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SERIES: REWRITING JESUS

SPEAKER: NAT CRAWFORD

TITLE: An Interview with Gregory Koukl

Pastor Nat Crawford talks with special guest, Christian apologist, and author Greg Koukl about his latest book, “*Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions*”.

NC: And today I am here with a special guest, author and president of Stand to Reason, Greg Koukl. Greg, great to have you here.

GK: Hey, Nat. It is a treat to be able to chat with you again. I think it's been about a year and a half since I was out your way in the corn country, and really enjoyed that time. So I'm looking forward to this.

NC: Obviously I know who you are. I've read your books and have followed you for some time, but there are probably some people who are listening today, who are watching today, who may not know who Greg Koukl is, and about your ministry. So take a few minutes and tell us a little bit about yourself, as well as your ministry.

GK: Sure, about let's say 27 years ago, I started an organization called Stand to Reason, which I still have going; it's a great going concern. I've been in radio for 30 years - even before we started Stand to Reason in 1993 - making the case that Christianity is worth thinking about. My educational background is I have a bachelor's degree in The Bible. I have a master's degree in Christian Apologetics, and I also have a master's degree in Philosophy, under J.P. Moreland over at Talbot. And so, it gives me kind of an array of capabilities of background training, to be able to address a lot of different things that we're dealing with today.

I've written a few books, probably most notably, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Midair*. And then I wrote that with Frank Beckwith, and then I wrote *Tactics* a little more than 10 years ago, which is subtitled, *A Game Plan for Discussing your Christian Convictions*. And then two years ago, I wrote a book that I'm really fond of, if I could put it that way. It sounds weird, I guess, but it's called *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How it Ends and Everything Important That Happens in Between*. And in that book, it's really kind of my modest attempt to offer a kind of *Mere Christianity* to a new generation. I mean, there's only one C.S. Lewis. I don't mean to be comparing myself to him, but what he did, was he captured the Christian worldview in a very clear way, and in a way that's accessible. And he also has mixed in there, with what I call soft apologetics, you know. Simply put, my heart is for discipleship, and I want to train other Christians to do the work of evangelism effectively, to defend the faith, and to help people to see that Christianity is in fact worth thinking about.

NC: Yeah. Well, I think you've covered your ministry really well. And I will have to say, *The*

Story of Reality was a fantastic book, and there are only a few books that I keep on my shelves to give away. And *The Story of Reality* is a book I often give away to people, because it is - I think you're right - a modern day *Mere Christianity*, but it's beautifully written and it's a beautiful story. And I think you've just woven it all together beautifully, but again, a great resource for a believer and a non-believer alike, and it's fantastic.

GK: By the way, let me underscore that Nat, because I want the non-Christian - the people who don't see the world the way we do - to be encouraged to take another look at something they may have misunderstood: that is the Christian understanding of the way the world is - the Christian view of reality; the story of reality. And so, I had that in mind the whole time, and this is - I wanted to make a book like you kind of described it - that a Christian would not be embarrassed to hand to someone who doesn't share their view, and would be interested in reading it anyway. So thank you for that word.

NC: Well, let's talk just for a moment about apologetics and philosophy, because many people don't even know what those two things really are, but how would you define those, and also what got you into studying those?

GK: Okay, well, apologetics is the Christian - I'm struggling to describe it as a discipline, which then makes it sound hard - or an art, which makes it sound inaccessible to some - but it's really kind of both. That is, it is the area - it's the idea of - making a case that Christianity actually is true, and that deals with objections towards Christianity, things that people think that would maybe disprove Christianity - the problem of evil is classic. Or it deals with making a positive case - so making a case for the historical reliability of the New Testament documents, for example, or the fact of Jesus' Resurrection in history and time-space history, for example. So it deals with both.

Now, the word is a little unfortunate, because it sounds like we're apologizing. And in the old sense of the word we are, because the word used to mean, "make a defense for". And so when we are apologizing in that sense, we are defending. And so there are actually apologists in lots of different disciplines, making the case for their discipline and their issues. There are apologists for atheism. For example, Richard Dawkins is probably the best known example of an atheist apologist, for his view. Okay. And this phrase, by the way, this word comes from 1 Peter 3:15, which says that we should always be ready to *make a defense* for the hope that's within us. And the word *defense* there comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which means, to make a defense.

Now philosophy: this is somewhat of a tainted word to a lot of Christians, because they confuse the discipline of philosophy with philosophies. All right. So what philosophy is, is a discipline, and an art also, of taking a close look at the nature of reality. And it looks at existence, and what exists, and what doesn't. And it looks at how we know what we know; that's called epistemology. And it also looks at what is right and what is wrong; that's ethics. So it deals with the kind of core issues, and it's a discipline that allows you to make refined distinctions, like zero in more tightly on things. And by making refined distinctions, get a clearer picture of what's true and clarifying things for people.

And so what I do with philosophy and apologetics, is now I have some understanding of the broader field, and I'm able to kind of rub shoulders with the really smart people like J.P.

Moreland and Bill Craig, and others, and learn from them, and then translate that for the rank and file. So I think the skill that we have at Stand To Reason is, as translators, we try to throw the ball, the big ball, the kind of ball that a lot of people wouldn't engage with, so that they can catch it, and maybe integrate some of these concepts into their lives. And it will help them understand God better, and again, the story of reality better, and their Christian lives are going to be more effective and more satisfying. They're also going to be more effective in communicating to other people.

So to me, this is where the philosophy and the apologetics, and the theology course, foundational to all of that. You know, you've got to have the right view of reality - that's good theology - in order to defend that view of reality, and help people see that it's the true view. The problem is with not philosophy, but philosophies of men, and Paul warns against that in Colossians 2:8, *to not be taken captive, he says, by philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, rather than according to Christ*, that's the problem. So if we don't have some background in apologetics, or a little bit of insight that I think that the philosophy training brings to me, then we're not going to see what the philosophies of men are, contrary to Christ, and we're going to be taken in by them, and that's happening in spades today. So our job, yours and mine, all of us as Christians, is more important than ever.

NC: Greg, we are going to now transition, as you've just covered a great background of who you are, but also apologetics and philosophy, which has shaped your life, has shaped your ministry. And I think you said really well, you help translate, and you're trying to make these subjects, worldviews, thinking, critical thinking, so it's attainable, and digestible, and usable for everyday people. And one of the ways that you've done that is you wrote a book, *Tactics*, and *Tactics*, by far, has got to be one of my favorite books, and, by far, the most popular class I've ever taught as a pastor - this is one that every year people say, "Nat, can you please do this one again? I need to bring a friend". And you know, that rarely happens in a church. I mean, Sunday schools are hard to fill, but when *Tactics* comes up, people say, "Yes, please, may I have seconds?" which is testimony to what you've written, [Oh, that's great.] but tell our listeners what exactly *Tactics* is all about.

GK: Okay. If you think of military terms here, sometimes it's unfortunate, because I don't mean to be clashing here. This is diplomacy that I'm talking about, but just the military concepts of strategy and tactics. Strategy is the big picture. Okay. You can kind of get that you have this overall look at things, and how you want to move, and maybe the kinds of content. This is the way I think about it with Christianity. It's the good content that we have, to deal with these things to either make the case for Christianity, or answer the objections. We've got tons. I mean, our bench is really, really deep. There's hardly a challenge that's come up that smart people have not responded well to. So that's the big picture, but what tactics are, is like, think of it like one-on-one basketball: you know, you go out there and it's just a move here, a move there. It's what happens in the moment. Okay. So you've got D-day, that's Operation Overlord, you know, on June 6, 1944 - that's the big strategy. The tactics take place when you hit the beach, when you go face to face with the opposition. And so, what the book, *Tactics*, is meant to do, is to provide a game plan for those circumstances, and actually a step-by-step. There's three basic steps to the game plan. And as you know, from your experience, they're very, very easy to employ. There is a tremendous amount of safety that's available to the Christian, because of the way the game plan

proceeds, specifically, that the Christian is not doing most of the talking, [Yes] but the Christian still is in the driver's seat of the conversation. And that's how the tactical game plan works.

NC: Okay. So I think you've described it really well, but are there some dangers to using tactics?

GK: Well, I think yes, the answer is yes. And sometimes it's misunderstood by people who are not familiar with the way we teach it. And to some people, it sounds like manipulation. It's "Oh, this is the way to make the other person feel bad". Because tactics are powerful, and it's not hard when you know how to use these. And people have foolish ideas, to make them feel foolish in the process - this is not our purpose. And there is a warning on this in the book. And I talk about it. Our goal is not to manipulate. It isn't to control a person. It's meant to manage the conversation, so that the Christian is in the driver's seat; that is, directing the conversation in a way that the Christian thinks is most productive. And we found that these techniques, these tactics, especially the basic game plan, do a tremendous job of managing even really hostile critics. It turns out, in my view, to be one of the best tools that you can have in your toolbox, as a follower of Christ, to be able to navigate in conversations.

NC: Absolutely. Well, I'm curious about a common - a little bit ago, you mentioned pushbacks - one of the common pushbacks I hear as an apologist is, "You know what, you can't convince anyone into Heaven, you know; you can't..." [Oh Yeah.] "You can't reason with them. [You can't argue anybody in.] Right. Yeah. So we can't save anyone. You know, even 1 Corinthians 3, they will use that as a text to say, "Look, God is the one who saves". I agree. But what do you say to someone, especially coming into a church, or someone, "This apologetics stuff doesn't do any good". [Yeah.] Well, what do you say to them?

GK: Well, I'll just give you the quick answer. You know, when I'm dealing with somebody who's bugged at me on that particular point, you know, I'm going to navigate a little more carefully and quietly, but the simple answer is, "Sure it does; it works all the time, and it worked in the Bible, and it works in our lives too. We are commanded to do it in Scripture." Actually, the way I put it - I'm trying to think of my little, like four point outline - never mind that it is commanded in Scripture, never mind that Jesus and the apostles did it, and the prophets, never mind that it works, what apologetics will help to do - and this is the fourth thing - is that it will help to silence or answer the toughest critic you'll ever face, and that's yourself. Because everybody has doubts. And so it is entirely biblical, but the qualification needs to be made: No apologist I know, thinks that just the right argument is a silver bullet that's going to turn the key and the lock, to get someone saved, as if the argument is doing the work. No, nobody can come to Christ, except for if the Father's there, working by the Spirit, through Jesus, to draw him. Okay. And so that's, I mean, crystal clear; we acknowledge that. And by the way, in that sense, those people who think, "Well, apologetics don't work; instead, just give the simple Gospel". The simple Gospel doesn't work either, in a certain sense - because I've given the Gospel to lots of people who never believed - you need the Holy Spirit. But once the Holy Spirit is in the mix, then all kinds of things work, loving them into the Kingdom, simple Gospel, giving a testimony, or giving apologetics. And this is why we see it so frequently in Scripture, with Jesus and with the Apostles in the Book of Acts.

NC: Great answer. Great answer. Well, I think, Greg, the way I sometimes I remind people is,

“Hey, all we're doing is, we're trying to remove all the obstacles, so people can see Jesus clearly”. And the way you put it is, you put a pebble in someone's shoe, and you can maybe talk about that here in a minute. But the big key in this book, that you talk about almost right at the beginning, is the Columbo tactic, right? You talked about three steps, so why don't you - And I'm a little disappointed, I don't see the Columbo jacket on you. That's a key part of it.

GK: It's over in the closet Nat [OK, good] I'm going to Chicago tomorrow. [Okay]. So I've got to take it with me. But Lieutenant Columbo is someone that old folk know pretty well, because he's the number one TV icon of all time. Younger people don't know about him, but he's a detective in a detective program called Columbo. And he shows up at the crime scenes with his trench coat and cigar. And, you know, he scratches his head, and he doesn't look like he can think his way out of a wet paper bag. You know, this guy's stupid, but he's stupid like a fox, because he has a method. And at some point he's going to ask, “Do you mind if I ask you a question? Something about this thing bothers me. You know, do you mind if I ask you a question?” and then he gets the answer. “Oh, you're very intelligent. Uh, one more thing”, you know, and he *one more things*, them to death, with question after question. And so the Columbo tactic is really a way of maneuvering in conversations, not by making statements, but rather by asking certain types of questions, to set the stage and to get people thinking, okay. And to avoid obstacles and to keep yourself safe.

And this is something I want to emphasize Nat. This is the safest way I know to effectively engage people. So, I mean, it's safest not to say anything, but if you want to engage - you know, we can't sit on the bench, there's too much at stake - so if you want to engage, this is the way to do so, with a tremendous margin of safety, and it's incredibly effective as well. So the key to the Columbo tactic, is that the Christian goes on the offensive in an inoffensive way, with carefully selected questions that advance the conversation. I mean, that's the key to it and that's the Columbo tactic. The other tactics, the game plan - and there's a whole section of additional ones - with names like Suicide and Taking the Roof Off, and Just the Facts Ma'am, and Rhodes Scholar, and Inside Out, and, Watch Your Language, and all kinds of different things. And we have more of them in the new edition. However, the core is the game plan called Columbo.

NC: Okay. So why don't you share a little bit about those, the three parts of the Colombo tactic? I think that'll be the most beneficial for our listeners and people watching today.

GK: Sure. Well, let me share the first one now, because this is the, in a certain sense, this is the most important one, and there's a certain perspective that's involved with it as well. My goal is not in any conversation to try to win that person to Christ at that moment. Okay. That's harvest mentality. Most people are not in harvest mode. All right. And so we're in gardening mode with them, not harvesting mode. All right. The harvest is easy when the fruit is ripe - how does it get ripe? Good gardening. And I think most people are gardeners, and so, me too.

And so what I'm going to do when I start engaging somebody in a conversation that I hope will have spiritual impact on them, I'm not thinking of the end game, which is to win them. All I'm thinking about is one thing. And it is the first step, and I'm thinking, I want to gather information. I want to gather information. So I'm going to ask lots of questions to get as much information about that person's point of view as possible. And I'm kind of giving you the truncated version here, but the simple question that can be asked is, “What do you mean by that? What do you

mean by that?” or some variation. And, I'm just working on a piece now, just finished it last night, that will go out to our constituents at *Solid Ground*, at Stand to Reason. It's called *Solid Ground* - it comes out every other month - but I'm dealing with a whole bunch of tactical circumstances, where people ask questions, or they make claims, “Well, that's just your interpretation”. Okay. Well now what? The first thing you ought to do, is to ask them what they mean. Yup. I mean what it does is, you maybe have a pretty good idea, but what it does is, it buys you time for one, puts the ball back in their court, and it also forces them to clarify their point. So if they say, “Well, I mean, you know, you have your interpretation and I have mine.” “Well, that's true. I do. That's obvious. But you mean more than that. It sounds like you're saying what? That they're all just as equal?”. “Yeah. Yours is good for you. Mine is good for me”. Oh, notice how they just relativized it now. They relativized reading. “You read it one way; I read it another, and who's to say who's right?” Okay. So now you have a much more clear idea of what the nature of the concern or objection is, because you asked the question. You may not know how to navigate from here, but I do. Because they've just made a mistake. They've just said that all language is a matter of one's interpretation. So if I said, well, “Why do you hate homosexuals so much?” “What? I never said anything about that.” “Well, that's my interpretation”. [Yep] So now I'm applying their rule back on them. “Oh, I guess it isn't just whatever. All right. Okay. So good. So now we know that there may be a meaning an author has in mind that we are trying to figure out. So if you think I missed the author's meaning, can you take me back to the text, and show me where I went wrong?” Okay. Now this drives them back to the text.

Now I realize that went fast. Okay. What I just said is in the article that's coming out, and it will be available on our website, so people can read it if they want. But the point that I'm making there - and I hope they catch, if they don't catch the details of that particular question - is that what I did first, is when the challenge came in my direction, I asked a clarification question, “What do you mean by that?” And then when the response wasn't very clear, I asked the same question in a different way. And then I summed up what I thought the other person actually meant, so I get clear on their view, and I'm not misrepresenting it. And so all of this time, we are having a back and forth conversation that is calm and relaxed and friendly. I mean, I'm setting this tone for this. I'm trying to be friendly, and so it's going to be friendly. “I'm just trying to understand your view” kind of attitude. And then when I realize that the view I just had clarified for me has some problems, I'm going to try to clarify the problem for them. “Wait a minute, wait. Are you saying that there are no meanings in sentences at all? And it's whatever we make up in our mind?” “Well, I'm not saying that”. “Oh, okay. Well then I'm misunderstanding. Help me out here”. So notice how this is back and forth, and what it does, and it's not hard to apply this game plan, but it does take a little practice to get more fluid with it. All right. And I give a lot of illustrations in the book help, but what ends up happening is, if the Christian is in the driver's seat in a good way, and the other person is the one that has to face the inadequacies of their own view. And sometimes, you know, we have to answer challenges directly, and there's a time for that. But we also, if we do that, we want to do that in a tactically sound way. And so what I do, is I teach how to do that in the game plan, in a more detailed way in the book.

But if we get clear on somebody's view, especially if it's somewhat controversial, and they're making a strong claim, then I want to ask a second question. And that second question is, “How did you come to that conclusion? Or, “What are your reasons for that?” Notice that even at this point, second step of the game plan, I'm not making my case. I'm not arguing in favor of Christianity. I'm still trying to get clear on the person's view, and now their rationale for it. And

it's amazing, Nat - you probably have experienced this yourself. How often, when you ask people, "What do you mean by that?" Or, "How did you come to that conclusion?" You get dead air, you know, you get silence. They don't have any idea because they have not thought about it. [Right] So anyway, there's a thumbnail sketch of the first two steps, at least.

NC: Yeah, right. Well, our time unfortunately is up for this episode. Greg, thanks for spending time with us today. Very helpful.