Are you afraid to argue about abortion?

Don’t worry—almost everyone is. Either we think the subject is too impolite, or we don’t want to be branded an intolerant fanatic, or we worry that we won’t represent the pro-life side well enough.

You can overcome this fear, says Trent Horn in his new book, *Persuasive Pro-Life*. With a little knowledge and a few proven techniques, you can become a bold and effective apologist for the unborn.

Drawing on over a decade as a pro-life activist, Horn helps you cut through the diversions and obfuscations of the “pro-choice” side in order to accurately frame the legal, historical, and medical issues. Using vivid real-life examples, he drives home the critical importance of charity—no matter how loud the debate gets. For we must be not just warriors for the pro-life cause, he says, but ambassadors for it.

Then Horn leads you on a guided tour of the many types of pro-abortion opponent or inquirer (“the pragmatist,” “the skeptic,” “the conflicted”), along with more true stories from the field. In each case he teaches you specific approaches—what to say, what not to say, and how to bear yourself—that are custom-tailored to every situation.

The struggle over abortion has never been hotter, and the stakes could not be higher. Read *Persuasive Pro-Life* today and never again be afraid to speak up for the precious and fundamental right to life.

“Trent Horn really knows how to get people thinking and talking about abortion. Persuasive Pro-Life is an invaluable handbook for anyone who wants to become more skilled at defending the humanity of the preborn.”

—Lila Rose
President, Live Action

“I am so grateful for this book! It brilliantly combines reason and compassion in order to build up a culture of life.”

—Fr. Frank Pavone
President, Priests for Life

“Trent Horn articulates the pro-life case clearly and effectively. Persuasive Pro-Life is a model of logical clarity and completeness, and of patience with and genuine good will toward pro-choice objectors. This book will repay study by any pro-life advocate.”

—Patrick Lee
McAleer Professor of Bioethics, Franciscan University of Steubenville

TRENT HORN
FOREWORD BY FR. FRANK PAVONE
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A Gracious Approach

One of my first experiences with the Justice for All exhibit was at the University of California in Santa Barbara.52 By the afternoon, thirty protesters were marching around the exhibit chanting slogans like “Pro-lifers lie, women die!” “My body is not your property!” and “Get the U.S. out of my uterus!” Fortunately, the volunteers with Justice for All are trained to take anger from protesters and channel it into productive and civil dialogue.

I remember watching one young man in a tight red T-shirt look at our exhibit. He was wearing sunglasses, but they couldn’t conceal the anger on his face. He walked over to where I was standing, and I braced myself for a verbal barrage. The young man abruptly turned and began yelling at the pro-choice protesters instead. It turns out he was a pro-life student on campus whom we had not trained at our seminar the previous weekend. Indeed, his lack of dialogue training became evident as his conversation with the protesters began to deteriorate.

“What’s the matter with you people?” he shouted. “This is the murder of babies! How can you be for this?”

“They’re not babies, they’re fetuses, and it’s our choice.” “You don’t have a right to take away our choice!” the protesters shot back.

“You had a choice when you had sex!”

“You’re a man! You have no rights over my body! We can have sex and not be punished by pigs like you!”

The young man’s face flushed with anger. “We wouldn’t have abortion if women like you could learn to keep your legs shut!”
“Enough!” I said, stepping forward. “You should apologize to these women and listen to what they have to say. You might not agree with them, but that doesn’t give you the right to insult them.”

“Forget you, man!” he replied and hurried away.

One of the female protesters turned to me and said, “Thank you so much. I can’t stand anti-abortion people.” I smiled and told her who I was. One of the women’s jaw dropped, and she said, “But . . . you’re so reasonable!”

That young man at UCSB was angry that children were being aborted and no one seemed to care. I understand his anger, and I wish more people would be as upset about abortion as he was. But I don’t condone his response to that anger or his treatment of those protesters. Instead of hearing a compassionate plea for the lives of the unborn, all these women heard from this man’s outburst was “I hate you!”

At Justice for All we taught people how to be ambassadors for the pro-life position, and we often quoted 2 Corinthians 5:20: “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We urge you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Pro-life ambassadors are effective when they combine knowledge with a persuasive approach. For a while I didn’t understand the need to be a pro-life ambassador until one time I failed at it. Massively.

_Learning by failing_

The scene was the University of Arizona, and I was talking to a belligerent student whose yelling had attracted more than a dozen onlookers.

“If you’re pro-life, then you must be against IVF,” he said to me.

IVF, or in vitro fertilization, is a process in which human embryos are created outside of a woman’s womb and then later implanted there. Often embryos that have genetic
abnormalities are destroyed or aborted later in the woman’s pregnancy. This prompted me to respond by saying, “Well, if IVF kills embryos, and those embryos are human beings, then, yes, I oppose IVF.”

“Ha! I knew it!” he shouted. “I was an IVF baby. Without IVF I wouldn’t be here!”

As the crowd formed a ring around us, this young man and I began a rapid-fire debate. For every argument he advanced, I fired the perfect rebuttal right back at him.

“Don’t you think creating life is a good thing?” he asked, to which I immediately responded, “Ah, abusus non tollit usum, or ‘abuse does not annul the proper use’ of an act. IVF abuses the natural order involved in procreation, so that makes it gravely immoral.”

We argued with increasing franticness. As a result, the young man became more and more frustrated. Finally, he threw up his hands and said, “You know what? If you’re not going to listen to me, I’m leaving.” He walked away. I looked around and the crowd slowly began to walk away as well, in awkward silence. One man came up to me and said, “Wow, you really blew it.”

I was furious when he said that. I knew the facts and arguments about abortion inside and out—how dare he criticize my ability to debate and present a flawless argument!

And yet, I had blown it. I had become so caught up in mastering arguments that I missed the important skill of mastering people. That is why I teach pro-life ambassadors to follow these five ambassador rules when they engage in conversations on not just abortion but any controversial topic.54

1. Don’t be weird.
2. Make your evidence bulletproof.
3. Use questions instead of statements.
4. Actually listen.
5. Agree whenever possible.
1. Don’t be weird.

I understand that our culture often labels people who think abortion should be illegal as “weird.” When I say, “Don’t be weird,” I don’t mean do anything it takes to make pro-choice people like you. If that’s your goal, then you should start paying for abortions! Instead, “Don’t be weird” means don’t engage in activities that will unnecessarily offend those who disagree. Consider the pro-life advocate who dresses up in a grim reaper costume, complete with skull mask and scythe, and holds an “I’ll see you in hell” sign at an abortion facility.

Now, I bet this person cares deeply about the unborn, and I am glad he’s at least outside an abortion facility. But has he stopped to think of what the women going into this facility think when they see him? Instead of seeing someone who makes them feel safe and welcomed, those women see someone who makes them feel scared and uncomfortable.

When Abby Johnson served as a director of a Planned Parenthood in Texas and saw such protesters, she would think, “If they cared about these women, they wouldn’t look so frightening.” Johnson later quit her job and became a pro-life advocate. She credits her conversion to the group 40 Days for Life, whose participants showed her genuine love and compassion while praying in front of her abortion facility.

As pro-life advocates, we become weird when we don’t think about how our words and actions affect other people. St. Paul said, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one” (Col. 4:6). If I had been more understanding in my IVF conversation and less weird, I would have slowed down the pace and asked more questions. I would have known how to treat this young man like a person to be ministered to and not an enemy to be defeated. In fact, I was so focused on “winning” the conversation that I forgot to get from him the one
thing that we use to dignify the person with whom we are speaking: his name.

Instead of going into a conversation with the attitude “I’m going to win,” go into the conversation with the attitude “I’m going to be winsome,” and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. Proverbs 15:1 reminds us, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

2. Make your evidence bulletproof.

Does not being weird mean we should simply love other people and not try to prove they are wrong? If St. Paul were here, I’m sure he would say, as he often does in his epistles, “By no means!” In Ephesians 4:15 Paul says we must “speak the truth in love.” The most loving thing we can do for someone is to tell him the truth and prevent him from being deceived. This doesn’t mean that all pro-life advocates have to be walking encyclopedias, but it does mean that we must be committed to growing in our knowledge about the issues related to the abortion debate.

We must also acquire our knowledge from reliable sources or we might be embarrassed later. One of my pro-life friends gave a talk at a public university in which she claimed that an unborn child could feel pain at a very early point in pregnancy. When a pro-choice medical student challenged her claim with evidence from peer-reviewed medical journals, my friend admitted in front of the audience that the only source for her claim was a newsletter from a national pro-life group. Even if my friend had been correct when it came to fetal pain, the students she addressed would not have believed her, because she did not have adequate evidence to back up what she was saying.

What’s the lesson? Just as one drop of cyanide can poison an entire glass of water, so too can one egregious error cause people to discount your entire argument. To keep this from
happening, I do my best to make my evidence bulletproof. This means using the most trusted, up-to-date sources and having responses to anticipated objections.

As I did earlier when I described abortion procedures, we should use sources that pro-choice advocates accept as being reliable so they have less excuse to dismiss our conclusions that are drawn from those sources. Of course, just as no amount of body armor can guarantee a person won’t be injured, no amount of study can prevent us from occasionally being stumped.

Once while hanging out with a group of friends I was introduced to someone who volunteered for a euthanasia advocacy group. He found out I was pro-life and asked me, “Why won’t you let people have dignity and be able to choose when they die?” His questions became more pointed, and I became flustered, because that year I had studied issues primarily related to abortion, not euthanasia. I felt almost naked at the lack of arguments I had to offer. I was so desperate that I opened my laptop while he was distracted and searched the Internet for anti-euthanasia arguments. Eventually, I just repeated the same weak assertions and evasions until the conversation switched subjects.

That is the wrong attitude to have. No one has the answers for every question. When someone asks us a question we don’t know the answer to, we should just admit it. If the other person cares about truth, they should understand if you say, “You know, that’s a really good question, and I’m not sure how to answer it at this moment. Would you mind if I do some research and e-mail you a more helpful answer, and you can let me know what you think of it?”

When people see that we genuinely care more about knowing the truth than winning arguments, it makes them more receptive to what we have to say. If we are honest and humble about our lack of knowledge, most people will not
think we are ignorant. In reality, a person is more likely to sound ignorant when they pretend to be an expert in something they know nothing about!

3. **Use questions instead of statements.**

When we make statements in conversation, they can turn unintentionally into speeches that get ignored. A better approach is to ask questions, because this lets us steer our conversations toward the truth without having to “preach” the truth to anyone. I have found that there are four questions that are essential to any good conversation, including those regarding abortion.

1. “What do you believe?” Too often we assume what someone else believes based on their income, their race, their gender, their religion (or lack of religion), or some other external factor. Never assume what someone believes. Instead just ask.

2. “Why do you think that’s true?” or “How did you come to believe that?” How a person arrived at a belief, or why he thinks it’s true, can be even more interesting than what he actually believes. It’s vital to discover this so that you can help the person see where his thinking went wrong if he happens to have a false belief.

3. “What did you mean by [fill in the blank]?” If we don’t stop and define the words in our conversations, we run the risk of misunderstanding the other person. Here are just a few words whose meanings can vary dramatically between people when they talk about abortion: *life, choice, rights, fetus, person, human,* and even *abortion.* By carefully defining the words being used, you will be able to talk to people you disagree with instead of talking past them.
4. “What would you say to someone who says [fill in the blank]?” After you learn what the other person believes and why he believes it, you may want to challenge his belief and show him it’s false. It is not disrespectful to challenge the truth of someone’s beliefs. You can respect a person and be kind to him without respecting any particular opinion he has. By using a question from a hypothetical inquirer, instead of a direct accusation from yourself, the person with whom you’re speaking is less likely to become defensive or take the challenge personally.

Asking a question is especially helpful when you have conversations with the two toughest audiences: family and people on the Internet. Conversations with family and close friends can be explosive, since they know us well and can push our emotional buttons. Conversely, conversations on the Internet can be explosive because those people don’t know us well and can hide behind a veil of anonymity that emboldens their rude behavior. In both cases, a set of questions can lower the level of hostility. With enough practice, without having to make a single statement, you can help a person see that what he believes does not make sense. One way to do this is to ask what I call “dumb questions.”

One time a student told me that abortion wasn’t a big deal because it just terminated a pregnancy. I asked him what a pregnancy was or what it meant when a woman was pregnant. He gave me a confused look, since it should just be obvious what pregnancy is. I pressed him to define it, and he said pregnancy meant a woman had a child inside her. I then said, “Childbirth also ‘terminates a pregnancy,’ but would you agree that abortion is very different than childbirth? If abortion terminates a pregnancy without resulting in a live birth, then
doesn’t abortion terminate a child as well?” He was quiet and looked away until someone else started to talk to me.

To help your conversations on abortion, I recommend asking one of these ten “dumb questions.”

1. What is abortion?
2. What is a child?
3. What is a human?
4. What is pregnancy?
5. What’s wrong with being pro-abortion?
6. Why is it wrong to kill a newborn baby?
7. What does abortion do to the fetus?
8. Is there a difference between a condom and an abortion? (If so, then what is it?)
9. Why is abortion a sad or difficult choice?
10. What is so upsetting about pictures of abortion?

4. Actually listen.

My conversation at the University of Arizona went poorly because I was not practicing respectful listening. I certainly heard what this young man said, but I wasn’t listening to him. We all fall into this temptation at some point. I remember once having a disagreement with my wife in which I calmly explained to her why I thought she was mistaken. I then asked her what she thought of my response, and she became startled and said, “I’m sorry! I wasn’t listening. I was thinking of my next argument!” Of course, I have been guilty of doing the same thing to her. When it comes to being a better listener, my advice is to slow down the conversation and frequently paraphrase what you have heard.

Heated conversations are like ping-pong matches where arguments and rebuttals are traded back and forth in rapid succession. Sometimes there isn’t a chance to catch your breath. In contrast, our conversations on abortion should feel more like
a game of volleyball. When a volleyball is served or returned, it usually floats through the air for a few seconds before it is hit. The arguments we share with one another should “float” in a similar way.

To achieve this kind of dialogue, I recommend pausing to think after a person has finished speaking. Then paraphrase to the person what you heard him say. This reduces tension by slowing down the conversation and provides an opportunity for clarification of misunderstandings.

A good way to start a paraphrase would be to say, “Let me make sure I understand where you’re coming from. You said [insert paraphrase of the argument]. Did I understand you correctly?” Psychologist Carl Rogers summarizes listening this way:

Real communication occurs . . . when we listen with understanding. What does this mean? It means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person’s point of view . . . to sense how it feels to him to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about.62

Respectful listening also helps when dealing with the kind of person Christian apologist Greg Koukl calls a steamroller.63 These people spew multiple, complex arguments while demanding simple yes or no answers. They’re the kind of people who elevate the blood pressure of everyone around them. By not talking and instead listening intently to what the person is saying, you can let the steamroller just run out of steam. When he stops talking, simply say, “You’ve given me five arguments to answer. [If you’re really good, paraphrase each argument.] I can’t answer all of them at once, so which one would you like me to respond to?”

If he continues to interrupt, or is rude and disrespectful, you might leave the conversation by saying, “I’m interested in
having a real dialogue, and I don’t think we can with your attitude.” If someone is not willing to listen to you, you are not obligated to listen to him and can choose to talk to someone else who is more open to hearing the truth.

5. Agree whenever possible.
Some pro-life advocates think that if they agree with a critic on anything, then somehow they have hurt their defense of the pro-life position. In reality, if a pro-life advocate fails to agree with a critic on anything, he will come off as a walking agenda and not as an honest seeker of truth.

Pope St. John Paul II wrote in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, “Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by the deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills.”64 One tool that moves our conversations forward and respects the dignity of each person is the use of common ground. Steve Wagner, author of *Common Ground Without Compromise: 25 Questions to Create Dialogue on Abortion*, defines the essence of common ground:

[W]e should build common ground to begin a dialogue at the beginning of an argument. We should also retreat to common ground frequently throughout the argument, not to give up on finding truth, but to gain necessary footing so we can move forward to a new consensus on what is true. If the argument we are having is like a car taking us to the beach of truth, then common ground is the fuel. Your argument will have to access common ground from the outset if it is to move forward. You will need to stop and refuel at times, too.65

Common ground allows people to focus on their agreements instead of their disagreements. In fact, it’s so enjoyable
the participants may be tempted to keep the dialogue *only* on common ground and avoid the heated topic of disagreement. That’s why it’s important to remember that common ground is not an end; it is a tool that helps us solve our disagreements. In a meeting with more than 200 representatives of other world religions, Pope Benedict XVI said that dialogue is not meant to create good relationships but that “the broader purpose of dialogue is to discover the truth.”

Here are some questions Wagner considers to be the most helpful when trying to find common ground on the issue of abortion.

1. “What do you think about late-term abortions?” (If you think they should be illegal, then where would you draw the line? Why did you pick that stage of development to outlaw abortions?)
2. “Do you believe men should have the choice to abort their fetuses?” (Do you think men should be charged with the murder of a human being if they kill a pregnant woman’s fetus? Do you think the punishment should change if the fetus was unwanted?)
3. “What do you think about aborting a fetus simply because she is female?” (Do you think a feminist can support abortion against female fetuses?)
4. “Would you prefer there were fewer abortions?” (Why? What is it about abortion that you find unpleasant?)
5. Should abortion be legal through all nine months of pregnancy for any reason? (If not, why not? Where do you think the cutoff should be, and why do you draw the line there?)

U.S. President Barack Obama broached what he considered common ground in his controversial commencement address at the University of Notre Dame in 2009:
[W]hen we open up our hearts and our minds to those who may not think precisely like we do or believe precisely what we believe—that’s when we discover at least the possibility of common ground. That’s when we begin to say, “Maybe we won’t agree on abortion, but we can still agree that this heart-wrenching decision for any woman is not made casually; it has both moral and spiritual dimensions.”

This is actually great common ground and provides the opportunity for the pro-life advocate to move the conversation forward with a question like this: “Why is abortion a heart-wrenching decision for any woman to make? What are the moral dimensions that are involved in having abortion?” For pro-life advocates, the fact that abortion ends the life of a valuable human being explains why abortion is “heart-wrenching” and has a “moral dimension.” I’m curious to see how pro-choice advocates would explain these aspects of abortion without referencing the death of a valuable human being.

_How an ambassador defuses an emotional bomb_

The following real-life scenario shows how the tools of a pro-life ambassador, when used wisely, can help you engage even the most emotionally difficult conversations.

It was the middle of the afternoon at the University of Northern Colorado, and my stomach was annoyed with me. But as I opened my humble brown paper bag to take out a sandwich, I noticed some students looking at our exhibit. I set my lunch aside and said to myself, “One more conversation couldn’t hurt.” Three girls were loudly agreeing with each other that our exhibit was stupid and offensive. I walked up to them and one girl, whom I’ll call “Annie,” dropped a bomb on me. She said, “I used to prostitute myself for cocaine, and when I got pregnant I knew that I couldn’t give birth to a
cocaine-addicted baby. Are you going to tell me that my abortion was wrong?”

I said to Annie, “Wow. I’m so sorry for what happened to you. But it seems that you’ve really turned your life around. How did that happen?” I spent the next twenty minutes listening to how Annie traveled out of the country to kick her drug habit only to feel judged by her Catholic friends when she came home. I learned that her friends’ actions were the reason she had stopped going to church. By asking questions and listening, I gained Annie’s trust and could now drive the conversation back to Annie’s original question: Is abortion wrong?

I said, “Annie, I think you and I can agree that abortion is emotionally and circumstantially complicated, and each woman’s abortion experience is different. I think you have a good heart and you try to do what’s right concerning other people. Can we also agree that doing the right thing can be very, very difficult, and it’s sometimes understandable when people don’t choose to do it? Think of the prisoners in a concentration camp who are bribed by the guards with food for their starving children if they just tell them which prisoners are planning to escape. It’s wrong to betray your fellow prisoners, but doing so is understandable given the horrible circumstances involved.”

Annie nodded in agreement as I continued, “I oppose abortion, but I also want to make sure women who’ve had abortions are cared for and listened to. But if the unborn are human beings like these women, then I want to treat them with the same dignity and respect these women deserve. Do you understand where I’m coming from?” At this point Annie had done an about-face. We were now calmly talking about the humanity of the unborn instead of fighting about circumstances that can lead to abortion.

Annie declined my offer to be introduced to a volunteer who specializes in postabortive counseling, but I was still able
to encourage her to give God a second chance in her life. In these conversations you should not think your message was rejected just because the person did not convert right in front of you. Sometimes the words we say don’t sink in until months or even years later. Eventually our conversation came to a close, and Annie and I parted ways. I picked up my lunch, which had been withering in the sun for longer than an hour. It was an hour well spent.