

## In the Light of Logic

### ***Argumentum ad Baculum: Arguing by Force, Fear or Intimidation***

In a scenario played out thousands of times daily all over the world, a restless two year old eyes the toy of bigger child and goes to investigate. "I want to play with that," he announces. "No!," he is told, in no uncertain terms. "It's *my toy*." The toy possessor may even advance an argument for why he alone should be able to play with it: "My Mommy and Daddy gave it to me for my birthday and I want to play with it." The coveting child then thinks of a rebutting argument--a reason for the other child to give up the toy: "If you let me play with it, I'll invite you to my birthday party." Again the answer is "No, it's MY TOY!" Having run out of arguments or valuables to offer in exchange, the covetous child gives up and leaves. In this schoolyard interaction lies an essential truth: In the absence of reason and truth, brute power will predominate.

The two boys who went on a killing spree at Columbine High School ran out of arguments for their superiority over athletes, blacks, *etc.*, and got the attention they wanted by brute force. Every day, criminals of all sorts run out of reasons for competing within the rule of law and decide to take what they want by force, threat or intimidation.

It turns out that this phenomenon has a long and storied history, and has a Latin name: the *Ad Baculum* fallacy of logic. *Baculum* is Latin for "force," and *Argumentum ad Baculum* is the Latin name for an argument made by the appeal to force rather than appealing to reason or evidence. This fallacy is usually committed by those who have failed to persuade by any other means and who finally resort to force or the threat of force to cause acceptance of their position. This is aptly put by the old saying, "might is right," instead of "right is right," as determined by an objective standard of morality.

Many Christians misconstrue the meaning of Scripture and come to the conclusion that God is essentially a heavenly bully, threatening extinction to those who do not believe in Him or obey His commandments. They believe that God's primary appeal to mankind is as a Sovereign ruler making rightful demands upon His subjects under the threat of force and intimidation. The problem with that view is that it does not fit with the way Jesus Christ lived and taught, nor with the whole picture painted by Scripture. God is primarily interested in a *relationship* with us as His children, and a child who is terrorized into compliance is not going to be filled with love for his father. He is more likely to be resentful and rebellious.

In Daniel 3:6, King Nebuchadnezzar commanded that all of his subjects must worship an image of gold or else be cast into the midst of the "burning fiery furnace." Having no rational basis on which to ask such devotion to his image, the king resorted to the threat of death to command obedience. There is no mention of any reasons for such worship other than the avoidance of the furnace. Reason would dictate that some evidence be offered in support of such worship, like maybe "I am a god, therefore you should worship me!" But he offered no reason whatsoever.

The threat of death was, clearly, logically irrelevant to the truth or falsehood of the proposition that his image should be worshiped. It is interesting to note in Daniel 3:29 that after Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego withstood the king and were delivered from the furnace by God, the king made a *new* decree, also enforced by the threat of death, that all his subjects should worship the God of the Jews. Even having experienced the power of the true God, his thinking really never changed. He persisted in his demand for absolute obedience under the threat of death, even though he was then trying to honor God.

Another example of this fallacy is in John 7:1: "After these things Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him." They sought to kill him after they were not able to disprove his claims by reasonable means. He always answered their questions and shut their mouths with the power of his words. As Luke 20:26 says, "And they could not take hold of his words before the people: and they marveled at his answer, and held their peace."

Their conclusion was that Jesus was an imposter and a blasphemer, but they could not prove it logically nor offer any evidence to support it. Hence they resorted to force to cause acceptance of their conclusion, when rational methods failed. Thus, they played into the hands of the Adversary due to their blinding envy, seeking to kill Jesus rather than taking the reasonable course of action, which was to hear what he had to say and find out whether he was who he said he was.

In Acts 4 is a good example of the *Ad Baculum* fallacy committed by the Sanhedrin in response to the healing of the lame man in Acts 3:

**Acts 4:14-17 (KJV)**

(14) And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.

(15) But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves,

(16) Saying what shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem: and we cannot deny it. (17) But that it spread no further among the people, let us straightly threaten them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name.

In the face of such overwhelming evidence of the power of God, the Sanhedrin could find nothing to say against it. They were without any reason whatsoever to deny the power or the authenticity of the words that the apostles spoke. They were left with two alternatives: believe for themselves, which would have been the logical choice in the face of such compelling evidence, or threaten the apostles with punishment or death to eliminate this disturbance of their religious equilibrium. The latter was an illogical choice, finding them guilty of a logical fallacy, using force or the threat of force to cause acceptance of their position.

A corollary to this fallacy is the appeal to practical consequences. In common terms, it could be called "fear-motivation." This fallacy comes in more subtle forms than outright threats or appeals to force. It occurs whenever one attempts to persuade on the basis of the consequences of not obeying rather than offering evidence or reasons to believe a given proposition. This is analogous to the parent who tells his child not to steal because he might get caught. The consequence of being caught is logically irrelevant to the reasons why one should not steal. Such a reason might be that the object does not belong to the child and he ought to behave toward others and their property as he would have them behave toward him. This would explain the principle to the child and help him do the right thing, even if evil consequences were not forthcoming. On the other hand, the parent might attempt to bribe the child to do good by offering him positive consequences: "If you're good, I'll give you a lollipop." But what *logical* connection is there between doing good and a lollipop?

The fear-of-consequences model of parenting and management traps people in the most childish type of motivation. In order to mature as adults and as Christians, we must learn to move beyond fear of consequences to a deep commitment to do the right thing regardless of the outcome. Logically and ethically, one ought not to act on the basis of what consequences may ensue, but on the basis of what is right and true. At times, telling the truth may result in negative consequences but, in the long run, be most profitable in terms of self-respect.

Philosopher J.J. Moulds aptly describes the limitations of this "fear of consequences" model of parenting, but the same goes for any exercising of authority:

"If you don't behave, Dad will give you a good licking when he gets home." But why shouldn't the child do it? Do not let these rewards or punishments be the reason. The result of such bribery ethics is a child reared to be good as long as evil does not offer a more substantial bribe... It results in the totalitarian mind, the man who does not mind loss of liberty, so long as he gets what he regards as his share of food, shelter, clothing and the comforts of life.

Children should earlier in life learn the reasons why, in terms of consequences, yes, but not merely their own pain or pleasure; rather, consequences in terms of injury to others and one's own internal loss of self-respect. In the case of so many of us, we are good only so long as it is profitable to be so. As long as penalty is slight, we do it time and again... Fear of punishment may keep a child from wrongdoing for the moment, but later the fear may be connected in his mind only with getting caught doing wrong.

The question naturally arises from reading the Bible: Does God motivate man to act on His Word by threat or the appeal to force? The answer is a qualified no. It is qualified because the Bible does reveal God as the judge of all the earth, and the executor of His righteous wrath upon evildoers. This would be termed His "severity," to use the biblical term from Romans 11:22. It is a part of His righteousness and holiness that one day evildoers will get what they so richly deserve. However, this "day of wrath" will

take place only after a lengthy time of grace, during which God is giving all men an opportunity to hear about His Son and turn away from evil.

Kindness and longsuffering are always God's primary way of dealing with mankind. This time of the gentleness or kindness of God is clearly described in the following verse.

**Romans 2:4 (NIV)**

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

If anyone could demand respect and obedience and require it by the use of force, God could. But He always motivates primarily according to the dictates of logic and truth, providing evidence for belief and obedience. Contrary to traditional Christian teaching, the fear of hell is never held over the head of man as a reason to believe His Word. The doctrine of "eternal torment" in hell is a terrible distortion of God's heart. It depicts God as a vengeful and punitive tyrant who demands obedience, and if he doesn't get it, subjects the disobedient one to everlasting punishment. Besides being scripturally groundless, it is demented logic to assert that in response to 70 years of sinful disobedience God is justified in repaying the sinner with *timeless torment*.

As a loving parent does, God spells out for childish man the consequences of his unbelief. Sometimes the consequences are the immediate result of our own misdeeds. Sometimes God Himself is the agent of justice, as in the Flood of Noah's time. But is His primary goal of obedience so compelling that He is willing to threaten and intimidate people? In the case of the Flood, God simply asked Noah to speak for Him and warn the people to repent and tell them what would happen to them if they didn't. Many chose to disregard the warning and stood in the consequence of their choice. In the death of the firstborn of Egypt in Exodus, God allowed everyone to protect himself by the application of blood to the lintels of their doorposts. Thus, those who had a death in their family were those who refused to believe Moses.

God's way is to honestly describe the consequences of man's unbelief and lovingly warn him of the dangers of his error, rather than threatening him into compliance. When God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, He gave them the opportunity to disobey by placing in their midst the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He plainly warned them of the consequences that would befall them if they partook, but not with the intent of *scaring* them into obedience. He said "you will surely die," not "I will punish you." His desire was to have them walk uprightly from the heart, not out of compulsion or threat, but out of love. Fear did not enter the Paradise picture until sin introduced it.

2 Peter 3:9 says:

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness-- but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

If it is not God's will that any should perish, then they must perish because of their own unbelief and ignorance of His Word. Satan, God's arch-enemy, is the author of death (Heb. 2:14). Why then would God use the threat of death or sickness (which is death in part) as a means to move men to worship Him? He would not, for God does not sacrifice principle for selfish gain.

For Him, the end does not justify the means. Rather, He operates strictly within the confines of justice, logic and love, and does not use evil that good may come (Rom. 3:8). Though He desires that all men be saved and come unto an accurate knowledge of His Word (1 Tim. 2:4), He is not willing to resort to any means to achieve this end. The Devil, on the other hand, chooses as his primary purpose to hinder and obstruct the true God, and he will use any means to achieve that end. Among these means is the appeal to threat and force, intimidation and fear, which are all incorporated in the logical fallacy of *Ad Baculum*.