Measuring William Bell Riley’s Anti-Evolution Crusade in Minnesota

Andrew Hughes and Randy Moore

World War I and other societal disruptions ushered in the theological battle that sparked the fundamentalist movement, in which conservative Christians opposed the modernist beliefs of liberal Christians and others (Larson 1997). Fundamentalist leaders garnered support by blaming modernism for a variety of societal ills such as war, alcohol abuse, and increased crime rates, while also claiming that modernism “led Germany into barbarism, and it will lead any nation into the same demoralization” (Editorial 1918:49).

The formal unification of fundamentalists occurred in 1919 when William Bell Riley, pastor of Minneapolis’s First Baptist Church, established the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA) to “bring the world back to the Bible” (Enemies of evolution 1922; Larson 1997). The austere Riley, “a tall, strikingly handsome man with a lionsque mane of white hair, a resonant voice, and a commanding presence,” thrived in the public spotlight (Haycraft 1959). Soon after its formation, Riley shifted the WCFA’s focus to the evolution controversy that raged within society (Russell 1972).

In 1921, Riley led his first “anti-evolution conference,” and the first of his twenty-eight public debates about evolution followed in 1922 (Trollinger 1995; Moore 2010). During these debates, Riley’s impeccable oratorical skills often “resulted in substantial majorities for the indomitable Baptist preacher” (Trollinger 1995:15). As a result of Riley’s charismatic demeanor, public support for his anti-evolution crusade increased through the mid-1920s. This, in turn, prompted Riley to intensify his anti-evolution efforts from 1924 to 1927 as he repeatedly spoke to capacity crowds at First Baptist Church and elsewhere.

Riley considered evolution to be “the most burning question of the present day” because it was (in his view) an anti-scriptural threat that would undermine Christianity and lead to anarchy (Riley 1926a:385,432). Riley believed evolution was “infidelity palmed off in the name of science” (Linder 2004) and he was determined to drive it out of every public school in America. Riley’s speech “Evolution: Shall we tolerate its teaching?” which was attended by more than 5000 people at Minneapolis’s Kenwood Armory on March 7, 1926, equated monetary donations with public support: “Tell those of us who make up the Anti-Evolution League that you are back of us; that we can depend upon your fellowship in our fight [and] if the courts need to be applied to or the legislature asked to aid in our campaign, that you will make your personal and financial sacrifices” (Szasz 1969:209). Riley concluded his speech by noting that the true supporters of the fight against the teaching of evolution would be apparent “when we take up a collection” (Szasz 1969:209). Riley relied on public appearances—for example, numerous sermons at First Baptist Church and a series of lectures at the University of Minnesota and elsewhere throughout the state, as
Hughes and Moore Measuring William Bell Riley’s Anti-Evolution Crusade in Minnesota

well as public debates with scientific figures—to mobilize support for legislation banning the teaching of evolution (Figure 1). Riley lectured and preached about evolution for weeks at a time, and by 1925 the public’s enthusiastic response to his message prompted Riley to predict that there would be “a furious conflict [about evolution] in the not distant future” (Riley 1925a:9).

![Figure 1. An advertisement for Riley’s speech at the State Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during his anti-evolution crusade.](image)

The climax of Riley’s anti-evolution movement occurred in 1927 with the introduction of an anti-evolution bill to the Minnesota legislature. However, Riley’s anti-evolution movement lost momentum when this bill was defeated 55 to 7 in the state senate (Szasz 1969). In contrast to the public’s strong support for Riley in preceding years, this legislative defeat documented the public’s fading support for Riley’s movement. The contrasting public support for Riley in the early 1920s compared to 1927 and thereafter also shows that the success of Riley’s anti-evolution crusade depended on the public’s interest in the evolution controversy. Despite the public’s fading interest in his anti-evolution crusade, Riley continued to address evolution from the First Baptist pulpit until his retirement in 1942. Throughout, Riley consistently focused on evolution’s speculative nature, lack of evidence, contradiction with scripture, and damaging consequences to society (Pastors condemn evolution 1922; Trollinger 1995).

Several publications have documented Riley’s anti-evolution crusade through anecdotal evidence and qualitative data (Szasz 1969; Russell 1972; Trollinger 1990; Moore 2010). These studies have inspired and intrigued us, but we wanted to examine Riley’s crusade with more objective, quantitative data. Therefore, because Riley’s entire anti-evolution crusade coincided with his pastorship at First Baptist Church, we examined the yearly totals for the congregation’s membership and monetary support throughout Riley’s tenure.

Riley and his church referred to the monetary donations collected at church services as “basket offerings,” and the church’s annual reports from 1897 to 1948 document these
totals. Although we could not analyze the membership and basket offerings from 1930 to 1934, and 1943 to 1944, because these reports were missing from the archive’s collection, these years were not central to either Riley’s crusade or to the national anti-evolution movement. The membership and finances of Riley’s church (Figures 2, 3, 4, and 6) strongly correlate with, and inform us about, the successes and failures of Riley’s anti-evolution crusade.

**Before the Scopes Trial**

As noted above, Riley’s anti-evolution crusade can be traced to his establishment of the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA) in 1919. Although the WCFA initially addressed the changes within Protestant denominations that resulted from “the leadership of the new infidelity, known as modernism,” the association’s primary concern shifted to the evolution controversy by 1921 (Larson 1997:53). Riley justified the WCFA’s attack on evolution by claiming that “we discovered that basic to the many forms of modern infidelity is the philosophy of evolution” (Szasz 1982:107). Since the WCFA unified Riley’s supporters, it played an integral role in Riley’s efforts to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools.

The popularity of Riley’s crusade was evident by the 6000 individuals who attended the first WCFA conference in Philadelphia, which Riley characterized as a “more historic moment than the nailing up, at Wittenberg, of Martin Luther’s ninety-five Theses” (Riley 1919; Moore 2010). The membership and basket offerings at Riley’s church similarly reveal a strong level of public support during the WCFA’s early years and the beginning of Riley’s anti-evolution crusade (Figures 2, 3). Specifically, basket offerings increased by $2140 per year from 1919 to 1921, while membership increased by 145 members per year during the same period (Figure 3). (According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, $2140 in 1919 is equivalent to $29100 in 2014.)

**Figure 2.** Monetary donations (“Basket Offerings”) and church membership during William Bell Riley’s pastorship of First Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
The average annual increase of $2,140 from 1919 to 1921 far exceeds the average increase of $86 per year in basket offerings that characterized the two decades preceding the formation of the WCFA and the start of Riley’s anti-evolution campaign (Figure 2). Because basket offerings increased at a much higher rate than membership from 1919 to 1921, the major increase in basket offerings must have resulted from individual parishioners donating more than previous years. The dramatic increase in monetary donations indicates that Riley’s establishment of the WCFA and the initial efforts of his national anti-evolution crusade also motivated his congregation in Minneapolis. Indeed, his congregation’s unprecedented monetary support marked the first time in Riley’s long pastorship that his societal efforts energized his congregation to dramatically increase their financial support of his work.

In the early 1920s, Riley maintained the public’s support for his anti-evolution crusade by engaging in numerous public debates against various proponents of evolution. Riley’s first such debate occurred at North Carolina State College against Zeno Payne Metcalf, a biology professor, in May 1922 (Trollinger 1995). Riley’s effective debate skills were highlighted when he “shifted the attack with bewildering movement, at one moment reciting an anecdote that left his supporters howling... and the next delivering some cryptic indictment with sharp, incisive sentences” (Dr WB Riley of Minneapolis 1923:66–67).

Riley continued his public attack on evolution in October 1922 when he sponsored appearances by famed politician and fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan in Minneapolis and St Paul (Szasz 1969). Nearly 12,000 people heard Bryan claim that “evolution is a menace to civilization” (Szasz 1969:204). Bryan’s speeches inspired Riley to establish the Anti-Evolution League in 1923 “to force the teachings of the evolutionary hypothesis from the public schools” (The Anti-Evolution League 1923:16; Moore 2010). In addition to leading the Anti-Evolution League, Riley unified supporters at the national level to advocate anti-evolution legislation in several other states (Trollinger 1995). Riley’s efforts throughout the
early 1920s maintained the relevancy of the evolution controversy in Minnesota as well as nationwide.

The relatively small changes in basket offerings from 1921 to 1923 suggest that Riley’s First Baptist congregation remained supportive of Riley’s anti-evolution movement during these intermediate years (Figure 3). The apparent plateau in donations during this period may be due to the fact that there were relatively few evolution-related events to stimulate additional donations. Riley’s appearances maintained the public’s interest and support, and ultimately set the stage for the famous Scopes trial of 1925.

THE SCOPES TRIAL

The Scopes trial of 1925 is the most famous event in the history of the evolution/creationism controversy. Riley’s direct impact on the trial was limited because he did not attend the trial; he was at the Northern Baptist Convention in Seattle to urge the denomination to require that all missionaries hold to the “fundamentals of faith” (Trollinger 1995). Nevertheless, Riley affected the trial because he convinced William Jennings Bryan to represent Riley’s WCFA at the trial (Larson 1997). Bryan’s representation of the WCFA provoked famed attorney (and agnostic) Clarence Darrow to volunteer to represent John Scopes, thereby setting the stage for the famous confrontation (Larson 1997). The presence of these two national figures, Bryan and Darrow, dramatically increased the publicity, relevance, and stature of the trial.

As Scopes’s trial approached, Riley continued to participate in numerous highly publicized debates; these debates further stimulated public support of, and interest in, the anti-evolution movement (Larson 1997). Bryan noted in a letter to fellow fundamentalist John Roach Stratton that the outcomes of the debates were “very encouraging” (Bryan 1925). Scopes’s conviction in July 1925 provided additional momentum for Riley to pursue anti-evolution legislation elsewhere, including in his home state of Minnesota.

In Minneapolis, the First Baptist community was inspired by Riley’s anti-evolution efforts, as is evident by another dramatic increase in monetary support in 1925 and 1926. Indeed, donations at First Baptist Church peaked in 1925 and 1926 (Figure 2), which correspond to the height of the evolution controversy in the United States. Clearly, Riley’s anti-evolution efforts immediately following the Scopes trial were strongly supported by his church.

RILEY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

In October 1925, Riley initiated correspondence with the University of Minnesota’s president Lotus D Coffman to stage a debate about evolution on campus at the Armory building. Coffman responded to Riley on November 2, 1925 that the University “cannot rent the Armory for public debate” (Coffman 1925). However, Fred J Kelly, Dean of Administration, complicated the situation when he contradicted Coffman. In his November 5 letter, Kelly informed Riley that “the University will be glad to extend the courtesy of the use of the Armory for such discussion as you suggest” (Kelly 1925a).

Although Kelly later cancelled Riley’s use of the Armory, the University of Minnesota offered to sponsor an “evolution discussion” (Kelly 1925b). Kelly and Riley agreed that the “evolution discussion” would be limited to independent presentations by Riley and a biology professor (Kelly 1925b). Despite contacting professors from several universities, Kelly
was unable to locate a representative for the scientific viewpoint (Szasz 1969). William A Riley (no relation to William B Riley), Professor of Animal Biology at the University of Minnesota, told Kelly “that a debate with [Riley] on the subject of Evolution would be undignified and futile” (Riley WA 1926). After many professors expressed their opposition to an evolution discussion, Kelly and William Bell Riley decided that an individual lecture was the best way for Riley to deliver his message on campus. Riley’s presentation was scheduled for March 3, 1926, at 4:30 pm in the Old Library (Kelly 1926).

The days leading to Riley’s presentation were filled with controversy that stemmed from more miscommunications between Riley and Kelly. When Riley submitted an article to the Minnesota Daily to advertise his appearance, he changed the title of his presentation—without Kelly’s approval—from “Evolution is a fallacy and should not be taught in our public schools and colleges” to “Should the teaching of evolution be longer tolerated in this state university?” (Szasz 1969).

Kelly refuted Riley’s advertisement, which stated, “Dr WB Riley … proposed to the University of Minnesota recently to put on a debate in the Armory. They accepted the proposition and have assiduously sought a noted biologist to meet Dr. Riley, and having failed, have requested him to speak in the Old Library Building” (Riley 1926b). In response to Riley’s advertising tactics, Kelly cancelled Riley’s appearance less than 48 hours before the scheduled presentation (Szasz 1969). Although Riley emphasized in November 1925 that he was “not particular to the exact wording, provided we can get the subject fairly before the student body” (Riley 1925b), Kelly used the unapproved title as one reason for the cancellation. The ambiguous, indecisive, and public correspondence between Kelly and Riley ultimately helped bring the evolution issue to the forefront in Minnesota.

Following the cancellation of his University of Minnesota presentation, Riley utilized a different approach to inform the public, especially college students, that evolution is a “philosophy masquerading as a science” (Riley assails U 1926). On March 7, 1926, Riley spoke about “Evolution: Shall we tolerate its teaching?” to more than 5000 people at the Kenwood Armory in Minneapolis (Szasz 1969; Trollinger 1995). The Kenwood Armory was distinct from the Armory building on campus at the University of Minnesota. Riley reserved nearly half of the Kenwood Armory’s seats for college students to ensure that they could hear his presentation originally scheduled for the University of Minnesota (FBC 1926). Riley’s goal was to educate the audience because they have “the right to hear two sides of a controverted subject”. The audience was receptive to Riley’s message; when asked “If you will back us up in a fight for the God-fearing majority, say so,” the crowd responded with “Yes! Yes! Yes!” (Szasz 1969:209).

Financial records and anecdotal evidence confirm that there was much support for Riley’s anti-evolution efforts in early 1926. According to the basket offerings at First Baptist Church, Riley’s congregation maintained elevated levels of financial support in 1926 (Figure 3). Although the 1926 basket offerings were slightly lower than 1925, they were still much higher than any other year of Riley’s pastorship. The congregation’s financial support also corresponded with increased attendance at Riley’s sermons. For example, from March 14 through May 16, 1926, Riley delivered anti-evolution sermons at First Baptist Church and there was never an empty seat in the audience (Moore 2010). Basket offerings and atten-
dance at Riley's sermons suggest that Riley's anti-evolution crusade received exceedingly strong support from the First Baptist congregation in 1926.

In October 1926, Riley again asked Dean Kelly if he could speak at the University of Minnesota “in defense of Christian fundamentalism, which is being so constantly attacked by certain of your professors and some of your textbooks” (Riley 1926d). Riley argued further that “supporters of the University are not in agreement with this philosophy, but stand for the faith that I hold dear… we are entitled to be heard” (Riley 1926c). To minimize miscommunication, President Coffman handled the University of Minnesota's correspondence with Riley. Coffman granted Riley four appearances on campus, beginning with a November 18 convocation address at the Armory (Coffman 1926).

Riley's convocation address was titled “Fundamentalism and the Scopes trial,” and was attended by more than 3,000 students (Riley 1926e; Szasz 1969). Riley followed his convocation address with three additional lectures at the Old Library (currently Burton Hall) on November 19, 22, and 23 (Riley 1926e; Burton Hall 2010). Several hundred students attended Riley's subsequent lectures titled “Is man the product of evolution or of creation?,” “Is civilization the result of evolution or of religion?,” and “Is the Bible an evolution or a revelation?” (Riley 1926e; Szasz 1969). However, the general consensus from students was disappointment because “they [wanted] to learn why Dr Riley believes as he does, and what the facts of his case are—not to hear another typewritten list of generalizations read in a voice that can't be heard at the back of the room” (A very nice 1926:2). Nevertheless, Riley began preparing an anti-evolution bill for Minnesota's upcoming 1927 legislative session.

**Riley's Anti-Evolution Legislation**

On January 7, 1927, Riley informed the First Baptist community of his anti-evolution bill, which he authored under the guidance of fundamentalist Gerald B Winrod (Moore 2010). Riley's bill, which was similar to Tennessee's Butler Act of 1925, prohibited teachers from teaching “that mankind either descended or ascended from a lower order of animals in all public schools, colleges, State Teacher’s Colleges, and the University of Minnesota” (Szasz 1969:211–212).

Riley's anti-evolution bill was introduced into the Minnesota legislature by Senator KK Solberg on February 25, and by Representative Hemming Nelson on March 2 (Szasz 1969). To increase public support, Riley spoke about his anti-evolution legislation in more than sixty-five towns throughout Minnesota (Szasz 1969). During these presentations, Riley told listeners that evolution would “destroy the faith of their children” (Szasz 1969:212). Newspapers and other media publicized Riley's anti-evolution legislation and speeches, which ensured that a large proportion of Minnesota citizens were aware of the impending legislative vote (Szasz 1969).

However, Riley's efforts were strongly opposed by the University of Minnesota administrators, faculty, and students, as was made evident by the numerous articles condemning Riley’s bill on the front page of the March 8 edition of the *Minnesota Daily*, the university's newspaper. For example, one article described the University Council's declaration of an “All University Emergency” to discuss Riley’s legislation, while the main headline was “Meeting Called at Noon to Fight Riley Bill” (Meeting called 1927:1). Over half of the university's undergraduate population rallied at the meeting, and the students' actions became
known as “one of the greatest undergraduate protests against a legislative measure ever felt at the University” (Student sentiment 1927:1; Szasz 1969).

The bill’s public hearing occurred on March 9, in front of an audience that gathered hours before the proceedings began. Unlike university presidents and other educational leaders in Tennessee, who did not publicly oppose their state’s anti-evolution bill two years earlier, President Coffman spearheaded the opposition to Riley’s bill, and he delivered a powerful 15-minute speech at the hearing (Szasz 1969; Webb 1994; Larson 1997). In his speech, Coffman argued that Riley’s bill would “stifle learning, cripple research, and destroy intellectual integrity” at the University and elsewhere (The “anti-evolution” bill 1927:1).

Riley countered Coffman’s argument by asserting that the beliefs of the university administrators were not representative of their students, and that students supported his anti-evolution legislation. Howard Haycraft, editor of the Minnesota Daily, immediately challenged Riley’s statement and presented a petition signed by 6500 students opposing Riley’s anti-evolution bill (Szasz 1969). Riley’s bill was defeated in the Senate on March 10 by a vote of 55 to 7 (Moore 2010). Riley labelled the overwhelming legislative decision “only the beginning, it is merely a skirmish and a skirmish never determines a war” (Coffman pleased 1927:1).

However, Riley was wrong; the war was over. Support at Riley’s First Baptist Church for his anti-evolution efforts declined dramatically in 1927; basket offerings decreased from $8510.23 in 1926 to $7039.35 in 1927 (Figure 3). (According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, $1471 in 1926 is equivalent to $19630 in 2014). These data indicate that Riley’s anti-evolution movement was losing momentum in his own church. It was also fading elsewhere. Except for a successful public referendum on evolution in Arkansas in 1928, Riley’s loss in Minnesota was the last major effort to ban evolution from public schools (Trollinger 1990). Oklahoma, the first state to have passed an anti-evolution law, repealed its law in 1927, and anti-evolution bills in Florida, Delaware, New Hampshire, California, West Virginia and elsewhere all failed (Ginger 1958). Despite Riley’s claims, anti-evolution legislation was never reintroduced in Minnesota.

After peaking at near six million in 1927, membership in Riley’s WCFA began to decline (Furniss 1954; Gray 1970). By 1928, attendance at WCFA meetings also began to decline, and the following year the discouraged Riley resigned as its president (Russell 1976). Remarkably, the 1930 WCFA meeting included no talks about evolution (Furniss 1954). Riley’s earlier promises that his WCFA would “roll back the tide of modernism” and “smite the enemies of truth with overwhelming fear” were never fulfilled (Trollinger 1990:41).

**RILEY’S RESPONSE TO LEGISLATIVE DEFEAT**

Riley tried to re-energize his church with additional attacks on evolution throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, again relying primarily on anti-evolution sermons and anti-evolution pamphlets to disseminate his message. Riley preached about evolution repeatedly in 1930, 1932, 1933, and 1941, and the titles of his sermons resembled those of his presentations from the 1920s. However, some possessed unique titles such as “Nature’s revolt against darwinism” (FBC 1930), “Evolution—not a leg left to stand on” (FBC 1932a), “Evolution—disproved by the exact science of mathematics” (FBC 1932b), and “Evolution, the basis of Hitlerism” (FBC 1941). Riley’s four anti-evolution pamphlets published throughout
the 1930s were entitled “Darwin’s philosophy and the Flood,” “Evolution—A false philosophy,” “The theory of evolution tested by mathematics,” and “Are the Scriptures scientific?” (Trollinger 1995).

Although Riley’s anti-evolution campaign from 1919 to 1926 energized members of his church, Riley’s return to sermons attacking evolution in the 1930s and 1940s failed to rally support (Figure 2). Riley was never able to reverse the declining monetary donations that followed the defeat of his anti-evolution legislation. Basket offerings decreased at a rate of $570 per year from 1927 to 1935 (Figure 2). (The Great Depression began in late 1929, which was nearly three years after the congregation’s monetary donations started to decline. Parishioners’ basket offerings may have been influenced by the Great Depression in the early 1930s.) Riley’s later failure to galvanize support from his congregation suggests that the parishioners’ interest, like that elsewhere in America, had shifted away from the once popular evolution controversy.

For the first time in the 40 years of Riley’s pastorship, church membership decreased between 1938 and 1939, and this declining membership characterized Riley’s final years at First Baptist Church. Membership decreased from 3,557 in 1938, to 2,981 in 1939, and to 2,395 in 1942 (Figure 4).

Although the public lost interest in the evolution issue after 1927, Riley again attacked evolution in the early 1940s. Riley’s later evolution sermons stressed the unscientific nature of evolution while blaming the Jews and a “Jewish-Bolshevik-Darwinist conspiracy” for hindering his anti-evolution crusade (Linder 2004; Trollinger 1990). In 1926, Riley claimed that “the Bible went out of the schools because the Jews and Catholics were supposed to have rights in the schools, and now Darwinism—the origin of materialism, if not atheism—has been substituted instead” (Riley 1926:432). According to Trollinger, the Jews became Riley’s “personal and social scapegoat” around 1933 or 1934 (Trollinger 1990:71). Riley relied on books, pamphlets, and sermons to disseminate his anti-Semitic viewpoints throughout the
1930s (Trollinger 1990). Riley linked evolution with Communism and Hitlerism, which ultimately led to his anti-evolution pamphlet titled “Hitlerism; or, the philosophy of evolution in action” in 1941 (Figure 5) (Trollinger 1995).

![Figure 5. Riley's 1941 anti-evolution pamphlet, “Hitlerism; or the philosophy of evolution in action.”](image)

Curtis B Akenson, pastor of First Baptist Church from 1946 to 1974, acknowledged the negative impact of Riley's continued attacks on evolution when he noted that “Riley's early preaching about evolution filled the church. Riley's later preaching about evolution emptied the church” (personal communication with Layton Brueske).

Riley's retirement in 1942 also affected basket offerings at First Baptist Church. Donations soared with the arrival of Riley's successors, specifically Robert Moyer and Curtis Akenson (Figure 6). From 1945 to 1948, monetary donations increased by $2013 per year, while
membership increased by 35 members per year. (According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, $2,013 in 1945 is equivalent to $26,430 in 2014). These data indicate that parishioners strongly supported Riley’s successors and suggest that Riley’s church was ready for new leadership and a new message. In contrast to Riley’s attacks on evolution and other issues, the sermons of Moyer and Akenson emphasized the positive aspects of society and the Gospel, and they avoided the evolution issue (judging from weekly bulletins stored in the church’s archives). The significant increase in basket offerings during this period documents the parishioners’ desire to transition away from societal attacks, such as the evolution issue, to Moyer and Akenson’s uplifting sermons.

William Bell Riley’s anti-evolution crusade reveals that some social issues can temporarily inspire the support of church congregations. The First Baptist community strongly supported Riley’s anti-evolution efforts until 1926, but parishioners (like people nationwide) lost interest in the evolution issue throughout the subsequent years of Riley’s pastorship. The congregation’s decreased interest in the evolution issue, despite Riley’s revitalized evolution sermons in the 1930s and the 1940s, suggests that the popularity and effectiveness of controversial social issues as fundraising measures eventually diminishes and, once diminished, cannot easily be revived.

**REFERENCES**


**Figure 6.** The impact of Riley’s retirement (1942) on church membership and donations.
Hughes and Moore

Measuring William Bell Riley’s Anti-Evolution Crusade in Minnesota


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Hughes and Moore

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