

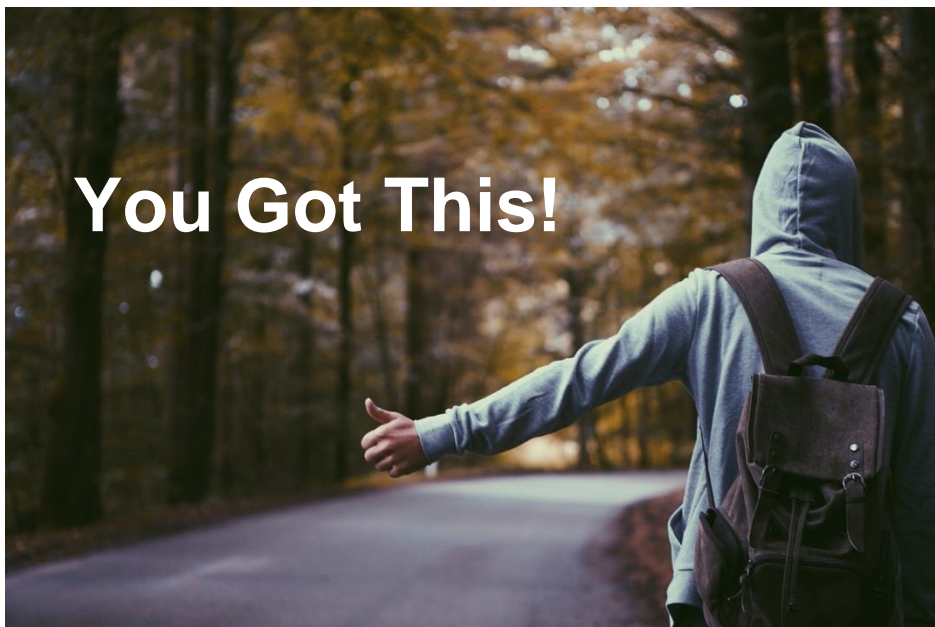


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Note to the Reader:

Each chapter of this book comes from a post at [Classicaltheism.com](https://classicaltheism.com).
If you benefit from these ideas, check out the blog for more.

Chapter 1

Stop Losing Debates (The #1 Thing)

I bet you lose a lot of debates. I bet you've offered up some fantastic points only to be clobbered by a room (or Facebook group) of unpersuaded skeptics.

On topics related to Donald Trump, God's existence, the minimum wage, abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, socialism, or state nullification, you've found yourself tongue-tied. You're unable to answer the other side.

Or perhaps the naysayers didn't crush you because *you remained silent*. You looked away waiting for the topic to change. Perhaps you thought of responses but figured they weren't good enough to share.

Well, I've been there done that. All of that. I've offered what I thought were brilliant points defending [classical theism](#), only to be shut down immediately. I've also stayed silent plenty of times.

So, what's the alternative?

One key to stop losing debates is to stop having debates. If either party perceives a discussion as a debate, each person will plan a rebuttal while the other is speaking. The conversation is more tense and less fruitful. Each participant strives to avoid looking foolish. *Saving face* becomes the goal.

The alternative: **Aim for *dialogue* instead of debate.**

"One key to STOP
losing debates is
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debates."



The #1 Thing to Get Right

The **#1 thing** you need to discuss tough topics works in-person and on social media. It will significantly improve your conversations, even if you don't improve your intellectual capital by 1%.

So, what is the **#1 thing**?

To ask questions rather than make statements. Replace *assertions* with *questions*. Avoid flinging claims back and forth. Avoid citing mounds of research, studies, facts, and evidence (at least initially). At the beginning of every dialogue, ask questions. Save assertions for later in the conversation.

This approach allows you to enter into *dialogue* and takes you off the hot seat. *Dialogue* is distinct from *debate*.¹ Debates are often about scoring points, while dialogues are more easily directed toward truth.

You will use questions with the following goals in mind:

1. Require others to articulate their views clearly
2. Require others to *justify* their views
3. Highlight weaknesses in their views



Many people ignore (1). They quickly launch into a defense without clarifying what the other person is criticizing! Consider this. The day after President Donald Trump announced two of his cabinet picks, I had the following exchange with a colleague:

Colleague: Did you hear Trump just appointed *two racists* to his cabinet?

Me: I don't know; I think the media blows a lot of that out of proportion.

Please understand, I am not a Trump voter. And I am very far from supporting *anyone* on the left. But I dislike my reply. I blew the perfect opportunity to use the **#1 thing**. I made counter-assertions when I could have asked questions to clarify, require justification, or highlight weaknesses.

Here's is how it could have gone:

Colleague: Did you hear Trump just appointed *two racists* to his cabinet?

Me: Interesting. What *exactly* do you mean by *racist*? And what makes you think they are *racist*?

Notice how this takes the pressure of myself. The other person now has to *clarify* what they mean by the term 'racist' and explain *how they know* those two people fit into that definition.

¹ See [this article](#) for more on the distinction.

While it's possible he had a ready answer, it's more likely he did not prepare to clarify and justify. By asking questions, I would have slowed the conversation, forced the person to think, and headed toward the truth of the matter. This is what you need to do when entering dialogue on tough topics.


What Specific Questions Should We Ask?

Here's a nugget from Greg Koukl, a master at the #1 thing, "**Simply put, never make a statement, at least at first, when a question can do the job.**" The 3 specific questions you should ask vary depending on the topic, but they follow this format:

1. What do you mean by *that*?
2. *How* did you come to that conclusion?
3. Have you ever considered [x, y, or z]. . . ?

These 3 specific questions are taken from Greg Koukl's excellent book [*Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions*](#). Notice how they correspond to the 3 goals of questioning: (1) focus on clarity (2) require justification and (3) aim to highlight weaknesses.

More questions can be added to this list. However, starting with these 3 specific questions *alone* will equip you for more productive dialogue.



"SIMPLY PUT, NEVER MAKE
A STATEMENT, AT LEAST AT
FIRST, WHEN A QUESTION
CAN DO THE JOB."
- GREG KOUKL



What follows is an example of how to start using the 3 specific questions when talking to an atheist.

An Atheist/Christian Mock Dialogue

Atheist: God definitely does not exist. Fairy tales are good for children but not for adults. God is just like Santa Claus or the flying spaghetti monster. A superhero for grown-ups. It's quite silly to believe in God.

Christian: You say God does not exist. I'm curious, *what do you mean* by God?

Atheist: Well, you know, he's a superhero type character like Santa Clause. A made-up being like Zeus or all of the other Gods of mythology.

Christian: Interesting thoughts, *how did you come to the conclusion that God does not exist?*

Atheist: Basically, I grew up. I realized that true things require evidence and are discoverable by science. God is not like that at all. He's just a made up character like I've mentioned already.

Christian: I see. Well, I will say that I believe in God, and I think I'm a reasonable person. However, you also seem to me a reasonable person, and I'm open to hearing more about what you have to say. *Have you ever considered any evidence for God?* For example, the *Kalam argument* or the *argument from contingency*, which show that God best explains the beginning of the universe and why anything exists at all?

Atheist: Hmm, I think I've heard of things along those lines. I don't find it persuasive. Most people who talk about God just end up falling back on personal feelings.

Christian: Personal testimony can be very important to Christians, but I can tell that is not what you are looking for. It seems you are looking for *evidence that God exists*, and that is precisely what the *Kalam* and *contingency* arguments provide. Have you ever considered this? [*Insert presentation of the Contingency or Kalam argument*]²

End of the mock discussion.

I hope this illustrates some of the power of *asking questions*. It is **the #1 thing** you want to get right when discussing tough topics. As Aristotle and St. Thomas both *note*, "A small error in the beginning grows enormous in the end." Avoid the error of jumping right into a speech of counter-claims.

In summary:

1. Stop having debates. Have dialogues.
2. ASK QUESTIONS rather than making statements.

² These arguments are explained at in short, helpful videos: [here](#) and [here](#).

Chapter 2

Avoiding Hell in Discussions (3 Tips)

You don't want your discussions to go to Hell. This does not mean the topic of Hell should never arise. Rather, you want to monitor the *temperature* of the discussion very carefully and use appropriate tactics to prevent an *overheated* conversation.

In the last chapter, I revealed that **the #1 thing** you must do is to *ask questions* rather than *make statements*. However, that is not the only thing. You also need *the right questions*. But even that is not enough. You must add to your tactical tool belt. I recommend three more things (the 3 P's) to help you discuss tough topics and avoid ineffective, *fire-breathing* screaming matches.

1. Prepare
2. Pray
3. Practice kindness

The First P

First, let's talk preparation. I am a math teacher. I plan questions to facilitate intellectual discussion focused on math content. Sometimes I don't plan the questions in advance. Sometimes I teach a topic and "go with the flow" of conversation. Without a doubt, *the better conversations start with the questions I planned*.

Most of the worst lessons I've ever taught (and I've taught some bad ones) were due to lack of planning and anticipation.

That is the purpose of preparing to discuss tough topics. Plan your questions. Anticipate what some common responses to a topic might be and how you can handle it with a question. Think back to past discussions you have had on the topic and how you could improve your responses.

For example, if you discuss the existence of God with a skeptic, atheist, or agnostic, there's a good chance you'll chat about [the moral argument](#). So, it's helpful to know the most common man-on-the-street reply to the argument is, "But there are plenty of good people who don't believe in God. You don't need to believe in God to be a good, moral person."

Those who have *prepared* for such a discussion will be aware of this and able to correct the misunderstanding right away (a confusion of moral behavior and moral ontology).

The key takeaway is this: **When discussing tough topics, or just living life, the more you prepare, the more you will succeed.**



The Second P

Second on my list, **pray**. Pray to God for the courage, resolve, and prudence needed to discuss tough topics. The adversary does not want you to bring up religion in conversation. And when you do, he wants you to be ridiculed. It is *very tempting* to stay silent, ignore, or pass over important discussions with people who disagree with you. Praying will help strengthen your resolve to enter discussions.

There is even more reason to pray. Entrepreneurs have identified the reality of the imposter syndrome. [John Lee Dumas](#) describes this very well in his book on podcasting:

“This is the number one doozy of them all. It affects every single human being on the planet. We all have those doubts and those fears that haunt us in everything we do. . . .”

The imposter inside of us screams, “Who are you to act like an expert and enter tough discussions. I don’t have a PhD. I haven’t read 50 academic books and studied various fields deeply.” This talk is silly. We don’t have to be experts, and we don’t have to read 50 books (though that’s not bad if you have the time!). We need to pray, prepare, and be instruments of the Holy Spirit.

Pray to remind yourself that God is *real* and part of every waking moment of your life. He is nearer to you than the veins in your neck, and he already knows *everything* about you and loves you. If you have trouble on this front (who doesn’t?) check out Matthew Leonard’s great [free guide to jumpstart your prayer life](#).

The Third P

Third, practice kindness. Smile. Use a goodhearted joke. Laugh with others. Human beings connect when they trust each other, and they are not going to trust a mean-spirited jerk.

Recall the book of Proverbs (15:1) when it says, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” In a world of people that want to shout people down and destroy property, we should aim to be ambassadors for genuine conversation. In doing so, we stand out and our conversations will enjoy more fruit.

More on this in chapter 5!

Going Deeper

I have three books to recommend if you want to delve very deep into the art of discussing tough topics. However, I must stress that the best way to proceed is to simply GO FOR IT IN REAL LIFE! You will make mistakes. You will learn from them. And God will be with you every step of the way, even if you think you make a fool of yourself here and there. Remember, every expert was once a beginner.

Put yourself out there. You will learn from your failures. And you will improve!

I recommend:

1. [*Tactics*](#) by Greg Koukl. A classic in the field of apologetics and evangelization. This is the best book on the subject. You will learn a lot!
2. [*How to Win Friends and Influence People*](#) by Dale Carnegie (secular). A classic that my parents read and gave to me to read. I reread the principles from time to time because they are so powerful.
3. [*Never Split the Difference*](#) by Chris Voss (secular). This is a new book by a retired FBI hostage negotiator. It is riveting. He sucks you right in with incredible stories, and he teaches extremely useful principles for negotiating in real life. He shows how much of life, and everyday conversation, can improve with good negotiation tactics.

Prepare, pray, practice kindness and enter the conversation!

Chapter 3

Punch the Bully in the Nose

Schoolyard bullies expect you to cower in fear and fold. If the bully has you outnumbered, this is especially true. However, if you catch him off guard, face him, and *punch him right in the nose*, the shock of the situation may be enough to ward off the whole gang. **Counter-sharing** provides that *punch* in certain situations when tough topics arise.

What is Counter-sharing?

Counter-sharing is sharing your *positive testimony* in response to someone else's *negative testimony*.

Consider the following scenarios:

Ex. 1: *Several people chat in a circle before an exercise class. A woman remarks, "My cousin is getting married and it's been miserable. The priest is the worst and keeps asking them all these questions like whether they are using contraception. Apparently, my Uncle Cameron who is divorced and remarried isn't allowed to receive communion. It's awful. It's why I left the Catholic Church."*

Ex. 2: *At the luncheon after a funeral, several relatives are sitting around a table when a boisterous cousin with a strong personality declares, "And that's why religion is for small people. I used to be religious. But now I realize religion is a crutch for those who can't deal with the realities of life."*

The Outcome

I found myself in situations *exactly like* those. What resulted? In the first case, most people, even the Catholics, agreed that the priest was mean and that was terrible. In the second case, awkward silence filled the air, and eventually someone changed the subject.

Notice, in both examples *the group heard negative testimony ONLY*. Everyone fell silent or agreed with the negative testimony. This intimidating situation can strike a blow to believers. I recommend *counter-sharing* to remedy for situations like these.

Now, do not jettison the tactical approach of asking questions (Chapter 1). But when in a group situation and faced with powerful negative testimony, an interrogation can seem cold or lacking in empathy. Instead, *counter-share*: **Provide your own positive testimony in response to someone else's negative testimony.**



Counter-sharing

Providing your own positive testimony in response to someone's negative testimony.

How to Counter-share?

Prepare to *counter-share* by recalling your own relevant experience. Then, follow this two step method:

1. Offer sympathy, recognizing any pain or hardship caused by the situation.
2. Explain how you are *especially sorry* because your experience has been so different.

Let's look at some examples of counter-sharing in response to the initial examples laid out above:

Reply to Ex. 1: *I'm so sorry your cousin had a bad experience with his priest. Especially because my own experience as a Catholic is so different. In college, we had a priest, Fr. Bill, who was the kindest and most genuine person you could meet. My friends and I were so blessed to know him.*

Reply to Ex. 2: *I'm so sorry you've had such negative experiences with religion. Especially because my personal experience is just the opposite. When I go through the tough day-to-day grind of work and obligations, I get exhausted. But the Catholic religion provides hope. I'm so happy to know that there is MORE to life than the daily grind, and that there is the possibility of everlasting joy with the creator of the world. So yes, perhaps religion IS a crutch that holds us up in a broken world, and I am thankful for it.*

The Benefits

These *counter-shares* have a lot of potential positives.

- The negative experience is NOT the only one on the table.
- It strengthens fellow religious believers and builds their confidence.
- You avoid *attacking* the other person's experience.
- Doors to future conversations are opened with people interested in what you said.
- It sparks dialogue about the conflicting experiences.

Equipped with **the #1 thing, the 3 P's, and the ability to counter-share**, you are ready to discuss tough topics. These tactics are not magic bullets to melt the enemy, but they are tools to improve your confidence and effectiveness in conversation.

Chapter 4

How to Respond Like a Pro

It's difficult to think on the spot. Suppose you're trying to explain rational arguments for God's existence. No matter how well you know the arguments, skeptics can rattle off quick objections like machine gun fire:

- Why is there evil if God exists?
- Children die of cancer all the time. Why couldn't God just cure them?
- Why doesn't God make His existence more obvious?
- If He's all-powerful, why couldn't He just convince everyone that He exists?
- The vast majority of scientists don't believe in God and that tells you something.

Just as you think of an answer to one point, the skeptic is ready with another. It's even more difficult in a high-pressure situation like a formal debate or the Thanksgiving dinner table. How could you possibly know how to respond to everything without years of formal study?

How do THEY do it?

Watch [William Lane Craig](#), [Timothy Keller](#), or [Trent Horn](#) defend Christian ideas. They are not *stumped*. They always respond logically and often with wit. Yes, they have had formal training and study, but they have also learned a ton through experience. So, how can YOU respond like the pros?

One key is revealed in William Lane Craig's [question of the week #533](#) on how to cure slow thinking. Here it is: **Never Be Surprised by an Objection More than Once!**

Craig follows that principle *strictly*. How can you? Simple. Every time you are faced with an objection that gives you pause or that you are unsure how to answer, write it down (or type it). Obviously you can't do that during a discussion. But later, at home, reflect on the objection and what made it difficult. Feel the weight of it. Sit down with it. Study it. Search for answers.

And finally, write them down. As a high school teacher, I know students are more likely to remember what they write down or summarize on their own. Physically write down (or type) the best answers to those objections. Keep a file folder (or electronic folder) of all these objections and your replies. Place them in categories like Atheism, Abortion, Trinitarianism, the Gospels, and so forth.

The more you have written down, the less thinking you will need to do on the spot! In chapter 2, I discussed the 3 P's (Prepare, Pray, and Practice kindness). Add this file folder idea to the PREPARE category.



"Keep a file folder
(or electronic folder)
of all these objections
and your replies."

Chapter 5

Give More Compliments

People like compliments. They like to be praised. I always enjoyed receiving praise from my teachers. I like when my wife tells me I've done something well. As Christians, we fight the sin of pride and the urge to desire human praise in a way that leads to it. But as defenders of Catholic Christian ideas, we should give praise and compliments to those who disagree with us.

Practical and theological reasons abound.

Practical Reasons

Catholic Christians believe very unpopular ideas. You plan to defend Catholic Christian ideas. Therefore, you will defend very unpopular ideas. Don't let that keep you from discussing tough topics. Remember, truth is not a popularity contest.

Nonetheless, you should employ a winsome approach to deal with the cultural disadvantages. This includes the #1 thing (Chapter 1), the 3 P's (Chapter 2), and it should also include giving compliments.

When you compliment or praise someone during a discussion, a few things may happen:

- You soften the person; negative emotions toward unpopular ideas fail to overpower them.
- They avoid straw man³ critiques.
- Civility pervades the discussion.
- Your ideas receive a genuine hearing.
- They are reluctant to disagree maliciously or unfairly.

Now, I say those things *may happen*. They may not. But by complimenting your discussion partner, you will increase the likelihood of all those things. Put away the grandstanding and snarky comebacks. They are not useful tools in a dialogue aimed at truth.

Theological Reasons

We are talking to people made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). They have intrinsic moral value as human beings and deserve our respect. Plus, we are commanded to love our neighbors (John 13:34). One way to express love is to speak the truth. Another way is to give genuine compliments and praise.

³ This occurs when you refute a *caricature* of your opponent's actual position.

It's not hard to find compliments to give. Especially when you consider most dialogues occurring today. Consider your average political debate on television or your average *Facebook* discussion on a tough topic. Emotions and insults fly everywhere. By pausing to compliment others, you will stand out.

Here are a few quick ways to compliment someone who disagrees with you on a tough topic. After they have spoken their piece, you can say:

- From that objection, I see you've spend time studying the issue, and I want to commend that.
- Thanks for hearing me out and giving an intelligent response. This will be a good discussion.

Praise a Noble Desire

Sometimes, you can praise the desire implicit in their objection. When discussing abortion, someone might say, "The problem is that if abortion is made illegal, women are going to be dying in back alley abortions. Abortion won't be stopped. It will just become way more dangerous."

It would be immoral to agree with them, especially since abortion is such a horrific moral crime. But, you can still reply: "**I recognize your desire to protect women and keep them healthy and safe. And I want you to know I think that is a noble desire.**" After that type of response, they may be more willing to hear your response to the objection.

You catch more flies with honey than vinegar. And grace builds on this natural truth. As Catholic Christians, we recognize *conversion is ultimately wrought by the Holy Spirit*. Compliments can lead others to let down their walls. When the walls are lowered, the Spirit of God might just rush in.

About Me



- I teach high school mathematics in New Jersey and study philosophy and religion on the side.
- Currently, I take graduate courses at Montclair State University working toward a master's degree in pure and applied mathematics.
- I am a devout Catholic Christian and belong to Our Lady of the Lake Parish in Verona, NJ. As a Catholic Christian, I acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Lord, King, and Savior, and I desire to please Him with all that I do.
- My website, blog, and podcast are a labor of love; I deeply enjoy learning about faith, religion, and philosophy. **Nonetheless, my true love is my wonderful wife Christine, whom I married on April 22, 2017. She provides constant support and encouragement.**

May the Lord bless you, keep you from all evil, and bring you to everlasting life.

Peace,
John DeRosa