

The Silence of the Scriptures

By David Phillips

When communicating with speech, silence is a powerful tool. A person can say just as much with what they do not mention as with what they do mention. Parents can tell their children to stay in the yard and expect the children to know that the street, the neighbor's yard, and the park across the street are all off limits, even though they never mentioned those things. Silence allows us to understand our limitations without being given a list of everything that is forbidden.

God uses this same principle in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, after the law was given, Moses commanded the people, "*Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it*" (Deut. 12:32). In other words, God expected the people to obey His commands exactly as they were given. When they went beyond the commands of God, they were adding to what was written. This principle can be seen in the nature of the priesthood. God designated the tribe of Levi to serve Him as priests among the people of Israel. From the time the law was given until Christ nailed it on the cross, no other tribe served as priests. "*For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood*" (Heb. 7:14). Concerning the priesthood, God's silence said a great deal about the other tribes' ability to serve as priests. That is, by specifying the tribe of Levi, God excluded all other tribes from being priests.

The truth is that silence is one of the most basic principles of communication. We use it in our everyday lives as we give and receive instructions at school, at work, and even at home. Nevertheless, there are a great many people today who want to throw out all semblance of reason when they approach the Scriptures by saying, "If God did not condemn it, then we are free to do it." It would be as if a child said, "Mom never said I couldn't go in the street, she only said 'Stay in the yard.' Therefore, I have the right to go in the street." Or someone from the tribe of Benjamin saying, "God never said a Benjamite couldn't be a priest, He only said the Levites could. Therefore a Benjamite has the right to be a priest."

In the Scriptures, God shows us the great danger of this line of reasoning. In 2 Chron. 26:16-20, King Uzziah (who was from the tribe of Judah) became very arrogant. He felt that as king he had the right to offer incense in the temple. Many today might reason that what Uzziah did was not wrong; since God never said he couldn't do it, he had every right to offer the incense if he wanted to. However, when Uzziah entered the temple, eighty priests went in after him. Read what they understood about God's word, "*It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense.*" Do we hear what this passage says? When God specified that the Levites were to be priests, He expected all Israel to understand that His silence concerning all of the other tribes meant that they were forbidden to be priests. Uzziah was unwilling to respect the silence of the Scriptures and, as a result, God struck him with leprosy for the rest of his days (2 Chron. 26:19-21).

Uzziah was not the first person to ignore the silence of the Scriptures. In the old law, God specified that the priests were to use the coals from the altar to burn incense in the tabernacle. Two priests, however, did not respect God's silence on the matter. In Lev. 10:1-2, Nadab and Abihu, two of the sons of Aaron, decided to use fire from a source that the Lord never mentioned. "*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.*" Notice, they did not do something that God had specifically condemned, they merely did that which "*He had not commanded.*" Because they were unwilling to respect the silence of God's word, God struck them dead with fire at that very moment.

Fenced In By God's Word

The accounts of Uzziah and Nadab and Abihu scream out to us to be careful, to pay attention to what God has to say, and to respect His silence. In 2 John 9, John teaches us to heed limitations set by God's word.

“Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” The word “transgress” means to “go aside, go beyond” (Vine’s). In 2 John 9 it is contrasted with the word “abide,” which means to dwell or remain in a place, to continue in or with.

The picture in 2 John 9 is that of a fence. In this case, the doctrine of Christ is the fence. By means of the New Testament Scriptures, the line has been drawn. God tells us how He wants us to worship Him. He tells us what kinds of works are good works. He shows us how to organize the local church and what the mission of the church is. He even tells us how to carry out that mission. Everything that God wants His people to do has been revealed, “...*that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:17). We must emphasize this point in our minds if we are to understand 2 John 9: Whatever God’s will is for us to do in our service to Him, He has told us through the Scriptures. He teaches us how to do *every* good work. Therefore, everything we do which God has not commanded is on the wrong side of the fence; it is beyond the doctrine of Christ. For that reason, if we choose to do things not found in the Scriptures, even though God never said not to, we transgress the doctrine of Christ and do not have God.

Oracles of God

In 1 Peter 4:11, Peter teaches us to limit ourselves to God’s word. *“If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God.”* An “oracle” is a word or utterance. The point of this passage is, if any speaks let his speech be as the word of God; i.e. speak where the Bible speaks, keep silent where the Bible is silent. The importance of this principle cannot be over emphasized. There are a large number of churches in the world who are rejecting God’s pattern for the church because they have not learned to respect the silence of the Scriptures. They are using the church to do works which God never gave for the church to do, and they are using manmade organizations to do the work that God intended for the church to do. In truth, they are rejecting the Scriptural pattern in order to pursue human goals—much like the denominations—all because they believe “God never said we couldn’t do it.”

When God wants things done a certain way, He is very specific in His instructions, as with the priesthood and the burning of incense in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, He has been quite specific concerning the organization, the mission, the work, and the methods of doing the work of the church. If we truly love the Lord with all of our hearts, then we will respect the silence of the Scriptures and limit ourselves to the pattern God provides in the New Testament. Granted, there are some things concerning which God is flexible: i.e. there are some methods which He has left to our discretion, and there are also tools available to help us fulfill His commands. But where God is specific in His instructions, we need to understand that His commands are unbending and unchanging.

If we men are to truly be servants of the Almighty God, then our purpose must be to only do that for which God has given us authority. If our desire is to do the will of the Lord then we will refrain from transgressing His doctrine. We will abstain from that concerning which God is silent. And we will do with all of our might the will of God as expressed in the New Testament, speaking only where the Bible speaks, and keeping silent where the Bible is silent.

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