

**POLITICS**

## A Pastor's Case for the Morality of Abortion

Jes Kast, a minister in the United Church of Christ, believes the procedure should be fully legal and accessible. Her path to that position has been complicated.

**EMMA GREEN** MAY 26, 2019



ERIC GAY / AP

In America, the debate about abortion is often reduced to binary categories. Religious versus secular. Misogynists versus murderers. Even “Christian theocracy” versus, presumably, everyone else.

With abortion once again in the headlines this month, after Alabama and several other states passed near-total bans on the procedure, Jes Kast, a pastor in the United Church of Christ, spoke up as someone who does not fit those categories. She supports abortion rights, and is representative of her denomination on this issue: According to the Pew Research Center, 72 percent of people in the UCC, a small, progressive denomination with a little less than 1 million members, think abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Kast also serves on the clergy-advocacy board of Planned Parenthood, which works to “increase public

awareness of the theological and moral basis for advocating reproductive health,” according to its website.

Kast has not always supported abortion, however—far from it. She grew up in a conservative-Christian community in West Michigan, attended an evangelical church as a teenager, and participated in anti-abortion protests. Her process of coming to support abortion rights has been long, and definitive: Kast no longer believes there are any circumstances under which it is immoral to get an abortion. She has been open about her views with members of her new church in State College, Pennsylvania, and told me she would feel comfortable preaching about abortion from the pulpit.

Kast’s experience shows how widely people’s moral perspectives on abortion can vary, including among clergy. Although she has clear views on abortion, she lives in community with people who see the issue very differently. Part of her job, and her life, is to navigate those differences with care, which can sometimes be complicated. I asked Kast about how her views have changed, what it’s like disagreeing with her conservative Christian family, and why she believes scripture justifies abortion. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Emma Green:** When you were growing up, what did you think about the morality of abortion?

**Jes Kast:** My family has deep roots in the pro-life movement. When I was a child, before I even knew this language of *pro-life* and *pro-choice*, my family would talk with vigor about protecting the unborn. I heard that at church. I heard that at the dinner table. One of my family members had a sweater that said, “Endangered Species,” with all of the different animals. One of the pictures was a fetus inside of a womb.

That’s what it meant to be Christian: to protect the unborn.

**Green:** Did you engage in any activism around this issue?

**Kast:** The first protest I ever went to was when I was 12. It was an anti-abortion protest. We lined the streets in my small Michigan town, with signs—something along the lines of SAVE THE UNBORN BABIES. It was a silent protest.

**Green:** When would you say you first started questioning the values you had been taught around abortion?

**Kast:** It began with other issues, which led to abortion. I was in college, a private Christian school in Michigan. At that time, President [George W.] Bush was talking about [weapons of mass destruction].

I remember sitting with my mom and my dad at Chili's. And I said, "I don't believe that there are WMDs, and I'm not sure I trust President Bush." In that mind-set, to be Republican is to be Christian. That all went together. And I began questioning it.

**Green:** How did that connect with the question of abortion?

**Kast:** I began to understand myself as a woman in ministry. I began to see myself as this Christian feminist. I began to own my voice differently, and to question the rules of engagement of Christianity that I was raised with.

I began saying things like, "Why is it that abortion is the only issue that my parents and family really care about?" I have a very good relationship with my family. I'm not trying to paint them in negative light. But why? Why is this the only issue?

Like many Millennials coming out of evangelicalism, I began to care about different justice issues. I began to care about the Earth, and racial justice, and interfaith justice. And one of the topics that arose for me was abortion.

I began questioning: What about bodily autonomy? Isn't that justice? How would God ever infringe upon that?

And this was a big one for me: Why is it that when it comes to this topic, it's almost always white, straight, Christian men who are the loudest?

*[Read: Rachel Held Evans, hero to Christian misfits].*

**Green:** How would you describe your views on abortion today?

**Kast:** When I was serving on the Upper West Side, my church and different synagogues in the area got together for the One Voice to Save Choice event.

I remember approaching my board, saying, "Is this who we are? Can I go, as a pastor?"

And it was unequivocal: Yes.

Cecile Richards, the previous president of Planned Parenthood, was there. It was a formative moment for me. Here we are, different faithful people of different creeds coming together to say bodily autonomy and reproductive rights are justice issues. That was a tipping point for me.

I believe reproductive rights and bodily autonomy are deeply important. I believe that is faithfulness to Christianity. I believe in access to safe and legal abortions. I believe that the person who can best make these decisions is the person who's considering these decisions.

I meet one-on-one with people in my congregation. Although I am ordained, and I carry a certain authority with me, my job is to walk with people through those decisions. I have known people who have accessed abortion and reproductive care. Some haven't had any emotional turmoil over it; it has been like more celebration for them. And I know people who saw it as a hard decision.

I believe every person I encounter, including myself, has the right to their body. When that bodily autonomy is taken away, to me, that is against Christian scripture, and is against the Gospel I believe in.

**Green:** So, just to be clear, what do you think is the Christian theological argument for abortion?

**Kast:** When people talk about, "Our body is a temple of God, and holy," I see that as, *I have the right to choices over my body, and the freedom to make the decisions that are right for me.*

In Genesis, it says that God breathed God's spirit into our lives—Christians would say "the Holy Spirit." Because of that, we're not puppets controlled by God. Because of the image of God in us, we have freedom. That's what's really clear to me, is freedom.

There's this little passage in the Gospel of John that continues to stay with me. Jesus says, "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly." The Greek word that's used there for "life abundance" is this word *zoe*, which means not just that you're living and breathing, but that God's plan for our lives is to actually have a meaningful life with loving contentment and satisfaction.

Because of that—because I value life, and I believe Jesus values life—I value the choices that give us the type of life that we need.

**Green:** I often speak to people in what you might call a gray space on abortion. They might say something like, “I believe in a legal right to a safe and accessible abortion. But on a personal, one-on-one level, I believe in encouraging people to choose to carry pregnancies to term.”

Would you say that perspective resonates with you, especially in those pastoral-counseling contexts?

**Kast:** No. I still think encouraging someone to carry a fetus and give birth to a baby might not be the most life-giving decision. For instance, let’s take a more extreme case: a 12-year-old who gets raped. I think it’s evil to ask that 12-year-old to carry that baby to term. I don’t think that’s life. I don’t think that’s valuing a 12-year-old’s life.

**Green:** Do you think there’s any context in which it’s immoral to have an abortion?

**Kast:** That’s a really great question. Let me think if I do think that or not. Let me just be really thoughtful about that.

**Green:** Okay.

**Kast:** I don’t. I really don’t. I don’t think I do. For me, it’s a health-care issue. The best person to make that decision is the person who has to decide that. And if that person believes it’s immoral for them, then I would have to honor the conscience of that person and walk with them through what they would choose.

**Green:** You talked earlier about this view that was imparted to you in your childhood—that to be Christian is to be opposed to abortion. Do you believe that Christians have to be opposed to abortion?

**Kast:** No. No. Like, not at all.

In some ways I feel I have repented from a view of Christianity that I don’t believe is true anymore. I believe I am walking in faithfulness.

I think there’s this view that progressive liberal Christians don’t take scripture or theology seriously. That couldn’t be farther from the truth. I take scripture and

theology, I believe, more seriously now.

*[Read: [The progressive roots of the pro-life movement](#)]*

**Green:** Would you say there is space in your church for a vocally pro-life person?

**Kast:** I actually thrive in places where not everyone has the same opinions as I do. When I look out into the congregation, I don't expect everybody to agree with me. I am their pastor. Whomever they voted for, whatever their values are around abortion or whatever issue, I will be their pastor and love them. So yes, there's room.

I've also been very transparent about who I am. I try to be honest about that. I'm playing with this phrase—conviction without certainty. I am Christian, and I follow this guy named Jesus who said, above all, love your God with your whole heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. And for me, that includes the people who didn't vote like me, who hold different opinions than me. That is important to me.

**Green:** What would your parents think of your views on abortion today?

**Kast:** My parents know. They don't understand. They ask questions. They love their daughter, and they're very good at loving their daughter, and they would disagree with me—I mean, probably strongly. I think anti-abortion conversations are still probably one of the No. 1 things my parents value in their understanding of Christianity. And they couldn't be prouder of their daughter who is a minister.

**Green:** How do you wish abortion was talked about in Christian circles in the United States?

**Kast:** I wish there was more clarity of conviction with compassion. I wish one section of Christianity didn't demonize another section of Christianity, because there are Christians like myself, and like my denomination, who see safe and legal abortion access as part of what it means to do justice. We are deeply faithful Christian people. I would love that respect from my more conservative siblings in faith.

I value a more nuanced conversation. I value thoughtfulness a lot. And I wish those who are considering the choices in front of them were honored and respected, and

that government and institutions and even God doesn't have the final say over how we make the choices that are best for us.

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