the Trinity according to Calvin. Calvin believed that a total unification between the three aspects of the Trinity existed, meaning the essence, divinity, or will of all three are one and the same and together make up all that is meant in the name of God.<sup>4</sup>

Distinguishing traits remain, however, in that each part of the Trinity plays a role within the will of God, resulting in three other titles: the Father; the Son, Christ; and the Holy Spirit. These subsidiary titles are relational terms that have important implications. For example, the Father begat Christ, but only the human form of Christ, not the divinity within Christ, which remains unified with the Father. Therefore, when Calvin uses the term "the Father" he implies a contextual reference to the earthly Son, since the same essence that begat the earthly Christ is within Christ.<sup>5</sup> The implicit relationships between the terms are not as blatant when dealing with the Holy Spirit, yet they still exist such that the will of Christ or the Father is the same as that of the Holy Spirit, who carries out the will of God in men's hearts. The main point for addressing the impending conflict with the idea of predestination, though, is that when Calvin

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<sup>1</sup> Helm, Paul. *John Calvin's Ideas*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 44.



declares predestination as “God’s eternal election,” he refers to an election that is consented to by the entirety of an all-knowing Trinity.<sup>6</sup>

### **On Calvinist Predestination**

How can listening to the Gospel being preached in the same way lead one man into faith and another into nothing? Partly in seeking to answer that question, Calvin supported the idea of predestination,<sup>7</sup> which is now explained by what we call the “Five points of Calvinism.”<sup>8</sup>

Adam’s original sin in the Garden of Eden caused humans, according to Calvin, to enter such a depraved state that no man alone could ever be good enough to earn God’s mercy or come into a strong faith in God.<sup>9</sup>(Point 1)<sup>10</sup> A strong faith in God, however, is what Calvin, in accordance with Martin Luther, believed to be the key component on the path to salvation.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Calvin stated, “Neither the beginning of faith nor any preparation for it lies in us.”<sup>12</sup> The only way for man to receive enough faith to reach salvation would be for God to bestow his mercy upon him (Point 2)<sup>13</sup>, an idea that is part of Calvin’s stance on providence, the belief that God dictates all aspect of human life, and is the core of predestination.<sup>14</sup>

Predestination leads to other implications in life and theology. The most notable, and one that Calvin admits to be both horrible and beyond human reasoning,<sup>15</sup> is that if God selects only some on whom to bestow his mercy, he must also select every other person to be reprobate,<sup>16</sup> meaning Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was only for the elect. (Point 3)<sup>17</sup> Calvin does attempt to provide a reason as to why God would do this: if God wants to show his merciful side to humanity there must be a point of comparison in order for humanity to realize that they are experiencing mercy, namely humans who do not receive his mercy. Reprobation also creates humility before God; as Calvin points out, the elect should be all the more grateful to and humble before God since they know that they are too weak to make an attempt at a

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<sup>6</sup> Helm, p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> Shepherd, Victor A. *Nature and Function of Faith in the Theology of John Calvin*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer UP, 1983) p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> Ryken, Philip G., and James M. Boice. *The Doctrines of Grace*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2002) p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Tomline, George. *A Refutation of Calvinism*. (6th ed. London: Cadell & Davies, 1812) p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ryken, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Leith, John H. *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox P, 1989) p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Shepherd, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ryken, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Leith, p. 112.

<sup>15</sup> Shepherd, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> Ryken, p. 31.

salvation-worthy life, yet God ordains predestination and shows mercy out of his love for humanity.<sup>18</sup> That being said, Calvin tries to draw attention away from the easily provoked negative feelings toward the idea of reprobation by emphasizing the fact that no person deserves salvation, as we are all too weak and corruptible in comparison to God.<sup>19</sup> He does not, however, justify why all men deserve to be cast into hell in the first place for being naturally unable to do good.

Furthermore, no person knows whether he is or will be among the elect or the reprobate,<sup>20</sup> for even those who appear to have faith may lose it or, in all cases outside of the elect, in fact may not have enough faith for salvation because their faith is just a result of their own will.<sup>21</sup> The faith of the elect, however, is the result of the Holy Spirit working in a person in a way that cannot be turned away. (Point 4)<sup>22</sup> Calvin also maintains that, even though people's work on Earth with regard to the Bible is irrelevant in terms of receiving God's mercy,<sup>23</sup> if a person truly has faith bestowed upon him by God, it should be evident in the way he acts and in how he shares the Gospel with others.<sup>24</sup> This is the case because we do not know who is among the elect or who may become elect in the future, and all of those who are among the elect should persevere to understand the Bible and live life in accordance with it.<sup>25</sup> (Point 5)<sup>26</sup> In addition, the Gospel and election are closely linked so that full certainty can only be obtained through an understanding of the Gospel.<sup>27</sup> As Calvin states, "It is the gift of divine election when, having embraced the teaching of Christ by faith, we also follow it in our life."<sup>28</sup>

### **On the Role of the Trinity in Predestination**

The conflicts between double-predestination and Calvin's definition of the Trinity come from the role of the Trinity in carrying out double-predestination. In addressing predestination, Calvin sets the focus around the idea of God bringing people into a salvation-worthy faith through his mercy. The result of this faith is being drawn into the Gospel for the purposes of gaining knowledge as to how to live their lives and of spreading the message of God to others. Each part of the Trinity plays its own role in this process. The general role of God and thus the Trinity is clear and is one that was made before any human existed:

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> Ryken, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Leith, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Shepherd, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> Ryken, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Shepherd, p. 28.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p. 59.

to select those who will be among the elect and who will be among the reprobate. However, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all serve an individual purpose within their unified role.

The Father, in this instance, is to be looked at solely as the begetter of the earthly Christ. Christ's role in the process of salvation is also his general role - to serve as the earthly messenger of God and cause the Gospel to be written so that the elect will have guidance and purpose to their lives.<sup>29</sup> The role of the Holy Spirit, then, is to enter the hearts of the elect, bless them with faith, and provide them with perseverance to learn and educate others about God according to the Gospel.<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, the role of the Holy Spirit is also to harden the hearts of the rest of the populace,<sup>31</sup> some 80% of people on Earth,<sup>32</sup> because, as Calvin says, "Unless it is God who blinds the reprobate there is the intolerable situation of the creature conclusively defying the Creator. This God cannot allow without compromising his own deity."<sup>33</sup>

### **On the Conflict Created by Predestination, Christ's Role and a Unified Trinity**

All of this seems to fit together, however, Calvin discusses the power of the Gospel over humankind elsewhere in his theological ideas. These powers of the Gospel over humanity raise the question of whether the power of the contributions of Christ in the Gospel contradict the will of God in the doctrine of predestination. To consider this question, it is necessary first to look at how Calvin describes the relationship between the Gospel, Christ (and therefore God), and faith and then to relate that to the aspect of coming to faith through predestination.

Calvin speaks of Christ in the *Commentaries*, saying:

Christ is a perfection to which nothing can be added...the whole God is found in him, so that he who is not satisfied with Christ alone desires something better and more excellent than God. The sum is that God has manifested himself to us fully and perfectly in Christ.... In Christ God communicates himself to us wholly...in Christ he has appeared to us essentially.<sup>34</sup>

This quotation reiterates the idea that Christ is entirely God and serves the role of communicating God's message to humanity. Calvin further addresses the essence of Christ and therefore the essence of God. Jesus Christ is God's "will-to-mercy" and is unable to encounter a person without the power to bring that person into faith because of the nature of his spirit, the Holy Spirit.<sup>35</sup> Since bringing people into faith is

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<sup>29</sup> Shepherd, p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*

<sup>32</sup> Guthrie, Shirley C. *Christian Doctrine: Teachings of the Christian Church*. (Atlanta: John Knox P, 1968) p. 127.

<sup>33</sup> Shepherd, p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, p. 73.

God's mercy, Christ always has the power to bless others with God's mercy.<sup>36</sup> This is to be expected, as the essence of God is the essence of Christ, however, Calvin includes another aspect of Christ, which is that he is the Gospel, otherwise known as the Word of God or the Act of God.<sup>37</sup>

One purpose of Christ on Earth was to bring about the merciful teachings in the Gospel, as he *is* the Gospel. The elect are to learn the Gospel and teach others of its knowledge, in other words, preach. Preaching is "outward calling," which, as the power of the Gospel is that of the mercy of Christ, spreads mercy, or at least attempts to spread mercy, universally.<sup>38</sup> Through Calvin's appointed power to the Gospel, this universal spread of mercy through teaching the Gospel should have the power to bring people into a faith in Christ that is worthy of salvation. However, this is where conflict arises: if this were the case God would be overruling the mercy spread from outward calling in order to uphold the selecting of the reprobate. To make this overruling would be to overrule the actions of Christ, which is unreasonable as it is God overruling God.

Other examples of contradictions exist as well. Calvin says, "But I hold the grace of God to be so universal that I make the distinction to consist of this; not all are called according to God's purpose."<sup>39</sup> This means God deliberately only chooses some people to be among the elect, but he has the *ability* to select all people to be elect. Also derived from this is that grace would be given universally if God's purpose did not prevent that from happening. So, God's purpose cannot be grace, for then he serves no purpose for society outside of the chosen community of belief. Calvin also says, however, through the connection between the Gospel, mercy and Christ on Earth, that God in Christ served the purpose on Earth of providing people with the ability to earn faith, something seen as the result of God's grace for humankind.<sup>40</sup> There is a contradiction, therefore, between the purpose of Christ on Earth: showing humans the path to faith through His grace, and the point that God's purpose cannot be grace.

In believing that predestination includes God being both just and merciful, Calvinism raises another question as to how it can be that justice is served when the reprobate are punished for living a life that was pre-ordained by God.<sup>41</sup> Could it be that God is then punishing people for his own decision? This is again contradictory to the nature of mercy in God that Calvin described through his declarations about Christ. Furthermore, Calvin states that God has one of two choices: either he can give grace to whomever

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<sup>36</sup> Shepherd, p. 73.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p. 74.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, p. 75.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p. 80.

he wants, or he cannot judge any person.<sup>42</sup> Setting a limit on God's options does not seem to resolve this apparent contradiction.

These contradictions cause problems for the role of the Holy Spirit as well. The spirit of Christ according to Calvin must always play the role of the merciful, since whenever Christ comes into contact with people, including through the Gospel, the spirit is at work within the people. Since, also according to Calvin, the role of the Holy Spirit is to work in the hearts of the elect and the reprobate, the "Spirit of Christ" must be doing the opposite of its ordained role of Christ when it works within the reprobate.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the seeming contradictions above between Calvin's concept of the Trinity and predestination, there are also many ambiguities in Calvin's writings that make it very difficult to assume whether Christ brings about universal redemption or whether double-predestination exists. For instance, Calvin states in his exegesis of Hebrews 4:16 that:

the way is open for all who trust the mediation of Christ and come to him. Indeed, he (the author of Hebrews) encourages those who believe to be bold in presenting themselves before God without any hesitation. This is the outstanding fruit of spiritual teaching; namely, the sure confidence of calling on God, just as on the other hand all religion falls and perishes when this certainty is taken away from men's consciences.... Indeed, if we were so persuaded that Christ was holding out his hand to us, who would not seize the full boldness of approaching?<sup>44</sup>

This leads one to believe that universal salvation does exist and the way to get it is to be bold and courageous enough in taking it from the open hand of God. The uncertainty in Calvin's meaning pertaining to the importance of humans' action is evident in other parts of his writings as well, especially about the outstretched hand to all people.

If Calvin did not stress that Christ and God are of the same essence, or if he allowed the idea of reprobation to cease to exist, it would be easier for the Trinity and predestination to fit together. Either way, it appears that it is not that Calvin's idea means people must accept not being able to fully understand God's actions, so much as that Calvin's idea contradicts both some of Christianity's most-agreed upon aspects of God, such as playing a role in gaining faith, and other places in Scripture, that makes predestination difficult for many Christians to accept.

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<sup>42</sup> Shepherd, p. 84.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p. 77.

### **Calvin's Acquittal of the Contradictions**

Calvin's acquittal focuses around making God still appear righteous in predestination, which has been addressed earlier, and further defining the will of God and God's secret council of predestination. Calvin connected the will of God to Jesus Christ, as was mentioned earlier, in that the will of Christ was to spread the Gospel and thus to save others from damnation. God's secret council was thus the decision of who will be among the elect and who will be among the reprobate. In Calvin's acquittal, however, he cites St. Paul, who "claims for God the right and the power to harden and have mercy according to his will."<sup>45</sup>

This can be seen as leading to one of two possibilities. The first option is that Calvin is changing what he formerly referred to as "God's secret council," to the "will of God," to eliminate the idea of Christ's intention to *universally* spread the Gospel, and mercy. The second option is that Calvin is conjoining the two ideas so that they are both the will of God. Either way, Calvin's own change in word choice after these contradictions arose perhaps shows that he recognizes that he appears to contradict himself.

With regard to Calvin's attempts at making God seem righteous in selecting some to be reprobate, Calvin appears to be unable to support the statement with much evidence. He explains the inability of God to allow people to defy him and the necessity of damnation for the elect to understand they are receiving mercy, but he also makes unsupported statements. "St. Paul shows that as far as God's predestination manifests itself, it reveals true righteousness,"<sup>46</sup> and "God's unimpeachable equity is to be seen as clearly in the destruction of the reprobate as in the salvation of the elect,"<sup>47</sup> are comforting statements for Calvinists, but they have no substantial support to eradicate doubt.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of double-predestination has been studied, debated, refuted, and preached since before Calvin's time. Still today, many theologians devote time to substantiating and discrediting the doctrine of double-predestination.

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<sup>45</sup> Shepherd, p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, p. 79.

Predestination is grounded in the idea that men can do no good in the eyes of God on their own. There are, however, places in the Bible that seem to show just the opposite. God seems to have favorable opinions towards men such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Job;<sup>48</sup> in addition, there are Biblical passages that show humanity's natural ability to do good:

So, when gentiles, not having the law, still through their own innate sense behave as the Law commands, then, even though they have no Law, they are a law for themselves. They can demonstrate the effect of the Law engraved on their hearts, to which their own conscience bears witness; since they are aware of various considerations...<sup>49</sup>

These points suggest a possible flaw in one of the principal bases of Calvinist predestination.

A second main point in predestination is that men cannot come into faith unless God selects them. When Jesus explains the parable of the sower, however, he says, "As for the part in the rich soil, this is people with a noble and generous heart who have heard the word and take it to themselves and yield a harvest through their perseverance."<sup>50</sup> This leads people to believe that security in faith can exist through their own free-will and motivation.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, this motivation need not be brought about by God, for as Christ told his disciples, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you<sup>7</sup>... If you, then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!<sup>11</sup>"<sup>52</sup>

Calvin was unquestionably aware of the previously mentioned Scripture, yet he still supported double-predestination. In St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he said, "by grace ye are saved, through faith: and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."<sup>53</sup> Passages such as this, and others similar to it, seem to provide a clear outline for Calvinist predestination. However, anti-Calvinist theologians would say that this bit of Scripture is really just meant to support the importance of self-motivation by contending that the path to faith is one in which man and God work together; although faith is a gift of God, it is a gift that humans must take, not one forced upon some.

A deeper look into the many other arguments, which must remain unexplained in this essay, both for and against predestination may lead to personal acceptance of one side or the other. However, Calvin himself may have ignored debate about this doctrine because the more minute points in theology such as this were less important for him to prove; instead, they would be left up to faith, in comparison to debate over more

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<sup>48</sup> Tomline, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible: Study Edition*. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1994) Romans 2:14-15.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, Luke, 8:15.

<sup>51</sup> Tomline, p. 15.

<sup>52</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible: Study Edition*, Matthew 7:7-11

<sup>53</sup> Tomline, p. 41.

fundamental Christian doctrine and interpretation.<sup>54</sup> Or, as Donald McKim put it, “One can say that Calvin was so radically fixed on the grace of God that his own mistakes never gave him occasion to despair.”<sup>55</sup>

Both sides of the argument admit that some of God’s actions are impossible to understand. The contradiction between the Trinity Calvin defines and that necessary to carrying out predestination and the debate between the two sides of predestination are examples of how, because of the nature of theology and inability of man to understand God entirely, the study of theology can lead to opposing views that, even after being disputed for nearly 2000 years, are not yet resolved. However, it is clear when contradictions, illogical reasoning, or unsupported points are made in theological arguments, and Calvin’s original work on the Trinity and double-predestination had some of these errors. Although theologians since Calvin’s time have attempted to strengthen the defense of double-predestination, the ambiguity between what the true will of God entails and the nature of Christ’s power to spread grace through the Gospel is present in his work, leaving the doctrine open to dispute and disbelief.

*Word Count- 3995*

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<sup>54</sup> Lawton, Rev. Dr. Bill. Personal interview. 15 Sept. 2007.

<sup>55</sup> McKim, Donald K., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), p. 24.



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