

"Tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?"-1King 22:16

Biblical Authority and the "Silence" of the Scriptures: Does it Allow or Disallow part 1?

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.”

- Jefferson David Tant

I believe this material to be very good. It is filled with biblical principles that we need to learn. If it be the Lord’s will, next week we will introduce part 2. - F.S.