

## ***The Silence of the Scriptures***

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One of the greatest causes of religious error is disrespect for God's silence. Far too many people, including many among God's people, believe that God's silence actually *authorizes* religious doctrines, practices and programs rather than exclude them. They interpret God's silence as *permissive*, rather than *prohibitive*. They believe that if a thing is not explicitly condemned in the Scriptures, then it is right to believe, teach and practice. Those with this view often defend their practices by saying, "*But God didn't say not to?*" Or, "*Where does the Bible say that we can't do this or that?*" The theory is an interpretive approach that allows people to believe, teach or practice anything that is not expressly forbidden in Scripture, which makes it a popular theory in religion.

Paul told the Colossians, "*And whatsoever you do in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus...*" (Colossians 3:17). Christ has "*all authority in Heaven and upon earth*" (Matthew 28:18). As "Lord" (Luke 2:11; Acts 2:36; Colossians 3:24), Christ has the right to command certain behavior, reward those who obey Him and punish those who disobey Him. We are not at liberty to believe, teach or practice just anything and everything that we want in religion. We are not permitted to practice things in religion unless they are *first* authorized by Christ. Disrespect for God's authority, including disrespect for God's silence, leads people to practice things *without divine approval*. They may *rubber-stamp* the desired practice by applying the name of "Christ," "God," or the "Church" to their practice, but mere humans have no right to do that stamping. God alone has the right to authorize religious practices. Our place is to respect His authority, and that authority is expressed in the New Testament.

Disrespect for God's silence is seen everywhere in modern religion. Many churches have become country clubs that focus upon food and fun. They make Bible-based appeals to people for money, claim that it was "*given to the Lord,*" but then use that money to build and operate things like gymnasiums, playgrounds, theaters and family life centers. When asked for scriptural authority for such facilities, they respond, "***God didn't say not to build them!***" In the so-called "name of Christ," they provide their members with various entertainment and recreational programs, along with all of the necessary paraphernalia to provide these programs, yet they have *no divine authority* for such activities. They practice things like *child church, infant baptism, pouring/sprinkling water for baptism, infant church*

*membership, instrumental music in worship, week-day money collections, tithing, the use of special religious titles and clergy/laity distinction.* When asked for scriptural authority for these practices, they respond, “*God didn’t say not to do it!*” No *New Testament* Scripture is offered. Such practices are defended upon the basis that “*God didn’t say not to do them.*” It is not God’s authority that is invoked, but His *silence*. God’s silence must not be construed as permission.

### **The Sin of Presumption**

Psalm 19:13 says, “*Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.*” Often translated by the word “insolence” in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for “presumptuous” suggests an arrogance of disregard for God’s laws and instructions. This is precisely the attitude that disrespects God’s silence. Presumptuous people presume to think, speak and act in the place of God. They assume that their own ideas, plans and purposes are as good as God’s and are automatically authorized upon the grounds that God did not explicitly forbid their ideas. One’s likes, dislikes, project ideas and doctrinal theories are elevated to the level of holy and inspired Scripture. This is the height of arrogance. The Bible commands us to “*speak as the oracles of God*” (1 Peter 4:11). This means speaking where God speaks and being silent where God is silent.

### **What We Mean By The Term “*Silence of the Scriptures*”**

Given the commonness of the view that God’s silence authorizes, it is possible that some people may have never stopped to consider whether or not the concept is legitimate, and they may not understand the basis of our objection. One might even take issue with the very phrase, *silence of the Scriptures*. One might ask, “In what sense are the Scriptures *silent*?” We must, therefore, define our terms.

When we speak of the silence of the Scriptures, we have reference to what the Scriptures ***do not say, and thus, do not authorize***. Bible authority is established by direct statements, commands, implications and approved examples (see my article on *Bible Authority*). In each of these areas, some Bible passage or principle is used to determine the will of God. Conversely, appeals to *silence* are efforts to justify practices *in the absence* of actual Bible teaching. If God’s silence was meaningless, and every possible action had to be specifically identified as being either allowed or disallowed, the Bible would be so large that one could not pick it up. For example, God did not give Noah a list of all of the various kinds of wood that were **not** to

be used in the construction of the ark, nor did He have to. He simply specified the one kind of wood that He wanted Noah to use for the construction. This specificity eliminated all other kinds of wood (Gen. 6:14). God was silent about the other types of wood, and rather than authorize their use, His silence prohibited their use. God's silence was respected by faithful Noah and he was commended for it (Gen. 6:22; 7:5; Hebrews 11:7).

Justifications from silence always involve either *adding to or taking from* the word of God, which God always condemns (Deut. 4:2; 5:32; 12:32; Prov. 3:5, 6; Prov. 30:5, 6; Gal. 1:8, 9; Rev. 22:18, 19).

We sometimes speak of people *reading between the lines*. This expression suggests that one was basing his conclusion, not upon what was *explicitly stated*, but upon what was *not explicitly stated*. This is what many people do with regard to the lines of Scripture. Scripture is composed of "*precept upon precept, and line upon line*" (Isa. 28:10). These lines express God's will. Some people ignore the *lines*, and allow their eyes to wander to those white spaces *between* the lines. Their imaginations then supplant Scripture and they end up inventing doctrines, programs and practices never imagined by God.

### **God's Silence: Expedients and Generic Authority**

Some people confuse God's silence with *implicit authority*. Some things are *implicitly* authorized by Scripture, being authorized not by *specific* instruction, but by *generic* instruction. For example, the Bible is silent about the use of *church buildings, songbooks and baskets* in service to God, but these things are acceptable for Christians to use. Church buildings, songbooks and baskets are *expedients* which help in the execution and accomplishment of God's commands to assemble (Heb. 10:25), to sing (Eph. 5:19) and to collect funds (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). For a thing to be expedient it must be *lawful* and *edifying* (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23). So, though the expedient is not explicitly named in Scripture, its use is authorized by the authorized practice that it facilitates.

The Bible is silent about the use of cars and airplanes as means of transportation, but in the great commission, Jesus commanded the apostles to "go preach" (Mk. 16:16). The command to "go" is a *generic* command with respect to *how* one goes. Jesus did not specify any particular method of transportation, thus we may use whatever method that serves us best (train, plane, automobile). These methods are authorized by the general command to "go."

In cases of expediency and general authority, there is Scripture authorizing the use of the unspecified items.

In cases of silence, there is no Scripture authorizing the thing that is done. Quite the contrary. In many cases, there is Scripture authorizing something entirely different to be done, as is the case with *singing versus instruments of music* in worship to God.

### Passages to Consider:

**Hebrews 7:11-14:** The force of God's silence is clearly taught in this passage. The book of Hebrews repeatedly asserts the present and continuous High Priesthood of Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:17, 18; 3:1; 4:14-16; 5:10; 6:10; 7:11-10:18). However, as strange as this may at first sound, these verses teach that Jesus was not qualified to serve as High Priest while the Law of Moses yet stood. But how do we know this? Is it somewhere specifically stated? Did God expressly state for Jesus "not to" be a priest while the Law of Moses was still in force? No. Let us see what the verse says:

13. *"For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar.*

14. *"For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests (emphasis mine, TH)" (Heb. 7:13, 14, ESV).*

Jesus was prohibited from serving as a priest during the reign of the Law of Moses because Moses *spoke nothing* about priests from the tribe of Judah, and Jesus was of the tribe of Judah! It was God's *silence* that prevented Jesus from serving as a priest under Mosaic Law. In order for people to know that priests were allowed from only the tribe of Levi, it was not necessary for Moses to name and specifically exclude every other tribe of Israel. He needed only to specify *Levi*. People often defend their religious practices on the basis that "God didn't say not to do a particular thing." Well, God didn't specifically tell Jesus or others of the tribe of Judah "not to" serve as priest under the Law of Moses. Jesus was prohibited from doing so upon the basis of God's *silence*! If God Himself is restrained by the principle of the silence of the Scriptures, then why on earth would mere humans think that they are not restrained by that silence!

This begs an important question: How then was Jesus allowed to become a priest? The weight of God's silence is again seen in the level of change that had to occur in order for Jesus to qualify as High Priest over the people of

God. Since **Moses said nothing** about priests from the tribe of Judah, and since Jesus was of that tribe, it was necessary to change the Law in order to change the priesthood. Hebrews 7:12 says, *“For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.”* Many people obviously fail to consider the implications of this passage. If the Law of Moses remained in force today, Jesus would not qualify to be our High Priest! The Law of Moses had to be removed and replaced in order for Christ to qualify as our great high priest.

**Acts 15:24:** Certain Pharisees (Judaizers) were teaching the Gentiles that it was necessary for them to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5). These Judaizers attached conditions to salvation that were not required by God. A meeting took place in Jerusalem involving these men, the Jerusalem elders and the apostles. Of course, the apostles were under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 15:28). A letter was produced that was intended to set the record straight and explain to Gentile converts what their true responsibilities were. The introduction of that letter states the following:

*“Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, **although we gave them no instructions** (emphasis mine, TH)”* (Acts 15:24, ESV).

Note that the things being bound upon new converts were not things that were specifically forbidden: They were things about which *nothing was said!* The Judaizers were violating God’s silence! They were wrong, not because they had violated direct commands, but because they had acted in the absence of divine permission. The absence of instruction on these Jewish ordinances and rituals did not constitute permission for men to bind the practices upon others. Silence does not authorize: it prohibits!

### Conclusion

The mere absence of a specific divine prohibition against a particular religious practice does not in and of itself justify that practice. Respect for divine authority includes respect for God’s silence. Many Old Testament examples of disrespect for God’s authority demonstrate the need to respect His silence. For example, the Jews sinned when they transported the Ark of God by hauling it upon a cart (1 Chronicles 13:7). We know that the Jews were told that the Ark was to be transported by the priests carrying it with the gilded acacia poles (Ex. 25:13), but where did Scripture ever tell them “not” to carry it on a cart? Saul was condemned for offering a burnt offering for the people (1 Samuel 13:9-ff). We know that God had specifically

authorized the Levitical priests with this task, but where did he specifically tell other tribes “not” to offer such sacrifices? The story of king Uzziah could be used to make this same point (2 Chronicles 26:16-ff). Many other similar examples could be cited, but these suffice to make the point that respect for God’s authority involves respect for His silence. Let us carefully consider what all God *has said* on a subject before discussing what He has “not” said.

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