One psalm, two causes and two meanings

by David Van Biema in the May 16, 2012 issue

Saralee Howard remembers the woman who walked into the Shared Pregnancy Women's Center in Lansing, Michigan, last year and asked for an ultrasound even though she was leaning toward an abortion.

Howard sat with her during the ultrasound, and together they listened to the fetal heartbeat. When the woman identified herself as Christian, Howard talked about "God valuing this precious unborn child made in his image." The woman, with little money and two children, said she thought God would understand her decision.

As the woman stood to leave, Howard slipped her a Bible bookmarked to a prayer that sings of God's prenatal involvement in the swelling rhythms of sacred poetry: "For it was you who formed my inward parts," it read, "You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

The next day the woman canceled her abortion.

Rebecca Voelkel, a minister who coordinates religious programs for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, recalls a gay pride parade some years ago where she noticed a simple white poster bearing only the words "Fearfully and Wonderfully Made." She smiled at the public display of a phrase that had, privately, played a huge role in her own coming out.

Howard is ardently antiabortion and believes that active homosexuality is a sin, if no worse than many other sins. Voelkel, meanwhile, supports abortion rights and is an out lesbian. But the women were citing the same verses from Psalm 139.

For decades, Psalm 139 has been a byword of the antiabortion movement, printed on posters in crisis pregnancy centers. More recently, it's been tied to the use of high-resolution ultrasounds, the movement's most potent technological persuader.

At the same time, the psalm has also emerged as a source of strength for gay and lesbian Christians. The two uses illustrate how a Bible verse can attract diverse constituencies.

All the Psalms assume intimacy with God, in petition, complaint or praise: it is why the Psalms remain one of the Bible's most indispensable and beloved books. Psalm 139 portrays that intimacy in precise yet lyrical detail.

It probably started as a kernel of a legal oath of innocence—an ancient Hebrew version of "As God is my witness"—and blossomed into a hymn to God's nearness to believers, wherever they roam.

"You know me when I sit down and when I rise up. I ascend to heaven, you are there," it declares. "If I make my bed in Sheol [hell] you are there. If I . . . settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall hold me fast."

It would be affirmation enough if it ended right there. But instead, Psalm 139 extends God's familiarity backward in time—into the womb, with the stanza culminating in the clause, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

The womb verses arrived in the antiabortion discourse in the late 1970s, along with vocal conservative Protestants. Sermons on Psalm 139 helped establish a biblical antiabortion bridge between scripture-minded evangelicals and Roman Catholics who are motivated by official church teaching.

When crisis pregnancy clinics appeared in commercial districts to compete with abortion clinics, the psalm came too: often as calligraphy, on a poster over a photo of a fetus floating in a soft red light, and in counseling sessions.

Bob Foust, a longtime pregnancy center activist from Alabama, calls the verses "foundational to my life." He recalls how the elegant weave of strands of DNA reminded him of the psalm's "knitting" language. "It just made me go, 'wow,'" he said.

The wow factor mushroomed in the 1990s, when high-tech prenatal ultrasounds struck some as psalm-on-a-screen. Marvin Olasky, author of *Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America,* says it was inevitable that the sonogram would be regarded as "the hitherto invisible sinew of what God had done."

“When you look at the screen that’s exactly what you see: ‘The forming of my inward parts,’” said Howard, from the Michigan crisis pregnancy center. The Southern Baptist Convention even titled its funding program for ultrasounds in pregnancy centers the “Psalm 139 Project.”

Meanwhile, Psalm 139 was establishing itself in a very different context. Initially, gay Christians looked to Bible verses privately, a kind of scriptural “sanctuary, a safe space,” Voelkel said. She recalled a 1992 retreat in Puget Sound at which the Sunday sermon was based on Psalm 139. “You discern my thought from afar,” she recites. “You know my lying down and my rising up.”

She paused. “There’s no explicit talk about sexuality, but it’s ‘You know every single piece of me in my totality.’ And then, ‘I am fearfully and wonderfully made’—this ultimate blessing. When people have gone their whole lives thinking there was this fight between their very flesh and their identity as Christians. Everyone was in tears.”

Voelkel’s own Bible, she says, “flops open to 139.” Gradually the verses surfaced in the public rhetoric of activists and those who support the personhood of gays and lesbians. James Martin, a Catholic priest, best-selling author and editor at the Jesuit magazine *America,* said, “Whenever I work with gay people or comment about gays and lesbians to the media, I use it.”

Jeff Chu, author of the forthcoming book *Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Pilgrim Searches for God in 20th Century America,* described encountering the psalm as “one of a family of verses that make up a kind of positive spin on predestination.” But Chu warns that the application leaves some questions hanging. “You could use it with alcoholism,” he said. “If there’s a biological predisposition, did God knit that in?”

In fact, a bit of caution could be useful all around, said Elliot Dorff, an expert in Jewish bioethics. Dorff noted that Psalm 139 has never been part of rabbinical discussion of abortion; Jewish tradition instead revolves around a legal passage in Exodus about a miscarriage. Ancient jurists who framed the abortion debate, the rabbi-scholar said, would have regarded legalistic use of psalms—which they understood as emotional, metaphorical speech—as “a category mistake.”

Even if evangelicals felt bound by Jewish interpretation, the antiabortion appropriation of the psalm is as much poetic as doctrinal. And gay activists, Voelkel

said, regard Psalm 139 not as a proof text but as an affirmation of their already “hard-won and deeply discerned” understanding of God’s acceptance and embrace.

Could both uses be embraced? Polls show that younger Christians are increasingly accepting of homosexuality and opposed to abortion, suggesting a growing constituency for reading Psalm 139 as antiabortion and pro-gay. If that’s the case, the double duty would be neither ironic nor unprecedented: it’s merely one more testament to the ongoing allure of this psalm—and all the Psalms. —RNS