

The Sayings and Silence of God

Sayings: “The word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day” (John 12:48).

God communicates His will to us through *words* (1 Corinthians 2:12-13), and we, knowing that His words will judge us, take their meaning very seriously. **Our response to God’s instructions needs to match His words.** For example, when God commanded Noah to build an ark (Genesis 6), His instructions were detailed (a specific kind of wood, specific dimensions of the ark, etc.). Noah’s actions were exactly what God had said to do, so they are listed with many other examples of pleasing and faithful obedience (Hebrews 11).

God communicates in words;
we need to do what He says.
“Thou shalt” authorizes;
God’s silence prohibits.
E.g., Nadab and Abihu,
the Jewish priesthood
Applications to New Testament
worship

Two other examples come from Old Testament worship. God specified for His people many **details of how to worship**, and they were obedient in sometimes very tedious details (e.g., Exodus 36 – 39; Leviticus 8 and 9). The recurring phrase “as the Lord had commanded” applied to the people’s obedience as well as to that of Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s sons; they were **following the sayings** of God. As a result, not only did Moses bless the people (Exo. 39:42-43), “the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” showing God’s approval by way of His presence (Exo. 40:34). And in terms of who could stand before God to offer religious service, **the Jewish priests** came only from a specific family, namely from Aaron’s sons.

In all these examples, we see that **“thou shalt” authorizes**. God’s instructions, His positive statements, (His “thou shalt,” if you will), guide us and instruct us. When God specifies an action to be done, that specific action is “authorized,” and we should carry out God’s commands as specifically as He gives them. Beyond that, we use our judgment in *how* to fulfill His commands. For example, we take it for granted that Noah needed to do whatever was necessary and helpful (in terms of tools, procedures, and such) to carry out God’s specific instructions. (See the companion article *Expediencies*.)

The terms “generic/general” and “specific” are *relative terms* and are not discrete types of authority. In almost everything God has said, He could have said something that was *more specific* and also could have said something more *generic*. For example, the command to “go” is *more specific* than “do something good,” but is *less specific* than “sail.” Similarly, “sing” is *more specific* than “make music,” but is *less specific* than “sing in unison.”

“Thou shalt” does not prohibit. God may, in another instance, *authorize something else* to go along with that first thing. A human illustration is ordering from a menu. My order of an appetizer doesn’t exclude me from ordering an entrée. Similarly, with regard to **how to be saved**, the passages about belief (such as John 3:16) *do not exclude* any other action (such as repentance or confession or baptism). In other words, belief is *not exclusive* for being saved. God *telling* me to do *one thing* does not exclude me from doing *other things*. In fact, other actions *are* indeed *specified* in passages such as Acts 2:38 and Romans 10:9-10.

Silence: “We gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:24).

Silence is prohibitive. Two things might prohibit an action: either a *prohibition* (a “thou shalt not,” if you will), or God’s *silence*. The argument “but He didn’t say *not to*, so it’s okay” doesn’t work (even with our parents). It is unfair and unrealistic to expect God (or my parents, or my boss, etc.) to list everything we may *not* do. It is enough for Him (or them) to tell us what we *should* do. The burden is **not** on God to make a complete list of prohibitions; it’s on us to do what He has said.

Returning to a couple of the above examples, we learn that, while “thou shalt” authorizes, **God’s silence is prohibitive**, and violating that silence is condemned.

- 1) **Worship details.** The priests **Nadab and Abihu** sinned when offering incense. They acted *without God’s authority*, and God struck them dead (Leviticus 10:1-3). The Scripture explains that the fire they offered was “strange” (ASV, NASB, KJV), “profane” (NKJV), or “unauthorized” (ESV, HCSB, NIV) because it was fire “which He had not commanded them” (ASV, ESV, NASB, NKJV, HCSB), “contrary to his command” (NIV) (verse 1).
- 2) **The priesthood.** Some of the cousins of Nadab and Abihu, *other Levites* from the family of Kohath, once claimed *they also* could be considered “holy” and serve as priests. The account of Korah’s rebellion ends with God miraculously and violently denying their claim (Numbers 16). In the next chapter, God drives home the verdict with another miraculous display, Aaron’s budding rod, reaffirming what He had *said*, that “Aaron and his sons” were to be priests (e.g., Exodus 28:1). The matter was settled once and for all, that men from *other tribes*, such as Reuben (see Num. 16:1), were *not allowed* to serve in that capacity (Num. 17). God did not write “no” or “rejected” on the other 11 rods, He simply made *Aaron’s rod bud!* God’s *silence* about the other tribes was deafening!

This very truth is what prevented our Lord Jesus from serving as priest under the Law of Moses, because He was from Judah, “of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood.” **God’s silence was prohibitive! God made Jesus our High Priest** according to a *different order*, and a new law was inaugurated accordingly (Hebrews 7:11-14).

Now let’s look at an example from the *New Testament*.

- 3) **The salvation of the Gentiles.** Several prophecies specifically *included* “the nations” in the plan to bless *all people* through the Messiah. So God was not silent about Gentile **salvation**, and He was not silent about **circumcision**: It was to be practiced on the eighth day of a Hebrew boy’s life and on any male wishing to convert to Judaism. However, some believing Jews mixed these two concepts in error, teaching, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” and “It is necessary to circumcise them [the Gentiles, GC], and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:1, 5). In response to these whom we now label “Judaizing teachers,” Peter told how God had purified Gentiles by faith, without the unbearable burden (“yoke”) of the Law of Moses. Barnabas and Paul told how God had done miracles by their hands while they were teaching and converting Gentiles. And James quoted from the Old Testament about the salvation of the Gentiles. The common thread through their arguments – the thread that supported their conclusion (“we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,” v. 19) – was that **God was silent about circumcising Gentiles.**

When the Judaizing teachers started this new teaching, they had “troubled” and “unsettled the souls” of the Gentiles. The apostles and elders and brethren in Jerusalem appealed to *their own* silence: “**We gave no such commandment**” (v. 24). And the commands, the “necessary things,” *from the Holy Spirit*, again **said nothing** about circumcising Gentiles (vv. 28-29). The Judaizing teachers were teaching something on which the Holy Spirit, the apostles, the elders, and the brethren were **silent**. Their teaching was **unauthorized**; it was **prohibited**. The book of Galatians contains very harsh condemnation of false teachers generally, an extended (four chapter-long) thesis against Judaizing teachings specifically, and an imprecation on those teachers!

Some applications to New Testament worship.

- 1) **God authorized** the elements for the **Lord's Supper**, specifying bread and **fruit of the vine**. Apple juice is prohibited, but it is not prohibited by God *naming* the fruit of the vine. (He could have conceivably added another liquid as well.) It's prohibited by God's **silence about any other liquid** for the Lord's Supper. There is simply *no authority* for another liquid.
- 2) God is **not silent about music** in New Testament worship: **He tells us** (authorizes us) **to sing** to each other with grace in our hearts, making melody in our hearts, teaching and admonishing each other (Eph. 5:19; Colossians 3:16). **God is silent**, however, about **instrumental music** in the New Testament*, so it is *not authorized*. It is *prohibited by God's silence*.

*Note that the Old Testament was only for the Jews (Exodus 19:3, 6), and that God has inaugurated a New and better Covenant, with a new High Priest, by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 7:22; 8:6; 9:23-26). Now all people can come to God through Jesus Christ, by the new and better way.
- 3) Some churches have **adapted pseudo-Jewish practices**. The special garb for the clergy is reminiscent of the clothing worn by the Jewish priests, but it's not the same. So it has no authority from God, in either the Old or New Testament! Similarly, swinging censers of incense reminds us of the Jews' incense, but incense has only a spiritual or non-literal equivalent in the New Testament (e.g., the "sweet-smelling aroma" of our Christian walk, Eph. 5:2, or of our financial offerings, Phil. 4:18, or even of our prayers, Rev. 5:8). Once again, when it comes to New Testament worship, **God is silent** about these activities.
- 4) Some churches have included practices that were never part of Jewish corporate worship and are simply not mentioned in the New Testament. An example would be the "praise" or "liturgical" dance, on which **God is simply silent**.

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In summary, God's sayings, His *words*, tell us what to do. His silence is prohibitive, and violating His silence is condemned. Let's be content with what God has said and busy ourselves in faithful obedience. Let's not follow the religious world into the deadly realm of God's silence.