

## IN THE LIGHT OF LOGIC

### Argumentum Ad Hominem

A logical fallacy that is very common both in the Word of God and in present day life is *Argumentum Ad Hominem*. This is an argument that is not addressed to the truth or falsehood of an argument, but rather attempts to discredit the person advancing the argument by attacking his character, circumstances or hypocrisy. It might come in the form of attacking his motives, his background, his lack of advanced degrees or some other circumstance that is logically irrelevant to the truth or falsehood of the argument itself. There are several variations of this fallacy.

*Ad hominem abusive* is committed when a person's character is called into question instead of addressing his argument. *Circumstantial ad hominem* is committed when it is concluded that a person's claim is false simply because it is in his interest to make the claim. For instance, person A may say that person B's argument that gun control is ineffective is false because person B is a member of the National Rifle Association, and so of course he would say that. It would be prudent to be suspicious of the claims of a tobacco company's "research" that tobacco does not cause cancer, but to conclude that it is false *because* it is produced by a tobacco company is fallacious reasoning. If a conclusion is to be logically arrived at, the evidence must be considered. *Ad hominem tu quoque* is concluding that a person's claims are false because they are inconsistent with his other words or his actions (*i.e.*, hypocritical). Interestingly, Jesus decried the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and encouraged his disciples to heed their teaching, but avoid their example (Matt. 23:3). Had he told them to avoid their teaching because of their poor example, he would have been committing this logical fallacy. Learning about logical fallacies helps us appreciate the essentially rational appeal of the Word of God.

Whatever one feels about the personality or character of Thomas Edison, for example, one cannot invalidate his discovery or the value of the electric light on that basis. Were one to reject the use of the electric light because of a dislike for Edison personally, he would be acting irrationally and robbing himself of a blessing. So it is with God's Word. Its perfection and power cannot be negated by the personal traits of the men who wrote it or by the actions of the men and women who believe it. As much as God's Word validates the necessity of good character, it also reveals that the issues of character and truth must be kept distinct.

Obviously, the character of a person is very relevant to establishing his general credibility and whether he should be trusted. If he is a habitual liar, his occasional attempts to be truthful will not be taken seriously. So why is a logical fallacy employed when character issues are addressed in relationship to the truth or falsehood of a particular statement or argument? The key issue is *relevance*.

Though important, the personal character of a person, is, strictly speaking, *logically* irrelevant to the truth or falsehood of what he says. Very evil men can speak the truth and men of upstanding character can speak falsehoods. Billy Graham is widely respected as a man of integrity and good Christian character, but to believe every word he says on that basis is irrational and illogical. Indeed, the enemy uses people of sincerity and credibility to unwittingly promote falsehoods. Sincerity, credibility and general good Christian character are no guarantees

for truth in a propositional sense. The proposition that “all dogs have fleas” is not made more or less true or false by *who* argues for it. The statement is true or false in relationship to the *reality* it asserts.

Our present occupant of the White House has been the subject of much discussion as to his character, and whether character counts in leadership. He has even been caught in a number of very public lies. But does that mean that we can logically conclude that everything he may argue for in the future will be false because he has been caught in various lies in the past? As much as we may find satisfaction in saying yes because of our personal distaste for the man’s lack of character, if we are to be logical and rational, we must say no. Logic demands that we fairly examine a man’s arguments and prove or disprove them on their own merits and not on the basis of his character. The reason American courts do not allow a jury to know of a defendant’s previous convictions is to guard against the tendency to find him guilty in the present instance simply because he has been convicted of something in the past.

Since we are talking about legal questions, what about the role of character witnesses in a trial –doesn’t this demonstrate that it is not fallacious to look at the credibility of a witness by looking at his motivation, background, etc? The issue is not whether or not there is value in determining the validity of a source or a witness. Clearly there is, and both the legal system and historical research depend on methods to test the credibility of sources. But the judgment testimony can often be colored by subjectivity, making it less valuable in the determination of guilt or innocence than the value of physical evidence.

Some of the most compelling courtroom dramas revolve around the testimony of witnesses and defendants. Often the evidence leading to conviction in a murder trial is the testimony of several eye-witnesses whose testimony agrees. But many African Americans in the “Old South” were convicted on trumped up charges and brutally hanged on the basis of false testimony by people who claimed to be “eye-witnesses,” but who had conspired to lie in order to frame the defendant. Later appeals based on actual physical evidence (fingerprints on a murder weapon, a wallet left at the scene, etc.), would have exonerated them.

So we see that the value of the testimony of witnesses is relative to the amount and kind of physical evidence available. The less physical evidence there is, the more a jury must weigh the credibility of testimony. In the case of Clinton v. Lewinsky, it was a matter of his word against hers until the stain on the dress, *physical evidence*, demonstrated that she was telling the truth and he was lying. Subsequent attempts by Clinton’s lawyers to assail her credibility were fruitless in the face of this damning evidence, and he was forced to admit his lie.

The jury in a criminal trial must weigh the totality of the evidence and come to a *reasonable* conclusion of guilt or innocence. Reason is to outweigh emotion, and fact must be separated from fiction. The jury must decide if there is reasonable doubt or reasonable certainty of either guilt or innocence. A juror’s thinking is fallacious if he reaches his conclusion based on the testimony of someone he deems credible because of his apparent sincerity, his neat appearance, his degrees and titles or his apparently sterling character, but overlooks or rejects contradictory facts or physical evidence.

In practice, the *ad hominem* fallacy is so common in our culture that it has practically been accepted as normative. Politicians use it routinely to manipulate the public mind, and lawyers use it to manipulate juries with emotional appeals. At least some of what is wrong with the American legal system must be laid at the feet of the American public who serve as jurors. They appear not to have sufficient training in logical reasoning that they are able to come to a “reasonable” conclusion, or come to an understanding of a “reasonable” doubt. This shows up in the form of “justifying the guilty and condemning the righteous” (Prov. 17:15).

Advertising messages are replete with emotional appeals that center on the imagined credibility and character of a celebrity. Though these celebrities know practically nothing about the product and have no expertise whatever that would qualify them to speak with authority about it, people will buy the product in droves because they like the person associated with it. One of the more logically irrelevant assertions in recent memory is: “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.” The absurdity of this ad would make it humorous were it not for what it reveals about the gullibility of the American public.

### **“We Be Not Born of Fornication”**

It might help us to see how this fallacy was employed by the enemies of Jesus Christ, a person of perfect character. In John 8, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their rejection of him, and in the heat of the discussion, the Pharisees respond by saying, “We be not born of fornication” (John 8:41). The Pharisees believed that Mary was impregnated by Joseph before they were married, making Jesus a son born out of wedlock. This was a false accusation, since God was His father. But what if the accusation had been true? Would his being born out of wedlock negate the truth of his words? Clearly and logically, the answer must be no. The circumstances of a person’s birth are logically irrelevant to his present situation and the truth or falsehood of his words. Interestingly, Jesus never answers this charge, but over and over directs their attention to the evidence of his works, as in the following scripture:

#### **John 10:36-39 (KJV)**

(36) Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?

(37) If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not.

(38) But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.

(39) Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand.

### **“A Prophet Is Not Without Honor”**

Another example of this fallacy as faced by Jesus is expressed in the statement, “A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house.” Notice the preoccupation of his enemies on the circumstances of his family.

**Matthew 13:53-57 (KJV):**

(53) And it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these parables, he departed thence.

(54) And when he was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works?

(55) Is this not the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas?

(56) And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things?.

(57) And they were offended in him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house.

How do the circumstances of a man's family or upbringing bear logically on what he says in the present as far as proving or disproving the truth of his statements? Circumstances like this exist in every man's background, but they are logically irrelevant to evaluating the truth-value of any statement he makes in the present. Christopher Columbus' background is logically irrelevant to whether or not he discovered America. One cannot ultimately determine the validity of another's statements or achievements by looking at his background, personal life or special circumstances. His statements or achievements must be evaluated on their own merits or disproved on the basis of evidence or logic.

**The Apostle Paul Answers His Critics**

The Apostle Paul encountered this fallacy also, as indicated by certain sections of the Epistles. He was being accused of misconduct in his personal life, as is implied by the following statement from 1 Corinthians:

**1 Corinthians 9:3-7 (KJV):**

(3) Mine answer to them that do examine me is this,

(4) Have we not power to eat and to drink? (5) Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas?

(6) Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working?

(7) Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock?

Obviously the Apostle Paul was being accused of misconduct in what he ate and drank, women he was seen with, not working to support himself while amongst the believers, etc. And the accusations were designed to discredit his apostolic ministry. But all of these issues are logically irrelevant to the truth or falsehood of what he spoke as an apostle. What if he got drunk every day, ran around with every woman in town and never worked? Would that invalidate the book of Ephesians as the greatest revelation ever given to man? Ephesians stands as written, even if Paul died the next day or went back to persecuting Christians.

Another charge leveled at Paul was that he was more concerned with making money by his teaching than he was concerned for the Gospel itself. This charge is implicit in this scripture:

### **1 Thessalonians 2:1 and 5 (KJV)**

- (1) For yourselves, brethren, know our entrance in unto you, that it was not in vain:
- (5) For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloak of covetousness; God is witness.

God entrusted him with His Word because his heart was pure to speak the truth as pleasing God, not men. But for the sake of argument, what if he suddenly did become covetous? Would that invalidate his words or render him incapable of speaking the truth? Certainly not. Even if he made a million dollars a day teaching the Word of God, ultimately, the truth of what he spoke would still be determined, not on the basis of the size of his paycheck, but on the basis of his words themselves. Do they fit with the Scriptures? (Acts 17:11). Do they come to pass when believed and acted upon? (Deuteronomy 18:22). These are issues logically relevant to the question.

### **“The Accuser of the Brethren”**

As “the accuser of the brethren,” one of Satan’s main methods is to attempt to discredit the believer’s testimony by casting aspersions on his or her personal character and motivation. What men do and say about the Bible, either for or against it, is not a logical basis upon which to judge its truth or falsehood. Much evil has been done by people who thought that they represented God and the Bible, but this does not discredit either, logically speaking. In fact, the Bible predicts this very behavior, even among those who supposedly are “believers.” The validity of the Bible must be judged by the evidence of its own words. Does it contain errors of fact or history? Does it contradict itself? Does it accurately describe reality? Does the God it describes keep His promises when they are believed? These are the questions that must be asked to logically verify or invalidate it.

The record of Baalam in Numbers 22 and 23 serves to illustrate the principle that the truth of a man’s words cannot be invalidated by examining a man’s personal life. Baalam is found disobedient to God’s Word and out in “left field” spiritually, yet proceeds to deliver a profoundly true prophecy in Numbers 23. Apparently God does not indulge in the *ad hominem* fallacy. Although He calls men to very high standards of virtue and excellence in their personal life, He at times has given His Word to men who were not exactly paragons of excellence of personal character. Though character is important, it is apparently not as important to God *who* speaks the Word as *that it gets spoken*.

If God had to wait for men to be of sinless character before He would allow them the privilege of speaking for Him, only one man would have ever had that privilege: the Lord Jesus Christ. Rather, God gives His Word to men who believe Him, and it is this faith that God accepts for righteousness. This is a logical and equitable standard whereby God can uphold His ethical standards and yet still have men to speak for Him.

God has no pen to write His Word but man’s, and no mouth with which to declare His Word but man’s. His primary desire is to bring those who represent Him to the place that the testimony of their mouth, the motivation of their heart and the virtue of their actions all harmonize. We who endeavor to speak for God must recognize the methods of the Adversary and be “blameless”

and “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2). On the other hand, we must discipline ourselves to seek the truth wherever we may find it and learn to separate the message from the messenger. Sometimes even jackasses speak the truth (Num. 22:30). As long as the Adversary can deceive men’s minds with illogic to the end that they look primarily at the flesh with all its personal idiosyncrasies and imperfections, instead of at the truth that a person speaks, he can be successful in keeping people from hearing and believing the Word of God, which “effectually works in them that believe” (1 Thess. 2:13).