

Angela Weszely

Becoming

Expanding the
Abortion
Conversation
Beyond Life
Versus Choice

ProGrace



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Introduction

Asking Different Questions

The reason the [abortion] issue is hard is that you can't accommodate both interests. You have to pick.

That's the fundamental problem. And one interest has to prevail over the other.

SUPREME COURT JUSTICE,
DOBBS VERSUS JACKSON HEARING, 2022

HOW COULD GOD HAVE DESIGNED the creation of human life? Any way he wanted, yet he chose pregnancy. And through that design, God has made it impossible for us to try to help one person while bypassing the other. The woman and the child are intertwined, so that anything we do to one impacts the other. This truth stares us in the face anytime someone is pregnant. Our country's political abortion debate centers around a demand to choose which person we will value or protect over the other—the woman or the child. I know many Christians who feel unsettled by this binary, who believe something about it is off, and yet most conversations I've heard in the church about abortion still revolve around the question “Are you pro-life or pro-choice?”

What if we're asking the wrong question?

Throughout his life, Jesus resisted binary questions that asked him to choose one value at the expense of another. The gospel accounts show this happening almost exclusively with the religious leaders of his society. In many cases, Jesus chose not to provide a direct answer and instead responded with new questions. These questions often prompted the religious leaders and all others listening to look inward



and examine the motivations of their own hearts rather than judge others. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks the crowd, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?” (Mt 7:3-4).

This is one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves today—no matter what our political and ethical convictions around abortion may be.

In response to the question “Are you pro-life or pro-choice?” I propose alternate questions for Christians to ask:

Is legislation the primary way Jesus brings about change in the world?

Does either political platform (pro-life or pro-choice) offer a full expression of God’s redemptive nature?

Does the way we think and talk about abortion accurately represent Jesus?



Jesus taught—and even, more importantly, he showed us through the life he lived—that it is who we are as people that matters most, allowing God’s redemptive work to flow through his people and impact culture. As Dallas Willard summarized in *Renovation of the Heart in Daily Practice*, “The revolution of Jesus is one of *character*, which proceeds by *changing people from the inside* through an ongoing personal relationship to God in Christ and to one another. . . . From these [transformed] persons, social structures will naturally be transformed so that ‘justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream’ (Amos 5:24 NRSV).”

Jesus’ emphasis on the priority of our transformed character stands in stark contrast to the US church’s collective response to

abortion over the past fifty years. In my view, this response has primarily emphasized influencing others—by shaping their moral views, voting behavior, or the legal options available to them. We have been instructed more on how others should believe or behave and less on how we can be transformed by engaging in conversation, listening to people’s stories, or learning about the emotional and practical realities that lead to abortion. An approach that prioritizes external outcomes over internal transformation often relies on partisan rhetoric, judgment, or blame to achieve its ends, and it has caused harm in the process. We see evidence of this harm by observing how women relate to the church when considering abortion.

A study from Lifeway Research shows that only 7 percent of all women who have abortions speak with someone at a church before making that decision.¹ It also shows that, while four in ten women are attending church once a month or more at the time of their abortion, the percentage of them who approach a church for help is only marginally higher at 16 percent. Viewing these numbers side by side, we see that even women *within* church communities do not approach the church for support when faced with the decision to carry or terminate a pregnancy. That same study also found that while seven in ten women who have had an abortion identify as Christian, 76 percent of all women say local churches had neither a positive nor negative impact on their decision.²

For all our emphasis on outcomes, the church has had very little impact on those who have direct, firsthand experience—known as *lived experience*—of unintended pregnancy or abortion. Worse, we are perceived as unsafe by many women. According to the same Lifeway study of women who have had abortions:

- Women are twice as likely to say they expect a judgmental church response rather than a caring one when facing an unintended pregnancy.

- Women are twice as likely to say they expect a condemning reaction rather than a loving one.
- Sixty-five percent of women say church members judge single women who are pregnant.

Every church leader I've talked with over the years has told me their church wants to be welcoming and supportive for people with this lived experience, and many believe their church would be supportive if someone approached them. What is standing in the way is not our intentions, but deeply rooted mental models we often aren't even aware of. Those perceptions come from our culture as well as the church, and they leak out in our attitudes and words even when we don't realize it. If we're going to be as approachable and compassionate as Jesus was, we have to get to the root of any place these models don't resemble the way Christ valued people.



The terms *pro-life* and *pro-choice* don't equip Christians to communicate the inherent worth of both women and children. This is a source of frustration for many people I know who hold complex and multifaceted views on abortion. These labels are political descriptors rather than spiritual ones; they are rooted in specific partisan American politics, and with these terms comes the implicit demand to prioritize one person over the other. The main issue with relying on these partisan terms is that both views fail to convey a comprehensive Christian ethic that recognizes the *imago Dei* (image of God) in all people.

The term *pro-life* emphasizes the value of the child without acknowledging the equal value of the woman, the life-altering impact of pregnancy and parenting, and the societal factors that leave many women and children without essential support. The term *pro-choice* highlights the value of the woman without acknowledging or

adequately wrestling with the mystery of God's creation of life through pregnancy, whether at conception or some later stage. These *theological* shortcomings make both terms incomplete in reflecting a truly Christian perspective.

The pro-life/pro-choice binary also makes it very difficult to communicate nuanced *policy* views, such as when or under what conditions abortion should be legal. I know many Christians who support limited legal access to abortion—for example, in cases of rape, incest, life-threatening pregnancy, or during the first trimester or other early stages. This kind of qualified view is their way of communicating that they are considering the needs of the woman more than policies that seek to abolish, criminalize, or prosecute abortion. It also communicates that they are considering the value of the child more than policies that seek to legalize abortion, for any reason, up to forty weeks. But which term can they use to articulate their perspective on legislation?

I have heard Christians who hold complex views say something to the effect of, “I’m personally pro-life but politically pro-choice.” While this statement attempts to bridge values from both political parties, relying on partisan labels can make it hard for believers to truly understand each other and find common ground.

In my experience, thoughtful Christians from different political sides have much more in common with each other than with those who lean toward extreme positions on their own side. Over two decades of conversations around abortion, I’ve encountered very few Christians who appear completely indifferent to the needs of either the woman or the child. Most believers wrestle deeply with these concerns, but the emotional weight and political polarization often keep us from listening well and hearing each other.

For these reasons, I have found it most productive to limit the use of *pro-life* and *pro-choice* in favor of language that helps Christians express a more comprehensive, holistic perspective informed by Scripture and the life of Jesus.



I use the term *prograce* because it elevates the hope of Christ above any attempt to change others through force or argument.

The term *prograce* is grounded in two primary theological pillars applied to the abortion conversation:

1. *Equal value, equal dignity—honoring the inherent worth in every human.* If we lead with a political position of pro-life, we will be perceived as valuing the child more, and if we lead with pro-choice, we will be perceived as valuing the woman more—this leads to stereotyping and shuts down conversation with other Christians. If we make our political affiliation secondary to our theological belief in the dignity of all human life, we can honor both the woman and child involved in a pregnancy, which is the fullest expression of God’s heart.

2. *Transformed by grace—relying on the power of grace alone.* If we become defensive, thinking the problem is the response of other people, we will continue in the same patterns, seeing the same outcomes. If we immerse ourselves in grace, we can look inward to recognize ways we may have unintentionally contributed to division, judgment, and shame in this conversation, instead of creating a culture of compassion in our families, churches, and communities.

Prograce is the posture and language I have found through my journey to best express what I believe: We won’t see transformation in society until we, as the church, are transformed by grace. And that belief starts with my own story.



I’ve never experienced an unintended pregnancy, but I have faced emotional distress around reproduction and motherhood. From high school on, I wanted to go into full-time ministry. I didn’t grow



up seeing women in vocational ministry roles, but a whole new world opened up to me when I joined campus ministry in college and saw women and men working together with students on campus. I decided to go on staff with an organization right after college, and I felt that my work was equally as important and needed as my male peers' work. I got married a few years later to my husband, Bob, who was also on staff, and I still felt we were treated as equal partners, with similar responsibilities and encouragement from our leaders. And then I got pregnant.

Up until this time, I hadn't noticed that none of the women actively leading discipleship groups had children. When I told my supervisor that I was pregnant and wanted to keep leading one of my groups, she told me she thought I would want to be home full-time once our daughter was born, so she preemptively started to lead my group herself. And that was that. I remember being crushed and angry, but I don't remember pushing back on the decision.

We had our daughter Sarabeth in the summer. When the school year rolled around, our supervisors expected my husband to keep the same schedule he had before she was born, while I was expected to be home with her. I tried to stay involved and brought her along with me to ministry events, but she was 100 percent my responsibility at those events. Sarabeth was active, expressive, and always making sounds, whether happy or sad. I attempted to keep her busy and quiet while also participating in the events, but I felt self-conscious, like I was trying to push something that no one else thought was important.

One day, I casually told a fellow staff member that I was trying to find a way to do ministry part-time on campus, just like my mom had worked part-time when I was growing up. He looked at me deadpan and said, "Well, you just don't value motherhood."

If this happened today, I would have a lot of responses: "Where in Scripture do you find that wanting to work outside the home means not valuing motherhood?" or "You work fifty-plus hours a week on



campus. Do you not value fatherhood?” or even simply “That’s ridiculous.” But I didn’t. I said nothing.

This lie entered my heart like an arrow and lodged there, and I suffered for many years because I believed it. My daughter suffered because, while she got more of my time, she didn’t get the fully alive version of me. My marriage also suffered because I wasn’t being fully myself. And I grieved the missed opportunity to mentor young women on campus who I cared about. Worst of all, I had been told that God was the one behind all of this. I had much respect for leaders in this organization, because my understanding of God’s love and grace expanded significantly through their teachings and mentoring relationships. This legacy made the new narrative even more confusing. My Christian community, where I had found healing, and where I had received much of my sense of identity and belonging at the time, was in essence telling me I had to pick between being a good mother and pursuing my personal dreams; what I wanted didn’t matter, and if I was going to value motherhood, it had to look like what they told me.

This experience allowed me to begin to understand, even if just a little bit, what it might be like to face an unintended pregnancy and feel caught in the narrative that I have to choose between my life—my dreams, my future, my identity—or my child.

Bob and I eventually left the organization, but I still didn’t work outside the home because of the paradigm I now had around motherhood, even as our finances suffered. When Sarabeth went to school, and we still didn’t have another child due to secondary infertility, I felt the freedom to work part-time outside the home. After four years working in some pretty awful sales and substitute teaching jobs, I took a development role at a Christian pregnancy organization that described their services as providing unconditional support to women facing unintended pregnancies. I assumed that meant it was neutral politically. Though I came from a politically pro-life background, I had always been uncomfortable with the

political rhetoric around abortion and tried to stay away from it. Only after I took the position did I begin to see how partisan, pro-life mental models, messaging, and practices were deeply embedded in the organization.

A year into that role, right as I was going through my last round of infertility treatment, they asked me to interview for the role of executive director. I knew how hard it was to raise a child, and I knew how hard it was to work outside the home with a school-age child. I still doubted whether I could or should try to do both with a baby. I prayed, “God, if I’m going to get pregnant, please let it be before they offer me this role, because I don’t know if I can do both.”

By the time I completed the interview process, we were past the window of time the doctor had given me to get pregnant, so I took the job. I got pregnant with my son Noah the week I started that new job. Bob knew about my specific prayer, and when we looked together at the positive pregnancy test he said, “Well, it looks like God wants you to do both.”

Shortly after I started leading the pregnancy organization, I drove to my hometown of Peoria, Illinois, to attend my twenty-year high school reunion. I was now the face of an organization that was involved in the pro-life/pro-choice debate, and I was nervous about being asked the question everyone would ask me all night long: “So, what do you do now?”

I didn’t want to categorize myself or my work into either extreme, so I spent hours crafting an elevator pitch that I felt would be non-political and provide common ground everyone could agree on: “I lead a Christian nonprofit. We serve women facing unplanned pregnancy, and we want to see the number of abortions dramatically reduced.” I used that pitch over and over again with dozens of my classmates, expecting a follow-up question like, “Wow, that seems like such a common ground, nonpolitical approach, tell me more.” What

I got was silence. Some people even took a perceptible step back from me. Everyone changed the subject.

Time after time, I unintentionally shut down conversations with my former classmates when I told them that I was a Christian who served pregnant women and was concerned about abortion. Even though all three of those were true, the picture they created when I stitched them together was not positive, helpful, or even innocuous. I started to wonder what had been done or said by Christians around the abortion issue that would cause classmates who genuinely liked me to have such a negative reaction, and I decided to look more closely at the practices of my organization.



Our service recipients were women facing unintended pregnancies, and the programs supported our mission of seeing fewer abortions. As I searched our archives and training materials, I couldn't find any materials that showed we had intentionally asked the question of *why* women chose to have abortions. We had built programs around assumptions about the women we served without conducting any meaningful surveys or research to ask them about their experiences.

I found testimonials from women who went to other Christian pregnancy organizations for help, and the pattern I heard when they talked about their experience was very different from the unconditional support and hope I had envisioned when I entered this field. One woman put words to it when she said, "They were only concerned about me giving birth. They treated me like a walking womb."

Hearing women describe their experiences with fellow Christians caused me to examine my own perceptions more closely as well. I said I wanted to support women, but did I understand what that meant? Was my view of helping women informed more by my

Christian values of service and carrying each other's burdens or our country's political rhetoric?

I also asked these questions of the organization I was leading. I knew my colleagues were as well-intentioned as I considered myself to be, so what was causing women to feel unseen? I started to hear my colleagues express a belief that God was primarily calling us to reach out to women within the window of time that they were making a decision about their pregnancy and persuade them not to have an abortion.

My organization and thousands like it were started as outreaches of local churches in the two decades after *Roe v. Wade* was passed in 1973. So my organization was a visible expression of the theology, worldview, and mental model of the Christians from local churches who founded, led, funded, and staffed it. Our practices flowed out of this worldview, and the women we served felt their needs were secondary to our beliefs and our preferred outcome. And my heart broke, because I knew what that felt like.



Many of my beliefs about how God calls Christians to respond to the abortion conversation have been challenged, expanded, and reformed in the past twenty years. I have held unjust stereotypes about people with different political convictions and repented of this judgment once I heard their reasons for that belief and the journey that led them to it. I have gone from a vague sense of understanding why someone may have an abortion to a deep understanding of the barriers, unmet needs, and systemic failures that move people toward that decision. As a result, my paradigm has moved away from believing my primary Christian responsibility is to have the right moral and political view on abortion. I'm now convinced that my primary responsibility is to be inwardly formed in the image of

Jesus and allow his love to overflow into my family, church, workplace, and community.

What hasn't shifted significantly for me is how I view the practice of abortion itself. I believe God takes an active role in creating every human life, meaning abortion is an unnatural interruption of his creation. Through both conversations and research, I've come to understand this interruption impacts every person involved. I have not talked to a single woman or man who *wants* to experience an abortion or who does so without seriously considering and wrestling with the complexities involved.

My political convictions about abortion today don't fit neatly on either side of the political spectrum. I have a deep reverence for God's involvement in human life that remains unshaken, and I am passionate about advocating for policies that provide support to pregnant women, such as accessible and affordable healthcare and childcare, flexible work environments, protection from pregnancy discrimination, and paid maternal leave.

The ProGrace community is made up of thoughtful Christians who fall across the spectrum of political beliefs, which means I work every day with Christians who fall to the right and the left of me. Regardless of our different perspectives, we unite around shared values, offer grace to each other in our conversation, and collaborate to pursue change. We are united by our fierce commitment to honor the *imago Dei* in every person and work for justice through the transformative power of grace.

The church of Jesus is one-of-a-kind in our country and world. When truly walking in Jesus' ways, the church can offer more hope, belonging, and unconditional support than any other institution in our society. At the same time, when we don't walk in his ways, we have the potential to cause more harm than other institutions, specifically because we are claiming to represent God.

With every election cycle and shift in abortion legislation, I'm encouraged to find an increasing number of Christians who feel tension

around the political divide and are actively seeking a framework that more fully represents Jesus and honors the *imago Dei*. Being prograce means understanding that the church can be a redemptive force in the world when, and only when, we are people who collectively resemble Christ. This, unlike the talking points of our political parties, is a uniquely Christian response to abortion.



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