

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #68:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL SILENCE
By John Temples

Which gets people in more trouble with God--what the Bible SAYS, or what it DOES NOT SAY? Good question.

The study of the silence of Scripture is absolutely vital to a correct understanding of Biblical authority. Churches of Christ believe in needing Biblical authority for what we do and teach, and not going beyond what is written--respecting the silence of the Scriptures.

You hear preachers and teachers talk about silence in connection with the Bible. "We don't do this or that because the Bible is silent about it." "We speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent." What do these statements mean?

Consider two scenarios: (1) A visitor walks into our service and notices that we do not use instruments. He asks, "Why do you not use a piano, organ, etc.?" Answer: "Because the New Testament is silent about the use of such instruments in worship; it says nothing about them." On the way out, the visitor asks another question: "Why do you have a church building? Where is your authority for one?" Answer: "Because the Bible is silent about church buildings; it says nothing about them." The visitor says, "Uh...let me get this straight. You DON'T have instruments because the Bible is silent on them, but you DO have church buildings because the Bible is silent on them?"

Scenario (2): Many years ago, there was a debate between a gospel preacher and a denominational preacher on the subject of infant baptism. The denominational preacher said, "We baptize babies because we believe they are born sinners, and the Bible is silent--it does not say NOT to baptize them." The gospel preacher said, "In churches of Christ, we do not baptize babies. One reason is that the Bible is silent--it says nothing about baptizing babies." So one man affirmed that babies SHOULD be baptized, and the other man affirmed that babies SHOULD NOT be

baptized, and both gave the same reason: the silence of the Bible on the subject!
Do you see the importance of this study?

HERE ARE TWO IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES:

First: Biblical silence by itself does not teach or authorize anything. This is the fallacy of the widespread idea that we can do anything in religion that the Bible does not specifically forbid. The Bible is silent on the use of drugs, or being a drug dealer; but would anybody say it's all right to do those things because the Bible does not say NOT to use them?

H. A. Dobbs wrote in the Gospel Advocate, December 1990 issue: "Since silence is the absence of sound...it cannot instruct by conveying information. Silence does not necessarily give consent....A quiet time may give opportunity for reflection, and meditation may instruct the heart; but the silence by itself gives neither advice nor consent, nor intelligence, nor wisdom. Silence is just that --silence!"

But second, silence DOES come into play and becomes meaningful when it is associated with explicit statements or commands. God told Noah to build an ark of gopher wood. "But God, pine wood is on sale at Home Depot." No, all would agree that Noah would have violated God's command if he had used pine.

But consider another Biblical command: "Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together" (Hebrews 10:25). Christians can obey that command in many different ways--by meeting in a home, or a cave, or by a river, or in a church building. The assembling of the church is vital; the place of assembly is optional.

So Noah COULD NOT use pine wood in the ark because God was silent on the issue; but Christians CAN meet in church buildings for the same reason.

WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?

"Make an ark of gopher wood" is a SPECIFIC command (one kind of wood is specified). "Assemble yourselves together" is a GENERIC command (no specific way or place of assembly is given--multiple options are available).

How do I know whether a Biblical command is specific or generic? Ask yourself, “Can I fulfill this command in more than one way? Do I have options?” If you have no options--you can only fulfill the command one way--it is a specific command. If you have multiple options (you can fulfill the command in several ways), it is a generic command.

Let me make this clearer by giving some examples of commands and their nature:

- Pick fruit (generic). Pick oranges (specific).
- Go (generic). Walk (specific).
- Make music (generic). Sing (specific).
- Sacrifice an animal (generic). Sacrifice a male lamb of the first year (specific).

Let me make it even MORE clear with a modern example. You send your child to the grocery store. You tell him, “Get some hamburger meat.” He comes home with hamburger meat, buns, ketchup, fries, and pizza. You get out the belt. His attempted defense is, “But you didn’t say NOT to get those other things.” You would say, “Yes, but I SPECIFIED one thing, hamburger meat. That automatically eliminates any other type of meat or grocery item.” But what if you had told the child, “Go to the store and get us something to eat?” Then all those other things would have been permissible.

Here is the heart of the lesson: silence associated with a SPECIFIC command is PROHIBITIVE (“I told you to get one exact thing”). When God specifies something, everything else is forbidden by silence.

THE PRINCIPLE APPLIED TO OTHER BIBLICAL COMMANDS

“Go and preach the gospel to all nations” (Matthew 28:18). The command is specific: “preach the gospel.” We are not at liberty to preach anything else.

“Lay by in store on the first day of the week” (1 Corinthians 16:1,2). Can we take up a collection on Wednesday night? No, because “the first day of the week” is specific. (It’s the same with the Lord’s Supper, Acts 20:7).

“Sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16). Can we play instruments to accompany the singing? No, because “sing” is a specific command--there’s only one way to fulfill it. But can we use four-part harmony, or a song book, or a song leader, even though the Bible does not mention these? Yes, because when we use those things, we are still just singing.

That last example points out one final thing we need to understand: in every command there can be both SPECIFIC elements and GENERIC elements. “Be baptized in water” points to a specific act, immersion, and a specific element, water. But can we baptize in salt water? Running water? Heated water? Yes to all, because it’s still just water.

What about “go and preach the gospel to all nations”--what are the specifics and the generalities? “Go” is not optional; we must do it. But how can we go? That is generic. Mule, jet, internet, it does not matter HOW we go. All these are authorized by Biblical silence associated with a generic command. “Preach the gospel,” though, is specific--we cannot preach opinions or the doctrines of men. We must preach only the revealed gospel. But even the command to preach has some generic elements in it (use a PA system, sit or stand to preach, use a pulpit, length of sermon, etc.).

Brother Dobbs, in the article cited above, said it this way: “The silence of the Bible can be permissive or it can be prohibitive. It can both allow and forbid.... If the command of the Bible is specific, then its silence is prohibitive.... On the other hand, if God tells us to do something but does not tell us how to do it, we are at liberty to use any method that does not violate another principle of divine law.... Where there is a positive statement requiring a specific action, silence restricts. Where there is a general command and no instructions about how the command is to be obeyed, silence permits.”

This is why we could tell the visitor to our services that we don't use instruments because of Biblical silence, and also that we do have church buildings for the same reason.

Here is the bottom line: silence associated with a SPECIFIC Biblical command PROHIBITS things; silence associated with a GENERIC command PERMITS things. --John Temples