

# ERRORS IN REASONING

Some may remember Ron Abel's lively series of talks at the Rathmines Bible School teenage class on the traps to watch out for when debating the Truth with non-Christadelphians. In discussion we often feel that something isn't quite right, but we let it go because we can't put our finger on it. However, once we recognise and clearly perceive a failure in logic or the use of emotive words we can easily correct the problem. It also helps us to think clearly and saves us being led by the nose by an experienced debator.

Here is a quick recap of the main points.

## 1. Be aware of emotive words.

Words have the ability to convey both information and emotional impact. Words which have emotional charge are called "emotive" words. The same incident or characteristic can be described in words with very different emotional overtones. For instance, if a person persists in an argument he may be variously described (depending on the observer's own viewpoint), as "firm", "obstinate", or "a pig-headed fool"! Other examples of this divergence of opinion are:

"I am righteously indignant, you are annoyed; he is making a fuss about nothing!"

"I have reconsidered it, you have changed your mind; he has gone back on his word!"

Two newspapers described the same event thus: "COMMUNISTS SWEEP AHEAD IN FIVE MILE ADVANCE" and "REDS STOPPED COLD AFTER FIVE MILE PUSH". Often in public debating, attempts are made to sway the audience with emotive words. A mormon once stopped a discussion which he was losing by saying that it was an argument and "we don't believe in arguing".

## 2. Errors in reasoning.

Rather than supplying evidence for the truth of their case, people often use language which evokes attitudes likely to cause acceptance of the argument. Thus they may succeed in being persuasive despite an illogical argument. This may follow one or more of the patterns listed below.

### a) Appeal to force. (*Latin "argumentum ad baculum"*)

"Might makes right" — "The Roman Catholic Church is the best because it's the biggest and oldest". Some people have been converted to Roman Catholicism merely upon beholding the magnificent St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. In World War 2, Churchill is reported to have said that the Pope had suggested a certain course of action. Stalin squashed the Pope's plan by caustically asking "And how many divisions did you say the Pope had available for combat duty?"

### b) Abuse. (*"argumentum ad hominem"*)

Instead of trying to disprove the truth of what is said, one attacks the person who made the assertion. As Dr. Thomas once said, "People who resort to personalities are showing the weakness of their position, that it cannot be sustained with reason and logic". Thus they argue that a person's ideas are no good because he was convicted of stealing, or he has big ears and a bent nose. Christadelphian Truth is often ridiculed because of what people consider to be ideosyncrasies of their members, for instance, short hair.

**c) Argument based on the opponent's circumstances.**

This is where a person ignores the question of whether the contention is true or not, and seeks instead to prove that his opponent's views are based on special circumstances. Thus it is assumed that the reasons a person brings forward are mere rationalisations of conclusions dictated by self-prejudice. Whilst this may be the case sometimes, it is by no means always the case. An example of this fallacy is "You can't believe what Prof. X says about the importance of higher salaries for teachers. As a teacher himself he would naturally be in favour of an increase".

**d) Argument from ignorance. ("argumentum ad ignorantiam")**

It is assumed that an argument is true simply because it has not been proved false and vice versa. For example, "There can't be a God because you can't see him", "miracles couldn't happen because they cannot be scientifically proved", and "A person is innocent until he is proved guilty".

**e) Appeal to pity. ("argumentum ad misericordiam")**

This is where the facts are disregarded and pity is appealed to as the basis for a decision. The woman of Tekoa successfully had her murderous son saved from justice when she used this appeal before David. David then allowed Absalom back into favour—a move which ended in the deaths of thousands of Israelites. The classic example of this argument is when children die and it is argued that their souls have gone to heaven and are saved. How can we be so cruel and inhumane as to believe otherwise?

**f) The majority must be right. ("argumentum ad populum")**

This is an attempt to win support for a conclusion by arousing the feelings of the multitude. The popular ideas of the church must be right because "everybody knows it". The same applies to the theory of Evolution. Certain products are advertised as "best" because most people use them, a certain policy is right and wise because most people accept it. However, we know that Christ warned us that "narrow is the way" and "Many are called but few are chosen."

**g) Appeal to authority. ("ad verecundiam")**

Where the conclusion is sought to be proved because some famous or respected person says it is that way "it must be right because X said it was". The Pope's decrees are therefore laws to millions.

**h) Generalisation.**

Believe in Jesus and you'll be saved—"that's all", it is argued, without examining the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the Name of Christ Jesus. This is a case of taking something specific and making it general. The inverse can also be done. "What you bought today you eat tomorrow, therefore, if you bought raw meat today, you eat raw meat tomorrow". Clearly this is fallacious, and has not taken into account other factors which render the general law invalid for this specific case.

**i) Begging the question. (arguing in circles)**

When one assumes the thing which one is trying to prove, e.g., How do you know that Roman Catholicism is right? Because the Pope is infallible. How is he right? Because he is head of God's true church.

**j) Complex question.**

"Did your sales increase as a result of your misleading advertising?" Either yes or no implies guilt. Mormons may ask: Do you think that it is important that there are latter day prophets?—thus attempting to get you to agree that their 12 elders are Divine appointees. The question is complex and needs to be divided. Are there latter day prophets? If not, the importance of their existence becomes a non-question.

argumentum a silentio

- says that if something is not mentioned specifically, is omitted, or absent, then the something doesn't exist, has no weight, or reason to be considered as valid.

This is like supposing that parables about the Kingdom of heaven (ie. Mt 13: 36-40, 44, 45+46, +47 + 48) don't teach anything about 1) resurrection, or 2) Jesus judging people for eternal life or death, since neither is mentioned explicitly.

Yet from vv 36-40, + from vv 47 + 48 these parables teach a discerning between 2 types, good + bad, with the bad being destroyed by fire or thrown away, strongly implying judgment. Also, resurrection is implied in vv 40 + 49 because the above is done "at the end of the age". Further more, the parables in vv 44, + 45 + 46

teach us about the value of the Kingdom, + not the 2 aforementioned doctrines.

What is to be said for the promises to Abraham, or other important doctrines in these 4 parables? Silence, yes, but certainly not non-existence or irrelevance just because they are not mentioned here. Each parable does a marvellous job of teaching 1 or a few truths, but no 1 parable, or a handful, show us all things concerning "the Kingdom of God + the name of Jesus Christ," Ac 8:12.

Bro. Jerome Knorr