

The Silence of the Scriptures by Steven Lloyd

When I was in my early twenties, my wife and I signed up to participate in the church's visitation program. We received the name of a young man in his late teens. At the end of our visit we asked him if he had any questions. He said yes: "Why don't you have music in the church?"

I was not brought up going to church—any church—so the absence of instruments was a non-issue for me until that visit. It sent me back to the elders and preacher with questions.

Perhaps you were brought up in a similar background, or perhaps you were brought up worshipping where instruments were used. How big a deal is this, or are we making too much of it?

A debate between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, names associated with the early Reformation movement, provides us with an appropriate beginning. Martin Luther wanted to retain in the Catholic Church all that was not expressly forbidden, while Zwingli was intent on abolishing all that could not be proved by Scripture.

The debate, on the surface, may seem strictly academic, but the implications are not. The debate persists to this day. It affects how we read the Bible, and what we believe and practice. I hope that much of what I write will strike the reader as common sense. For that reason, I hope to keep this simple.

The following illustration strikes me as having a great deal of explanatory power. Let's say the doctor gives you a prescription. The only writing on the note is what the doctor prescribed. It does not need to list everything that does not go into the prescription.

The same line of reasoning is used by writers of the Bible. Take, for example, these tried and true illustrations. Noah was told to build an ark of a particular kind of wood—gopher wood. Do you suppose Noah could have or should have built it with some other kind of wood?

Moses makes explicit reference to the principle in reporting the death of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron. They "offered unauthorized fire before

the Lord, which he had not commanded them” (Lev. 10:1; 16:12, ESV). In the previous chapter, fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering, and the people shouted and fell on their faces (Lev. 9:22-24). In Leviticus 10, fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the offerers. Notice again the words, “unauthorized” and “had not commanded.”

To clarify, the idea of *silence* does not always prohibit. The specific statements of Scripture qualify *silence*. For example, the Bible says nothing about songbooks, song leaders, or singing in four-part harmony, but it does say something about singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16). Songbooks and singing four-part harmony in no wise nullifies the injunction to sing. They are all aids or means by which singing is accomplished.

Someone might argue that instruments are aids or means by which singing is accomplished, but I think a categorical mistake is made with this line of reasoning. The general category is music. There are two kinds of music: instrumental and vocal. God has called the church to sing. In light of the fact that no injunction for the church to “play” is found, this would eliminate any other kind of music as much as specifying Gopher wood would eliminate any other kind of wood from being used to build the ark.

Back to examples of specificity and *silence*, who would have ever thought to add two *silver* cherubim over the mercy seat when the Lord instructed Moses to place two *golden* cherubim over the ark (Exod. 25:10-22)?

Who would risk being so presumptuous as to add to or substitute elements in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-34)? Does it not strike the reader as obvious that the specificity of the Lord limits the observer to using bread and fruit of the vine?

The most egregious violation I have ever seen was an advertisement inviting people to attend an evening worship service in which Polynesian Belly dancers were the featured attraction. You tell me, where does the Bible condemn that?