



# “I Get You” or “Gotcha”?

Two Tools for Different Purposes

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STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

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Dear Friends,

Growing up, my house was usually abuzz with some new thing one family member had heard or seen. If he or she was excited enough, all of us would experience it together (sometimes many times). Family lore was born, a story that would be told and re-told, the enjoyment of it growing with each retelling.

There was [one particular debate](#) that rose to that level: Scott Klusendorf debating abortion with two Canadian forensic champions, Rob Silver and Amber Dolman. Peppered throughout that recording, Scott's perfectly concise one-liners would stop the opposition in their tracks. A cross-examination question meant to make Scott stutter only left the audience chuckling...in his favor. Here's an example:

**Rob:** Do you believe abortion has always existed?

**Scott:** Yes, as has slavery.

The gotcha moment is exciting, at least if it's your side delivering it. Scott's performance in that debate electrified my whole family. It especially helped to motivate my brother Jon and I to work full time to save the unborn and their parents from abortion. We memorized parts of it (the quote above is an example) and replayed it over and over.

The gotcha moment also keeps people on the edge of their seats, listening to intellectual sparring they never expected to enjoy. It can really help people, especially when wielded by a master like Scott. His congenial personality, real concern for pro-choice advocates, and solid intellectual arguments provide the necessary context for moments that not only get the opposition. They get the listener, too.

Although I sometimes debate in a formal setting, I'm more often taking the heat on the open mic on a campus like Arizona State. I recently posted some video clips on my blog ([www.stephenmwagner.com](http://www.stephenmwagner.com)) from one noon-time session in January. I had many opportunities for gotcha moments. One viewer was puzzled, though, by their absence:



*Steve, I've been watching these videos and I'm right there with you - working out the logic, understanding their view, finding common ground, then... then I'm waiting for you to deliver a one-two punch of logic to enlighten them, but I don't see it here. What is the tactic of these open mic dialog sessions? Is it just to put a "stone in their shoe" like Greg Koukl always says? -Brian*

This statement summed up my reply: "I think my style on the open mic has more of a dialogue texture than a debate texture. I am not attempting to give people a one-two punch..."

Brian saw the point and worked out some of the logic:

*Thank you for your reply, Steve. Thinking about it more, the way you are dialoging with these students is much more applicable to conversations that can be held anywhere, anytime ... ones I might have at work or with a friend. I'm definitely learning by watching these videos. I'm now seeing that*

*your methods defuse the steamrollers, the hotheads, or those that might easily go on the defensive. I'll be checking this blog quite often! Thank you for your work.*

Make no mistake. The gotcha moment certainly has a place in formal debates and media interviews where sound bites are the name of the game. Unless you quickly summarize why your point is true and your opponent's is false, you lose. Scott uses these venues to great effect, training pro-life advocates to make the case for life. His gotcha moments helped make me the pro-life trainer I am today.\*

In open mic debate, however, I'm attempting to model for pro-life advocates how to put that case for life into one-to-one dialogue. I'm also inviting pro-choice advocates to share their opinions. I clarified for Brian why "illuminating with a one-two punch" would not accomplish either:

*I believe playing more of a role of moderator of the dialogue sometimes gives me a better cross-section of people on the mic (as opposed to only hotheads). People simply aren't willing to talk if they feel they'll be trapped or embarrassed...Please don't misunderstand. I want desperately to give people the argument for the pro-life view, and I wish it came through a bit more prominently in some of these segments. But creating an intellectual environment where people feel comfortable rethinking is just as high a priority.*

When I'm at my best on the open mic, I take time with each person. I try to let them have multiple opportunities to explain themselves. I don't "move in for the kill." While I ask tough questions, I'm also content to let some false statements or arguments go unanswered. I don't always have to have the last word. Why? Because I think communicating to each person the phrase, "I get you," is more important than making sure everyone else knows "I gotcha."

It's one of the essential skills we teach every pro-life advocate: Listen to understand rather than to refute. Listen the way you wish your parents would have listened to you.

I hope you've experienced the complete attention of another person I'm referring to here. Think of a good friend who listens. His eyes communicate that he understands you. Her nod underscores that she "gets you." If you consider how

#### Recent and Upcoming Events

See [www.stephenmwagner.com](http://www.stephenmwagner.com) to find out where Stephen will be speaking this month. Click on the link in the upper right-hand corner!

God listens to us, the "I get you" approach is ministry.

It's also smart. If you listen to understand, you'll be more helpful when you respond. While you create an environment for rethinking, you'll also win an opportunity to clarify the truth.

Some think this sort of thing is out of place in serious intellectual discussion. Let the best argument win. Let the chips fall. I'd put it the other way around, though. The stakes are too high to leave the relational side to chance. In many cases, a person's life hangs in the balance. The most important intellectual discussions are also the most personal (e.g. Does God exist? Why am I here? Is abortion right or wrong?), so we can't talk adequately about them if our only concern is who wins the intellectual battle of wits. While we can't give up concern for truth, the person must be our first priority.

Take a look at the videos for yourself. Do I strike that balance? Post your own comments to let me know what you think. You can be sure I'll sit and take in your thoughts, trying "to get" what you're communicating.

For the God Who "Gets Me,"

*Stephen*

Stephen Wagner

\* My focus on Scott's gotcha moments here may imply to some readers that this is the only hallmark of [Scott's work](#). This is unfortunate. See Scott's just-released book, [The Case for Life](#), published by Crossway, for his well-rounded approach to discussing abortion with friends and neighbors. It will be required reading for all JFA staff!

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Help Steve train pro-life advocates to engage those who disagree!  
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