

## I. Setting the conclusion and then working toward it

Virgil Warren, PhD

## 1. Ways of referring to the problem

- a. It is a “foregone conclusion.”
- b. Prooftexting
- c. Getting the dogmatic principle ahead of the exegetical one
- d. Getting the practical problem ahead of the exegetical one
- e. Not reading the Bible “on its own terms”

## 2. Pattern of the procedure (the reason it has apparent validity)



People may “work backwards” from what works or what they have experienced to what they believe. At each step in the process, they choose what hooks up with other points that lead toward the desired conclusion. Setting the conclusion and working to it, yields firm interpretations in ambiguous cases, and twists statements in the direction of the foregone conclusion.

Instead of posing a conclusion and working out a scenario to get to it, interpretation should begin “blind” to where it is going. Otherwise, it assigns more significance to information than it should have.

## 3. Situations that foster the problem

a. Previous conclusions. People “run to” those positions that harmonize with what they believe on other matters. They do not want to change one point because it may mean changing some other ideas. Change implies a great deal of work and some personal confusion.

b. Denominational stance. People’s religious heritage inclines them to see what they expect to see. The familiar seems true; being familiar causes preference for that comfortable position instead of an alternative one. Identity and security come in part from a sense of “belonging” (cp. getting the dogmatic question ahead of the exegetical one).

c. Viewpoint of a hero, friend, or winsome personality. Someone faced with a major religious difference is more likely to accept a viewpoint that makes marriage possible, for example. The same can happen when a loved one is involved in divorce-remarriage, homosexual behavior, and the like. People rethink such matters to discover a way of understanding the biblical texts so as not to censor the ones they love or admire.

d. Need orientation. Reading the Bible in terms of one’s own needs makes the Bible relevant, but it has the danger of not reading the text on its own terms. The readers’ needs provide a context for statements, shape the way they take them, and make them want to make it address what the question they are asking.

e. Need for settling a controversy. People set out to interpret passages in a way that contradicts the viewpoint of someone they think is wrong—even on another subject.

f. Getting the practical problem ahead of the exegetical one

(1) Christians may feel that God will be angry with them for changing convictions; changing “feels” like forsaking. Of course, there is no reason to suppose their present viewpoint is correct; God will be pleased when they adjust to the truth.

(2) Christian leaders fear losing their teaching posts or preaching positions if they switch from a belief important to their peers.

(3) Christians do not want to face rejection by family, colleagues, and their circle of Christian friends.

(4) Taking a new viewpoint requires some “theological reshuffling” as a new stance may affect other aspects of a person’s belief system.