Frank’s series “Fallacies”

We live in a world of great deception. It is a world where we find fallacies operating in our debates, TV ads, daily conversations and especially in the political realm. It is important for us to understand these fallacies in order that we too are not deceived. These 14 fallacies are the ones most usually used.

                                   LETTER #1 - WORDS

Proverbs 18:21 “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”

In his essay called “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell shared a crucial insight about the decline of language: “A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”

Mike Bauman says, “Sloppy language makes sloppy thought possible.” In Orwell’s “1984,” the masses are fed redefining slogans like “War Is Peace,” “Freedom Is Slavery,” and “Ignorance Is Strength.” We are in a cultural war and in this battle it is often on the use of words. How do we define and redefine words. Language is very important and like Proverbs says: “The tongue has the power of life and death.”

In the next few weeklies for this New Year I want to write about some of the fallacies that are out there influencing us whether we know it or not. These fallacies have to do with how we use words and how we frame our arguments.

The ‘opinion makers’ of this world (those who use words to make a living) are framing their arguments in such a way that they are moving society down a slippery slope. We are told in the Word: “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.” Mark 7:21-23 (KJV)

Also the Word says: “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.” Luke 6:45

In this New Year there are two resolutions that the Lord has laid upon my heart.

First, we need to get the Gospel out to **all** mankind. What the above verses are telling me is the need to see the heart of man changed and only the Gospel can do that. Wealth, government legislation, education, better standard of living, or like we say here in USA pursuing the American dream (whatever that is), will not change the heart of man. Only the Gospel can do that and we, the church, have a tremendous obligation to do just that using the gifts, abilities that the Lord has given us.

Secondly, we must learn to frame our arguments wisely. Ideas have consequences and some of the ideas that are being bandied about will have a dastardly affect upon us and our children and grandchildren. One of these deadly ideas that is being brought forth is that ‘matter is all that exists.’ In this idea there is no spiritual realm. This is why when the tragedy that struck Newtown, CT when 26 people were gunned down and 20 of them children from the ages of 5-10 most of our ‘opinion makers’ had no answers let alone solutions.

We need to understand and be able to explain it wisely that in this modern age God is still on the throne and He is sovereign over the nations and human history. “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.” (Psalms 22:27-28)

To do this we need to learn to think Biblically and understand the fallacies that are circulating in our media, entertainment, government, family, market place and yes, even the church.

LETTER #2 - LEARNING TO USE OUR MINDS

Proverbs 1:5 “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.”

Proverbs 12:15 “The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.”

James 1:19 “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

Last year when I was writing my weekly letters on Ecclesiastes the one thing that Solomon kept bringing out to his son Rehoboam was the need for wisdom. With all of your getting – get wisdom seemed to be the criteria that Solomon was trying to get across to his son and to us. The problem is that when we get old enough to realize how short life is that we begin to realize how valuable it would have been if we had learned wisdom early in life.

I would say that one of the most important lessons in the book of Proverbs is that we should work hard to use our minds to understand things. This means that we will have to stretch and exercise our minds and not let our minds grow fat and flabby. One of the problems we face is that we try to avoid using our minds as much as possible. We need to change that!

As Christians we have the obligation to use our minds to serve God. We must exercise our minds just as we exercise our body. We need to develop an inquiring mind.

Some years back I read a little booklet called The Awesome Power of the Listening Ear. This book brought out how many people solve their own problems by being able to have someone to listen to them. As they began to talk they realize their own solutions. Often we find that people enjoy telling what they think more than listening to what others have to say. It is in listening to others that we begin to learn things.

Solomon said in Proverbs 1:5 "A wise man will hear, and will increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel." A spirit of listening goes a long ways to communicate and attitude of humility.

How do we know if someone is showing humility and has a desire to listen?

1.   He is more interested in hearing what other people have to say than in having them listen to him. Humility brings respect for others and for their thoughts.

2.   He places a modest value on his own opinions – he admits that other people often have better ideas than he does.

3.   He willingly admits when he doesn't know something. If he does not understand something, he is open about it.

4.   He is willing to question his own position on an issue.

A person who loves to listen is another ingredient to having an inquiring mind. When we are forming an opinion on an issue, it is often a good idea to collect other people's viewpoints on the issue. Proverbs 11:14 says, "where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory." Here Solomon is telling us to not only get guidance from a wise man, but from many wise men.

Why are many counselors good? If they all gave us the same advice we would not learn anything, but when there are many different points of view, we can observe and learn. Listening to all these different view-points can help us choose what is the best advice. Part of an inquiring mind is to be diligent in learning about alternative views.

In these letters we will be looking at some of the different fallacies being presented through media, entertainment, our judicial system and government and at times even from the pulpit.

LETTER #3 - RED HERRING

Proverbs 22:17-19,21  "Pay attention and turn your ear to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach,  for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips.  So that your trust may be in the Lord, I teach you today, even you, teaching you to be honest and to speak the truth, so that you bring back truthful reports to those you serve?"

When I think of the passage above in Proverbs I thought about some of the different fallacies that are circulating in our society, and how important it is for us to understand so that we are not trapped by them and at the same time be able to give, like Proverbs says, an answer that is ‘ready on your lips.’

Probably one of the most important lessons to learn is how to think logically. This, I believe is where Proverbs come in dealing with the fallacies that we face today.  Thinking properly we also learn how to recognize bad reasoning.

A fallacy is an error in logic and it is something that we have much of today. This is why Proverbs is important, because it will expose bad logic and help us to logically think things through.

**Red Herring fallacy**. Whenever we introduce something irrelevant into an argument, this is known as 'a red herring' - we are avoiding the question.

A red herring is a dead fish that has started to become ripe and smelly. Dog trainers used red herrings to train tracking dogs. They would lay out the scent of a raccoon or whatever they wanted the dog to learn to track and let the trail become old, they would drag the red herring across the trail and off in a different direction and train the dog to stay on track and ignore the red herring smell.

So a red herring is a distracting scent trail. A red herring is when someone brings up and irrelevant topic which distracts us from the real question. We might be discussing or trying to answer a particular question, but soon find that we are off in a different direction and completely away from the original question. Someplace in the conversation 'a red herring' was introduced.

When someone introduces a red herring, he may be saying something which is true, although irrelevant. Red herrings are often good arguments. The only problem is, they do not prove the point being argued – they prove something else.

A red herring is a debating trick used to throw an opponent or the audience off-track. One of the problems with a red herring is the **appeal to ignorance.** In other words if we cannot prove that he is wrong then we often conclude that he might be right. It is often very difficult to prove a negative. In other words if we cannot prove Martians do not exist, conclusion is that they probably do exist.

Another aspect of the red herring argument is in regards to **irrelevant goals or functions.** This type of arguments makes a good case for what it is trying to prove, but what it is trying to prove is irrelevant to the case at hand.

Another aspect of the red Herring is what they call the **straw man fallacy**.  The difference between the straw man and the irrelevant thesis is that the speaker is trying to disprove or discredit an opponent's position, rather than prove a thesis of his or her own.

An example of a “straw man fallacy” is how, for example, all religious conservatives are lumped together under certain labels like homophobes or under hate speech. To lump all those who believe that homosexuality is wrong with violent thugs who beat people up is to distort the position of those who speak out with honesty and with compassion that homosexuality is wrong and that we should call those who actively engage in it to repentance. In other words a ‘straw man’ is the type of argument against a position that is not really the position held by the opposition.

LETTER #4 - AD HOMINEM

Proverbs 4:24 "Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips."

Proverbs 10:11 "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked."

Proverbs 11:9 "With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor."

Proverbs 26:28 "A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin."

We have seen how people use red herrings to avoid a question, but another method that is used is known as an “Ad Hominem” when they want to avoid answering the question. In other words and Ad Hominem attack is attacking opponent’s character, or his motives for believing something, instead of disproving his argument.

In the latest presidential campaign and the public debates that took place often we see “Ad Hominems” coming out in attacking one another's persons rather than getting down to the real questions at hand.

Not only do we see Ad Hominem coming out in public debates, especially political debates, but also in the ads that come out on TV, etc. For example, in the last political debate between President Obama and Mitt Romney how often we saw the character of President Obama and Mitt Romney being attacked.

The idea in back of this type of fallacy in attacking his opponent’s character or motives that the public will often think badly of his opponents arguments as well. This is not the right way to argue. Someone might have character flaws, we all do, but his arguments might be valid.

An Ad Hominem can also occur when someone accuses his opponent of having bad motives. However, it is not an Ad Hominem when someone questions whether or not the person is telling the truth.

Ad Hominem can be translated as either "to the man" or "against the man." Ad Hominem is probably one of the dirtiest tricks that a debater can employ, because it is irrelevant to the source of what is being debated and an uninformed public will often not make a distinction between the character of the man and his argument.

Another reason why an “Ad Hominem” is a dirty debaters trick, although it is easy to spot, is because it evokes emotive language. The emotions come into play and in the process the real source of the argument is lost. The public loses because we do not get to the real answers to the questions being asked.

Using as an example the latest presidential elections that we have had here in America many questions that needed to be answered has been lost because of the “Ad Hominem fallacy.” In choosing our leaders we need to know what they really think and we get that by answering the real questions.

Another aspect of the “Ad Hominem fallacy” is what they call “circumstantial.” What this basically says is that a person's argument ought not to be given weight simply because of the circumstances of that person. In other words an example of this would be not to give credibility to a person’s argument on abortion because he is a Roman Catholic. How often we have seen this type of fallacy being promoted in the abortion debate.

“Circumstantial Ad Hominem” is not necessarily abusive, but it brings out the circumstances or the credibility of the person in the debate. In other words, there is no credibility to his argument because of his/her circumstances.

LETTER #5 - GENETIC FALLACY

Proverbs 2:6 "For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”

Proverbs 15:2 "The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.”

Proverbs 15:28 "The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil."

Proverbs 16:10 "The lips of a king speak as an oracle, and his mouth should not betray justice."

This is another fallacy type of personal attack. It is called “genetic” because it addresses the genesis, or the beginning of something. It is different from the Ad hominem because it does not attack the person making the argument but the place where the argument comes from.

In other words the "genetic fallacy" is condemning an argument because of where it began, how it began, or who began it.  A good example of this would be Sigmund Freud in trying to explain why people believe in God. His hypothesis is that when people do not have a good experience or a relationship with their father they wish for and imagine a God who can offer them the things that they missed. He would go on to say that a belief in God who was created out of people's wishes could not exist.

It is very difficult to argue with somebody when he uses this fallacy because no matter what you say they will always claim that it is because of your difficult past and therefore everybody can ignore what you say.

if an argument was made up by a bad person or a bad historical event does not mean that the argument is necessarily bad itself. An example of this would be in the presidential election of Gore and Bush. Gore won the popular vote, but Bush won the electoral votes. The electoral college, which is the system of the Constitution, laid out for choosing the president may have been created by people with bad motives (as some claim, but I do not think so) does not necessarily mean that the electoral college is bad itself. Although some would claim it is.

LETTER #6 - FAULTY APPEAL TO AUTHORITY

Proverbs 2:6 “For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”

Proverbs 15:14 “The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly.”

Proverbs 16:23 “A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction.”

A faulty appeal to authority is an appeal to someone who has no special knowledge in the area being discussed.

In other words, when we are not knowledgeable on a certain subject, the wise thing is to first ask an authority – somebody who is knowledgeable on the subject. For example, you do what the mechanics says because he knows more about cars than you do.

We are appealing to an authority when we claim something is true because an authority said it was true, but if the person we are appealing to is not actually an authority in the area we are discussing, our appeal is faulty.

What happens is that some people use an appeal to authority in the wrong way, appealing to an authority when arguing with people - just to overawe them.

Movie stars are often used as a faulty appeal to authority. Because of their movie star status their opinion on numerous things – politics, nutrition, etc. are being asked for, but we find that they are no authority on these subjects.

When the topic under discussion is controversial among several respected authorities, then appealing simply to the opinion of a single authority is a faulty appeal to authority. We find this for example in the argument regarding global warming.

We live in a world where knowledge base is so great that no one could ever achieve a level of expertise in every subject and therefore because of this we rely on the knowledge of experts and specialists regarding many areas of our life. However, we must be careful and even skeptical deciding which authority we ought to accept.

There are four appeals to the illegitimate authority.

1. Accepting the opinions of one who has no expertise in the particular subject that he is talking about.
2. Accepting the advice or opinion of a biased authority.
3. Accepting the advice or opinion of an unnamed authority secondhand.
4. Accepting the advice or opinion that transfers his celebrity status for the thing being talked about. This is especially true in many advertisements that we see all the time on TV.

We often find in the news media what is known as "un-named sources” or "unidentified spokespersons." The news media does this to lend authority or credibility to their story or whatever it is that they are reporting on, but we have to look at these with great skepticism because we do not know whether these unidentified or unnamed sources are reputable.

One of the most common abuses of this approach is the use of celebrity’s testimonials for different products, but, often, there is little or no connection between the product and what it is that made the celebrity famous. Like someone said, it is not really Michael Jordan's cologne that has made him famous.

LETTER #7 - APPEAL TO THE PEOPLE

Exodus 23:2 “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd."

This is another fallacy that we often see being used. “Appeal to the people” is when we claim that our viewpoint is correct because many other people agree with it. This is very similar to the faulty appeal to authority. The only difference is appealing to authority figures while the other is to the people in general. The general public is very seldom a proper authority on anything.

For example: We hear often about abortions, gun control, etc. that the reason we are for or against is because of what public opinion might or might not be. For example some will say that abortion is murder although public opinion might be that 76% of the people do not believe that. We need to keep in mind that murder is murder no matter what the public says or thinks.

Another example: I will hear that someone's book is one of the best because it has been on the best-seller list for months. This might or might not be true, but it is also another appeal to the people.

One of the things that we often hear today in these uncertain economic times is that we should not be concerned because the majority of people believe that the economy is improving. Again this is an appeal to the people.

Along with this fallacy is what is known as the 'bandwagon.' This is where we jump on the bandwagon and do what everybody else is doing. This is where peer pressure comes in for us to conform or do what others are doing.

We see this type of fallacy coming out in advertisements. We need to buy this or that article or thing because we are told millions are buying it and we need to join the millions. In other words, get on the bandwagon.

When it comes to the nightly news we might be told that majority of people get their news from the ABC, but does that mean that ABC gives us the best news??

We will often hear our teenage child asking to go someplace or to see something (like a movie) and when the parents say “no” they will come back and say, “But everybody is doing it or seeing it.” This is again that bandwagon fallacy.

The issue in this is not whether everybody is doing it, but the real issue is: Is it right or wrong? Is this a good movie to see and is ABC actually the best source of the news or guidance?

In other words, if all of the people in the world are going to the same place or doing the same thing it is no reason for us to follow suit. The important issue is: Is it right, or wrong?

LETTER #8 – STRAWMAN FALLACY

Proverbs19:20 “Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.”

The fallacy of the “Strawman” is changing or exaggerating the opponent’s position or argument to make it easier to refute. What this does is to distort the opponent’s argument just enough to make it weak, because the original argument was not as easy to knock down.

We should always take the time to hear, think and try to understand about the opponent’s belief in what they mean and say. This is especially true with children. A mother or father might say to the son/daughter that they are spending too much time on video games and the child comes back and says, “Should I throw away hundreds of dollars of video games just to go and do something else?”

This child introduced a “strawman fallacy.” That is not what the father or mother said, but by introducing the strawman makes it easier to refute the original argument. This fallacy is like the ‘red herring’ in the sense that it introduces something irrelevant to the position that one is taking or by taking the opponent’s argument and presenting it in an inaccurate light.

A “red herring” fallacy argument distorts from the main issue, but the “strawman” argues against a position that is not the position at all.

Some of the more politically correct textbooks use the term “straw-person” rather than “strawman.”

We see this approach being used against conservative Christians when what they say is constantly being lumped together under names like “homophobes,” for their “hate speech,” etc. We, who are evangelical Christians say that homosexuality is wrong and repentance is called for, but the opponents try to change the position that is not a position at all. We do not hate homosexuals nor are we engaging in hate speech, but by distorting what we believe it is easier for them to tear down what we believe. One can see in our society how successful this has been. In one sense the “strawman” fallacy reveals the fallen nature of man. Instead of facing the facts or truth, the tendency is to turn the truth into a caricature.

When recognizing that the opponent’s position has some merit to it, a “strawman fallacy” shows intellectual cowardice and unwillingness to face the truth.

The “strawman fallacy” relies heavily on psychology and propaganda rather than truth. We see the “strawman” fallacies coming out with many atheists - like Richard Dawkins in how they paint a false caricature of who God is. Often they read passages in the Old Testament, like in the Book of Joshua when the children of Israel came into the Promised Land, and bringing out how vicious and cruel He was.

The character of the “strawman” is one who wants to win an argument no matter what. He is not interested in doing the study, the discipline of learning what the opponent is actually saying or meaning. Often he lacks the humility to face the truth.

In dealing with “strawman fallacies” we must counter by bringing out the error. We must keep our “strawman” honest by bringing out what is really meant and showing that the issue has not been addressed properly. However, in all of this we must be much aware of the danger of creating our own “strawman” of our opponent. We must be able to understand and express our opponent’s argument better, or at least as well as he does. This takes time, study, reflection, etc.

As Christians we must first discern the actual facts, and then contrast the “strawman fallacy” against the truth.

LETTER #9 - TU QUOQUE

Proverbs 4:24 "Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips."

Proverbs 6:2 "if you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth.”

Proverbs 14:3 "A fool's talk brings a rod to his back, but the lips of the wise protect them."

Proverbs 15:2 "The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly."

“Tu Quoque” in Latin means "you too." This is the type of argument that is used in dismissing someone's viewpoint on an issue because he himself is inconsistent in that very thing. In other words, "you too."

In this type of argument someone might come to another person and say that they should not do a particular thing (whatever it is) but the response from the person is: “But you do it too.” What the person is telling them not to do might be something very bad for them, but they do not listen because of the inconsistency of the other person telling them not to do it.

For example an older person might come to a teenager and tell him/her not to smoke because of the bad health consequences of smoking. However, the teenager does not really listen because the older man himself is smoking. To think that way is to fall into fallacious thinking. Whether the person giving you the advice smokes or doesn't is beside the point. The point is smoking is bad and it is bad for your health.

People who commit this fallacy often have guilty consciences, and it makes them feel better somehow when they shift their guilt onto someone else. This fallacy also happens when somebody claims that two wrongs make a right.

So the question is, why should we listen to someone who is not consistent with his or her own argument? There are two good reasons. First, we must always allow people to change their minds through experience.

When faced with such a challenge the famous economist John Maynard Keynes once put it quite nicely: "When I find out that I've been wrong, I change my mind – what do you do?"

The second reason is that we should not look at the credibility of the person offering his opinion, but the merits of the argument that he is making.

For example, the older man through experience understands what smoking really has done to his own health and this has caused him to form the opinion that he is giving to his younger friend. He has changed his mind about smoking. In other words: Smoking is bad.

LETTER #10 - ASSUMPTIONS

Proverbs 15:28 “The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.”

The definition for ‘assumption’ is something taken for granted, or accepted as true without proof. How often we make assumptions without even being aware of them.  When we have an argument over something it might actually be because we have different assumptions. If we understood one another's assumptions then we might understand why we disagree and why we may be wrong.

In one sense we need to have a healthy sense of ‘suspicion’ of everybody, including ourselves. I do not believe that anyone can be completely objective. Along with assumptions we need discernment. A.W.Tozer said: **"Among the gifts of the Spirit scarcely one is of greater practical usefulness than the gift of discernment. This gift should be highly valued and frankly sought as being almost indispensable in these critical times. This gift will enable us to distinguish the chaff from the wheat and to divide the manifestations of the flesh from the operations of the Spirit."**

Nathaniel and Hans Bluedorn on recognizing bad reasoning give three suggestions on how to be objective.

1. Listen. Every time we listen to someone else's viewpoint, we give ourselves the opportunity to become un- deceived.
2. Evaluate our assumptions. It is important to recognize that everyone has a bias, and that we need to understand and to manage our own biases. We need to be aware of the assumptions which we are making. Keep asking, "why do I think this is true?" There is nothing wrong with having assumptions, just as long as we have the correct assumptions.
3. Evaluate other people's assumptions. We should be alert for clues in what people say which may indicate their assumptions. This will give us insight into why they believe what they believe.

In the midst of a debate or argument it is easy to make assumptions that something is correct when in reality it is not. Something might be presented to us in an either or situation when in reality there might be a third, or even a fourth option.

Most of the arguments within families are due to, I believe, wrong assumptions. We presume or assume something that is not true as far as the other person is concerned, in either what they say or what we think that they should do.

In studying and writing about these different fallacies the one thing that is coming to me is the reality of knowing the Word of God and applying it to my life, my walk and my talk. Proverbs tells us: "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.”

LETTER #11 - APPEALS TO EMOTION-FEAR

Proverbs 10:13 “Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment.”

Proverbs 18:6 “A fool's lips bring him strife, and his mouth invites a beating.”

“Appeal to fear” is a propaganda technique. “Appeal to fear” is used when someone makes you fear the consequences of not doing what he wants. Often we will find a prosecuting attorney addressing the jury and urging John Doe to be convicted and put away where he would never commit another crime, because you might be his next victim.

It is never good to act out of fear. However, fear is a great motivator. When people fear something they tend not to think matters through. Appeal to fear is often used in advertisements. I am sure if we took the time we could think of many commercials that use fear to get their product out.

When someone fears something or someone, he often makes decisions which he might not make in calmer situations. Sometimes the appeal to fear is referred to as an appeal to force. Although appeals to force are not, at times, attempts at persuasion to change our beliefs but are simply attempts to change our behavior. However, some individuals or organizations do try to change people's way of thinking merely by resorting to force. This sort of practice can be labeled "thought control," something that was used during the Spanish Inquisition as well as the Maoist regime of China.

This type of fallacy overrides truth with fear. Some scholars have called this type of fallacy "appeal to intimidation." We must always keep in mind that the statement is true or not irrespective of how we feel about it. In other words no amount of punishment for dissent can transform a false claim into a true one.

Since we use the word "fear" in different roles, it is important to make some distinctions. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." (Proverbs 1:7) This type of fear means reverence, awe and respect. It means a regard for the holiness of God and the sacredness of God's law. In the sense of respect and reverence or principle in their life all of us have this type of fear for somebody.

However, parents disciplining their children do use the "appeal to fear" especially for those who refuse to learn through instruction. The Bible says, "He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently.” (Proverbs 13:24)

In the Bible we find many instances of people using the appeal to fear or force in order to persuade. When he tried to get an answer from Jesus Pilate said, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" (John 19:10)

We see this smear campaign coming out that aim to frighten anyone who might oppose different groups like the homosexual lobby, Planned Parenthood, racial pressure and special interest groups etc.

It is important for us to recognize these fallacies and to stand on the truth.

LETTER #12 - APPEAL TO EMOTION - PITY

John 7:24 “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

Appeal to pity, like an appeal fear is just a propaganda technique. Often we will see this in advertisements. Propaganda in its various forms can be very powerful. In one sense there is nothing wrong with propaganda if it is used rightly, like in advertising about our product.

Propaganda is any strategy for spreading our beliefs or ideas. Writing these articles and sending them out to subscribers as my weekly letters or putting them on Facebook I am using propaganda in the sense of spreading my ideas.

Propaganda can be found in political speeches, TV commercials and shows, movies, radio, newspapers, advertisements and many other places. There is nothing wrong with propaganda if we do it honestly. The problem is that many times people buy into a product or idea because it appeals to emotion instead of to clear thinking.

For example: A truck dealer might try to get us to buy his truck because it looks tougher, not necessarily because it is tougher. The lawyer in the court room will try to persuade the jury to feel (emotion) that his side is right. Even the evangelist or preacher tries to persuade the audience through emotion rather than challenging them to think things through clearly. Not that our emotions necessarily are bad and incorrect, but when making decisions it is always good to have clear thinking.

Manipulative propaganda is used when someone plays with our emotions in a way designed to make us agree with him without thinking through the matter carefully.

We have already seen the “appeal to emotion through fear,” but now through the “appeal to **pity**.” This pity appeal is when someone tries to get us to do something because of pity for the person or something that he is associated with.

The “appeal to pity,” like the appeal to fear is an appeal to our emotions, our sense of compassion. This appeal is trying to get us to accept something, do something, or believe something based upon our emotions instead of good and careful reasoning.

When it comes to giving money we often see the “appeal to pity.” We might see starving children, homeless people, or areas where a storm might have swept through and left many homeless (like the recent storm of 2012 just before Christmas that hit the East Coast in USA). Since this is a technique that is often used by con-artists we need to be able to think clearly and concisely to ensure that this is a legitimate need and the one appealing to our emotions is a reputable person or organization.

As Christians we have to be careful because an “appeal to pity” can counteract another Biblical principle like TRUTH. In other words, we are to “love our neighbor,” but not at the expense of truth. An example of this is found in the following verse: “Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving. Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house.” (Proverbs 6:30-31)

Might God give us clear, critical, Biblical thinking in these days when "truth and error walk the same highway," as A.W. Tozer so eloquently said. We live in days of great deception and discernment is a great need.

LETTER #13 - MOB APPEAL

Proverbs 14:12 “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”

Mob appeal is an attempt to persuade others by either making them feel like they want to be ‘one of the guys’ or by preying on the emotions of a large crowd. Socrates once said: “The crowd cannot be a lover of wisdom.”

Reading through Proverbs and Ecclesiastes we see that God has called us to a life of wisdom and discernment. We are not to buckle under ‘peer’ pressure or to any charismatic speaker trying to motivate or manipulate the masses.

Where we see this type of appeal is often in politics. For example: Often we find the Democratic party referring to themselves as the party of the ‘working man’ or the Republican party as 'being against the lawyers and being outside of the establishment' - even though many have been in public office most of their lives.

We see this “mob appeal” also in advertisement. I was watching TV when the advertisement for the Chevrolet truck came on, set in the background ‘out on the range’ surrounded by cowboys. Another advertisement was in the midst of a steel plant and a voice was saying that the truck is built like a ‘rock.’

The thing against the “mob appeal” is that it distracts from the main point and makes us want to be a part of the mob or the crowd.

To me one of the main dangers of this emotional appeal is that it plays at one of our most vital needs; the need to be accepted. One of the ways that Satan keeps people locked into their little kingdoms is through the bars of acceptance and rejection. We are afraid of being rejected by our peers and so we find ourselves going along with the crowd. In other words, everyone else is doing it and you will not be cool (part of the group) if you do not go along.

One of the things that has been speaking to me is what is called the “spiral of silence.” Because of “mob appeal,” going along with the crowd, we find that we do not speak out even though we know that what is being said is wrong, a fallacy. We do not want to be the ‘odd man’ out!

Socrates said: “The crowd cannot be a lover of wisdom.” Often we have found out that some very popular ideas have turned out to be 'very false.' Look at Hitler in the 1930s who rode to power on a radical wave of popularity.

I often think of this verse in Proverbs: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” Proverbs 14:12

LETTER #14 - POISONING THE WELL

Proverbs 10:11 “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.”

Proverbs 10:31 “The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be cut out.”

Proverbs 11:9 “With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape.”

Another very common way to tarnish a debate is to cast doubt or in some way misinterpret the source of information. I find that often people will come to me and say or express doubt about a particular news caster or news channel that they are not reliable because they are to leftist or too conservative.

They will always come and say: “Consider the source.”  I am not saying that we should not consider the source, because we should, but to completely shut them out is not right either, because of certain issues they could be telling us the truth. A habitual liar could still be telling the truth on certain matters under debate.

Corrupt character may well imply something is not right in one’s argument, but it does not necessarily mean that there is not an element of truth in what is being said or debated.

“Poisoning the well” was an act of warfare in ancient times to kill unsuspecting villagers. Even today the “poisoning of the well” or water supply is a possible terrorist tactic. People know that drawing water from a poisoned well they can die. Likewise, if someone can discredit their intellectual opponent, then an audience will instinctively reject the opponent’s arguments as well. He has “poisoned the well.” Not only is the opponent’s source rejected, but also any future facts that he might bring out.

There are two things to do in order to defeat this fallacy. First, one must bring out the facts. Even if the person is the most vile person alive, there still can be an element of truth in the argument.

The person might be vile, but….

Or the source might be lopsided, but….

We always need to look at the argument itself and not get sidetracked by the “poisoning of the well.”

Also, when a person tries to “poison the well” it could very well be that he is showing his own vulnerability in the debate in putting forth the “poisoning of the well” fallacy to cover his own intellectual cowardice. In other words: perhaps he is afraid to address the real issue?

People who “poison the well” can pertain to any source: people, nations, races, eras, universities, ideologies, etc. In other words, an argument that says: “Do not believe anything coming from………”

Did the Pharisees “poison the well” when they said that Jesus cast out demons by the power of the prince of demons? Yes, they were trying to refute who Jesus was and get the audience not to believe anything Jesus said. But, Jesus refuted this fallacy by pointing out that people are known by their works.

We really need the gift of discernment today.