



ISSUE

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Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN OF
THE OL-
SEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Ryan Ferguson

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McNear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Justin Smiley

Kevin Wise

Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

Generic and Specific Authority

By Kyle Pope

The Bible emphasizes the importance of having authority for what is done in religious practice (Col. 3:16-17). To act without authority is to act presumptuously. David indicates that to commit **“presumptuous sins”** is to commit **“great transgression”** (Ps. 139:13). While the New Testament speaks of the liberty we have in Christ from, sin, from the Old Law, and the traditions of men, all throughout Scripture it is clear that we must not add to or take away from the word of God. (Deut. 12:32; 2 John 9). Paul told Timothy that Scripture allows, **“the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”** (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NKJV). That tells us that we can determine from Scripture what we are authorized to do that the Lord considers **“good work.”**

How can Scripture teach us what God defines as **“good work”**? We can do this by looking at the Bible just as we would any written literature. We consider what it says directly. Jesus taught that disciples must be taught to **“observe all things that I have commanded”** (Matt. 28:19-20). We may also look at examples that are described as approved. Paul taught the Philippians, **“The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you”** (Phil. 4:9). Following the example of the apostles can allow us the same assurance that God will be with us.

Many things are expressed in written literature by inference rather than by direct statement or description. These allow us to draw inescapable conclusions that inform us about the content. Scripture teaches us by necessary inferences just as it does by commands and examples. For example, Acts 20:7 speaks of Christians meeting on the first day of the week to break bread and 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 describes the collection **“for the saints”** also being offered on the first day of the week. That allows us to conclude that Christians met on the first day of the week for these two acts of worship. That establishes

authority for us to do the same as a **“good work.”** To do otherwise, would not be acting upon Scriptural authority and could not therefore be considered a **“good work.”**

Different Types of Authority

Generic Authority. While we can determine authority by what Scripture states directly, describes, and infers, we must also understand that some things authorized in Scripture carry with them varying degrees of generality and specificity. For example, Hebrews 10:24-25 forbids forsaking **“the assembling of ourselves together.”** This prohibition lays down a general command for Christians to meet together but it does not specify a place where they are to meet. Considering other Scriptures, we can see authority for Christians to assemble in homes (Acts 20:7), in the temple (Acts 5:12), in a facility used as a school (Acts 19:9), and likely in a place set apart for an assembly (Jas. 2:2—**“assembly”** is the Greek word *synagogue*, used of an assembly and the place of the assembly). So, we can see that Scripture grants general (or generic) authority for the church to meet in a va-

riety of places and to do what is necessary to secure a place to meet. To insist that an assembly could only be in one of these places would ignore the full record of Scripture and restrict where God has not restricted.

Specific Authority. What if Scripture does not offer a variety of ways by which something commanded can be carried out? What if only one method is described or commanded? Acting contrary to what is specified cannot be considered to be acting upon Scripture, it is in fact going beyond Scripture and cannot therefore be considered a **“good work.”** For example, when Noah was commanded to build the ark using **“gopher wood”** (Gen. 6:14), it specified a type of wood and thus excluded any other types of wood. Consider how this principle applies to musical worship to God in the New Testament. In two passages Paul commands Christians to worship in song specifying only singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). If we look at examples described in the New Testament, we see that all references to worship by Christians upon earth involved only vocal music (Matt. 26:30; 1 Cor. 14:15, 26). So, just like God’s command to Noah, by indicating a specific way to carry out the instruction, God disqualifies other things about which He is silent. We must conclude, therefore, that It is authorized for us to worship God by singing, but not with mechanical instruments of music.

Specific Authority is Not Required for Things Generically Authorized

These principles are important to recognize when seeking to determine if something is or is not scripturally authorized. While we must have authority for anything we practice in the Lord’s church to be assured it is a **“good work”** that does not mean we must have *specific* authority for every practice that allows us to carry out something generically commanded. For example, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 authorize taking up a freewill **“collection for the saints”** on the first day of the week, but it does not specify how this collection is to be made. Other Scriptures address principles about attitudes involved in giving, and the use of the contribution, but not method of collection is specified. Could it be placed in a drop box? Could a plate be passed around the assembly? Neither of these practices is specifically authorized in the New Testament, but both are expedients by which we can carry out the generic command to offer a **“collection for the saints.”**



Olsen Park Church of Christ

In the early twentieth century these principles became important in the Bible class issue. Can the church offer classes to different ages? Can women teach such classes for children? Pivotal to this whole controversy was the distinction between generic and specific authority. Those who opposed Bible classes did so on the basis of two flawed objections:

1. “There is no example of Bible classes.” I would contend that there is no difference between the scores of studies that are described in Scripture involving small groups or individuals outside the assembly and Bible classes coordinated by a local church. For example, Acts 18:24-28 describes a Bible study that was outside of an assembly of the church involving a husband and wife and an individual. If this was authorized, local churches are therefore generically authorized to organize smaller Bible classes that do not involve the entire assembly of a local church.

2. “There is no authority for Women teachers.” It is true that women are to be absolutely silent in the assembly of the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35). It is also true that a woman is not to teach over a man (1 Tim. 2:11-12), but Titus 2:3-4 commands older women to be **“teachers of good things”** even specifying what they are to teach younger women. Timothy’s mother and grandmother are praised for the faith they shared with Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3-5). These things grant generic authority for women to teach children and other women in contexts outside of the assembly of the church. There is no difference between this and women who teach in efforts coordinated by a local church.

In each of these objections, opponents of Bible classes demand specific authority for things that have been generically authorized. They do not do this in questions about the place of assembly or methods of taking up a first day of the week **“collection for the saints,”** but insist upon it in the Bible class question. If something is generically authorized, we do not have to find specific authority for every expedient way to fulfill what has been commanded.

What Constitutes Specific Authority?

In the instrumental music issue, it is not simply the fact that no example of the use of mechanical instruments is described, but the fact that a method is specified in the instruction. It involves, **“teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord”** (Col. 3:16) and **“singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord”** (Eph. 5:19). We noticed above that approved

examples are not merely options, but the binding condition by which we can know that God will be with us in our efforts (Phil. 4:9). That teaches us that we are bound by apostolic examples that are approved.

Does this mean that every specific apostolic example is binding? In the example in Acts 20:7, the saints met in a house to observe the Lord’s Supper and met in an upper room. Does that restrict all assemblies to only upper rooms? Or does it restrict the observance of the Lord’s Supper to upper rooms? No. In the wording of Hebrews 10:24-25, there is nothing in the command to assemble or in other Scriptures addressing the assembly or observance of the Lord’s Supper that specify anything about the location. In fact, the examples regarding the assembly show a number of places where Christians met that did not involve upper rooms. 1 Corinthians 11:18 does describe the Lord’s Supper as a congregational activity, but nothing is said about this involving an upper room. We can conclude, therefore, that some specifics about apostolic examples are incidental and not binding and restrictive.

Specific authority is usually determined by the specifics of the command, but there are times when examples clarify specifics regarding a command. For example, in the Lord’s institution of the Lord’s Supper he said

nothing about the time when it was to be observed (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Yet, the only example we have regarding when it was observed is Acts 20:7, which places it on the first day of the week. This informs us that Christians in the New Testament observed the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, and we are thus authorized to do this also. To follow this specific element of the example allows us to know we do a **"good work"** in the assurance that God is with us in this activity. To observe the Lord's Supper on another day would not be following Scripture but acting without authority.

As we noted above, when we have generic authority for something, we must not imagine that we can only act when we have specific authority for a practice. Let's apply this to another question about the Lord's Supper. Is there authority for a church to offer the Lord's Supper when they come together a second time for those who could not be at a first service on the first day

of the week? We should note, there is no specific authority for this practice—just as there is no specific authority for Bible classes—but there is generic authority. How can this be proven? First, Christians are commanded to observe the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:25). The approved example of when this was done is on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7) by a congregation (1 Cor. 11:18). However, Scripture does not specify a course of action for: (1) One who comes in late. (We customarily give them a chance—if their conscience compels them to eat.); (2) Those in another part of the building because of illness or a crying child. (We give them an opportunity to eat if they feel that they should—even though they were not physically in the assembly.); (3) A large congregation which would require a large gap of time from the first person who partakes until the last partakes. Yet, we recognize that these conditions fall within the generic authority of the instruction to observe the Lord's Supper. It is the same type of issue when a person (for whatever reason) is not able to be at an earlier assembly and yet desires when he or she assembles with the church on the Lord's Day to observe the Lord's Supper. This is not a second observance it is giving one, whose conscience compels him or her to eat, the opportunity to follow the instructions of Scripture. It is generically authorized and therefore a **"good work."**

These are distinctions which involve careful examination of what the Bible does and does not say. We must be cautious that we don't just do things out of tradition or personal desire but have a willingness to **"test all things, hold fast what is good"** (1 Thess. 5:21). Human judgment will undoubtedly play a role in our analysis of the language of Scripture, and we must always show a respect for the individual conscience of our brothers and sisters in Christ. But let us ever maintain a commitment to base all that we do on the authority of Scripture. Only then can we be assured that it is a **"good work"** we may practice in the assurance that God is with us in the activity.

