

The Silence Of The Scriptures

Introduction. In 1808, Thomas Campbell said, "Where the Bible speaks we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent." This is a much needed principle today (Colossians 3:17; 1 Peter 4:11). Many fundamental issues that divide religious groups boil down to a correct understanding and application of the silence of the scriptures.

I. ***Respecting God's Silence***

- A. While the phrase "the silence of the scriptures" cannot be found in the Bible, the principle definitely exists. No matter what period of time a person might have lived, or which law he might have been under, God always expected him to observe the boundaries of His word (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32).
- B. People readily understand what it means to "diminish" from God's requirements. To violate this would be to fail to speak where God has spoken and thus would be a violation of the explicit requirement of the scriptures. However, God made it just as plain that we must not "add" to any command. To violate this would be to speak where God has not spoken and thus would be a violation of the silence of the scriptures (cf. Proverbs 30:6; Numbers 24:13; 1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 John 9; Revelation 22:18-19).

II. ***Specifics And Generics***

- A. Commands can include both specific and generic authority. The specific part of a command is always obligatory and never optional. On the other hand, the general or generic part of a command always involves options as to how to do it. However, the options we choose must not violate some other command or principle.
- B. Examples of specific and generic.
 - 1. Ephesians 5:20 -- To whom to pray is specified but the posture is generic.
 - 2. 1 Corinthians 16:2 -- The day of giving is specified but the time of day is generic.
 - 3. Luke 22:17 -- Dividing the cup is specified but how to divide the cup is generic.
 - 4. Colossians 3:16 -- The kind of music is specified but the kind of singing is generic.
- C. When an obligation is commanded, the silence of the scriptures prohibits us from doing anything else in the category of the specifics. It should also be clear that in the generic or non-specific aspect of an obligation, the silence of the scriptures allows us the liberty to use human judgment as to how to carry it out.

III. **Implications And Exclusions**

- A. Implications are just as authoritative and binding as direct statements, and this is true of both requirements and prohibitions. The "silence of the scriptures" is just another way of referring to negative implications, ascertained through necessary inference. Whenever God positively requires something it automatically eliminates any alteration. This is the negative implication, and this will always be true unless God gives additional authority.
- B. Examples of implications and exclusions.
 - 1. Numbers 20:11-12 -- Moses was told to take his rod, assemble the people, and speak to the rock and it would give forth water. God did not specifically tell Moses not to strike the rock. In fact, He had instructed him to do that once before (Exodus 17:6). God's three instructions automatically excluded everything else.
 - 2. Leviticus 10:1-2 -- Nadab and Abihu did not violate a stated prohibition but simply failed to respect an implied one which God had not commanded.
- C. This principle has sometimes been called "the law of exclusion." When we go to a restaurant, we do not have to tell the waiter what not to bring us. Likewise, when God specifies what we are to do, His specific order excludes all other actions that fall into the same category. There are a lot of good examples to demonstrate this principle.
 - 1. Acts 15:5, 24 -- When some in the early church presumed to add to the doctrine of Christ, the apostles rejected it. Even apostolic silence excluded any additions.
 - 2. Hebrews 1:5 -- God never said this to any angel, therefore God's silence proves Jesus to be superior to the angels.
 - 3. Hebrews 7:14 -- The priesthood was for the Levites without specifically eliminating the other tribes. This excluded Jesus from being a High Priest on the earth.

IV. **Examples Of Violations**

- A. A failure to distinguish between specifics and generics and a failure to understand implications and exclusions causes a misunderstanding of God's silence. There are a lot of examples in the Bible which show how divine silence affects certain commands.
 - 1. Genesis 6:14 -- The type of wood was specified but the type of tools used to build it was not. Silence in the one case was restrictive and in the other case permissive.
 - 2. Exodus 12:3 -- The kind of animal used for the passover sacrifice was specified but the manner in which it was slain was not. God's silence in one case amounted to an exclusion, whereas His silence in the other case amounted to a liberty.

3. Mark 14:22-23 -- The type of food used in the Lord's supper was specified and offering any other kind of food is sinful.
 4. Ephesians 5:19 -- The kind of music is specified and offering any other kind of music is sinful.
- B. In these last two examples, all other types of food and music are excluded beyond what is specified. But a plate to hold the bread and a song book to reveal the words and notes are not excluded since the plate is not eaten and the book makes no music. These latter two items fall outside the categories of what are specifically commanded. Only what falls within those categories are excluded by the silence of the scriptures.

Conclusion. To appropriately respect the silence of the scriptures, we must realize that any statement that involves an obligation on our part must be treated as a command, and that implicit commands are just as authoritative and binding as explicit ones. In any positive command or statement of obligation there is an implied opposite -- an implicit negative command. As we read the positive, we draw an inference or make a deduction about the negative, and this inferred negative conclusion is inescapable.

Christians need to realize that for any given practice we must never begin by asking, "Where does the Bible say we cannot use it?" We must first see if it is excluded by what is specified. If it is not, then we are at liberty to use it. If it is, we must respect God's silence.