

## The PC(USA) and Reproductive Rights

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, September 4, 2022.

Jeremiah 18:1-11  
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

I have never once preached a sermon about reproductive rights. I have counseled and prayed with women who have wrestled with the deeply personal decision of whether or not to end a pregnancy. I have supported organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, which have ensured people access to comprehensive reproductive health care, including safe, legal abortion services. I once accompanied a friend as she went through an abortion procedure. But I have never preached about it, because I felt that the subject was just too controversial.

Now that the U.S. Supreme Court has overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision and states across the country are enacting laws to further restrict or ban abortion access, I feel compelled to speak out. I cannot remain silent while the loudest Christian voices dominating public discourse in our country advocate for a total ban on abortion, arguing that a fetus is a person and abortion is murder. Theirs is not the only Christian position on the matter. Not all Christians are antiabortion. And even among those who are against abortion, not all of them want to impose their beliefs on everyone else through the force of law.

I chose this Sunday to address this subject, because one of today's lectionary readings, Psalm 139, includes a verse that some cite as biblical justification for opposing abortion. The psalmist, addressing God, writes: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb." There's a similar verse in the first chapter of Jeremiah, where the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah saying: "Before I formed you in the

womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” The argument made is that with God so intimately involved in the creation of human life within the womb, we have no business interfering with God’s creative activity.

But the Bible does not speak with one voice on this topic. Two less familiar Bible passages lead to a very different conclusion. In the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Exodus, we read: “When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman’s husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine.” This tells us that the fetus was not considered a person. Had it been, instead of the responsible party being fined, he would have been put to death. A life for a life.

And in the book of Numbers, chapter 5, if a husband suspects that his wife has committed adultery, he can take her to the priests. They will give her a potion that, if she is guilty, will make “her womb discharge” and her “uterus drop.” If she is not guilty, “then she shall be immune and be able to conceive children.” Such a procedure was in keeping with biblical family laws in that it assured a husband that he was the father of his wife’s children. Note, however, that the passage expresses no qualms about the potion inducing an abortion if the woman *were* pregnant.

So, you see, the Bible does not provide a single, clear-cut position on the issue of abortion. Indeed, nowhere in the Bible is the question of elective abortion addressed directly. You will not find one passage in the Bible prohibiting abortion.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) acknowledged as much in 1992. “There is both agreement and disagreement in our use and interpretation of Scripture. There is also agreement and disagreement on the basic issue of abortion. The committee [on problem pregnancies and abortion] agreed that there are no biblical texts that speak expressly to the topic of abortion, but that taken in their totality the Holy Scriptures are filled with messages that advocate respect for the woman and

child before and after birth. Therefore, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) encourages an atmosphere of open debate and mutual respect for a variety of opinions concerning the issues related to problem pregnancies and abortion.”

Over the past 50+ years, our denomination has done its best to maintain a “big tent” “atmosphere of open debate and mutual respect for a variety of opinions.” At the same time, however, since 1970 it also has consistently affirmed a woman’s right to choose whether to continue or end any given pregnancy. The 1970 General Assembly declared that “abortion should be taken out of the realm of the law altogether and be made a matter of the careful ethical decision of a woman, her physician and her pastor or other counselor.”

This position was strengthened by the 1972 Assembly, which said: “Women should have full freedom of personal choice concerning the completion or termination of their pregnancies and that the artificial or induced termination of pregnancy, therefore, should not be restricted by law, except that it be performed under the direction and control of a properly licensed physician.”

In 1973, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was among the founding members of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, which brings interfaith and multiracial voices together to preserve reproductive health, rights, and justice as a basic principle of religious liberty and diversity. The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice evolved from an underground network of ministers and rabbis called the Clergy Consultation Service, which formed in 1967, six years before the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion. In response to the deaths and injuries of women caused by unsafe abortions, this group of clergy quietly referred women to abortion providers they had researched and found to be safe. After the 1973 *Roe* decision, the Clergy Consultation Service formed the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights to safeguard the newly won constitutional right

to privacy in abortion decisions. The group later changed its name to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

In 1978 the church called on elected officials to codify and support the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, asking "the President, the Congress and State Legislators to guarantee equal access to abortion rights as stated in the 1973 Supreme Court decision, by ensuring public funding for those who are unable to pay." And when the northern and southern branches of the Presbyterian Church reunited in 1983, the new denomination once more affirmed the *Roe v. Wade* decision and the cause of reproductive justice.

The 1980s saw an epidemic of antiabortion violence, which was first addressed by the General Assembly in 1986. Reporting to the Assembly Committee on Justice and the Rights of Persons, the standing Council on Women and the Church and the Committee on Women's Concerns wrote, "Acts of terrorism are being committed against abortion clinics and counseling centers. Harassment, both verbal and physical, plagues women seeking abortions and even follows them home. Certain religious groups, well-organized and well-funded, are increasing their efforts to overturn the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision of the Supreme Court, and to legislate a ban not only on abortion but on contraceptives as well." The Assembly adopted the committee's report, which reaffirmed reproductive choice, deplored harassment of women seeking abortions, protested the ongoing terror campaigns against abortion clinics, and urged congregations to start volunteer networks to escort women to abortion clinics.

The church's most comprehensive policy statement on pregnancy and abortion came out of the 1992 Assembly, but took a more moderate, nuanced stance with regard to reproductive choice than had prior assemblies. It said, among other things, that "abortion should not be used as a method of birth control," but rather "ought to be an option of last resort," echoing arguments of abortion opponents.

The 2006 General Assembly approved language that clarified our denomination's position on problem pregnancies. "When an individual woman faces the decision whether to terminate a pregnancy," it said, "the issue is intensely personal, and may manifest itself in ways that do not reflect public rhetoric, or do not fit neatly into medical, legal or policy guidelines. Humans are empowered by the spirit prayerfully to make significant moral choices, including the choice to continue or end a pregnancy. Human choices should not be made in a moral vacuum, but must be based on Scripture, faith and Christian ethics. For any choice, we are accountable to God; however, even when we err, God offers to forgive us."

The 2012 General Assembly pushed back against legislative efforts to restrict abortion access, stating that "no law should impose criminal penalties against any [person] who chooses or physician who performs a medically safe abortion . . . and no law should sanction any action intended to harm or harass those persons contemplating or deciding to have an abortion."

We are living in desperate times when the right of women to control what happens to their own bodies is under assault. Fortunately, the Presbyterian Church (USA) offers a progressive Christian voice to the public debate that is markedly different from the more conservative Christian voices dominant in the media.

This past July, just two weeks after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the 225<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, meeting in Louisville, reaffirmed our denomination's pro-choice position and rejected government attempts to limit abortion access. The Assembly affirmed "that women and pregnant people are full moral agents, created in the image of God" and supported "their moral capacity to decide whether to continue or end any given pregnancy." It denounced "attempts to prevent people from receiving essential healthcare, particularly when it results in forced pregnancy and the violation of bodily autonomy." And it

rejected “attempts at all levels of government to reduce, limit, or eliminate access to contraceptive and abortion care.”

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, I’ve raised a controversial issue this morning. While many of you may be supportive of our denomination’s social witness policy on this matter, I would not be surprised at all if others of you disagree with our denomination’s pro-choice stance. I realize, too, that this sermon may have raised some difficult memories or stirred some strong emotions for some of you. So, this morning I want to offer a Sermon Talkback opportunity to give you a chance to express your thoughts and feelings. Following worship, during our Fellowship Time, I’ll be at a table in the Activity Room to listen to anyone who wants to talk. If the group gets too large we can move into the sanctuary. And of course if any of you would prefer to talk with me one-to-one, please let me know and we can set up a time to meet this week.

Thank you for listening. May the peace of God be with us all.  
Amen.