

## Is There Authority in Biblical Silence ?

### Int.

1. Aim: To show that the Silence of the Bible is authority for us.
2. Heb. 7:14 "For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood."
  - a. Nothing = not any at all, nought, none
  - b. ESV "For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests." <sup>1</sup>
  - c. This is an example of silence of the scriptures
3. Many today have the attitude: **"Where does the Bible say we can't do it?"**
4. Down through the years we see these two ideas.
  - (1) One position is that silence is permissive and that we are free to do whatever we desire if the Bible is silent about the subject.
  - (2) The other position is that silence is prohibitive and that we are only to do what God does say.
5. These two ideas make the difference between those who are trying to restore original N.T. Christianity and those whose goal is to have a man-made religion that serves God in a way that is pleasing and acceptable to them.
6. Is there authority in Biblical Silence ?
7. "What Does God say when He doesn't say anything?"

## Discussion

### **I. CONTROVERSY ABOUT SILENCE OF SCRIPTURES**

- A. One of the controversies that has raged in the religious world for centuries is the matter of whether or not the "**silence**" of the Scriptures must be respected or ignored.
- B. Some allege that whatever is not expressly forbidden is allowed in religious practice; others contend that anything not authorized is not permitted.
1. The dispute surfaced early in the post-apostolic age.
  2. Tertullian (A.D. 150-222) spoke of those who argued that "the thing which is not forbidden is freely permitted." He replied: "I should rather say that what has not been freely allowed is forbidden" <sup>2</sup> [Carthage - Tunisia] Africa
  3. During the early Reformation period, Martin Luther (1483-1546) taught that "whatever is without the word of God is, by that very fact, against God."
  4. He frequently appealed to Deuteronomy 4:2: "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish aught from it."
  5. But he gradually modified his view. Later Luther wrote: "Nothing ought to be set up without scriptural authority, or if it is set up, it ought to be esteemed free and not necessary" [Germany]
  6. Finally, he declared: "What is not against Scripture is for Scripture, and Scripture for it" <sup>3</sup>

C. How tragic it is that Luther's course of doctrinal digression is now pursued by so many today.

1. Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) of Switzerland felt that practices "not enjoined or taught in the New Testament should be unconditionally rejected" <sup>4</sup>
2. Yet not even he grasped the full implication in this phrase, for he sanctioned infant baptism — which is neither enjoined nor taught in the New Testament.
3. Controversy arose between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli when they discussed the question of the authority of the scriptures and what was allowed and what was disallowed.
4. "Luther was desirous of retaining in the church all that was not expressly contradicted by Scripture, while Zwingli was intent on abolishing all that could not be proved by the Scripture."

D. In the end, the issue actually is:

1. Does the Bible itself teach that the "silence" of the Scriptures is prohibitive? In other words, we cannot do it if the Bible is Silent. That is what counts.
2. Both the Old and New Testament amply demonstrate that one is not allowed to engage in any religious practice for which there is not scriptural authority (either in a generic or specific format).

E. "What Does God say when He doesn't say anything?"

## II. EXAMPLES OF SILENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. The difference between Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam, was the difference between respecting what Jehovah had authorized, and what he had not.
1. Cain offered the produce of the field; Abel offered the firstlings of his flock  
Gen. 4:3-4
  2. Abel's offering was "by faith" (Heb. 11:4)— which comes by hearing what the Lord has spoken (Rom. 10:17)— not what he has left unspoken!
  3. Cain's offering was obviously of human inclination, and so he was rejected by the Creator.
  4. He could have said: "God did not say we could not offer the produce of the field."
  5. Not all "Cains" have passed from earth's scenes!
- B. Similarly, when Noah constructed the ark, he did so "by faith" (Heb. 11:7), which means that he did "according to all that God commanded him" (Gen. 6:22), or, as the (NKJV) "Thus Noah did; according to all that God commanded him, so he did."
1. Though the question is frequently ridiculed these days— when authority is held in contempt— it is still appropriate to ask:
  2. Would Noah have been preserved if he had acted upon the presumption that "whatever is not forbidden is allowed," and so had altered the divine pattern for the building of the ark? Suppose he had used Oak?
  3. God did not tell him he could not use Oak. He just told him to use Gopher wood.
  4. "What Does God say when He doesn't say anything?"

C. **Nadab and Abihu** were sons of Aaron, the first Hebrew high priest. Lev.10:1-2

"And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD."

1. When they used "strange fire," i.e., fire not taken from the altar of sacrifice (Lev. 16:12), they were destroyed by God. What was their crime?
2. They offered "that which [God] had not commanded them"
3. 'Whatever reasoning they used for obtaining fire from another source is not given. They might have reasoned, "Fire is fire, and one burns as well as another", or, "Well, after all, God didn't say not to use this other fire.."
4. Whatever their reasoning was, it was not acceptable to God.
5. It was not that God had specifically forbidden the fire they used, but rather he had specified what fire they must use.. (Lev. 16:12; Numbers 16:46).
6. God didn't have to go down a list of other sources of fire, specifically forbidding each source. Just to tell them what fire to use was enough.
7. Whatever is unauthorized "not commanded" lacks biblical approval.
8. Failing to adhere to what God has said, failure to respect His silence, is to manifest disrespect for God.
  - a. God is "treated as holy" when we have enough respect and awe for our God that we simply are happy to do what He has said, no more and no less.
  - b. These priests were innovators and progressive.
  - c. They were trying something different and experimenting.
  - d. And God wasn't impressed.

- D. One of the sacred items of the tabernacle system was the ark of the covenant.
1. The Mosaic law specified the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant - (Deut. 10:8). "At that time the LORD separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister unto him, and to bless in his name, unto this day."
  2. The Levites were thus authorized to carry the ark.
  3. There was no specific prohibition regarding the other tribes; the law was simply silent as to their privilege of transporting the holy vessel.
  4. Was that silence prohibitive? Yes it was, for a parallel passage explicitly states: "None ought to carry the ark of God but the Levites, for them Jehovah has chosen to carry the ark..." I Chron. 15:2
  5. When the Levites were specifically authorized to bear the ark, that clearly implied that "no one else" should function in that capacity. Silence excluded!
  6. Furthermore, the Levites were to bear that ark by poles, which were passed through rings on the side of the golden box (Ex. 25: 12-14).
    - a. David, however, had borne the ark on a "new cart" (II Sam. 6:3).
    - b. Was such a sin, inasmuch as the law was silent respecting the matter of carts?
    - c. Israel's great king clarified this matter when he later confessed: "...we sought [God] not according to the ordinance" (I Chron. 15:13).
    - d. One is not at liberty to go beyond what has been "prescribed" in a religious practice, any more than a pharmacist is allowed to add more to your medicine than what the physician prescribed!

- E. The very **first commandment** of the Decalogue stated: "I am Jehovah thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me" - Ex. 20:2-3
1. Of course the nation of Israel violated that prohibition across the centuries.
  2. There is an interesting commentary on this matter in the book of Jeremiah.
  3. God's prophet was instructed to stand in the gate of the temple compound and urge the nation to: "Amend your ways" - Jer. 7:3
  4. What was their transgression? Among other things: "They have built the high places [centers of idol worship] of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded not, neither came it into my mind" - Jer. 7:31
  5. A comparison of this passage, with the original law forbidding idolatry, plainly shows that a practice which the Lord has not commanded is equivalent to an explicit prohibition. The Bible is its own best commentary!

### III. NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

- A. In his first letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul addresses the problem of attaching oneself to a church leader and forming a sect around that individual.
1. Paul Asked.... "Is Christ divided?", etc. - I Cor. 1:12-13
  2. Later, he refers to the issue again when he says: "Now these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes; that in us ye might learn not to go beyond the things which are written..." I Cor. 4:6 ASV
  3. The reference to "myself" and "Apollos" is "a veiled allusion to those who were actually responsible for the church factions, tactfully withholding their names..."<sup>5</sup>
  4. When one goes "beyond the things that are written," he has entered the realm of silence. And the inspired apostle says that one must learn not to do that.
  5. Modern man wants liberty to do what he wants to do regardless of the consequences.
  6. But in religion there are restraints and boundaries. There are perimeters that must not be passed if you would be faithful to God. It's hard for many people to accept this.
  7. But we must teach what the Bible requires about authority and boundaries and being submissive to Christ.
  8. If we don't teach this we will be a church that is a church only in name because in faith and practice we're going to be libertines - people who have taken liberty to excess and trampled over all the boundaries.
  9. We must teach it to our children and our grandchildren. There are boundaries and we must respect authority. There are limits to our liberty.

- B. One of the most powerful arguments setting forth the "silence" principle is found in Hebrews 7-8.
1. In Hebrews 8:4 it is affirmed that Jesus Christ, if on earth, could not function as a priest. "For if he were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law:"
  2. And why was that the case? Because, as indicated in Heb. 7:14, the Lord Jesus was from the tribe of Judah (not Levi). "For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood."
  3. Here is the crux of the matter. Concerning priests from the tribe of Judah, "Moses spake nothing," or, to say the same thing in another way: He was silent about it!
  4. Silence amounts to no authority, and is thus prohibitive.
  5. One scholar expresses it in this fashion: "It was from the tribe of Judah that our great High Priest descended. The Mosaic legislation never authorized anyone from that tribe to be a priest" <sup>6</sup>
  6. Or note the comment of the renowned scholar John Owen, in his monumental seven-volume set of commentaries on the book of Hebrews: "And this silence of Moses in this matter the apostle takes to be a sufficient argument to prove that the legal priesthood did not belong, nor could be transferred, unto the tribe of Judah" <sup>7</sup>
  7. Since Moses spoke NOTHING about priests coming from Judah, therefore under the Law, no one had the right to be a priest from that tribe.
    - a. The Bible itself argues AGAINST practices from what wasn't said by God.

- b. But according to the reasoning of some, the fact that God specified Levi as the priestly tribe, only included the Levites, but didn't exclude those from other tribes.
  8. Could a matter be clearer? This argument has never been answered by those who ridicule the "silence-is-prohibitive" concept.
  9. "What Does God say when He doesn't say anything?"
- C. An inspired apostle wrote: "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son" (II John 9).
  1. There is an objective body of truth designated "the teaching of Christ."
  2. To step beyond it— either into that which is specifically forbidden, or into the unauthorized realm of "silence"— is to transgress the will of God.
  3. If you abide in the doctrine of Christ you have the Father and the Son. But if you go beyond it you do not have the Father and the Son.
  4. The "silence" principle is quite valid, and a repudiation of it leads to abject apostasy.
    - a. The Bible is our boundary. It's like a fence that surrounds faith.
    - b. As long as we are within the boundaries of the Bible we are safe.
    - c. As soon as we go beyond border that we are in trouble.
  5. We do not ask where does the Bible forbid this matter? But our questions should be: Where does it authorize it ?
  6. "What Does God say when He doesn't say anything?"

**IV. WE ARE LIMITED IN OUR FAITH AND PRACTICE TO THOSE THINGS GOD HAS AUTHORIZED IN HIS WORD**

- A. Mt. 28:20 "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you:"
1. I can teach you that you must obey the Lord's instructions to be baptized in water, by immersion for the remission of your sins. It's in his covenant, it is what he has commanded.
  2. But I have no authority to teach you to be sprinkled. He didn't command that.
    - a. Col. 2:12 - "Buried with him in baptism,..."
    - b. Rom. 6:4 "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death:..."
    - c. Ill. Baptism by Fire Department Water Hose
    - d. Sprinkling is not Bible baptism.
  3. I have no authority to teach you to baptize your babies.
    - a. He didn't command that.
    - b. Only repentant believers are eligible to be baptized. Babies are not sinners and therefore not lost.
    - c. Mark 16:16 "He that believeth and is baptized...." Babies cannot believe - they are not able to understand the gospel
  4. I can teach you that you ought to partake the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week.
    - a. And that you should use bread and the fruit of the vine.
    - b. But I have no authority to teach you that you can commune every morning, or at weddings or at funerals or special holy days.
- B. I can only teach you "whatsoever he has commanded". I must teach you all things that he has commanded - no more and no less.

## **V. THE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD RECOGNIZE THIS PRINCIPLE OF SILENCE**

### A. Prescription

1. Doctor gives a prescription for antibiotics.
2. If you take that prescription to a pharmacist and he fills it with the antibiotic laced with strychnine then you would refuse to take it.
3. But the Pharmacist might say: "The doctor did not say I was not to give you the poison. I interpreted his silence to be permissive."
4. That man would not keep his license and his job.

### B. Builder.

1. You have a set of blue prints to build a house and take them to a builder.
2. The man who builds it cannot change things without your authority.
3. He is obligated to do what the blue print says to do.
4. He recognizes the law of silence. The blue prints do not have to say "do not put the door over here". It shows him where to put the door and that is the authority for it.

### C. Restaurant restrooms

1. When you go to a restaurant you will see a sign with an arrow pointing to the restrooms.
2. You will see one door which has a stick figure of a woman on it and the other door will have a stick figure of a man.
3. We understand that only women are to enter the door with the stick figure of a woman on it and the men the other with the stick figure of a man.
4. This is the principle of authority. They do not have to put a note on the women's door that men cannot enter. And vice/versa with the men's.

D. Order from a store

1. If you ordered a shirt from J.C. Penney's, and they added a belt, a tie, and a pair of shoes and charged you for them, would you pay for them?
2. What if you told the store manager that you didn't order these things and he replied, "You did not tell us we couldn't send these other items also."
3. Would you be satisfied with this reasoning?
4. Do you think God is pleased when man treats His Word in the same careless and disrespectful manner?

E. The law of exclusion or silence is plain common sense.

1. A command to do a thing authorizes only the doing of the thing specified.
2. The doing of all other things is forbidden.
3. The expression of one thing is the exclusion of another. It must be this way or there could be no contracts or judicial decrees.

**VI. THINGS THAT ARE IN VIOLATION OF THE SILENCE OF SCRIPTURES**

A. Infant Baptism

1. The Bible says - "He that believeth and is baptized." Mk. 16:16 - Acts 2:38  
"Repent and be baptized" - "Obey from the Heart" Rm. 6:17
2. All the examples show that it is a person old enough to hear, Believe repent and obey from the heart.
3. We have no authority for infant baptism. There are no examples, no instruction.
4. It is not authorized.

## B. Sprinkling for baptism

1. Rom. 6:4 Col. 2:12
2. We have authority to take people into the water and baptize them - immerse them and come up out of the water.
3. We have specific Bible authority for that.
4. We have no scripture that authorizes sprinkling or pouring.
5. It's not enough for a person to say: "Where does the Bible forbid it?" It doesn't have to forbid it. You show us where it is authorized.

## C. Instrumental music

1. The Bible says we are to sing and make melody - Eph. 5:19
2. Where does the Bible forbid us to use instrumental music? It doesn't! But that's the wrong question. Where does the Bible approve of your using instrumental music?
3. Until you can find a scripture that approves it you can't use it.
4. An older preacher told how he taught people about instrumental music. He told them to read Mt. 28:20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." You go through the N.T. and find where Christ authorized it, or commanded instrumental music. Some would spend months reading the Bible trying to find it. But it is not there.

D. Incense, candles and holy water.

1. Catholics, Pagans and Episcopalians and other groups practice these things.
2. Where does the Bible forbid us using these things in worship?
3. It doesn't!! The question is, "Where is it authorized in the N.T.?"

E. Missionary societies, synods, conventions, councils, conferences.

1. Where does the Bible Forbid missionary societies? It doesn't have to.
2. Show us the authority for it in the N.T.
3. There is no scripture that forbids us having an annual convention with delegates taking care of the business of the Church. But there is no authority for it.

F. Fund Raising.

1. I Cor. 16: 1-2 authorized to lay by in store upon the first day of the week and we are to give as we have been prospered.
2. No authorization for Bingo, raffles, car washes and schemes for raising money.

G. Holy days

1. No Bible authority for observing Christmas, Easter Sunday.
2. It does not forbid these things, but there is no authority.

## **VII. WE SPEAK WHERE THE BIBLE SPEAKS AND ARE SILENT WHERE THE BIBLE IS SILENT**

- A. There has been a time in our history when we recognized this law of silence
  
- B. In the early days of the restoration Campbell and B.W. Stone and others pointed out that we cannot do it without authority. "We speak where the Bible speaks, and we are silent where the Bible is silent." 1 Pet. 4:11 "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God;..."
  
- C. Then this law was forgotten by a large element by 1850 who wanted a missionary society.
  1. Even Campbell for a while argued "Well it's not forbidden in the scriptures"
  2. It was his son-in-law W.K. Pendleton who made a big speech in defense of the missionary society who argued "If it is not condemned in scripture then we have the right to use it."
  3. From that day on those determined to have those things argued that if it's not condemned in the Bible we can do it.
  4. We lost about 80% to the digression and only 20 % argued and said we can only do what the Bible authorizes.
  5. When the church made a comeback in the early 1900's the brethren preached this principle of respecting the authority of the scripture.
  6. But by the late 50's and 60's we had forgotten to emphasize these truths and many today are growing up who see no problem with the same things of denominationalism.

## CONCLUSION

1. Is there authority in Biblical Silence ?
    - a. No !
    - b. "What Does God say when He doesn't say anything?"
    - c. The Bible authorizes by what it says, not by what it does not say !
  2. The only thing we are to do in religion is what God has commanded!
  3. If an item is not authorized then we cannot do it and be pleasing to God.
  4. Christians must say:
    - a. I don't care if everybody else in the world does it that way, if it is not biblical it is wrong.
    - b. We have to have the kind of conviction that if we are the only church in town that doesn't do it a certain way, that's all right.
    - c. If the Bible doesn't authorize it we dare not do it.
    - d. We must stand forth as a solid rock appealing for Bible authority and pointing to Bible authority teaching people to respect Bible authority.
  5. "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; I Pet. 4:11a
  6. If we reject God's word He will reject us.
- 
-

## End Notes

1. Silence of the Scriptures by Barry Grider p. 319 S.S. Lectureship 2002
2. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995, Vol. III, p. 94
3. A. H. Newman, A Manual of Church History Chicago: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1902, Vol. II, p. 308
4. Ibid, P. 308
5. W. E. Vine, 1st Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1951, p. 61).
6. William McDonald, The Epistle to the Hebrews Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1971, p. 102
7. An Exposition on the Epistle to the Hebrews Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, Vol. V, p. 442

---

Sermon by Arthur Pigman - Sunday morning Dec. 13, 2009  
Evans Church of Christ  
515 Gibbs Road  
Evans, Ga. 30809  
706-855-1249  
evanscoc@bellsouth.net  
www.evansgachurchofchrist.org