

Jesus The Logician

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ABSTRACT: In understanding how discipleship to Jesus Christ works, a major issue is how he automatically presents himself to our minds. It is characteristic of most 20th century Christians that he does not automatically come to mind as one of great intellectual power: as Lord of universities and research institutes, of the creative disciplines and scholarship. The Gospel accounts of how he actually worked, however, challenge this intellectually marginal image of him and help us to see him at home in the best of academic and scholarly settings of today, where many of us are called to be his apprentices.

Few today will have seen the words "Jesus" and "logician" put together to form a phrase or sentence, unless it would be to deny any connection between them at all. The phrase "Jesus the logician" is not ungrammatical, any more than is "Jesus the carpenter." But it 'feels' upon first encounter to be something like a category mistake or error in logical type, such as "Purple is asleep," or "More people live in the winter than in cities," or "Do you walk to work or carry your lunch?"

There is in our culture an uneasy relation between Jesus and intelligence, and I have actually heard Christians respond to my statement that Jesus is the most intelligent man who ever lived by saying that it is an oxymoron. Today we automatically position him away from (or even in opposition to) the intellect and intellectual life. Almost no one would consider him to be a thinker, addressing the same issues as, say, Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger or Wittgenstein, and with the same logical method.

Now this fact has important implications for how we today view his relationship to our world and our life--especially if our work happens to be that of art, thought, research or scholarship. How could he fit into such a line of work, and lead us in it, if he were logically obtuse? How could we be his disciples at our work, take him seriously as our teacher there, if when we enter our fields of technical or professional competence we must leave him at the door? Obviously some repositioning is in order, and it may be helped along simply by observing his use of logic and his obvious powers of logical thinking as manifested in the Gospels of the New Testament.

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Now when we speak of "Jesus the logician" we do not, of course, mean that he developed theories of logic, as did, for example, Aristotle and Frege. No doubt he could have, if he is who Christians have taken him to be. He could have provided a Begriffsschrift, or a Principia Mathematica, or alternative axiomatizations of Modal Logic, or various completeness or incompleteness proofs for various 'languages'. (He is, presumably, responsible for the order that is represented through such efforts as these.)

He could have. Just as he could have handed Peter or John the formulas of Relativity Physics or the Plate Tectonic theory of the earth's crust, etc. He certainly could, that is, if he is indeed the one Christians have traditionally taken him to be. But he did not do it, and for reasons which are bound to seem pretty obvious to anyone who stops to think about it. But that, in any case, is not my subject here. When I speak of "Jesus the logician" I refer to his use of logical insights: to his mastery and employment of logical principles in his work as a teacher and public figure.

Now it is worth noting that those who do creative work or are experts in the field of logical theory are not necessarily more logical or more philosophically sound than those who do not. We might hope that they would be, but they may even be illogical in how they work out their own logical theories. For some reason great powers in theory do not seem to guarantee significantly greater accuracy in practice. Perhaps no person well informed about the history of thought will be surprised at this statement, but for most of us it needs to be emphasized. To have understanding of developed logical theory surely could help one to think logically, but it is not sufficient to guarantee logical thinking and except for certain rarified cases it is not even necessary. Logical insight rarely depends upon logical theory, though it does depend upon logical relations. The two primary logical relations are implication (logical entailment) and contradiction; and their role in standard forms of argument such as the Barbara Syllogism, Disjunctive Syllogism, Modus Ponens and Modus Tollens--and even in strategies such as reductio ad absurdum--can be fully appreciated, for practical purposes, without rising to the level of theoretical generalization at all.¹

To be logical no doubt does require an understanding of what implication and contradiction are, as well as the ability to recognize their presence or absence in obvious cases. But it also requires the will to be logical, and then certain personal qualities that make it possible and actual: qualities such as freedom from distraction, focussed attention on the meanings or ideas involved in talk and thought, devotion to truth, and willingness to follow the truth wherever it leads via logical relations. All of this in turn makes significant demands upon moral character. Not just on points such as resoluteness and courage, though those are required. A practicing hypocrite, for example, will not find a friend in logic, nor will liars, thieves, murderers and adulterers. They will be constantly alert to appearances and inferences that may logically implicate them in their wrong actions. Thus the literary and cinematic genre of mysteries is unthinkable without play on logical relations.

Those devoted to defending certain pet assumptions or practices come what may will also have to protect themselves from logic. All of this is, I believe, commonly recognized by thoughtful people. Less well understood is the fact that one can be logical only if one is committed to being logical as a fundamental value. One is not logical by chance, any more than one just happens to be moral. And, indeed, logical consistency is a significant factor in moral character. That is part of the reason why in an age that attacks morality, as ours does, the logical will also be demoted or set aside--as it now is.

Not only does Jesus not concentrate on logical theory, but he also does not spell out all the details of the logical structures he employs on particular occasions. His use of logic is always enthymemic, as is common to ordinary life and conversation. His points are, with respect to logical explicitness, understated and underdeveloped. The significance of the enthymeme is that it enlists the mind of the hearer or hearers from the inside, in a way that full and explicit statement of argument cannot do. Its rhetorical force is, accordingly, quite different from that of fully explicated argumentation, which tends to distance the hearer from the force of logic by locating it outside of his own mind.

Jesus' aim in utilizing logic is not to win battles, but to achieve understanding or insight in his hearers. This understanding only comes from the inside, from the understandings one already has. It seems to "well up from within" one. Thus he does not follow the logical method one often sees in Plato's dialogues, or the method that characterizes most teaching and writing today. That is, he does not try to make everything so explicit that the conclusion is forced down the throat of the hearer. Rather, he presents matters in such a way that those who wish to know can find their way to, can come to, the appropriate conclusion as something they have discovered--whether or not it is something they particularly care for.

"A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." Yes, and no doubt Jesus understood that. And so he typically aims at real inward change of view that would enable his hearers to become significantly different as people through the workings of their own intellect. They will have, unless they are strongly resistant to the point of blindness, the famous "eureka" experience, not the experience of being outdone or beaten down.

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With these points in mind, let us look at some typical scenes from the Gospels: scenes that are of course quite familiar, but are now to be examined for the role that distinctively logical thinking plays in them.

(1). Consider Matthew 12:1-8. This contains a teaching about the ritual law: specifically about the regulations of the temple and the sabbath. Jesus and his disciples were walking through fields of grain--perhaps wheat or barley--on the sabbath, and they were stripping the grains from the stalks with their hands and eating them. The Pharisees accused them of breaking the law, of being wrongdoers. Jesus, in response, points out that there are conditions in which the ritual laws in question do not apply.

He brings up cases of this that the Pharisees already concede. One is the case (I Samuel 21:1-6) where David, running for his life, came to the place of worship and sacrifice supervised by Ahimelich the priest. He asked Ahimelich for food for himself and his companions, but the only food available was bread consecrated in the ritual of the offerings. This bread, as Jesus pointed out (Matthew 12:4), was forbidden to David by law, and was to be eaten (after the ritual) by priests alone. But Ahimelich gave it to David and his men to satisfy their hunger. Hunger as a human need, therefore, may justify doing what ritual law forbids.

Also, Jesus continues (second case), the priests every sabbath in their temple service do more work than sabbath regulations allow: "On the sabbath the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are innocent." (Matthew 12:5) It logically follows, then, that one is not automatically guilty of wrongdoing or disobedience when they do not keep the ritual observances as dictated, in case there is some greater need that must be met. This is something the Pharisees have, by implication, already admitted by accepting the rightness in the two cases Jesus referred to.

The still deeper issue here is the use of law to harm people, something that is not God's intention. Any time ritual and

compassion (e.g. for hunger) come into conflict, God, who gave the law, favors compassion. That is the kind of God he is. To think otherwise is to misunderstand God and to cast him in a bad light. Thus Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea: "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice', you would not have condemned the innocent." (Matthew 12:7; cp. 9:13) Thus the use of logic here is not only to correct the judgment that the disciples (the "innocent" in this case) must be sinning in stripping the grain and eating it. It is used to draw a further implication about God: God is not the kind of person who condemns those who act to meet a significant need at the expense of a relative triviality in the law. Elsewhere he points out that the sabbath appointed by God was made to serve man, not man to serve the sabbath. (Mark 2:27)

Now the case of sabbath keeping--or, more precisely, of the ritual laws developed by men for sabbath observance--is one that comes up over and over in the Gospels, and it is always approached by Jesus in terms of the logical inconsistency of those who claim to practice it in the manner officially prescribed at the time. (See for example Mark 3:1-3, Luke 13:15-17, John 9:14-16, etc.) They are forced to choose between hypocrisy and open inconsistency, and he does sometimes use the word "hypocrisy" of them (e.g. Luke 13:15), implying that they knew they were being inconsistent and accepted it. In fact, the very idea of hypocrisy implies logical inconsistency. "They say, and do not" what their saying implies. (Matthew 23:2)

And legalism will always lead to inconsistency in life, if not hypocrisy, for it will eventuate in giving greater importance to rules than is compatible with the principles one espouses (to sacrifice, for example, than to compassion, in the case at hand), and also to an inconsistent practice of the rules themselves (e.g. leading one's donkey to water on the sabbath, but refusing to have a human being healed of an 18-year-long affliction, as in Luke 13:15-16).

(2). Another illustrative case is found in Luke 20:27-40. Here it is the Sadducees, not the Pharisees, who are challenging Jesus. They are famous for rejecting the resurrection (vs. 27), and accordingly they propose a situation that, they think, is a reductio ad absurdum of resurrection. (vss. 28-33) The law of Moses said that if a married man died without children, the next eldest brother should make the widow his wife, and any children they had would inherit in the line of the older brother. In the 'thought experiment' of the Sadducees, the elder of seven sons died without children from his wife, the next eldest married her and also died without children from her, and the next eldest did the same, and so on though all seven brothers. Then the wife died (Small wonder!). The presumed absurdity in the case was that in the resurrection she would be the wife of all of them, which was assumed to be an impossibility in the nature of marriage.

Jesus' reply is to point out that those resurrected will not have mortal bodies suited for sexual relations, marriage and reproduction. They will have bodies like angels do now, bodies of undying stuff. The idea of resurrection must not be taken crudely. Thus he undermines the assumption of the Sadducees that any 'resurrection' must involve the body and its life continuing exactly as it does now. So the supposed impossibility of the woman being in conjugal relations with all seven brothers is not required by resurrection.

Then he proceeds, once again, to develop a teaching about the nature of God--which was always his main concern. Taking a premiss that the Sadducees accepted, he draws the conclusion that they did not want. That the dead are raised, he says, follows from God's self-description to Moses at the burning bush. God described himself in that incident as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." (Luke 20:35) The Sadducees accepted this. But at the time of the burning bush incident, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been long 'dead', as Jesus points out. But God is not the God of the dead. That is, a dead person cannot sustain a relation of devotion and service to God, nor can God keep covenant faith with one who no longer exists. In covenant relationship to God one lives. (vs. 38) One cannot very well imagine the living God communing with a dead body or a non-existent person and keeping covenant faithfulness with them.

(Incidentally, those Christian thinkers who nowadays suggest that the Godly do not exist or are without conscious life, at least, from the time their body dies to the time it is resurrected, might want to provide us with an interpretation of this passage.)

(3). Yet another illustration of Jesus' obviously self-conscious use of logic follows upon the one just cited from Luke 20. He would occasionally set teaching puzzles that required the use of logic on the part of his hearers. After the discussion of the resurrection, the Sadducees and the other groups about him no longer had the courage to challenge his powerful thinking. (vs. 40) He then sets them a puzzle designed to help them understand the Messiah--for which everyone was looking.

Drawing upon what all understood to be a messianic reference, in Psalm 110, Jesus points out an apparent contradiction: The Messiah is the son of David (admitted by all), and yet David calls the Messiah "Lord." (Luke 20:42-43) "How," he asks, "can the Messiah be David's son if David calls him Lord?" (vs. 44) The resolution intended by Jesus is that they should recognize that the Messiah is not simply the son of David, but also of One higher than David, and that he is therefore king in a more inclusive sense than political head of the Jewish nation. (Rev. 1:5) The promises to David therefore reach far beyond David, incorporating him and much more. This reinterpretation of David and the Messiah was a lesson learned and used well by the apostles and early disciples. (See Acts 2:25-36, Hebrews 5:6, and Phil. 2:9-11)

(4). For a final illustration we turn to the use of logic in one of the more didactic occasions recorded in the Gospels. The parables and stories of Jesus often illustrate his use of logic, but we will look instead at a well known passage from the Sermon on the Mount. In his teaching about adultery and the cultivation of sexual lust, Jesus makes the statement, "If your right eye makes you to stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell," and similarly for your right hand. (Matthew 5:29-30)

What, exactly, is Jesus doing here? One would certainly be mistaken in thinking that he is advising anyone to actually dismember himself as a way of escaping damnation. One must keep the context in mind. Jesus is exhibiting the righteousness that goes beyond "the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees." This latter was a righteousness that took as its goal to not do anything wrong. If not doing anything wrong is the goal, that could be achieved by dismembering yourself and making actions impossible. What you cannot do you certainly will not do. Remove your eye, your hand, etc., therefore, and you will roll into heaven a mutilated stump. The price of dismemberment would be small compared to the reward of heaven. That is the logical conclusion for one who held the beliefs of the scribes and the pharisees. Jesus is urging them to be consistent with their principles and do in practice what their principles imply. He reduces their principle--that righteousness lies in not doing anything wrong--to the absurd, in the hope that they will forsake their principle and see and enter the righteousness that is "beyond the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees"--beyond, where compassion or love and not sacrifice is the fundamental thing. Jesus, of course, knew that if you dismembered yourself you could still have a hateful heart, toward God and toward man. It wouldn't really help toward righteousness at all. That is the basic thing he is teaching in this passage. Failure to appreciate the logic makes it impossible to get his point.

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These illustrative scenes from the Gospels will already be familiar to any student of scripture. But, as we know, familiarity has its disadvantages. My hope is to enable us to see Jesus in a new light: to see him as doing intellectual work with the appropriate tools of logic, to see him as one who is both at home in and the master of such work.

We need to understand that Jesus is a thinker, that this is not a dirty word but an essential work, and that his other attributes do not preclude thought, but only insure that he is certainly the greatest thinker of the human race: "the most intelligent person who ever lived on earth." He constantly uses the power of logical insight to enable people to come to the truth about themselves and about God from the inside of their own heart and mind. Quite certainly it also played a role in his own growth in "wisdom." (Luke 2:52)

Often, it seems to me, we see and hear his deeds and words, but we don't think of him as one who knew how to do what he did or who really had logical insight into the things he said. We don't automatically think of him as a very competent person. He multiplied the loaves and fishes and walked on water, for example--but, perhaps, he didn't know how to do it, he just used mindless incantations or prayers. Or he taught on how to be a really good person, but he did not have moral insight and understanding. He just mindlessly rattled off words that were piped in to him and through him. Really?

This approach to Jesus may be because we think that knowledge is human, while he was divine. Logic means works, while he is grace. Did we forget something there? Possibly that he also is human? Or that grace is not opposed to effort but to earning? But human thought is evil, we are told. How could he think human thought, have human knowledge? So we distance him from ourselves, perhaps intending to elevate him, and we elevate him right out of relevance to our actual lives--especially as they involve the use of our minds. That is why the idea of Jesus as logical, of Jesus the logician, is shocking. And of course that extends to Jesus the scientist, researcher, scholar, artist, literary person. He just doesn't 'fit' in those areas. Today it is easier to think of Jesus as a "TV evangelist" than as an author, teacher or artist in the contemporary context. But now really!--if he were divine, would he be dumb, logically challenged, uninformed in any area? Would he not instead be the greatest of artists or speakers? Paul was only being consistent when he told the Colossians "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are concealed in him." (2:3) Except for what?

There is in Christian educational circles today a great deal of talk about "integration of faith and learning." Usually it leads to little solid result. This is in part due to the fact that it is, at this point in time, an extremely difficult intellectual task, which cannot be accomplished by ritual language and the pooh-poohing of difficulties. But an even deeper cause of the difficulty is the way we automatically tend to think of Jesus himself. It is not just in what we say about him, but in how he comes before our minds: how we automatically position him in our world, and how in consequence we position ourselves. We automatically think of him as having nothing essentially to do with 'profane' knowledge, with learning and logic, and therefore find ourselves 'on our own' in such areas.

We should, I believe, understand that Jesus would be perfectly at home in any professional context where good work is being done today. He would, of course, be a constant rebuke to all the proud self-advancement and the contemptuous treatment of others that goes on in professional circles. In this as in other respects, our professions are aching for his

presence. If we truly see him as the premier thinker of the human race--and who else would be that?--then we are also in position to honor him as the most knowledgeable person in our field, whatever that may be, and to ask his cooperation and assistance with everything we have to do.

Catherine Marshall somewhere tells of a time she was trying to create a certain design with some drapes for her windows. She was unable to get the proportions right to form the design she had in mind. She gave up in exasperation and, leaving the scene, began to mull the matter over in prayer. Soon ideas as to how the design could be achieved began to come to her and before long she had the complete solution. She learned that Jesus is maestro of interior decorating.

Such stories are familiar from many areas of human activity, but quite rare in the areas of art and intellect. For lack of an appropriate understanding of Jesus we come to do our work in intellectual, scholarly and artistic fields on our own. We do not have confidence (otherwise known as faith) that he can be our leader and teacher in matters we spend most of our time working on. Thus our efforts often fall far short of what they should accomplish, and may even have less effect than the efforts of the Godless, because we undertake them only with "the arm of the flesh." Our faith in Jesus Christ rises no higher than that. We do not see him as he really is, maestro of all good things.

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Here I have only been suggestive of a dimension of Jesus that is commonly overlooked. This is no thorough study of that dimension, but it deserves such study. It is one of major importance for a healthy faith in him. Especially today, when the authoritative institutions of our culture, the universities and the professions, omit him as a matter of course. Once one knows what to look for in the Gospels, however, one will easily see the thorough, careful and creative employment of logic throughout his teaching activity. Indeed, this employment must be identified and appreciated if what he is saying is to be understood. Only then can his intellectual brilliance be appreciated and he be respected as he deserves.

An excellent way of teaching in Christian schools would therefore be to require all students to do extensive logical analyses of Jesus' discourses. This should go hand in with the other ways of studying his words, including devotional practices such as memorization or lectio divina, and the like. It would make a substantial contribution to the integration of faith and learning.

While such a concentration on logic may sound strange today, that is only a reflection on our current situation. It is quite at home in many of the liveliest ages of the church.

John Wesley speaks for the broader Christian church across time and space, I think, in his remarkable treatise, "An Address to the Clergy." There he discusses at length the qualifications of an effective minister for Christ. He speaks of the necessity of a good knowledge of scripture, and then adds,

"Some knowledge of the sciences also, is, to say the least, equally expedient. Nay, may we not say, that the knowledge of one (whether art or science), although now quite unfashionable, is even necessary next, and in order to, the knowledge of Scripture itself? I mean logic. For what is this, if rightly understood, but the art of good sense? of apprehending things clearly, judging truly, and reasoning conclusively? What is it, viewed in another light, but the art of learning and teaching; whether by convincing or persuading? What is there, then, in the whole compass of science, to be desired in comparison of it?"

"Is not some acquaintance with what has been termed the second part of logic (metaphysics), if not so necessary as this, yet highly expedient (1.) In order to clear our apprehension (without which it is impossible either to judge correctly, or to reason closely or conclusively), by ranging our ideas under general heads? And (2.) In order to understand many useful writers, who can very hardly be understood without it?"²

Later in this same treatise Wesley deals with whether we are, as ministers, what we ought to be. "Am I," he asks,

"a tolerable master of the sciences? Have I gone through the very gate of them, logic? If not, I am not likely to go much farther when I stumble at the threshold. Do I understand it so as to be ever the better for it? To have it always ready for use; so as to apply every rule of it, when occasion is, almost as naturally as I turn my hand? Do I understand it at all? Are not even the moods and figures above my comprehension? Do not I poorly endeavour to cover my ignorance, by affecting to laugh at their barbarous names? Can I even reduce an indirect mood to a direct; an hypothetic to a categorical syllogism? Rather, have not my stupid indolence and laziness made me very ready to believe, what the little wits and pretty gentlemen affirm, 'that logic is good for nothing'? It is good for this at least (wherever it is understood), to make people talk less; by showing them both what is, and what is not, to the point; and how extremely hard it is to prove any thing. Do I understand metaphysics; if not the depths of the Schoolmen, the subtleties of Scotus or Aquinas, yet the first rudiments, the general principles, of that useful science? Have I conquered so much of it, as to clear my apprehension and range my ideas under

proper heads; so much as enables me to read with ease and pleasure, as well as profit, Dr. Henry Moore's Works, Malebranche's Search after Truth, and Dr. Clarke's Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God?"³

I suspect that such statements will be strange, shocking, even outrageous or ridiculous to leaders of ministerial education today. But readers of Wesley and other great ministers of the past, such as Jonathan Edwards or Charles Finney, will easily see, if they know what it is they are looking at, how much use those ministers made of careful logic. Similarly for the great Puritan writers of an earlier period, and for later effective Christians such as C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer. They all make relentless use of logic, and to great good effect. With none of these great teachers is it a matter of trusting logic instead of relying upon the Holy Spirit. Rather, they well knew, it is simply a matter of meeting the conditions along with which the Holy Spirit chooses to work. In this connection it will be illuminating to carefully examine the logical structure and force of Peter's discourse on the day of Pentecost. (Acts 2)

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Today, by contrast, we commonly depend upon the emotional pull of stories and images to 'move' people. We fail to understand that, in the very nature of the human mind, emotion does not reliably generate belief or faith, if it generates it at all. Not even 'seeing' does, unless you know what you are seeing. It is understanding, insight, that generates belief. In vain do we try to change peoples' heart or character by 'moving' them to do things in ways that bypass their understanding.

Some months ago one who is regarded as a great teacher of homiletics was emphasizing the importance of stories in preaching. It was on a radio program. He remarked that a leading minister in America had told him recently that he could preach the same series of sermons each year, and change the illustrations, and no one would notice it. This was supposed to point out, with some humor, the importance of stories to preaching. What it really pointed out, however, was that the cognitive content of the sermon was never heard--if there was any to be heard--and does not matter.

Paying careful attention to how Jesus made use of logical thinking can strengthen our confidence in Jesus as master of the centers of intellect and creativity, and can encourage us to accept him as master in all of the areas of intellectual life in which we may participate. In those areas we can, then, be his disciples, not disciples of the current movements and glittering personalities who happen to dominate our field in human terms. Proper regard for him can also encourage us to follow his example as teachers in Christian contexts. We can learn from him to use logical reasoning at its best, as he works with us. When we teach what he taught in the manner he taught it, we will see his kind of result in the lives of those to whom we minister.⁴

NOTES

1. See my paper, "Degradation of Logical Form," in Axiomathes, Number 1-3, 1997, 1-22, especially pp. 3-7. [Return to text.](#)
2. From Selections from the Writings of the Rev. John Wesley, edited by Herbert Welch, New York: Eaton & Mains, 1901, p. 186. [Return to text.](#)
3. Ibid., p. 198. [Return to text.](#)
4. For necessary elaboration of many themes touched upon in this paper, see J. P. Moreland's crucial book, Love Your God with All Your Mind, Colorado Springs: Navypress, 1997. [Return to text.](#)