

E. Misidentifying the Intended Reference (frame of reference) Virgil Warren, PhD

A word, phrase, or general presentation does not mean whatever the expressions could mean; it means what fits the immediate flow of thought, the distant context, and the nature of the case. Readers need to look for the relevant contrast over against which the writer is speaking. They need to properly identify the topic an author is speaking about. They must transcend their existential situation and personality bent lest they put biblical statements in a foreign framework; otherwise, the dogmatic and practical principles get ahead of the exegetical one (see entries above). Readers have to read the biblical writer “on his own terms”; they have to “get inside the writer’s mind.”

Whether a passage can be applied beyond its intended reference depends on the nature of the case and how someone applies it. In any case, we must be careful with inferences. Certain larger contexts may bring features into the picture that are alien to the issue. Authors do not necessarily guard their statements with disclaimers against every conceivable misunderstanding on unaddressed topics. It is precarious to attempt to answer questions from biblical statements that do not address those questions. When people speak, they try to word their thoughts so as not to confuse their hearers about relevant issues; but they cannot guard against every misunderstanding on other topics.

****“Do not kill”** (Exodus 20:13; *etc.*) prohibits murder. It belongs in a social setting, not a political, martial, or legal one. It does not require pacifism by prohibiting war, police action, or self-defense since the Torah enjoined capital punishment elsewhere and God sanctioned warfare for Israel’s self-protection and overthrow of the Canaanite inhabitants of Palestine. The sixth commandment does not require vegetarianism since dietary laws specified what animals could be eaten when they speak of clean and unclean meats. It obviously does not prohibit eating vegetables; otherwise, people could not stay alive at all. The ultimate ethical principle is not “reverence for life.”

****“Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth”** (Exodus 21:24; *etc.*) belongs in the judicial setting, not in the social one (Matthew 5:38-42). “Lesser affirmation” and “adequate fulfillment” likewise look away from a larger, longer reference.

“These signs will follow them that believe.” Is Mark 16:17-18 (+ 20) talking about the whole gospel age or about the time of apostolic witness? In favor of the latter is a nearby statement of fulfillment in 16:20. At any rate, if no Christians today—in “this place” at least—can perform such miracles, it does no good to claim that they ought to be happening.

****The prediction in Psalm 16:10** (cp. Acts 2:27, 32) that Messiah would not see “corruption” does not prove that Jesus’ body did not stay in the tomb “*for three days and three nights*.” The degree of corruption Peter has in mind can be read off of the corruption that occurred with King David.

****In Romans 5:12** Paul says that sin entered the world through one man and death entered through sin. Some creationists take this beyond the humankind frame of reference and make it say that the death phenomenon as such entered through human sin. So, no animals supposedly died before the fall, and therefore fiat creation becomes the necessary view.

****Universal statements appear in delimiting frameworks.** In 1 Corinthians 5:9ff. Paul makes clear that not keeping company with fornicators applies only in cases where

fornicators call themselves brothers. It was a principle for the church setting, not the general social setting.

**In 1 Corinthians 14:14, 27 the reason for saying “he is praying to God” determines the sense in which Paul meant it. He is praying to God by default.

**Galatians 3:28 is said in connection with salvation. What is true soteriologically does not set the full pattern for Christian living; hence, there is no contradiction between “*no male or female*” and designated role emphasis. Paul does not deny male-female distinctions physically and psychologically so as to approve of homosexual behavior or homosexual marriage.

**In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 Paul says that women should keep silent in the churches and if they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home. Paul must be assuming some implicit delimiting framework since elsewhere he mentions women praying and prophesying with their heads covered (11:5, 13; cp. Acts 21:9). That limitation evidently related to respect for husbands (14:35) and orderly assembly (14:33a). Deference is the issue in the veil wearing discussion of 1 Corinthians 11 and in teaching according to 1 Timothy 2. It is difficult to see how asking questions would indicate insubordination as such. Paul must not mean “silent” in an absolute sense but has in mind women conducting themselves in a way that implied deference to their husbands and in a way that would cause confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33a). Let the husband speak for the family. His proscription could be comparable to the comment about eating at home (1 Corinthians 11:22). His concern then is for order and peace; hence, outside that limiting framework his proscription does not apply.

**“*Submit/defer to one another*” in Ephesians 5:21 belongs in an organizational setting, not simply in an interpersonal one. The participial phrase stands at the head of all the familial relations Paul goes on to identify, not just the husband-wife one. So it applies to parent-child relations as well, which would not be mutual.

**1 Timothy 2:15 does not show that a woman can save herself by having children, because Paul says, “*she will be saved by her childbearing*.” Obviously, the apostle means to use the expression to epitomize the distinctive aspect of a woman’s role in society and the home. She does not have to leave that role and go off after some “more important” career to satisfy God and be meaningful.

**“*Husband of one wife*” (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:6) belongs in a moral setting, not a legal one. It does not address deuterogamy, celibacy, remarriage after scriptural divorce or conversion, and other amoral marital statuses. While defending the proposition that Paul was requiring married eldership, some interpreters have tried to deny that marriage after the death of a spouse (deuterogamy) was being prohibited here. They may say that a remarried widower would not be the husband of two wives but one, obviously meaning “one at a time”; but that would be an unnecessary limitation of meaning for the wording: an unscripturally remarried divorcee would not be the husband of two wives either. Scripture does not discuss deuterogamy either way as a moral state for elders *per se*; it refers to it only as an acceptable status for general church members. But that becomes no reason to remove deuterogamy from stricture in 1 Timothy 3:3, because scripture considers it okay for general members to remain unmarried. Such interpreters have assumed some unexpressed reason for a legal directive here (by positive commandment vs. moral law via inherent necessity).

**Things that are true are not necessarily meant by this text.

****Jews of Jesus' day were reading the Messianic prophecies in terms of national Israel instead of spiritual Israel. They did so especially because of their current political oppression by the Romans.**

****Note the illustration about provision in a company's contract for two hours off with pay to allow for daytime employees to vote. The night crew wanted two hours off with pay as well!**

****The Great Commission did not refer only to the apostles, to whom Jesus was indeed speaking in Matthew 28. The process was to be carried out to the end of the age, and they were to teach their disciples everything Jesus commanded his disciples, which would include the commission itself; hence, the commission is self-referencing.**

****Does the Old Testament forbid cremation when it requires a dead body to be buried the same day (Deuteronomy 21:22-23)? The prohibition may assume the cultural practice of burial rather than cremation and call for a certain way of doing it—to avoid disrespect and disease.**

****“Keep off the grass” does not mean no one can mow it.**

****By and large, the frame-of-reference issue lies behind the contemporary debate over the proper approach to the early chapters of Genesis.**

****Karl Barth used the notion of eschatological limit to allow for universalism even though scripture uses “forever” to describe the condemnation of the wicked. The idea posits the possibility that “forever” stands within an implicit, unexpressed limitation in future eternity. (See *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 130-31.)**

The intended frame of reference makes it important to discover a writing's purpose. Knowing the purpose of writing adds clarity to what it says and what it includes. What it includes, the reader should automatically associate with the stated purpose of writing. Hebrews, for example, calls itself “*a word of exhortation*” (13:22; cp. 6:9-13). That accounts for the great number of “let us” expressions in the book: 4:1, 11, 14, 16; 6:1; 10:22, 23, 24; 12:1b, 1c, 28; 13:13, 15.