

Specifics and Generics

by Maurice Barnett

If I were to step into a room full of teenagers and say, “go get some bread,” I would have specified something I wanted done. I would have specified locomotion in “go get.” I would also have specified that I wanted “bread.” Beyond those specifics, are several things that are necessary in order to “go get some bread.” I did not specify just who was to get the bread. Anyone, or a combination of people, or perhaps the whole roomful might go. I did not specify where they were to get the bread, or even that they were to buy it. They might borrow it from a neighbor, go to a supermarked close by or across town or get it from their homes. I did not specify how they were to go in getting the bread, so they might walk, take a bike, car, cab, bus, skateboard, or something else. I didn’t specify when I wanted the bread, though they might correctly conclude that I wanted it in a reasonably short time. I did not specify how much bread to get, So I might wind up with a little or a lot; I just said “some.” I did not specify what kind of bread, so I might get wheat, rye, potato, soy, or something else, in the form of a loaf, buns, rolls, or some exotic foreign “bread.”

As long as they do what I tell them to do, they are free to choose the best way to do it. The unspecified choices I leave for them to decide are what we call *generic authority*. If I want to place more restrictions on them, I must be more specific in what I tell them. I might say, “Charles, here’s the money; take my car, right now; go to the grocery on the next corner; buy one loaf of fresh, Holsum, thin sliced, white, sandwich bread and bring it right back to me.” That greatly limits their choices.

As the one who gave the instruction, I would have the right to leave it as indefinite as possible. Or, I would also have the right to make some of those decisions for them and so close off some of the choices they might otherwise have. Or, I might take all of the decisions out of their hands and be so specific that they would essentially have no options from which to choose. In the same way, the more details God adds to his instructions, the fewer choices we have.

Modifying The Rules With Details

To amplify what has just been said, we must look at how God modifies what he says, at times by adding restrictions within the context or in other passages. Ephesians 5:19 says we are to “sing.” If God had stopped with that specific, we would be limited to singing but with a large number of decisions to make. We could sing country western songs, as well as pop and opera. However, He specifies “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” by adding those details and so limits us to the specific details.

When God told Noah to build an ark, he didn’t leave it at that. He added details of kind of material, dimensions, and other items, because such details were

important enough in His wisdom that He didn't want to leave these decisions to Noah. Perhaps God knew Noah was not capable of making such decisions. The concluding rule is—*Specific instruction can only be altered, modified, or limited by adding other specific details.*

Further, all scriptures are in harmony and must remain so. This is seen in Matthew 4, the temptation of Jesus by Satan. Though Satan quoted scripture, Jesus shows that Satan's use of scriptures put them out of harmony with something else God said. The applicaiton of the scriptures used by Satan was in error.

Or, note Matthew 18:19. "*Go teach all nations.*" The choices in "Go" allowed the apostles to choose any means of locomotion they found best at any given moment. However, though they could ride a mule, they couldn't steal one in order to "go" because that would be contrary to passages that forbid stealing. The end does not justify the means.

A particular position on remarriages was popular at one time, and may still be in some places. It was based on I Corinthians 7:9. Some have claimed that if one cannot contain himself, which means he cannot control his sexual desires, then he should marry, "*for it is better to marry than to burn.*" the conclusion was asserted that this applies, with God's approval, to anyone regardless of the person's previous marital condition, perhaps having been married and divorced many times before. Several things are wrong with that. First, it fails to take into account such passages as Matthew 19:9-12 and Romans 7:1-3 that place limitations on divorcing and remarrying. Second, the next two verses in I Corinthians 7 insist that a married person who "departs" is to remain unmarried or go back to her husband. It wouldn't matter what her sexual urges might be, she couldn't marry someone else and the only way she could gratify her desires is to return to her husband.

I Corinthians 7:39 says that a woman is bound to a husband as long as he lives, but if he is dead, she is free to be married to whom she will, "*only in the Lord.*" If the statement that she is free to marry whomever she wants was left without limitation, the widow could marry anyone regardless of whether or not the other person had a right to marry her. Whatever the phrase "only in the Lord" means, we know it limits who she can marry. Whatever it includes, most certainly Matthew 19:9, Romans 7:1-3 and other passages must be considered.

In the same category of subjects, I Corinthians 7:20, "*Let each man abide in the calling wherein he is called*" has been used to say that one who is baptized is to remain in whatever relationship he has at the time of baptism. Thus, if he is in his 100th marriage, former marriages being mere abandonment for frivolous reasons, he is to remain in the marriage he got caught in when he was baptized. No, that is a perversion of the passage. Paul is talking about remaining in things that are lawful to begin with. Could we say that if one is an idolator when he is baptized that he is to remain an idolator? How about someone in a homosexual relationship? Or, being part of a gang of thieves, can he stay in that? Just to ask such questions is to answer them. God's marriage regulations apply to everyone, Christian or non-Christian. One cannot stay in a relationship that is contrary to God's law, just as it was with Herod and Herodias, Mark 6:18.

In Exodus 31:15, God gives regulations concerning the Sabbath: "*Whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath...shall be put to death.*" That is a clear, precise statement. However, God said some other things that have a bearing on this. Numbers 28:9-10 specifies that the priests were to make certain offerings on the Sabbath. Jesus refers to this in Matthew 12:5. He points to this law, saying that the priests profane the Sabbath and are guiltless. Butchering animals, offering sacrifices along with other activities, was "working" on the Sabbath. Yet, they were guiltless. Why? Well, the God that gave the one law also gave the other that altered it. If Jesus had not made the statement recorded in Matthew 12:5, we would still know of this modification in Numbers 28:9-10. The Jews should have put the scriptures together to see that fact without its being pointed out to them.

Another like instance is in Leviticus 12:3. It says that all male babies were to be circumcised on the eighth day. So, if that eighth day fell on the Sabbath, it had to be done on the Sabbath. This is what Jesus said in John 7:22-23, that "the law of Moses not be broken." The one law was as much a part of the Law of Moses as the other. There was no contradiction between the two. Without the point made by Jesus, we would still know the truth of the matter by comparing the contexts of the Old Testament passages. One statement is modified by more details from another statement. There are no contradictions.

These are two modifications to the law of the Sabbath that showed the Pharisees didn't understand the subject properly. Jesus went to two other passages in the Law to present the full truth. Essentially, this is what preachers do; they go to all pertinent passages to give a complete picture of what God wants us to know.

There are several New Testament passages dealing with the duties of elders. I Peter 5:1-4 commands that elders are to "*tend the flock of God which among you, exercising the oversight.*" Acts 20:28 says much the same thing. The specific instructions limit elders. They cannot oversee more than one congregation nor the work of any congregation but the one where they are elders. Nor are they to oversee anything other than a local congregation. Whether the subject is benevolence or evangelism in the scriptures, any passage must be limited by these instructions on congregational autonomy, independence and the oversight of elders. The one set of instructions affects the other. Many have appealed to emotions to authorize their schemes, going on the basis that the end justifies the means; after all, doesn't God say we are to be benevolent, and are to preach to the lost? certainly! But we cannot lift something from the Bible and apply it the way Satan did, a way that puts it out of harmony with other instructions from God. The Missionary Society was formed by well meaning brethren with the noble purpose of preaching to the lost. But it violated so many other scriptures that it has no authority from God for its existence.

When we insist that the Scriptures contain the rules governing our conduct, we are immediately charged with inconsistency. "You don't practice the holy kiss, and that's a command," we are told. They then jump to the assertion that since this is not practiced, we don't have to do everything the Bible says, we don't have to have Bible authority for everything we do.

However, even if it were true that there are commands we do not obey, it does

not destroy the authority of God's commands nor the necessity of their being obeyed. It only demonstrates that we are disobedient. There have always been people, from Adam and Eve on, who have not done what God has commanded either on purpose or by neglect. If man can get away with such conduct, why has God punished, destroyed, or promised eternal punishment for such disobedience. Since the "holy kiss" is the most often used assertion against God's rules, we will take the time to look at the subject.

We must understand that not all of God's commands and instructions are applicable to all people. Some are not applicable to anyone today. Regulations for women do not apply to men or those of men to women. All men are not subject to the responsibilities of elders. Regulations of spiritual gifts cannot be obeyed or disobeyed today because there are no spiritual gifts.

"Greet" or "salute" one another with a "holy kiss" is found in four passages, Romans 16:16, I Corinthians 16:20, II Corinthians 13:12 and I Thessalonians 5:26. I Peter 5:14 refers to it as a "kiss of love."

Men greeting one another with a kiss was a common cultural practice for centuries before the first one and continues today in that part of the world. The above passages are not commanding the act of kissing but rather regulating the common practice of greeting. It was to have the best motives behind it, hence "holy" and "of love." Without hypocrisy. The same could be said of fasting. Greeting with a kiss and fasting are certainly permissible, but not required. If we greet another with a kiss, then the command does apply in that our motive in doing so must be right. Our modern American manner of greeting of handshake or hug is regulated by the same adjectives. So, we do obey the command of these passages but must understand what the command tells us.

Generics Equal Options, Choices

I read somewhere the thought that some people want to serve God, but only in an advisory position. They would have created the world differently, they could have made improvements on the human model, they could have done a better job of writing the Bible so that all our decisions would be made for us and all possible questions answered, etc. However, the world and universe around us is a marvel of design, the human body functions just right for the kind of existence we have and the purpose of God in our being here. The Bible is put together just right. Specific instruction, including necessary conclusions, is applicable for all societies in all centuries and the choices that are left to us open the way for all people of all time to serve God as He prescribes. Different societies in all countries over the centuries have made different choices than we have in carrying out God's instruction; their choices have suited their circumstances exactly. If God had specified everything about every circumstance for all people of all time, He would have revealed more information than He wanted to us to have and it would have involved more details in more volumes than would have been feasible. Beside all that, God wants us to think and reason and not be mere robots.

It should be obvious that *specific statements or commands always take precedence over those unspecified choices* that we must, or are allowed to make. *There is no generic authority, no options/choices without specific instruction.* When God gives specific instruction, stated or implied, as a statement or a command, we look at the specifics first to see what his limitations may be. We then determine what unspecified choices God lets us make in carrying out what He does specify. Keep our illustration of the roomful of teenagers in mind. The specific instruction was given and then they had to decide the best way to carry out that instruction. Only by making more specific details would their choices be removed. The more specific items there are, the fewer choices there are.

Thus, authority answers to several questions: *what, when, where, why, who, how often, how much*, etc. Both specifics and choices answer to any one or a combination of these questions. God may specify in a passage the *who, what* and *where* and leave the *how* and *when* up to us to decide. It means that as long as we observe the *who, what* and *where*, God will be satisfied with our choice of *how* and *when*. The fact is, God did not give specific teachings regarding all possible situations, thereby leaving no choices for us to make.

The command to “*Go teach all nations*,” in Matthew 28:19 is specific in regard to *who, what* and *where*. That is, *you, go, teach* and *all nations*. “Go” specifies locomotion, movement, transport from one place to another. They had to carry out the specific instruction. However, Jesus did not tell them *how to do the going*, i.e., what means of transportation they were to use. Obviously, He didn’t care how they went as long as they went. The choices they might make would depend on the time and place. That makes the “how of going” *generic*, a matter of choice, an option left to the Apostles. It might be a boat, chariot, an animal or they might just walk. Their choices of ways to travel today would be much increased.

“All nations” established a class, category or place. Jesus left options of order and priority up to the Apostles. Jesus did specify a beginning order for them—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and then all nations, Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8. Obviously such specifics of priority would only apply to the Apostles in that particular time and place and had no application for anyone after that time.

The command to “teach” all nations specifies the work to be done. However, the *method* of teaching (such as one on one, a group, writing, etc.) was a matter of choice as long as they did what was specified.

Misapplying The Use of Choices

People have always tried to add options not contained in specific teaching. We have seen that attempt by Nadab and Abihu, Naaman and others. If some cannot find authority for what they want to do in specific teaching, they throw their plan or project into “generic authority,” claiming their plan as their choice of “options.”

The early controversy among brethren over instrumental music in worship centered on expediencies. On the one hand was the sentiment expressed by H.T. Anderson in *The Christian Standard* for June 12, 1869, page 186. This was in replying to Robert Richardson—

"I am no advocate for instrumental music in churches. But the doctor with his legalism cannot legislate it out of the churches. I might easily say to him, where there is no law, there is no transgression. There is no law against instrumental music in churches; therefore, those who use it are not transgressors."

Richardson had written in the March issue, page 73, the following that prompted such a rebuttal from Anderson—

"My position was simply that, an expediency has to do with the manner, time, means and circumstances connected with the doing of things. No question of expediency can rightfully arise until it is first proved that the things themselves are lawful and proper to be done. I feared, and my fears have been fully confirmed by some who have since written on the subject, that expediency was supposed to occupy a wide sphere beyond the boundaries of law, and in its jurisdiction, to be quite independent of law. My view is that with us, it can have no place at all until law has first authorized something to be done, and that, therefore, its exercise must be restricted within the limits of some law, or rule of life and action."

The instrumental music controversy involved how we are to understand specific and generic authority as well as the "silence" of scripture.

Another controversy we have had since 1849 has been over the Missionary Society in doing evangelistic work. The defenders of this organization have tried to authorize it under generic authority of the word "teach." The word "teach" in Matthew 28:19 involves all methods of teaching. Certainly none of the methods of "go" and "teach" are specified. However, what Missionary Society advocates have done is inject a "who" into the "what" as just a method of going and teaching. Such an organization as the Missionary Society is *not* a method of either going or teaching but rather *an organization that uses and supports methods of going and teaching*. The who belongs to *another category from go and teach*.

The only organization that is authorized in the New Testament is the local church; *that is* God's "missionary society." The local church can use methods and make choices in carrying out the work of God. We cannot build organizations of our own devising that compete with the local churches, turning the work God gave local churches to do over to such organizations. That is like adding "strange fire," or "looking for another river."

Another place where people assume generic authority where there is none, is in regard to "good works." Harding College President, George S. Benson, said in a class I attended in 1955 that "Elders have the right to do anything they want to do as long as they think it's a good work." But, even before that, in a letter to G.C. Grever, dated April 7, 1932, N.B. Hardeman said in reference to local church support of Colleges, "We have contended here, ever since I can remember, that the church has a right to contribute to anything it considers a good cause," booklet, *Congregations and Colleges* by G.C. Brewer, page 21. Hardeman was President of Freed-Hardeman College at the time. Some may claim that their project is "work," and doing a lot of "good" as far as they are concerned. Therefore, it is a "good work," authorized by passages like II Corinthians 9:8, II Timothy 2:21, Titus 3:1, Galatians 6:10.

If we take this approach, it would mean that whatever man may think is a good work is therefore approved by God. As we have seen, Matthew 7:22-23 records the arguments of some people on the day of judgment. They claim that, in the name of Jesus, they did many “wonderful works.” Jesus said it wasn’t so. Not denying that they may have been wonderful works in their own eyes, Jesus does deny the people did them “in his name,” meaning “by his authority.” II Timothy 3:16-17 informs us that the scriptures are the source of information about which works are good and which are not—

“Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness. That the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.”

In the aforementioned booklet, G.C. Brewer placed church support of colleges in the same class as church buildings or preacher’s homes. Alexander Campbell said exactly the same thing about the Missionary Society, that it was as authorized as a church building—

“The building of a meeting house is as conventional as a Bible Society or a missionary society; and he that opposes the one, should on all his premises and logic, oppose the other.” *Millennial Harbinger*, September, 1850, pp. 500-501.

However, church buildings are expedients of *assembly by a local church*, Hebrews 10:25 and a place for the preacher to live, is an expedient of *wages paid*, II Corinthians 11:8. There is no authority for a local church to operate a secular teaching institution and has no authority to contribute to one. Neither a college nor a missionary society is an expedient of anything the church can support.

An Application

Let’s make application of some of the principles we have looked at so far. Claims are often made as to what restoring the the New Testament church involves as versus what some insist we must do that have a New Testament church.

It is widely believed, and often said, that we are to engage in “five acts of worship” every time we assemble on Sunday. These “acts” are prayer, preaching, singing, communion and the contribution. By long standing practice and repetition of that position, it has become law in the minds of most brethren. Actually, when we have discussed these items, what has really been meant is that *we cannot have any MORE than these five items*, which is quite another matter. The following quotations state the above position that we must perform the five acts in every Sunday assembly. The first is from a bulletin article of one preacher and the other two from a taped sermon by another preacher. I kept the quotations on file but have since lost the source. Yet, the source or names of the preachers are of no consequence as they state a fairly common position—

“While it is certainly true that the Lord’s Supper is an important part of our worship, one of the false notions I spoke of above has it as the only act of worship that is of any major or true consequence. In contrast, however, we find five acts of worship in the New Testament which are all important. This is the main reason I never encourage taking the Lord’s Supper to those who are sick unless we can also en-

gave in those other acts of worship the apostles and prophets of the Bible taught."

"And I will make the statement again that I made last Sunday morning. 'If you want to be a New Testament Church you're going to have to include in each assembly on the Lord's Day those things that the New Testament Church included in its assembly or drop your claim to be a New Testament Church.' Now, I don't believe I can be any plainer than that."

"In the New Testament, when a Church assembled on the Lord's Day, here's what they did. They prayed, sang, they taught, they gave, and they participated in the Lord's supper. We have some Churches today that are in the unenviable position of saying we are the New Testament Church and yet assemble for worship on the Lord's Day and have eliminated one of the five things, one of the five distinctive marks of the worship of the New Testament Church. Now, I say that you can't do that and go unnoticed."

Not only is the position, as stated, untrue, I don't believe that the preachers or churches they have worked with, have ever practiced what these men taught. For instance, I think that every church has had Sunday afternoon singings where they did nothing but sing and have prayer. Was it worship? Yes. Was it the first day of the week? Yes. Did they cease to be a New Testament church because they didn't have preaching, communion and take up a collection? No. If we can't have one "act" without the others then we can't have just a Sunday afternoon singing or just a teaching and prayer meeting.

There is a second thing wrong with the thinking of these preachers. It is the view that by going through certain motions or ceremonies, a local congregation has "worshipped," fulfilling the obligation of five acts. So, it is said that "*we do the same things on Sunday night that we do on Sunday morning.*" But they don't do any such thing!

Several years ago, I heard an explanation about a particular eldership. Their qualifications were questioned, but the reply came back that the eldership met all the qualifications in Timothy and Titus. Of the five elders, two were married but only one had any children, three of them were apt to teach, four were temperate, three were sober-minded, one was given to hospitality, etc. When you put them all together, all the qualifications were present in the eldership.

Here's the point. On Sunday morning the congregation usually does participate in the "five acts." "All" eat the bread and drink the fruit of the vine, most contribute something, most sing, many listen attentively to the sermon while some do not and some say "amen" at the close of the prayers. However, on Sunday night, there might be only one person there who eats and drinks and may or may not "make a contribution." Many times, there is NO ONE there who takes communion and NO ONE contributes any money. Have they done on Sunday night just what they did on Sunday morning? No. Have the "five acts" been done? No.

But, it is said at this point that the Lord's Supper is offered even though no one takes it. That particular part of the assembly is usually performed by someone asking, "Is anyone here who did not eat the Lord's Supper this morning?" Or, as has happened in some places, men attend the table, offer thanks for the bread and THEN ask if anyone wants to partake and no one does.

So, it is said, "The Lord's Supper was *offered* so the Lord's Supper was *observed*." No, it wasn't! The *act* of "offering" the Lord's Supper or putting a plate out for a "contribution" is not fulfilling either responsibility. I Corinthians 11:20, 33 specifies that they assembled together *to eat*. Verse 26 says—

"For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come."

This does *not* say "as often as ye *offer* this bread and *offer* the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come." The worship related to the Lord's Supper is the *eating* of it, *not the distributing* of it to the people. And, there were specific rules on the how of its proper eating.

Brethren assembled together for several reasons in the first century. Prayer, Acts 12:12; to use spiritual gifts, I Corinthians 14; to act on discipline, I Corinthians 5:4-5; to hear of work done, Acts 14:27, 15:4; to sing, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16. We know they met to eat the Lord's supper on the first day of the week from several places, I Corinthians 11:18-33, Acts 20:7, but I will not argue the evidence from these and other passages at the moment. We must have at least one assembly on the first day of the week for this purpose. We infer from this and from language in I Corinthians 16:1ff that brethren were to contribute of their personal means with the first day of every week specified. However, the five items of "worship" on the list have different specifics and thus different options.

The "first day of the week" is a lengthy period of time. It is open to more than one assembly, as is the practice of most church. We could come together at 8 a.m. on Sunday morning for no other purpose than to eat the Lord's Supper, have prayer and a song. We could then assemble at three in the afternoon for a sermon, prayer and take up a collection from the members. We would meet all requirements of each item in the two assemblies.

The money contributed by members is a duty of membership, not an act of worship like the Lord's Supper or prayer. Nor is *the act of dropping the money into a plate* or *the act of taking up a collection* an act of worship. We are *obligated* to support whatever work the congregation does. The instruction of first day of the week in I Corinthians 16:1-2 only specifies when it is put together in one place. Members are told to give "as they have prospered." Acts 11:29 says that every man according to his ability" gave for the relief of those in Judea. Some may not have prospered at all and thus have nothing to give; others are paid only once a month and give as they have prospered on the next Sunday after payday; they have nothing to contribute the rest of the month. Some insist they should divide it up into portions according to the number of Sundays in that month and drop it in the plate each Sunday. But, contributing on the one Sunday *as prospered* fulfills the specific instruction.

After Pentecost, those who had property, sold it, and bringing the money, "laid it at the Apostles feet," Acts 4:36, 5:1-11. On Sunday, we may drop our contribution in a box in the foyer on our way in or out of the auditorium and still meet all the specifics of the instructions. Some members mail a check to the church if they can't be there for some reason. It is put with the rest of the money collected. Some-

times a member has a friend take his money and put it with the rest. In a family with only one income, the husband puts the money in the plate and his wife puts in nothing. Has she worshipped correctly though she, personally, put nothing into the plate? She may have done only three of the acts of worship. In a two income family, sometimes only one drops the money in the place that represents both their incomes. Can that one person eat the Lord's Supper for the other one as well. Or, must they both drop their respective "as prospered" money into the plate separately in order to worship that day?

Actually, many brethren pay by check. We have given no actual money as such but a check that represents money. There won't be any money for the church until the check clears the bank. Thus, no money has actually been contributed by the member that day. Occasionally, someone's check "bounces." They misjudged what was in their account. The check comes back to the church building, but the member makes up for it the next Sunday. But, does that mean that, unknowingly, on the Sunday he put the insufficient check in the plate that he didn't worship on that day because it was a bad check? God would not accept his worship until he made the check good? He actually did only four of the five acts that Sunday.

On the other hand, the husband cannot eat the Lord's Supper for the wife and family. One cannot stop and eat it at a card table as he enters the building as do the other members as they arrive over a period of thirty minutes. No friend can eat in the place of another who is sick at home. In the same way, one cannot sing in the place of another; no solos, quartets or choirs. The specific instructions of the Lord's Supper, contribution, singing, prayer and preaching are not the same. Each has its necessary acts and respective options.

In any passage of instruction, we must first identify all of the specifics involved and then determine what choices we have in carrying out the instruction. If there is no specific instruction, then there are no options.