

THINKING ABOUT "THE BAN" (1)
The Relationship Between General And Specific Commands Of Scripture

All churches in South Africa (and, indeed, around the world) have been affected by government regulations related to COVID. Things especially came to a head in South Africa in January 2021, when our government imposed a ban on church services, while allowing casinos, restaurants, movie theatres, and gyms to remain open. At Grace Fellowship, after respecting the ban for two weeks in order to underline our desire to submit to the government, we then chose to open services in spite of the government's prohibition. We did so based on at least *three principles*, and the elders have asked me to lay out those principles for us in a series of short articles.

The *first principle* that led us to open services has to do with *the relationship between general and specific commands of Scripture*—particularly when those commands appear to contradict one another in a specific situation.

JUST DO WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS!

As I said in my sermon on 17 January, our default setting at Grace Fellowship has always been, "We'll just do what the Bible says!" That is an *excellent* motto. However, I also pointed out that there are times when more than one command of Scripture will apply to a situation, requiring us to carefully shape our obedience as we place side by side *all* the applicable directives of Scripture touching on an issue.

Proverbs 26:4-5 provides the classic example: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly Answer a fool as his folly deserves."¹ Clearly one cannot apply those two commands in exactly the same way at exactly the same time. However, so that you aren't left wondering which command to prioritise in a given situation, in the second line of each verse, Solomon told you how to choose between them: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly *or you will be like him*. Answer a fool as his folly deserves *so that he not be wise in his own eyes*."

IN SEARCH OF A PRINCIPLE

This shows us that an important aspect of biblical wisdom is learning how to prioritise and apply commands of Scripture when one biblical command appears to negate or impinge on another. In Proverbs 26:4-5, Solomon gave the rationale in the verses themselves. However, the process is not usually that easy. Therefore, our question is this: Is there a sensible principle that can guide us in cases where multiple biblical commands apply to a situation, and when one of those commands tugs us in one direction and a second tugs in another? Indeed, there is such a principle. To draw it into the light, let's consider a number of examples.

As you read the seven pairs of biblical commands below, look for this principle to emerge: When applying multiple commands of the Bible to specific situations, **we consistently allow a *specific* command of Scripture on a specific subject to qualify or to take priority over a**

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the NASB, 1995.

more general command of Scripture on that subject. Or, to turn it around, **we do not allow a general command of Scripture to erase or obviate a more specific command of Scripture on a specific subject.**

Let's see that principle at work.

Example 1:

General command:

Romans 13:1. *Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.*

Specific command:

Proverbs 23:13-14. *Do not hold back discipline from the child ... You shall strike him with the rod and rescue his soul from Sheol.*

Because of our government's legislation against spanking, it is impossible to fully submit to the government in that area *and* to obey the instruction of Proverbs on child-raising. Understanding that, most Christian parents continue to apply measured, carefully restrained, loving physical discipline to their children. How can they justify elevating God's various commands to apply the rod over His command to obey the government? The answer is not random choice, nor is it a spirit of rebellion against authority. In fact, most Christian parents intuitively understand that a specific command of Scripture regarding child-raising must take priority over a more general command that touches the matter of child-raising only in a distant or indirect fashion.

Example 2

General command:

2 Timothy 4:2. *Preach the word ... with great patience.*

Specific command

Titus 3:10. *Reject a factious man after a first and second warning.*

When someone comes to Grace Fellowship with an erroneous doctrinal view, we patiently instruct, counsel, and encourage him in right doctrine, often taking months or years to help him adjust his thinking. However, if that same man starts to aggressively promote his doctrinal error in the congregation, the more specific command of Titus 3 to disbar a divisive man from fellowship must be given priority. In such cases, the baseline principle (patient instruction) is qualified by a specific command addressed to a situation in which a failure to act decisively would be destructive.

Example 3

General command:

1 John 3:17-18. *But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.*

Specific command:

2 Thessalonians 3:6, 10. *Keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life ... If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat either.*

A choice not to help a church member financially can't be arbitrary, haphazard, or selfish. However, at times the more specific command of 2 Thessalonians 3 must be given priority over the general instruction of 1 John 3.

Example 4

General commands:

Romans 15:7. *Accept one another.* John 13:34. *Love one another.*

Specific instruction/command:

1 Corinthians 6:9. *The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God ... nor homosexuals ...; Matthew 18:15, 17. If your brother sins, go and show him his fault If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

When it comes to the issue of homosexuality, theological liberals trumpet Romans 15:7 and John 13:34, arguing that churches must accept homosexuals without confronting their behaviour or thinking. There are several things wrong with that approach. First, such theologians are giving a conveniently abridged definition to the word "love"—one that denies that a rebuke can be loving. Second, they are ignoring the context of Romans 15 (preference issues, not overt sin). Third, it is not appropriate to subordinate the clear teaching of Scripture regarding homosexuality and church discipline to more general commands regarding love and acceptance. The process of church discipline must be carried out *lovingly*, but Christ's command to love cannot be used to obviate His more specific command for dealing with sin in the assembly.

Example 5

General command:

Matthew 7:1. *Do not judge.*

Specific command:

Matthew 7:6. *Do not give what is holy to dogs and do not throw your pearls before swine.*

Matthew 7:6 makes it clear that, at times, fulfilling Jesus' general command not to judge must give way to a stern biblical judgement on a person who is exhibiting a rebellious and defiant attitude.

Example 6

General command:

Ephesians 6:2. *Honor your father and mother.*

Specific command:

1 Corinthians 5:9, 11. *Do not associate with immoral people ... with any so-called brother.* (see also Matthew 18:15-17)

On the basis of the specific commands of 1 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 18, Christians will at times—as honourably as possible—be required to break off normal social interaction with a grossly and persistently sinful parent who professes to be a Christian. The principle? Specific commands of Scripture regarding how to handle sin must be allowed to qualify or limit a more general command regarding honouring parents.

All that, of course, leads us to the two biblical commands that, unfortunately, the government forced us to decide between in January with their unduly selective ban on church meetings.

Example 7:

General command:

Romans 13:1. *Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.*

Specific command:

Hebrews 10:24-25. ... *Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking assembling together as is the habit of some; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.*

INTUITION → CONCRETE PRINCIPLE

Many Christians intuitively responded to the government's selective ban on church meetings by thinking, "This isn't right; we must meet!" Why did they do that? For several reasons. For one, they were instinctively applying the principle highlighted in the examples above. When two commands of Scripture appear to bump into each other, we consistently give priority to the more specific command, the one that more directly addresses the issue—in this case, the issue of public worship.

This way of viewing the relationship between specific and general commands is the way Bible-believing Christians consistently handle wisdom dilemmas of this nature.

For example, the relationship between specific and general principles is exactly the reason we reject the feminists' use of Galatians 3:28 to argue that women should be allowed to teach and lead men in the church. The verse reads, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The fact that men and women are equally saved and united in Christ is a wonderful truth about salvation. However, it cannot be used to erase the more specific teaching of 1 Timothy 2:11-12, where the Holy Spirit explicitly said that women are not to teach or lead men in the church. If we had no biblical instruction on the role of men and women except Galatians 3:28, we might reason that women should be allowed to teach and lead men, since all are "one in Christ Jesus." However, the specific instruction of 1 Timothy must be allowed to qualify or limit that more general truth.

So, those examples combine to reveal that qualifying or nuancing a general command of Scripture with a more specific command on a given subject is a normal and necessary facet of Christian wisdom.

And that is the first reason that I believe it was right for Grace Fellowship to open services in January in spite of the government's ban: we were giving priority to the more specific command of Christ on the subject of worship. A decision to disobey the government is not one to be rushed at or to be taken with a rebellious, dismissive spirit. However, the decision we made was in line with the principle we consistently employ when balancing the relationship between the general and specific commands of the Bible.

A WISDOM CALL

It is important to acknowledge that our church's decision to ignore the government's ban on worship services was a "wisdom call." That is why we freely allowed people in our congregation to make a different decision without having it damage our love for them or fellowship with them. Furthermore, that is why we have not criticised other churches who chose not to open. In this situation, some might see the relationship between Romans 13 and Hebrews 10 slightly differently than we did, and we respect that.

However, other questions remain: Should we have kept our worship services closed in January since the government's ban was *well intentioned*? Why did we stop assembling in April and May last year if specific commands take priority over general commands? Is an overt ban on gospel preaching (such as the apostles faced in Acts 4-5) the *only* time that a church should take a stand against government intervention?

Those are excellent questions, and I'll address them in subsequent articles.