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Necessary Consequence: Answers to Last Month's Exercises

by Michael Holloway

Last month, I challenged you to test your ability to distinguish between premises and conclusions by reading five different arguments and separating each into its conclusion and the premises supporting that conclusion. Before giving the answers, here are the five arguments repeated, just in case you've misplaced last month's *Calvary Herald*:

1. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:8, NASB)

2. A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed. (Constitution of the United States, Amendment 2)

3. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised (1 Corinthians 15:16, NASB)

4. In 1972 Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote that "punishment for the sake of retribution is not permissible under the Eighth Amendment." That is absurd. The element of retribution does not make punishment cruel and unusual, it makes punishment intelligible. It distinguishes punishment form therapy. Rehabilitation may be an ancillary result of punishment, but we punish to serve justice, by giving people what they deserve. (George Will, *Newsweek*, 24 May 1982, p. 92)

5. As always, all the issues are ultimately theological. All the problems we encounter--whether issues of crime or morality or economics or the environment or anything else you can imagine--are issues ultimately shaped by our sense of who God is and how we are supposed to live before him. (Joel Belz, "Sociology without theology," *World*, 25 December 1993, p. 3)

If you didn't already attempt the exercise, try it now before looking at the answers below. But don't peek. Here are the answers:

1. **Conclusion:** the one who does not love does not know God
   Premise: God is love

2. **Conclusion:** the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed
   Premise: a well regulated militia [is] necessary to the security of a free State

3. **Conclusion:** not even Christ has been raised
   Premise: if the dead are not raised

4. **Conclusion:** that (referring to Justice Marshall's statement about punishment for the sake of retribution) is absurd
   Premise (1): the element of retribution does not make punishment cruel and unusual, it makes punishment intelligible

Premise (2): [the element of retribution] distinguishes punishment from therapy
Premise (3): rehabilitation may be an ancillary result of punishment, but we punish to serve justice, by giving people what they deserve

5. **Conclusion:** all the issues are ultimately theological
Premise: all the problems we encounter--whether issues of crime or morality or economics or the environment or anything else you can imagine--are issues ultimately shaped by our sense of who God is and how we are supposed to live before him

How well did you do? If you have any questions, comments, or disputes about any of these, please let me know.

Before leaving the subject of premises and conclusions, there is one more point we need to cover: all of the premises and conclusions of an argument are not always stated explicitly. For those of you who are interested in such things, the technical term for an argument in which only parts are stated is an *enthymeme*.

Because of the vast amount of knowledge that is assumed in almost any statement we make, most real-world arguments are, in fact, almost always enthymemes of some type. Consider, for example, the very simple argument we've used before:

All men are sinners.
I am a man.
Therefore, I am a sinner.

All of the premises necessary to establish this as a complete and correct argument are not present. At the very least, the argument should read something like the following:

The Bible says that all men are sinners.
The Bible is the Word of God.
God always tells the truth.
I am a man.
Therefore, I am a sinner.

Of course, even this is incomplete, because it does not establish that the Bible is the Word of God, or that God always tells the truth, or that I am a man. The complete argument would be quite complex. This complexity, along with an assumption that people share a certain amount of common knowledge, is why most real-world arguments are abbreviated.

Next month, we'll begin examining how to tell if a given argument, whether it be complete or abbreviated, is correct; or, in the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith, if it consists of "good and necessary consequences." This is where the real fun will begin.