17

Logic: Straight or Curved

You do not know a man until you have eaten
forty pounds of salt with him.

RUSSIAN PROVERB

THIS CHAPTER ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN how people from various cultures reason differently. Thought patterns and ways of arriving at a decision vary greatly around the world. How does the mind work in defining an issue, solving a problem, making a point or coming to a conclusion? I was schooled in linear thought where one works in a straight line to the conclusion or decision. Linear logic was the format for my public speaking and sermon preparation classes. It was efficient, direct and precise. Everyone could follow the main points and would, therefore, arrive at the same conclusion—assuming my preparation was good and there were no weak links in this straight-line, chain-link logic.

When living in other countries, I tried to interpret the thought patterns of others through my linear frame of reference. It usually ended in confusion because most did not use a linear form of reasoning. I concluded two things: these people had not prepared well and they were very illogical. Because someone did something that confused me or that did not fit my frame of reference, I judged them negatively. (Remember negative attribution?) Once again I failed to see a cultural expression as different. I saw it as wrong. If it is wrong I can feel free to judge it and try to correct it.

DANIEL'S PROBLEM

Daniel had been one of my students as an undergraduate and a graduate.

He was Korean, though all his education had been in the United States. When he was my teaching assistant for several years we formed a wonderful bond. He later did a second graduate degree at Yale Divinity School. Since I often taught for a week each year near Yale, Daniel and I would meet a few times for some delicious Korean food.

On one occasion he asked if I wanted to take a drive up to the bluff overlooking the bay. Since I had come from the flatlands of Illinois, new scenery seemed a great idea. As we drove slowly to the destination, Daniel began to talk, vaguely and, from my perspective, without a clear point. It started out with his church, moved on to his ministry with the college group, what he was doing, who was attending and what was happening or not happening.

About forty minutes later and at the top of the bluff overlooking Long Island Sound, I got the first clue of what this was all about. Daniel said, "Do you think it is appropriate for someone in a pastoral position to date someone in the church?" In my get-to-the-point way I said, "Daniel, you are the college pastor. Are you interested in dating someone in your college group?" My bluntness caused him to falter for a moment, but then he agreed that was the issue. With that we both broke into laughter followed by a lengthy conversation about this topic that was presently consuming him.

Two metaphors come to mind to help the Western mind understand Daniel.

Onion. First, the metaphor of the onion—Daniel peeled off the outer layers one at a time, checking to see if I was listening, understanding and properly responsive. At any point where he felt uncomfortable with my response, he might safely stop, not having exposed the sensitive, core concern. Little-by-little, the layers came off and eventually we got to the middle of the onion—the heart of the issue. Daniel, so handsome and possessing an exceptionally beautiful personality, gave most of his energies to ministry and schoolwork. Dating, while it happened, did not preoccupy his life. But now, he was feeling the need to think about marriage

and the future. Thus, talking about dating, especially with a seriousness that might lead to marriage, was very sensitive, requiring every caution. Thus, he entered a more Korean mode as he talked with me.

Spiral. The second metaphor is one of a spiral[1] moving inward toward the center. Note in figure 17.1 that the spiral starts from the outside and slowly winds its way around until it comes to an end in the center. Daniel started with the more distant talk about his church, continued toward the center of the spiral when he evolved into talk about his college group, then the people attending and finally a girl.

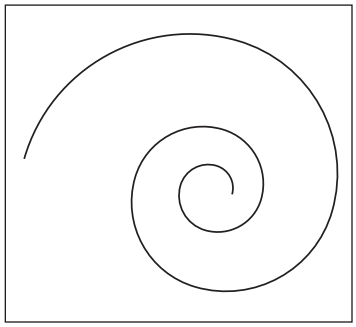

Figure 17.1

Daniel could be more direct, but when the concern was close to his heart and so sensitive, he reverted to the Korean way of thinking about it and explaining it. It was different from the logic I use, but it was effective for him and, in reality, it seems to possess some distinct advantages. First, he could test my interest and commitment as we went along. Was our trust strong enough for him to show me his heart on this tender matter? Second, by peeling the onion or slowly circling toward the center of the spiral, he was providing me with valuable history and information, which I would need if I were to offer any help. Third, Daniel, probably without realizing it, was telling me who he was. When it came to matters of the heart, he was deeply Korean in how he would handle it. For the years he was my student, he would accommodate to me, to my Western ways. Now that we were both professionals and I was on his turf, he would invite me into his world the way he lived it. It was my turn to accommodate. I needed to experience that. Too quickly I can believe that I am the norm and expect others to adjust to my ways.

Our friendship grew stronger that day. Later, Daniel spent a year in

South Korea, where he found a lovely young lady. He brought her back to the States and introduced me to her. I was honored to coofficiate with a Korean pastor at their wedding.

Eastern and Western Logic

Miscommunication often happens because people from different traditions think in different cultural patterns. The sequential, linear logic of the West, sometimes likened to the links of a chain because of its connectedness, allows for more direct communication. Thus, Westerners get to the point and want you to give it to them straight without beating around the bush. The spiral logic, often used by Asians, allows for more indirect communication, important for protecting people's face and not causing shame.

Okabe offers this comparison:

> American logic and rhetoric value "step-by-step, "chain-like" organization, as frequently observed in the "problem-solution" pattern or in the "cause-to-effect" or "effect-to-cause" pattern of organization. . . . By contrast, Japanese logic and rhetoric emphasize the importance of a "dotted," "point-like" method of structuring a discourse. No sense of rigidity . . . is required in the Japanese-speaking society, where there is instead a sense of leisurely throwing a ball back and forth and carefully observing each other's response.[2]

It is possible to understand the words the other person is speaking and still not understand the message. The indirect and often imprecise language used in Asia tends to confuse Westerners who prefer clear, defined steps to the point, the conclusion or the solution. The directness of Westerners, often perceived as aggressiveness, may be offensive and even humiliating to the Asian. The confusion from such misunderstanding often leads each party to think suspiciously about the other. Thus, business contracts, learning and relationships are hindered, even disrupted.

Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim give the following account of how styles of logic can affect business. They discuss the topic within the category of worldview.

> Consider, for example, a business delegation from North America meeting with strangers from the East to decide whether or not their two companies should work together on a joint venture. Based only on their differing world views, it might be expected that misunderstandings will occur. The North Americans would analyze all of the "facts" and would develop a direct argument as to whether or not the two companies should do business together. The strangers, in contrast, would base their decision on a synthesis of all the data and on their intuition as to whether or not the idea is a good one and, in addition, would discuss the issues in an indirect rather than a direct method. Obviously, if one of the groups does not understand the other's world view and adapt their communication accordingly, misunderstanding is going to occur.[3]

Lustig and Koester quote Ishii's comment on the matter:

> The rules for language use in Japan demand that the speaker not tell the listener the specific point being conveyed; to do so is considered rude and inappropriate. Rather, the Japanese delicately circle a topic in order to imply its domain. The U.S. English concepts of thesis statements and paragraph topic sentences have no real equivalent in Japanese.
>
> Imagine the consequences of an intercultural interaction between a Japanese and a U.S. American. What might happen if one of them is able to speak in the other's language and is sufficiently skilled to convey meaning linguistically but is not adept at the logic of the language? The Japanese person is likely to think that the U.S. American is rude and aggressive. Conversely, the U.S. American is likely to think that the Japanese is confusing and imprecise. Both people in this intercultural interaction are likely to feel dissatisfied, confused and uncomfortable.[4]

Incidentally, one of the reasons Western teachers have difficulty understanding the papers written by students from the Two-Thirds

World is that the students often use a different logic in writing, especially if they are new to Western education. They tend not to start with a thesis statement, do not highlight main points and offer unclear supporting subpoints which do not lead to a firm conclusion. They are understandably confused when their paper gets a low mark accompanied by comments such as "Couldn't follow your reasoning," "Clarify your point" or "ambiguous conclusion."

One can also see the implications for sharing one's faith. Many Westerners are taught to share their faith in Christ in a Western linear logic that does not fit comfortably into the minds and hearts of people who use different logic. Also, as I said earlier, our witness is one of words whereas much of the world places emphasis on relationship before the words become important.

African Thought Patterns

My experience in sub-Saharan Africa reveals yet a different kind of logic with some similarities to Asia. I have heard hundreds of sermons and speeches of various sorts while living and traveling on that continent. I confess to a wide variety of responses but most not favorable, until I discovered the logic behind the words. Since I was critiquing everything through Western lenses, I judged most sermons inferior (more negative attribution) because they did not follow the linear logic of my homiletics and public speaking classes. In fact, I taught both subjects to my students in South Africa thinking that by straightening them out we might see some "good" pulpit ministry in the future.

After I had done a couple years of damage, I began to decipher the logic of my African brothers and sisters. The metaphor I use to describe their kind of logic is that of a flower—a daisy in particular. One thinks of the many petals surrounding and being attached to the center (see figure 17.2). Let me explain.

In Africa many speakers would begin with a point, which I would

represent as the center of the flower. The point would be the topic or issue that the speaker was going to address. Then, the speaker would use a Bible verse or illustration and, as it were, expand out into one of the petals. Then the speaker would return to the point or topic again. Then the speaker would go off in another direction, into another petal and return again to repeat, now for the second time, the main point or topic. Off the speaker would go into yet another petal soon to reiterate the point once again. By now the Western listener is thinking about how circular the reasoning is (not a positive thing in the West) and how repetitious this was getting. Such thoughts usually precede frustration and tuning out.

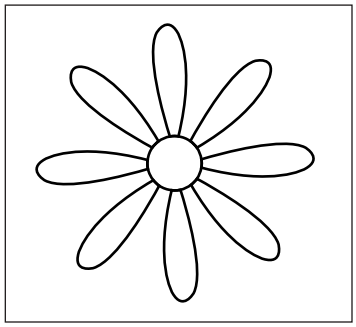

Figure 17.2

Yet there is something amazingly effective about this speaking style. It took me a long time to appreciate it, but once I did, I benefited more from this circular, flower petal style than from many of the linear sermons. For this reason, I much enjoy watching some of the African-American preachers on TV or visiting an African-American church.

A SERMON NOT FORGOTTEN

When I was teaching cross-cultural communications in the Detroit area, we would usually send our participants, all predeparture missionary appointees and usually an all-Caucasian group, to Greater Grace Temple for Sunday worship. Greater Grace was a mostly African American congregation where our group was always warmly received and given unconditional acceptance. On Mondays we would debrief their experience at Greater Grace. One time a person blurted out that it was a waste of time after the first five minutes. He went on to explain that the pastor simply repeated the same point again and again and again—maybe seven to eight times during the forty-minute sermon. I asked him what

the point was. He noted that it was two Scripture verses: "Surely I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20) and "Never will I leave you; / never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). And then he noted again with frustration in his voice, "I got that point in the first five minutes. He could have moved on, but he just kept going over it."

Nearly five years later this person came back from his assignment overseas and attended one of our furlough programs. Upon seeing me he came charging toward me with a force that bordered on frightening. He demanded, "Do you remember me? I was here almost five years ago." I acknowledged that I did indeed remember. "Do you remember my reaction to Greater Grace Temple?" I said that I did. Then he made a most remarkable comment, "I don't think I have gone more than two to three days during my entire time overseas without thinking about that sermon. I am convinced I would not have lasted if I had not heard it. It was the greatest sermon I have ever heard and certainly the only one that I remember in this way. Don't ever stop sending people to Greater Grace."

The pastor's topic and preaching style—so repetitive, frustrating and seemingly a waste of time for this young missionary—turned out to be the enduring truth that stabilized him for four years in another culture.

Hispanic Thought Patterns

Samovar and Porter summarize the differences between the Western style of negotiating and debate with that of Mexicans and, in a more general way, to Latinos.

> The American is persuaded by expert opinion and supporting hard evidence and uses such in presenting a position in negotiations. Mexicans, however, are less likely to be equally impressed. They generally prefer a *deductive* approach as opposed to the American inclination toward the *inductive*. Like other Latin Americans and other nationalities as well . . . the emphasis is placed on starting with the most general aspects by defining issues, categorizing them, and deciding on the main principle. Once this

is done, then logic follows along to the conclusion with less attention to supporting evidence. Or new evidence may be interpreted in the light of the main principle already determined.

This contrast in approach is sometimes found in UN debate. Americans become irritated with the time taken in argument over which principle applies, to which UN committee an issue falls, or the exact wording of a title to be assigned to a new issue. The Americans want to concentrate on the facts available, to look for cause and effect, and to get on to problem-solving.

Tentatively, Mexican reasoning may also be more complex because it incorporates some of the Spanish tradition of placing more emphasis on contemplation and intuition. . . . Emotion, drama, and feeling play a larger part as contrasted to American considerations of efficiency, scientific method, and practical application of the colder logic and reasoning of the French.[5]

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

1. People use different types of logic in different parts of the world. We must resist thinking of it as illogical or confusing and try to see how the mind works differently.
2. No form of reasoning is better or worse than another. We might prefer one style but others prefer another. It is to our advantage to learn several styles to be effective in this global village.
3. Listen and analyze the structure behind the words. It has been helpful for me to try to diagram a conversation, sermon or speech—not in my linear way but in the way that seemed to reflect the speaker's mind.
4. Just as there are variations on how people use linear logic in the United States, so there will be variations in other cultures. I hope the pointers in this chapter will give you an ability to suspend judgment until you can understand the local situation.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a logic different from what you are accustomed to? Explain, as best you can, what it was like. How did you feel during the experience?

2. Describe how you tend to handle situations that confuse you.

3. What can you do to prepare yourself for encountering different reasoning styles? For example, are there people you can connect with who represent a different culture? Perhaps you could read them parts of this chapter and ask them how they respond.

4. Do the writers of Scripture employ different kinds of logic or reasoning? Do the writings of Paul have a different style than John's, for example? What style seems more prominent in the Old Testament?