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Of Principles and Particulars

—Russ Bowman

Ours is a generation that has seen fairly dramatic changes in the world around us. Witness the political concerns and climate of the world. Attention once given to Europe and then the Soviet Union has shifted first to southeast Asia and now to the Middle East (with, of course, regular glances at Russia and North Korea). Old enemies are now allies and old allies are now viewed with suspicion. Or consider the technological developments that have become a practical part of daily life – microwaves, satellites, computers, lasers, cell phones, etc. Even more impressive are the fields of bioengineering or medicine or nanotechnology or any of a hundred other pursuits that have completely transformed our existence. And religion has certainly not been immune to such significant changes. Traditional denominationalism is rapidly dissolving. Doctrinal delineations are disappearing. Gender lines and functions are blurred. Moral issues are no longer issues, as divorce, homosexuality and promiscuity are considered normal or accepted behavior. Worship that once focused upon the demands of God now revolves around the entertainment of the audience. Temporal success, science, and culture now mold religious practice much more than the Word of God, and absolute truth has been sacrificed upon the altar of political correctness. There seems to be little attention anymore to pursuing what God wants, and a lot of consideration given to what men want.

I thus find it a bit interesting, and not a little ironic, that there is still some effort made on the part of religious leaders to justify all of the innovations of modern religious activity.

Is it not a bit hypocritical to try to justify disobedience by citing the very authority you are denying? For years I've watched as religious bodies introduced something into their worship or accommodated some error and then tried to cite some biblical authority for such. Citing the authority for the defiance of said authority is irrational at best, and ludicrous in reality. But it happens again and again, and generally with some argument made in reference to "biblical principle". In other words, the principle of "love" justifies some huge expenditure of congregational funds when there is no commandment or example of the treasury ever being used in such a manner. Or the principle of "compassion" is offered to allow fellowship with someone who has been married and divorced five times, regardless of the teaching of Matt.19.1f. The precept of "equality" might be promoted to authorize women preachers, whereas "grace" excuses us from any religious effort of our own. I even heard someone recently justify instruments of music in worship by citing the principle of "praise". As the modern argument goes, we should not worry so much about all the "particulars" of God's Word, so long as we give apt attention to the "principles". Yet there are a couple of observations that ought to be made about this "principles vs. particulars" issue.

First of all, when I read my bible I never cease to be impressed with just how much attention God pays to details (read "particulars") therein. Just read the section about the construction of the tabernacle and all that went with such (Ex.25-31f), or the passage in Lev.1-8 that describes God's law concerning the sacrifices to be made. Over and over God made great and detailed demands of His people, and their acceptance was conditioned upon their careful observation of His laws – "Therefore you shall be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you..." (Deu.5.32-33). Did such requirements mean that they earned their blessings? No, for God repeatedly reminded them of their sins and of His forgiveness. But He did condition His mercy upon their effort to obey (Deu.11, 27-30). And He underscored His attention to detail when men such as Nadab and Abihu (Lev.10.1f) or Uzzah (2 Sam.6.1f) violated such "particulars", regardless of their intention. The principle of "worship" didn't save

Aaron's sons and the principle of "honor" didn't deliver Uzzah. They died because they failed of the particulars. God must be serious about such.

Secondly, I find it hard to separate particulars from principles, for it seems to me that every real principle is verified by the particulars that express it. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep my commandments" (Jn.14.15), yet more often than not I hear "love for God" offered as justification for "love of what I think is a really good idea". "Benevolence" has more than once been cited as the principle which justifies some grand scheme of hyper-organization which is more about fundraising than about loving our neighbor. The particular of benevolence is clearly addressed to individual Christians in Jas.1.27 where we are told to "visit orphans and widows in their trouble" or in 1 Jn.3.17-18 wherein John tells us not to shut up our heart from those in need, but to love "in deed and in truth". And the principle of fellowship has been so abused that most people have never considered the biblical particulars, which do not address social activities, but the demands of worship, instruction, and mutual support in spiritual activity. How can people accept the principles contained in God's Word and ignore the particulars which express them? Certainly I need to worship and praise God, but is it worship and praise when I ignore what He has asked of me?

Finally, what about the principle of "honor"? In all of the semantic gymnastics that are offered to justify human preference, why doesn't someone underscore the principle which says that honor gives attention to the desires of the one honored? And more so, in the case of honoring authority, true regard is shown in compliance with such authority. My children are commanded by God to honor and obey me (Eph.6.1-4) so long as I am not demanding of them what is ungodly. And I am privileged to have three daughters who are honorable and obedient children. But where is the honor when they defy my requests in order to do what they think I want? Or even more so, when they do what they want and then try to pass it off as honoring me? Their honor is shown in obedience to my rules. And so with God. I can tell myself, you, and anyone else who'll listen that I am honoring God by my life and activity, but if I am disobeying His Word for whatever reason, then where is the honor? Try as we may, it seems hard to divorce the principles from the particulars and still be pleasing to God. Focus Magazine Online – focusmagazine.org



Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

Our adult and high school classes are headed into a brief study of what is commonly identified as the Sermon on the Mount. I have heard another preacher call it Jesus' Mountain Message. The sermon lays before those present and us today, just what it is going to take to be His disciple and enter into the kingdom of heaven. As we study the text, let Jesus' message challenge you and your thinking. He will challenge your attitude (Matthew 5:3-12). Jesus will establish His authority in His "But I say unto you" teaching. (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34) He will address what is really at the heart of evil things. He will speak of the importance of your influence upon others for good. (Matthew 5:13-16). Let this section of Scripture leave you also, "astonished at His teaching" (Matthew 7:28) You are a wise man if you hear and do what Jesus is saying. (Matthew 7:24:27)

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