

## PERFECTING THE COLUMBO TACTIC #3

### Review:

Last time, we talked about the burden of proof remains on the person who is making the claims. Just because a person gives an alternative explanation does not mean that it is more reasonable. The question to ask is, "How did you come to that conclusion?" We also mentioned being careful of the "Professor's Ploy" where he tries to make you bear the burden of proof to prove his claim wrong.

### Introduction:

In this lesson, we want to learn how to use leading questions to make a point. Let's say someone asks you this question: "You're saying that people who don't believe just like you are going to Hell?" How do you respond? To say "Yes" makes you sound intolerant & arrogant because you believe you are right and everyone else is wrong.

When people try to put you into a box about a controversial issue, preface your remarks with a question that sets the stage, in your favor, for your response.

For example, you could ask, "Before I answer your question, I want to know if this is a safe place for me to be honest. Do you respect diverse points of view or do you condemn others for convictions that differ from your own?"

Now if you share, it is going to be very different for them to call you intolerant or judgmental without looking guilty too.

- I. Using leading questions to make a point
  - A. First question, "What do you mean by that?"
  - B. Second question, "How did you come to that conclusion? Why do you believe like that?"
  - C. With the first two questions, you don't need to know anything. You are just gathering information. With the third question, you need to know the point you want to make.
  - D. Once you know the point you want to make, listen to find the weakness or inconsistency in the person's point of view.
    1. A key to help you do this is to listen carefully to the answer they give, "How did you come to that conclusion?"
    2. Do their conclusions follow from their evidence?
  - E. Then address any inconsistency you discover with a question not a statement. In the example I just gave, the inconsistency that I brought out was that they have beliefs as well, and they think they are right and I am wrong, but they don't think they are intolerant because of their beliefs.
  - F. Examples of claims & questions to show inconsistencies.
    1. "You shouldn't push your morality on me."

a. You could ask, "Why not?"  
b. When they say you shouldn't push your morality on them, they're pushing their morality on you.

2. "You're intolerant & ignorant."  
a. "What do you mean by that?"  
b. "Well, you think you're right, and everyone who disagrees with you is wrong."  
c. "Tell me, do you think your views are right?" (Of course he does. That's why he believes them.)  
d. "Why is it that when I think I'm right, I'm intolerant, but when you think you're right, you're just right?"

3. "Jesus was a good man and a Prophet, but He wasn't God or Savior."  
a. How could Jesus be a good man & prophet but be mistaken about His own identity & purpose?"  
b. If Jesus was wrong about His claim of being Savior, it becomes difficult to call Him a good man.

G. Sometimes you can soften your approach by first requesting clarification.  
1. "Can you help me understand this? I'm confused. Can you clear this up for me?"  
2. Next, offer your objection by gently challenging the weakness in their argument.  
3. For example:  
a. "Can you help me understand this? If the Bible was "merely written by men", how could it contain fulfilled prophecies?"  
b. "Can you clear this up for me? If abortion is morally acceptable, on what grounds do we condemn infanticide since the only difference between the two is the baby's location – inside the womb or out – and location seems irrelevant to the baby's value?"

## II. Two basic executions of the Columbo Tactic

A. The first approach to soften your challenge of another's claims.  
1. "I'm just curious..."  
2. "Help me out because I'm confused about this..."  
3. "Maybe I'm missing something because I don't understand this..."  
B. The second approach is more confrontational.  
1. This is similar to what a lawyer does in a court of law.  
2. The important rule of this approach is to never ask a question he doesn't know the answer to.  
a. This is asking specific questions that legitimately challenge the other person's view.  
b. This is asking questions with a goal in mind.

III. Improve your Columbo skills with three steps.

A. Anticipate

1. Try to anticipate objections and think of questions in advance.
2. Work on an issue that has stumped you in the past and think of questions

you could ask that put you in the driver's seat.

B. Reflect

1. After you've had an encounter, reflect on how you might have done

better.

2. Think about questions you might have asked.

3. This will help prepare you for your next opportunity.

C. Practice

1. Role play a discussion and how you would respond.

2. Practice prepares you for actual encounters.

3. But remember you need to actually engage with someone face to face.

IV. How to defend against the Columbo Tactic when it's used against you

A. This shouldn't be a problem with questions one & two because you should be able to explain your own views and your reasons for them.

B. But what happens if they go on the offensive and use Columbo #3 questions to try to trap you with your own answers?

C. First, stop the advance.

1. Don't let them set you up with leading questions.

2. Politely respond by saying, "I'd rather not answer right now. I want to know what you think."

D. Regain control.

1. Say, "It sounds like you're asking questions in order to make a point. Instead, could you simply state your point clearly so I understand it?"

2. Once you're clear of the point, you can say, "Let me think a bit about what you said and then get back with you."

E. The point of using Columbo #3 is not having to assert something you want someone else to believe in. You aren't taking the burden of proof on yourself. Instead, your questions make the point for you.

V. Read an example of using this method

Once in a restaurant in Seattle, I got into a chat about religion with the waitress who was serving my table. My general comments were met with an approving nod until I said, "When it comes to religion, people believe a lot of foolish things." Then a shadow of disapproval crossed her face.

"That's oppressive, not letting people believe what they want to believe," she said.

Now, much can be said about this simple remark. For example, notice how she felt that just challenging a view was a threat to personal liberty, a “forcing” of my beliefs on others. I ignored that problem, though, and zeroed in on a more fundamental flaw. I asked a simple question – a variation of the first Columbo question.

“So, are you saying I’m wrong?”

She balked, realizing she was about to commit the same error she’d just accused me of making.

“No, I’m not saying you’re wrong. I’m just trying to understand your view.”

I chuckled in a good-natured way. “Be honest; admit it. You think I’m wrong. If you don’t think I’m wrong, then why are you correcting me? If you do think I’m wrong, then what are you ‘oppressing’ me?”

It was clear that she believed some people could be wrong – me, in this case. Like many who espouse this confused sense of tolerance, the waitress couldn’t play by her own rules. Mine was a simple question that gently boxed her in.

After this, she stammered for a moment and then replied, “All religions are basically the same, after all.” Notice that this comment had little to do with my original question. It was a parry – a stock retort. But she had just made a claim, and now it was her job to defend it.

“All religions are basically the same? In what way?” I asked.

This question had a remarkable effect on her. Her jaw fell slack, and her face went blank. She didn’t know what to say. She’d obviously never looked closely at other religions. If she had, she would have known they are worlds apart. Why would she have made this claim, then? I suspect she had gotten away with it many times before.

“Consider this,” I said. “Either Jesus is the Messiah or He isn’t, right?” She nodded. So far, so good.

“If He isn’t the Messiah,” I continued, “then the Christians are wrong. If He is the Messiah, then the Jews are wrong. So, one way or another, somebody’s right and somebody’s wrong. Everyone can’t be right at the same time, can they?”

After stumbling around a bit, the waitress offered a different diversion. “Well, no one can ever know the truth about religion.”

This is another assertion that should never go unchallenged, so I calmly asked, “Why would you believe that?”

The turn-about caught her by surprise. She was used to *asking* this question, not *answering* it, and she wasn’t prepared for the role change.

I waited patiently, not breaking the silence, not letting her off the hook. Finally, she ventured: “But the Bible has been changed and retranslated so many times over the centuries.”

This was another dodge. It had nothing to do with the issue. Even if the Bible vanished from the face of the earth, some knowledge of God would still be possible, it seemed, at least in principle.

But I chose a different tack. “Oh? Have you actually studied the transmission of the ancient documents of the text of the Bible?”

Once again, the question stalled her. She couldn't defend her own assertion. "No, I've never studied it," she said. This was a remarkable admission, given her confident contention just moments before, but she didn't seem the least bit bothered.

It would have been impolite to say what I was thinking – "Then what you're saying is you're sure about something you really know nothing about." Instead, I simply said I'd studied Bible transmission enough to know that the academic results were in, and there was no reason to believe the Bible had been corrupted in the way she thought.

One by one, her options evaporated and she began to get uncomfortable. "I feel like you're backing me into a corner," she complained.

I wasn't trying to bully her intellectually, but rather challenge her politely with fair questions. She was beginning to feel trapped because that's what careful questioning does: By eliminating foolish options, it forces a person down the narrow corridor of truth.

Note what happened here. I said some people are foolish in their thinking on spiritual matters, and she responded by saying mine was an oppressive view. She then proved my point by serving up her standard menu of muddled challenges. With each claim she made, I responded with a question.

She was speechless not because I was clever, but because, I suspect, she had never before been challenged to answer for her own claims. I asked why I should swallow any of this, and she complained she was being cornered.

#### Conclusion:

1. We have discussed the power of questions to make a point. The goal is not to prove someone wrong. The goal is to get them to think about what they believe and come to accept the truth. If you win an argument and the person is no closer to Christ, we haven't won anything.
2. We can use questions to exploit a weakness or flaw in the other person's views.
3. There is no special formula for finding flaws. Just listen carefully, then think about what they said. Pay close attention to how they answer the first two questions. Do their conclusions follow from their evidence?

#### Application:

1. Look for opportunities to ask the first two questions.
2. If you can identify inconsistencies in their claims, ask them questions to help them see them.

### Small group questions

1. Were you able to use the first two questions in your conversation this week? (What do you mean by that? How did you come to that conclusion?) If so, tell us about it?
2. What was the point of this lesson? (to use questions to challenge a person to think about their beliefs) Why did we suggest using questions instead of just telling people what they should think? What is the goal?
3. How can you use questions to get people to think about their position? (Listen to their reasons for their conclusions and ask them questions to help them see the inconsistencies in their beliefs)
4. How can you improve your skills at asking good leading questions?  
(anticipate, reflect after a conversation, practice with someone with real issues)
5. How do you respond if they start asking you questions?
  - if they are trying to put you into a controversial position first ask them questions that set the stage in your favor.
  - Respond by saying, "I'd rather not answer right now. I really want to know what you think."