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What if Someone Uses the Columbo Tactic against Us?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about what to do if someone uses the Columbo tactic against you, why some Christians say that only some doctrines matter and should be defended, and whether the extent to which one spends time and resources looking for answers to apologetics questions can become wrong.

- * What should we do if someone uses the Columbo tactic against us?
- * I have a high respect for truth, but my Christian friends tell me that only some doctrines matter. Why not defend all that has been taught for the past 2,000 years?
- * Can the extent to which one spends time and resources looking for answers to apologetics questions become wrong if other parts of one's spiritual life are beginning to suffer?

Transcript

I'm Amy Hall, I'm here with Greg Cokel, and you're listening to hashtag STRask from Stand to Reason. Welcome, Greg. Here I am.

Alright, this for today, Greg, we have some questions about doing apologetics. Alright. So this first question comes from Yatsuk.

I love Columbo tactics. It's absolutely great. However, the claim that it works in every situation seems to be false to me.

I think it does not work when somebody is using Columbo tactics against us. What should I do in such a case? Well, first of all, the idea of it using it in every situation, that's a generalization. Okay, when in doubt, ask a question is what I say.

Always use a, never make a statement when a question will serve your purpose better. Sometimes the question doesn't serve your purpose better. Okay.

So just to qualify that concept. Secondly, it is not unusual to answer, to respond to a

question with a question. If people are asking us questions, in fact, a lot of times the question they're asking, it is essentially a challenge offered in the interrogative.

Okay, with a question mark after it. Well, those challenges even offered as a question generally can contain ambiguities that need to be clarified. And the question, well, what do you mean by that? Hasn't the Bible been changed? That's a question to me.

What do you mean it's been changed? Isn't it true that such and so? And then you ask a question for clarification. What this does is, obviously, it buys you time. That's a really good thing.

But it throws the ball back in their court and forces them to clarify. So you have a clearer understanding of what you're up against. So it certainly doesn't seem clear to me that questions can't be used in those circumstances.

Now, sometimes the question being asked is very clear and doesn't give itself to asking another question. There's nothing wrong with them just responding. I don't have any difficulty with that.

The concern that I have with regards to Colombo, or which is why the Colombo tactic is so helpful, is it gives people a different way of responding than answering or preaching or giving their view, which could then be disregarded or gainsayed. They could be objected to or contradicted is the point. And so by asking questions and street smarts, by the way, is filled with examples of this, of points that people are making against us, challenges that they're making against us, or ways of putting their own view that seem to be impermeable.

Like, oh, the atheist as well, I just lack a belief in God. Okay, I lack a belief in God. Since I lack a belief, nobody has to defend their lack of belief.

You lack a belief in lots of things, and you don't have to defend your lack of belief. Well, that's, I think, a very disingenuous maneuver. And so this is where there is, you know, we have questions to ask to clarify.

The fact is they may lack a belief in God, but the reason that they lack a belief in God is that they believe God does not exist, which is the classical definition of an atheist. But they don't want to affirm God does not exist because that seems to put some burden of proof on them. So there are lots of things like that in the book where people come at you, and the questions are going to be geared to help unwrap the challenge on us or the defense that they're offering for their own view.

And so I guess in principle, I would acknowledge Yossack's point that not every single circumstance is well suited for asking questions, but I would say most are. And I think it's important to remember the goal of the tactics. The tactics aren't a trick.

They're there for a purpose, and the purpose is clarity. The purpose of the tactics is to keep a good conversation going where you can bring out the truth. So if someone else is legitimately asking you good questions, that's fine.

Our whole goal is to get our view out and have a clear view. So we're asking questions to draw them out. If somebody's already interested in the conversation and they have questions about your view, maybe they're pointing out a way that your view is contradictory, that's fine.

We want the truth and we want to explain the truth. So there's nothing wrong with them even using Colombo tactics. Sure.

They're just helping you clarify your position. Maybe one case in point about clarification, though, is I was at an event with Dennis Prager and it was all Jewish audience and Dennis asked me is it is belief in Jesus required to go to heaven or something to that effect. And of course, the answer to that, he knew it because we talked about this before, but he wanted to engage that issue before the Jewish audience and have me kind of explain or characterize it in my way.

And I said, if I were to answer just a simple answer, yes, it would give the wrong impression. It would make my view look anti-Semitic and it would also make it sound like people were going to help for being Jewish. Like that's what I was saying.

And so I need to clarify this and lay some groundwork for that. And then I did an explanation. You were actually there.

You were sitting in the back of the audience there. And our staff, you know, the only goyim that were there except for the priest and sitting next to me on my left and also Dennis's wife, Susan. So it was an attempt to help people see the sense of it that Jesus was a rescuer of all people from the punishment that was due them for rebellion against God and in either Jesus pays or we pay.

You know, that's the simple calculus. So anyway, there is an occasion where a question was asked that not meant to trap me, but it's the kind of question that Jews would ask. But if you just give the straight up answer, it gives the wrong impression.

And so we have to be careful to characterize it in a way that gives the correct impression and not the wrong impression. In fact, in that case, I don't think he was trying to trap you at all, but there are some people who are trying to use questions, maybe illegitimately. And in those cases, hopefully you can use the clumpo questions to say, what do you mean by that and draw out where they're maybe bringing in a hidden assumption or they're asking something that's illegitimate.

But as long as they're asking legitimate questions and challenging what you're saying and asking what you mean by that, if they're using text as correctly, there's nothing to

fear from that. That's right. That's right.

And you're right about Dennis. And he was trying to create dialogue where I could give a more full-throated explanation. But that wasn't the case with Deepak Chopra when I had that debate with him.

And he raised the same issue. And it was basically, it was something to the fact of people. So people who didn't believe just like you were going to hell.

That was kind of the way he put it. And so I had to navigate that. I talk a little bit about that, the tactics book.

And somebody helped me to task because they saw the video and said, that wasn't his exact quote. I thought, okay, it's going from memory. But that was pretty much his point.

So sometimes that can be asked in a way to make our view look ridiculous. And this is why it's really important that we are able to characterize it accurately. And we can't do that unless we understand it.

That we understand no one goes to hell for not believing in Jesus. It's not there at the great white throne judgment. There we see in Revelation 20, they are judged according to their deeds.

It's a just judgment based on humans' crimes against God. And that's what sometimes is a little tricky for Christians to characterize because they don't think of it in that term. They think of it like, well, if you don't believe in Jesus, you go to hell.

Well, Jesus is a solution. He's not the problem. So when somebody dies and it doesn't say died of stupidity on the tombstone, he didn't go to the doctor.

The doctor is the solution. He died of some disease that the doctor could have helped him with. But it was the disease that killed him.

And in our circumstances, the human condition, the disease, so to speak, is a moral one and is called sin rebellion against God. Here's a question from B. From the tradition of Christian apologetics, I have received a high respect for truth. However, in theology and doctrines, all my Christian friends tell me that only some doctrines matter.

Why not defend all that has been taught of right doctrine for the past 2000 years? I just don't understand. Well, there's a difference between something that's heretical and something that is heterodox. Okay? Heretical views are those that deny some essential core of Christianity, deity of Christ, for example, substitutionary atonement.

That God exists. Or why would that be contentious? Because there are people who are even men of the cloth who are atheists. It's strange, but it's true.

So because I see religion as being an entirely different kind of enterprise. So there are core doctrines of things about the nature of being human, the resurrection of Jesus. If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, there's a claim to deity there.

And believe in your heart, God raised him from the dead. Then you will be saved. Okay, Romans 10.

So there are these pieces. And this is what I tried to capture. The foundational pieces there in the story of reality, God, man, Jesus cross ultimate resurrection to reward or punishment.

These are all cornerstones, if you will, foundational pieces of the Christian view of reality. Now, it's what C.S. Lewis might call mirror Christianity. Now, once you have that in place, there are disagreements about particulars.

And do you have to be baptized to be saved, for example? Now, the claim that you must be water baptized to be saved is a heterodox view. It's not, I think it undermines the certain aspects of the work of the cross. But you can believe that and still be a Christian.

I think it's false. I think it's damaging, but you can still be a Christian. What this points out is that there are some issues that are more important than others.

They're not more true than others. Truth is not a degree property. Either it's true or it's not true.

Any given precise clear statement. Okay. But the weight of the truth of that may be in question.

Deny the truth of the deity of Christ and you're not a Christian. You may be a fine person and you may be a different religion. And by the way, for the sake of discussion, you might even be right, but you wouldn't be Christian because an essential piece of Christianity is the deity of Christ.

Okay. But on other issues, there are multiple issues about the return of Christ. That Christ is coming back.

That is orthodoxy. Okay. Denying Christ's return, this is a problem.

This is a big problem. But when Christ is going to return and what that term, return looks like in terms of historical events, well, there is quite a bit of variety on that view. They can't all be right.

And our questioner, what's her name? B. B. I don't know if it's a. Oh, okay. And B is right that we should try to pursue the truth on any given issue that we're focusing in on. But what we don't want to do is strain it nats and swallow camels.

All right. We don't want to be really, really dogmatic about a smaller thing that isn't so critical that we could be mistaken on and it's not critical to the foundation. But we should, and by the way, those things that are critical to the foundation are repeated frequently.

All right. So what does it mean in 1 Corinthians 15 where it talks about baptism of the dead? Well, I don't know. It's the only place it's mentioned.

There's some ideas about what it could be referring to, but the LDS Church, our Mormon friends, make a huge doctrine out of it. And this is why they baptized for the dead because they think people who didn't get saved after the fashion of their doctrine in this life can be saved later if we by proxy baptize them into salvation. Okay.

Well, notice that there's a doctrine that is built on one verse. And by the way, does seem to go contrary to other verses that are rather clear. So the main things are the plain things.

And if a thing is not plain and frequently mentioned, it's probably not a main thing. There is a truth to the matter, no question. And if you want to focus it on that, it's important to try to get the truth.

But I think it's a mistake to major in minors if you don't have the majors clearly in place. Yeah. I think what's key here is there.

There's probably a situation where you could defend any doctrine. It's not that you should ignore certain doctrines. You should think clearly about every doctrine.

You should try and think through what you think is the truth. You should think about everything. And there will be situations where you are discussing with your fellow Christians say, you know, could be some secondary doctrine.

I don't even know what end times, whatever it is. And there's a place for Christians debating that and trying to defend their beliefs and trying to convince others. There's a place for that.

So it just depends on who you're talking to. If you're talking to an unbeliever, there are certain things that have to be in place before you move on to end times. And I think that's the point here.

And that might be the point that your friends are barking to you. It's not that you can't defend all of these things. There are situations where you will.

But in a situation where somebody knows nothing, you're not going to start within times. Even Paul talks about how they weren't ready to move on to other doctrines. They have to start with the core doctrines.

And then once they understood those, then they would move on to other ones. And that's just, I think that's all that's going on here. We're focusing on when you're talking to an unbeliever, we're focusing on defending the things that are core to Christianity and salvation.

But there are times, there are certainly times. I'm really grateful there are academics and theologians and all sorts of people who are discussing the finer points of doctrine. There's certainly a place for that.

But it's probably not with your, you know, the person on the street. Yeah, I was last week or so in the evenings. I, my bedtime reading was Alan Gomes' edition of WGT Sheds Dogmatics, which is like a thousand pages.

It's a huge dome. And man, he goes through lots of things in really fine ways. But the work is over a hundred years old.

It's 125 years old, or even more. And it's amazing how carefully older theologians were able to think through issues. It's amazing.

And I benefit from that, even on these kind of secondary questions, because they do shed light on the primary issues as well. So there is benefit in looking at the details and doing the best that we can to get them right. But like I mentioned, first things first.

All right, let's take a question from Johannes. Looking for answers for apologetic questions can be quite time consuming and resource binding. To what extent can it become wrong once other parts of a spiritual life are beginning to suffer, such as reading the Bible, participating in church events, etc.? Well, it's hard to, a little bit hard to answer that question.

If all you're doing is reading apologetics books and you have no relationship, there are no relationship building activities that you have, building your relationship with God and with being involved in your community, because you're doing all this other stuff, then that's a problem. I think that's a problem because it doesn't build a balanced individual. It seems like in that case, all apologetics are as a kind of rational, I don't want to say game, really, but something like that.

You know, activity or still can't find the right word. Like a recreational thing. Oh, this is fun for me.

So I like to do this and figure all this stuff out. But apologetics is the defense of the faith. That is the content of the things we hold to be true.

So it makes little sense to be involved in apologetics. If you are not interested in defending the faith once for all delivered to the saints and promoting that and living consistently with it. In fact, that's part of our point.

If Christianity is true, it affects everything. It affects our entire life, not just quote, quote, unquote religion in a restricted sphere, but our business and our education and the way we comport ourselves in all kinds of circumstances. These should be informed by a robust Christian worldview.

So there isn't this dichotomy, this, this, like two story, fact value dichotomy. Okay. On the lower story, to use the metaphor, you've got facts and the facts are unrelated to the values which are just guesses, kind of thing.

And if we are looking at facts of Christianity by the defense of the faith, and we are just doing that and we are not showing the ramifications that our discovery of the truth of Christianity is having in all areas of our life, including morality, family issues, the way the full expression of human existence, then we are, we're not doing apologetics the way they should be done. Notice that when the famous apologetics verse, 1 Peter chapter 3 verse 16, Peter says, always be ready to give an answer, make a defense for the hope that is in you, for the hope that is in you, not the abstract truth of Christianity, but the truth of Christianity gives us a hope regarding the future and the present. And so even in that verse, the focus is on the hope that we have justified by the facts.

He's talking, he's talking to Christians who are being persecuted and, but they continue to do what's right. So people are wondering, why are they still doing what's right? If, why aren't they returning evil for evil? And it's because they're representing Jesus and that's what Jesus did for us. And that's what Jesus did for them.

So their behavior ends up being an apologetic for who Jesus is. And I think, I think you've hit the nail on the head, Greg, that this, we've got to remember what this is for. This is all about knowing God, loving God, being with God, being with his people.

That's what we're defending. And it's kind of like if you, if you wanted to defend the nuclear family and you never went home because you were always, you know, in your classroom or, you know, defending the nuclear family, right? There's something, there's a reason for all this. It's not just ideas.

There's something more important going on here. You have to remember your soul is real. If you are not eating and drinking the Bible and prayer and fellowship, then you will starve to death.

And I've seen this happen. I've seen people email me and say, you know, they've been spending all this time on atheist blogs and they've been talking to people and they're starting to feel dead inside. And the answer is, well, you know, you have a relationship with God.

If you were to defend, let's say your spouse, but you never talked to your spouse, what would happen? You start that, that would just shrivel up and die. The whole relationship.

So if it's coming in between you and God, then there is a problem because that is the number one thing we're supposed to do.

When you're reading the Bible, you see the main things we're supposed to be doing. We're supposed to be living in fellowship with others, worshiping God and bringing other people to into that fellowship. That's another point.

As you're talking to people and you're doing apologetics, your whole goal is to bring them into that fellowship. Into that body of Christ. So you need to nurture your place in that body.

Now, where does it, at what point does it become wrong? I mean, I can't really answer that exact question except that if you are not placing importance on these other things, you are going to have a lot of trouble in the future. And there's going to be difference with different temperaments. And I wrote about this recently in a mentoring letter that I think it just went out last month that different people have different responses.

They have different temperaments. They're going to, some will feel closer to God emotionally and others will feel more distant. And we still are, we still need to work on that.

So even those who feel in a certain sense more left brain in the whole process and can't get as much in touch. With the affect of elements of Christianity as somebody is more right brain, you can still work to nurture that relationship. And that's what I talk about in that letter.

And let me say one last thing because I have seen this happen too, where, you know, he says looking for these answers can be quite time consuming and resource binding. So what I've seen people do is they get stuck on a question and they think they have to find an answer right now. But that just isn't the case.

Just give yourself time. If there's, if you don't have to answer everything right away, you've got time to go back. You've got time to look.

You don't have to resolve every question you have immediately. And I've seen people get so focused on one question that they do put everything else aside. But if you can just give yourself a little bit of grace and say, you know, I'm going to put this in the back of my mind for now.

I'm going to read through the Bible a few times. See what comes up. Then I'll come back to it.

It's okay. We, we, we trust that Christianity is true based on everything that we know already. And because of that, we can, you know, take our time answering things when we need to.

All right. That's all the time we have. Thank you for your questions.

If you'd like to send us a question, send it on Twitter with the hashtag STRAsk. Or you can go through our website at str.org. We look forward to hearing from you. And we look forward to reading your questions.

We love hearing from you. You send the most interesting questions and we're really grateful for that. All right.

This is Amy Holland, Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.