



## The Silence of the Scriptures

By Keith Greer

In every discussion of the Bible's authority, we must also examine the subject of its silence. What God's word says matters little if we do not equally respect His silence. So many of our differences with those of other faiths, and with those in the Lord's church, are not over what the Bible says -- but over what it does not say!

Basically, there are **two approaches** to Bible authority.

*Whatever God revealed in His word constitutes authority. This belief is often expressed by statements such as "a thus saith the Lord," book, chapter, and verse," or "where the Bible is silent we must be silent."*

*Wherever God's word has not expressly and specifically forbidden, we are free to act. In other words, where the Bible is silent, we are at liberty to act as we think best. This approach is often evidenced by the question -- "where does the Bible say not to."*

We must decide which is in harmony with God's will, and which is not. Both cannot be right.

Martin Luther forcefully objected to papal traditions and Roman Catholic teaching. He validated his thinking by believing that Bible silence on any given subject gives implicit authorization. Luther's influence not only affected his followers, it also touches every one of today's major Protestant denominations.

Another reformer, Huldreich Zwingli, a Swiss leader, had a far narrower view. He believed authority existed only where the scriptures contained clear, identifiable authorization. This thinking led him to disregard the teaching concerning the papacy,

mass, intercession for the dead, purgatory, clergy, celibacy, relics, images, and instrumental music. Zwingli believed God's will as set forth in the Bible, and that conformance to it is the central feature of religion. Luther leaned more toward emotionalism and subjectivism. Some of Zwingli's followers felt that he did not go far enough in applying the silence of the scriptures. Many began to doubt the validity of infant baptism and to practice full immersion as they learned from the scriptures. Men such as Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone held to the same type of thinking. Again, we must ask "which position agrees with the scriptures?"

Let's look at some basic Bible examples. Based on silence, Cain offered his sacrifice. Since faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17), and the Hebrew writer tells us that by faith, Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice (Hebrews 11:4), we must conclude that God spoke on the subject. Abel based his action on what God said; while Cain based his on what God did not say. Please read Genesis 4:1-9. Remember God's words to Cain -- "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it." {Genesis 4:7}

Nadab and Abihu presumptuously offered strange fire that God refused to accept. "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." {Leviticus 10:1,2} They burned incense, not the perpetual fire of the altar, in their censers (Leviticus 6:13; 16:12). How did God acknowledge their offering, which violated the scripture's silence? His wrath poured down with fire from heaven!

What about the priesthood of Christ? In explaining Christ's priesthood, which was after the order of Melchizedek, the Hebrew writer conceded that under the Law of Moses, Jesus could not have served as a priest in the temple. He was of the tribe of Judah-not Levi, which was the priestly tribe under the old covenant. "Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. For He of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. For it is evident

that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood." {Hebrews 7:11-14} Do we understand such thinking? If a schoolteacher gives a student permission to go to the restroom, the teacher's silence concerning going outside for a smoke, making a phone call, or stopping by the vending machine for a snack does not give consent for the student to engage in these activities. Doing so is considered disobedience to authority and is grounds for some sort of punishment.

Do you remember that David wished to build a temple for the Lord? Why? David had a fine house and thought it a terrible thing that God's house was a tent-like structure (tabernacle). "For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt, even to this day, but have moved about in a tent and in a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about with all the children of Israel, have I ever spoken a word to anyone from the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?' {2 Samuel 7:6,7} God had not asked for such a house! Many today defend their projects and gimmicks by boasting that the Bible says nothing about it, so it must be all right. Why? Because the work or project is well-intentioned and brings good results -- in other words, "the end justifies the means." This is why many of our own brethren believe God approves of church-supported orphanages, widows' homes, old folks' homes, colleges, and fellowship halls. Never mind there is not one word of Biblical support for such things, look at the good they accomplish. There's one minor problem -- good intentions are not a substitute for Bible authority, and God's silence is the best reason to abstain from these projects.

Some want the worship to be more innovative, to make things better for God. Yes, the Bible does tell us to give (1 Corinthians 16:1,2); to pray (Acts 2:42); to partake of the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-29); teach the lost; and edify the saved (Matthew 28:19,20; Acts 20:32). And yes, it does say to sing (Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16); but singing sounds so much better with musical instruments. Again we must ask -- where is the Bible authority for singing and playing? Others want the services to be more emotional (clapping, yelling, swaying, dimming the lights, applauding at baptisms to show we are filled with the spirit). Nadab and Abihu stand ready to testify that God does not appreciate changes to His worship service. Let's leave the divine pattern alone.

We need no creed but God's Word. "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." {Revelation 22:18,19} Some would have us believe that men's creeds are designed to clarify the confusion of God's word and improve on His communication with us. Really? "For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." {1 Corinthians 14:33} God is not the author of confusion, but men are! When the scribes, Pharisees, and elders in Jesus day tried to make their traditions equal with law, it did not bring unity, but a wall of doctrinal disunity that caused factions and divisions. The one who presumes to speak for God invites removal of his name from the Lamb's Book of Life. God created man, knowing what He designed him to do, and how He wanted him to do it. We need to limit ourselves to just what God said -- not what we think He meant to say. "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen." {1 Peter 4:11}

The apostle John made it easy for us to understand what God desires. "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. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds." {2 John 9-11} God's silence is golden and those who claim to love Him should respect that silence. Not doing so leads to breach of fellowship with the Father and the Son. How much more serious could it be?

Such attitudes have caused division, even among us. Those who came to be known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) adopted this view of authority. By their own admission, they believed that silence gave them freedom to act according to their own understanding. This led to their acceptance of the Missionary Society and mechanical instruments of music in the worship services. Later, they added state-wide organizations, trained choirs, fellowship halls, chicken dinners, ice cream socials, and a host of other things; all fall under the "silence of the scriptures" heading. Their contention: "we are told to preach the gospel, but not how to get it done." Today, some of our own embrace this mindset. They say: "We do many things for which we have no

authority." We have church-sponsored recreation, social programs of every sort, youth ministers, gyms, and even family life centers. Where will it end? Sadly, wherever men want to take it!

God's will must be revealed to men (1 Corinthians 2:9-13). Men can worship Him in "spirit and truth" (John 4:24). The work of the church falls into three areas--evangelism, edifying the saints, and helping needy saints (Ephesians 4:8-12). No one knows that God is pleased with all these innovations -- they presume He is because He is silent. God's word clearly teaches that silence prohibits; it does not give authorization. Please read 1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 Peter 1:3; 2 Timothy 3:16,17; Colossians 3:17. Where the scriptures stop, we also must stop. Yes, we must respect what God has said, but at the same time, we must also respect His "thundering silence."