

## **The Silence of the Scriptures**

Considerable controversy has arisen over “silence of the Scriptures.” Some say silence allows; others say silence prohibits. Still others say the Bible is not a book of rules and so asking about “silence” is the wrong question. So, what about “silence?”

God gave humans the capacity for language. He revealed His will to us by guiding people to write in existing human languages so we could understand His message much as we would other communication. So, if “silence” is a factor in our ordinary understanding of language, God would expect us to use it in reading Scripture. To learn about “silence,” let’s imagine we have received an invitation to dinner: “The honor of your presence is requested on February 7, 2002, at 7 p.m. at the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Smith.” Would the Smiths expect us to use silence in understanding this invitation?

Since one date is specified, we would understand all other dates are excluded. The Smiths don’t have to list all the dates not to come to the dinner and we would not call asking to come on February 9. By specifying one possibility out of the “date” category, silence about all other dates naturally excludes them. In the “time” category, 7 p.m. has been specified. Silence about all other times naturally eliminates them. In the “place” category, the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Smith has been specified. Silence about all other places naturally excludes them.

So, Silence Principle No. 1: If one or more options out of a category are specified, silence about all other options in that category excludes them.

That the Bible expects us to follow this use of silence, as in the ordinary use of language, is clear from many passages. When Saul, for example, offered a sacrifice without waiting for Samuel, Samuel told him, “You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you” (1 Samuel 13:13). What command? Since Saul had asked that the animals for the sacrifice be brought to him, it appears he offered the sacrifice himself. But, where did God command Saul not to offer a sacrifice? In Leviticus 1:7, God had said “the sons of Aaron the priest” are to offer sacrifices. In the category of who offers sacrifices, then, God specified priests and His silence about anyone else was a “command” for no one else to do it. Hebrews 7:13-14, in a similar way, says Jesus could not be a priest under the Mosaic system because he was from the tribe of Judah. But where does the Bible say those from Judah cannot be priests. Hebrews explains, “In regard to that tribe [Judah] Moses said nothing about priests.” Thus, Hebrews says that since Moses said nothing (was silent) about Judah when specifying who should be priests, this silence excluded those out of Judah from being priests. Scores of other cases in the Bible show the exclusionary power of silence. When God told Moses to speak to the rock to get water, striking the rock was eliminated (Numbers 20:8). Moses didn’t offer as an excuse, “You didn’t say not to strike the rock.” When God specified where to get fire to burn incense, Nadab and Abihu suffered the consequences of getting “unauthorized fire” (Leviticus 10:1) because they got fire from a place other than the one specified. When David moved the ark by ox cart, Uzzah died because David did not transport the ark “in the prescribed way” (1 Chronicles 15:13). All ways not prescribed were eliminated. God told Naaman to dip in the Jordan, and that eliminated all other rivers. When God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, he didn’t have to list all the places he was not to go. When the Corinthians did not follow the directions Paul gave for taking the Lord’s Supper as Paul had “received from the Lord and passed on” to them, they were guilty of sinning against the Lord’s body and blood and were eating and drinking “judgment” on themselves (1 Corinthians 11:23-29).

From these and many other Bible cases, it is clear that when the Lord specifies one option out of a category, His silence about other options excludes them. Applying this principle, because God specified bread and fruit of the vine for the Lord's supper, other foods are excluded from this service. Because the Lord specified elders in each congregation as the form of approved leadership, a papal system is excluded. Because the Lord specified immersion as the method of baptism, sprinkling and pouring are excluded. Because the Lord specified vocal music as the option out of the music category, instruments are excluded. Because the Lord specified prayer in the name of Jesus, prayers offered in the name of anyone else are excluded.

So when one option out of a category is specified, other options in that category are excluded. That is how language operates. Pharmacists fill a prescription knowing that because the doctor specified one medicine, he prohibited using any others. Builders know that when the architect specifies doors of a particular size, they are prohibited from using other sizes. The cook knows that if a recipe specifies a certain oven heat, other heats are not intended. If language did not work this way, it would be practically useless.

Back to the dinner invitation. Did you notice a category about which there is total silence? Nothing in the invitation said anything about the category of "dress." Total silence about that category leaves all options in that category open and so, in this case, silence allows. What I wear to the dinner, then, is my choice. If the invitation had said, "Formal Attire," then one type out of the category of "dress" would have been specified and others would have been excluded. Since, however, the invitation was silent about "dress," I am free to dress as I consider appropriate.

Scripture demonstrates this principle. This is, in fact, Paul's very point in Romans 14 as he deals with a category about which God had not specified. On eating food in the Christian era, God has not specified particular items in the category of foods that we may eat or not eat. Silence on this matter allows us to eat what we wish. While Paul says I must consider how my eating choices might affect my own conscience and my influence on others, he says I have "freedom" in the matter of foods (1 Corinthians 8:9). Because God has not specified in the category of foods, silence allows us freedom to choose any of the options.

So, Silence Principle No. 2. If a category is left open with nothing specified, we may choose any options in that category.

Thus, in the Lord's supper, the day is specified, but the silence on the time of day allows us to observe it at any hour. From the music category, singing is specified, but the style of songs, and whether we sing in unison or with harmony is open. In the category of what to teach, we are limited to what Christ and those He inspired have revealed, but, since nothing is specified in the teaching methods category, this silence allows us to teach in whatever ways we choose. Christians are told to assemble, but the length of the service, the place of meeting, and the order in which they arrange what they do is unspecified. Silence about a category, then, allows us to choose among its options.

In ordinary language, then, silence prohibits using unspecified options when particular options in a category are specified. Silence allows, however, when no options in a category are specified. Since God has revealed His will in the ordinary language of the people, and since the Scriptures give us samples of both of these uses of silence, He expects us to exercise these same uses of silence in understanding His message.