

The Sounds of Silence

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The Sounds of Diversity

Let's build a hypothetical congregation of Christians.

First, let's convert a modern Israeli from Tel Aviv—then a Sunni Muslim from Baghdad. We'll lead to Christ a coffee house performer from Boston, and convert a Gypsy from Croatia. Let's bring an urban postmodern young adult to Christ. And then we'll convert an international student from Tibet, whose background is Buddhism. And finally, let's go get farmer from western Kansas.

Now, they are all Christians. And let's say that they have become deeply spiritual and faithful Christians. Each of them is closely following Christ. They are studying their Bibles—probably more than most of us. They are learning and growing. And they all have questions about the historical settings and contexts of the Bible. So we help them and mentor them.

At some point, one of them curiously asks, "What makes the Churches of Christ different from other Christian denominations?" So, we try to explain to them what we know about the history of the American Restoration Movement and our ideological attempts to restore New Testament Christianity, on the basis of biblical authority alone. We might even say, "*Where the Scriptures speak, we speak, and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.*"

When they hear that concept, they might become excited or they might become confused. But this motivates them to study their Bibles even more fervently, as they start comparing the modern American church to what they read in the New Testament. So it should not surprise us that they have questions about our modern American church traditions and methods, which they simply cannot seem to find anywhere in the Bible.

For some reason, they cannot locate any passages that command or even describe . . .

- ✓ church buildings
- ✓ Sunday school
- ✓ pulpits
- ✓ musical notation (either in song books or projected)
- ✓ orders of service
- ✓ children's worship
- ✓ Bible camps
- ✓ youth ministry
- ✓ campus ministry

- ✓ the nursery
- ✓ Vacation Bible School
- ✓ Sunday night services
- ✓ Christian schools and colleges
- ✓ Children's homes
- ✓ Christian newspapers and magazines . . .

On and on goes the list—as our new brothers and sisters find more and more modern American church practices for which they cannot find *book, chapter and verse*. Moreover, they are confused about a few practices they do find in the Bible that we don't do—or perhaps do differently.

They read about first-century Christians praying with their hands lifted up. So they want to know why we tend to bow our heads and hide our hands. They read about women praying with their heads covered, but they see very few hats (and no veils) being worn in the assembly. The woman converted out of Islam wonders if she should start wearing a veil again.

They know that early Christians shared in the Lord's Supper. But we use communion trays. And one fellow remarks, "*But they did not have refrigeration or modern methods of canning and bottling. So wouldn't they have used fermented wine?*"

They read about the early Christian practice of the *love feast*. So we explain to them that early churches did not have Sunday night *worship services* as such—and that if they gathered a second time (or stayed gathered) it was to share a meal and share in fellowship—to encourage and strengthen each other. That sounds like a great idea to our new brothers and sisters, who want to know why many of us don't do that.

And in the face of questions like these, we are forced to admit that some of the decisions we have made, some of our practices, and all of our traditions have been shaped by social and cultural influences. For our lives now are separated from the early church by two millennia of history and thousands of miles of space and a countless variety of cultures.

As new converts from diverse backgrounds, they understand that concept. In fact, they understand it far better than we do. For they have not yet developed any Christian traditions of their own (other than complying with ours). And their understanding of church life has not yet become institutionalized. When we see how open they are—and how simple their perspective of Christianity is—those of us who were reared in the church marvel. And we wonder if we were ever capable of perceiving the Christian life with such simplicity and purity.

As these new converts continue to learn and grow, we discover that they are all capable of understanding what God has revealed. Sometimes their

previous religious backgrounds and personal experiences cloud their understanding. But for the most part—and in the ways that it really matters most—they all come to an understanding of what God *has* revealed. However, is it reasonable to think that they will all come to the same conclusions on what God has *not* revealed? Will they all agree—in every way—on every disputable matter that lies within God’s silence? Or will they have different opinions?

Of course they will disagree. They will disagree with each other. And they will disagree with us—just as we ourselves disagree. So now what? Well, we will teach them how to remain united despite their differences of opinion. And we will teach them that we all need to respect and validate each other’s opinions—and to accept one another without being judgmental or contemptuous.

But we must all be realistic about our new converts—realistic about their fellowship with each other and with us. For they did not come to Christ from out of a vacuum. They came to Christ from extremely different backgrounds and cultures with a variety of worldviews. So even though they are in Christ together and sharing in the life of the same church family, they will continue to differ in their opinions and perhaps even in some of their practices. And so will we differ. We will disagree with them, just as we already disagree with each other on issues for which God has not given us specific instructions. This illustrates the problem Paul is addressing in Romans 14.

The Sounds of the Early Church

Romans 14 (NIV)

1 Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. . . . 3 . . . for God has accepted him. 4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. . . . 10 You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. . . . 13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.

The Roman church was comprised of Christians from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Jews who worshiped Jehovah had welcomed Jesus as Messiah. And Gentiles from several cultures had come to Christ out of immoral, hideous pagan idolatries.

The Roman Christians were like oil and water, as they tried to mix. But Paul does not condemn their differences. And he does not tell them to stop being different from each other. He does not tell the Jews to stop acting like Jews. And he certainly does not tell the Gentiles to act more Jewish. Instead, he commands them to accept one another, despite their obvious differences.

The Sounds of Silence

Disputable Matters Exist and Opinions Vary.

The first thing we notice in Romans 14:1 is that disputable matters exist and opinions vary. But why? That just doesn't seem right, does it? At least, some of us feel that way. Perhaps we tend to feel uneasy at the very thought of Christians being different from each other. After all, (we may think) it would be so much easier for us all to get along, if we were all on exactly the same line of the same page—on every issue, in every way, all the time.

But opinions—or matters which God apparently leaves disputable—do indeed exist. And opinions vary, simply because we are different as people. Cookie cutter Christianity is not possible, simply because God did not use a cookie cutter when He made people. God commands unity, but He does not expect uniformity. Harmony must prevail, but homogeneity will never exist.

It is possible for us to agree on what God *has* revealed. But we will never be in complete agreement on what God *has not* revealed.

Taken at face value, Romans 14:1 presupposes the existence of opinions (or disputable matters). Thus, differences—allowable differences—do exist within the Christian community. And this context makes allowances for such. If it did not, Romans 14 might have been a condemnation of our differences, instead of an exhortation to accept one another despite our differences.

If Only Christianity Were Black and White . . .

As Christians, most of us probably hold the view that if only God had given us an answer to every question—if only God had given us the solution to every problem—if only God had built a ready-made system to handle every conceivable complexity—if only God had laid down everything for us in black and white with no grey areas or gaps . . . then there would be no room for Christians to have preferences, opinions. No room for any of us to differ, not in any way.

If that were the case, for God's people there would only be one viewpoint: God's. Among God's people there would be no disputable matters, because God would have left nothing in dispute. We would all be required by simple faith to do things God's way—and only God's way—because God would have provided a specific command for any and every occasion.

Some Christians do believe that God's revelation to man is black and white. But that is at best wishful thinking. And it is a very destructive self-delusion, which is easily destroyed with simple Bible study and a handful of unanswerable questions. The longer I study the Bible, the more I come to understand that God tells us pretty clearly *what* He wants us to do, but most of the time He does not tell us *how* to do it. The Bible may be black-and-white

on the *what* of an issue. But it may be either completely blank—or at best a fuzzy grey—on the *how*.

The Sufficiency of God's Silence

Is divine silence restrictive or liberating or passive?

If it is restrictive, who gets to legislate the restrictions? Who has the power and authority from God to restrict what God himself has not restricted? Who has the power and authority from God to command or to condemn what God himself has neither commanded nor condemned?

No one. Absolutely, no one.

The view that divine silence is somehow restrictive is a perspective that is destined to fail and to divide God's people. Because those who regard divine silence as restrictive must contrive the rules for themselves and then try to convince others to conform. And, of course, those who make it their business to do so will not agree with each other. Thus, conflict perpetuates. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for setting themselves up as lawgivers and for oppressing others with their man-made religious burdens. We would do well to take to heart the rebukes Jesus directed at the Pharisees to learn from (and avoid) their mistakes.

The fact that God leaves some things unsettled indicates that God intends for His people, who are led by His word and by His Spirit, to make some decisions. Whatever the reason for God's silence on any given issue, either we trust that God knows what He is doing or we do not. Either God's word is sufficient, or it is not.

Early Restoration Movement ideologist Thomas Campbell clearly understood this.



With respect to the commands and ordinances . . . where the Scriptures are silent as to the express time or manner of performance, . . . no human authority has power to interfere, in order to supply the supposed deficiency by making laws for the Church. (Thomas Campbell, Declaration and Address, Proposition V, 1809)

For anyone who sees divine silence as restrictive—or for anyone who has tried to impose his own human will upon other Christians—that last phrase should feel like a dagger in the heart.

. . . in order to supply the supposed deficiency by making laws for the Church.

To command what God has not commanded—to make laws which God himself has not made—is to make the faithless and arrogant assumption that God's word is deficient.

Let's make up our minds. Either God's word is sufficient or it is deficient. Be very careful here. For if you dare to claim that God's word is deficient, then you may as well claim that God himself is lacking—as if God just did not know what He was doing when He inspired the Bible—or as if God was not able to get the job done right. You might as well say that God is not all-knowing or all-powerful.

God's word is sufficient. And since God's word is sufficient, that means that even His silence must also be sufficient. If only we would all learn to trust the sufficiency of divine silence—instead of trusting in our own ability to second-guess God—there would be far less discord among God's people.

Human Clamor Pollutes Divine Silence.

The problem with divine silence is human, not divine. We sinful human beings make a lot of very negative—and sometimes nasty—noise within areas of divine silence. Interjecting our opinions is one thing, and that is allowable so long as we do not judge or treat each other contemptuously. But forcing our opinions, preferences and traditions on each other is another thing altogether.

Judging what God has not judged—condemning what God has not condemned—may place our souls in grave danger. Let's think through this. You may judge your brother or sister for some preference or practice about which God has not said one single word. God himself has not condemned that person's preference or practice, but you have. So what have you done? You may have condemned yourself, not the other person. If God has not defined the other person's behavior as sinful, have you sinned by judging that person? God *has* clearly prohibited such judgment.

Earlier in the context of Romans, God's Spirit through Paul has already established this very important principle.

Romans 4 (NASB)

¹⁵ . . . *the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.*

Where there is no law, there is also no violation. No law, no violation. That means it's not sinful. Now, this is talking about God's law. And if it applies to God's law—if God has not clearly defined something as sinful—what in the world makes us think that we can define it as sinful and make our own laws? How dare we! Personally, I want nothing to do with assuming God's job as lawgiver and judge.

Yes, God's silence in many areas of church life and on many issues is the cause of disputable matters. And, yes, God's silence allows for differences of opinion, and even differences of approach, method or style. So if you think you need to blame someone for disputable matters, be very careful. For God alone is responsible for his own silence. If God has not defined a practice as sinful, then neither should we. For God's silence on any issue is an absence of law on that issue. And *where there is no law, there is also no violation*.

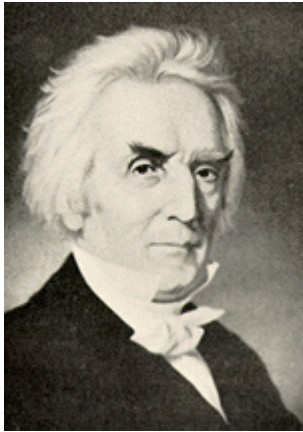
The Cloned Minds Theory Always Fails.

Well, since God has left some things unanswered and unresolved, since divine silence exists, some might argue that surely God must have made us all exactly the same. To think the same way. To feel the same way. To perceive and process our world in the same way, so that we can all look at what God *has* revealed to us and arrive at exactly the same conclusions and in complete agreement.

Let's call it the *cloned minds* theory.

To an extent, early leaders of the American Restoration Movement, like Alexander Campbell (Thomas' son), actually thought it was possible for all people to think alike and reach the same conclusions. They believed that by logically systematizing Christianity into a category of *essentials*, every Christian in America would be able to learn in exactly the same way and reach complete agreement with their *Christian System*.

Campbell was young and idealistic when he thought that way. And it was not long until he became disillusioned and more realistic. By the time he reached his 40's, Campbell had come to view divine silence as liberty, not as restriction.



For while nothing can be required for which there is no divine warrant, and nothing will be tolerated which is opposed to the laws and teachings of Christ and the Apostles, the greatest liberty of opinion is permitted as it respects everything which is not revealed. Of this kind are the order of the exercises of public worship, the manner in which the commemorative institutions are to be attended to, the kind of building which the church is to occupy; and in the same class are found the various ways and means by which the gospel is to spread abroad.

(Alexander Campbell, 1836)

The greatest liberty of opinion is permitted as it respects everything which is not revealed.

Isn't that the gist of Romans 14? Disputable matters exist and opinions vary. So let's start learning to cut each other some slack. Let's stop judging one another and stop regarding each other contemptuously when we differ. *The greatest liberty of opinion is permitted as it respects everything which is not revealed.* That one sentence is a great summary paraphrase of Romans 14.

In reality, God did not make human beings to function as mental, emotional and psychological clones. It is reasonable to think that all human beings (of normal health and cognitive ability) are capable of understanding what God *has* revealed. But it is preposterous to think that we are all capable of reaching the same conclusions on the questions and issues which God *has not* addressed.

We, like our hypothetical group of converts and like the early church in Rome, are also affected by our background, culture, social settings and worldviews. We always have been. And we always will be. When we come to Christ, and when we come together, we all come with history—a mental, emotional, social, cultural, philosophical and spiritual history. And some of us are as different from one another as first-century Jews were from Gentiles.

The Sounds of Harmony

So how in the world can we all get along in the same community of faith? And how can different communities of faith—even those who do for the most part agree on what God has revealed—cooperate and collaborate with each other?

- We must come to an understanding of what God has revealed, and what He has not.
- We must trust in the sufficiency of our God, trust the sufficiency of His word, and trust the sufficiency of His silence.
- Within areas of God's silence we must be realistic about disputable matters, understanding that we will, indeed, differ in our preferences and opinions.
- And we must accept one another, anyway—without judgment and without contempt.

Still in this context of disputable matters, Paul again urges . . .

Romans 15 (NIV)

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

If you are a Christian, Christ has accepted you. Since Christ has accepted you, I accept you, even if divine silence leaves us in disagreement. Why wouldn't I accept you? And why wouldn't you accept me? We both serve the same Master. Jesus is your Lord, and Jesus is my Lord. He has accepted each of us. So we will learn to accept each other. If you are not a Christian, consider what Christ has done—what he was willing to give up and what he was willing give—in order to offer you acceptance.