

“Wait! I Think I Can Help You!”

Common Ground to the Rescue...Again



JFA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MONTHLY LETTER

MARCH 2015

Dear Friend,

I could tell things weren't going to end well. Two women were just finishing a brief conversation at JFA's ten-foot kiosk display at Arizona State University in February. The woman on my left was advocating for the choice of abortion, and the woman on my right was adamant that abortion kills a baby. Their voices escalated as I came into earshot:

Pro-Choice Woman: Women need choice.

Pro-Life Woman: It's killing a baby.

Pro-Choice Woman: But what about the woman's right to her body? The woman...

Pro-Life Woman: [cutting her off] I don't care what you say; it's a baby. Abortion is murder. You think it should be...

Pro-Choice Woman: [cutting her off] You don't know what you're talking about.

The pro-choice woman capped the marker she had been using to write on the free speech board and prepared to leave the scene. I had to act quickly. I felt as if I had emerged from a telephone booth as *Common Ground Man*, clad in spandex with a shining “CG” emblazoned across my chest. My arms outstretched and animated, I said something like:

Steve: Wait! I think I can help you. I think I can help both of you find common ground.

The pro-choice woman seemed to brighten up at the prospect of something different. I thought the pro-life woman might not be willing to participate in my little experiment, but I hoped a few questions would give her reason to stay. I was almost certain these two would agree about one kind of abortion. I turned to the pro-choice woman first:

Steve: What do you think about abortion at 39 weeks? Do you think it should be legal?

Pro-Choice Woman: [disgusted] Now that's way too late. I don't have any tolerance for a woman who does that...I'd have to describe that sort of abortion as...ridiculous.

Steve: [turning to the pro-life woman] What about you? What do you think about 39-week abortion?

Pro-Life Woman: [a bit suspicious] It's the same as any abortion. It doesn't matter the time. It's killing a human.

Steve: I understand that that is your perspective. But let's focus only on 39-week abortions right now. What do you think about those?

Pro-Life Woman: It's killing. It's murder. That woman who gets that abortion is crazy.



It's my conjecture that in the rare case of abortion at this stage the doctor is usually recommending abortion even though the woman wants the child, so I wasn't eager to see women who have these abortions chastised as “crazy.” I was eager, however, for each of these two to see that the other person was *not* crazy. To help, we had discovered one small item of common ground: both women objected to abortion itself at this stage. I continued by pointing out a few other abortions about which I thought we all could agree. Here's an example:

Steve: [turning to the pro-choice woman] What do you think about aborting a female fetus just because she's female?

Pro-Choice Woman: I'm not for that...

Pro-Life Woman: It doesn't matter why she's doing it. It's still killing.



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Having focused on points the pro-life woman would think were obvious, I then attempted to see if I could help the pro-life woman to grant a point that the pro-choice woman would think was obvious:

Steve: Can we all agree that some abortions are more understandable than others?

Pro-Life Woman: Don't you see that I think abortion is killing regardless of when or why?

Steve: I appreciate that point, but I'm referring to something a bit different. Do you have more sympathy for a woman who is beaten by her boyfriend, raped, gets pregnant, and has an abortion than you have for a woman who has plenty of money and family support but gets an abortion flippantly?

Pro-Choice Woman: I do.

Pro-Life Woman: I still think both of those abortions are killing.

Steve: I understand, but don't you naturally have more sympathy for the woman who is raped and gets an abortion than for the one who is not raped and gets an abortion? That's all I'm asking.

Pro-Life Woman: I guess so, but you have to realize the way I see this. Abortion kills a human.

This dear pro-life woman had crystal clarity about the unborn and abortion, so I surely did not want to discourage her. I wanted her to feel affirmed, but I also wanted her to have a new experience. Imagine an orphan who has been ignored on the doorsteps of so many but is now finally invited in and interviewed, with the real hope of being adopted for good. I wanted this woman to have the experience of watching the truth she was proposing finally get invited in and considered, with the real hope that it might now be adopted. It's unfortunate that she had to leave before we got to the best part of the conversation, the part that came next.

I continued to ask the pro-choice woman for clarification about what she believed regarding abortion, and the reasons for her beliefs. We were discussing viability for a bit, and then one of her friends, an activist for drug legalization, came up and greeted her. When the activist found out what we were discussing, she predicted that the two of them had very similar views on abortion. Her prediction proved true, and the two of them now played tag-team, working out a defense of abortion based on viability, back-alley abortion, and the claim that keeping abortion legal is the most neutral, appropriate position in a pluralistic society.

Just thirty minutes later, though, we were discussing a question I had proposed: *If we agree that we as adults deserve to be treated equally, what is the one thing we have the same that demands equal treatment?* The three of us were now fully engaged in testing different explanations for these equal rights. Since I had spent a good deal of time listening in order to understand these women (along with offering some responses to their arguments for abortion), they had decided to listen with similar interest. I defended "human nature" as the best explanation for equal rights (see the link below for more), and pointed out that if human nature explains our basic right to life, and the unborn also has that nature, then the unborn has the same right to life. Perhaps for the first time, these women were considering the merits of this idea.

When these women finally decided they needed to go and study for class, they were effusive about how nice I was and about how this was the best conversation they had ever had with a pro-life advocate. This was encouraging, but accolades were not my aim or measure of success. Instead, I evaluated the conversation with this question: Did I balance *love* and *truth* in such a way that these women were encountering both love *and* truth at every point in the conversation? I listened as if each of these women brought something important to the discussion. I searched for common ground in the ideas they shared. I shared my own perspective with an emphasis on equal rights for adults, a phenomenon on which we all agreed. The result was that these women embraced the opportunity to invite the truth in to be considered. Let's pray that on further reflection or in further interaction over email, these women come to fully apprehend the truth that the unborn and they themselves have intrinsic worth as humans made in God's image.



Warmly,

Steve Wagner
Executive Director, JFA

Note: Since I'm recounting this conversation from memory, without the aid of notes, audio, or video, all I'm able to do here is try to capture the gist of what was said. Even in the absence of a word-for-word rendering of the dialogue, though, the point still stands.

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