

"WHERE THE BIBLE IS SILENT, WE ARE SILENT"

By George Battey

"If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pet 4:11). These inspired words inspired a motto. In 1809 Thomas Campbell gave a sermon in the House of Abraham Altars between Mt. Pleasant and Washington, PA. Campbell closed his speech with a famous motto: "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent" (West, I:47).

This popular slogan is interpreted in two different ways. Some believe when the Bible is silent, this silence is permissive. It means Christians are permitted to do anything they can possibly dream up and others should be "silent" and not condemn them since the Bible did not explicitly forbid their innovation. Others believe when the Bible is silent, such silence is prohibitive. They interpret Bible silence to mean Christians are forbidden to do anything not authorized either explicitly or implicitly. Additionally, there is disagreement over what constitutes silence.

This study will attempt to accomplish two basic things: (a) Define exactly what is meant by "silence" and (b) determine whether silence is permissive or prohibitive.

WHAT IS SILENCE

Everything in the Bible is taught in one of two ways: (a) explicitly or (b) implicitly. If something is taught explicitly, this means it is "fully and clearly expressed; leaving nothing implied" (American Heritage). "The Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim 4:1). When the Spirit "expressly says," that is another way of "explicitly saying." In this case, the Spirit is saying fully and clearly that some will depart from the faith and nothing is being left to implication in this particular case.

If something is taught implicitly it is "implied or understood though not directly expressed" (American Heritage). Implication is not silence. Here is an oft-committed mistake – assuming an implied statement is tantamount to silence. Instead, implication is another way of expressing truth. When God implied keeping the Sabbath Day holy every week (Ex 20:8), He was not being silent about weekly Sabbath observance. When God implied a resurrection in the Old Testament (Mk 12:26-27), He was not being silent about the resurrection.

Silence, then, means the absence of all instructions – both explicit and implicit. Silence means there is not one single passage which even implies a doctrine or practice. The question under consideration is this: When the Bible does not even imply a doctrine or

practice, is it permissible with God for Christians to teach the doctrine or practice the ritual? To put it another way: When the Bible does not even imply something, is something now authorized?

EXPLICIT, IMPLICIT & SILENCE

To illustrate silence, consider the following illustration (Beals, 63-66). Suppose three mothers each give their son a grocery list and send the son off to the store. The first son looks at his list and sees the following items:

- Fruit
- Meat
- White potatoes
- Box of cereal

The first thing on this list is fruit. So the son is authorized to buy oranges and apples. Apples and oranges are included in the word "fruit." This is implication. Oranges and apples are not authorized explicitly, but rather implicitly. If someone argued the list was "silent" about apples or oranges, they would be wrong. The list is not silent about these items. These items are implied and implication is not silence.

Looking at the list the son is wondering if he may buy white bread. It is admittedly possible that white bread could be authorized, but the son will never know by looking at the first word on the list. "Fruit" does not authorize white bread explicitly and it does not authorize white bread implicitly. If somewhere on the list white bread is authorized that will be fine. There is no logical contradiction between fruit and white bread. In other words, when the mother specified "fruit" that alone would not prevent her from later authorizing white bread. In order to know about bread, the son will simply have to keep reading his list.

The son continues down the list and sees meat, white potatoes and a box of cereal, but he finds nothing about white bread. He discovers his list is silent about white bread. Nothing even implies white bread. Since nothing even remotely implies white bread, this son is forbidden to purchase bread. If he purchases a loaf of bread anyway, he will have to add to the instructions given by his mother, for her list was silent about this item.

The second son looks at his list. He see the following items:

- 12 ears of corn
- 12 tomatoes
- Loaf of bread
- 3 steaks

This list actually says something about white bread when it says "loaf of bread." It does not explicitly say white bread, but it implies white bread by the generic term "loaf of bread." This list, then, is not silent about white bread. If this son buys a loaf of white bread, he will not be adding to the instructions his mother gave him.

The third son receives the following list:

- Loaf of white bread
- Pound of cheese
- 12 eggs
- Hamburger

This list also says something about white bread. It mentions white bread explicitly. Like the second son, this boy will not be adding to the instructions his mother gave him if he buys a loaf of white bread.

In summary, here is a difference between the three grocery lists. First notice that list #2 and list #3 differ from list #1 in that they both mention white bread. There is also a difference between list #2 and list #3. List #3 mentions white bread explicitly while list #2 mentions it implicitly. Remember, it would be incorrect to say list #2 does not mention white bread. It actually does mention white bread by implication and implication is not silence.

THE SYNAGOGUE

Now consider the oft-asked question dealing with the synagogue. "Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues" (Mt 4:23). An argument is often advanced called the "synagogue-argument." The synagogue-argument says:

- a) The Old Testament scriptures were silent about synagogues;
- b) Yet Jesus Himself approved of going to synagogues and preaching in them;
- c) Therefore, the synagogues demonstrate Bible silence is permissive.

In response to the synagogue-argument, the question must be asked: Was the Old Testament truly silent about synagogues? To answer this question, consider the word synagogue. The English word Synagogue comes straight from the Greek συναγωγή. This noun derives the verb συνάγω which is a compound word. The prefix συν is a preposition meaning "with." The root ἄγω is a verb meaning "to go." Literally the word means "to go with" or to gather people together. So the word means a gathering of people, an assembly and then the place where the assembly occurred – the building.

The question being asked is: Did the Old Testament authorize assembling people together in a building for the activities in which Jesus and others engaged? The answer is: Yes it did. All one has to do is find an Old Testament passage (or combination of

passages) which authorizes the kinds of actions that were performed in a synagogue. One could look for passages which have to do with assembling or public teaching. To find such passages, one might take a concordance and begin looking up words like: gather, assemble, law, teach, read, etc. Here are two passages. "When all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess" (Dt 31:11-13). Again, "Gather My saints together to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice" (Ps 50:5).

In these and other passages is found explicit authority for assembling and implicit authority for a building. The implicit authority is seen by the fact that the command to gather people together to hear the word of God requires some place. It is absolutely impossible to gather people together and teach like these passages require without some place to do the gathering and teaching. Someone's house is a place. Outside under a tree is a place. Being where there is light is a place. Being where there is not a blizzard is some place. A building, like a synagogue, is some place. When the Old Testament scriptures authorized a place by implicit teaching, the scriptures were not being silent about that place. Remember, implication is not silence. Therefore, the Old Testament was not silent about synagogues. Synagogues were authorized by implicit permission.

The synagogue-argument falls short of proving silence permits. The argument begins with an erroneous assumption – that assumption being the Old Testament is silent about synagogues. Assumptions prove nothing under the best of circumstances and they certainly prove nothing when they are erroneous to begin with. The Old Testament was not silent because it implied the synagogue. "[The Babylonians] have burned up all the meeting places of God in the land" (Ps 74:8). There were "meeting places" in which the faithful met in to read the law. These meeting places were burned up when the Babylonians invaded the land. Were those meeting places authorized? Yes, they were authorized implicitly as a permission. Synagogues were not required, but they were permitted by implication.

CHURCH BUILDINGS

The synagogue-argument brings to mind the next most often cited question: The church-building-argument. The church-building-argument says the scriptures are silent about church buildings and yet most brethren accept church buildings. The argument goes forward from that point and wants brethren to accept other things which the New Testament scriptures are truly silent about – things like preaching during communion, women teaching from the pulpit during non-Sunday assemblies, vacation Bible school and other innovations. Yet, as with the synagogue-argument, so with the church-

building-argument, the question needs to be asked: Is the New Testament truly silent about church buildings?

To answer this question, one must first look at the word for assembling people together. The New Testament records this command, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb 10:25). The word "assembling" in Greek has the word "synagogue" for its root (ἐπισυναγωγή). This word means an assembly of people. The verb form of synagogue is found in Acts 20:7, "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight." Notice the disciples "came together." This is the verb συνάγω from which synagogue derives. Both of these passages explicitly authorize brethren to assemble people together and they implicitly authorize a place.

Just as the Old Testament implicitly authorized a synagogue, the New Testament implicitly authorizes a church building. Church buildings are authorized by implicit permission. Synagogues and church buildings are not examples of Bible silence because the Bible implicitly teaches both. Silence means the absence of all teaching. Silence means (a) there is no Bible passage which explicitly teaches something and (b) there is no Bible passage which implicitly teaches it either. Remember, implication is not silence.

INTERPRETING SILENCE

When the Bible is truly silent about some action, there are four possible ways of viewing that silence:

- Silence forbids
- Silence permits
- Silence requires
- No way of knowing

To illustrate, Massachusetts a few years ago had the following law: If a traffic light is red and no sign or policeman is present giving instructions, then motorists are forbidden to turn right while the light is red. In this case the state of Massachusetts was saying: silence forbids. The only way one can know how to interpret silence in this case is for the government to reveal this information. In other words, there must be revelation for people to know how to interpret silence.

In contrast with Massachusetts, the state of Georgia has a different law: If a traffic light is red and no sign or policeman is present giving instructions, then motorists are permitted to turn right while the light is red. In this case the state of Georgia is saying: silence permits.

It is possible, if a state wanted, to make a law which said: If a traffic light is red and no sign or policeman is present giving instructions, then motorists are required to turn right while the light is red. In this case the state would be saying: silence requires.

To make the illustration complete, it is also possible that a state could be so ambiguous that motorists have no way of knowing what to do when they come to a red light that has no instructions and no policeman.

These scenarios exhaust the four possibilities of how to interpret silence:

- Silence forbids
- Silence permits
- Silence requires
- No way of knowing

As mentioned earlier, the only way of knowing how to view silence is for the governing authority to reveal how to understand and interpret silence. When it comes to interpreting the scriptures, God must also reveal how to interpret silence.

NO WAY OF KNOWING?

First, consider the "no-way-of-knowing" possibility. Some people truly believe the Bible is unclear and ambiguous about how to interpret silence. Therefore, the conclusion drawn by some is: People must be allowed to decide for themselves what to do when the Bible is silent.

There are at least three things wrong with this belief. First, if people are allowed to decide for themselves, some might decide to go ahead and participate in something which the scriptures are silent about. The no-way-of-knowing position says, "Let people decide for themselves and if they decide to participate, they must be allowed to do so and no one should condemn them." In this case the no-way-of-knowing position is actually saying: "When there's no way of knowing what to do, silence permits." To put it another way, the no-way-of-knowing position is saying: "When there is no way to know, one knows what to do – go ahead and participate." This position is self-contradictory. A position which is self-contradictory is false.

Second, according to the Bible, God gives His people complete instructions about what to do. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). If the Scriptures make God's people complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work, those scriptures cannot leave someone guessing about how to interpret silence. In order to be all-sufficient the scriptures cannot leave out instructions about silence. If instructions

about silence were left out, the man of God would not be thoroughly equipped nor would he be complete.

Third, if there are no instructions about what to do with silence, then Rom 14:23 comes into play. This passage states, "He who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin." This is the "when-in-doubt-don't" rule.

To illustrate the when-in-doubt-don't rule, imagine driving on crooked, hilly road, behind a slow driver. Responsible drivers would know the slow car cannot be passed if there are any doubts about passing safely. On a crooked, hilly road one might never know for sure about oncoming traffic. In such a situation, one needs to simply breathe deeply, relax and enjoy the slow drive through the country. The rule is: "when-in-doubt-don't."

Since faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17), if the scriptures are unclear about what to do with silence, honesty would cause the Christian to admit he has doubts. Rom 14:23 teaches when one has doubts about something, he should not do it simply because it could be sinful. Therefore, if there were truly no-way-of-knowing how to interpret silence, the honest Christian would eventually be driven to the position: silence forbids.

SILENCE REQUIRES?

Consider next the possibility that silence requires. No one really believes God requires a Christian to perform the action about which the scriptures are silent. This possible scenario is only mentioned for the sake of completeness – discussing every possible way of interpreting silence.

As mentioned above, 2 Tim 3:16-17 stresses that every good work is contained in scripture. It is enough to say: There cannot be a work required by God which is not contained in scripture.

ONLY TWO OPTIONS

In reality there are only two viable options. Either (a) silence forbids or (b) silence permits. There is no third alternative.

The position of silence-permits rests on the idea that anything a person can dream up is allowed unless there is a Bible passage explicitly forbidding the action. This requires belief in the explicit-only doctrine. The silence-permits doctrine is the "but-it-doesn't-say-not-to-so-it's-okay-to-do-it" doctrine. People holding this position say things like:

- "The Bible does not say, "Thou shalt not have instruments."
- "The Bible does not say, "Thou shalt not have drama plays."

- "The Bible does not say, "Thou shalt not have children's church."
- "The Bible does not say, "Thou shalt not have Bible classes."
- "The Bible does not say, "Thou shalt not have individual cups."
- "The Bible does not say, "Thou shalt not have church sponsored recreation."

The list could go on and on.

The position of silence-forbids rests on the idea that everything Christians do must be authorized by either Jesus or His apostles (ambassadors). If there is no authorization (explicit or implicit) God's people are forbidden to do the thing under consideration. This position is saying that when the Bible is silent about something that silence is significant. In other words, this position is saying God is communicating His will by what He says, and He is also communicating His will by what He does not say. This is called legislative silence. Legislative silence is when the law is purposefully silent about an action and that silence is viewed as expressing the intent of the lawmaker.

The weight of evidence falls overwhelmingly in favor of the silence-forbids position. Consider just a few of the many passages which demonstrate Bible silence forbids.

CAIN & ABEL

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, "I have acquired a man from the LORD." Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell (Gen 4:1-5).

Abel offered his offering by faith (Heb 11:4). Faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17). Therefore, in order to offer his offering by faith, God had to have given instructions. God's instructions required the shedding of blood – the offering of a lamb.

Cain's sacrifice was not of faith. He offered something God was silent about. God never gave instructions about offering the fruit of the ground. Because Cain offered an unauthorized sacrifice, his offering was rejected and he himself was rejected in the process. This story confirms: silence-forbids.

NADAB & ABIHU

Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the LORD and

devoured them, and they died before the LORD (Lev 10:1-2).

Here is fire which God did not command. God was silent about the fire these priests used. Silence meant the fire was not even implied. Consequently it was unauthorized. Silence meant the priests were forbidden to do what they did.

THE JERUSALEM CONFERENCE

They wrote this, letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law" — to whom we gave no such commandment (Acts 15:23-24).

To teach something which the apostles never commanded was forbidden. The position of silence-forbids is corroborated in this passage.

THE LORD'S DEITY

For to which of the angels did He ever say: "You are My Son, today I have begotten You"? And again: "I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son"? (Heb 1:5)

But to which of the angels has He ever said: "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool"? (Heb 1:13)

Here are three questions regarding the deity of the Lord. The questions are based on the silence of the scriptures. Because God never said these things to any angel, all men are forbidden to teach Jesus is an angel. These two verses teach the silence-forbids doctrine.

THE LORD'S PRIESTHOOD

In Heb 7 the scriptures discuss Jesus' priesthood. Jesus could not be a priest according to Old Testament law because He did not come from the tribe of Levi. "For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood" (Heb 7:14). This argument is based on the silence of the scriptures. Jesus Himself could not be a priest under the Old Testament system because of silence. Silence does not authorize; it forbids.

Since silence forbids and since the law was silent about someone from the Tribe of Judah being a priest, Jesus Himself was forbidden by the law from being a priest. "For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law" (Heb 7:12). In

order for Jesus to become our High Priest, the law had to be changed. The law forbade Jesus' priesthood by its silence.

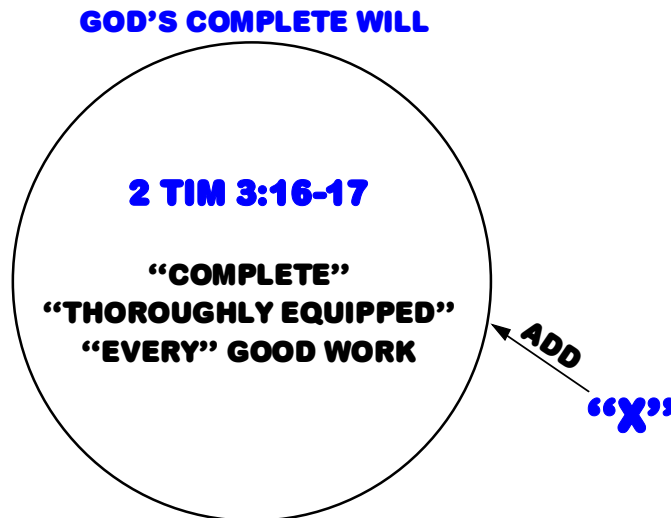
THE "DO NOT ADD" PASSAGES

All of the "do not add" passages teach the same lesson: Silence forbids. When God is silent that silence is significant. He means something by His silence. Over and over Christians are warned not to add to the scriptures when God is silent about something. "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you" (Dt 4:2). "Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar" (Prov 30:6). "For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book" (Rev 22:18-19). In all of these passages men are forbidden to do two things: (a) add to the word and (b) subtract from the word.

"Do not add" refers to the silence of the scriptures. Something which the law is silent about may not be added to the law.

BIBLE COMPLETE

To illustrate what's happening, let a large circle represent the scriptures.



Since the circle represents "every" good work, it also represents God's completed revelation – the New Testament scriptures. Second Tim 2:16-17 teaches that "every" good work is contained in the scriptures. Now, let "X" represent a doctrine or practice

which the New Testament scriptures are silent about. In order to teach this new doctrine or participate in this new practice the teacher would have to "add" to the scriptures – something Christians are strictly forbidden from doing. Silence, then, becomes significant. Silence forbids.

VARIOUS QUESTIONS

Understanding the doctrine of "silence forbids" assists in answering several questions.

1) Why does the church of Christ not baptize babies?

The Lord's church does not baptize babies simply because the New Testament is silent such a practice and silence forbids. No one is allowed to add to the word and in order to baptize babies, someone would have to add something that is not there.

If someone asked for authorization to baptize adults who believe in Christ, that could easily be done. Passages like Mk 16:16 or Acts 2:38 could be offered as authority for baptizing adults. However, there is no authorization to baptize babies. Not one single passage even implies infant baptism. Since everything taught or practiced must be authorized (Col 3:17), and since there is no authorization for baptizing babies (silence), the baptism of infants is wrong because silence forbids.

2) Why does the church of Christ immerse? Why is sprinkling not acceptable?

The Lord's church does not sprinkle people for baptism because the New Testament is silent about sprinkling and silence forbids. No one is allowed to add to the word and in order to sprinkle, one would have to add something that is not there.

By contrast, if someone asked for authorization to immerse passages like Acts 8:38 or Rom 6:3-4 could be offered as authorization. But where would one go for authorization to sprinkle?

3) Why does the church of Christ not use instruments?

The Lord's church does not use mechanical instruments of music because the New Testament is silent about mechanical instruments and silence forbids. No one may add to the word and in order to use instruments, one would have to add something that is not there.

On the other hand, if someone asked for authorization to sing (make vocal music), passages like Eph 5:19 or Col 3:16 could be offered as authorization. But where would one go to authorize instruments?

Often people want to go to the Old Testament (to David and the Psalms). Yet the church

is not under the authority of the Old Testament. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42). The New Testament church did not follow Moses. It followed the apostles' doctrine. The Old Testament was nailed to the cross (Col 2:14). The church looks to Jesus and His apostles for authorization today (Mt 17:5). This is the meaning of the church "having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone" (Eph 2:20).

4) Why does the church of Christ not many other things which denominations do?

- Why are Bible classes opposed?
- Why are individual communion wafers rejected?
- Why will the church not use fermented wine in communion?
- Why are individual communion cups rejected?
- Why is a second offering of the communion on Sunday evenings not practiced?
- Why does the church not take the communion to sick people at home?
- Why does the church not build and maintain gymnasiums?
- Why does the church not build and maintain hospitals, nursing homes and orphan homes?
- Why does the church not build and maintain schools and colleges?
- Why are choirs not organized and utilized?
- Why is hand-clapping not practiced?
- Why is religious dancing considered wrong?
- Why are religious drama performances not organized and presented?
- Why do the members of the church not call their preachers "pastor" or "reverend"?
- Why is the "guilty party" in a divorce not allowed to remarry?
- Why does the church not teach sinners to simply pray for salvation?

The answer to all these questions is the same. None of these things are believed or practiced simply because the New Testament is silent about each of these things and silence forbids. The Lord never gave His people the right to add to the holy word and, in order to do any of the above mentioned items, additions would have to be made to the word. Scriptural authorization should be given for everything the church does. Nothing should be taught and nothing should be practiced for which there is no scripture (Col 3:17; 2 Tim 3:16-17). The doctrines and practices of the church must rest in the wisdom and authority of God and not in the wisdom of men (Prov 3:5-6; 14:12; Isa 55:8-9).

CONCLUSION

God's people must show respect for the scriptures. The scriptures cannot be broken (Jn 10:35).

- Christians are told to have scripture authorization for everything they do (Col 3:17).
- Everything Christians need to know or do is contained in the New Testament scriptures (2 Tim 3:16-17).
- Christians cannot think beyond what is written (1 Cor 4:6).
- If anyone comes and does not bring the teaching of Christ, brothers and sisters are not to receive them into their houses nor wish them success (2 Jn 9-11).
- If anyone teaches something not taught by the apostles they are accursed from God (Gal 1:8-9).
- If anyone tries to worship in a way which is not authorized, their worship is worthless (Mt 15:9).

This is serious business. Eternal destinies are at stake here. Great care should be taken to make sure what is taught and practiced is actually is authorized. Great care should also be taken in how the scriptures are handled, being honest and careful to draw out of the scriptures only what is actually there and not reading wishful thinking into the scriptures (2 Tim 2:15).

The words of Moses are most appropriate here, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Dt 29:29). Truly: "Where the Bible speaks, we speak and where the Bible is silent, we are silent."

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