

# When in Doubt, Find Common Ground



A JFA UPDATE FROM MARY BIEGLER



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Dear Friends and Family,

It seems like the topic of abortion is becoming more heated and divisive with every passing minute. The reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, various states banning or legalizing abortion, as well as the recent election have all caused many people to become increasingly passionate about their views. Some of us have likely had conversations where we felt misunderstood, misrepresented, or even personally attacked. I'm sure many pro-choice people have felt the same way. These experiences are discouraging and could lead us to believe that productive conversations about abortion are not possible in our current political and cultural climate.

Today I hope to put these fears to rest by sharing about a recent experience I had.

A few weeks ago my colleagues Susana and Jeremy and I had the privilege of being part of an hour-long discussion on Zoom with three pro-choice advocates. The goal of this interaction was simple: discuss ways in which people can find common ground on the topic of abortion. We were not there to argue, challenge one another, or win a debate.

The young woman who facilitated the discussion is a student at George Mason University and is completing a grad certificate in conflict resolution. She asked us to focus specifically on what makes conversations about abortion so difficult and what we can do to remedy that.

My colleague Susanna Dirks kicked us off by sharing that the topic of abortion can be triggering for some people because it is deeply personal for them. Maybe they have had an abortion, they have been victims of sexual assault, or they are close to someone who has. If the pro-life advocate does not handle the conversation with sincere empathy, the pro-choice person may shut down and become unwilling to engage with questions or arguments in good faith—understandably so!

One of the pro-choice women on the call continued the discussion by pointing out how different understandings of when human life begins can derail a discussion early on and that defining certain terms can be very helpful. I added that often people aren't even sure what they mean when they use the words "life" or "human being" and that asking questions can help us to understand their views better. For instance, I might ask, "When you say the unborn aren't alive do you mean they actually aren't alive, like trees are alive, or do you mean they just aren't the same as you and me because they are underdeveloped?" I might also ask, "When you say the unborn aren't human beings, do you mean they aren't *biologically* human, or do you mean they aren't *persons* with the right to life?"

One of the other pro-choice participants mentioned that prejudice or stereotypes can negatively impact abortion conversations. This is something I have experienced personally. I have been written off as unable to have real discussions about abortion because I am Catholic and therefore I must rely only on religious arguments. In reality, I usually make secular arguments against abortion. I have also seen interactions where pro-choice advocates were ridiculed or ignored by older adults simply because they were young college students. We all agreed that assumptions about people on either side of the issue are a significant problem and an obstacle to having good conversations about any controversial topic.

We also discussed what it means to truly listen. The following are all indicators of a good listener: responding to



TRAINING THOUSANDS TO MAKE ABORTION UNTHINKABLE FOR MILLIONS, ONE PERSON AT A TIME

WEB: [JFAWEB.ORG/MARY-BIEGLER](http://JFAWEB.ORG/MARY-BIEGLER)

CONTACT: [JFAWEB.ORG/CONTACT](http://JFAWEB.ORG/CONTACT)

OFFICE: 316-683-6426

arguments rather than changing the subject, asking questions to clarify what has been said, and pausing to reflect instead of immediately offering a rebuttal. If you've ever had a conversation with someone who was truly listening and being present with you, you know what a gift that is.

As the meeting began to wrap up we were able to agree on concrete ways that pro-life and pro-choice people can civilize conversations about abortion including what JFA calls “the three essential skills”: asking clarifying questions, listening to understand, and finding common ground whenever possible. We reiterated the importance of not allowing assumptions, personal experience, or willful ignorance to cloud our judgement. One of the pro-choice advocates explained that when she feels truly understood and respected she is much more open to having her views challenged.

Finally all three pro-choice women, despite expressing how difficult these conversations can be, said that they are important conversations to have. They showed a willingness to dialogue respectfully with pro-life advocates, as well as a sincere desire to understand the pro-life view better.

It was so refreshing to have a discussion where we were focused on identifying problems and finding solutions *together*. I felt a sense of comradery with these women because it was clear that, despite our major differences, we care about many of the same things. We care deeply about women, we want to ensure human rights are being upheld, and we want people to flourish. We have very different ideas about what that looks like, but that is exactly why we need to have these conversations.

Good communication is the key to resolving conflict on both a large and small scale. Conversing with the people in our lives is something every single one of us can do, and right now is a great time to do it. One of my biggest takeaways from our discussion is that, rather than wanting to simply toe the party line, many people are hungry for productive and meaningful discourse about topics they actually care about.

I know that starting this type of discourse is much easier said than done—it's definitely easier if you're at a Justice For All outreach event!—so here are a few ideas for sparking conversations in various scenarios:

- Your friend shares a post on Facebook sharing some of her pro-choice views. Send her a direct message, expressing a desire to understand her position better, and offer to talk on the phone or over a cup of coffee. Listen, ask her questions, and look for points of common ground. Then respectfully push back with biological and philosophical evidence for the humanity of the unborn. Use tools such as Trot Out the Toddler, the 10-second pro-life apologist, and the Equal Rights Argument when appropriate. You can learn these tools and more by taking our free online course ([jfaweb.org/love3](http://jfaweb.org/love3)) or by downloading a copy of JFA's *Interactive Guide* ([jfaweb.org/add-ig](http://jfaweb.org/add-ig)).
- Your coworker mentions a story about a pregnant woman who died because she couldn't get an abortion. Ask her to share more about the story, and show genuine sympathy. Then ask if she thinks a circumstance like this is the only time abortion should be legal. (For help responding to arguments like these, see [jfaweb.org/life-of-mother](http://jfaweb.org/life-of-mother) or send me an email at [mary.biegler@jfaweb.org](mailto:mary.biegler@jfaweb.org). I'd be happy to talk about this or any other questions you have.)
- Your son says he is unsure about the abortion issue and that he understands both sides. Find common ground that it *is* extremely complex. Ask him in which specific cases he thinks abortion should or should not be legal. Continue the conversation by using the three essential skills and gently challenging his justifications for abortion.

Be sincere, kind, and humble, especially when making arguments. Remember that it's not a test—you're not being graded—so don't be afraid to push back, but also to say “I don't know” and to admit when you are wrong. Your job is not to win a debate but to lovingly plant seeds of truth. Rely on God in every interaction and ask for His help. He has helped me with my conversations more times than I can count.

When in doubt, find more common ground.

I hope this has been an encouragement to you and that you are convicted to step out courageously in defense of the unborn. In the meantime, please pray for me and especially for the members of my team who are having conversations about abortion multiple times a week. Their work is difficult, and they don't often get to see the fruit that comes from it, but your prayers and support are deeply felt by all of them.

I pray you and your families have a very blessed Christmas!

In Christ,

*Mary Biegler*