

## Specific and General Authority

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by Alex Hale

Examining how the apostles handle the conflict involving the Hellenistic widows (**Acts 6:1-7**) reveals to us numerous practical applications. There is also a principle that can be taken from this text regarding *the subject of authority*. One way in which New Testament authority can be established is through approved example. In Acts 6, we see a pattern, or apostolic example, for two things: (1) caring for widows, and (2) appointing men to positions of service. In both cases, we can see both *specific* and *general* authority.

At times, God is very specific in His commands. For example, when God commanded Noah to build the ark with gopher wood (**Genesis 6:14**), the *specific* nature of His direction ruled out any other kind of wood. Sometimes, however, God is general in His commands. The command to “go” (**Matthew 28:19**), for example, is general enough to include all methods of transportation for the purposes of evangelism.

When a command (or example) is general in nature, elders and congregations are given some latitude to determine the best way for them to carry out God’s plan. In **Acts 6**, the brethren are told to choose from among them men to serve. As a church today, we are told to appoint elders and deacons. Scripture gives us some guidance. The congregation is to be involved in the selection process. The men are to meet certain qualifications and be gifted to fulfill the tasks needed. We read of evangelists being involved in the appointment of these men (**Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5**).

However, the exact process of the selection is not detailed in scripture. Does the congregation take a vote? *Doesn’t say*. Do we fill out nomination forms? *Doesn’t say*. Does a man have to have a certain percentage of support? *Doesn’t say*. Do we wait two weeks? *Doesn’t say*. When the text does not say, a congregation is left to determine how they will handle the specifics of the situation. In doing so, we must ensure that we do not violate the guidelines that *are* seen in scripture.

Churches are given authority to help certain needy widows. The pattern of church benevolence places some restrictions on the use of a local church’s treasury. In the New Testament, when you see a church use money for benevolence, it is always for the saints. This is one of the purposes of a collection on Sundays (**1 Corinthians 16:1-2**). At times brethren will send money to other places, but again it is *for the saints* (**Romans 15:25-26; Acts 11:27-30**). With regards to widows, Paul gives more detailed instructions to Timothy (**1 Timothy 5**).

Again, however, the exact process of benevolence is not detailed in scripture. How did the seven men fulfill this task? *Doesn’t say*. How do we handle these kinds of situations today? Does the church just cut them a check? *Doesn’t say*. Do they bring their bills to the church? *Doesn’t say*. When the text does not say, a congregation is left to determine how they will handle the specifics of the situation. In doing so, we must ensure that we do not violate the guidelines that *are* seen in scripture.

You may have heard it said that the Bible is our owner’s manual to follow. This is true, and sometimes we are provided detailed, step-by-step instructions. However, with some issues, God does not offer us detailed directions, but instead parameters or boundaries wherein we must work. We often debate more about what the Bible does *not* say than about what it actually says. As we seek to determine the Lord’s will, we would do well to speak where the Bible speaks and remain silent where the Bible is silent (**1 Peter 4:11**).

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