

(The following column appeared in the *Calvary Herald* (vol. 10, no. 4, 1994), a publication of Calvary Reformed Presbyterian Church in Hampton, Virginia < www.clearlight.com/~crpc/>.)

Necessary Consequence: What is Good and Necessary? by Michael Holloway

Suppose you are talking to your neighbor one day, and he says to you that he does not believe that God exists. You ask him why he does not believe there is a God. He replies:

If God were able and willing to prevent evil, he would do so. If God were unable to prevent evil, he would not be omnipotent; if he were unwilling to prevent evil, he would not be loving. God does not prevent evil. If God exists, he is both omnipotent and loving. Therefore, God does not exist.

What would you say to this neighbor? Think about this for a moment or two before you continue reading.

One thing that you should not say, unless you want to speak falsely, is that your neighbor's argument is invalid. The argument is perfectly valid. Now, before you call Pete and insist that he stop letting a heretic write in the *Calvary Herald*, please let me explain.

Your hypothetical neighbor's argument for the non-existence of God illustrates a very important point: the validity of an argument and the truth of its conclusion are not the same thing. There is a relationship between the validity or invalidity of arguments and the truth or falsity of propositions, but the relationship is not a simple one.

In a **valid** argument, *if* all of the premises are true, then the conclusion must necessarily be true. An argument is **sound** if it is valid and all of its premises are known to be true. A sound argument proves its conclusion. That is, if an argument is sound, then we have no choice---short of abandoning reason---except to believe its conclusion. When the Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of "good and necessary consequence", it is speaking of sound argument. We could legitimately paraphrase Chapter I, Section VI to say "The whole counsel of God ... is either expressly set down in Scripture, or may be deduced by sound argument from Scripture"¹

The argument given by the neighbor is valid because *if* each of its five premises is true, then its conclusion ("God does not exist") is also true. (Techniques for determining whether an argument is valid will be discussed in future columns. For now, you'll just have to trust me that this one is valid.) The argument is unsound however, because at least one of its premises is false. Can you determine which one?

If an argument is unsound, then we are not compelled by the argument itself to believe that its conclusion is true. However, this does not mean that the conclusion cannot be true; it only means that the given argument does not establish the conclusion's truth. As an example, consider the following argument:

All people are regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

¹Actually, this isn't quite true. Many of the statements in the WCF are based on inductive, not deductive, reasoning, but we've not studied inductive arguments yet. The term *sound* doesn't apply to inductive arguments; the closest analogous term is *strong*. So, a correct paraphrase would read, "The whole counsel of God ... is either expressly set down in Scripture, or may be deduced by either sound deductive argument or strong inductive argument from Scripture"

All Christians are people.
Therefore, all Christians are regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

This argument is valid---if both of the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true---but it is unsound, because the first premise is false. Therefore, based on this argument alone, we do not have to acknowledge that the conclusion is true. Of course, we know from other sources besides this argument, namely the Scripture, that the conclusion is in fact true.

An **invalid** argument is one in which it is possible for all the premises to be true, but for the conclusion to still be false; such arguments are also often said to be **fallacious**. Many different types of fallacious arguments exist, and we will examine these in more detail in future columns. For now, consider the following three invalid arguments and try to determine why it is possible in each of them for the premises to be true and the conclusion to be false:

Polls show that a large majority of professing Christians believe in a premillennial, pretribulation rapture of believers. Therefore, the Bible must teach a premillennial eschatology.

The Daily Press opposes Oliver North. We know that the Daily Press is liberal; therefore, the right thing to do is to support Oliver North.

If a ministry is pleasing to God, then it will succeed. The Mormon church is successful. Therefore, the Mormon church must be pleasing to God.

As with unsoundness, the invalidity of an argument does not necessarily mean that its conclusion is false. Invalidity simply means that a particular argument is insufficient grounds on which to claim that the conclusion is true. To demonstrate the truth of a conclusion requires some other argument than the invalid one given. For example, if supporting Oliver North is the right thing to do, another argument besides the fact that the local newspaper opposes him must be given (whether such an argument is possible is a suitable subject for a political column, but not for this column). Throughout history many fallacious "proofs" for the existence of God have been formulated. In the case of these "proofs", their conclusion ("God exists") is true, but the arguments themselves do nothing to establish that fact.

To summarize the discussion: a **valid** argument is one in which *if* all of the premises are true, then the conclusion must necessarily be true. A **sound** argument is a valid argument with all of its premises known to be true. Sound arguments establish without doubt the truth of their conclusion. An unsound argument is a valid argument with at least one false premise. An invalid argument is one in which all of the premises can be truth, but the conclusion still be false. Neither unsound nor invalid arguments tell us anything about whether their conclusion is true or false. We should never be persuaded by an unsound or an invalid argument.

So, how should you answer your hypothetical neighbor's argument? Perhaps you could begin with something like, "Yes, that is a valid argument, but it is not a sound one. Not all of your premises are true. You say that if God were unwilling to prevent evil, he would not be loving, but the Scripture says"