

STAND TO REASON

GUARD THE TREASURE

Hit a Roadblock in your Conversation? Ask a Good Question!

Dear Friend,

February 1, 2006

The people who proclaim “God hates fags” claim to follow the same Jesus you and I follow. Their strategy to communicate Christ’s valuable message of reconciliation, however, is terribly misled.

Not many of us are guilty of a tactical error this grievous, but all of us can probably recall an episode where our approach had little or no positive effect. Perhaps we retorted with a Bible verse to a person who didn’t believe in the authority of scripture. It’s possible we allowed a conversation to crescendo into a shouting match. Or maybe we feared making a tactical error, so we didn’t even engage.

This is why, at Stand to Reason, we place a high premium on tactical wisdom. Knowledge alone is not sufficient. It must be deployed in a fair, skillful, and strategic manner. This may take time to master, but you can begin to put conversational tactics into practice almost immediately.

The Columbo tactic is a simple, yet powerful tactic. It involves asking questions to productively advance the conversation. It puts you in control of the conversation in a disarming manner. Although there are many types of Columbo questions, its most modest application is to help you *gain information*.

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This application is easy to employ and can be used to great avail among the novice or most advanced conversationalists. It can be a conversation-starter or an aide to bail you out when you hit a roadblock. Some key questions might include, “What do you mean by...?” or “Can you tell me more about...?” or “What, exactly, is your view on...?” The goal in each case is to get the other person to spell out their view, point, or objection.

Asking these kinds of questions accomplishes some important goals:

- It puts you in control of the conversation
- It keeps you out of the hot seat so the pressure is off of you
- It demonstrates respect for the other person by asking them what they believe
- It helps you gain valuable information about their view so you don’t misrepresent it
- It buys you time and gives you more material to work from to develop your response.

The great thing about the Columbo tactic is that you don’t have to know a lot about the subject matter to engage a non-Christian in a meaningful dialogue. You can just stay in fact-finding mode and ask questions. If the other person turns the tables, you have the option to answer if you choose. If not, you can simply defer by saying, “That’s a good question. I’m not sure I’ve thought too much about it. Let me chew on that for a bit and I’ll get back to you.” Then, at your leisure, you can research the answer or collect your thoughts on the issue and restart the conversation in the future.

Sometimes you’re in a conversation when a subject comes up that naturally moves in a spiritual direction. You want to delve deeper, but you’re afraid you might get stuck or asked a question you can’t answer. You can let the Columbo tactic do all the work.

Let's look at a sample dialogue.

John: "Well, this weekend, I have my brother's birthday party on Saturday and church on Sunday."

Zach: "Oh really, I used to go to church when I was younger."

John: "What made you stop going to church?" [*Columbo question*]

Zach: "I think I saw a lot of hypocrisy among church members."

John: "Hmm...What sort of things did you see that were hypocritical?" [*Columbo question*]

Zach: "I guess a lot of Christians were judgmental, but they weren't angels themselves."

John: "How do you think Christians should behave?" [*Columbo question*]

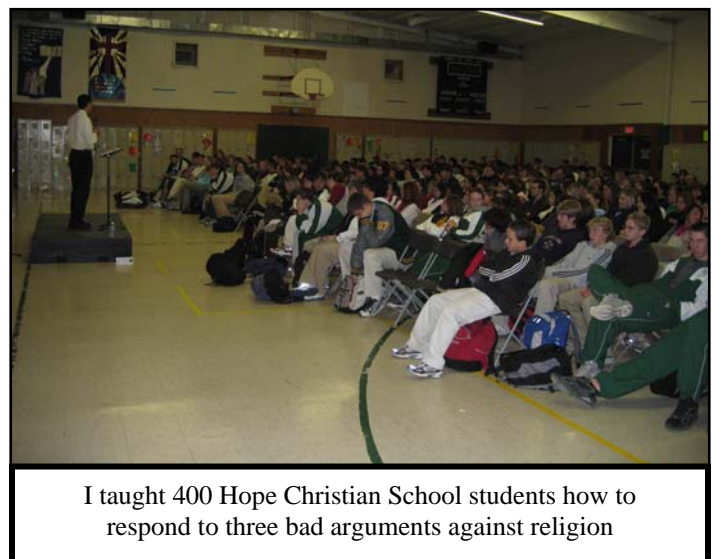
Zach: "Well, I guess they don't have to be perfect, but they shouldn't judge other people who don't share their faith."

John: "So, you don't go to church anymore because you don't want to be a part of judging other people?" [*Columbo question*]

Zach: Ya, that's right."

What happened in this short conversation? First, John discovered Zach's reason for leaving church. Secondly, John uncovered a misconception Zach held – Christians are supposed to judge non-Christians. Third, John created an opportunity to clarify an accurate position on Christians and judgment, *if he wants*. Fourth, John was able to accomplish all this without making a single statement or claim or having to defend any point of view. He just asked four simple, Columbo-type questions. In fact, he could go on and ask many more.

I've found this tactic gives Christians the confidence and freedom to engage non-Christians when they would have otherwise shied away from dialoguing. This past week I spent four days training Christians in Albuquerque to engage others using tactical wisdom. I spoke to approximately 1,000 people at Hope Christian School, the University of New Mexico, and The Foothills Church (for a two day conference on tactics and two sermons on Sunday morning). In addition, KNKT 107.1 FM had me in studio to discuss the tactics training and promote the conference on the air. It was a long week, but one well spent equipping believers to become powerful agents of change.



Thank you for your partnership with me. You are a valuable co-laborer in Christ.

Your partner for the truth,



Alan Shlemon

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