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BOOK REVIEW

Richard A. Holland Jr. and Benjamin K. Forrest. *Good Arguments: Making Your Case in Writing and Public Speaking*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017. xvi + 138 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8010-9779-9. \$17.99.

For many people, the word “argument” often conjures up negative images—doors slamming, people screaming, and so on. *Good Arguments: Making Your Case in Writing and Public Speaking* does not define the term “argument” in that way. Rather, Holland and Forrest maintain that “an argument is not a fight or dispute; it is a presentation of reasons that support a belief or claim” (xii). With “argument” defined in this particular way, this book delineates many of the fundamentals (including the biblical and theological grounds for doing so) that are required in order to argue well, that is, to make one’s case persuasive and present one’s position effectively in both oral/platform communication and (formal) writing. The authors communicate that it is their hope that after reading this book the reader will better “understand how arguments can be good” and “know how to develop good arguments” of their own (xvi). Incontrovertibly, they succeed in their aim.

The book is divided into an introduction, nine chapters of roughly equal length, and twenty case studies (more on this later). There is also a subject index and an eminently helpful glossary. There is no formal conclusion, nor is there an author index or an index of allusions, analogies, and illustrations.

The introduction centers on why arguments are not only necessary but should, in fact, be considered a good thing. The authors state, “People actually expect us to present good arguments. Doing so is a way to show them the respect they deserve” (xiv). Elsewhere they assert that “when we reason well and

present good arguments, we reflect” the character of God, who “created us as rational creatures” (xiii). Aside from these points, Holland and Forrest also claim that being able to develop good arguments can result in great personal benefit, as it can help a person clarify his or her own beliefs, present beliefs to others, and make wise decisions.

In each chapter the authors discuss a particular topic, dividing the content with various headings and subheadings, and supplement their discussion with many well-chosen and effective analogies, illustrations, and allusions. There are also numerous (but not too many) personal stories and shared experiences from the authors. Another notable feature of this volume is the tremendously useful sidebars that put key points into a set-off (but unshaded) portion of the page with special font and formatting so they can easily be found for later review or scanned to get the gist of what the main text says. Helpfully, each chapter also ends with a brief conclusion that not only summarizes the content that was just presented but also gives a preview of what is to follow in the next chapter.

Good Arguments is, in some ways, a primer to Aristotelian logic and epistemology. As such, the bulk of chapter 1, “The Basics of Good Arguments,” is spent discussing what a thesis and a premise are and how valid arguments have premises that are properly connected to the claim while fallacious arguments do not. In chapter 2, “Reasoning and Logic,” a fair amount of time is spent discussing if-then deductive syllogisms (including *modus ponens* [“mode of affirming”] and *modus tollens* [“mode of denying”] arguments), inductive reasoning, the laws of logic, and the three principles of common-sense reasoning (namely the law of identity, the law of non-contradiction, and the law of the excluded middle).

Chapter 3, “Fallacies,” goes into extensive detail about the various kinds of fallacies, including formal fallacies, “those that make mistakes in how the argument is structured . . . called *formal* because the defect is in the *form* of the argument,” and informal fallacies, those that “are not related to the form or structure of the argument but rather to the content or the meaning of words and phrases in the argument itself” (32, emphasis original). Ten

different fallacies (affirming the consequent, denying the antecedent, begging the question, *ad hominem*, *ad populum*, inappropriate appeal to authority, genetic fallacy, false dilemma, straw man, and red herring) are each discussed in detail within this chapter.

Chapter 4, “Belief, Fact, and Opinion,” discusses the differences between beliefs, facts, knowledge, opinions, and subjective and objective claims. Chapter 5, “Defining Your Terms,” primarily discusses the need to define (but not over-define) one’s terms and how to avoid making mistakes (such as equivocation, stipulation encroachment, self-serving definitions, and circular definitions) in the way one uses words.

Chapter 6, “Drawing Analogies,” discusses how powerful analogies can be if they are properly constructed and employed. In brief, “when properly constructed, an analogy can leverage the audience’s preexisting knowledge of one item of comparison to expand knowledge and understanding of the other. Additionally, analogies can help construct good arguments that lead the audience to adopt the conclusion” (69).

Chapter 7, “Cause and Effect,” discusses the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy, which is Latin for “after this, therefore because of this.” This fallacy consists of the mistaken assumption that because one event comes after another, it can be concluded that the first caused the second. This chapter not only offers extensive assistance in avoiding mistakes in causal reasoning but also gives five practical steps for making good causal arguments: (1) establish the need, (2) show clear reasoning, (3) rule out possible mistakes, (4) seriously consider the alternative, and (5) avoid overconfidence.

Chapter 8, “On Good Authority,” delineates the process of finding good sources (as well as some cautions for researching online) and some best practices with respect to quoting and citing sources in written and oral arguments. The final chapter, “Making Your Case,” presents six tips that “draw together some of the guiding principles and specific guidelines [that are mentioned throughout the book] to give you a better idea of how to put those guidelines into practice to persuade your audience” (103).

Perhaps the most unique element of this book, found at the end, is the case studies. The authors state, “Our goal in offering these is to highlight various principles for arguing developed throughout the book. In some cases there are specific answers. In others there may be differing analyses available as readers identify strengths and weakness in the arguments presented” (119). One example should suffice to give a fair representation of what these case studies are like. “In the song ‘Memoir’ by Audio Adrenaline, one lyric reads: [‘]I don’t need theology to know that God’s good to me. He’s given me a family . . . [’] Where does the argument in these lines go awry? Break down the premises and the conclusion” (119–20).

Within the concluding thoughts of the final chapter, the authors declare, “It is our charge to you the reader, and to Christians everywhere, to hone your skills of argumentation so that you may be effective in presenting your commissioned message to the world” (117). To this aim, the book can be heartily recommended to anyone who seeks to understand more clearly the means, mannerisms, and methods by which we can more effectively and persuasively communicate to others in a responsible, reasonable, and Christ-centered way. Minor quibbles of mine with respect to this volume concern the fact that the summaries at the end of each chapter lack clarity, therefore not allowing for at-a-glance review, and the fact that there is no a summary that delineates the main points of the whole book in an expedient fashion. It should also be noted that some (perhaps strongly conservative) readers may take offence to the overtly political nature of some of the case studies. For example, case study 6 discusses *ad hominem* as it pertains to United States Senator Elizabeth Warren’s comments about Donald Trump’s “goofy ‘Make America Great’” hat (121), and case study 7 features gun control (121). It is also noteworthy that there is a rather unusual emphasis on abortion and the pro-life position in the case studies: three of the twenty case studies (cases 5, 19, and 20) make this their focal point. The most notable deficiency of this volume, in my opinion, is that there is there no index of allusions, analogies, and illustrations or even an author index, which makes revisiting content sometimes difficult and

unnecessarily frustrating. Such criticism notwithstanding, this book does a great service to all those who seek to read or write more clearly, persuasively, and effectively—free from fallacious arguments or logical fallacies.

Its primary users will be theological/biblical studies students and Christian persons engaged in public speaking and writing (such as preachers, teachers, minister-pastors, columnists, and the like). For faculty who are looking for a good text that pertains specifically to the areas of research and writing or effective platform communication (either for a course that is specifically dedicated to those fields or perhaps a supplement to another course, such as apologetics or evangelism, for instance), *Good Arguments* is an excellent choice.

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