
questions Biblically in view of eternity!

THE SILENCE OF THE SCRIPTURES

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→ People everywhere seem to be in need of more instruction on the subject of how to establish Bible authority—especially that aspect of it which has often been called “the silence of the scriptures.” It is a failure to understand and respect such silence that is causing some erroneous beliefs and practices that are now creeping into the worship and work of many congregations. But this is not really something new. It was this very same failure to respect Bible authority that caused musical instruments to be introduced into congregational worship in about the year 1859 and ultimately led to a massive split in the church. Those with the lax attitude predominantly became known as the Christian Church. In more recent times, the main body of that group—the *Disciples of Christ*—completely renounced the concept of New Testament Christianity and voted itself into full-fledged denominational status. Such is the inevitable result of failing to respect *the silence of the scriptures*.

Good →

The Law of Exclusion

In spite of the massive digression, faithful Christians continued to teach and preach on the necessity of Bible authority for all that we believe and practice. Included in that teaching was insistence on the “law of exclusion”—that when God specifies a particular thing (such as *bread* and *fruit of the vine* in the Lord's supper or *vocal music* in worship) it excludes all other elements in that same category (*meat* or *milk* in the Lord's supper and *instrumental music* in worship). In these examples, all other types of *food* and *music* are excluded beyond those that are 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 things that are specifically commanded. Only those things that fall within those categories are excluded.

Good!
The validity of the "law of exclusion" is clearly seen in the classic case of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1, 2). They did not violate a stated prohibition but simply failed to respect the law of exclusion and so "offered strange fire before Jehovah, which he had not commanded." It is this "law of exclusion" which has otherwise been referred to as "the silence of the scriptures." The principle is clearly stated in the New Testament in Hebrews 7 and 8. The Old Testament law gave the priesthood to the tribe of Levi without specifically eliminating the other tribes by name (Numbers 8). But the silence of the scriptures had to be respected. Therefore, since "it is evident that our Lord hath sprung out of Judah, as to which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priests," if Jesus were on earth "he would not be a priest at all" (Hebrews 7:14; 8:4). When one tribe alone was named, the silence in respect to the other tribes amounted to an exclusion! The Holy Spirit thus demonstrated to us the validity of this principle.

Positive and Negative Obligations

In order to completely grasp the above principle, we must realize two more things: (1) any statement that involves an obligation must be treated as a command, and (2) 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 which leads to a conclusion about the negative. If we have correctly understood the positive statement, the inferred negative conclusion is decisive and inescapable. In the New Testament scriptures on music in worship (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16;

James 5:13), the positive command "Sing!" (vocal music) just as certainly involves the implied negative command "Do not play!" (instrumental music).

Current Deviations

Brethren in general used to teach diligently on matters pertaining to respect for the silence of the scriptures. However, in the last couple of decades there has not only been a lack of continued teaching on this subject in the Lord's church but, in some cases, an outright repudiation of it. A brother in California wrote a book a few years ago in which he contended that "nowhere is the Bible silent" and that any insistence on respecting such silences is just "well-worn Restorationist doctrine." And two articles published more recently in Alabama asserted that instrumental music in worship "is neither scriptural nor unscriptural because the Bible says nothing about it either way" and that "if the apostles ever taught that instruments were sinful, they never left one word to that effect."² All three writers were from a non-instrumental background, yet all three concluded that the use or non-use of instrumental music in worship is just a matter of opinion and personal preference.

These brethren and thousands of others need some good, basic lessons about the "law of exclusion" or "silence of the scriptures." Our preachers need to dust off those sermons of yesteryear that are not used much nowadays and teach with renewed fervor about the authority of the scriptures and their application to the worship and work of the church. They need to make sure it is understood that positives and negatives constitute both sides of authority when it comes to biblical statements regarding music in Christian worship and any other aspect of worship or work which God has enjoyed upon us. Neglecting such teaching can only result in a sure and steady drift into another massive digression. Christians

everywhere need to realize that we must never begin by asking, "Where does the Bible say we can't do it?" We must first see if a thing is excluded by what is specified. If it is not, then we are at liberty to use it. But if it is, we must respect the silence of the scriptures.

Footnotes

¹Russell N. Squire, *Where Is the Bible Silent?* (Los Angeles: Southland Press, 1973), pp. 24, 40.

²R.L. Kilpatrick, "Belmont and the Instrument," *Ensign*, 8 (February 1981), 197; Michael Hall, "Why Didn't the Apostles Use Instrumental Music?" *Ibid.*, p. 191.