

“Where Does The Bible Say You Can’t?”

Frequently, in discussions in which people try to justify adding things to the worship which they want, but about which the Bible says nothing by way of permission or prohibition, the question is raised “where does the Bible say you **can’t**,” and then they insert whatever it is that they want to include. It may be instrumental music in worship. It could relate to people’s desire for the church to build so-called “family life centers,” for its members (and others in the community) to exercise, lift weights, play games, to enjoy “fellowship meals,” etc., etc.

The presumption in each of these instances is that God’s silence equals God’s **permission**. In other words, if God did not say “you can’t do it,” then its Ok to do it. Generally speaking, those who make such arguments only want to justify a few items for which they may have a particular fondness, and they have not (for the most part) considered the logical conclusions of such reasoning. In order to illustrate the folly of divine silence being used as justification for whatever a person might want to add in worship, I cite the following statements posted in **Peace Bang Archives**, 2004-2009. It was written by a former member of the Unitarian Universalist Church. It goes like this:

“In recent years, the Sunday services of my UU church had degenerated into a carnival-like atmosphere with antics such as guess the minister’s weight, someone turning cartwheels on the stage, and songs from the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Every week there were skits with people dressed in silly hats or animal costumes. One Sunday morning they had a belly dancer on stage. During one service members were invited to come up on stage and show off their tattoos. On a couple of Sundays, the minister tossed a beach ball into the audience and invited parishioners to bat it around during the service.”

It is entirely possible that if one were to ask “the minister” of that “church” to provide justification for these antics, he might reply by asking, “where does the Bible say you **can’t** do these things,” and then he might even try to set forth some positive benefits of each of these antics. And let’s face it, nowhere in either the Old or New Testament does the Bible specifically forbid any of the antics which occurred in the so-called “worship” services of the UU church to which reference has just been made. So if one really believes that divine silence constitutes divine consent, then he or/she (at the very least) is being inconsistent if he or/she criticizes the antics which occurred in the “worship” services of that UU “church!” The point should be clear: if divine silence constitutes divine consent, then we may **do anything** imaginable in worship, so long as the Bible does not specifically forbid such action! And, sadly, this is what more and more churches are doing!

So, how do we reply to the question, “where does the Bible say you can’t?” First, we must stress the fact that the question is wrongly worded. It should be worded like this: “**where does the Bible say you can?**” As proof we cite the following scriptures: “*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth,*” John 4:24. “*Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond that which is written...*,” I Cor. 4:6. “*And whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father through Him,*” Col. 3:17. “*If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God...*,” I Peter 4:11. “*Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in*

the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son,” 2 John 9. “For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book,” Rev. 22:18-19.

More scriptures could be cited, but enough has been said in order to prove that our worship and service unto God must be determined by what the Bible **says**. In neither the Old or New Testaments has divine silence meant divine consent! To the contrary, we can read of those who acted on their own in their attempt to worship and serve God, and of God’s intense displeasure at such actions. A case in point is recorded in Lev. 10:1-2, which reads as follows: *“Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censor and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had **not** commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.”* The place for obtaining the fire for burning incense was the brazen altar, Lev. 16:12, but Nadab and Abihu took matters into their own hands and obtained the fire from another source. The result? *“Fire went out from the Lord and devoured them!”* They may have reasoned, saying, “fire is fire, what difference does it make as to where we get the fire,” or they may have just assumed that it made no difference. Their sin lay in the fact that they acted presumptuously. The fire was called “*strange*” (KJV), or “*profane*” (NKJV), in that it was not taken from the right source. There is no evidence that God had ever said “thou shalt **not** offer profane fire,” but God had authorized the burning of incense, and had designated the source from which the fire should be obtained. In 2 Samuel 6 we read of Uzzah and Ahio transporting the ark of the covenant on a new ox cart. When they came to Nachon’s threshing floor the oxen stumbled, and Uzziah “*put his hand on the ark of God and took hold of it,*” at which time “*the anger of the Lord was aroused against Uzzah,*” and God struck him dead! (vs. 3-7). At no time do we have an account of God actually **forbidding** the Israelites to carry the ark on an ox cart, and to our way of thinking that could have been a convenient way to transport the ark. However, God had specified that the ark be built with “*four rings of gold to be set at its four corners,*” that “*poles of acacia wood*” be inserted into the rings of gold, and by which the ark was to be “*carried,*” Ex. 25:10-14; 37:1-4. To our knowledge, God had not specifically prohibited the ark from being carried on an ox cart, but God had stated how it was to be carried. However, good his intentions were, Uzzah lost his life because he was acting presumptuously; he had no divine authority for what he was doing. Divine silence did not constitute divine permission!

The New Testament mentions different kinds of worship. (1) There is “**vain**” worship — worship which involves “*teaching as doctrines the commandments of men,*” Matt. 15:8-9. (2) There is **ignorant** worship, Acts 17:23, or worship which is offered by those who are without understanding as to the one true God, and His requirements. (3) There is “**will worship**” Col. 2:22-23 (KJV), or worship “*which one devises and prescribes for himself,*” Thayer. And (4) there is “**true**” worship, in which God is the Object of worship, and the worshippers worship Him “*in spirit and in truth,*” John 4:23-24, or according to God’s “*word,*” which “*is truth,*” John 17:17.

When God has specified “the items” of worship, or the acts of worship, then any change man makes, at best, is presumptuous and, at worst, damnable! Whereas Jesus commanded, saying, “*seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,*” Matt. 6:33, multitudes are simply seeking “their own way” in matters religious, and are introducing what they want while ignoring what **God** has **authorized**. When it comes to worshipping and serving God, it is not a matter of asking “where does the Bible say you can’t,” to the contrary, it is a matter of asking “where does the Bible say **you can**?” The inspired apostle Paul enjoined the saints at Thessalonica to “*prove all things; hold fast what is good,*” I Thess. 5:21. In the Bible, God does not specify everything

one can't do in worshipping and serving Him (to do this would make the Bible too big to carry!); to the contrary, He has revealed what we **can** (and must) do. To do anything else, however much it may appeal to us, can have tragic, eternal consequence! We will be judged by the word of the Lord in that last day, John 12:48; let us therefore make sure we have a "thus saith the Lord" for all we teach and practice!

*** — B. Witherington