

UNDERSTANDING SILENCE

In recent weeks we've considered worship and we have observed that God is the appropriate object of worship. We have seen that as his children we are to give unto the Father that which he desires – worship – in the way in which he has specified. While individual Christians may be encouraged, edified and even taught through the worship, God is the primary purpose and target of our praise and devotion. We have further considered how a worshipper may come to know what God wants in worship through the use of the direct command, the approved example and the necessary inference. We will now turn to consider the so-called "argument from silence." This argument is common to everyday life and we use it to prevent chaos in our world. It also has application in our worship lives and is critical to understanding how to approach God in worship. In fact, the argument from silence is so common that we never really think of it. We might say that it is just the way things are.

The argument from silence may be stated simply: When God has given a specific command, all other possibilities are excluded. Some common, everyday experiences from life will be helpful to illustrate this principle. Consider ordering products from a catalog or over the internet. When you place your order you authorize that the chosen items be charged against your debit card. The store may not add any items to your purchase without your expressed consent. It is not necessary to tell the clerk all of the things you do not want – such would be ludicrous and virtually impossible. Instead you authorize certain things and allow the law of silence to cover everything else. If you are silent on an item then you and the clerk both understand that you did not authorize it and it must not be added.

Consider what happens when you take a prescription to the pharmacy. Your physician has specified precisely what he wants you to take for your illness. When the pharmacist reads the prescription he provides exactly what the M.D. ordered. He does not add to the order nor take from it; he fills it exactly. Examine that prescription carefully. Nowhere will you find that the physician has listed all of the medicines he does not want you to take. The law of silence makes plan that what is not authorized is not allowed.

There is a stunning example of the law of silence found in the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews is arguing that because a better priest is

found in Christ Jesus, it is necessary to change the law under which men live (Hebrews 7:12). As you know, Jesus was born of the tribe of Judah while the priests all came from Levi. In showing that Jesus' priesthood requires a new a better law the writer argues that Jesus could not have been a priest under the Old Law. "*For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests.*" (Hebrews 7:14). The writer says Jesus could not have been a priest under the law of Moses because, using the law of silence, Moses did not so authorize. There were but 12 tribes in Israel's family. Even with such a limited number it was not necessary for Moses to list the 11 tribes from which priests could not come. It was only required that he authorize one.

Now as a practical matter, how do we apply this concept to our worship? We observe first that God has authorized or specified the way he wishes to be worshipped. It is not necessary for him to tell us what we cannot do because he has previously authorized what he wants. The law of silence covers everything else. As an example, the Lord's supper is comprised of the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine. This instruction, Paul affirms, he received from Jesus himself (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Because Jesus has said what he wants at the Lord's table (both by example and by direct command) we are prohibited, by the law of silence, from adding anything else to the table.

What if some meaning brother or sister wanted to add bitter herbs to the Lord's table to remind us of the bitter nature of sin? Bitter herbs were a part of the Passover (Exodus 12:8, c.f. Exodus 12:1-13; Numbers 9:11). But we must not include them, and no one I know has suggested we do, because Jesus excluded any and all additions when he specified the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine. Had he simply said, "gather around my table and eat a memorial meal unto me," then we could include whatever we desired because the above fictional statement does not make specific authorization and the law of silence cannot apply where there is no specificity.

We will next observe how the law of silence operates in the realm of church music. It is thorny issue for the denominations and frankly, proves their undoing. We invite you to continue your study with us.

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