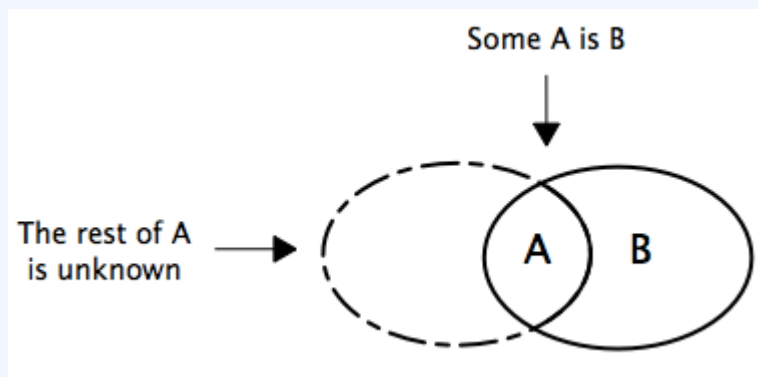


Silence and “Negative Inference”

In communication, silence is tricky. It might communicate either approval or disapproval. It may mean nothing at all. It all depends on the context and further information that surrounds it. By itself, silence is nothing.

There is a fallacy in logic known as “negative inference.” The idea is that just because something positive is stated does not in itself mean that its negative is to be inferred. For example, if one said, “those who eat meat are healthy,” he is not thereby implying that those who do not eat meat are unhealthy. There would have to be a further qualifier (e.g., an exclusive term like “only” attached). The positive affirmation, as it stands in this case, says nothing about those outside of that affirmation. The silence of the negative here would mean nothing until further information is given.

The particular affirmative, “some A is B,” is not a statement about the rest of A. In other words, it is would be fallacious to infer immediately that “some A is not B.” Logically, the positive statement affirms what is true of “some A,” but the rest of A is unknown. The rest of A might also be B, it might not be B. We don’t know. In diagram form, it could look like this:



This could be turned around as well (“some A is not B” says nothing about the rest of A, which could be B or could be something else not B). The point is that in order to make a logical statement about that which is outside of the positive affirmation, we need more information. Without that information, all we can reasonably say is that we don’t know about the rest.

Scriptural Communication

How does this principle apply to Scriptural communication? Is it possible that “rules” about silence have been unreasonably formed and used to condemn those who practice what God is silent about? If God is silent about something, does that necessarily mean it is wrong? What principles

should be considered? We do not wish to arbitrarily create rules only to condemn others who don't follow the rules we have created.

When we look at a biblical text that speaks to a particular practice, we need to consider what it is actually affirming. Then, what does it not say? Is there any further information that will help us decide what to think or do about any silence? Is that silence prohibitive? Does it allow anything? How do we decide?

Remember that not everything that is authorized must be specified. General authority is given often, which can include matters not specifically mentioned. However, that doesn't mean God is silent about it in the absolute sense. A meeting place like a building need not be specified to be authorized. The reason is that God is not silent about His people meeting, and a place is required to do this. Given the nature of general authority, we need to be careful about how we approach the particulars. I can tell my son to buy "bread," and he might reason that I was silent about "sourdough bread." However, "bread" encompassed all kinds. This would not be actual silence on the bread issue, but rather the way the general statements are made.

However, keep in mind that the best case scenario, when it comes to God's actual silence, is that we wouldn't know the mind of God at all on that matter. Let that sink in a bit. Where there is silence, we don't know. The mind of God is known by what is revealed (cf. 1 Cor 2), not by what is unknown to us.

We often hear that if God is silent about a practice, then it should not be something that we condemn or divide over. We ought to recognize that God is the only proper Judge of eternal destiny; that is not our job. Yet something else seems to be missed here: God is also the only One who can properly commend and approve. Even if we grant for the sake of argument that silence should not be seen as something for which we would condemn an action, then neither should silence be seen as something wherein we can commend an action. "We don't know" is the best we could say. The problem is that "we don't know" is not a basis on which to act if we are making it our aim to please God (2 Cor 5:9). The reason we don't want to act on silence is not because of some arbitrary rules about silence, but rather because it is acting in an area of the unknown when it comes to God's will, and is, without further indication, presumptuous on our part. Why not just go with what we know based on God's revelation rather than what we don't know based on silence? That way, we are operating within the realm of what we can know pleases God.

One of the problems with trying to appeal to silence in order to argue for the right to do something is that of committing the "appeal to ignorance" fallacy. This fallacy "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., from no knowledge" (Kreeft 86). If we do not have the mind of God on a matter, then appealing to that realm of silence is only an appeal to our ignorance. How can that be seen

as a viable way of arguing for God's approval of something? While it is important not to commit a fallacy of the "negative inference," it is just as important not to "appeal to ignorance" as a basis for authority. Our lack of knowledge authorizes nothing.

Yet there is another issue about biblical information that is significant, especially in matters of silence. The Lord puts limits around His own communication. When one in a position of authority says to go no further than what He has communicated, then what he says encompasses silence. Scripture, as God's communication, shows a "go no further" pattern. This pattern is seen through all of Scripture in varying contexts, which should help us to see that this "go no further" principle is something God takes seriously (cf. Lev 10; Deut 5:32; 12:32; 17:20; 28:14; 29:29; Josh 1:7-9; Prov 30:5-6; 1 Cor 4:6; 1 Pet 4:11; 2 John 9; Heb 7:14; Rev 22:18-19, etc.) There are specific contexts to these passages, but they demonstrate this underlying principle at work through all the contexts.

God does not want us presuming upon His will. Psalm 19 presents a beautiful picture of God's will (vv. 7-10). He says there is "great reward" in keeping God's will (vs. 11). He then warns of presumption: "Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not rule over me; then I will be blameless, and I shall be acquitted of great transgression" (vs. 13).

Warnings like this should not be taken lightly. Life is found in what He says, not what He doesn't say (cf. Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4; John 6:63, 68). If nothing is to be inferred from silence in general, then why not just leave it at that and work with what we can know?

Counter-Examples?

What about cases in Scripture that seem to work contrary to what we are talking about here—cases that appear to show God's approval for matters done based in silence? For example, in Numbers 30, if a woman takes a vow and her father hears it but says nothing, then she is to keep the vow. Likewise, if she makes a rash vow, and her husband knows of it and says nothing, then she is to keep it. Interestingly, in this text, the silence is specifically given a meaning. If we told someone that our silence means something specific in a given instance, then it really isn't silence in the truest sense because we have explicitly stated what it means. In this case, silence is approval, but it is not presumptuous because of the information given about it. We know what it means in this context.

Others point out that Jesus went into the synagogue or He attended the Feast of Dedication (John 10), and these were based in silence, so they serve to show that acting upon silence is approved after all. Other examples in the Old Testament, such as the Reubenites and Gadites building an altar (Josh 22), also come to mind. Do these prove that we, today, may act on God's silence and expect God to be happy about it? Is that a sound way to approach these texts?

One point of hesitation here is simply the question about how we know for certain that God was totally silent about these matters. We assume from the written texts that God was silent, yet these times also encompassed God's revelation through prophets and other means (dreams, etc.). Not everything ever revealed was written down; the written text was not the totality of God's revelation (cf. John 21:25). While we cannot say that God spoke about these issues directly, we don't have enough information to say that He was absolutely silent either. We need to be careful. Further, when such cases involve the Lord Himself, I would issue an even stronger caution. Just as He forgave sin while on earth (Mark 2), He had every right to authorize action and engage His will in conjunction with the Father. That gives us no more warrant to act on silence than it would to take it on ourselves to forgive sins in some authoritative way. He has all authority, and if He approves of something, then we cannot use that as a counter-example in this context.

Even if it were absolutely established that these are cases of acting on total silence, how does arguing from silence become a normative approach to Scripture? What would the boundaries be? How does it become a substantive method of arguing for doing whatever we would like to do when we think silence is involved? Perhaps God will be merciful? None will want to question that God is merciful, but dare we test God this way on purpose, given the explicit boundaries He has placed on His word? "Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar" (Prov 30:6).

The point is that we do not have sufficient evidence to warrant broad-sweeping conclusions about acting upon God's silence, especially when we have multiple other passages that warn us not to act presumptuously. Assuming that there might be any exceptions to the principles, who would we think we are to act presumptuously and then expect that God rubber stamp our actions? Acting on silence is still acting on our ignorance. In order to do this, we would indeed have to act on our own assumptions and desires, and this has never fared well.

"But you can't condemn someone who acts on silence." We recognize that God truly is the Judge. Yet, the counterpart is obvious. "You cannot approve someone who acts on silence." Consider the overall pattern of Scripture and ask how carefully God expected people to listen to His expressed will. If the things revealed are what belong to us, then how much right do we have dabbling in the things that are not revealed?

Argument from Negative Authority?

One of the objections we hear against the idea that we should try to follow what Scripture actually teaches and authorizes is, "But you do many things not found in Scripture."

Typically, this argument does not appear to be made in order to agree that we should have God's authority for what we do. It seems more the idea that since we are inconsistent, then we shouldn't insist that others have authority either. The problem, of course, is that such a response really

misses the point.

Even if we are inconsistent, such inconsistency would not therefore negate the need to go back to God's authority. If something really is without God's authority, then we should address that. If we are inconsistent, then we need to try to fix the inconsistencies, not ignore God's authority. It certainly is not the case that "whatever we do" is acceptable to God. "Whatever we do" is not a proper standard. "You serve the Lord Christ" (Col 3:24, HCSB).

The other problem often seen here is that the objectors confuse general authority for not having authority at all. The assumption is that, in arguing the need for authority, we are actually arguing for the need for specific authority. Such is not the case, but when this distinction is not understood, it easily leads to straw men arguments. "We don't read about buildings in the Bible, and you have a building, therefore you are doing things without authority." But doing things without authority is not the same as doing things based on general authority. No one I know argues that we must have specific authority for everything we do. Communication doesn't even work that way.

Further, when this type of argument is employed, it is often not an effort to show that the position taken on the other side is based on God's authority. Rather, the rationale seems to be more that since "you don't have authority for everything you do," then "we have a right to do things without authority, also." In other words, the argument can become a way of justifying what is admittedly not authorized. Perhaps those who think this way find it more noble: "we admit that what we do is without God's authority, so we are at least consistent." But consistency, while noble, is not in itself proof of truth. One can be consistently erroneous.

We can all too easily try to justify our practices, claiming God's authority, when in fact we have merely rubber stamped our own efforts because that's what we want to do. Yet the answer to such problems is not to jump the fence and imply that we just don't need God's authority at all, for then we really are just doing whatever we want. If we aren't acting based on God's authority, then on whose authority are we acting and why? Who gets to decide what and whose authority will rule the day?

This is why we need constant reassessment. The call to God's authority is not a claim that we do everything perfectly. It is a call to continually go back to the proper standard of authority. If we find we are inconsistent, then let's have the courage to address that. If we find we are doing things without God's authority, either specific or general, then let's have the humility to work that out according to God's will.

In all matters, God should be our standard. The Lord should be our Head. His will should be our desire. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Doy Moyer

Works Cited

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