

Common Ground and Uncommon Conversation

A Forgotten Key Opens Minds



STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

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Note: I originally sent this letter to supporters on December 5, 2005 while working at Stand to Reason (www.str.org).

Dear Friend,

Hostility...listening...sparring. A young woman from Kansas State and I had cycled through this typical conversation pattern. But by the end of the conversation, she was sharing her email address with a smile. As she departed, a young man standing nearby struck up a conversation with me.

“That was amazing,” he began. “I’ve heard the pro-life position a thousand times, but never like that. I believe if people hear that kind of argument, you will persuade many.”

Even in the face of a compliment, I guess I can’t help but act according to habit. I asked a question: “What made my argument effective?”

“Most people start with the Bible, but you made a very reasonable case.”

Let’s ignore this student’s implicit assumption that a Biblical reference is not reasonable. Why did he find my argument so appealing? I didn’t start with uncommon ground, like the Bible or the status of the unborn. I began by discussing human rights:

“Look around this campus at all of the born people. Would you agree that each person has the same basic rights, that each should be treated equally?”

Why begin this way? Because I know almost everyone I talk to believes in the basic human rights of all born people, regardless of differences or disabilities. I find common ground:

“But if all of us should be treated equally, there must be some quality we all have equally that justifies that equal treatment, right? What is that characteristic? It can’t be that all of us look human, because some have been disfigured. It can’t be that all of us have functional brains, because some are in a reversible coma. It can’t be the abilities to think or feel pain, for some think better than others and some don’t feel any pain. It can’t be something we can gain or lose, or something of which we can have more or less. If something like that grounds rights, equal rights don’t exist. And if we look at the whole population of America, almost 300 million people, there is only one quality we all have equally – we’re all human. We have a human nature and we all have it equally. You either have it...or you don’t.” [I owe this insight and the structure of this argument to J.P. Moreland.]

Then I relate my argument to modern-day concerns:

“Why are sexism and racism wrong? Isn’t it because they pick out a surface difference (gender or skin color) and ignore the underlying similarity all of us share? We should treat women and men, African-Americans and whites, as equals and protect them from discrimination. Why? Because they all have a human nature. But if the unborn also has that same human nature, shouldn’t we protect her as well?”

Only in the last sentence do I even so much as mention the unborn. That’s by design. I spend the least time talking about the most contentious topic. Seems backwards, doesn’t it? Shouldn’t we spend the majority of our time talking about things we disagree about? Don’t I want to change minds, after all?

Of course I want to change minds. But if I’m wise, I’ll spend most of my time discussing things about



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which we already agree. And more importantly, I'll discuss *why we should* agree about those things. Much confusion lies behind vague agreements about human rights and discrimination. If our friends can get clear on why born people matter, they are much closer to seeing why the unborn matter too.

And there's a hidden benefit in finding common ground: it's fun. With all of the anger about the pro-life position in our culture, who wants to spend all his time hearing scoffing and fielding glares? I'd much rather have a few moments to bask in the harmony of shared values.

To be sure, I'm not going to avoid the uncomfortable fact that I think abortion is wrong and that no healthy society can kill its weakest members. But why point to our differences when our points of agreement provide such fruitful discussion? And if agreement is so enjoyable, why do we so often ignore it? In a future newsletter, I'll explore the importance of common ground in more detail. For now, check out my super-quick version of the above argument, the *One-Minute Pro-Life Apologist*.

It's easy to forget that the most enjoyable part of a conversation is agreement.

I thank God for arguments that build common ground. They not only make my job easier, they help the students I train feel more comfortable interacting with strangers. And I thank God for the common ground you and I share: the desire to reach hearts and minds on abortion by training students. Earlier this month, I spoke to more than 800 teenage girls in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania about abstinence and modesty. Through tears, one girl shared that she had never heard anything like what she heard that night. And she had never seen abortion pictures either. The result? She and her friends are planning a strategy to radically change how their campus thinks about abortion.

As we begin this season of Advent, let's thank the Lord for blessing our efforts (and our arguments) in this past year. I can't wait to see what He'll do in the next.

For the Kingdom,

Stephen

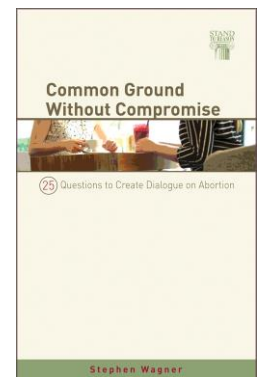
Steve Wagner

Update: What's Happened Since December 2005 with the Equal Rights Argument

Some of you reading this reprint have faithfully supported my work from before December 2005 when this letter was originally published. Since that time, my mentor Scott Klusendorf (www.prolifetraining.com) featured it prominently in his book, *Case for Life*, and I included a version of the material from the letter in my own book, *Common Ground Without Compromise* (www.commongroundbook.com).

My July 2013 letter ("A Good Conversation Is...a Mirror") featured another example of the Equal Rights Argument helping to change a mind. Recently, JFA trainer Tim Brahm noted that it is the most persuasive argument he's ever used to defend the unborn, and he made a powerful case that we should prioritize training *every JFA volunteer* to understand and use the Equal Rights Argument. I agreed, and we're right now in the process of training our staff to implement this decision by mastering a teaching section and mentor-led, interactive small group activities.

I'm especially grateful to Tim and his brother Josh Brahm (Right to Life of Central California) for finding new and helpful ways to explain and illustrate the argument this year. See their blogs for examples (www.timothybrahm.com, www.joshbrahm.com). In addition, the JFA staff training team has discussed and workshopped the argument, as well as using it more purposefully in conversations on campus. The feedback from this team of skilled dialogue artists has been very positive, and it's enabled us make the material more understandable to JFA's volunteers so they can be more helpful to the people they engage in conversation.



Although I can't take credit for creating the argument, I am gratified that a small newsletter I wrote in 2005 could have this sort of ripple effect. Thanks for helping to make this happen. – Steve Wagner, September 2013

See Steve's blog, *Human Beings Matter More* (www.hbmm.net), for things to read, see, and hear.