

City divided over Grace Act

On Tuesday hundreds of Waco residents showed up at the Convention Center to attend the city council meeting. Though a "Grace Act" that would effectively decriminalize abortion in Waco was not on the council's agenda, opponents and supporters of the proposal by District 4 Council Member Kelly Palmer came to voice their opinion. The crowd was so large



BLAKE BURLESON
BOARD OF CONTRIBUTORS

that security asked us to move into an adjoining overflow room.

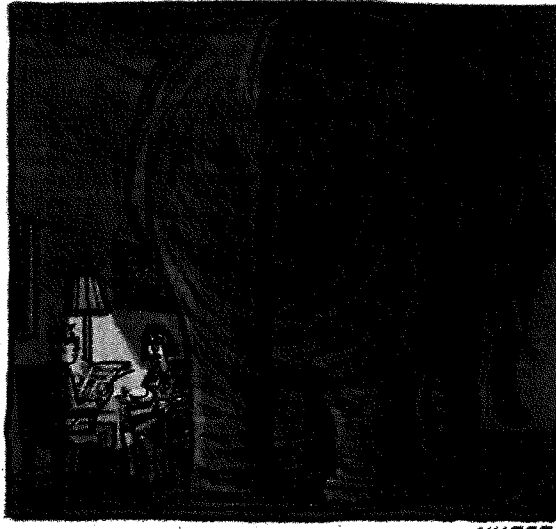
One could feel the tensions rising. Security asked us to keep our voices down as our conversations were apparently interrupting the council's business

session. Many supporters of the Grace Act wore green; some opponents in black or red wore anti-abortion t-shirts and carried placards. The wait for the chance to speak to the council would take three to four hours and some, including me, had to leave early. At one point during the wait, Ronnie Holmes, pastor of Waco's Church of the Open Door, stood up and unwisely demanded the attention of the 500 individuals in the room. At first, I thought he was one of the security personnel giving us new instructions, but quickly realized he was advocating a pro-life position. A pro-choice individual immediately hustled to the front and tried to shout out the pastor.

Following that combustible situation, security announced that "pro-life" supporters should remain in the room and "pro-choice" supporters would be taken to another holding room. As Sandy and I walked out the door with the "pro-choice" crowd, I heard from among those remaining: "Ah, the wheat is being separated from the chaff. There goes the chaff." "They walk in darkness." "Jesus will forgive you if you repent. Turn to Jesus."

Christians in America who have made a moral determination that all abortions are murder are standing with the politicians who passed these restrictive laws that now threaten the health of girls and women, including our family and friends in Waco. "Pro-life" Christians, many of whom live in a theological bubble of their own making, often seem unaware that their moral calculation is not shared by all or even most American Christians. After decades of debate, most Christians — while not supporting abortion for the sake of convenience — are not convinced that all abortion is immoral.

Let's examine two of the largest and most conservative denominations — Catholics and



"Talking about it is not cutting it."

Baptists. With limited exceptions to preserve the life of the mother, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that most abortions are immoral since from moment of conception the fetus is a human being with the rights of a person — among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life. Yet, even with the threat of excommunication for those who complete an abortion, polling consistently indicates that most Catholics in America do not agree with this position of their own church. According to Catholics for Choice, "56% of Catholics in the U.S. believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases, and 68% believe that *Roe v. Wade* should not be overturned. Moreover, Catholic teachings on abortion have changed over time, indicating that true Catholicism is based on a deep respect for each individual conscience when making moral decisions."

Southern Baptists passed a resolution at their annual convention in 2021 stating "unambiguously that abortion is murder," rejecting "any position that allows for any exceptions to the legal protection of our preborn neighbors" and "that the murder of preborn children is a crime against humanity that must be punished equally under the law." Yet not all Baptists agree with Southern Baptists. While most Baptists are opposed to abortion as a means of birth control, many do not want all abortions to be criminalized. The General Board of American Baptist Churches USA voted on a resolution (reaffirmed in 1994) that acknowledged "the diversity of deeply held convictions within our fellowship even as we seek to interpret the Scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit." The resolution affirmed that many "believe that while

abortion is a regrettable reality, it can be a morally acceptable action and they choose to act on the biblical principles of compassion and justice (John 8:1-11; Exodus 21:22-25; Matthew 7:1-5; James 2:2-13) and freedom of will (John 16:13; Romans 14:4-5, 10-13). Many gradations of opinion between these basic positions have been expressed within our fellowship." Pastors of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship churches in Waco have consistently voiced abortion rights.

Many of those opposed to the Grace Act began by quoting scripture. In their cherry-picking of Bible verses, it was unclear which side of the debate they were taking until they made their opinion clear. Christians who supported the Grace Act might have even chosen the very same verses in their argument. Indeed, if the Bible prohibits abortion, how do we explain the fact that Torah-observant Conservative and Reform Jews support abortion rights with few or no restrictions? Why do 30% of Bible-believing Southern Baptists, according to a 2014 Pew Survey, think that abortion should be legal in all or most cases? Moral opinions based on the Bible from the Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church and United Church of Christ support abortion rights. Even the conservative Church of Latter-Day Saints seems moderate compared to some, stating that church members who are interested in protecting religious freedom for all may wish to side with Jews who want to abide by Jewish law — a law that not only permits but requires abortion in certain circumstances.

Texas is one of 13 states that had a trigger ban in place before the Supreme Court decision re-

versing *Roe v. Wade* a few weeks ago. All abortions, with exceptions for medical emergencies, are now banned in Texas and violators of the law may face a first-degree felony if they knowingly perform or induce an abortion, or a second-degree felony if they attempt an abortion. The penalty for the first-degree offense is five years to life in prison and a fine of \$100,000. One of the speakers at the council meeting, State Rep. Charles "Doc" Anderson, was a co-sponsor of that legislation. His main argument against the Grace Act was that America is a country governed by rule of law and that his abortion ban was discussed and voted on by elected legislators. Anderson's opponent in the 2022 election, Erin Shank, spoke in favor of the Grace Act, citing local health care professionals and noting the abortion ban has compromised these physicians' ability to care for their patients with integrity.

The Grace Act ("Guarding the Right to Abortion Care for Everyone"), as passed in Austin, effectively decriminalizes abortion by preventing the use of city funds to investigate the procedure and by deprioritizing the enforcement of criminal laws concerning abortion. Versions of the act are being discussed and are at various stages of consideration in San Antonio, Dallas, Houston and now Waco. While the Waco City Council is, gratefully, not driven by partisan politics, members are being asked to consider some version of the Grace Act.

Texas' abortion ban will harm girls and women in Waco who need emergent help due to rape, incest or threats to their lives due to pregnancy. These "least among us" in Waco are no different than girls or women in Austin facing the same health care threats. Health care providers who treat these women are no different from Austin physicians, nurses and social workers who, bound by a Hippocratic oath, will serve their patients dutifully. Perhaps in Solomon fashion the council will provide a way forward. Before the council meeting this week, Mayor Dillon Meek reminded speakers that we are all "on the same team" and that we should treat each other accordingly.

In Waco, today there are some vulnerable "team members" whose lives are under threat. Might we hear the words of Jesus as their fate is debated: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Blake Burleson is an ordained Baptist minister and a faculty member in the Department of Religion at Baylor University.