

PRO-CHOICE  
AND CHRISTIAN

*Reconciling Faith, Politics,  
and Justice*

KIRA SCHLESINGER

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

© 2017 Kira Schlesinger

*First edition*

Published by Westminster John Knox Press  
Louisville, Kentucky

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*All rights reserved.* No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Westminster John Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396. Or contact us online at [www.wjkbooks.com](http://www.wjkbooks.com).

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission.

*Book design by Drew Stevens*  
*Cover design by Mary Ann Smith*

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Schlesinger, Kira, author.

Title: Pro-choice and Christian : reconciling faith, politics, and justice /  
Kira Schlesinger.

Description: First edition. | Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press,  
[2017] | Includes bibliographical references. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017013702 (print) | LCCN 2017034892 (ebook) |  
ISBN 9781611648324 (ebk.) | ISBN 9780664262921 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Abortion—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Abortion—  
United States.

Classification: LCC HQ767.25 (ebook) | LCC HQ767.25 .S36 2017 (print) |  
DDC 261.8/36—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017013702>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Most Westminster John Knox Press books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. For more information, please e-mail [SpecialSales@wjkbooks.com](mailto:SpecialSales@wjkbooks.com).

# CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction   | 1   |
| 1. A Brief History of Abortion from Prehistory to Illegality | 13  |
| 2. Before and After <i>Roe v. Wade</i>                       | 27  |
| 3. Faith and Fertility in a Changing Culture                 | 41  |
| 4. What the Bible Does (and Doesn't) Say                     | 55  |
| 5. Pro-Choice Churches                                       | 67  |
| 6. Reframing Pro-Life and Finding Common Ground              | 83  |
| 7. Where Do We Go from Here?                                 | 99  |
| Questions for Reflection and Discussion                      | 121 |
| Notes  | 125 |
| Recommended Resources  | 131 |

# INTRODUCTION

I never intended to write a book about abortion, but in 2015, I wrote a piece for *Ministry Matters* on how the pro-choice stance that I had held for a long time had become more nuanced and complicated. That article received a lot of hits, a lot of shares, and a lot of nasty comments from fellow Christians, though others expressed appreciation for my viewpoint that went beyond the usual simplistic divisions. At that point in time, it was the scariest and also the most satisfying thing I had written.

Amid the vitriol I received about condoning the murder of unborn children, that piece seemed to hit a nerve with an audience that was uncomfortable with policing the bodies of women but also saw a new life, at whatever stage, as a valuable gift. If pressed, these people would likely fall under the category of “pro-choice,” but they were unlikely to attend a rally for Planned Parenthood. At the same time, there were also those who identified more closely with the “pro-life” label, who also saw a new life as a gift, but hesitated to criminalize or condemn women making difficult personal decisions.

What about those of us in the middle who, as Christians, value the gift of life but believe there is a difference between a just-fertilized egg and a fetus at thirty or forty weeks’ gestation? What about those of us who see the

harmful impact of abortion restrictions on those already living on a razor's edge, trying to make ends meet, and so support a woman's access to abortion *because of* our Christian values of caring for the most vulnerable, not *in spite of* them? Polling tells us that the beliefs of the majority fall somewhere between wanting to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned, abortion criminalized, and women jailed, at one end, and wanting what some politicians have called "unlimited abortion on demand," at the other. Unfortunately, you wouldn't know that the people in this majority exist, because the loudest, most extreme voices dominate the conversation in the media, with both sides vilifying one another and hurling heinous accusations.

In the recent past, it has looked as if the lines were drawn in the sand quite clearly: pro-life vs. pro-choice, Republican vs. Democrat, the right to life of the unborn vs. the right to privacy of the woman, a Christian (meaning Catholic or conservative evangelical) culture of life vs. a secular, individualistic culture of death. We heard little from those who did not fit neatly into these divisions. But people are complicated, and even in the history of this argument over abortion, the lines blur.

Catholic women get abortions at the same rate as other women, and the Catholics for Choice advocacy group makes a robust case for freedom of choice and access to reproductive care from within the Catholic tradition. There are pro-life Democrats who continue the tradition of pre-*Roe v. Wade* pro-life activism by defending the unborn out of a desire to ensure the rights of the most vulnerable. As the demographics of the United States shift and racial and ethnic minorities are projected to become a majority, these categories that make such a neat and tidy media narrative will continue to shift. For example,

the Latino/a demographic is predominantly Catholic and pro-life but tends to side with the Democratic Party on immigration issues.

Meanwhile, the liberal factions of mainline Christian denominations have remained strangely silent on abortion, while taking strong stands on other controversial issues, ceding the conversation on abortion to Catholics and evangelicals. Churches continue publicly to debate LGBTQ inclusion and same-sex marriage, and many are very active on a variety of other social justice issues. Clergy and church leadership have boldly declared that Black Lives Matter and have stood against the Dakota Access Pipeline going through Sioux reservation land. Issues of environment, economic inequality, or gender inequality get plenty of airtime. But bring up abortion, and all you hear are crickets. Even within so-called progressive Christianity, abortion is a third-rail topic, untouchable in conversation or from the pulpit. In denominations like the United Methodist Church that contain a variety of viewpoints, on abortion there has been a move to the right at the highest levels of church governance. While many denominations have some sort of statement on abortion (including several that are pro-choice), I would wager that most people in the pews are not aware of these statements and resolutions.

All of this is to say that, as on many other issues, including women's ordination or LGBTQ inclusion, Christians are divided on the issue of abortion. But I believe that we are not as divided as we think or as divided as the media would like to portray us. Finding common ground in the principles of our faith and who we believe God to be leads us to more complete and expansive "pro-life" principles that support the flourishing of all people.

## CHRISTIANITY AND THE CULTURE WARS

Every day when we open a newspaper, watch the news on television, or scroll through our social media feeds, we encounter voices bemoaning the state of our nation. Those holding more traditional or conservative values view many of the social and legal changes in our country since the 1960s—the legality of abortion; the civil rights progress made by people of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals; the removal of prayer from public schools—as evidence of the decline. Those with more progressive or liberal values are similarly concerned, from the perspective that change has not gone far enough to protect minorities and vulnerable citizens or that the positive changes that have been made are at risk of being reversed.

These culture wars have, in part, been characterized by a particular type of Christianity that manifests itself in the public sphere. Rather than seeking unity, Christians on the right and the left, driven by fear and anxiety, are sucked into an ever-louder public discourse. Since the late 1970s, the religious right, made up of predominantly white, evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics, has championed socially conservative political positions in line with the Republican Party. With their positions on issues like school prayer, contraception, and abortion rights, the Republican Party has often catered to conservative Christian groups like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council.

Meanwhile, progressive Christians and those in mainline denominations have not had the same amount of political or cultural influence and often have been written out of the narrative altogether. The so-called religious left lacks a centralizing political organization and includes a diversity of viewpoints, which minimizes their impact on

the political process, despite their politics being strongly influenced by their faith. The predominant social discourse and media reporting often equate “Christian” with those who make up the religious right and fail to acknowledge the nuance and diversity of opinions among those who call themselves followers of Christ.

In the United States of America, decades of these culture wars have divided people of faith so that instead of working together as the body of Christ, we are shouting at each other across a great divide. At times, it can even seem as if we are speaking different languages, with those of us in mainline denominations drawing from historical creeds, theologians, and science in addition to Scripture, while our evangelical family members insist that Scripture stands alone and must be interpreted literally.

Paul’s letters to the Corinthians show us that divisions have existed between Christians since the early church; yet we also pray and work for a day when Jesus’ prayer for his church might come true, that we all may be one (John 17:21). While we may never see eye to eye on certain issues, we may be surprised at what we can accomplish when we seek out and find common ground with those with whom we assume we disagree. Ultimately, we must believe that there is more that unites us than divides us, that despite holding a variety of opinions on certain cultural issues, we are all “called to the one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4–5).

## ABORTION AND CHRISTIANITY

For Christians, the culture war battles around abortion and contraceptive rights are driven in large part by the theology of personhood. Since 1974, every year in January,

anti-abortion activists flock to Washington, D.C., for the March for Life, to protest around the anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*, as the March for Life website puts it, "to share the truth concerning the greatest human rights violation of our time, legalized abortion on demand." Politicians in conservative-leaning states appeal to their conservative Christian constituencies by proposing amendments to state constitutions and regulations on abortion clinics and by threatening to withhold federal funding from Planned Parenthood clinics. The goal of the religious right is that the Supreme Court ultimately overturn *Roe v. Wade* and return the issue to state governments, with the hope of making abortion illegal once again.

Christians who are in favor of legal access to safe abortions are rarely pro-abortion and do not consider the termination of a pregnancy a decision to be entered into lightly. Rather, they view the decision of whether to carry an unplanned pregnancy to term as a decision to be made by the woman, her medical team, her family, and others who might provide spiritual or personal counsel, rather than by a mandate from the government. They recognize that these decisions are not made in a vacuum, and that wealth inequality and racism are factors in health care. Decreased access to abortion and contraceptive services is more likely to affect women in poverty and women of color, making them less able to effectively plan their families, particularly in conservative, rural areas of the country, and thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty.

The term "pro-life" for anti-abortion activists deserves criticism when their positions on other life-giving issues suggest they may be more pro-birth than pro-life. When those who call themselves pro-life are also in favor of capital punishment and work to cut funding for programs that assist

people with food, housing, and access to health care, they cannot be considered to have a consistent pro-life ethic. As Sister Joan Chittister, a Catholic nun, has said,

I do not believe that just because you're opposed to abortion, that that makes you pro-life. In fact, I think in many cases, your morality is deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but not a child fed, not a child educated, not a child housed. And why would I think that you don't? Because you don't want any tax money to go there. That's not pro-life. That's pro-birth. We need a much broader conversation on what the morality of pro-life is.<sup>1</sup>

To standardize mass communications for American journalists, the Associated Press Stylebook instructs writers to use “anti-abortion” instead of “pro-life,” and “pro-abortion rights” rather than “pro-choice”; but given the complexity and limitations of these terms, I will use all of these terms throughout the book as appropriate.

Outside of the usage of “pro-life” in the context of the discussion on abortion, I believe that Christians of all political stripes can find common ground in a commitment to being expansively pro-life, even as we might differ in how that is politically executed in our common life. Throughout Scripture, God reveals God's self to be pro-life, pro-human flourishing. God creates life out of dust. God rescues God's people from slavery and other anti-life conditions. God becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ, to live out God's pro-life mission through Jesus' ministry of healing and feeding and restoring people to community. Ultimately, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God defeats death once and for all, offering new life to all of humanity. Jesus

says about his sheep, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

I believe Christians can agree that the broken and sinful world we currently inhabit and the world that God desires for us are far apart, and that we share a longing for the coming of God’s kingdom, a kingdom that is broadly pro-life and pro-human flourishing. We can pray and work for a world that is closer to what God intends for God’s creation, where every child conceived is desired and every pregnancy is met with joy, where every birthed child is loved and cared for and raised in a household and a community that meet their physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs. In an ideal world, the situations of rape, incest, and abuse that result in pregnancy would not exist, and the far too frequent choice between the health and survival of the mother and the termination of the pregnancy would never have to be made. Every sex act between two people would be one of mutual delight and joy and pleasure, an outpouring and bonding of love, never exploitative or a display of dominance.

However, our social and political realities demonstrate that we are far from this ideal world. There are concerns like the Zika virus spreading through Latin America, causing devastating birth defects for pregnant women and their children. In many Zika-affected countries abortion rights and access to affordable contraception are nonexistent or limited, leading health officials to ask women of childbearing age to refrain from getting pregnant for two years. Even though it takes two people to create a child, women are being asked to bear sole responsibility for their fertility with limited resources, or else suffer the consequences of a disabled child with special needs to whom she may not be able to offer adequate care. This is just one

scenario that demonstrates the need for access to safe and legal contraception for all women, including procedures for terminating pregnancies.

### COMPLICATING THE DIALOGUE

While I have supported a woman's right to bodily autonomy and to make medical decisions that are right for her and her family for a long time, the issues and questions raised by the rhetoric around abortion rights took on new meaning and significance as my friends and I moved into a life stage marked by marriage and children. Friends and family members suffered challenging pregnancies, miscarriages, and infertility, despite deeply desiring to have children. Other friends, taking seriously into account their life circumstances and support systems, made the decision to end unplanned pregnancies.

As I grieved with and supported these loved ones in their varying circumstances and challenges around reproduction, I realized that, scientifically, we were talking about the same biological entity. For families experiencing miscarriages, these groups of cells were a person, their child, for whom they had hopes and dreams and plans, even in the earliest stages of existence. This pregnancy was a joy, a happy occasion, and to lose it was devastating. For others choosing to terminate their pregnancies, this collection of cells was not yet a distinct human and certainly not compatible with life outside of the womb. Their pregnancies were unwelcome and stressful, and to terminate them was a relief.

Advances in medical technology allow us not only to hear a fetal heartbeat at week six of a pregnancy but also to diagnose possible issues and even perform surgery on a

child in utero. Just a few decades ago, children born as early as thirty weeks would not have survived, but today, the care of neonatal intensive-care units can often help these premature babies continue to develop, survive, and thrive outside of the womb. These technologies are undeniably a good, though the inundation of information and testing adds another dimension and complication to conception, pregnancy, and childbirth.

Every pregnancy, every situation is unique, because it involves people, and people are complicated individuals with their own joys, griefs, and relationships. Sometimes people do horrible things to one another, as in the cases of rape and incest. Sometimes a woman's age or medical conditions make pregnancies difficult or dangerous. Sometimes contraception doesn't work the way it is supposed to; a woman accidentally skips a pill, a condom breaks, a vasectomy fails. Sometimes a family already has more children than they can support financially and emotionally. Conception and pregnancy are not always welcomed with joy and gratitude, even for a married couple.

In the movie *Waitress*, Keri Russell's character Jenna has been preparing to leave her no-good husband when she finds out that she is pregnant. When her doctor congratulates her on the pregnancy, she specifies in no uncertain terms that she is not happy about it, but she is planning on keeping the baby. The societal pressure for women to become mothers and graciously to welcome the sacrifices that entails is very strong.

Based on the 2008 abortion rate, the Guttmacher Institute concluded that one in three women will have an abortion by the age of forty-five. While the incidence of abortion may have declined since then, thanks in part to lower rates of teen pregnancies and better methods of birth control, this statistic

illustrates how common abortion is. Perhaps even you, the reader, have had an abortion. The shame and stigma surrounding abortion and unwanted pregnancies, particularly in religious circles, are a huge impediment to having honest and forthright discussions about something nearly a third of women have gone through. I can only imagine that the shame and stigma of an unwanted pregnancy prevent many women from discussing these issues with a clergyperson or other spiritual mentor, given the vitriol with which the most vocal segments of Christianity discuss abortion.

If you are tired of the inflammatory and divisive rhetoric around abortion from the right and the left, this book is for you. If you are a Christian and ambivalent about abortion but don't want it to be outlawed, this book is for you. If you are looking for common ground with other Christians amid disagreement, this book is for you. If you believe that your faith has something to say about the lives of women and families, as well as unborn children, then this book is for you.

In the first two chapters, we will look at the political history of abortion and abortion laws in the United States to give us a sense of what abortion looked like before *Roe v. Wade* and how the political conversation has changed since then. In chapter 3, we will look at the impact that societal changes and medical technology have had on the debate concerning when life begins. Next, we will move on to what the Bible says about conception, birth, and life. Following that, we will look at what the church has had to say, how statements on abortion from denominational and church-wide bodies fit into this conversation. In chapter 6, we will work on reclaiming what it means to be pro-life and how that might support abortion access. Finally, we will finish with what we can do constructively to add to this ongoing conversation and discern steps to take action.