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## **Necessary Consequence: Some of My Favorite Fallacies** by Michael Holloway

A few weeks ago, shortly before Douglas Wilder withdrew from the race, there was a debate in Farmville between the four leading candidates in the Senate campaign. I did not watch the debate when it took place, but I did tape it and watch the proceedings a few days later. As the tape played, I found myself saying over and over again --- sometimes to myself, sometimes out loud, sometimes out loud with a raised voice --- "That's fallacious."

I cannot recall a single instance in which someone gave a coherent and valid argument for a particular position. Every once in a while, one candidate or another did manage to stumble upon a true conclusion, but the arguments given to support that conclusion were rarely, if ever, valid. Because the quality of discourse in the campaigns has not improved since the meeting in Farmville, I can think of no better time to discuss some of the most common types of fallacious arguments.

(Recall from the *Necessary Consequence* column in Volume 10, Number 4, that an argument is fallacious, or invalid, if it is possible for all the premises to be true, but for the conclusion to still be false. The invalidity of an argument does not *necessarily* mean that its conclusion is false. Invalidity simply means that a particular argument is *insufficient* to prove that the conclusion is true.)

One of the fallacies most frequently employed by politicians is known as the argument *ad hominem* (as you will see as you continue to read, many fallacies have been given Latin names). An *ad hominem* argument seeks to disparage the character, intelligence, or reasonableness of a proponent of a conclusion in order to argue against that conclusion. Here are two examples of *ad hominem* arguments, one from politics and one from theology:

Powerful Senators and Congressmen oppose term limits, because they don't want to lose their power; therefore, we should support term limits.

Postmillennialists often use the same approach to interpreting Scripture as do the liberals; therefore, true conservative believers cannot be postmillennial.

Such arguments are invalid, because the truth or falsity of a conclusion is independent from the characteristics of those arguing for (or against) it. Another example of reasoning that succumbs to this fallacy is the statement attributed to Gandhi that were it not for the Christians he had known, he would be a Christian.

Another type of fallacy that is wide-spread within politics and society in general is known as argument *ad populum*. An argument that commits this fallacy appeals to that which is popular, suggesting that if something is believed by a large number of people, then it must be true. Here are two examples illustrating *ad populum* arguments:

Polls show that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe the federal government should guarantee health insurance to every person; therefore, the right thing for the government to do is to provide universal health insurance.

The Assembly of God denomination is the fastest growing denomination in the country; therefore, the charismatic gifts must still exist today.

Arguments *ad misericordiam* are also popular. Fallacious arguments of this type replace logical reasoning with appeals to the sympathy or pity of those to whom the argument is made. Two examples of this fallacy include the following:

My mother's only source of income is her small Social Security check; therefore we cannot eliminate or reduce Social Security benefits.

If faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven, then what about those poor people who've never heard the gospel? Surely, it isn't fair for God to send them to hell, when they never had a chance to accept Him.

Yet another type of invalid argument that is often used is known as *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, which is Latin for "after this, therefore because of this." Arguments of this type claim that because one event occurred after another one, the first must have been the cause of the second. Two examples:

Presidents Reagan and Bush strengthened the military. After the U.S. military was strong again, the Soviet Union collapsed; therefore, increased military spending by the U.S. was one of the causes of the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Shortly after the Supreme Court outlawed spoken prayers in government schools, SAT scores went down; therefore, removing spoken prayer from the schools caused the drop in test scores.

There are many more types of fallacious arguments, and we will discuss some of them in future columns, but the four listed above --- *ad hominem*, *ad populum*, *ad misericordiam*, and *post hoc ergo propter hoc* --- are among the most common and the most easily recognized. Be on the lookout for them in the coming weeks and months, and do not allow yourself to be persuaded by them, whether they be advanced by politicians, theologians, teachers, columnists, or anyone else.