Arguments and Argumentative Fallacies:

A Primer for Church Officers

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The first to plead his case seems just,
Until another comes and examines him. Prov. 18:17

Introduction.

Church officers are given responsibilities to govern the church, and/or its resources. In carrying out their ordained responsibilities, officers must deliberate and reach a decision. Arguments, properly understood, are the reasons given for advocating a view or a position. Every officer must learn to argue and to evaluate arguments, if the officer intends to be able to function in a deliberative body.

I. The Big Issue: Distinguishing matters of principle from matters of expediency.

There are two fundamentally different categories of considerations with which officers must concern themselves. Matters of *principle* are matters in which biblical and confessional values inform the decision (e.g., whether believers should worship). Matters of *expediency* are matters in which pragmatic considerations inform the decision (whether we should worship at 10 am or 11 am). Most decisions involve both categories; there are decisions of principle and decisions of expediency to make. However, the two categories must be carefully distinguished for two reasons. First, no matter of expediency or efficiency can ever be permitted to take precedence over matters of principle. What is true and right can never be negotiated; what is effective or expedient is always to be negotiated. Second, these categories must be distinguished because the material available for solving each is different. Matters of principle are determined by appeal to the Bible as the primary standard and to any confessional documents as a secondary standard. In such matters, a minister, equipped with a theological education, should be prepared to provide leadership to the other officers, in researching the history of the church's opinions on the matter, and in evaluating those opinions in the light of scripture. Matters of expediency are determined by appeal to

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the natural order of creation, to the laws of nature and human nature.[1] The minister has no special advantage in these areas, and no special responsibility for leadership. His knowledge of the world and of human nature are not necessarily different from, or better than, his officers' knowledge of the same.

II. Why we argue or deliberate.

The most God-honoring and saint-honoring thing an officer can do (when acting in an official capacity) is to argue. <u>Rightly understood, arguing is not a matter of coercing, name-calling, or manipulating; it is a matter of indicating the *reasons* why you currently hold your current view.</u> In doing this, you allow others to fulfil their responsibility to discern whether your view accords with truth (whether specially or naturally revealed). This honors God, who wishes believers (and especially leaders) to be discerning. This honors other saints, because it permits them to follow the wishes of God rather than our wishes. If, by contrast, we say, "I believe we should do x," without indicating the *reasons* why we should do x, <u>we are essentially asserting our will over others</u>. Yet these others are under no obligation to do our will, but to do the will of God, which can only be discerned by special revelation and natural revelation. If we do not give *reasons*, from natural or special revelation, we do not assist other people in their duty of obeying God.

III. How we argue and deliberate.

It may be helpful to divide this discussion into three categories: arguments common to all discussions; arguments common to discussions of principle; arguments common to discussions of expediency. The first category is the category which would normally be covered in a text on logic or argumentation; and will cover the bulk of our

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[1]This is reflected in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1:6, "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge… that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed."

discussion. The last two will include a few considerations germane to these special categories of discussion.

IV. Arguments common to all discussions.

Since the human mind tends to function in an orderly and logical fashion, the discussion of argumentation need not define every positive rule to observe. Rather, such a discussion can be more helpful if it proceeds by pointing out those ways in which people tend *not* to proceed in a logical or orderly manner. Thus, our discussion will proceed primarily in a negative way, as we attempt to point out *fallacies* of argumentation. As we shall see, all fallacies have an element of truth to them, which is what makes them dangerous. They appear to be truthful (they are *specious*) in some way, and therefore they deceive us.

A. The *ad hominem* fallacy. One of the most common errors of reason is the argument "against the person." <u>In this fallacy, a view is argued to be wrong because a bad person believed it, or right because a good person believed it.</u> Since all people are sinners, and since grace is, in some ways, common, all individual people are a mix of good and evil. No individual has been consistently wrong about every thing nor consistently right about every thing. Thus, one cannot argue that a view is either right or wrong by referring to an individual who holds the view. In fact, the matter is entirely irrelevant. If a wicked person such as Hitler believed that the earth was round, his belief in a round earth would not make it square.

The element of truth in this fallacy (which does not make it less fallacious) is that we ought to be especially alert to the possibility of prejudice when we consider someone's argument. Knowing what we do about Hitler, we would evaluate *very* carefully any statement he might have made about the intellectual or moral capacities of Jews. Nevertheless, if we evaluated his evidence carefully, and if he had been able to produce compelling evidence or argument that Jews were intellectually inferior, we would have been obliged to agree with him.

B. The definitional fallacy (equivocation). The fallacy of definition occurs when one of two things happens: <u>when a definition is too general to be specifically useful:</u>

"Christians should be *loving* (general), so we should not excommunicate anyone (specific)," <u>or when a definition is permitted to *change* in the middle of a discussion</u> (which is what the term, "equivocation" refers to). Suppose we define "legalism" as the attempt to secure justification before God by one's own works. Then suppose that we condemn legalism as an error. Then suppose that someone attaches the label of "legalism" to an individual who is attempting to obey the commandments of God, and therefore condemns the individual as "legalistic." We have agreed that "legalism" is wrong, but we have not agreed that this individual is to be condemned, because we do not accept the *changed definition* which was snuck in.

This fallacy, whether intended or not, is one of the most powerful forms of improper persuasion. If we can convince someone to agree with a particular *word* by *defining* it a particular way; and if we can then attach the agreed-upon word to a debated issue, we may be able to win the individual's consent. Politicians love to take generalizations and employ them in the defense of whatever view they are attempting to win support for. In our culture, for instance, "democracy" or "the right to choose" are often treated as moral absolutes, when, in fact, no one wishes to grant the right to vote to two-year-old children, nor does anyone wish to grant murderers the "right to choose" to murder. "Pro-choice" people actually seem not to care much about the choice of the unborn infant or of the father; "pro-life" people are often in favor of capital punishment. Each group would rather label itself with a general term, especially one which sounds good, than by a specific term, which expresses precisely their position.

C. The causal fallacy (*Post hoc ergo propter hoc*). This particular fallacy suggests that, <u>since one event *preceded* another event, it must have been the *cause* of the event.</u> Many events precede a given event, but not necessarily in a causal way. I often wake up before the sun rises, but I have not yet taken credit for its rising (please, do not send letters of thanks). Yet many individuals will often cite an event which occurred prior to an admittedly unhappy circumstance, and imply that the first event caused the second, and that we, therefore, should not approve that first event. "The mainline Presbyterian church had a delegated General Assembly; then the mainline Presbyterians went liberal. Therefore, a delegated Assembly leads to liberalism." Whether a delegated assembly does or does not lead to liberalism must be argued on other grounds (Have all

delegated assemblies gone liberal? Have all non-delegated assemblies remained orthodox?) than the fact that, on one occasion, a delegated assembly preceded a denomination going liberal.

The element of truth in this fallacy is that an event can only cause another event if it precedes it. However, an event must do more than precede another event in order to cause it.

D. False appeals to authority or expertise. The fallacious appeal to expertise normally takes one of two courses.

1. Expertise implies infallibility. Some people will argue that a view must be correct because a given expert endorses the view. The problem with this is that experts are capable of being wrong (they may be *expert* humans, but they are still *humans*), and, in fact, they often disagree with one another.

2. Expertise in one area implies expertise in another area. This is even more fallacious than the previous. Sometimes an individual will commend a view because some expert endorses the view; yet the expert is not an expert in that field. I know a little bit about Koiné Greek, but I don't know anything about Calculus, so you'd be well-advised not to follow my advice on engineering. No one is omni-competent; capable experts in one field do not necessarily have any capability in another field.

The role of experts or authorities in argumentation can be confusing, because they do play some assisting role in helping us decide certain questions. An expert on architectural acoustics, though capable of making errors, is capable of assisting us in deciding how to construct a church building in a way that a sermon can be easily heard. When consulting experts, then, it is often wise to consult several. A wise pastor, for instance, while (hopefully) having some expertise in biblical interpretation, will often cite a well-known commentator or theologian on a contested point, as a way of assuring his hearers that other experts agree. It is still possible for every expert to be wrong, however. Prior to Copernicus, every expert on astronomy was wrong. The very fact that progress sometimes takes place in a given discipline proves that there have been moments, historically, when every expert in a given field was wrong. In the final analysis, the only infallible expert regarding special revelation is God, its Author; and the only infallible expert regarding natural revelation is God, its Creator and Sustainer.

When consulting experts, we should do everything in our power to insist that they *explain* their viewpoints to us; we should never be satisfied merely to solicit their viewpoint.

E. The fallacy of the beard.   Often committed in our we-hate-to-make-a-distinction generation, this fallacy occurs when we argue that, <u>since two (or more) views can be perceived as being on a continuum of some sort, there is no real distinction between them.</u> We call this the fallacy of the beard, because one could argue that, since it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a person has a beard or merely a "five o'clock shadow," there is no distinction between a clean-shaven face and a bearded face. Yet, we all know that, despite the gradual continuum between the clean-shaven and bearded faces, there is a difference between the two faces, and one which can be meaningfully discussed.   Some would dismiss the discussion of Theonomy, for instance, as merely a matter of degree: "We're all theonomists in one degree or another."   In fact, however, there is a point at which a clear distinction can be made. Do we say that *all* civil authorities are obliged to the civil laws of Israel *unless* they can prove that a given law does not oblige them; or do we say that *no* civil authorities are obliged to the civil laws of Israel unless it can be proven that a given law does oblige them (the position of the Westminster Confession of Faith)? This is a very practically significant decision. In the one case, the burden of proof falls on the individual who argues that a given law does not oblige; in the other case, the burden of proof falls on the individual who argues that a given law does oblige. Whatever continuities exist in other ways, at this point the issue is black or white; night or day. A person incapable of seeing such a distinction must need help to know whether to shave in the morning.

F. The question-framing fallacy (fallacy of excluding the middle).   The question-framing fallacy normally occurs <u>when an individual begins the discussion of a matter by giving an either-or alternative:</u> "Are we going to ordain women as pastors in our churches, or are they just going to sit around and do nothing?"   Well, somewhere between doing nothing and preaching are several other activities and services, and the issue is not assisted by *excluding* these other alternatives. The problem with such a view

is that it tends to make only two of the alternatives known, when in reality there may be many other alternatives, one of which might be the correct one.

We must not lose sight of the fact that some either-or alternatives are real. Whether we will repent of a particular sin or not is an either-or alternative. Whether we will serve God or mammon is an either-or alternative, because they cannot both be served. Thus, some real either-or alternatives exist in life (whether you turn the porch light on or off), but not *all* alternatives are either-or (in the dining room, you may have a dimmer switch, to make the room more or less illuminated). In the church, there are many either-or decisions to make (Will we support this particular missionary or will we not?). There are, however, other decisions which permit a wider range of alternatives (There are over a hundred missionaries in our denomination; which shall we support?).

G. The fallacy of passion (appeal to emotion). In a general way, the fallacy of passion is not the fallacy of its existence, but the fallacy of appealing to it in areas where it is incompetent. Some passions are right and noble, and can be properly enlisted as motivators in a given cause (Jesus cleanses the Temple because of his zeal for God's house). However, decisions about alternative views should be made by the mind; as dispassionately as possible. Once such decisions are properly made, godly passions will motivate one to obey the decision. Passions can be primarily of a positive or negative nature. The following are examples of passionate fallacies.

1. Compassion (sympathetic appeal). A positive passion, compassion is appealed to incorrectly when we argue that we should do what Jim wants, "because he's had a hard time recently, and if we don't do what he wants, he could be very disappointed." Well, it is not wrong to be compassionate for Jim; to the contrary, if we decide in a way that will disappoint him, we ought to remind him of our love and appreciation for him. However, it is normally irrelevant to the particular question to consider how people will feel, and to decide the issue in a way that will not hurt someone's feelings. Exceptions to this general rule might be what to do on someone's birthday; there, the issue of how the person feels is relevant.

2. Hate/Disgust (antipathic appeal). The inverse of the previous, we might be induced to embrace a particular position because some vile person has taken the contrary position. "If we did x, it would sure send a loud message to that so-and-so, Y." Spite, however, does not make a view right or wrong. We cannot decide what is right or wrong by considering what affect it might have on someone.

H. The genetic fallacy (argument from origin or source). This fallacy occurs when <u>the</u> <u>*origin* of a view or practice is employed as a means of arguing for or against it, on the</u> <u>assumption that historical origins so determine views or practices that one cannot</u> <u>embrace the view or practice without embracing its origin.</u> Whether Christmas or Easter originated as Pagan rites is beside the point of whether they are useful celebrations *now* (I am opposed to their observance in the church myself, but not because of their origins). That marijuana may have been originally cultivated either as an aspect of false religion or as a means of getting high is no argument against its use to cure glaucoma. If a wicked person, attempting to develop a deadly poison to kill his bill collector, discovered instead the cure for cancer, we would not refuse to use the medicine because of its origins.

A discussion of origins is not, however, useless. Historically, the discussion of origins can be very useful in understanding the world in which we live. We often understand a view or practice better if we understand its origins. Such understanding rarely, however, assists us in determining whether we should agree or disagree.

I. The "slippery slope" fallacy. This is a slight variation on the causal fallacy mentioned earlier. <u>This fallacy occurs when someone argues that embracing a</u> <u>particular view exposes one to the *risk* of embracing a dangerous or erroneous view.</u> An Arminian might argue that embracing predestination exposes one to the risk of becoming unconcerned about evangelism. A liberal might argue that believing in inerrancy could lead one to being intolerant of others. Often, a slippery slope argument is "enhanced" by citing an example of someone who "slipped." It is then suggested that the view under consideration, while not wrong in itself, should be rejected because of what it might lead to. Of course, since we are sinners, we are capable of (and indeed skilled at) twisting, distorting, and perverting most of God's truth. Thus, for us sinners,

it is a rather easy matter to multiply instances of an individual abusing some truth. This abuse, however, does not make the truth dangerous in itself, or wrong. It is still a truth, to be embraced by everyone who loves truth.

The reason the slippery slope fallacy is so appealing to us is that there is an element of truth to it. Beliefs are logically connected to other beliefs, and it is true that embracing one *error* will, normally, produce other errors. However, truth does not inherently lead to error; God believes everything that is true, and not one of those truths leads Him into any error of any sort.

J. The fallacy of power (appeal to force, or *ad manum*). The appeal to power or force is normally designed to quiet someone. Lucy once balled up her five fingers into a fist, and said to Linus: "I'll give you five good reasons…" Of course, this is no proper argument. That embracing truth may have negative consequences (The world crucified Truth in the flesh) does not mean that truth is less true. Coercion and conviction are fundamentally different things; and coercion is a poor substitute for conviction. In evaluating an argument, it is irrelevant (for evaluative purposes) what the personal consequences are of embracing the truth.

K. Chronological snobbery. Chronological snobbery occurs when an individual argues for a view because of its date. <u>Ironically, someone will argue that an old idea is superior to new ones and someone else will argue that "newer is better."</u> Both are wrong. Ideas are not like milk; they do not spoil with age. Nor are they like distilled beverages; they do not improve with age. Whether a view is new or old, while historically interesting, is not logically significant. A viewpoint could be either true or false regardless of its age. Yet people continue to commit this basic fallacy with great regularity. Many individuals routinely embrace a view simply because it is "the latest thing." Such faddism is foolishly self-congratulatory (no generation has been as wise as ours), and a great offense to the prayers, studies, and virtuous example of previous generations of saints. At the other end, there are some who refuse to believe anything that is new. Such recalcitrance is a sin against the same previous generations, because it suggests that their efforts have not left us in an advantaged position, ready to make further progress.

L. The fallacy of assumption (sometimes called the complex question). The fallacy of assumption occurs <u>when a question is stated in such a way as to assume the truthfulness of something which has not yet been proven as true.</u> "Shouldn't you quit smoking?" is actually a two-part question: "Did you ever smoke?", and "Have you stopped?" If the first is not true, then the second is not applicable. To frame a question this way only permits an individual to answer the question if the individual agrees with that which is assumed. When, in a parliamentary assembly, someone moves to "divide the question," it is often because a complex motion has come to the floor, with part of which a person might agree, but with other parts of which, an individual might not agree.

M. Argument from silence. "Nowhere in all of scripture does God say anything about nuclear warfare; therefore it must be right (or wrong)."   The fallacy involved in this argument is <u>due to the assumption that silence indicates approval (or disapproval), when in fact, under most circumstances, silence indicates nothing, one way or another.</u> "The Bible never says we should use personal computers," a technophobic individual might say. Well, the Bible's silence on personal computers cannot be presumed as either an endorsement or a condemnation of them. Silence is silence, and conclusions cannot be derived from silence.

There are exceptions to this in special circumstances. When, for instance, the prophetic word says: "Do everything according to the pattern delivered on the mount; do not add to it or take from it," silence *is* a relevant consideration, because the Levites are forbidden from adding anything to that which was delivered on the mount. Silence, in this case, would indicate disapproval.

V. Fallacious arguments common to discussions of principle.   There are a few additional considerations which are especially germane to questions of principle in the church.

A. The "proof-text" fallacy. <u>This fallacy assumes that a view is "biblical" if somewhere in the Bible there is a text which, divorced from the rest of the scripture, sounds like a</u>

slogan promoting a particular view. This fallacy contradicts the foundational Protestant principle of *tota scriptura*, a principle which teaches that the biblical view of a matter is only known by consulting the totality or entirety of biblical revelation. An argument which is biblical must do justice to the entire revelation of the scriptures.

B. The "pick-'em" fallacy. This is the fallacy of arguing that there are several "biblical" views, and that one must simply choose from among them. The error is similar to the proof-text fallacy, because each in effect denies that God, as the Author of scripture, has revealed Himself consistently. Each denies in effect the possibility of arriving at a position which is consistent with the scriptures as a whole, and therefore each position is satisfied with a view which may not correspond to the whole of scripture. We would be happier if such individuals just left their Bibles on their shelves. They merely confuse the issue of what it means to be biblical, and since they are not biblical (in the Protestant sense of the word) anyway, we would rather they just say so. Evangelicals are much more prone to this error than are liberals, because liberals often don't care to appear biblical. Evangelicals still like to think of themselves as biblical, yet, not having the old Protestant commitment to careful study, they rarely have the ability to synthesize the teaching of scripture on a given matter.

The element of truth which might exist in this error would come from those occasions where there is, in fact, no biblical information which addresses the issue at hand. Under such situations, one must indeed arrive at a decision which is not biblically-derived. It would be better, under such circumstances, simply to say, "There is no biblical position on this issue," than to say, "God, being confused as He often is, has several views on this subject, and since the Almighty hasn't the capacity to sort it out, we'll just have to make a choice." I actually prefer the liberal error (the Bible is merely a human work) to the Evangelical error (the Bible is a divine book, but the divinity is too confused to say anything clearly or consistently), but I'd prefer avoiding error altogether.

VI. Fallacious arguments common to discussions of expedience.

A.   The "older is wiser" fallacy.   Occasionally, in discussions of expediency, <u>a particular variation of the *ad hominem* argument appears, when someone will say, "I used to think the same thing when I was younger."</u> In effect, this comment is an attack on more youthful people, and a somewhat cowardly attempt to silence one's opponents without refuting their arguments. If you believe you have learned something over the years which causes you to see the matter in a particular way, share this insight with others, and contribute to their growing accumulation of wisdom. <u>But don't rule their comments out simply because they come from youthful lips.</u> A young person, for instance, who reads, may have accrued the wisdom of many older people, and may in fact be a good deal wiser than his or her seniors. Or, a young person, quite inexperienced in many areas, might have a great deal of experience in the particular area being discussed. The simple fact is that a view is more expedient than another only if some reasons or evidence prove it to be so.

B. The "no fool like an old fool" fallacy. This fallacy is the opposite of the previous one. It is the proverb employed by young people to eliminate the arguments of older people. <u>It assumes, erroneously, that older people embrace particular views *because* they are old.</u> Both this and the previous variation on *ad hominem* argument are irrelevant. Whether an "old fool" or a "young whipper-snapper" promotes a view is irrelevant; the only relevant consideration is whether the view is right.

C. The "people like x" fallacy. In discussing matters of expediency, appeal to the populace is commonly made. The fallacy in this appeal is several-fold: First, since the populace is so varied, one can rarely state with any truthfulness what "the people" like. Different people like different things; and what attracts one person will undoubtedly repel someone else. <u>Second, some people are more vocal than others, and deciding an issue on the basis of what "people like" often backfires, because a vocal minority misrepresents the silent majority.</u> Third, people, in general, are neither wise nor generally correct in their opinions. The history of the human race is a history of folly and stupidity, interrupted by occasional lapses into wisdom. What is expedient must be determined by consulting natural revelation; by examining the world and the people

within it, and determining from our observations what we believe would be the wisest thing to do. What is expedient cannot be determined by asking what people like.