

Where would Jesus stand on abortion? The state of the debate

By Steve Freeman
Special to Religious News Service

(RNS) — If Jesus were walking the earth today, would he be on the pro-choice or the pro-life side of the abortion debate?

It might seem a somewhat flippant question, but the answer from Christians on both sides of the issue show the depth of the disagreement within the religious community 18 years after the Supreme Court granted wide abortion rights in *Roe v. Wade*. At the same time, representatives of a range of views — those for abortion rights, those against and those somewhere in between — agree that abortion is a religious issue.

“Jesus would be pro-life,” said the Rev. Louis Moore, assistant director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission in Nashville. “He loved people: the way he treated all people, like the Samaritan woman, the disciples, his mother, the way he was willing to heal. . . . The Bible says in Jeremiah that God knew who we were in the womb. Jesus would hold that position.”

Marilyn Breitling of Caseyville, Ill., executive director of the United Church of Christ's Coordinating Center for Women, believes Jesus would be pro-choice. “I look at the Gospels and

see the way in which Jesus lifted up the lives of women in a time, place and culture where women were very much considered less fully equal to men,” she said. “Jesus named them as whole beings and people with a right to live their lives and make choices about their lives. And I think he would not be different from that today.

“While I wish we could move away from the kind of confrontational types of issues and name-calling that is divisive,” she said, “I think the issue is very closely connected to the most intense parts of our faith.”

It's a matter of perspective, said the Rev. Martin E. Marty, the noted church historian at the University of Chicago. “Everybody that's pro-life would say, ‘Well, if Jesus were watching the abortion of a baby, he'd be on our side,’ and everybody who's pro-choice would say, ‘Jesus loves freedom, and in a debate he'd be on our side.’”

Yet, the Lutheran scholar said, the Bible provides more of an attitude than a direct pronouncement on the issue, especially since Christ never spoke about abortion.

“There are three or four verses in the Bible that can be quoted by pro-lifers where the fetus is talked about as a ‘me,’” Dr. Marty said. “I don't know how literal to be about them. I think that the most effective pro-life people don't try to do it on a couple of Bible verses. They do it on the basis of natural-law thinking.”

Gary Thomas of the Christian Action Council of Falls Church, Va., an evangelical pro-life organization, said that “virtually everyone pronounces sanctity of human life. The question that a pro-abortion-rights church would tack onto that is that the sanctity of the mother's life has to take sway.”

Dr. Marty said the most influential group in religious circles is the estimated 70 percent of the citizenry who do not want abortion banned but who have “real conscience problems” with it. They would urgently seek alternatives before opting for that choice and would hope society takes the same approach, he said.

On either side of the issue, according to Dr. Marty, are 10 to 15 percent of people who are absolutely pro-life or pro-choice. Those groups are at a standoff, with neither able to gain new converts, he said.

The scholar said the segment that is gaining adherents is made up of pro-life advocates who are not absolutists but who allow for abortion in a minimal number of circumstances. He said pro-choice advocates had more power 10 years ago, but today more and more have backtracked to admit that a life issue does exist that must be considered.

“I think some denominations who were ready to come out with pure pro-choice statements 10 years ago have backed off from them, partly under the influence of very conscientious, philosophically, theologically deep people,” Dr. Marty said.