## Silence Is Not Always Golden

by Harry Osborne

“Silence is golden” is a proverb that almost everyone has heard. It was immortalized in a popular song by The Four Seasons back in the 1960’s. It has been a part of poems and prose in the English language for centuries. The same thought was even a popular expression in Latin, “*silentium est aurum*.” Proverbs are intended to voice general truths and remind us of maxims widely valued. Yet, proverbs (whether biblical or societal) are not intended as truths to guide our conduct in every situation. With respect to this saying, it should be obvious that silence does not always manifest wisdom, honor and greater value. In recent years, several IRS officials, when questioned before Congress about their unlawful conduct, have chosen to remain silent under the protection of our “Fifth Amendment” which is a constitutional provision to protect one from being compelled to give self-incriminating testimony.

Why would an honorable, law-abiding person try to shun an answer and keep a matter shrouded in silence? What is the purpose of intentionally keeping the facts about one’s conduct from those charged with investigating whether or not a crime was committed? Why would one not want it to be known where he or she stands on a question or what action one has taken? The most basic reasons are the fear of opposition or to avoid the consequences of wrong. The safe road to avoid taking a stand is to stay quiet or issue a disclaimer to signal neutrality.

In Bible times, some refused to take a stand for God and His truth. They were condemned for such cowardice. People of courage, daring to stand against the views of those in places of power, were approved by God.

Elijah was a man who stood in opposition to the wicked ways of King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel. Ahab and Jezebel had introduced the idolatry of Baal to Israel with all of its associated evils. Elijah stood against that system and urged others to oppose it as well. When Ahab came face to face with Elijah, the king's first words were these: "Is that you, O troubler of Israel?" (1 Kings 18:17). Elijah replied, *"I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and you have followed Baal"* (1 Kings 18:18).

When all of the people were gathered, they had a clear choice. Who would they believe and follow? Their king who had the power over them or Elijah who spoke an unpopular message of truth in opposition to the king? The Bible records the occasion in these words:

And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him." But the people answered him not a word (1 Kings 18:21).

Many of that crowd had participated in the idolatry to Baal and their silence stemmed from their own guilt in this sin. Others feared the king more than they loved the truth, so they chose silence rather than standing for righteousness. However, the prophet stood with boldness that day and God gave victory to His truth through Elijah (1 Kings 18:22-40).

In John 9, Jesus gave sight to a man who had been born blind. When the Pharisees who opposed Jesus asked the man who had made him to see, the man answered unashamedly even over the objections of the powerful Pharisees. However, the man's parents did not exhibit such courage. The Pharisees asked them how their son received his sight. The parents responded, "By what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself" (John 9:21). This answer was a dodge. They knew how he was made to see, but they were afraid to tell the Pharisees for fear of what they might do in retaliation. The next verses make that clear:

His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him" (John 9:22-23).

They were cowards who issued their disclaimer to protect themselves from the Pharisees instead of standing for the truth regardless of the cost. The level of their cowardice is seen more clearly in their failure to stand in defense of the one who had acted with such grace in healing their son.

In John 12, we see another case of the same thing involving those in places of power who did not want to lose their position by confessing Christ. Notice how the Bible describes these people:

Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 12:42-43).

Think about the influence for good these leaders could have had if only they had the courage to stand up for truth. What a shame it was that such people loved the praise of men more than God! It is a sad fact that some still do.

Our society has witnessed unquestionable ungodliness on display in every realm from places of political power to family relationships -- from corporate settings to religious circles. Yet, we have chosen a tolerant acquiescence over a bold stand for right. It seems the voters in this country are ready to sacrifice a stand for honor as long as peace and prosperity prevail. Such is to be expected as characteristic of the world (1 John 2:15-17). However, it is very distressing to see many among God's people doing the same thing in principle.

In recent years, we have witnessed an ever growing litany of teachers of false doctrines to be received, errors to overlook as "no big deal" and sins tolerate within our fellowship. Instead of boldly urging a stand for Bible truth, many elders in large congregations and preachers with heavy meeting schedules have taken the “silence is golden” approach. Too many members have been more anxious to have numerical growth even at the sacrifice of truth. "Unity-in-diversity" has become the rallying cry of those willing to practice a growing tolerance, except towards faithful saints boldly standing for Bible truth. It is now clear that open division looms ever nearer the horizon. If we have not already done so, each of us will face the decision of standing with a minority for truth or gathering with the popular, powerful and more wealthy majority who ignore pleas for open study in favor of silent tolerance of evil. Just as our Lord warns, that division will cut deep -- even into our families and close friends (Matthew 10:34-38; Luke 18:28-30).

If we are to serve God acceptably, we must realize our responsibility to stand for God and His truth regardless of the cost. At times, it will cost us ridicule, opposition and even denunciation. But we must remember that it is the ultimate praise of God that we seek, not the temporary popularity of this world. Years ago, I remember hearing the late John Clark preach a sermon in which he said something that has always stayed with me: “Silence is not always golden. Sometimes it’s just a dingy shade of yellow.” Which color better describes our silence?