

## CHAPTER THREE

GETTING IN THE  
DRIVER'S SEAT: THE  
COLUMBO TACTIC

LET'S start this chapter by putting you in a tough spot. I want you to imagine yourself in the following situations.

**Scene 1:** You're hosting a dinner party at your home for some of your close friends from church. The conversation ranges naturally over a number of interesting spiritual topics. Suddenly, to your surprise and embarrassment, your fifteen-year-old son announces with some belligerence that he doesn't believe in God anymore. "It's simply not rational," he says. "There is no proof." You had no idea he'd been moving in this direction. There's a stunned silence. What will you say?

**Scene 2:** It's the night of your weekly Bible study group. During the discussion of the Sunday sermon on the Great Commission, a newcomer remarks, "Who are we to say Christianity is better than any other religion? I think the essence of Jesus' teaching is love, the same as all religions. It's not our job to tell other people how to live or believe." The rest of the group fidgets awkwardly, but says nothing. How do you respond?

**Scene 3:** You're riding the university shuttle with a friend who notices a Bible in your backpack. "I've read the Bible before," he says. "It's got some interesting stories, but people take it too

seriously. It was only written by men, after all, and men make mistakes." You try to recall the points your pastor made a few weeks earlier about the Bible's inspiration, but come up empty-handed. What do you say?

**Scene 4:** You're sitting at the car dealer, watching TV and waiting with other customers for your car to be serviced. A television news program highlights religious groups trying to influence important moral legislation. The person sitting next to you says, "Haven't these people ever heard of separation of church and state? Those Christians are always trying to force their views on everyone else. You can't legislate morality. Why don't they just leave the rest of us alone?" Other people are listening, and you don't want to create a scene, but you feel you must say something. What's your next move?

## 10-SECOND WINDOW

In each of these cases you have an opportunity, but there are obstacles. First, you must speak up quickly because the opportunity will not last long. You have only about 10 seconds before the door closes. Second, you're conflicted. You want to say something, but you are also concerned about being sensitive, keeping the peace, preserving friendships, and not looking extreme.

What if I told you there was an easy escape from the challenge that each situation above presents, a way to minimize the awkwardness and engage the other person productively and gracefully? What if you had a simple plan in place that would guide you in your next move? Would that give you the confidence to take a small step toward addressing challenges like these?

I have such a plan. My plan helps me know how to use that critical 10-second window to my best advantage. It acts as a guide to direct my next steps. When I consider each of the scenes above, a host of questions immediately come to mind. Later in the chapter I'll give you the back story to these questions. For the moment, think about how these responses begin to address the content of

the person's remarks yet still draw him into an interactive conversation in a very intentional way.

**Challenge 1:** "It's not rational to believe in God. There is no proof."

What do you mean by "God," that is, what kind of God do you reject? What, specifically, is irrational about believing in God? Since you're concerned about proof for God's existence, what kind of evidence would you find acceptable?

**Challenge 2:** "Christianity is basically the same as all other religions. The main similarity is love. We shouldn't tell others how to live or believe."

How much have you studied other religions to compare the details and find a common theme? Why would the similarities be more important than the differences? I'm curious, what do you think Jesus' own attitude was on this issue? Did he think all religions were basically equal? Isn't telling people to love one another just another example of telling them how they should live and believe?

**Challenge 3:** "You can't take the Bible too seriously because it was only written by men, and men make mistakes."

Do you have any books in your library? Were those books written by humans? Do you find any truth in them? Is there a reason you think the Bible is less truthful or reliable than other books you own? Do people always make mistakes in what they write? Do you think that if God did exist, he would be capable of using humans to write down exactly what he wants? If not, why not?

**Challenge 4:** "It's wrong to force your views on other people. You can't legislate morality. Christians involved in politics violate the separation of church and state."

Do you vote? When you vote for someone, are you expecting your candidate to pass laws reflecting your own point of view? Wouldn't that essentially be forcing your views on others? How is that different from what you're troubled about here? Is it your view that only nonreligious people should be allowed to vote or participate in politics, or did I misunderstand you? Where, specifically, in the Constitution are religious people excluded from the political process? Can you give me an example of legislation that does not have a moral element to it?

I want you to notice several things about these responses. First, each is a question. My initial response in a situation like this is not to preach about my view or even disagree with theirs. Rather, I want to draw them out, to invite them to talk more about what they think. This takes a lot of pressure off me, because when I ask a question, the ball is back in their court. It also protects me from jumping to conclusions and unwittingly distorting their meaning.

Asking questions enables you to escape the charge, "You're twisting my words." A question is a request for clarification specifically so that you don't twist their words. When I ask a clarification question, my goal is to **understand** a person's view (and its consequences), not to **distort** it.

Second, each of these questions is an invitation to thoughtful dialogue. Each is an encouragement to participate in conversation in a reflective way. Though my tone is relaxed and cordial, my questions are pointed enough to challenge the person to give some thought to what he's just said.

Third, these are not idle queries. I have a particular purpose for each question. With some, I'm simply gathering information ("Do you vote?"). Others, you might have noticed, are subtly leading; that is, the questions themselves suggest a problem with the other person's thinking ("Wouldn't that essentially be forcing your views on others?").

Each of the questions I have suggested above occur to me because I have a plan. I know that getting into conversations about spiritual matters is not easy, especially if someone's guard is up. It's not unusual to get tongue-tied, not knowing what to say. This is complicated by the fear of getting in over your head—or worse, of offending someone. We need some help.

Our first tactic is a handy solution to that problem. That's why I use it more than any other. It makes it easy for even the most timid to engage others in a meaningful way because it provides a step-by-step guide—a virtual game plan—to help ease into a conversation.

It might be called the “queen mother” of all tactics because it's so flexible and adaptable. It's easily combined with other moves you will learn later. It's the simplest tactic imaginable to stop a challenger in her tracks, turn the tables, and get her thinking, a virtually effortless way of putting you in the driver's seat of the conversation.

It's simply called “Columbo.”

## TAKE A TIP FROM LIEUTENANT COLUMBO

The Columbo tactic is named after Lieutenant Columbo, a brilliant TV detective with a clever way of catching a crook.

The inspector arrives on the scene in complete disarray, his hair an unkempt mop, his trench coat rumpled beyond repair, his cigar wedged tightly between stubby fingers. Columbo's pencil has gone missing again, so his notepad is useless until he burns a pen off a bystander.

To all appearances Columbo is bumbling, inept, and completely harmless. He couldn't think his way out of a wet paper bag, or so it seems. He's stupid, but he's stupid like a fox because the lieutenant has a simple plan that accounts for his remarkable success.

After poking around the crime scene, scratching his head, and muttering to himself, Lieutenant Columbo makes his trademark move. “I got a problem,” he says as he rubs his furrowed brow.

“There's something about this thing that bothers me.” He pauses a moment to ponder his predicament, then turns to his suspect. “You seem like a very intelligent person. Maybe you can clear it up for me. *Do you mind if I ask you a question?*”

The first query is innocent enough (if the lieutenant seems threatening, he'll scare off his prey), and for the moment he seems satisfied. As he turns on his heel to leave, though, he stops himself mid-stride. Something has just occurred to him. He turns back to the scene, raises his index finger, and says, “Just one more thing.”

But “just one more” question leads to another. And another. Soon they come relentlessly, question after question, to the point of distraction and, ultimately, annoyance.

“I'm sorry,” Columbo says to his beleaguered suspect. “I know I'm making a pest of myself. It's because I keep asking these questions. But I'll tell ya,” he shrugs, “I can't help myself. It's a habit.”

And this is a habit you want to get into.

The key to the Columbo tactic is to *go on the offensive in an inoffensive way by using carefully selected questions to productively advance the conversation*. Simply put, never make a statement, at least at first, when a question will do the job.

## ADVANTAGES OF ASKING

There are dozens of fun ways to do this, and with a little practice it can become second nature. Hugh Hewitt, a nationally syndicated radio talk show host, is a master of this technique. In his wonderful little book *In, But Not Of*, a primer for Christians on thoughtful engagement with the culture, Hewitt advises asking at least a half-dozen questions in every conversation. It's a habit that offers tremendous advantages.

For one thing, sincere questions are friendly and flattering. They invite genial interaction on something the other person cares a lot about: her own ideas. “When you ask a question, you are displaying interest in the person asked,” Hewitt writes. “Most people are not queried on many, if any, subjects. Their opinions are not

solicited. To ask them is to be remembered fondly as a very interesting and gracious person in your own right."<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the little things have the greatest impact. Using simple leading questions is an almost effortless way to introduce spiritual topics to a conversation without seeming abrupt, rude, or pushy. Questions are engaging and interactive, probing yet amicable. Most important, they keep you in the driver's seat while someone else does all the work.

Second, you'll get an education. You'll leave a conversation knowing more than when you arrived. Sometimes that information will be just what you need to make a difference. When a young man asked me to recommend a book on Buddhism so he could witness to his Buddhist friend, I told him not to bother with the book. Instead, ask the Buddhist. Sit down over coffee and let him give the tutorial. It's a lot easier, he'd be learning the specifics of his friend's own convictions (instead of some academic version), and he'd be building a relationship at the same time.

Third, questions allow you to make progress on a point without being pushy. Since questions are largely neutral, or at least seem that way, they don't sound "preachy." When you ask a question, you aren't actually stating your own view. There's a further benefit here: If you are not pressing a point, you have nothing to prove and therefore nothing to defend. The pressure is off. You can relax and enjoy the conversation while you wait for an easy opening.

Once, during a dinner party at the home of a well-known comedian, I got into a spirited conversation with the actor's wife about animal rights. I had serious reservations about her ideas, but I didn't contradict her directly. Instead, I asked questions meant to expose some of the weaknesses I saw in her view.

Eventually, she began to challenge what she thought were my own views. I pointed out I'd never actually stated my beliefs.

I'd only been asking questions, so strictly speaking, there was nothing for me to defend. I didn't mind answering for my own views, but up to that point they had not come up. I was off the hook.

Finally, and most importantly, carefully placed questions put you in the driver's seat. "Being an asker allows you control of situations that statement-makers rarely achieve," Hewitt notes. "An alert questioner can judge when someone grows uneasy. But don't stop. Just change directions.... Once you learn how to guide a conversation, you have also learned how to control it."<sup>2</sup>

It might have occurred to you that Jesus used this method frequently. When facing a hostile crowd, he often asked leading questions meant to challenge his audience or silence his detractors by exposing their foolishness: "Show Me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" (Luke 20:24); "Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?" (Luke 20:4); "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Arise, and take up your pallet and walk?'" (Mark 2:9).<sup>3</sup>

In none of these cases was Jesus speaking idly. He understood the power of a well-placed query. Whenever Jesus asked a question, he had a purpose. In the same way, the Columbo tactic is most powerful when you have a plan.

There are three basic ways to use Columbo. Each is launched by a different model question.<sup>4</sup> These three applications comprise the game plan I use to tame the most belligerent critic. Sometimes I simply want to *gather information*. Other times, I ask a question to *reverse the burden of proof*, that is, to encourage the other person to give the reasons for her own views. Finally, I use questions to *lead the conversation* in a specific direction.

### "WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?"

When Lieutenant Columbo shows up at a crime scene, the first thing he does is gather facts. In the same way, sometimes you'll need more information before you can proceed in a conversation.

Your initial probe, then, will be open-ended: "What do you mean by that?" (or some variation).

This question provides a natural opening for conversation, and it puts no pressure on you. It's delivered in a mild, genuinely inquisitive fashion. It's a simple, virtually effortless way to use Columbo, and it has tremendous advantages.

First, this question immediately engages the nonbeliever (or the believer, if the difference of opinion is an in-house theological one) in an interactive way. This makes it an excellent conversation starter. When I noticed the jewelry worn by the witch in Wisconsin and asked, "Does that star have religious significance?"—a variation of "What do you mean by that?"—it led to a productive conversation.

There are times when discretion is the better part of valor. For example, if your wife calls you an idiot, don't ask, "What do you mean by that?" She might oblige by clarifying.

Next, this question uncovers valuable information; it helps you know *what* a person thinks. There are two reasons this is important: You don't want to misunderstand him, and you don't want to misrepresent him.

Some questions or challenges are vague. It makes no sense to move forward if you're confused or unclear about what is being said. For example, the claim that "everything is relative" is wildly ambiguous. It should never pass without a request for clarification. Questions like, "What do you mean by 'relative?'" "Is *everything* relative?" and "Would that apply even to your own statement?" are all in order.

Other challenges are complex. They actually contain a number of specific issues jumbled together. For example, sometimes people claim that God is not necessary to explain morality; evolution can do the job. Since our survival depends on shared ethics, it's clear to them how natural selection could be involved in the process.

But this explanation hopelessly conflates two distinct notions. The first is Darwinian evolution which, by definition, can only explain morality in terms of *genetically determined physical traits* selected for survival (though one wonders how the rest of the animal kingdom seems to have endured very well without it). The second is the "evolution" of *intelligently designed civilization* from a primitive nuclear stage with each local tribe fending for itself, to a social contract stage enabling all to live together in safety and harmony. These are different issues. You may need to probe gently with questions to clear the confusion and then deal with each possibility on its own terms.

Second, if you don't understand a person's point, you may misrepresent it. This is a serious misstep, even when done by accident. Instead of fighting the real issue (your opponent's actual view), you set up a lifeless imitation (a "straw man") that you then easily knock down. If you're guilty of using the straw man fallacy, you may find you have given a brilliant refutation of a view the other person doesn't hold.

Sometimes the reason you are confused about another person's meaning is because *she* is confused, too. She objects to Christianity for reasons she hasn't thought through. The objection flourishes because no one has challenged the lack of clarity that led to the muddled thinking in the first place.

Don't be surprised, then, when your question "What do you mean by that?" is met with a blank stare. People don't know what they mean much of the time. Often they're merely repeating slogans. When you ask them to flesh out their concern, opinion, or point of view with more precision, they're struck mute. They are forced to think, maybe for the first time, about exactly what they do mean.

Be patient. Asking questions is the simplest way to clear up the confusion. It also gives you time to size up the situation and gather your thoughts.

Ironically, sometimes a bit more clarity is all that's needed to parry an objection. When someone says to me, "Reincarnation was

originally part of Christian teaching, but was taken out of the Bible in the fourth century," I always ask them to explain how that works (a variation of our first Columbo question). The devil, as they say, is in the details of such a deception. How does someone remove select lines of text from tens of thousands of handwritten documents that had been circulating around the Mediterranean region for over three hundred years? This would be like trying to secretly remove a paragraph from all the copies of yesterday's *L.A. Times*. It can't be done.

Be sure to pay attention to the response to your questions. If the meaning is still unclear, follow up with more queries. Say, "Let me see if I understand you on this." Then feed back the view to make sure you got it right.

Don't underestimate the power of the question "What do you mean by that?" Use it often. You can ask it in its many variations all day long. It will keep you engaged in productive, genial conversation while keeping the focus and the pressure on the other person, not on you.

## 10-SECOND WINDOW — REDUX

Earlier in this chapter I posed four different scenarios for you to consider. Then I offered a series of questions that I thought were appropriate responses to each one. My general goal was to use the Columbo tactic to get information, buy time, and steer things in a direction I thought might be productive. You may have wondered, though, why I chose the specific questions I did. Here was my thinking.

In "Scene 1," I noticed it was unclear what kind of God was being rejected. For some people, God is an old man with a beard sitting on a throne out in space somewhere. If that's the kind of God they *don't* believe in, then I agree with them. Some reject the notion of

a personal God, but still believe in an impersonal god-force that animates the universe. Or it may turn out I'm simply dealing with good old-fashioned naturalistic, materialistic atheism. In any case, I need more information before I can continue.

Even when there seems to be little ambiguity in a remark, a clarification question, even a simple one, can break the tension of an awkward moment and buy you some time. It may even yield information you hadn't expected.

I hope you see the benefit of this minimalist approach, at least as a starting place. When you first encounter an atheist, you could launch into something like the kalam cosmological argument for God's existence — if you knew it, if you understood it, and if you remembered it — but that would be premature, wouldn't it? Why make things hard on yourself? A question serves you much better initially.

The demand for proof of God's existence is sometimes a trick. It may be a reasonable request for evidence, but often it is not. Unless you know in advance what kind of evidence would count (scientific? historical? philosophical arguments? revelation?) or what kind of "proof" would be satisfying (absolute proof? proof beyond a reasonable doubt? proof based on the preponderance of evidence?), you'll probably be wasting your time. It's too easy for an intellectually dishonest person to dismiss your efforts. "Not good enough," is all he needs to say.

The charge that belief in God is irrational is common, but completely without basis. I'm not going to let anyone who makes this assertion off easily. I want to know, specifically, how theism is at odds with good thinking. My Columbo question forces the person to spell out the problem instead of coasting on vague generalities.

Believing in leprechauns is irrational. Believing in God, by contrast, is like believing in atoms. The process is exactly the same. You follow the evidence of what you *can* see to conclude the existence of something you *cannot* see. The effect needs a cause adequate to explain it.



There is nothing irrational or unreasonable about the idea of a personal God creating the material universe. A Big Bang needs a "big Banger," it seems to me. A complex set of instructions (as in DNA) needs an author. A blueprint requires an engineer. A moral law needs a moral lawgiver. This is not a leap; it is a step of intelligent reflection. Therefore, the question "Specifically, what is irrational about believing in God?" is completely in order.

"Scene 2" presents another common challenge: religious pluralism. My questions were meant to capitalize on a number of weaknesses.

First, the comments show a naïve understanding of other religions (they actually vary wildly in fundamental beliefs). Second, pluralism presumes that the similarities between faiths are more important than the differences. Are aspirin and arsenic basically the same because they both come in tablet form? For some things, the differences are critical. Religion is one of them.

It's also clear that Jesus was not a pluralist.<sup>5</sup> As an observant Jew, he held to the Ten Commandments. Foremost among them was the first: The Lord is God and we owe fidelity to him alone. All other religions are distortions and deceptions. The early followers of Christ were first called "Christians" in Antioch by others (Acts 11:26). Their name for themselves was simply "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9; 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

Did you notice, by the way, that this "Scene 2" person's minimal theology ("The essence of Jesus' teaching is love, not telling other people how to live or believe") does not allow him to escape his own charge? He has his own theological convictions—love, not judgment—that he thinks should govern how other people think and believe. This, of course, is a judgment itself. That's why I asked, "Isn't telling people to love one another just another example of telling them how they should live and believe?"

In "Scene 3," the key word is "only," as in "the Bible was *only* written by men." Notice that the statement itself presumes what it's attempting to prove, that the Bible is a purely human document. Since this is the very question at issue, the attempt is circular.

But there's a more fundamental problem. Even without God's help, fallible human beings sometimes get it right. Our libraries are filled with books written by mere mortals who seem completely capable of accuracy, insight, and wisdom. If this is true of so many others, why not of Paul, Peter, John, or Jesus?

I understand that this is not a slam-dunk argument for inspiration. It is not meant to be. Remember, my goal is modest. I want to put a stone in the person's shoe. I want to get him thinking. I want him to consider listening to Jesus first before dismissing him. If I can simply open that door, I have accomplished something important. Here's why.

Most people who believe in the authority of the Bible did not come to this conviction through argument, but through encounter.<sup>6</sup> For example, when soldiers were sent to arrest Jesus early in his ministry, they returned empty-handed. Why had they disobeyed orders? Because they had *listened*. "Never did a man speak the way this man speaks," they said (John 7:46). Jesus didn't start his discourse with reasons why people should believe his words. Instead, he simply spoke the truth, and it immediately resonated with many in the crowd.

I came to believe the Bible was God's Word in the same way I suspect you did. I encountered the truth firsthand and was moved by it. If you want skeptics to believe in the Bible, don't get into a tug-of-war with them about inspiration. Instead, invite them to listen—to engage Jesus' words firsthand—then let the Spirit do the heavy lifting for you.

So when someone says the Bible was "only written by men," I ask questions to encourage him or her to treat Jesus like any other teacher. I want that person to listen to the words of Jesus first, then draw conclusions. In my travel bag, I keep copies of John's Gospel, and I offer one as a gift, suggesting, "It might be best to let Jesus speak for himself." Once my new friend has read a bit, any further reasons I give for biblical authority will have the soil needed to take root.

It's easy to see the problem with the first challenge in "Scene 4" ("It's wrong to force your views on other people"). Those who are

sensitive about "forcing" viewpoints have no business participating in a legislative process that does just that, ergo the question, "Do you vote?"

As to legislating morality, Aristotle famously observed that all law rests upon a necessary foundation of morality. If the government's exercise of power is not in the service of the common good, then its actions are illicit. Simply put, morality is the only thing you can legislate.

Sometimes this first Columbo question is directed at a specific statement or topic of discussion. Other times, the question can be more open-ended. As the dialogue continues, gently guide the conversation into a more spiritually productive direction with additional questions.

## WHAT WE LEARNED IN THIS CHAPTER

We started the chapter with a challenge. I gave you the opportunity to consider what you would say in the 10-second window of time available to respond to some standard challenges you might encounter as a Christian ambassador. Then I began to outline a simple plan as a guide to direct your steps. This plan is called "Columbo."

The Columbo tactic is a disarming way to go on the offensive with carefully selected questions that productively advance the conversation. This approach has many advantages. Questions can be excellent *conversation starters*. They are *interactive* by nature, inviting others to participate in dialogue. They are *neutral*, protecting you from getting "preachy," helping you make headway without stating your case. Questions *buy valuable time*. Finally, they are essential to keeping you in *control of the conversation*.

Next we learned there is a specific purpose for the questions we ask. The first purpose of Columbo is to gain information. The

question, "What do you mean by that?" (or some variation) accomplishes that end: It clarifies the person's meaning so that you don't misunderstand or misrepresent it. It also immediately puts you in control of the conversation.

This question does something else that's very important. It forces the other person to think more carefully about precisely what he does mean when he tosses out a challenge. Instead of settling for statements that are ambiguous or vague, we ask him to spell out his objection clearly. We then looked in some detail at four very specific challenges to see how this works.

The question "What do you mean by that?" is your first step to managing conversations. Use it often. In the next chapter we will add another step to our game plan, the second use of the Columbo tactic.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# COLUMBO

## STEP TWO: THE BURDEN OF PROOF

SOME people think Christians are the only ones who need to answer for their beliefs. Of course, we should be able to give reasons for what we think is true. But we are not the only ones; others should be able to do this, too.

It's not unusual, though, for people to forget that they have this responsibility. At times they seem to think that all they have to do is tell a really good story and they have done their job. You might call this a "bedtime story." They conjure up a tale meant to put your view or your argument to rest. But this will not do. They might just as well have started with "Once upon a time." When you understand this, your job as an ambassador will be much easier.

If you have watched any reruns of *I Love Lucy* (or if you are old enough, like me, to remember the first runs), you might recall Ricky Ricardo saying, "Lucy, you've got a lot of 'splainin' to do." Ricky's statement applies here, too. People on the other side of your opinion have a lot of "splainin'" to do themselves, and it's your job to get them to do it.

Many challenges to Christianity thrive on vague generalities and forceful but vacuous slogans. How do we help others to be more explicit about the reasons for their views? How do we keep them intellectually honest? The second step of Columbo will help. I call it "reversing the burden of proof."

The burden of proof is the responsibility someone has to defend or give evidence for his view. Generally, the rule can be summed up this way: Whoever makes the claim bears the burden. The key here is not to 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 his duty to prove his view. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

### COSMIC CONFUSION

Once I was a guest on the top-rated secular radio station in Los Angeles. The topic was intelligent design over evolution. When a caller used the Big Bang to argue against a Creator, I pointed out that the Big Bang worked in my favor. Then I used my "a Big Bang needs a Big Banger" line. This always gets a laugh, but it is also a clever way to make a good point.

The caller disagreed: The Big Bang doesn't need God. "You could start with a base of nothing," he explained, "and you could say that there was nothing but an infinite, continuous moment, until one tiny, little, insignificant thing happened: a point happened in the nothingness."

Now I know what you are probably thinking. How do you start with nothing and then end up with something? How do you get a point in the nothingness? Hardly a "tiny, little, insignificant thing." If your bank account has no balance, there's no sense checking the statement every month to see if you've earned interest.<sup>1</sup> The thought, apparently, did not occur to the caller, however. Facts, as C. S. Lewis once noted, can be very inconvenient things.

"This requires no intelligence," he continued, "so no intelligent God had to intervene. All we need is a tiny imperfection in the perfect nothingness that expanded and became increasingly complex, and soon you have galaxies and planets."

"You're right about one thing," I responded. "When you start with 'You could say that ...' you can spin any yarn you want. But then comes the hard part: giving reasons why anyone should take

your science-fiction story seriously. It's not *my* job to *disprove* your something-from-nothing fairy tale. It's *your* job to *prove* it. You haven't done that. You haven't even tried."

You might have heard the phrase "throw down the gauntlet" and wondered what it meant. A "gauntlet" was an armored glove worn by medieval knights. When a knight threw his gauntlet into the arena, it was a challenge to another knight to "take up the gauntlet" and square off for a fight.

The caller on this radio show had thrown down his "gauntlet" and then expected to walk off with the prize without a struggle. This happens all the time. But I wasn't going to let him off that easily, and neither should you. For too long we have let others continue fanciful challenges and then sit back and watch us squirm. Those days are over. No more free rides. If they tell the story, let them defend it. They need to give an argument.

## A HOUSE WITHOUT WALLS

An argument is a specific kind of thing. Think of an argument like a simple house, a roof supported by walls. The roof is the conclusion, and the walls are the supporting ideas. By testing the walls, we can see if they are strong enough to keep the roof from tumbling down. If the walls are solid, the conclusion rests securely on its supporting structure. If the walls collapse, the roof goes flat and the argument is defeated.

Some arguments are not really arguments at all. Many people try to build their roof right on the ground. Instead of erecting solid walls (the supporting ideas that hold the conclusion up), they simply make assertions and then pound the podium—or verbally pound you.

An argument is different from an assertion, though. An assertion simply states a point. An argument gives supporting reasons why the point should be taken seriously. The reasons, then, become the topic of mutual discussion or analysis. But if there are no reasons, there's little to discuss. Opinions by themselves are not proof. Intelligent belief requires reasons.

Roofs are useless when they are on the ground. No one can live in a house without walls. In the same way, an assertion without evidence is not very useful.

I frequently get calls on my radio show from people who think they are giving me an argument when all they are doing is forcefully stating a view. This may sound compelling at first, and their story may even seem plausible. But there is a difference between giving an explanation and giving evidence: the explanation is actually true. Your job is to recognize when the roof is lying flat on the ground and simply point it out.

Don't let someone flatten you by dropping a roof on your head. Make him build walls underneath his roof. Ask him for reasons or facts to support his conclusions.

## "HOW DID YOU COME TO THAT CONCLUSION?"

Our second Columbo question, "Now, how did you come to that conclusion?" is designed to enforce the burden-of-proof rule. Remember, this is a model question. You might also ask, "Why do you say that?" "What are your reasons for holding that view?" "What makes you think that's the right way to see it?" or "I'm curious. Why would that idea seem compelling to you?"

The first Columbo question helps you know *what* another person thinks. This second question helps you know *why* he thinks the way he does. It charitably assumes he has actually come to a conclusion—that he has reasons for his view and not merely strong feelings about it. It will give him a chance to express his rationale, if he has any. It will also give you more material to work with in addressing his objections.

You may be surprised to know that most critics are not prepared to defend *their* faith. So don't be startled if you get a blank

stare. Many people have never thought through their views and don't know why they hold them.

Caught off guard, some will quip, "I don't have any reasons—I just believe it." This is a remarkable admission. It is also a very foolish thing to say. In this situation I always ask, "Why would you believe something when you have no reason to think it's true?" Notice that this is just a variation of our second Columbo question. Do you see how simple that is?

The question "Now, how did you come to that conclusion?" accomplishes something vitally important. It forces persons you are in conversation with to give an account for their own beliefs. Christians should not be the only ones who have to defend their views. Reject the impulse to counter every assertion someone manufactures. Don't try to refute every tale spun out of thin air. Instead, steer the burden of proof back on the other person's shoulders. Make them give you *reasons*, not just a point of view. It's not your job to defeat their claim. It's their job to defend it.

This step of the Columbo tactic trades on a very important notion: *An alternate explanation is not a refutation.* Here's what I mean. It's not uncommon for someone to say, "Oh, I can explain that," then conjure up a story that supports her view. But I hope you see that giving an explanation is not the same as giving an argument—or refuting someone else's argument. She has to do more.

Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins wrote a landmark work entitled *The Blind Watchmaker*. Notice the way he explains how flight might have evolved:

How did wings get their 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 gradations to gliding wings, and hence to flapping wings.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, this explanation may be a good one if you are a Darwinist. Stories like this are meant to parry objections, and this particular one has a good track record. This is partly because it sounds plausible enough at first (if it didn't, it wouldn't be appealing), and partly because it shields the Darwinian paradigm from a certain kind of criticism.

Don't misunderstand me. Starting with a hypothetical explanation is not in itself the difficulty. Science, forensics, and normal day-to-day problem solving trade on this ability all the time. Imagining what might have taken place may be a legitimate *first* step. It is not the last one, though, because a story doesn't settle anything. More is required.

In the case of flight, Dawkins's breezy account obscures two obstacles. First is the need for a massive infusion of new genetic information—at just the right time and in just the right balance—to accomplish the prodigious structural changes needed for flight. Second is the mechanical, sensory, psychomotor alterations required for the kind of flight that evolution could take advantage of. In order to overcome these serious hurdles, Dawkins needs to show the detailed and precise evolutionary pathways in specific cases of flight (birds, for example). This he does not do.

Explanations like Dawkins's are common in Darwinian circles. They are known derisively as "just so stories" after Rudyard Kipling's book of that title, a children's book with chapters like "How the Leopard Got His Spots" and "How the Camel Got His Hump." But stories like these pop up outside of Darwinism, too. Make sure you are not lulled to sleep by them. There are three questions you should always ask whenever someone offers an alternate explanation: Is it possible? Is it plausible? Is it probable?

First, is it possible? Some options seem completely unworkable on closer examination. In chapter 3, I questioned the view that the teaching of reincarnation was secretly removed from the Bible sometime during the fourth century. Such editing would require deleting selected lines of text from tens of thousands of

handwritten New Testament documents that had been circulating around the Roman Empire for three hundred years. This could not happen. The “point in the nothingness” explanation for the Big Bang fails for the same reason. It’s not possible to get something from nothing.

Second, is it *plausible*? Is it reasonable to think something like this *might* have taken place, given the evidence? Many things are possible that are not plausible. It is *possible*, for example, that I would have liver for dinner tonight. Nothing, in principle, prevents that from happening. It is not *plausible*, however. The reason is simple—I hate liver. Therefore, no one would ever be justified in thinking liver would be on my dinner plate at suppertime.

Some people claim that the miracles recorded in the Gospels were an invention of the early church to help consolidate its power over the people. Is there any evidence that this is what actually took place? It may be theoretically possible, but is it plausible? Does it fit the facts?

Third, is it *probable*? Is it the best explanation, considering the competing options? The person you’re talking with must be able to show why his view is more likely than the one you are offering. For this he needs reasons. Why is his explanation a better one than yours?

When it comes to weighty matters, we want to make smart choices. Why go with a long shot, especially when so much might be riding on a decision? Wisdom, careful thinking, and ordinary common sense always side with the odds-on favorite. It may seem plausible to some that monkeys banging on typewriters long enough could eventually pound out the works of Shakespeare. That doesn’t mean we’re justified in thinking a baboon wrote *Hamlet*. I’m still convinced Shakespeare did that.

This is why your second Columbo question, “How did you come to that conclusion?” is so powerful. It helps you handle outlandish speculations and bizarre alternate explanations by placing the burden of proof where it belongs, on the shoulders of the one making the claim.

Reversing the burden of proof is not a trick to avoid defending our own ideas. When we give opinions, we have to answer for them just like anyone else. We have a responsibility, but so do they — that’s my point.

If you find yourself stymied in a discussion, you may be looking for an argument that isn’t there. It may be a bedtime story or an unsubstantiated assertion. Simply ask yourself, “Did he give me an argument, or did he just give me an opinion?” If the latter, then say, “Well, that’s an interesting point of view, but what’s your argument? How did you come to that conclusion? Why should I take your point seriously? Please take a moment and give me some of your reasons.” When he answers you, be alert to the differences between what is *possible*, what is *plausible*, and what is *likely*, given the evidence.

There are only a few exceptions to the burden-of-proof rule, and they are usually obvious. We are not obligated, for example, to prove our own existence, to defend self-evident truths (e.g., denial of square circles), or to justify the basic reliability of our senses. The way things appear to be are probably the way they actually are unless we have good reason to believe otherwise.<sup>4</sup> This principle keeps us alive every day. It doesn’t need defending.

This second use of Columbo is not a trick to avoid shouldering the burden of proof. Rather, it’s meant to ward off extreme and unfounded doubt. Just because it is *possible* to be mistaken about something that seems obvious doesn’t mean it’s *reasonable* to think we are. This is the skeptic’s error. Do not be taken in by it.

## THE PROFESSOR’S PLOY

The Columbo tactic is a good one to use in the classroom, but there is a pitfall. I call it the “professor’s ploy.” Some professors are fond of taking potshots at Christianity with remarks like “The Bible

is just a bunch of fables," even if the topic of the class has nothing to do with religious issues. Well-meaning believers sometimes take up the challenge and attempt a head-to-head duel with the professor.

Don't make this mistake. It's right-hearted, but wrong-headed. This approach rarely works because it violates a fundamental rule of engagement: Never make a frontal assault on a superior force in an entrenched position. An unwritten law of nature seems to govern exchanges like these: The man with the microphone wins. The professor always has the strategic advantage, and he knows it. It's foolish to get into a power struggle when you are out-gunned.

There's a better way. Don't disengage. Instead, use your tactics. Raise your hand and ask a question. For starters, you might ask, "Professor, can you give us a little more detail on what you mean? What kind of fable are you talking about? Do you think nothing in the biblical documents has any historical value? Is everything in the book a fanciful invention of some sort? What's your opinion?" Notice that these are all creative variations of our first Columbo question ("What do you mean by that?").

Let the professor explain himself. As a good student, listen carefully to his response. Take notes. Ask further clarification questions if necessary. If he falters in any way, the other students will notice. If he has trouble making his ideas clear, it will become obvious that he has not thought carefully about his ideas.

When you are satisfied that you have a clear take on his view, raise your hand again and ask him how he came to his conclusions. Ask him to explain the line of evidence that convinced him not to take the Bible seriously. Make the teacher, the one making the claim, shoulder the burden of proof for his own assertions. This allows you to stay engaged while deftly sidestepping the power struggle.

Now here's the pitfall I warned you about, the distracting "ploy" intended to derail your efforts. The professor may sense your maneuver and try to turn the tables. He might say something

like, "Oh, you must be one of those Fundamentalist Christians who thinks the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Okay, I'm a fair man," he continues, looking at his watch. "We have a little extra time. Why don't you take a moment and prove to the rest of the class that the Bible is not filled with fables?"

What has the professor just done? In one quick move, he has cleverly shifted the burden of proof back on you, the student. This is unfair, because you have not made any claim. He is the one who is expressing a view. It's up to him to defend it. He's the teacher, after all.

*Don't take the bait.* Falling into this trap is nearly always fatal. The professor is trying to get you to do his job. Don't let it happen.

Instead, when you find yourself facing any form of the "Why don't you try to prove me wrong?" challenge, shift the burden back where it belongs, on the one who made the claim. Respond this way: "Professor, I actually haven't said anything about my own view, so you're just guessing right now. For all you know, I could be on your side. More to the point, my own view is irrelevant. It doesn't really matter what I believe. Your ideas are on the table, not mine. I'm just a student trying to learn. I'm asking for clarification and wondering if you have good reasons. That's all."

If he gives an answer, thank him for explaining himself and either ask another question or let it go for the time being. You have done the best you can under the circumstances.

The "professor's ploy" is to shift the burden of proof from himself to someone else. He demands that others defend views they have not expressed even though he is the one who has made specific claims. He tries to sidestep his responsibility, but the burden of proof is still his.

Do not be afraid to question your professors. Challenge them on your terms, though, not theirs. And do it with grace, respect, and tact. Remember, you don't have to be the expert on every subject. If you keep the burden of proof on the other side when the other person is making the claim, it takes the pressure off you but still allows you to direct the conversation.

## GETTING OUT OF THE "HOT SEAT"

There's a further advantage of Columbo. I call it "getting out of the hot seat." Sometimes we're afraid we do not have enough information or are not quick enough on our feet to keep up with a fast talker in an intense discussion. The fear of getting in over our heads is enough to keep us from saying anything at all. We especially dread the possibility of being embarrassed by some aggressive critic blasting us with arguments, opinions, or information we are not equipped to handle.

In this circumstance, the tactical approach really shines. Columbo questions help you easily manage the conversation even when you sense you are overmatched.

First, don't feel under pressure to immediately answer every question asked or every point made, especially when someone else is coming on strong. Instead, practice a little conversational aikido. Let them keep coming at you, but use their aggressive energy to your advantage.

The minute you feel overmatched, buy yourself some time by shifting from persuasion mode to fact-finding mode. Don't try to argue your own case yet. Instead, ask probing clarification questions and ask for reasons (your first two Columbo questions). Say something like this:

It sounds like you know a lot more about this than I do, and you have some interesting ideas. The problem is, this is all new information for me. I wonder if you could do me a favor. I really want to understand your points, but you need to slow down so I can get them right. Would you take a moment to carefully explain your view and also your reasons for it to help me understand better?

These questions show you are interested in taking the other person's view seriously. They also buy you valuable time. Make sure you understand the ideas. Write them down if you need to. When all

your questions have been answered, end the conversation by saying the magic words: *"Let me think about it. Maybe we can talk more later."*

These words — Let me think about it — are like magic because once you say them, you free yourself from any obligation to respond further at the moment. All the pressure is gone because you have already pleaded ignorance. You have no obligation to answer, refute, or reply once you have admitted you are out-gunned and need to give the issue more thought.

Think for a moment how useful this approach is. Instead of trying to resist the force of another's attack, you step aside and let him have the floor. You invite him to make his case. However, he must do it slowly and clearly so you'll have an opportunity to fully understand his point.

Next, on your own, at your leisure, when the pressure is off, do your homework. Research the issue — maybe even enlisting others in the process — and come back better prepared next time. You might even want to start a notebook. Open a computer file and record the question and its details from your notes. Then begin to craft a response based on your research.

Finally, review what you have written. Rehearse your response out loud a few times, or role-play with a friend. If your discussion was just part of a chance meeting, you may not be able to revisit the topic with the same person. But when the issue comes up with someone else, you'll be ready. You'll own that question.

When you face a new challenge, start another entry and go through the same steps. You'll be surprised how soon your expanding notebook will cover the basic issues. There aren't that many.

The key here is to get out of the hot seat, but still stay engaged by deftly shifting control of the conversation back to you while shifting the spotlight — and the pressure — back on him. It's not retreat; it's just a different type of engagement. It greatly reduces your anxiety level, strengthens your confidence, and gives you an education so that you can be more effective the next time around.



If you take this approach, no egos are at stake, so there are no losers. You are simply asking the more aggressive person to give you his best shot. Essentially, you are inviting him to do what he wanted to do in the first place, beat you up. You're just giving him the opportunity to do a complete job.

Now let me ask you a question. Is there any Christian you know—even the most retiring, shy, bashful, timid, or reserved—who is unable to do this? Is there anyone who cannot say, "Oh, so you want to beat me up? Fine with me. Just do it slowly and thoroughly." There isn't. This is easy. Anyone can do it. This little technique will allow the most skittish Christian to tame a tyrant. It really works.

## WHAT WE LEARNED IN THIS CHAPTER

First, we learned the second use of the Columbo tactic. It is based on the notion that people should be able to give reasons for important things they think are true. Instead of letting our critics have a free ride, we make them defend their own beliefs—or unbelief, as the case may be.

I called this move "reversing the burden of proof." In any dispute, the person who advances an opinion, claim, or point of view has the job of defending it. It's not your duty to prove him wrong. It's his duty to prove himself right. Our second Columbo question, "How did you come to that conclusion?" applies the burden-of-proof rule.

When someone says to you, "The Bible's been changed so many times," or "You don't need God to have morality" or "There's an infinite number of universes, and ours just happens to be the one that looks designed," don't retreat in silence. Instead, simply raise your eyebrows and say, "Oh? How did you come to that conclusion?"

Second, we learned how a basic argument was structured. Opinions alone are not proof. A person giving a real argument does more than just state her opinion. She supports her point of view with evidence and reasons much like the walls of a house

support the roof. Roofs are useless when they are on the ground. In the same way, it's not enough for someone to contradict your view by simply telling a story. An alternate explanation is not a refutation. The new option must not only be possible, or even plausible, but it must be more likely (all things considered) than the idea you are offering.

Next, we learned how to deal with the "professor's ploy," a common move used by others to escape the burden of proof. There are two important principles here. One, do not allow yourself to get caught in a power play when you are overmatched. Instead, use your tactics. Two, refuse to shoulder the burden of proof when you have not made a claim. The Columbo tactic comes to your rescue in each of these situations.

Finally, we learned how to use Columbo to keep ourselves out of the "hot seat." When we find that we are overmatched by a fast talker in an intense discussion, we practice a little "verbal aikido" by shifting from argument mode to fact-finding mode. We ask probing clarification questions instead of trying to win our case. Then we use the magic phrase "Let me think about it." Once we understand the other person's point of view, we work on the issues later, on our own, when the pressure is off.