

8. Silence

God reigns. Because of this, His followers need to be concerned with teaching God's will. "Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God" (1 Pet. 4:11a). Yet how are we to think with respect to what God didn't say?

The question of how to treat the silence of Scripture has long been one of the more controversial issues in determining what is or is not authorized by God. Does silence authorize? Do we have authority to act when God has said nothing? There are two basic approaches to silence: 1) we can do anything not specifically forbidden in Scripture, or 2) silence is not permission and we should not do something that is not positively indicated in some way. How shall we approach the issue?

Interpreting "Silence" or the "Unspecified"?

We need to distinguish between something that is generally authorized, even though unspecified, and something for which there is actual silence. "Silent" and "unspecified" are not equal. For example, I can send my son to the store with the instructions to "get bread." "Bread" is a category, so if nothing else is indicated to specify the kind of bread, then whatever fits the category of "bread" is permitted. That is different, however, from saying or indicating nothing (silence) about bread whatsoever. If something is stated in principle or in general terms, then whatever falls under that principle or generality is still within the context of what is spoken about. Not everything needs to be specified when a general principle is given that covers the specifics.

That said, silence is silence. It is nothing. It neither approves nor disapproves of anything in itself. However, we cannot quote an author on something he never said. This is a basic principle on which we normally operate. If we cite an author as approving something, we must be able to show where and how he spoke about it. Otherwise, we have misrepresented the author. When an author has said nothing about a subject, we have no warrant to say that he approves of the matter. An author "authorizes" by what he says, not by his silence, unless he has indicated otherwise. For example, singing is authorized in Ephesians 5:19. Those who want approval for mechanical instruments in worship will need to go elsewhere, for this passage says nothing about instruments.

If the author has not said anything about a subject, does that necessarily mean he disapproves? The only way to know this would be for the author to break his silence and indicate His will. How else could we know? Once he breaks his silence, this point is no longer at issue. However, imagine the author saying something like this: "I'm only approving of or promoting matters that I have

spoken about. I do not approve of anything else. Do not presume so." Then, when he is silent about something, what should we assume his feelings to be about it? We surely cannot assume that he approves of something he has not spoken about; in that case, based on what else he has told us, we need to assume he would not approve it. This leads to the next point:

Silence and the Problem of Presumption

Interpreting "silence" is easier when we see someone. We can see facial and bodily expressions, hear inflections in the way things are said, and be more aware of what a communicator might be trying to convey. A speaker can say something with a particular expression and we can more readily interpret what that means. In biblical interpretation, our challenge lies in the fact that we are reading a text without being able to see all the accompanying expressions that may or may not go with it. This lends itself to the problem of presumption and warrants a more careful approach.

Presumption is assuming something to be true when we may not have adequate grounds for accepting it. Indeed, the evidence may be in the other direction, but because we think, "Scripture is silent on that specific matter," we believe we can act. Or we may think, "that's a gray area, so I can go ahead and do it." Instead of being sure what we are doing is right, we presume that it's okay. This is dangerous ground to be avoided.

Even if real silence didn't prohibit (as many argue), it surely doesn't authorize. Why do we feel that we can presume upon silence to act? The mind of God is known through what is revealed (1 Cor. 2:10-13). If God truly is silent about a matter, there would only be a couple of reasons why this would be so: 1) He intends to be silent. In this case, we do not have the mind of God on the matter, and we can either presume upon His mind, or refrain from such presumption. Given the principles of honoring God in Scripture, which is more appropriate? We know the answer. 2) He intended to say something about the issue, but failed or forgot. This is not an option because it would make God incompetent. If God truly is silent, then He intended to be silent and we ought to respect that.

When considering the question of silence, we ought to bear in mind these principles: First, study all that God has revealed about an issue. Consider relevant principles, statements, or examples that cover what we are trying to address. Only by knowing what God has revealed are we able to determine whether or not He is silent about something. Second, always keep in mind the need to honor God in what we think and do. Failure to honor Him has gotten more than a few people into serious trouble (e.g., Nabad and Abihu in Lev. 10:1-3, and Moses in Num. 20:9-13).

Fallacy, Principle, and Silence.

In logic, there is a fallacy known as the appeal to ignorance (Ad Ignorantiam): “The ‘appeal to ignorance’ consists in arguing that an idea must be true because we do not know that it is not. It is a fallacy because ignorance can never be a premise or reason. Premises must express knowledge-claims. Nothing logically follows from nothing, I.e., no-knowledge” (Kreeft 86). Using silence as a basis for God’s authority is fallacious and presumptuous.

There are several principles that prohibit this type of fallacy and help us understand how God thinks about this.

“You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you” (Deut 4:2).

“Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it” (Deut. 12:32).

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29).

“Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar” (Prov. 30:6).

“Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go” (Josh. 1:6-7; cf. Deut. 5:32; 17:11).

“When they say to you, ‘Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter,’ should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.” (Isa. 8:19-20).

“But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does” (Jas. 1:25).

“So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’” (John 8:31-32).

“Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other” (1 Cor. 4:6).

“Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9).

“I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes

away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (Rev. 22:18-19).

“Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls...” (Acts 15:24).

“If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing ...” (1 Tim. 6:3-4ff, vv. 20-21).

Examine the contexts. Some of the references have specific points to be made about them, but we are showing a basic principle throughout Scriptures found in various contexts (law, history, wisdom, prophets, gospels, and epistles). Do we recognize the principle? Do we get the idea that God thinks this principle is important? What might we gather from what we know? Are we being too careful, or not careful enough about our speculations and filling in of the gaps?

Conclusion

While the question of God’s silence can be thorny, we need to start with how we understand silence in our normal communication. From there, we look at other principles that help us in our understanding of silence. In the case of God, we have very direct statements telling us what He thinks about our being presumptuous. Therefore, we must be very careful in our approach to any question on which God is silent.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the distinction between “silence” and “unspecified” important?
2. If an author says nothing about a topic, what should we assume about his position on the topic, and why?
3. Why is presumption a problem?
4. How do we know what God thinks about a particular matter?
5. If God is truly silent about a matter, what reasons might there be for this silence?
6. What is the “appeal to ignorance” fallacy and why is it significant for the issue of silence?

7. Given the passages listed, what should we conclude regarding God's attitude toward what He has not revealed?

8. How careful should we be in approaching questions involving silence, and why?