**General & Specific Categories In Communication & Authority**

(by Doy Moyer)

One of the reasons I take the position on authority that I do is because of the way communication works. As a follow-up to another article, [Must Everything be Specified to be Authorized](http://www.mindyourfaith.com/6/post/2013/11/must-everything-be-specified-to-be-authorized.html), I want to explore further the ways that specific and general statements operate in normal communication (and they often work without us even having to examine it this way; we typically just get it). I realize that some of this may seem a bit too technical, and I think that is partly because we usually do not spell this process out; we just accept and understand it in normal communication. Nevertheless, for some reason, when we come to the Bible we might discard ordinary communication processes in favor of what we desire (then claim we are doing it out of love or from the heart). Yet, if God has expressed His will, and if we love Him, then we need to be concerned about how His will is actually communicated to us. Thus, while I wouldn’t normally go into this kind of explanation for daily communication, I do it in order to show why we talk about general and specific authority.

To better understand the nature of general and specific authority in biblical context, we wish to note some important aspects of standard logic first. In the following, “general” is essentially the same as “universal,” and “specific” is essentially the same as “particular.”

All propositions fit one of the following patterns (see Kreeft, Socratic Logic, 148):

**1. Universal Affirmative: all humans are mortal.**

**2. Universal Negative: no birds are cows.**

**3. Particular Affirmative: some humans are male.**

**4. Particular Negative: some animals are not dogs.**

In the universal statement, the universal is the broad category. For example, in “all humans are mortal,” “human” is the broad category that encompasses both male and female and every particular person. However, it would not necessarily be true (and it isn’t) that all mortal entities are human. We cannot just flip the subject and predicate around in this case and have an equal statement. At the same time, though male and female both fit into the category of human, male and female are not identical; there are more particular categories within the broader category (and we can get even more particular if we specify individual males and females, etc.).

If you wanted a visual of this, think of circles within circles: the outer circle has the broad category (Mortal Entities); smaller, separated circles within this have subcategories (animals, humans); within the animal circle would be further specific circles (dogs, cats, cows); within the human circle would be gender circles (male, female); within the male and female circles might be specific people. The further into the circles you go, the more specified it gets, and the more specific it gets, fewer options are available.

Though particulars may share the same category, they are not identical to each other and should not be equated (else they lose their particularities). For example, within the bird category would fit the particulars of chicken, geese, sparrows, ravens, turkeys, and eagles. However, though all birds, they are not to be equated with each other (a sparrow is not a bald eagle). Blurring these distinctions would be fallacious.

If I said that I wanted something to write with, then any kind of writing instrument would work unless the context would show otherwise (pen, including all types of pens and colors, pencils, including mechanical and regular, medium and fine point, etc.).

However, if I said that I wanted a red, felt-tipped pen, then only that would do. I could even specify the brand if I thought it mattered.

Likewise, if I said that I just wanted some food, pretty much any type of food would do (unless I specifically denied certain types like liver or sweets or context shows otherwise). However, if I said I that all I wanted is a T-Bone steak with a baked potato, now I’ve been particular enough to rule out anything that is not what is specified. If I order this at a restaurant and they bring me spaghetti instead, that would not serve as an equal substitute for the order, even though it is food (and might, under other circumstances, be what I want). I would tell the waiter, “that’s not what I ordered.” Would that be unreasonable?

When I speak of animals in general, I include in that category dogs, cats, apes, deer, and all other animals. If I speak of dogs, however, I am not talking about cats. The general includes all the specifics of the category, but the specifics do not automatically include each other, even though in the same category.

Examples like these can be multiplied, and we use as many as we do in order to be clear about the way general and specific categories function in communication. When we specify something, we expect that it be respected. We do this continually, and we consider it to be reasonable. How, then, does this work with biblical authority?

Why would it work any differently in understanding God’s revealed will? We have been arguing all along that issues in biblical authority are rooted in the fundamentals of logic and communication. The point of the above is to show that we are not making arbitrary rules when it comes to biblical authority, but are rather applying fundamental logic and communication principles that we understand in every other area of life. As with the above illustrations, general orders include the specifics that fall under the general category, but specified orders do not include everything in the general category. If only a very general order is given, then all the specifics within that order are permissible; therefore something can be authorized even though not specified. However, the more specified the order, the fewer the options. Red is not blue; dogs are not cats; males are not females; and vocal singing is not instrumental music.

For example, in the Lord’s Supper instructions, we have been shown particulars (bread and fruit of the vine, **Matt 26:26-29**; **1 Cor 11:23-25**). Had the information simply been “food,” then we would have been free to operate within the general category of food and choose what we wish for the Lord’s Supper. However, the particulars are given, and this rules out substituting other particulars or making the Lord’s chosen particulars equal with other particulars. For the Lord’s Supper, ham is not to be equated with the bread (even though it shares the food category), and soda cannot be equated with the fruit of the vine (even though it shares the drink category). Food and drink are the categories, but since the particulars are given, they rule out other particulars.

In recognizing these principles, we are not just making arbitrary rules. Again, I know that some would think we are getting far too technical now. That is certainly not the intention. We are simply pointing out how communication operates in everyday usage, then making that same application to our biblical understanding. Communication is universal, and we cannot ignore the way it works just because our desires are otherwise. Why would we recognize these principles in all other fields but apply different rules when we come to Scripture? That would be a very arbitrary form of interpretation. We seek for consistency, and thus apply this principle of general and specified authority.

If we love the Lord, we will keep His will (cf. **John 14:15**). His will is expressed through language, and language means something purposeful. It is because we love the Lord that we want to listen carefully to how He has communicated His will to us.