Answering Questions About Bible Authority

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth...”
– Matthew 28:18
What if the Bible says *what* to do, not *how* to do it?

**Two types of authority: Specific and General**

**Specific Authority**
- Scripture explicitly states the *method and the intended result*
- No wiggle room here: limited authority
- Must carry out the command exactly as told

**General Authority**
- Scripture states the intended result *but not the method*
- Liberty to choose a method (*within certain bounds*)
- No authority to change the result
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**Specific Authority (example 1)**

- When the Scriptures specify exactly what to do and exactly how to do it
- Mark 16:15-16 – “*preach the gospel*”
  - Specifies exactly what disciples must preach
  - No wiggle room to preach a different message!
  - No authority to preach your own philosophies, opinions or personal agendas
  - cf. II Tim 4:1-2; I Pet 4:11
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**General Authority (example 1)**

- When the Scriptures specify exactly what to do **but not** exactly how to do it
- Mark 16:15-16 – “*preach the gospel*”
  - Does not specify *how* the gospel should be preached – i.e. the method to use.
  - The apostles preached the gospel by word of mouth (Acts 2:11), letter (II Thes 2:15), and sending messengers (I Cor 4:17): *they had the authority to choose!*
- **By extension**, we have general authority to preach via radio, TV, signs, newspapers, websites, etc.
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**Specific Authority (example 2)**
- Acts 20:7; I Cor 16:1-2 – *“first day of the week”*
  - Specifies the exact day to assemble for Lord’s Supper
  - No liberty to change this assembly to a different day
  - No authority to decide to have the Lord’s Supper at a Saturday wedding or Friday funeral

**General Authority (example 2)**
- Acts 20:7 does not specify exactly *when* or *where* the church must assemble for the Lord’s Supper
- In Troas, they happened to meet in the evening in an upper room (rented, borrowed, or owned is not stated)
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More on examples 1 and 2

- The commands to assemble and to preach give the church general authority to own/rent a building.
- Churches in the New Testament were found at the Temple (Acts 2:46), in an unspecified room (Acts 20:8), in homes (Rom 16:5), perhaps in a school (Acts 19:9), and, by necessary conclusion, many other places not specified.
- Since the *place is not specified*, the church has general authority to decide whether to own, rent, or borrow a place to assemble: *any choice is Scripturally acceptable.*
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More on examples 1 and 2

- The church does not have the authority to own, rent or borrow gymnasiums, theaters, banquet halls, or any other structure to facilitate activities outside the work of the church authorized in the New Testament!
  - Do not function to preach the gospel to the world
  - Do not function to accommodate the assembly of the saints for worship and spiritual things
  - Do not function to enhance the *spiritual* growth of Christians

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**Specific Authority (example 3)**

- Matt 28:19 – “baptizing them...”
  - “baptizing” (Greek, *baptizo*) means immersion, burial
  - “to dip, to immerse, submerge” (Thayer’s Lexicon)
  - “to immerse, to submerge, to make overwhelmed (i.e. fully wet)” (Strong Dictionary)
  - Represents a *burial*, Rom 6:4, Col 2:12
  - Baptizing disciples (for the remission of sins, Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16) is a *specific command*
  - We have no liberty to change the method to sprinkling or pouring

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**General Authority (example 3)**

- Matt 28:19 – “*baptizing them...*”
  - Does not specify where one should be baptized, who should do the baptizing, or what should be said
  - John baptized in a convenient place with “much water” (John 3:23)
  - Countless others were baptized in places that are totally unspecified (Acts 8:38, 16:15,33; etc.)
  - Paul clearly implied that it doesn’t matter *who* does the baptizing (I Cor 1:14-17)
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**General Authority (example 3)**

- Matt 28:19 – “baptizing them...”
  - Not a word is said in Scripture concerning what must be said before a person is baptized...
  - *Except* that the person baptized must first make a public confession of faith (Acts 8:37, II Cor 9:13, II Tim 6:12-13, etc.)
  - River, pool, special baptistery, one witness or many, words before or none: these and other options are acceptable by general authority from the Scripture!
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**Boundaries for applying general authority:**

1. *Intended result must be authorized by command, example, and/or necessary conclusion*
   - Look at what you’re trying to accomplish: is that result authorized in Scripture or not?

2. *The method must not be specified by the Scriptures*
   - If God already specified how the results must be accomplished, there is no authority to change the method.

➤ Remember Matt 28:18-20; II John 9-11; II Tim 3:16-17
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**Boundaries for applying general authority:**

3. *The suggested method must be helpful and must edify*
   - See 1 Cor 6:12, 10:23
   - Paul *counters* the argument that “all things are lawful” by teaching on profitability and edification
   - Even if many options are lawful, only helpful/profitable methods should be chosen
   - Even if many options are lawful, only methods that edify (i.e. for spiritual growth) should be chosen

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**Boundaries for applying general authority:**

4. *The method chosen must be decent and orderly*
   - See I Cor 14:40
   - Especially in regards to the assembly, God desires for us to serve Him in decency and order
   - *Decently* – gracefully, properly, in a seemly manner
   - Esp. in regards to influence on others (cf. I Thes 4:12; I Cor 14:22-25)
   - *In order* – regular arrangement, fixed succession
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**Boundaries for applying general authority:**

5. *The method chosen must not cause weaker Christians to stumble*
   
   ▪ See 1 Cor 10:31-32 in context, w. Rom 14
   ▪ To give offense means *to cause to stumble* (see NIV)
   ▪ Esp. in regards to the individual Christians and his/her influence on other Christians and the world
   ▪ Some things are lawful for us to do, but may not be understood as lawful by less knowledgeable people
   ▪ In such company, we must guard our influence and “not let [our] good be spoken of as evil”

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**EXAMPLES - boundaries for applying general authority:**

1. *Intended result must be authorized by command, example, and/or necessary conclusion*
   - *Suggestion to test:* a higher order of church organization than elders in the local church
   - Maybe a regional board of elders over many churches
   - Do we have general authority to extend organization beyond autonomous local churches?

- There is **no Scriptural authority** for organization or hierarchy beyond local elders! See Acts 14:23, etc.
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**EXAMPLES - boundaries for applying general authority:**

2. *The method must not be specified by the Scriptures*
   - *Suggestion to test*: make a time other than the first day of the week for certain people to observe the Lord’s Supper
   - Do we have general authority to take the Lord’s Supper away from the assembly and the first day of the week?

- There is **no Scriptural authority** for this method since the first day of the week and the assembly are specified.

See Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:17-34; etc.

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**EXAMPLES - boundaries for applying general authority:**

3. *The suggested method must be helpful, must edify*
   - *Suggestion to test:* should we do away with Bible study and worship midweek?
   - Maybe it’s difficult to find a day/time when all members can attend
   - There is no Scripture demanding any assembly other than the first day of the week – though early Christians met often, even daily (cf. Acts 2)

➤ Doing away with other assemblies might be lawful, but it is not helpful in our teaching and does not help us grow!
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**EXAMPLES - boundaries for applying general authority:**

3. *The suggested method must be helpful, must edify*

- Any practice that harms our ability to teach the world and to grow spiritually ourselves, any practice that causes division rather than unity – any such practice is not Scriptural, even if it appears that it is authorized!
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**EXAMPLES - boundaries for applying general authority:**

4. *The method chosen must be decent and orderly*
   - *Suggestion to test:* instead of a structured observance of the Lord’s Supper, we should have an *ad lib* observance where everyone eats and speaks at their own leisure and inclination.
   - Maybe structure and order seem rigid and cold...

- There is **no Scriptural authority** for taking part in the Lord’s Supper in this scrambled fashion.
- However, if our observance seems rigid and cold, something needs to change, but decently and in order.

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- If the Bible states *how* something is to be accomplished, there is no liberty to change that method.
- If the Bible states what to accomplish, but not how to do it, there is liberty for us to choose the method.
- There are boundaries that should be considered when choosing a method on our own.
- These boundaries often require much thinking, wisdom, discernment, and consideration of others.
- What is generally authorized in one situation might be very wrong, improper, inconvenient in another situation.
- What is specifically authorized for one church is to be followed the same way by every church.