

## *Silence Is Golden?*

It all depends. As we are told, there is ‘a time to keep silence, and a time to speak’ (Eccles. 3:7). And, of course, it needs wisdom to distinguish the two. In this article, I want to address when it is right to speak. To put it another way: when it is culpable to remain silent. I have in mind one who is trying to set out the doctrine of the gospel. In those circumstances, I assert that what a teacher fails to say can be more important than what he does say. I am not alone.

D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

We must... ask about any man: ‘What then does he say?’ This includes noting what he does *not* say; *i.e.*, we must take note of his consistent omissions.

Lloyd-Jones went on:

[A man] betrays himself by his silence or equivocation at just those points where the Bible calls for fearless precision.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, guilty silence.

Calvin wrote several letters to Melanchthon concerning the Lord’s supper, that issue which was causing open and bitter disagreement between Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, and wreaking havoc among the Reformed Churches. While he warned against placing confidence in men, Calvin urged Melanchthon to speak out clearly. First the warning:

In the church we must always be on our guard, lest we pay too great a deference to men.<sup>2</sup>

Having made that clear, he went on:

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<sup>1</sup> D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Maintaining The Evangelical Faith Today*, Inter-Varsity Press, London, second edition, 1968, p20.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin: *Letters of John Calvin*, Bonnet Edition (1855-1857), The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1980, p74.

Let us therefore bewail the calamity of the church, and not devour our grief in silence, but venture boldly to groan for freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Calvin, of course, was not urging Melanchthon literally to groan; he wanted him to speak out:

Consider, besides, whether the Lord may not have permitted you to be reduced to these straits,<sup>4</sup> in order that you may be brought to a yet fuller confession upon this very article [that is, the Lord's supper]. It is indeed most true, as I acknowledge it to be, that which you teach, and also that hitherto by a kindly method of instruction, you have studiously endeavoured to recall the minds of men from strife and contention. I applaud your prudence and moderation. While, however, you dread, as you would some hidden rock, to meddle with this question for fear of giving offence, you are leaving in perplexity and suspense very many persons who require from you somewhat of a more certain sound, on which they can repose; and besides, as I remember I have sometimes said to you, it is not over-creditable to us that we refuse to sign, even with ink, that very doctrine which many saints have not hesitated to leave witnessed with their blood. Perhaps, therefore, it is now the will of God thus to open up the way for a full and satisfactory declaration of your own mind, that those who look up to your authority may not be brought to a stand [that is, to a standstill], and kept in state of perpetual doubt and hesitation.<sup>5</sup>

In another letter, Calvin pressed Melanchthon again on the issue, telling him that his silence or ambiguity was encouraging those who were fighting against what he saw as the truth:

All good men lament and complain that those same individuals [those whom Calvin called 'illiterate and turbulent men?'] are encouraged by your silence. For however audacious ignorance is, still nobody doubts [the favourable results] if you could bring your mind to speak out openly what you think... Are you ignorant today what numbers are held floating in doubts in

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin: *Letters* p74.

<sup>4</sup> Melanchthon grieved over the disturbances.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin: *Letters* pp74-75.

consequence of the ambiguous manner of teaching to which you too timidly adhere?<sup>6</sup>

Again, in a further letter:

Our duties by no means depend on our hopes of success, but that it behoves us to accomplish what God requires of us, even when we are in the greatest despair respecting the results... Should you have to fear the worst extremes, still it is necessary that you should determine once for all what you owe to Christ, lest, by suppressing a candid confession of the truth, you should lend to wicked men a kind of implied patronage to oppress the church. That I might restrain their tumults, I have again comprised the summary of our doctrine in a short compendium. All the Swiss churches have subscribed to it. Those of Zurich gave it their unqualified approbation. Now I long to have your opinion; what also the rest of your countrymen think and say I am very desirous to know.<sup>7</sup>

So speak out, Melancthon!

C.H.Spurgeon had quite a bit to say about guilty silence during the Downgrade.<sup>8</sup> He warned of what he called:

...that complicity which will be involved in a conspiracy of silence... [when] even the most godly abide in cowardly silence; courage shall fail from the brave, and decision from the instructed... The religious papers have united in a conspiracy of silence; or else they have culled from their correspondence letters unfavourable to the truth, and have printed them, while

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<sup>6</sup> Calvin: *Letters* p161.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin: *Letters* p169.

<sup>8</sup> The Downgrade was Spurgeon's battle with the Baptist Union over the infallibility of Scripture, the substitutionary nature of the atonement, and the eternal punishment of the wicked. It culminated in 1887-1888. Spurgeon set it out thus: 'Believers in Christ's atonement are now in declared union with those who make light of it; believers in Holy Scripture are in confederacy with those who deny plenary inspiration; those who hold evangelical doctrine are in open alliance with those who call the fall [of mankind in Adam] a fable, who deny the personality of the Holy Ghost, who call justification by faith immoral, and hold that there is another probation after death... It is our solemn conviction that there should be no pretence of fellowship. Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin'.

those which were on the right side have been excluded... Although the policy of silence is again adopted by the Loose School in the matter of the Downgrade, it is happily the case that it is impossible to apply the pitch-plaster<sup>9</sup> to all mouths; there are yet men and papers which cannot be suppressed<sup>10</sup> or bought... Has the body of Baptists... become so easy-going and docile that it will by its silence endorse the action of its President?<sup>11</sup>

Gresham Machen, commenting on the Auburn Affirmation,<sup>12</sup> declared:

A document which would affirm the resurrection but will not say that our Lord rose from the dead with the same body in which he suffered – this is simply one more manifestation of that destructive Modernism which is the deadliest enemy of the Christian religion in practically all the larger churches in the world at the present day.<sup>13</sup>

A.W.Tozer also spoke of the matter:

Under the law of Moses, a man could incur guilt by keeping still [that is, silent] about some evil he knew was present in the camp of the Lord, and, in the New Testament, James tells us bluntly: ‘Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins’ (Jas. 4:17). Is it not a serious thought that many clean-living, decent persons, against whom no overt act of wrongdoing can be charged, may yet be deeply guilty and inwardly stained with the sin that does not show [itself; namely,] the sin of silence and inaction? There are moral situations when it is immoral to say nothing, and basely immoral to do nothing...

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<sup>9</sup> A dressing made with the viscous resin of the Norway spruce.

<sup>10</sup> Spurgeon had ‘burked’. To burke means to smother. It comes from W.Burke who was hanged in 1829 for murder on this count.

<sup>11</sup> C.H.Spurgeon: *The Downgrade Controversy*.

<sup>12</sup> The Auburn Affirmation was signed in 1924 by 1293 clergymen of the Presbyterian Church of the USA. It rejected the imposition of five points on the Presbyterian Church, one of which asserted that the bodily resurrection of Christ meant that Christ rose with the same body as he had died.

<sup>13</sup> Gresham Machen: *Modernism and the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA*, 1933, pp23-24, quoted by Iain Murray: ‘The Benefits and Dangers of Controversy’ in *Evangelical Holiness...*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2013, p118.

The fear [or the folly or the neglect – DG] that keeps us quiet when faith and love and loyalty cry out for us to speak is surely evil and must be judged as evil before the bar of eternal justice...

The sinfulness of silence and inaction is more than academic; it is sharply practical and may impinge upon the soul of any one of us at any time. Let a moral situation shape itself so that righteousness demands speech and action, and theory becomes practical fact instantly. We have but to keep still and sit tight to become guilty of real sin.

The world situation today is such that sin by silence may be more widespread than at any other time in the history of the world...

There is something more serious still. It is the failure to take sides to speak up when the enemy stalks into the very sanctuary, and pollutes the holy place...

Could it be that too many of God's true children, and especially the preachers, are sinning against God by guilty silence? When those whose eyes are opened by the touch of Christ become vocal and active, God may begin to fight again on the side of truth. I for one am waiting to hear the loud voices of the prophets and reformers sounding once more over a sluggish and drowsy church. They'll pay a price for their boldness, but the results will be worth it.<sup>14</sup>

John R.W.Stott wrote a book with the title *Our Guilty Silence*.

And, in another field altogether, as Albert Einstein confessed: 'If I were to remain silent, I'd be guilty of complicity'.

Or as Martin Luther King, on April 4th, 1967, in New York, declared: 'A time comes when silence is betrayal'.

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But I have in mind those of us who want to teach, explain and apply the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Should that not be every believer?) Narrowing it down, I have in mind those of us who go into print on the gospel. Although stated discourses and ordinary conversation are not exempt from what I say, in this article I concentrate on the written word.

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<sup>14</sup> A.W.Tozer: *God Tells The Man Who Cares*, OM Publishing, 1996, pp176-180.

But before I go on, let me say a little more about sermons. Sermons should be biased – they should come from the text, the passage, the word, before us, and that should not be adjusted to turn every sermon into a bland discourse. Of course, the preacher should make it clear that he is driving home the teaching of this particular passage, confining his remarks to that, and that the balance will come as he continues his discourses. In saying this, I am showing that I regard expository preaching as best. Preaching on isolated texts exacerbates the problem I have in mind. Finally on this point, since I believe preaching without notes is best, I concede that in gaining liberty by this method, there might be some loss of accuracy. It is a compromise I am willing to strike. Leaving that to one side, however, it is the printed word that I am especially concerned with here.

Of course, I am not saying that every atom of truth has to be stated in every piece of writing, nor am I condemning a man for failing in this respect. For a start, I would be shooting myself in the foot! The point I am trying to make is that we must always do what we can to make sure that those who read our work do not run away with the wrong impression – the wrong impression, that is, as we see it. Let me take that a little further. We must do what we can to *prevent* anybody running away with the wrong idea. Moreover, we have to take special care when we know that some are already doing it.

What about the suggestion that if a reader does not understand, or has doubts, he should ask the author? Well, of course, in theory, very nice! But living as we do in the real world, we all know that this will rarely happen. Moreover, this is passing the buck. I agree that the reader has his responsibility to verify things by Scripture (Isa. 8:20; Acts 17:11), but the responsibility I am addressing is that which rests squarely on the teacher. When I taught Mathematics, I could have blamed examination failures on my students for not asking me the right questions, and so giving me the chance to clear matters up for them. But, I have to confess, I never thought along those lines. It never entered my mind. Rather, I invented those ‘chances’ for myself; I did not leave it to them. I bent over backwards to make sure they understood what I was teaching them *as I was teaching them*, and

did all I could to point out where the pitfalls were. I tried to anticipate all difficulties – real and imaginary – and meet them before they became a problem. I instinctively felt this duty of care was an integral part of my job.

Here I am concerned with gospel teachers who leave something unsaid which should have been said, who omit necessary correctives which would prevent wrong deductions, especially when misunderstanding, not to say error, is abroad.

Let me use a real-life medical example to illustrate. I know of a man who was diagnosed with a potentially very serious heart condition. But he was supplied with medication that would give him a very high level of protection, *as long as he took the medication in the right way*. The prescribing nurse told him of this, but, later, his consultant went out of his way to stress the point emphatically. I deliberately use the tautology. If the man did not take the medication as prescribed, it would not work, and he would remain dangerously exposed to risk. So he was clearly warned. My point is that if the medical staff had stressed the benefits of the medication, its high protection factor, and all the rest, but failed to warn explicitly of the importance of taking it in the right way, they would have been culpable.

How much more in the spiritual realm. Let me speak personally.

I can say that justification is by faith. Excellent! So it is. But any Church Father, any Papist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Federal Vision man, New Perspective advocate, Baptist Sacramentalist... could say ‘Amen’ to it. What I have left out is key. What have I omitted to say? Justification is by faith *alone*. Luther felt the point so keenly, he actually distorted his translation of Romans 3:28 into German to include the ‘alone’, though it is not in Greek. He had no need to do this since the apostle goes on to make the case very clearly, ruling out any contribution from circumcision or law.<sup>15</sup> Even so, Luther was right to say:

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<sup>15</sup> As Luther himself saw. Commenting on his use of ‘alone’, and the criticism he met for it, he said: ‘The text itself, and... Paul’s meaning, urgently require and demand it. For in that passage he is dealing with the main point of Christian doctrine; namely, that we are justified by faith in

Whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this rejection of works will have to say: 'Faith alone justifies and not works'.

Silence when men are thinking salvation is by faith and... is guilty silence. Plain speaking, leaving no room for doubt, is essential under such conditions.

Paul, of course, had set the pattern, long before Luther. He had recognised the problem I am talking about. Writing to the Ephesian believers, he told them:

By grace you have been saved through faith (Eph. 2:8).

Nuff said? No! He did not leave it there:

By grace you have been saved through faith... not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

Why did the apostle not stop at 'faith'? Why the negative? Why did he state the case from the opposite point of view? Why did he add 'through faith... not a result of works'? Is it not obvious that Paul spotted the danger that some might think that their works – even thinking of their faith as a work – might contribute to their salvation? I am convinced of it. Plenty of people do think in terms of 'faith and...' – and that, despite the apostle's demolition of the claim! Consequently, he took the necessary steps to close

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Christ without any works of the law. Paul excludes all works so completely as to say that the works of the law, though it is God's law and word, do not aid us in justification. Using Abraham as an example, he argues that Abraham was so justified without works that even the highest work, which had been commanded by God, over and above all others, namely circumcision, did not aid him in justification. Rather, Abraham was justified without circumcision and without any works, but by faith, as he says in chapter 4: "If Abraham were justified by works, he may boast, but not before God". So, when all works are so completely rejected – which must mean faith alone justifies – whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this rejection of works will have to say: "Faith alone justifies and not works". The matter itself and the nature of language requires it'. In his 'Open Letter on Translating', Luther stated: 'Furthermore, I am not the only one, nor the first, to say that faith alone makes one righteous. There was Ambrose, Augustine and many others who said it before me'. For my contribution to this issue, see my 'The "But" of John 1:17: Absent but Vital'.



the loophole. He was thinking of his readers, was he not? He did not want them to run away with a wrong impression. So he did all he could to make sure they couldn't.

*And he did not leave it even there!* For he went on immediately to add:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

Paul, having stopped one danger, knew he had, at once, to correct yet another! Having removed the notion that a sinner's work could contribute to his salvation, having stressed the sovereign and free grace of God in salvation without the sinner's works, the apostle saw the risk that his readers might run away with the idea that works don't count at all! 'Out of frying pan into the fire'! So he stopped it before it could start. A sinner cannot work for his salvation, but once he is saved he is duty-bound, under apostolic command, to work out the salvation that God has already worked in:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

And this is why Paul hammered home all these points to the Ephesians, making sure he established salvation by faith alone, without works, but also making it clear that once a sinner is saved he will inevitably go on to produce good works, that it is his duty<sup>16</sup> so to do:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).

The fact is, if Paul had not painted the full picture, he would have failed, and worse; he would have been cavalier, acting

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<sup>16</sup> Do not miss the 'should'.

irresponsibly. But he, having a true pastoral heart, was not confining his thinking to the theoretical; he had his readers and their eternal welfare in mind, and so he took steps to make sure they got the right message, the complete message, and thus prevented any possible misunderstanding.

I say we must show the same spirit. I try to take my own medicine. I will continue so to do. I am convinced that when we know certain wrong deductions are possible from what we are teaching – or even that there is evidence that some are already making such deductions – if we do not make sure that we fully spell out what we are saying – both positively and negatively – when we know of lurking dangers, then we are blameworthy. Silence is golden? Not in such circumstances.

I know that I can – and must – call sinners to believe. I urge, exhort, seek to persuade, plead with them, command, invite them to believe. So far so good! But I know that Sandemanianism – especially, incipient Sandemanianism – is rampant.<sup>17</sup> So unless I make it clear that mental assent is not enough, but sinners must trust Christ, rely upon him – and that from the heart and not simply with the mind – then I know that I am culpable. It is not enough to let my readers go away thinking all they need to do is believe. They might well think they are saved if they believe – accept – the facts of the gospel. They are not! Heart trust is essential. If I don't make this clear, I am guilty.

Take another case. I am utterly persuaded of the glories of the new covenant, and I do all I can to set forth those glories for the salvation of sinners and edification of saints. Say I am stressing the liberty the believer has in Christ, his perfection before God because of his union with Christ, his death to the law of Moses, and so on. Now if I know, or suspect, that some who read my works are listening to teaching that pushes this liberty to the extent that they think there is no law for believers, that the believer is under no law, that words like 'duty' and 'obligation' are taboo, since I am persuaded that this is a grievous mistake, I would be guilty if I left my words uncorrected.

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<sup>17</sup> See my *The Secret Stifler: Incipient Sandemanianism and Preaching the Gospel to Sinners; The Seeking Sinner: Fact or Figment?*

Again, I know that every believer has the Spirit, that the Spirit moves and enables believers to love and obey Christ, that God writes his law – the law of Christ – in the heart of every believer, giving him a sense of that law and a love of it, and so on. But if I also know or suspect that some of my readers are listening to teachers who push this to the extent that they deny that the Scriptures (as nuanced by Christ and his apostles) are the written law of Christ, and thus are in danger of repeating the error made time and again in the history of the church and elevating the Spirit above Scripture, I would be culpable if I did not do all I can to correct it.<sup>18</sup>

Say I speak of the importance of baptism, but fail to make it clear that baptism is the dipping, the plunging, the immersing of believers, and believers only, and that infants have no right to it, even though I know that some of my readers have the mistaken notion that infant sprinkling constitutes baptism, am I not culpable? What is more, there is the ever-present sacramentalism leading to sacerdotalism and baptismal regeneration to be thought of. Indeed, sacramentalism has arisen among contemporary Baptists – of all people! Silence at this point, therefore, is irresponsible and worse. Clarity is essential. It is as important to disabuse error as to establish truth. Silence is far from golden in such circumstances.

Then again, say I keep stressing the believer's perfect positional sanctification in Christ, but neglect to say anything at all about the essential doctrine of progressive sanctification, especially when I suspect that some of my readers are listening to teachers who deny the very existence of progressive sanctification, might I not risk leaving my readers with an imbalanced view of sanctification? And not only in a theoretical, doctrinal sense. As I have just said, the doctrine of the believer's progressive sanctification is essential.<sup>19</sup>

And so on.

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<sup>18</sup> See my *Believers Under the Law of Christ; Liberty not Licence*.

<sup>19</sup> See my 'Progressive Sanctification: A Matter of Eternal Life or Death'. See also my *Fivefold Sanctification; Positional Sanctification: Two Consequences*.

Finally, for my part, I can see how God's warning to the prophets plays into this positive and negative aspect of my teaching. God, addressing Jeremiah, declared:

Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant (Jer. 1:9-10).

And to Ezekiel he said:

If I say to the wicked: 'You shall surely die', and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul (Ezek. 3:18-21).

The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will

require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul (Ezek. 33:1-9).

While – and I hope this goes without saying – I do not claim the authority, gift or commission of a prophet or apostle, even so, I am convinced there is a principle here. As James said: ‘Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin’ (Jas. 4:17).

So I close this article as I began. What a teacher fails to say can be more important than what he does say. At least, this is the medicine I myself am in the habit of taking.

And who of us has not failed in this? What encouragement, therefore, can we draw from Jonah’s example! How miserably he failed in this respect, failed by silence – even to the extent of trying to run away from God himself! But he was restored, and though he still had his hang-ups, he retraced his steps, opened his mouth, and broke his silence. And God used him mightily for his glory and the good of the Ninevites. This, surely, is recorded on the sacred page for our learning or instruction (1 Cor. 10:11). But this ‘learning’, *nouthesia*, let us remember, includes admonition, warning and exhortation!