

Christ And The “Silence” Of Scriptures

By Steve Higginbotham

How one understands the authority of Scripture is, in my understanding, the single most important ingredient to achieving unity among God’s children. In order for unity to exist, there must be an agreement upon a standard by which to measure one’s beliefs and practices. Without a common understanding of how the Bible authorizes, even the most earnest desire and irenic spirit are insufficient to attain and maintain unity when one fails to acknowledge the authority of God’s word, and to make proper application of it.

In support of the above affirmation, one need only look at our own history over the past one hundred years. A little more than a century ago, the United States Census Bureau, for the first time, listed Churches of Christ and Christian Churches as two separate religious bodies. This official recognition of the division that existed between Churches of Christ and Christian Churches was the culmination of half a century of disagreement over such issues as the missionary society and the employment of instruments of music in worship. While the missionary society and instrumental music in worship certainly played a role in the division that occurred, the primary reason for the division was how brethren understood the authority of the Scriptures.

While both sides would readily affirm that they believed in the authority of Scripture, they disagreed with each other concerning how the Scriptures authorize; in other words, how to interpret the “silence” of the Scriptures. **[For the record, I will use the terms “silence of the Scriptures,” and the “principle of silence” in a colloquial sense throughout this lecture. More precisely stated, the principle of silence would be better called the principle of authority. Technically, we are not trying to interpret the silence of God, but we are trying to determine how we are to interpret the words of God].** Both groups claimed adherence to the motto, “We speak where the Bible speaks, and where the Bible is silent, we are silent.” However, to those in Churches of Christ, God’s silence on musical instruments in Christian worship meant they were unauthorized, and therefore should not be employed. To those in Christian Churches, God’s silence on musical instruments in Christian worship meant that they could use them since Scripture is silent, and there is no explicit prohibition against their use.

Consequently, division was inevitable due to this fundamental difference in the way Scripture is approached, and authority is ascertained. How is one to understand “silence” after God has already spoken? Is “silence” prohibitive or permissive? Is “silence” intentional or incidental? Disagreement over this fundamental issue is what divided us 100 years ago, and continues to keep us separated today.

Fortunately, determining whether “silence” is prohibitive (withholding authority) or permissive (granting authority) after God has said what he intended to say, does not require that we consult the writings of Alexander Campbell, Thomas Campbell, Ulrich Zwingli, or any other religious personality. The answer to this question is set forth in Scripture, itself. All we need to do is allow the Scripture to be its own interpreter.

Hebrews 7:14 & The Principle Of Silence

“For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood” (Hebrews 7:14, NKJV). This passage provides us an example of the “principle of silence” put into application. In Numbers 8:1-26, God explicitly authorized the sons of Levi to function as priests. However, Jesus, our High Priest (Hebrews 3:1) did not come from the tribe of Levi; he came from the tribe of Judah (Hebrews 7:14). The Hebrew writer used this fact as evidence that there had to have been a change in the law, for of this tribe, [the tribe of Judah] “Moses *spoke nothing* concerning the priesthood.” In other words, God’s silence was understood as prohibitive. The fact that God was silent or “spoke nothing” concerning the tribe of Judah becoming priests was viewed as prohibitive, not permissive. God’s silence concerning the other tribes of Israel serving as priests did not give them permission to become priests, but rather demonstrated that they were not authorized to function as priests.

God did not need to go through all 12 tribes of Israel and declare, “No one from the tribe of Reuben may be a priest. No one from the tribe of Simeon may be a priest. No one from the tribe of Judah may be a priest. etc.” The Hebrew writer used the fact that he “spoke nothing” concerning these other tribes as proof that they were not authorized to function as priests. In other words, God’s silence was prohibitive.

Hebrews 7:14 & Practical Application Of The Principle Of Silence

I think it is important to remember just what the Bible is. It is a communication from God to man through the use of words. The words in the Bible were used in the same way that we use words every day. How much difficulty do you have communicating to another person or understanding what they mean when speaking to you? Generally speaking, we understand each other without too much difficulty. The same principles that allow us to understand each other in every day life, if applied to the Scriptures, would help us to understand God’s communication to us as well.

For example, while I know this is an old illustration, it drives home the truthfulness of the prohibitive nature of silence. Suppose I ordered a pair of pants from a retail store. Then to my surprise, three days later five semi trucks appear in my driveway, unloading all sorts of merchandise. Suppose I would then go to the men unloading the merchandise and say, “What are you doing? I didn’t order any of these items. The only thing I ordered was a pair of pants.” Imagine them responding with the following, “We know that. We saw your order for your pants and have fulfilled that order. But we also noticed that you were silent about all these other items, so we assumed that your silence gave us permission to add them to your order.”

Everyone can see that such reasoning is foolish. No retailer would ever take such liberties with my order. However, is it not ironic that men attempt to take such liberties with God’s orders? My silence does not give the retailer permission to charge me for all these other items about which I was silent. However, when it comes to how to understand the Bible, many people tend to jettison the common, everyday rules of language we use to communicate with each other.

Hebrews 7:14 & Biblical Application Of The Principle Of Silence

In addition to the application of this principle of silence in every day usage, there are many biblical illustrations of this same principle. For example, the last recorded words of God to Noah, prior to the flood were, “Come into the ark...” (Genesis 7:1). A year later, Noah removed the covering of the ark, and saw that the surface of the ground was dry (Genesis 8:13). However, the text reveals

that he did not exit the ark for nearly another two full months (Genesis 8:14). One can only imagine how badly Noah must have wanted out of that ark, but Noah did not exit the ark until God *spoke* to Noah, saying, "Go out of the ark..." (Genesis 8:15-16). Noah did not understand silence as permission to leave the ark, he waited for the authority of the Lord before he acted.

Another biblical example of the principle of silence is seen in the giving of the ten commandments. The very first commandment given said, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). However, the children of Israel did not always observe this command. Their disobedience to this command provides us with a rather interesting commentary from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah, the prophet was told to stand in the gate of the temple and to urge the people to "Amend your ways..." (Jeremiah 7:3). What ways did they need to amend?

According to Jeremiah 7:31, they had built high places upon which to burn their sons and daughters. But note the principle to which God appeals to condemn their action. God said they were guilty of doing that "which *I did not command*, nor did it come into My heart." God used the principle of silence to condemn their idolatry! Their condemnation was not based upon the original prohibition of idolatry, but rather was based on the equivalent practice of doing that which the Lord had not commanded.

In Leviticus 10:1-2, Nadab and Abihu sinned by ignoring this principle of silence. They offered strange fire before the Lord "which He had not commanded them." By doing that which the Lord had *not commanded* them, they were found guilty. Nowhere did God say, "You cannot use this fire." However what God did do is tell them what fire they were supposed to use, and there was no permission to be found in God's silence about other fires.

In connection with the ark of the covenant, God appointed the tribe of Levi to transport the ark of the covenant (Deuteronomy 10:8). However, there was no specific prohibition regarding other tribes from carrying it. Was God's silence about other tribes to be understood as prohibitive? Certainly, for a parallel passage explicitly says, "No one may carry the ark of God but the Levites, for the Lord has chosen them to carry the ark of God and to minister before Him forever" (1 Chronicles 15:2). When God commanded the Levites to carry the ark, his silence about other people carrying the ark was not considered permissive, but rather prohibitive.

In 1 Samuel 13:8-14, King Saul made an unauthorized offering at Gilgal. Rather than waiting for Samuel to offering a burnt offering to the Lord, Saul offered a burnt offering without him. Samuel then told Saul that he had acted foolishly and had not kept the commandment of the Lord. One might ask, "where is the commandment that forbade kings from offering sacrifices to God?" There need not be a specific command forbidding such action. The reason is that God commanded the priests to offer sacrifices, and the principle of silence did not give permission to others to do the same, but instead was considered restrictive or prohibitive.

In Hebrews 1:5, the Hebrew writer argued for the superiority of Jesus over the angels. In an effort to prove his affirmation that Jesus is superior to the angels, he asked the question, "For to which of the angels did He ever say: 'You are my Son, Today I have begotten you?'" (Hebrews 5:1a). In other words, the author was arguing that since God never called the angels "His Son," they had no right to claim such a status. However, the one to whom he spoke these words [Jesus]

could claim such a status. This is the principle of silence at work.

There are many other passages that teach and illustrate this same principle. Scripture is clear in teaching that after God has said what he intended to say, there is no authority in silence, but rather authority is bound up in what God has spoken. However, in spite of this biblical teaching, efforts are being put forth to negate this truth.

Hebrews 7:14 & Consistency

Some claim that it is inconsistent to affirm that silence is prohibitive (thus excluding instruments in worship), while at the same time affirming that such things as baptisteries, public address systems, song books, and PowerPoint projectors, about which the Bible is also silent, are permitted.

Such a claim of inconsistency fails to distinguish between an “aid” and an “addition.” Every command of God requires that we use expedient actions to fulfill his commands. In Genesis 6:14-16, God commanded Noah to build an ark out of gopher wood. Though the Bible is silent concerning the type of tools Noah was to use to build this ark, no one would argue that the use of tools was unauthorized. On the contrary, they were authorized expedients or “aids” that could be used to obey the Lord’s precise command. However, had Noah chosen to use another type of wood in place of or in conjunction with the gopher wood God commanded, such action would have been unauthorized. Using another kind of wood, about which God was silent, would not be considered an “aid” to obeying the Lord’s command, but rather an unauthorized “addition” to the Lord’s command.

There exists a great need for people to understand the difference between an “aid” which does not add to or diminish from the Lord’s command and an “addition” which changes the nature of the Lord’s command.

Hebrews 7:14 & The Abandonment Of Authority?

Some today are actually contending that this entire discussion about what is and is not authorized is in itself divisive, and that we don’t need authority for all that we do. Some are affirming that such an approach to Scripture robs us of our liberty in Christ and forces the Scriptures to be used in a way in which they were never intended to be used.

However, think of the far-reaching implications of such a position. If we ignore the principle of silence as affirmed in Hebrews 7:14, then how could one oppose such practices as infant baptism, sprinkling, prayer to saints, baptism for the dead, the office of a Pope, and animal sacrifices? Where would it stop?

Not long ago, a preacher was asked if there was anything wrong with worshiping God by sacrificing a sheep on an altar? His reply was as follows, “Only from the *sheep’s* point of view!!” He then proceeded to say, “...if you were honestly, from your hearts, engaging in this act of worship to express genuine thanksgiving to your God, and you both believed this to be acceptable to Him, and it was done in such a way that none of your brethren were caused to stumble and none who were lost were hindered from being drawn to the Lord, and if you did not seek to bind

this practice upon others, then I would find no reason to condemn your worshipful expression.” (Maxey).

Do you see where the rejection of this principle takes us? There is no end. Anything and everything apart from that which is explicitly forbidden becomes permissible. Such an approach to interpretation not only flies in the face of common sense, but countless biblical examples proving otherwise.

We must call people back to the Bible, and seek a “thus sayeth the Lord.” We must speak where the Bible speaks, and where the Bible is silent, we must be silent. Whatever we do, in word or in deed, must be done in the name of [by the authority of cf. Acts 4:7] the Lord. We must call people to respect the authority of God’s word, and to act only in harmony with his revelation. To do otherwise is to depart from a view of authority that Scripture itself upholds through precept and example.

I challenge all men to heed the words of the Puritan preacher, Richard Baxter (1615-1691) who stated, “For what man, dare go in a way which has neither precept nor example to warrant it? Can that be obedience which has no command for it...O, the pride of man's heart, that instead of being a law-obeyer, will be a law-maker! For my part, I will not fear that God will be angry with me for doing no more than He has commanded me, and sticking close to the rule of His word, in matter of worship; but I should tremble to add or diminish!” (Baxter, 24)

May we have such reverence for God and his authority that we might all tremble at the very thought of adding to or diminishing ought from God’s word!

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