

“Where the Bible Speaks; We Speak; Where the Bible is Silent, We are Silent.”

Danny Brown

This famous slogan, *Where the Bible speaks; we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent* was spoken by Thomas Campbell in August or September of 1809. It is implied by those who believe and accept the principles implied in the motto that they: 1) Believe that the Bible is the Word of God and that it is fully and verbally inspired; 2) Believe that it was infallible in the original autographs; 3) Accept the Scriptures as the only authoritative rule for faith and practice and to it all must appeal for authority for things done and believed in service to Deity; 4) Believe that the Bible can be understood and that men can understand it alike.

A Little Bit of History

The principles contained in this slogan are not new. What was new was that the principles which had been applied to the Catholic church were now being applied to the sectarian denominations.

“Chillingworth had written his book, ‘The Religion of Protestants, a Safe Way to Salvation’ in 1637, and had argued that the Bible was the sole authority in matters of salvation. His conclusion, ‘The Bible, I say the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants’ purported to be the claim of all Protestant bodies.” (Earl West, *Search for the Ancient Order*, Vol 1 pg. 47)

Qualben, in his “History of the Christian Church” gives a brief summary of Luther’s religious conviction in 1517 among which he lists: “(3) The Bible is the sole Norman authority for faith and life. Tradition has value only in so far as it is based on Scripture.” (page 231)

On April 16, 1521 Martin Luther was summoned to appear before the Diet of Worms. D’Aubigne’s *History of the Reformation* records,

Never had man appeared before so imposing an assembly. The Emperor Charles V, whose sovereignty extended over a great part of the old and new world; his brother, Archduke Ferdinand; six electors of the empire, most of whom descendants now wear the kingly crown; twenty-four dukes, the majority of whom were independent sovereigns over countries more or less extensive, and among whom were some whose names afterward became formidable to the Reformation – the Duke of Alva and his two sons; eight margraves, thirty archbishops, bishops, and abbots; seven ambassadors, including those from the kings of France and England; the deputies of ten from cities; a great number of princes, counts, and sovereign barons; the papal nuncios – in all two hundred and four persons.

After a moment of solemn silence John Eck rose and said in a loud voice:

Martin Luther, his sacred and invincible imperial majesty has cited you before his throne, in accordance with the advice and counsel of the States of the holy Roman empire, to require you to answer two questions: (1) Do you acknowledge these books to have been written by you? (At the same time

pointing to twenty books on a table directly in front of Luther.) (2) Are you prepared to retract these books, and their contents, or do you persist in the opinions you have advanced in them?

It was then requested that the titles of the books be read, which was done, and 'Luther acknowledged them to be his. He was again asked, 'Will you retract the doctrines therein?' Then Luther, after having briefly and precisely repeated the question put to him, said:

I cannot deny that the books named are mine, and I will never deny any of them; they are all my offspring. But as to what follows, whether I shall reaffirm in the same terms all, or shall retract what I may have uttered beyond the authority of Scripture – because the matter involves a question of faith and of the salvation of souls, and because it concerns the Word of God, which is the highest thing in heaven and on earth, and which we all must reverence – it would be dangerous and rash in me to make any unpremeditated declaration, because in unpremeditated speech I might say something less than the facts and something more than the truth; besides, I remember the saying of Christ when he declared, 'Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven, and before his holy angels.' For these reasons I beg, with all respect, that your Imperial Majesty give me time to deliberate, that I may answer the question without injury to the Word of God and without peril to my own soul.

'The next day in his speech he divided his books into three classes. The first were written for the edification of believers, and his adversaries admitted them to be harmless, and even useful. He could not retract these. Were he to do it, he would be the only man doing so. In other books he had attacked pernicious laws and doctrines of the papacy which, as no one could deny, tortured the consciences of Christians and also tyrannically devoured the property of the German nation; if he should recant these he would be but adding to the force of the Roman tyranny, and opening not merely the windows, but the doors, to great impiety, and make himself a disgraceful abettor of wickedness and oppression. In the third place, he had written against persons who defend and sanction this tyranny, and aiming at annihilating these pious teachings; against them he said he had possibly been more severe than he should have been, and that he did not claim that his conduct had always been faultless. 'But the question,' said he, 'is not concerning my conduct, but concerning the doctrine of Christ; and therefore I could not recant these writings, for Rome would make use of such disavowal to extend her oppression. I demand the evidence against me, and a fair trial. I stand here ready, if any one can prove me to have written falsely, to recant my errors, and to throw my books into the fire with my own hand.'

'When Luther had finished, Eck addressed him in a threatening manner, and told him that he had not answered the question; that this was not an occasion for general discussion, but to ascertain from him whether he would retract his errors. 'In some of your books you deny the decision of councils and that they have often erred and contradicted the Holy Scriptures. Will you recant or reaffirm what you have said about them? The emperor demands a plain answer.'

'To which Luther replied:

Well then, since His Imperial Majesty wants a plain answer, I will give him one without horns or teeth. Unless I am convinced of error by the testimony of Scriptures or clear arguments – for I believe neither the pope nor the councils alone, which have erred and contradicted each other often – I am convinced by the passages of Scripture which I have cited, and my conscience is bound by the Word of God. I can not and will not recant anything, for it is neither safe nor right to act against one's conscience. Such is my profession of faith, and expect no other from me. Here I stand, I can not do otherwise. God help me, Amen! (the quotations above are from J. W. Shepherds book, *The Falling Away and the Restoration*, Pgs 107-110)

In 1526 Ullrich Zwingli, a contemporary with Martin Luther, whose reform work was done in Switzerland, contended that nothing should be practiced that was not expressly commanded by the Scriptures.

J. W. Shepherd comments:

Under the Protestant banner there arose sectarian churches, professing to take the Bible alone as their rule of faith and practice, when assailing the claims of Rome, and yet binding by creeds, unknown to the Bible, all embraced within their folds; till Protestantism became as creed-bound as Romanism. Taking into view the larger results of this inconsistency, they bring under notice the Lutheran Church, the State churches of England and Scotland, as well as non-conformist churches which have arisen from them. (*The Church, the Falling Away and the Restoration*, pg 135)

John Locke (1632-1704) was one of the most influential philosophers of his day, trained in medicine, philosophy, religion and politics.

Now, nothing in worship or discipline can be necessary in Christian communion but what Christ our legislator, or the Apostles by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have commanded in express words. (Maurice Barnett, *By What Authority*, pg. 118)

John Glass said the same thing Thomas Campbell did in the famous slogan, but in different words in 1731.

We do not read of any other evangelist or officer left there but Titus alone; and where the scripture is silent, so are we.

Be you silent where the Scripture history is silent; let what it says not be nothing to you. (Maurice Barnett, *By What Authority*, p 121)

On June 28, 1804 B. W. Stone along with five others wrote “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.” There are two items that deal directly with the subject under consideration:

Item: We will, that our power of making laws for the government of the Church, and executing them by delegated authority, forever cease; that the people may have free course to the Bible, and adopt the *law of the spirit of life in Jesus Christ*.

Item. We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven; and as many as are offended with other books, which stand in competition with it, may cast them into the fire if they choose; for it is better to enter into the life having one book than having many to be cast into hell.

The slogan *Where the Bible speaks; we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent* came into existence in a speech delivered by Thomas Campbell in 1809. He had come to the United States two years before for health reasons. He was religiously and old light, anti-burgher in the Seceder Presbyterian Church. When he arrived in Philadelphia he presented his credentials to the Synod of North America and was assigned to the Chartiers Presbytery in western Pennsylvania. Amidst the religious division Thomas Campbell worked for unity and was of the opinion that the Holy Scriptures, Divinely inspired, were all sufficient and were alone sufficient for all the purposes contemplated by their Author, in giving them. He did not object so much to the doctrines of the Secession creed and platform, as a doctrinal basis. At this time he was a devoted Calvinist. However because of his attitude and action toward unity and the sufficiency of the Bible he fell into trouble with the Chartiers Presbytery and was expelled from their ranks in 1809.

By his forced withdrawal from the Presbytery, he found himself without church affiliation. He had gained a wide and strong influence in the region so he continued to preach in private dwellings, schoolhouses, under trees, etc. It was not his purpose to establish a separate religious party. There were already too many of them. However the numbers in attendance continued to grow. A time was set to discuss the future. They agreed to meet in the home of Abraham Altars that was located between Mt Pleasant and Washington, Pennsylvania.

A feeling of deep solemnity pervaded the entire assembly, when at length Mr. Campbell arose to address them. The theme of the occasion had grown to be the burden of his heart. He gave a clear exposition of the situation and of the object of the assembly. The events that had led to the calling of this meeting, well understood by all, had made a deep impression upon them. The discourse was a strong argument against sectarian divisions and in behalf of Christian unity on the Bible as the only infallible standard of doctrine and practice, to the rejection of all human traditions. He concluded this remarkable discourse by urging with great earnestness the adoption of the following principles as the rule of their future action and life as Christians: "*Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.*" This bold maxim was so just that no one of the audience, prepared as they were by previous teaching, could for a moment hesitate to accept it as right.

When Mr. Campbell had concluded, opportunity was given for free expression of views, whereupon Andrew Munro, as shrewd Scotch Seceder, arose and said: 'Mr. Campbell, if we adopt that as a basis, then there is an end of infant baptism.' This remark and the manifest conviction that it carried with it produced a great sensation, for the whole audience was composed of pedo-baptists who cherish infant baptism as one of their cardinal doctrines. 'Of Course,' said Mr. Campbell, in reply, 'if infant baptism is not found in Scripture we can have nothing to do with it.' This bold declaration came like a new revelation to the audience. Thomas Acheson, one of Mr. Campbell's closest friends, in a very excited manner arose and said: 'I hope I may never see the day when my heart will renounce that blessed saying of the Scripture, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom

of heaven!’ Upon saying this he burst into tears, and was about to retire in the adjoining room when James Foster, well informed in the Scriptures, called out, ‘Mr. Acheson, I would remark that in the portion of Scripture you have quoted there is no reference to infant baptism.’ Without offering a reply Mr. Acheson passed into the adjoining room to weep alone. (L. W. Shepherd, *The Church, the falling Away and Restoration*, pp 179-180)

Thus the slogan, or motto, or principle, or whatever you desire to call it came into existence. Since it’s beginning, though it is built on timeless principles, it has been the controlling factor in the lives of countless thousands of individuals. It has been and is the guiding light of those who believe in the all-sufficiency of the Divinely inspired Scriptures in one’s relationship to God.

Some Reasons Why I Believe the Bible

1. Because Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The apostle John said, *“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.”* (John 20:30-31) Thus the miracles Jesus did testify and prove Him to be Deity. Thus as Deity He either quoted from or referred to the books of the Old Testament and revealed by the Holy Spirit the New Testament. (John 16:13) Thus I believe the Bible to be the Word of God because Jesus, who is Deity, approved it.

2. Because Jesus rose from the dead on the third day after His crucifixion never to die again. There are three substantial proofs of His resurrection: 1) The empty tomb. (John 20:1-8) 2) His appearances after His resurrection: to Mary Magdalene, Peter, the women, ten apostles, two men on their way to Emmaus, eleven apostles, over five hundred brethren, the disciples in Galilee and Saul of Tarsus. 3) His resurrection was the fulfillment of prophecy (Ps 16:10; Acts 2:25-32). Paul said that the resurrection proved Jesus to be the Son of God. Thus, as Deity, He approved the Old Testament and established the New Testament. Thus I believe the Bible to be the Word of God because Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

3). Because the gospel of Jesus Christ is a certified gospel. (Gal 1:10) That is, it is an approved gospel. It is certified by miracles that were done to confirm the Word as being from God. *“And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.”* (Mark 16:20) *“How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?”* (Heb 2:3-4) This miracle confirmed the gospel (the New Testament) testifies that the Jews had the oracles (the Word of God) of God. (Rom 3:1-2) Thus I believe the Bible is the Word of God because it is certified by heaven.

4) Because the Bible is historically true. I understand that the Bible is not a world or secular history book, nor does it claim to be. It is a historical revelation of how God has worked to bring His scheme for the redemption of men into being. In times past some of the claims to discredit the Bible have been that it was wrong on

certain points of history, i.e. there were no such people as the Hitites and that Sergus Paulus could not have been a proconsul (deputy, KJV) for Crete never had proconsuls. When the archaeologist did their work and the truth was in, it has been proven that there was a great Hittite nation and that Crete had proconsuls at the very time the Bible says Sergus Paulus was one. Many other historical objection to the Bible have been made, but when the whole truth has been discovered, in every case, the Bible has been proven correct. Thus I believe the Bible is the Word of God because it is historically true.

5) Because the Bible is scientifically correct. The Bible does not purport to be a textbook on material science, it is a textbook on religion. It was written hundreds of years before men began to postulate modern science, yet it is scientifically accurate. Modern science has never disproved any statements of the Bible, but it has proven and demonstrated hundreds of statements of the Bible to be true. However, now and then it does touch on scientific truths and principles. The Bible is true and not at variance with true science. The God that created the world is the same God that inspired the Bible, one does not contradict the other. Thus I believe that the Bible is the Word of God because it is scientifically accurate.

Where the Bible Speaks, We Speak

The truth in this statement is seen in a number of passages of Scripture:

1) *If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.* 1 Peter 4:11

This passage refers to the use of gifts mentioned in verse 10. The gifts may be of the miraculous nature, as the special gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12) or the ordinary or natural abilities, as the gifts, talents, considered in the parable of the talents. Whichever gift is received, miraculous or natural and whether it has to do with speech or doing, the possessor of it is to be a good steward of the grace of God. (vs 10) Paul said, "Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." (1 Cor 4:2). The term "oracle" refers to divine utterances or revelation. (Acts 7:38; Rom 3:2; Heb 5:12) Thus the passage teaches that those who speak about the Lord or the things of God are to be governed by what God said, the Word of God. He is to limit his speech to what the Word of God states. There is to be no speculation or teaching one's own ideas independent of the revelation from God. That is, he is to speak where the Bible, God's Word, speaks.

The college press series commentary on 1 Peter in its expanded translation section on 1 Peter 4:10-11 says,

According as every one was gifted *by God*, employing this same gift, be serving *and* ministering among yourselves as good stewards (caretakers, managers) of the grace of God which is abundant *and* many-sided. If any one speaks, *let the words be uttered* as words of God. If any one is performing a service, let it be done as one who serves out of the strength which God supplies, that in everything God may receive glory through Jesus Christ, whose is the

glory and the might – power and dominion – unto the ages of the ages, *i.e.*, forever and ever. Amen.

2) 1 Corinthians 4:6, “Now these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes: that in us ye might learn not to go beyond the things which are written; that no one of you be puffed up for the one against the other.”

It seems that the statement *learn not to go beyond that which is written* is a well-known saying or slogan which should bring to mind the limits in which man must abide, that is, the authority of the Scriptures. Thus far in this epistle to the Corinthians Paul had quoted three O. T. passages used in 1:19; 1:31; 3:19-20. Each was a strong protest against the conceit that could and would lead them to go off after their own wisdom. Paul was urging them to stay within the revealed Word of God. As examples, Paul and Apollos were not originators but humble servants of God subject, as everyone else, to the things that were written. None should say or do anything in service to God which goes beyond that which is written.

“But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.” – Galatians 1:1-9

By these words Paul warns against perverting the gospel. But I can't see anything wrong with a little change (addition, subtraction, substitution, etc.) some may say. Suppose someone concludes that we ought to have more social activity in the church and suggest a small change in the work of the church. Under the guise of social activity add a “fellowship” dinner now and then. Suppose you ask me if it is alright? I answer, “I don't know.” (In reality I have a much better answer, but for sake of argument let my answer stand for now.) Then you add the “fellowship” dinner to the work of the church. Now the question becomes: Is it alright with God? If it is, everything is fine. If it's not, you could loose your soul. Do you want to take that chance? How many sermons have you heard on not going beyond that which is written? How many sermons on the text, “Is it from Heaven or from Men?” What did you learn from them? Is it alright to make a small change in baptism so that instead of immersion we just pour a little water on the individual's head? It's just a small change, doesn't take but a minute to do it. If you can make one change why not two and if two why not whatever number you want? Where is the stopping place?

3) 2 Corinthians 5:7, “For we walk by faith, not by sight.”

The religion of the Bible is a religion of Faith. All service, which we render to God must be of faith. No proposition is more clearly established in the Bible than that. Not only is it plainly declared that *“we walk by faith,”* but in Hebrews 11:6, is the explicit statement that *“without faith it is impossible to please God.”* Any act of religious worship or service, however great or small, must be of faith. In Romans 10:17, Paul declares: *“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”* This forever settles how faith comes; it comes by hearing the word of God. Accordingly, where the word of God is, there can be faith, where there is no word of God, there can be no faith, and if no faith, then no walking by faith. Jesus applied this truth when he said to the Pharisee's, *“But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments*

of men.” (Matthew 15:9) They were not walking by faith. Notice that the heroes of the Old Testament recorded in Hebrews 11 walked by faith. They believed and acted upon what God said, not on what He did not say. Thus, it follows, that when we speak where the Bible speaks we are walking by faith. When we speak where the Bible is silent we are not walking by faith, nor are we pleasing God.

Conclusion

The Bible warns of adding to the word of God, “You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.” (Deut 4:2) When Micaiah, the prophet, was asked not to speak the full word of God, he said, “*As the Lord lives, whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak.*” (1 Kings 22:14 NKJV) Balaam was told by God, “*Only the word which I speak to you – that you shall do.*” (Num 22:20) Paul’s charged Timothy to “Preach the word, be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. Only where the Bible speaks are men to speak today.

The rule of biblical interpretation that Thomas Campbell stated over two hundred years ago has stood the test of time. It has done so because it is exactly what the Bible says.