

The Silence of the Scriptures

M.W. Bassford
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Introduction.

- A. One of the most important questions any church can ask is "What is the work of the church?" In other words, "What is the church here for? What is it supposed to do?" The answer to this question defines that church.
- B. As we consider the bewildering diversity that shelters under the umbrella of Christianity in the US, it becomes apparent that this question can be answered in two main ways. The first answer, the answer that most choose, is that the church is supposed to do good in whatever way its members see fit. This line of thinking has led churches to participate financially in all sorts of earthly endeavors. There are hospitals run by churches. There are colleges run by churches. There are orphanages run by churches. Basically, just about any kind of do-gooding institution we can think of is being operated by a church somewhere.
- C. The second answer is the answer given by only a tiny minority of self-professed Christians in the US. This Christian minority would agree that hospitals and orphanages are good things, but it would argue that whether they're good things or not isn't the point. The question is whether God intends the church to devote itself to THOSE good things, and to answer that question, the minority continues, we need to see what the Bible says.
- D. Of course, the Bible has nothing to say about human institutions. There is no mention anywhere in God's word of colleges, orphanages, or anything like that. In fact, the work of the church is narrowly defined in Scripture. First-century churches only spent their money on things directly related to God's plan of salvation, such as preaching, teaching, and providing for the needy of the church. On anything else, the Scriptures are silent.
- E. To the extent that they talk about it at all, those who believe in church support of institutions argue that the silence of Scripture is permissive. They say that even if the church of God starts doing things God doesn't authorize in the Bible, then God is still OK with that. Others say that the silence of the Scriptures is exclusive. This view holds that God revealed absolutely everything He wants His church to do in the Bible, and that when we begin to do things that are not in God's word, we are overstepping our authority and disobeying God. Where does the truth lie? The answer to this question can be found in a story from the Old Testament, a story that tells us all we need to know about the silence of the Scriptures.

I. God's Command.

- A. Although this story is important, it only makes sense when we put it in the context of one of God's commands. We find this command in Deuteronomy 10:8-9, and it tells the Israelites how they are to transport the ark of the covenant. This was an important consideration for the Israelites at the time. This was still in the middle of their wandering in the wilderness, so they needed some way to take the ark of the covenant with them.
- B. Here, God tells them how. God selects the men of the tribe of Levi to carry the ark. Another Scripture in the book of Numbers tells us that Levites from the family of Kohath had this job. However, those two passages contain everything God says about transporting the ark. There are no negative commands to go along with that one positive command. God never says, "Don't let anybody from the tribe of Judah carry the ark." God never says, "Don't put the ark on wheels." God never says, "Don't put the ark on a boat." The Scriptures are completely silent about any other mode of carrying the ark besides entrusting it to the children of Levi.

II. David's Mistake.

- A. This commandment, which we probably wouldn't pay much attention to otherwise, is called to our attention because of a mistake made by the great king David, some 400 years later. Here's the way the story starts: the Philistines, enemies of the children of Israel, have captured the ark of the covenant in battle. However, the Philistines soon discover that because they now have the ark, they are under a curse. We see how they react in 1 Samuel 6:1-2. The Philistines are worshipers of idols instead of God, so they ask their religious experts, their pagan priests and fortune-tellers, how they can get rid of the ark. The Philistine priests answer in 1 Samuel 6:7-8. They have no connection with God, so they tell the lords of the Philistines to put the ark in a new cart, along with a trespass offering to God, and then let the cows that are yoked to the cart take the ark wherever they want to go. That's what the Philistines do: they put it in this cart and send it away.
- B. After some adventures, the cart with the ark ends up in the middle of nowhere, in Israelite territory, and it stays there for another 50 years. By this time, David has become king, he's defeated Israel's enemies, and he's looking for something else to do. We see David's new idea in 1 Chronicles 13:2-3. He wants to go out to the back of beyond where the ark is and bring it to Jerusalem so God's people can use it in worship.
- C. The people think this is a great idea, so everybody goes to get the ark. 1 Chronicles 13:7-8 tells the story of their plan for transporting the ark to Jerusalem: just like the Philistines did under the guidance of their pagan priests, David and his men put the ark on a new cart. To drive this cart, David selects two men named Uzza and Ahio. Remember: all God has said about transporting the ark is to use Levites to do it. God has never

commanded them not to put the ark in a cart. David and his men, in fact, are sincerely convinced that what they are doing will be pleasing to God. We can tell because the whole time this cart is traveling to Jerusalem, David and other musicians are out in front of the cart leading worship to God. They think they're doing right.

- D. Sadly, David's belief here has tragic consequences. We see these consequences spelled out in 1 Chronicles 13:9-10. As this whole religious pilgrimage is making its way through the Judean countryside, the oxen pulling the cart stumble. Now, this is a problem. Unlike wagons, which have four wheels, carts only have two wheels. This means that carts can't stand on their own. If the animals pulling a cart go down, the cart goes down too, and everything in the cart falls out. So, basically, once the oxen pulling this cart stumble, the holy ark of God's covenant is going to end up in the middle of the road unless somebody does something about it. Somebody does do something about it. Uzza, one of the drivers, puts his hand out to catch the ark and keep it from tipping over. Hooray! The day is saved, right? Wrong. God is so angry that Uzza has touched the ark that He strikes Uzza dead on the spot. David's mistake has cost a man his life.

III. David's Correction.

- A. Thankfully, David soon sees his mistake and corrects it. David doesn't start out seeing what he did wrong, though. In fact, he was furious with God for, as he saw it, unjustly killing poor Uzza, who only wanted to help. However, David was a smart guy, and it doesn't take him long to put two and two together. We see David's thought process in 1 Chronicles 15:1-2. He's gone back to the Law, he has read God's commandment that the Levites were to carry the ark, and he has realized that it doesn't give the Israelites the right to transport the ark however they want. Instead, God's commandment to do one thing has forbidden every other alternative. David reads this commandment as saying that anything BUT having Levites carry the ark is wrong.
- B. We see David explaining his realization to the leaders of the tribe of Levi in 1 Chronicles 15:11-13. David commands these leaders to sanctify themselves and their families so that they can carry the ark in the right way. Indeed, David even gives an explanation for why God killed Uzza for merely touching the ark. That whole sad event happened because the Levites WEREN'T carrying the ark, which happened in turn because David did not consult God's instructions. Obedience would have prevented the tragedy.
- C. Indeed, we see the success that David finds in following God's plan in 1 Chronicles 15:14-15. He does what he reads in the Law. He has Levites consecrate themselves to carry the ark according to the commandment of God through Moses. The Levites carry the ark on its poles on their shoulders all the way to Jerusalem, and they get there without any trouble worth writing home about. They succeed through obeying God's law.

IV. Our Lesson.

- A. Although God's law has changed since the time of David, God Himself has not. As a result, this story from three thousand years ago still has a powerful lesson for us about the way God wants to be obeyed. The first lesson we can take from this story of David and Uzza is that **GOD'S SILENCE IS EXCLUSIVE**. In this case, God commanded that the Levites should carry the ark of the covenant, but He didn't say anything about putting the ark on a cart or any of the other options. God was silent about those things. However, His silence did not mean that the Israelites were allowed to put the ark on a cart. Instead, it meant the opposite. God's silence excluded any other means of transport besides having the ark carried by Levites. God's silence was exclusive, and it is still exclusive today. God's word mentions only a few works in which His church is to engage. God is silent about whether the church is to fund human institutions. However, God's silence on that point does NOT give us license to support them. Instead, we must accept that His silence excludes them.
- B. Second, we learn from this story that **DISOBEDIENCE HAS SEVERE CONSEQUENCES**. Certainly, no one would argue that God's command about the transportation of the ark was the most important statute in the whole Law of Moses. In the grand scheme of things, it just doesn't seem that important to human minds. However, this story tells us just how important that little tiny law was to God. God's perfect justice decreed that it was fitting to strike a man dead because the children of Israel disobeyed. Friends, this tells us just how important it is that we strive to obey God in everything, even the little tiny details of how He wants His church run. Today, the penalty for disobedience is not paid in earthly lives, but in souls.
- C. There are a lot of folks who would be outraged to hear this. They'd say, "But we're doing all these things for God because we want to serve Him! Surely He'll be pleased with us!" However, this story tells us that **GOD HATES EVEN WELL-MEANING DISOBEDIENCE**. Was there ever a more sympathetic cast of lawbreakers than David, Uzza, and the people in this story? They are all convinced that they're doing a GREAT thing for God by bringing the ark back on this cart. They're singing and praising God with all their might. Even Uzza only touched the ark because he wanted to keep it out of the mud. But you know what? All those good intentions didn't count for a thing. God didn't care why they disobeyed; He cared only that they broke His law. The same thing is true today. We don't get a free pass on sinning against the will of God because we had good intentions. The only thing that pleases Him is our obedience.
- D. Finally, this story teaches us that **WE MUST SEEK GOD ACCORDING TO HIS WORD**. That's what David learned in this story, and it's a lesson we must learn. Everything we do in God's service must be according to His book. If you're not faithful to Him, then obey the Bible, and your life will be right with Him.