

Specific and generic Authority

By David Phillips

Throughout the Scriptures God emphasizes man's need to abide within His teachings. In the Old Testament Moses forbade Israel from adding to or taking away from God's word (Deut. 4:2). Likewise, in the New Testament we are commanded to abide within the "*doctrine of Christ*" (2 John 9). In light of this, some have raised the question, "How can the church remain current and yet still be the church of the first century?" (Dunagan, *Generic and Specific Authority*). For example, in Jesus' day they did not have cars. If we must not go beyond God's word, where does God give us authority to use cars today since He never mentioned them in the Bible? We do not read about Christians using song books or sitting in pews in the New Testament, so how can we say we have authority for those things?

The principles of specific and generic authority deal with these very questions. In the Scriptures, God has been specific on many things. Where He is specific we have no options but to do exactly as He commanded. But in some areas His commands are generic, leaving it up to us to determine the best way to fulfill those commands. Generic means "general, opposite to specific" (*Webster's*). "Relating to or descriptive of an entire group or class" (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*). Specific, on the other hand, is defined, "precisely formulated or restricted; specifying or explicit" (*Websters*). "1. Explicitly set forth; particular; definite...3. Special, distinctive, or unique, as a quality or attribute. 4. Intended for, applying to or acting upon a particular thing" (*AHDEL*). "The more specific the statement or instruction, the fewer options we are being given. The more general, the more options" (Dunagan).

The Building of the Ark (Genesis 6:14-21)

God's command to Noah to build the ark is a perfect illustration of the use of specific and generic authority. According to God's pattern, Noah was commanded to build the ark out of gopher wood. There were many different kinds of wood from which Noah could have built the ark. Had God only said, "Make an ark out of wood," the command would have been generic. Noah could have used cedar, birch, oak, fir, etc. However, of all of the different types of wood available, God specifically commanded the use of gopher wood. Therefore, to use gopher wood was a specific command which excluded every other kind of wood. God was specific about other aspects of the building of the ark as well. It was to be a specific size, have specific dimensions, and have a specific number of levels and openings. Concerning these things, since God was specific, Noah was expected to do exactly as God commanded.

However, there were some commands concerning which God was generic, which meant Noah was able to choose from the options available to him. For example, God commanded Noah to "*Make for yourself an ark,*" but He did not tell Noah which tools to use. Therefore, since God only gave a generic command on that point, Noah had the authority to use whatever tools he felt were suitable for the job and enabled him to fulfill God's command to make an ark.

Virtually every command in the Bible has both general and specific elements. By applying these principles to His word, God has been able to give us the Bible in such a way that it is suitable for every generation and culture, no matter how advanced or primitive its technology.

The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20)

The use of generic and specific authority can be seen in the Great Commission. In this commission, Jesus told a certain group of people to fulfill a certain task. He was specific on some points, but generic on other points. Specifically, Christians (disciples of Christ) were the ones who were to go. Also, their commission was specific in that they were to “*disciples all nations.*” Jesus was also specific as to how they were to go about making disciples. He said, “...*baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*” Concerning this command, Mark 16:15 also records that Christians were to make disciples by preaching the gospel. Concerning these points, since Jesus was specific, Christians have no authority to do anything other than what Jesus said. They cannot make disciples by sprinkling or having them put their hands on their TVs. They cannot make disciples by preaching the words of men. Only by preaching the gospel and baptizing.

There are also elements of this command that Jesus left generic. For example, He said to “*go*” but He never specified HOW they were to go. Throughout the New Testament we see Christians walking, riding in chariots, on horses, in boats, etc. By the same authority that Christians used these means of travel, we have authority to “*go*” in our cars, on trains, or in airplanes, because Jesus left it up to us to establish the most appropriate means of going.

Naaman the Leper (2 Kings 5:9-19)

Naaman was a commander in the Assyrian army in the days of Elisha the prophet. He had leprosy and sought counsel from Elisha as to how he might be healed. Elisha directed Naaman to dip himself seven times in the Jordan River. When Naaman heard these words he became furious because he was expecting the prophet to do something great. The Jordan was relatively small and insignificant. At the very least, Naaman thought that the prophet could have chosen one of the great rivers such as the Abanah, the Pharpar, or the rivers of Damascus. Though Naaman was angry at first, his servant convinced him to heed the words of Elisha, which he did and he was healed.

In Elisha’s command to Naaman, there were some specific elements that needed to be followed if Naaman was going to be healed. Naaman knew that when Elisha specifically mentioned the Jordan, no other river would have had the desired effect. If he wanted to be healed, he had to dip himself in the Jordan River, because Elisha was specific on that point. Also, Elisha was specific concerning the number of times Naaman was to dip himself in the river. The Scripture says, “*So he went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean*” (2 Kings 5:14). Naaman was not healed on the third, or the fourth, or the fifth time he dipped himself. Since Elisha specified seven times, it was not until after the seventh time that Naaman dipped himself that he was healed. Here again, we see the importance of respecting God’s specific commands. Naaman had generic authority to choose any location on the Jordan that he wanted, but concerning these other points, he had no options but to do exactly as he was commanded.

Applying Specific and Generic Authority Today

In areas where God is specific, there is no flexibility. We must fulfill His commands exactly as they were given. But by leaving some commands generic, God allows His word to be flexible enough to apply to every person in every generation and culture. This means that the Bible can never become outdated, as some have claimed.

How can we say we have authority to use cars today when God never mentioned them? Because we have generic authority. As pointed out concerning the Great Commission, Jesus told Christians to “*go*,” but He never specified the means by which they must go. In the New Testament we see Christians walking, riding in Chariots, on horses, and in boats; essentially using whatever means was

most appropriate to reach the desire destination. By that same authority Christians today are able to use airplanes, trains, cars, trucks, and boats in order to “go” preach the gospel to the world.

By this same authority, we are able to use things such as pews and songbooks when we worship God. There are certain things in our worship concerning which God is specific. In Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16, God specifically commanded Christians to “sing” and to “*make melody in your hearts*”. This is the only kind of music God authorized in the New Testament. We have commands, examples, and necessary inferences that show only singing as being authorized and practiced by the New Testament church. Since God is specific on this point, we have no authority to use any other kind of music. Instrumental music, for example, is not authorized, because it goes beyond the specific command of God. However, God does not say from where we must get the music that we sing. God never said to sing “only the songs that you have memorized” or to “sing using scrolls.” Therefore, so that everyone in the congregation is able to sing the same thing and know what they are singing, many congregations use song books or overheads. This is authorized because it does not add to God’s commands and it allows us to fulfill the specific command to sing. By this same authority we are able to use trays to serve the Lord’s Supper.

In order to worship God in truth, Christians must assemble together, but God never specified where they are to assemble. In the New Testament we see Christians assembling at the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46), in people’s houses (Rom. 16:5), in upper rooms (Acts 20:7, 8), even outside. Today many congregations provided a location by purchasing or renting a meeting place. We have authority for this because God was not specific on this point. He was specific concerning what we are to do when we assemble, but He left it up to us to establish the most expedient location in which to fulfill the command to assemble.

Conclusion

In order to keep from transgressing God’s word, we must pay close attention to His specific commands and limit ourselves according to those specifications. A proper understanding of how God uses specific and generic commands to express His will can answer many questions concerning why we do what we do as the Lord’s church—and why we should not do many of the things practiced in churches today. It shows God’s great wisdom in providing a revelation that is applicable to every generation. Another principle we must make ourselves familiar with is how to use expedencies or tools to fulfill the commands of God. But this will be left for another lesson. Let us continually pursue a proper understanding of the authority of the Scriptures. In so doing we will have a better appreciation for God’s revealed word and we will prove ourselves workmen who do not need to be ashamed, because we will be able to handle God’s word in the right way (2 Tim. 2:15).

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