

## **“When Arguing With a Fool...”**

**By Paul R. Blake**

"When arguing with a fool, be certain he is not similarly engaged" (Dehoff's Commentary, Vol. III, Dehoff Publications, 1977, p. 299). Actually this saying is part of an entry that reads as follows: "Proverbs 26:4 - 'Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him.' One must be careful in dealing with a fool to be certain he is not doing the same. My mother said to me many times, 'Son, when arguing with a fool, be certain he is not similarly engaged'." (George DeHoff)

I have enjoyed that bit of wisdom immensely. When I was a much younger man, an older man who never had a chance to finish school told me that there were some discussions that were losers from the start. He said that one should "never argue with a feeler or a fool." His point was that the feeler bases his arguments on emotions, and the fool bases his arguments on ignorance; and so, rational debate with either is an exercise in futility.

Sometimes we appear foolish in combatting error because we use the reasoning techniques of a fool when we teach or write. Solomon wrote many things about fools in the book of Proverbs, some of which sound strikingly familiar. Proverbs 13:16 - "Every prudent man deals with knowledge: but a fool lays open his folly"; 23:9 - "Do not speak in the ears of a fool: for he will despise the wisdom of your words"; 18:2 - "A fool has no delight in understanding, But only in expressing his own heart"; 20:3 - "It is honorable for a man to stop striving, Since any fool can start a quarrel." These things serve to remind us to use wisdom and prudence when dealing with error.

What are the debate techniques of a fool? Suffice it to say that one will not find examples of these mistakes in the works of inspired Bible writers. But we can be certain that when uninspired men fail to study or attempt to prove the scripturally unsubstantiated, that blunders will abound. These mistakes hinder our effectiveness in the ongoing battle against sin and apostasy. What fallacious arguments do we commonly hear (and possibly use ourselves)?

Fallacy of irrelevant premise. This occurs when the reason given to support a conclusion has no bearing on the truth of the matter. "Why did I find the defendant guilty of grand theft auto? Because there have been a lot of cars stolen here lately!" The reason doesn't support the conclusion. Another example: "Why do I believe playing 'Old Maids' is a sin? Because gambling with cards is sinful!" Certainly gambling is sin, but the debater has failed to make a connection between Old Maids and gambling.

Fallacy of appeal to ignorance. This argument displaces the burden of proof from the one making a claim to the one doubting the claim. "I believe that the planet Pluto is inhabited by a race of ice-loving Disney dogs. Since no one has been to Pluto to prove me wrong, then I must be right." I grow weary just thinking about the number of times I have heard brethren assert something and when asked for proof fire back with "prove me wrong!" The burden of proof falls to the one making the statement.

Ad hominem arguments... attack the man rather than the point. Suppose I am losing an argument with a Calvinist; in frustration, I answer his point with "you can't believe him, he's a Calvinist!" Do you suppose I will have carried the day with that outburst? One does not win a debate by mocking his opponent; he wins by carefully addressing and dismantling his opponent's arguments. However, there are a few occasions where ad hominem arguments can be effective. If one can show that his opponent's position is built upon his ignorance or bias, then that will prove to be an effective means of disqualifying his position. But, just calling the man ignorant or biased just makes one look foolish.

Fallacy of appeal to ambiguous authority. "They say" or "some experts say"..... So what! What experts? What is the specific area of their experience? I do not want my plumber giving me dental advice. Unnamed authorities have no authority at all.

Fallacy of appeal to popularity and tradition. "We have always" and "most people believe" is not a basis for establishing Bible authority. Most people do not go to college and get a degree. Does that constitute a valid argument for avoiding higher education?

Strawman fallacy. "My opponent believes that walking in the rain is baptism. After all, he believes in sprinkling for baptism, and rain sprinkles water on one's head; so, here is why I believe walking in the rain is not baptism." Debate your opponent's position. Don't build a false tenet for him and then tear it apart; don't put words in his mouth.

Slippery slope fallacy. "My opponent takes off his shoes and socks to wade in the creek. It won't be long before he goes to a nudist beach and takes off all of his clothes." I had someone tell me about ten years ago that because I wrap gifts for my children to open on December 25th, that I will eventually "go Catholic" if I don't watch out.

False dilemma fallacy. I had an exchange with a Calvinist on our local BBS. He stated that I either had to accept the tenets of Calvinism or deny that God has all power. He only presented two alternatives. There is a third, namely, I believe that God has all power and that He exercised that power by delegating the choice to obey or disobey to man. If I obey, God manifests His power by rewarding me; if I disobey, God demonstrates His power by punishing me.

Golden mean fallacy. I call this the straddle the fence fallacy, adopted by those who think that the answer is an average of the positions of the two opposing sides. While truth is seldom at the extremes of human opinion, it is not the mean of those two extremes. In any given debate, one or both can be wrong. Both cannot be right.

Begging the question fallacy. Restating the conclusion as a premise does not prove the conclusion. "Why do I believe it is wrong to have lectureships? Well because whenever brethren get together to have lectures, they have sinned." Hasn't proven a thing, right? Boiled down, all that has been said is "it's wrong because it's wrong." Give evidence or give up.

Circular reasoning. "This ancient artifact is 2 million years old."

"How do you know it is 2 million years old?"

"Because I found it in this 2 million year old rock layer."

Need I say more?

There are several other goofs that we all occasionally make; for example: failing to distinguish between point and illustration, and failing to distinguish between cause and effect. But, I believe that carefully reading the scriptures and judiciously reading our opponent's point will eliminate most of these gaffes. Remember, not one of the Bible writers used the debate techniques of a fool. We should take care to walk in their steps. "When arguing with a fool, be certain he is not similarly engaged."