**The Bible Must Speak for Itself**

*by Roy E. Cogdill (1907-1985)*

One of the most vital rules to learn in the study of the Bible is that the Bible must speak for itself. Men too often read into the Bible what they want it to say, or wish it would say. There can be no reading between the lines in a successful effort to study the Word of God. We must take God at his word, and remembering that the Bible is an all-sufficient divine revelation of God's will, we must be willing to take the truth exactly as God has stated it without addition or subtraction. Reading into the Bible what is not there results always in our being led away from the truth.

**1. Bible Its Own Interpreter**

The same passage of scripture is not susceptible of conflicting interpretations. To say that you can interpret it your way, and I can interpret it my way, and both be right is to accuse God of "double-talk" and indefinite, ambiguous language, which, of course, is not true. God has spoken in definite and positive terms that are plain enough for us to understand. Otherwise the Bible is no "revelation" at all. We can therefore understand what God wants us to know if we will strive to learn the intention of the language used and determine what the will of God actually is.

When any instrument is introduced into court and its construction becomes necessary, the first rule that is followed to learn what its language actually means is this: What does the instrument as a whole actually say? The purpose of this is to take the whole instrument into consideration and really construe it, first of all, as a whole instead of in separate parts. Whatever any statement may seem to say when taken by itself surely must be in harmony with the rest of the instrument or else the instrument is faulty and is not binding. This is a simple principle but it needs application badly in the study of the word of God. No statement of God's Word is out of harmony with the truth which the Word as a whole teaches. When we reach any conclusion concerning any passage which is out of harmony with what the rest of God's word teaches, our conclusion is wrong. Peter makes this very demand of teachers when he said, "If any man speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God" (I Peter 4: 11). Be sure your utterances are in harmony with the rest of what God has said, the rule is: study every passage in the light of the whole truth God has given.

**2. The Context**

Frequently a careful study of the context of a passage will prevent its misuse and our misunderstanding of it. The verses that go immediately before and those that follow should be studied in the light of the question -- what is the writer discussing? The subject matter under treatment cannot be disregarded in any proper study of the Bible. Further consideration of the context will require that we examine the passage and ask -- to whom was this written? The application of commandments or promises contained in the Bible and addressed to particular and special groups should certainly not be extended beyond those groups. Jonah's message was for Nineveh. Noah's message was for the world before the flood. Moses' law given at Sinai was for the Jews or those who had been delivered from Egypt. The Promises of the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit were directed to the Apostles (John 14:16, 17, 26; 16:7-14). No man has the right to try to extend these and many others like them beyond the scope God gave them at the time they were spoken.

Still another question to ask concerning any passage is -- by whose authority is this spoken? God speaks unto us in this last age through his Son (Heb. 1:1). We are under law to Christ (I Cor. 9:21). All authority both in heaven and on earth has been given into his hands; therefore no one else speaks with any authority at all unless he speaks what Christ has spoken (Matt. 28:18-20). The gospel of Christ is the only message that this world had ever been given that has the power to condemn the souls of men who do not believe it (Mark 16:15-16).

**3. Literal or Figurative**

Good common sense employed in the study of the Word of God will easily determine when the language is literal or figurative. Men do not ordinarily have any difficulty in determining what is figurative when they read the daily papers about ordinary events.

Signs and symbols abound in the Bible, especially in the prophecies and the book of Revelation. There is no justification for basing a contention upon such a passage when no plain, positive statement of the Word of God can be found elsewhere to support it. Jesus called Herod "an old fox," but we understand easily that this is a figure of speech. The prophets said that John would come "leveling down the hills and filling the valleys and preparing the way," but we have no problem in understanding that John was not to be a road-builder or highway engineer. Yet, many people will take such passages as Revelation 20, and in spite of the highly symbolic language and the figures of speech abounding on every hand, will try to make a literal application of some portions of the chapter, selecting those verses which they think support some particular theory they have accepted. Such is not only irregular; it is unscriptural and contrary to all proper use of language. John meant to prevent such use of the book when he said, "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues which are written in this book; and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book" (Revelation 22:18-19).

**4. The Silence of the Bible**

Many theories and practices have been defended, not on the ground of what the Bible does say, but on the ground rather of what the Bible has NOT said. Thus a premium is placed on the silence of the Bible. We need to learn that what God has said cannot be properly respected unless we respect God's silence likewise. John tells us that to respect God's silence and to refuse to trespass upon it is demanded at our hands. "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son." (2 John 9.) Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they were not to go beyond that which was written (I Cor. 4:6.) To presume upon God's will when he has not spoken and transgress God's word by trespassing upon his silence is sinful and has always been condemned. We should he satisfied with what God has said, and abide within the testimony He has given. Faith requires this of us.