

Christians disagree about Alabama embryo ruling

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(RNS)—When Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Tom Parker issued his concurring opinion earlier this month in the court’s controversial ruling declaring frozen embryos children, he did so with an unapologetically religious flair.

The Feb. 16 ruling—which has resulted in all but halting in vitro fertilization procedures, which can use frozen embryos to help people become pregnant, in the state—drew on anti-abortion language in the Alabama Constitution to conclude embryos created during IVF have the same rights as children.



Alabama Supreme Court Justice Tom Parker speaks on the steps of the state judicial building on April 5, 2006, in Montgomery, Ala. When the court ruled this month that frozen embryos are children, Parker, now the chief justice, made explicit use of Christian theology to

justify the court's decision in his concurrence, where his language echoed the broader anti-abortion movement. (AP Photo/Jamie Martin, File)

Parker, amid references to theologians and the Bible, concluded that by declaring frozen embryos children, Alabama was modeling a “theologically based view of the sanctity of life” that insists “human life cannot be wrongfully destroyed without incurring the wrath of a holy God.”

Parker may have presented his policy position as rooted in an authoritative Christian view, but he may be in the minority when it comes to his fellow religious Americans—including Christians.

Religious views on fertility treatments

While personal views on IVF are harder to assess, there seems to be broad familiarity with the practice among religious groups.

When Pew Research asked adult respondents last year whether they have used fertility treatments to have children or know anyone who has, white Catholics were the mostly likely to say yes (55 percent), followed by white mainline Protestants (48 percent), white evangelicals (44 percent)—all higher percentages than those who identified as atheist or claimed no particular religion (40 percent).

Hispanic Catholics (29 percent) and Black Protestants (26 percent) were the least likely to say they used fertility treatments or know someone who has, although Pew researchers told Religion News Service that finding “appears to be driven more by differences across race and ethnicity than religion.”

In addition, the researchers elsewhere noted wealthier people are more

likely to say they've used fertility treatments or know someone who has, an "unsurprising" finding given the high cost of IVF, which can range from \$15,000 to \$20,000.

Some of the outspoken opinions on IVF fall along predictable lines, mirroring that of the abortion debate. Religious advocates for abortion rights support IVF, and the Catholic leadership opposes it.

Denominational views on IVF

But IVF is arguably a narrower issue: Even among religious groups that seek to ban abortion, many do not agree the destruction of frozen embryos is the same as taking a life. Some mainline denominations do not even have an official position on IVF, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Other groups openly have praised the practice, particularly more liberal-leaning mainline denominations.

The Episcopal Church has [endorsed IVF since 1982](#), and the United Church of Christ [passed a resolution](#) at its 1989 General Assembly that referenced IVF before declaring the denomination "supports the rights of families to make decisions regarding their use of the reproductive technologies."

"A lot has changed in the field of reproductive technologies since 1989, but our values have been consistent in this regard," Rev. Shari Prestemon, the UCC's current acting associate general minister, told RNS in a statement.

"We support the rights of individuals and families to make these very private decisions for themselves, and urge care and compassion for these families along what can often be such a painful and challenging journey," Prestemon wrote.

Even denominations that have expressed ambivalence about abortion have

nonetheless voiced openness to IVF.

Although the United Methodist Church has issued statements saying it is “reluctant to approve abortion” and [declared in 2016](#) that people “should not create embryos with the sole intention of destroying them,” it grants an exception for IVF.

A UMC [denominational resolution](#) stated that “obtaining and fertilizing multiple ova may be justified” even if embryos are lost, because it helps “avoid the necessity of multiple attempts to obtain ova.”

Religious reactions to Alabama ruling

Religious advocates for abortion rights were among the first to voice outrage over the Alabama court’s ruling, arguing it furthers a disputed theological claim about when life begins—one not shared by all religious Americans.



Rev. Katey Zeh
(Courtesy photo)

“I don’t think anyone could make a biblical claim about this because the technology of IVF is very modern,” said Rev. Katey Zeh, the head of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, a group that advocates for abortion rights.

“There’s a huge spectrum of theological opinion about when life begins or when personhood begins,” she told RNS in an interview. “There’s no consensus here, so there’s a lot of hubris in claiming—especially in the legal standing—that this is the theological viewpoint of an entire religious tradition. That’s certainly not true.”

Zeh argued opposition to IVF often is fueled by broader faith-based campaigns against abortion, with some religious leaders and activists insisting the destruction of unused frozen embryos is tantamount to an abortion.

Some religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, have enveloped opposition to IVF into their larger anti-abortion stance.

A [1998 document](#) promoted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops deemed the discarding of unused embryos in IVF is “a terrible offense against human life,” arguing that while a baby may still be born, “other lives are usually snuffed out in the process.”

Evangelical support for IVF

Meanwhile, Southern Baptists such as Andrew T. Walker, a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, have [called](#) on the denomination to adopt an official resolution addressing IVF at its next convention later this year.

“When you consider the moral goods that Scripture holds as inseparable for where conception ought to occur, IVF is ruled out,” Walker [posted](#) on X earlier this month.

But there is even some evidence evangelicals support IVF, at least according to Republican officials.

In the wake of the Alabama ruling, the National Republican Senatorial Committee sent out a memo discouraging candidates from voicing agreement with the decision. [According to Politico](#), the memo cited a survey conducted in October by a consulting firm associated with Kellyanne Conway, former President Donald Trump’s onetime senior counselor, that found 83 percent of evangelicals support IVF.

Attempts to reach the polling firm associated with Conway, The Polling Co., were unsuccessful.

For advocates such as Zeh, the Alabama Supreme Court's ruling, which already has ground IVF procedures to a halt in many parts of Alabama, crosses a moral line by putting infertility treatments even further out of reach.

"It just feels so similar to rulings about abortion—the lack of regard to the people whose lives are actually impacted," she said. "As a person of faith, that's what feels so immoral to me."