**Must Everything Be Specified To Be Authorized?**

(by Doy Moyer)

In discussions of biblical authority, it is not uncommon for a conversation to zero in on the question of specifics. One might argue the need for biblical authority, and another might then reply with questions like this:

 *Well, where is the authority for a church building?*

 *Where is the authority for song books?*

 *Where is the authority for a song leader?*

 *Where is the authority for multiple cups for the Lord’s Supper?*

None of these items are specified in Scripture, so on what grounds can we say they are authorized by Scripture? Sometimes those questions are legitimately coming from those who really desire the information and haven’t understood. At other times, however, those who bring up questions like this are actually making an argument against the need for biblical authority in all that we do. The implied argument is this: *Since we don’t have authority for church buildings and song books, then your argument for the need for authority either 1) shows that you are wrong, or 2) shows that you are being hypocritical. Since you obviously don’t have authority for everything (like buildings and song books), then your “method of establishing authority” is erroneous.*

Though it sounds like a serious strike against authority, those who use this point as an argument misunderstand the basic nature of authority, primarily because they are not being consistent with the way communication works in every facet of life. Here, then, is the question: must everything we do be specified in order to be authorized?

The answer is “no.” Now the question is, on what basis can we argue that we must have authority on the one hand, but we don’t always need specified statements on the other hand? How can something be authorized if it is not specified? Once again, the answer to this question goes back to the fundamentals of logic and communication. By doing this, we can avoid making arbitrary rules about authority that fit what we like, and instead we can be grounded in the actual communication process that functions logically everywhere. In other words, this is not just some biblical rule we are making up, but rather it is how communication works in all areas and we are simply recognizing its function in biblical application. The beauty of this is that we already know how it works.

Think about the communication process. We have elsewhere pointed out that we make our wills known to others by telling them what we want, showing them what we want, and implying what we expect them to understand. Are there any other ways to communicate without using these? Now then, virtually all telling and showing imply other factors that are not specified. For example, if I told my son to take out the garbage, without any further statements, I am implying that he can choose how to do that. Though I didn’t specify every action involved (walk over to the cabinet, open the cabinet door where the trash is, pull the trash out, tie the garbage bag, pull it out of the can, walk to the outside door, open it with your hand, go to the outside garbage cans, open the lid of the one on the right, drop the bag into the big can … you get the idea!), I implied that as long as he does what I asked, he has some freedom in carrying out the task. I don’t need to specify every single action in order to make my will known, and he has some freedom in carrying out my will. Which door he goes out, which hand he uses to open the door, how long he takes to do it, whether he uses a hand truck, etc. are all part of the choices he makes along the way. Without further orders or specifications, these choices were all “authorized” by the simple order to take out the garbage.

This principle falls under the category of what we typically think of as general authority. Something can be generally authorized by a more specific statement. If I tell my daughter, “Go buy some bread,” there are both specific and general indicators. If that is all I said, then there are several actions that are permissible. She may “go” any number of ways: walk, ride a bike, drive a car, etc. She might even be able to purchase a couple of ways: use cash, swipe a debit card, etc. That would depend on what she had or what I give her. She might buy any number of types of bread: wheat, white, sourdough, rye, etc. On the other hand, the situation may imply that I expect a certain type of bread. We might have just run out of wheat bread for sandwiches, and the circumstances show that I am implying that this is what I want her to buy. Even then, when she goes to the store, since I didn’t specify the brand name, she is free to pick up whatever she wishes … unless, of course, we always only buy one brand and she already knows this.

When we communicate, there are many factors that need consideration. What we bring to the table as communicators and what the recipient of the communication brings to the table need to be factored into the process. Further, the context under which the communication occurred must be considered. Most of this we unconsciously accept and we don’t typically need it spelled out. We already know how it works.

When Scripture commands that we go teach and preach, the specifics entail the general ways in which we can fulfill these commands. Whether we walk, ride, fly, or drive, we are still going. The fact that the Lord did not specify this part leaves us open to any number of ways of going. When we know it is the Lord’s will that Christians meet together on the first day of the week, a variety of places to meet are included in fulfilling this. The general nature of the order allows for the options. We must also be mindful of another important principle that we learn from the communication process: the more specific something is, the less freedom we have; the more general something is, the more freedom we have.

Again, this isn’t an arbitrary rule for Bible authority. It’s a principle of the communication process. If I tell my wife to buy me a red pen for grading papers, I surely don’t mean to get a blue one or black one. Red is specific enough to rule out the other colors for my purposes.

On the other hand, if I just asked for any pen, it is general enough to allow for all colors. The principle is fundamental & logical. The principle works the same in biblical communication. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we find the principle at work. “Gopher wood” was far more specific than “wood.” “Levites” as a term is more specific than “people.” The family of Aaron is more specific than “Levites” for priests. The specifics of the tabernacle were clear and didn’t allow for much variety. In the New Testament documents, we find the same principle. There are many ways to sing, but “sing” is specific enough to mean just that, as opposed to a more general “make music” (**Ephesians 5:19**). “Fruit of the vine” is more specific than “drink.” “Bread” is more specific than “food.” The principle is logical and found everywhere.

Since not everything must be specified, does all of this mean that we are free to do whatever we want to? General authority does not equate to “whatever we want.” If the command is general, we must still obey the command within boundaries. Going back to the store with my daughter, I might be general in asking her to buy bread, but she must still buy bread instead of whatever else she wanted. Even if I said, “Buy whatever food you think we might like for dinner,” she still needs to come home with food. A general order allows for more variety in carrying it out, but variety does not mean fundamentally changing what the general order expresses. If I ask for a writing instrument, then a pen or pencil will work, but if someone hands me a rock to write with, the point will have been missed.

Not everything needs to be specified in order to be authorized. Therefore, when some argue that the authority argument insists that everything must be specified, they are misunderstanding the nature of the argument, if not the process of communication. Authority is grounded in fundamental logic and communication. Such communication includes the way we both specify and generalize our desires. God has communicated with us in the same way. Since we already know how it works, we are simply making the application to the communication that comes from Scripture.