

# Brave Church

## Tackling Tough Topics Together

### Ethics of Abortion

#### What Does the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Say?

##### **The Presbyterian Church (Old School) Assembly – 1869**

The earliest appearance of abortion as an issue before the General Assembly occurs in 1869, at the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (Old School) Assembly in New York. Responding to Overture 44, on “unscriptural views of marriage, divorce, and infanticide,” the commissioners wrote, “This Assembly regards the destruction by parents of their own offspring, before birth, with abhorrence, as a crime against God and against nature.”

##### **UPCUSA General Assembly – 1962**

A century later the 1962 UPCUSA General Assembly adopted the report of its Committee on Responsible Marriage and Parenthood holding that abortion could not be “an individual decision on the part of the physician and couple. Their decision should be limited and restrained by the larger society.”

##### **The UPCUSA Assembly – 1966**

In 1966 the UPCUSA organized the Task Force to Study Sexuality and the Human Community, which reported to the 1970 Assembly, reversing the 1962 position: “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.” The influence of the Confession of 1967 is evident here. Though it extensively decried “sexual anarchy,” the confession sought to frame sexual relationships and matters of home and family in terms of compassion rather than discipline: “The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by society when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.”

##### **The 182<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly – 1970**

Presbyterians have struggled with the issue of abortion for more than 30 years, beginning in 1970 when the General Assembly, the national governing body of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), declared that: *“the artificial or induced termination of a pregnancy is a matter of careful ethical decision of the patient . . . and therefore should not be restricted by law . . .”*

##### **The 195<sup>th</sup> General Assembly – 1983**

A strong commitment to the value of and responsibility for life underlies these policy recommendations. Options for human choice-making at the beginning of life are many, offering persons the opportunity to be co-laborers with God in the development of their families. The potential for abuse and dehumanization is also present, challenging Christians to thoughtful decision-making. Genetic research brings promise for relieving suffering and enhancing life, but it also raises the threat of idolatry in the search for the “perfect human being.” While abortion may be a morally responsible choice and must remain available, it cannot become ordinary. In times when funds to programs that provide services to the poor and underprivileged are being slashed, the church must speak out against these cuts. The church must challenge the abuses of justice in access to medical care, which it sees in cuts in Medicare, Medicaid, and policies that deprive the poor, the very young, and the elderly of programs that provide nutrition and basic services designed to prevent disease. Great care must be given to decisions at the end of life so that the wishes of persons who are dying are heard and respected. Caution must be taken so that prolonging life does not become idolatrous. In all these areas, the church must defend life as God’s good gift, affirm the responsibility of persons to make decisions about its quality and use, and recognize that each individual life is finite in its earthly tenure.

## **The General Assembly Mission Council – Original 1984; Revision 2010**

Abortion should be considered only after carefully weighing the other two alternatives—having and raising the baby or planning for adoption. The church's position is that none of these three options is always an absolute. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has deep respect for human life. It also recognizes that in certain circumstances abortion can be a morally acceptable decision to make. However, the church also considers abortion an option of last resort.

The basic Reformed tenet is that God alone is the Lord of the conscience. That belief undergirds long-standing church policy in support of a woman's ability and responsibility, as guided by the Holy Spirit, to make good moral choices about contraception and abortion within the limits of federal and state law. In society this is usually called a "pro-choice" policy, which allows for a woman to consider a range of options with regard to reproduction.

The church affirms that idea, but the church does not advocate abortion. Rather, the church recognizes a woman's moral authority and circumstances that may make abortion the least objectionable of difficult options, but also the option of last resort.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has policy statements regarding problem pregnancy issues.

The church also affirms the value of children and the importance of nurturing, protecting, and advocating their well-being. The church, therefore, appreciates the challenge each woman and family face when issues of personal well-being arise in the later stages of a pregnancy.

*"In life and in death, we belong to God."* Life is a gift from God. We may not know exactly when human life begins and have but an imperfect understanding of God as the giver of life and of our own human existence, yet we recognize that life is precious to God, and we should preserve and protect it. We derive our understanding of human life from Scripture and the Reformed tradition in light of science, human experience, and reason guided by the Holy Spirit. Because we are made in the image of God, human beings are moral agents, endowed by the Creator with the capacity to make choices. Our Reformed tradition recognizes that people do not always make moral choices, and forgiveness is central to our faith. In the Reformed tradition, we affirm that God is the only Lord of the conscience—not the state or the church. As a community, the church challenges the faithful to exercise their moral agency responsibly.

When an individual woman faces the decision whether to terminate a pregnancy, 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 to 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 make, we are accountable to God. However, even when we err, God offers to forgive us.

We affirm that the lives of viable unborn babies—those well-developed enough to survive outside the womb if delivered—ought to be preserved and cared for and not aborted. In cases where problems of life or health of the mother arise in a pregnancy, the church supports efforts to protect the life and health of both the mother and the baby. When late-term pregnancies must be terminated, we urge decisions intended to deliver the baby alive. We look to our churches to provide pastoral and tangible support to women in problem pregnancies and to surround these families with a community of care. We affirm adoption as a provision for women who deliver children they are not able to care for, and ask our churches to assist in seeking loving, Christian, adoptive families."

## **The 197<sup>th</sup> General Assembly – 1985**

The 197th General Assembly (1985) approved the following statement and directed that it be printed in all copies of the Covenant of Life document:

*“We are deeply aware of the concern and pain in the church as expressed in the many overtures from presbyteries which deal with the question of abortion. We are disturbed by abortion which seems to be elected only as a convenience or to ease embarrassment. We affirm that abortion should not be used as a method of birth control.”*

### **The 1992 Problem Pregnancies and Abortion Report**

The 1992 problem pregnancies and abortion report provides guidance for how Presbyterians who have different points of view about abortion can get along in their church. Two general ways of using and interpreting scripture and five points of view about when a human life begins are listed as sources of disagreement. The policy development section of the paper is clearly designated and lists areas of substantial agreement, followed by implications for the life and witness of the church.

The 1992 report clarifies the church’s affirmation of a woman’s moral authority. *“We affirm the ability and responsibility of women, guided by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, in the context of their communities of faith, to make good moral choices in regard to problem pregnancies.”*

The report lists some of the possible circumstances that may make abortion justified: severe physical or mental deformity, rape or incest, or threats to the woman’s or fetus’s physical or mental health. Also listed are circumstances that are not seen as acceptable reasons: instead of birth control, to select gender for non-medical reasons, or to obtain fetal parts for transplantation. The church clearly says that abortion should be “an option of last resort” and that Presbyterians should work to change society so that fewer problem pregnancies happen as a way to decrease the number of abortions.

### **The 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly – 2006**

In 2006, the 217th General Assembly approved this statement that clarified their position on late-term pregnancy:

*“The church has a responsibility to provide public witness and to offer guidance, counsel, and support to those who make or interpret laws and public policies about abortion and problem pregnancies. Pastors have a duty to counsel with and pray for those who face decisions about problem pregnancies. Congregations have a duty to pray for and support those who face these choices, to offer support for women and families to help make unwanted pregnancies less likely to occur, and to provide practical support for those facing the birth of a child with medical anomalies, birth after rape or incest, or those who face health, economic, or other stresses.”*

### **The 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly – 2012**

The PC(USA) has wisely recognized that people of good faith can differ in their interpretation of Scripture, their understanding of when human life begins, and their decision about the morality of abortion. It has called upon Presbyterians to seek to decrease the number of unplanned pregnancies and, thus, to decrease the number of abortions through effective access to contraception for women and men and through medically accurate sex education that includes education about contraception. And it has opposed efforts to criminalize those seeking or providing abortions. Understanding the tragic dimensions that can accompany our reproductive lives, the church has stood for the freedom of adults to choose among hard choices with the best possible information and support. To restrict access to reproductive health care for individuals and families, especially to target the most vulnerable women and families, is an unjust exercise of governmental coercion. Such actions unjustly expose poor women and men and their families to a greater likelihood of unplanned pregnancies, serious illness detected too late, increased suffering, and earlier loss of life.

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While the church disapproves of abortion as a means of birth control or as a method of convenience, it seeks *“to maintain within its fellowship those who, on the basis of a study of Scripture and prayerful decision, come to diverse conclusions and actions”* on the issue.