

Biblical Authority and the “Silence” of the Scriptures: Does It Allow or Disallow?

For hundreds of years, believers in the Bible have discussed the question of “the silence of the Scriptures.” Does silence indicate a lack of authority, and thus whatever is not specifically condemned is permissible? Or does silence mean there is no authority for whatever practice is under consideration, and therefore it is unscriptural?

These questions rose early in the church, as Tertullian (ca. 150-222) wrote of those who claimed that “the thing which is not forbidden is freely permitted.” Tertullian responded with, “I should rather say that what has not been freely allowed is forbidden.”

In the Reformation

There were differences in the approach to the Scriptures by the Reformists Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531). In his early reformist years, Luther wrote, “Whatever is without the word of God is, by that very fact, against God.” He based this upon Deuteronomy 4:2: “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God which I command you.” In later years Luther changed his view, stating, “What is not against Scripture is for Scripture, and Scripture for it.” The Swiss Zwingli taught that practices “not enjoined or taught in the New Testament should be unconditionally rejected.”

Luther’s view won the day, and his looser interpretation became the preferred practice as denominations developed and proliferated. If Zwingli’s view had been preferred, then the history of the religious world might be quite different. But Luther lived 15 years longer than Zwingli, and thus had a longer period of influence. Zwingli suffered an untimely death after a Protestant pastor was captured by a Catholic group, tried for heresy and sentenced to be burned. The Protestant Zurich government declared war against the Catholics, and in a subsequent battle, Zwingli was serving as a chaplain when he was wounded and died. It was October 10, 1531.

In the Restoration Movement

In the Restoration Movement of the early 1800s, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone and others were leaving denominations and seeking to restore the simple New Testament church. The question of “silence” came to the front again. For some decades, the singing in the church was a cappella, following the model of the early church. As musical instruments were later introduced, L. L. Pinkerton was a vocal proponent of the instruments, and based the whole matter on the fact that they were not forbidden. This attitude helped bring about a division in the body of Christ. Pinkerton introduced a melodeon in the worship at Midway, KY about 1859. He complained that the singing was so bad that it would “scare even the rats from worship.” J. S. Lamar argued that the instrument was “an inevitable consequence of growth and culture.” In reading about Pinkerton, it is obvious that he made no attempt to justify the instrument by Scripture. To him, it

was merely an expedient. This attitude grew and ushered in many other practices, which resulted in the tragic division that brought about the Christian Church and churches of Christ groups. The view of “silence gives consent” is a very strong influence in virtually all denominations. But “**what saith the Scriptures?**”

In the Old Testament

Cain and Abel present the first case for consideration. We are told that Cain’s sacrifice was rejected, while Abel’s was accepted. We are not privy to what God told them, but we know he did reveal his will. Hebrews 11:4 informs us, “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain.” Since “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ,” (Rom. 10:17), we know that God did give instructions. (That’s what is called a “necessary implication,” another way by which we can ascertain God’s will for us.)

We know God revealed his will to both brothers. We do not know that he listed all kinds of sacrifices that would *not* be acceptable. If God had to deal with us in that manner, then the Bible would be so big we would need a wheelbarrow to carry it around with us.

The same reasoning applies to God’s word to Moses concerning a certain sacrifice. “This is the statute of the law which Jehovah has commanded, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel that they bring you an unblemished red heifer in which is no defect and on which a yoke has never been placed’” (Num. 19:2). Where, in all of the Bible, is Moses told not to offer an ant, a bedbug, a horse or a zebra? How many different species of animal life live on the earth? The point is clear. God spoke about what he wanted, but did not need to specify everything he *did not* want. Man’s nature is such that Moses might have searched the earth over to see if he could find *one* animal God did not name in his list of “do not’s.”

Consider **Noah** and the ark which he built in preparation for the flood. “Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood...” (Gen. 6:14). I don’t know how many different varieties of trees there were on the earth at that time, but I suspect there were several. Notice that God did not say, “gopher wood,” and then go on to say, “But do not use apple tree wood, birch, cottonwood, dogwood, elm, fir, hickory,” ad infinitum. If Mrs. Noah had insisted on paneling the master bedroom with golden oak, could Noah have reasoned that since God was *silent* about golden oak, it would be OK to use it? You know the answer.

My father, Yater Tant, stated in a sermon: “If Noah had used one plank of any other wood, the ark would have sunk like a rock.” Afterwards, a good sister challenged him. He insisted that Noah’s disobedience would have sunk the ark. She responded, “No, it never would have floated in the first place.” Point well taken!

The sad fate of **Nadab and Abihu** is another good example of respecting the silence of the Scriptures. God had instructed about fire, incense and offerings. “He shall take a firepan full of coals of fire from upon the altar before Jehovah and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense, and bring it inside the veil” (Lev. 16:12). The story of these sons of Aaron is related in Leviticus 10:1-2: “Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered

strange fire before Jehovah, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of Jehovah and consumed them, and they died before Jehovah.”

The operative phrase in the story is “*which He had not commanded them.*” Evidently God had been *silent* about the source of the fire they used. He had specified *which* fire he wanted, but was silent about fire from any other source. What do you suppose these brothers reasoned as they secured their fire? Were they thinking, “Well, if we use this fire, we are going to be roasted alive”? I doubt it. They must have thought, “One fire is as good as another. They all burn. And it is more convenient to use this fire than the one the Lord specified.” The NIV says, “They offered *unauthorized* fire before the Lord” (emphasis added—jdt). The RSV says it was “unholy” fire.

The tabernacle (later the temple) was the repository of the sacred **Ark of the Covenant**. When it was moved when Israel traveled, those to carry it were specified. “At that time Jehovah set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of Jehovah, . . .” (Deut. 10:8). Furthermore, even the mode of transport was given. “You shall cast four gold rings for it and fasten them on its four feet, and two rings shall be on one side of it and two rings on the other side of it. You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. You shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, to carry the ark with them” (Ex. 25:12-14). There is no reference to things being forbidden concerning these two matters.

The ark had been captured by the Philistines, and was now being returned to its rightful resting place in Jerusalem. David gave command concerning its transport. “Now David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him to Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God which is called by the Name, the very name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned above the cherubim. They placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were leading the new cart” (II Sam. 6:1-3).

This method of transport seemed sensible. They had considerable distance to cover, and how much more convenient and modern to place it on an ox-cart rather than having men bear this burden on their shoulders. What harm could come from this? After all, they were helping with God’s work and wishes—to return the ark to its rightful place. Is this not the argument that is made many times when some practice is called into question? “We are doing a good work.” But good in the eyes of whom? Man or God?

But we know harm did come. “They placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were leading the new cart. So they brought it with the ark of God from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Ahio was walking ahead of the ark. Meanwhile, David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the LORD with all kinds of instruments made of fir wood, and with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals. But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen nearly upset it. And the anger of the

LORD burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God” (II Sam. 6:3-7).

Why did Uzzah die? Wasn't he trying to help? Wasn't he doing “a good work?” But good in whose eyes—God's or men's? He died for violating a clear prohibition. "When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy objects and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, when the camp is to set out, after that the sons of Kohath shall come to carry them, so that they will not touch the holy objects and die.” (Num. 4:15) The holy things were not to be touched, under penalty of death.

David realized the sin that had been committed that brought about the untimely death of this sincere man, who was only trying to be helpful. He spoke to the Levites, and said: “Because you did not carry it at the first, Jehovah our God made an outburst on us, for we did not seek Him according to the ordinance” (I Chron. 15:13). David said they had not considered what God had said, but evidently assumed “silence gave consent.”

The priesthood was an important part of Israel's relationship with God. Priests were to come from the tribe of Levi. "You shall thus give the Levites to Aaron and to his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the sons of Israel. So you shall appoint Aaron and his sons that they may keep their priesthood..." (Num. 3:9-10). Thus genealogical records were scrupulously kept.

When the Jews returned from Babylonian captivity, they were setting things in order and reestablishing the priesthood. There arose a problem with certain ones who could not prove their ancestry. “Of the priests: the sons of Hobaiiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai, the Gileadite, and was named after them. These searched among their ancestral registration, but it could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood” (Neh. 7:63-64). What was the problem? The records were “silent” about these men, therefore they were not authorized to serve. Silence did not give consent.

In the New Testament

“Going beyond” was something on Paul's mind when he wrote to the church at Corinth. “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other” (I Cor. 4:6). The ASV says they were “not to go beyond...” Paul referred to himself and Apollos as ones authorized to speak with authority. To “go beyond” is to enter the realm of silence, which was not to be done.

Colossians has Paul's warning against certain practices that were not acceptable. "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) --in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the

appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Col. 2:20-23).

How should we define this “self-made religion” (NASV) or “will-worship” (ASV)? Paul says these things have “the appearance of wisdom...but are of no value...” Many practices in the worship of denominations are justified because they are entertaining and draw large crowds. Some of the popular preachers are described as “Dr. Phil in the pulpit,” referring to their practice of taking a verse of scripture and delivering a “feel good” sermon.

Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words defines will-worship as “voluntarily adopted worship, whether unbidden or forbidden.” Doing that which is forbidden is clearly understood, but if “unbidden” does not refer to that which is unauthorized, or about which the Bible is “silent,” then what else could it mean? Thayer’s Lexicon defines this as “worship which one devises and prescribes for himself.” “Here is the issue: if one may, with divine approval, operate in the realm of silence, why can’t he ‘devise and prescribe for himself’ whatever pleases him? And yet, it is this very thing being censured” (Wayne Jackson).

“Going beyond” is also mentioned in II John 9: “Whosoever goes onward and abides not in the teaching of Christ, has not God: he that abides in the teaching, the same has both the Father and the Son.” There has been much speculation about whether “the teaching of Christ” involves just the teaching *about* Christ, or the teaching that Christ did. But in the end it makes no difference. It would be absurd to claim we must adhere to the teaching *about* Christ, but then do not have to abide within the boundaries of what Christ taught.

“The priesthood and superiority of Christ” is a much-discussed topic in Hebrews. The letter opens with Christ’s superior position over the angels. “For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, This day have I begotten thee? and again, I will be to him a Father, And he shall be to me a Son?” (1:5). Why could angels not be considered as equal to the Son? Because God was silent about the matter, and so should we be silent, and not ascribe to angels an equality with the Son.

If all the foregoing reasoning is not convincing concerning the fact that silence does not give consent, please consider carefully the matter of the priesthood of Christ. “For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also. For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests” (Heb. 7:13-14). Then in 8:4, this statement is made: “Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law.”

Why did the Law have to be changed? Why could Christ not be a priest under the Old Testament? **Because Moses “spoke nothing” about those from the tribe of Judah serving as priests.** In other words, **the law was “SILENT” about this matter.** Question: If “silence gives consent,” then why could not one from Judah be a priest. Nowhere does the Old Testament *forbid* one from Dan, Simeon or Judah from the priesthood.

The Consequences of “Silence Gives Consent”

If we accept the view that “silence gives consent,” there are logical consequences that cannot be ignored.

“If it were the case that anything not expressly forbidden in the New Testament is permissible in the Christian religion, then we could not only use pianos to accompany our singing but beads to aid our prayers, crucifixes to focus our devotion, and hashish to enhance our sensitivity. We could also initiate an organizational network similar to that which has been protested so strongly in Catholicism or begin financing church projects with bingo games (where legal) on Tuesday evenings. Not one of these things is explicitly forbidden in the New Testament, and no one who denies the legitimacy of the authority principle as outlined above can consistently argue against any of them” (Rubel Shelly).

The opposing view is expressed by one who favored instrumental music in worship:

“God’s silence is not a governing factor in matters pertaining to life and godliness. The whole idea of ‘silence,’ as those of the anti-instrumentalist position have used the term, requires the interpretation of fallible men. **If God did not say it**, then how can we be sure that men have said what He meant, but did not say? How dare mortal men to take upon themselves to thus **unauthorizedly** speak for God? “ (Blakely, emphasis added).

Mr. Blakely is arguing that we cannot rightly use the silence argument since God was silent about the silence argument! But God has *not* been silent about the silence argument, as we have seen in passage after passage of Scripture. In fact, the arguments made in Hebrews about the priesthood of Christ should be enough to settle the matter. In checking fourteen translations of Hebrews 7:14, they unanimously say concerning the tribe of Judah that Moses “spoke nothing.” If indeed Moses “spoke nothing,” that means he was **silent**. And that silence settled the matter. To intrude on the silence, and take it as “permission,” would be a violation of God’s intent.

A second consideration about Mr. Blakely uses his own reasoning. He says that since God is silent about silence, then we cannot use the “silence” argument. Logically, then, we cannot use instrumental music in worship since God is silent about it! The man is silenced by his own logic!

Those favoring “silence gives consent” to allow instrumental music counter that God was not “silent” about Noah’s wood, Moses’ sacrifice or Nadab and Abihu’s fire, because God “specified” what he wanted. Agreed! But then they want to use instrumental music in worship because God is “silent” about instruments. Wait a minute. God did specify about music! He said “**sing**.” Surely the legs of the lame are unequal. (Cf. Col. 3:17; Eph. 5:19, etc.) An examination of the history of the early church will confirm that no instruments were used in worship for over 600 years.

Conclusion

If we apply the concept that “silence gives consent,” then what rule would apply when someone wants to borrow my bicycle? I authorize that, and then find the borrower has taken my car instead. When questioned by the police and charged with theft, his plea is, “But he didn’t say not to take the car. I found it suited my needs better to use the car, and since he was silent about it, I saw no reason not to take it.”

How far do you think that argument would get in a court of law? Not very far! And how far will that reasoning get in the Court of the Last Day—Judgment Day? I don’t want to risk it, and I trust that what has been written will encourage us to remain within the guidelines given in the revelation written by the inspired apostles and prophets. The only way we can do that is to respect the silence of the Scriptures. (rev. 4-09)

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