

## INTRODUCTION

We do need some basic knowledge in order to defend our faith. That is what I have sought to give you in this series.

Knowledge, however, is not enough. Our knowledge must be tempered with wisdom and character. Wisdom opens the door so that they'll listen. Character makes our presentation attractive.

**Matthew 10:16 (NKJV)** — **16** “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

**How do we discuss our Christian convictions with those who have questions?** How do we present what we have learned without coming across as argumentative and offensive?

What I'm going to present is developed in Gregory Koukl's book, “Tactics: A Game Plan For Discussing Your Christian Convictions” [Zondervan, 2009] Gregory Koukl refers to his approach as “tactics.” Tactics involve the art of navigating through the conversation itself.

**I want to encourage you to use THE COLUMBO TACTIC.** It is named after Lieutenant Columbo, a brilliant TV detective with a clever way of catching a crook.

**The Columbo Tactic** – “*Never make a statement, at least at first, when a question will do the job.*” That was Columbo's tactic. That was his “habit.” It is a good habit for the Christian apologists as well.

**Why is “asking questions” such a good habit?**

1. **Sincere questions are friendly and flattering.** It invites interaction on something the other person cares a lot about ... their own thoughts and ideas. When you ask a question you are displaying interest in the person asked.
2. **You'll get an education.** You'll leave a conversation knowing more than when you arrived. You'll learn more about atheism ... Islam ... Buddhism ... Hinduism ... New Age ... etc.
3. **Questions allow you to make progress on a point without being “pushy” or “preachy.”** When you ask a question you're not actually stating your own view. If you're not pressing a point, you have nothing to prove ... therefore, nothing to defend. The pressure is off. You don't come across directly as saying “you're wrong.”
4. **Carefully placed questions put you in the driver's seat.** Leading questions enable you to guide and control the conversation.

**Jesus used the Columbo tactic. The Columbo tactic is also the Jesus tactic.** Jesus often asked leading questions that were meant to challenge his audience or silence his detractors by exposing their foolishness.

**Luke 20:22–24 (NKJV)** — **22** Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not? **23** But He perceived their craftiness, and said to them, “Why do you test Me? **24** Show Me a denarius. Whose image and inscription does it have?” They answered and said, “Caesar's.”

**Mark 2:6–9 (NKJV)** — **6** And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, **7** “Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” **8** But immediately, when Jesus perceived in His spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, He said to them, “Why do you reason about these things in your hearts? **9** Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise, take up your bed and walk’?”

**Matthew 12:2–5 (NKJV)** — **2** And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” **3** But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: **4** how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat,

nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? **5** Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?

**Matthew 12:10–12 (NKJV)** — **10** And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—that they might accuse Him. **11** Then He said to them, “What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? **12** Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

**Matthew 12:24–27 (NKJV)** — **24** Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.” **25** But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. **26** If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? **27** And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges.

**Matthew 21:23–25 (NKJV)** — **23** Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?” **24** But Jesus answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: **25** The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?” And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’

There are three basic ways to use Columbo:

1. Ask questions that “gather information” ... i.e. what exactly are they thinking?
2. Ask questions that “reverse the burden of proof” ... i.e. to encourage the other person to give the reasons for their own views ... i.e. why they are thinking that?
3. Ask questions that “lead the conversation” in a specific direction

## STEP 1 – Gather Information

When Columbo shows up at a crime scene, the first thing he does is gather the facts.

**MODEL QUESTION: “What do you mean by that?”**

... or something similar ... i.e. force them to explain what they mean.

**First, this question engages them in an interactive way.** It is a conversation starter.

ILL: Gregory Koukl asked a woman wearing a Wiccan symbol ... “Does that star have religious significance to you?”

**Second, this question helps you know what a person thinks.** This is important because you don’t want to misunderstand them. If you don’t understand them, you might misrepresent them.

ILL: The claim that “everything is relative” is very ambiguous. Questions like, “What do you mean by ‘relative’?” ... “Is EVERYTHING relative?” ... “What is everything relative to? ... time? ... persons? ... location?” “Would that apply even to your own statement?”

ILL: They claim that believing in God is irrational. You could ask ... “specifically, what is irrational about believing in God?” or “why do you think that believing in God is irrational?”

- If they say it is irrational because you can’t see God you could ask ... “Do you believe in atoms? Can you see atoms? Why do you believe in them?”
- If they say it is irrational because there is no evidence, ask ... “what kind of evidence would it take to convince you that He exists.”

**Third, it may challenge the lack of clarity in they’re own thinking.** They may have never really thought through the implications of their own thinking. No one has really challenged the lack of clarity in their own thinking.

## Step 2 – Reverse The Burden Of Proof

Some people think that Christians are the only ones that need to answer for their beliefs. We should be able to give reasons for what we think is true. However, we are not the only ones.

**The burden of proof is the responsibility someone has to defend or give evidence for their view.**

**PRINCIPLE TO REMEMBER: Whoever makes the claim bears the burden.**

The key ... don't allow yourself to be thrust into a defensive position when the other person is making the claim. It's not your duty to prove him wrong. It's their duty to prove their view.

**MODEL QUESTION: "How did you come to that conclusion?"**

Other forms of this question could include:

- Why do you say that?
- What makes you think that's the right way to see it?
- Why would that idea seem compelling to you?

The first Columbo question helps you know what another person is thinking. The second helps you know why he thinks the way he does.

This question is not a trick to avoid shouldering the burden of proof. It's meant to ward off unfounded doubt.

Ask this question when someone says to you ...

1. "The Bible's been changed so many times."
2. "The Bible is filled with fables and fairy tales."
3. "The Bible was just written by men."
4. "The Bible is filled with errors."
5. "It is irrational to believe in God."
6. "The universe is just a product of evolution."
7. "When we die ... we just go into the ground and that is it."
8. "You don't need God to have morality."
9. "There's an infinite number of universes, and ours just happens to be the one that looks designed."

Most critics are not prepared to defend their faith. Some might reply ... "I don't have any reasons ... I just believe it."

**Recognize the difference between an "assertion" and an "argument."** An assertion simply states a point. An argument gives supporting reasons why the point should be taken seriously.

**Don't let people off the hook with ... "you could say that ..." ... "it could have happened ..." ... with no evidence provided.** Giving an explanation is not the same thing as presenting a good argument for one's position.

**ILL:** Richard Dawkins wrote a book entitled *The Blind Watchmaker*. In it he says ... "How did wings get there start? Many animals leap from bough to bough, and sometimes fall to the ground. Especially in a small animal, the whole body surface catches the air and assists the leap, or breaks the fall, by acting as a crude aerofoil. Any tendency to increase the ratio of surface area to weight would help, for example, flaps of skin growing out in the angles of joints. From here, there is a continuous series of graduations to gliding wings, and hence to flapping wings."

This is not an argument ... there is no evidence! Dawkins obscures the need for a massive infusion of new genetic information at just the right time and in just the right way. It is not really possible, plausible or probable.

**Watch out for "the professor's ploy."** They try to reverse the burden of proof back to you ... "you must be one of those fundamentalist Christians ... why don't you prove me wrong?" Simply say ... "I'd be glad to share why I think the Bible is the WOG ... but I'd like know why you think it was just written by man."

**PRINCIPLE TO REMEMBER: Refuse to shoulder the burden of proof when you have not made a claim.**

**When you find yourself overmatched keep yourself in the fact-finding mode.** Ask probing clarifying questions instead of trying to win your case. Then, simply say “let me think about that.” Work on the issues later, on your own, when the pressure is off. If possible, interact with them again after you have had a chance to think about it.

## **STEP 3 – Use Leading Questions**

The first two steps use friendly questions that help us understand a person’s viewpoint and their reasons for it. We put nothing on the line. Since there is nothing to defend, there is no pressure.

**In this third step you need to know the direction you want the conversation to go. You use leading questions to take them in that direction.**

- **Do you want to clarify a point?**
- **Do you want to convey new information?**
- **Do you want to expose a weakness or flaw in their thinking?**

This step requires some knowledge and understanding of the issues related to the topic at hand ... i.e. the kind of knowledge and understanding that I have sought to impart during this series.

If you don’t have the resources to go further in a discussion or you sense they are losing interest, don’t feel compelled to force the conversation.

As an ambassador for Christ you don’t have to hit a home run in every conversation. The first two steps will help get you in the game. The rest will come with time.

**In this step you may need to expose a flaw in their thinking or convey information that counters their opinion.**

**There are several ways that you can cushion the third step in using Columbo:**

### ***1. Preface your question with ... “Have you ever considered ...?”***

Use this phrase to introduce your concern. Then offer a different view that gently questions their beliefs or confronts a weakness in their argument.

- Have you ever considered ... if the Bible were ‘merely written by men’ it would be very hard to account for hundreds of fulfilled prophecy? How would you explain that?
- Have you ever considered ... Jesus disciples went from a scared bunch of men to those who were severely persecuted ... most to the point of death. How would you explain their willingness to die for what they were proclaiming?
- Have you ever considered ... that if Jesus was wrong about being the only way of salvation, it is difficult to call him a good man, a prophet, or a wise teacher? What do you think about that problem?

### ***2. Preface your concern with a request for clarification ... “Could you clear this up for me?” OR “Can you help me understand this?”***

- Can you help me understand this? If there is no evidence that life came from non-life and there is much more evidence against it, how can we say that evolution is a fact?

This approach emphasizes respect for the person you disagree with.

### ***3. Use statements that counter with respect***

- I think there may be a better explanation for the existence of man. Could I share that with you? I’d love to know what you think.
- Can I suggest an alternative to the Big Bang? If you don’t agree, then you can tell me why you think your opinion is better.

## **Examples Of Leading Questions**

Let me give you some examples of leading questions that clarify a point, convey new information and/or expose weakness in someone's thinking ...

### **They claim ... "truth is what works"**

- Could you clear something up for me? Lying may work at times. Does your view make those lies true?

### **They claim ... "truth is found in good intentions"**

- Help me understand. Could there ever be a well-intending person who is wrong?
- Could you clear something up for me? Liars can have good intentions, couldn't they? Do their good intentions make the lie true?

### **They claim ... "truth is relative/subjective"**

- Help me understand. Why wouldn't it make more sense to say truth is that which corresponds to reality?
- Could you clear something up for me? If something is true, shouldn't it be true for all people at all times and in all places regardless of a person's awareness or beliefs? If not, why wouldn't it be?

### **They claim ... "nobody can discover truth"**

- I'm a little confused. Could you clear something up for me? How can you be certain that nobody can discover truth if you can't know for sure that anything is true?

### **They doubt everything that claims to be true (skeptic)**

- I'm a little confused. If you doubt everything that claims to be true, shouldn't you be skeptical about your own skepticism?
- I was wondering. Do you doubt *everything* that claims to be true? If not, then why do you accept some things to be true?

### **They claim ... truth is different for everyone**

- I'm a little confused. How can truth be different for everyone? Why wouldn't it be the same for all people in all places at all times?
- Could you help me understand? What is truth relative to? Is it relative to time, persons or location?"
- I'm a little confused. Doesn't truth need to correspond with reality? If not, why wouldn't it?

### **They claim ... truth is what feels right**

- Could you clear something up for me? Since feelings and emotions change, doesn't your view imply that truth changes along with our feelings?
- I'm a little confused. What if two people have different feelings about the same statements?
- Could you clear something up for me? If only what feels good is true, do you reject all news that makes you feel unpleasant? Can bad news be true?

### **They claim to be an atheist**

- Could you help me understand how you came to that conclusion? What evidence do you have that God does not exist?
- Could you clear something up for me? Would you agree that whatever has a beginning has a cause? In your opinion, what was the first cause of the universe?
- I'm a little confused. Can you think of anything that came into existence without a cause?
- I was wondering. Do you live by a moral standard? What makes something right or wrong to you? Where did you get your moral standard from?

### **Talking to a pantheist ...**

- I'm confused. If everything is god, then what happens when we cut our grass? Are we cutting God?

- I'm confused. What would you do if a car is going to hit you? Why would god need to get out of the way of god? Help me understand.

## Talking to a polytheist ...

- I'm a little confused. If the forces of nature birthed the gods, why don't you worship nature as divine?

## Talking to an evolutionist ...

- Are you aware that there are billions of dead things buried in rock layers all over the world? How would you explain how they got there?
- I was wondering. If you found a watch on a beach, would you think that it had a designer? Why?
- Do you know that mathematicians have calculated that a universe with monkeys typing relentlessly throughout the oldest estimated age of the universe would have no realistic chance of producing Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, let alone a transcript of the genetic information required to build even the simplest living cell? Where do you think all the detailed information for DNA came from?
- Are you aware that DNA is much more complex than the software code that runs Microsoft Windows. Where do you think all the detailed information for DNA came from?
- I was wondering. Do you think the president's heads on Mt. Rushmore were the products of millions of years of erosion? Why not?
- I'm confused. Could you help me understand? How can life come from non-life?
- I'm confused. How can incredibly complex and compact information like that found in DNA come from non-intelligence?
- Help me understand. Evolution requires a tendency for things to improve and become more orderly without intelligent intervention. This violates the 2nd law of thermodynamics which says that things have a tendency to decay and to go from order to disorder. How do you explain this?
- Are you aware that beneficial mutations have never been observed. For evolution to be true there would need to be billions of beneficial mutations. How would you explain the absence of beneficial mutations?
- I'm confused. Evolution requires that new species be formed. How do you explain the fact that no one has ever seen a new species being formed?
- Could you help me out? We would expect to find evidence of transitional forms in the fossil record, yet none have been found. How would you explain the absence of transitional forms?
- Do you think evolution is a proven fact or a theory? Evolution is not a proven fact. It is a theory that does not meet the definition of good science. Good science involves that which is observable, measurable and reproducible. Evolution cannot be observed, reproduced or measured.

## Perfecting Columbo

**It takes time and practice to develop any skill. The same is true in using Columbo.**

**Usually the best time to develop something is when the pressure is off ... you can think clearly.**

**There are two times that the pressure is off:**

1. **Before the conversation begins**
2. **After the conversation is over**

**1 Peter 3:15 (NKJV) — 15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;**

**Three specific things you can do to be ready:**

1. **Anticipate beforehand what might come up**
2. **Reflect afterward on what took place**
3. **In both cases ... practice the responses you think of during these reflective moments**

Work on an issue or question that people frequently ask about or that have stumped you in the past.

After each encounter, take some time for self-assessment. Reflect on how you could have done better. Did you know enough about the issue, or do you need to brush up for next time? Did you do it with grace, kindness and patience.

When you think of a new idea or approach, practice it out loud.

**There are two things that will generate courage:**

- 1. Being prepared will give you confidence**
- 2. Interacting with others face-to-face**

**Let's look for opportunities to present the Gospel and use what we have learned in this series.**