

RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS AND THE COVID VACCINE

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Is there a religious reason to refuse the COVID vaccine?

That is a question that many Christians (and likely non-Christians) are asking in light of the recent mandates in many commercial and government sectors requiring vaccinations. These ultimatums are prompting many to claim religious exemptions and some pastors are going so far as to write religious exemption letters in support of their parishioners.

Many Christians take the vaccine with hardly a second thought. Others, however, approach them with hesitancy. Individual reasons vary, and each Christian must decide based on his or her closely held religious beliefs. However, the question remains: is there a legitimate reason to refuse the vaccine?

In my estimation, there are three areas that might be considered in making a case for an exemption. Some Christians may consider them and still take the vaccine without violating their conscience. Others may refuse. In each case, we must make our decisions in prayer and offer grace to those who come to a different conclusion. This document is not to be taken as an approval or disapproval of the religious exemption or even the vaccine itself: it is simply meant to explore the possible reasons a Christian might have a religious or conscientious reason to refuse the vaccine.

The three areas where I see a case *could* be made for a religious exemption are these (use ABC to help you remember):

- Abortion - The abortion connection
- Body - The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit
- Contribute - We do not want to contribute to future evil

THE ABORTION CONNECTION

The connection between abortion and the COVID vaccines is arguably the primary area of concern for Christians. Because misunderstandings are plentiful, we must first understand this connection, then determine for ourselves if taking the vaccine would violate our religious beliefs.

We must first point out that the COVID-19 vaccines do *not* contain aborted fetal cellsⁱ and no current abortions contribute to the development or production of the vaccines. However, decades-old fetal cell lines from aborted babies *were* used in different ways in the process of developing the vaccines.

Fetal cell lines

A fetal cell line is made up of cells that are descended from aborted fetuses. These cells, which are grown and propagated in a laboratory, have multiplied many times over, resulting in the current fetal cell lines being thousands of generations removed from the original cells.

Two aborted fetal cell lines are currently in use:

- HEK-293: A kidney cell line from a 1973 abortion in the Netherlands (there may be a question if it was from a spontaneous or elective abortion)ⁱⁱ
- PER.C6: A retinal cell line from an aborted fetus in 1985 in the Netherlands

These fetal cell lines were used to make the COVID vaccinations possible, either in testing or actual production. We will consider how these cell lines contributed to each of the three vaccinations approved for use in the United States: Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson.

First, however, it will help to understand the COVID virus itself. The SARS-CoV-2 (COVID) virus is called a coronavirus because of its distinctive shape—it is covered in spike proteins, making it resemble a crown. While traditional vaccines introduce a weakened or inactivated germ into the body, COVID vaccines cause the body to produce copies of the spike protein, triggering an immune response that develops antibodies that fight cells displaying this protein. The body then stores this information to recall when an actual COVID virus shows up in the body. The two types of vaccine currently used for COVID, mRNA and viral vector, approach this task in slightly different ways.

Pfizer and Moderna (mRNA vaccines)

The mRNA vaccines introduce mRNA (messenger ribonucleic acid) into the body, which teaches cells how to make the spike protein that is found on the COVID virus.ⁱⁱⁱ The body's immune system sees the protein and produces antibodies to fight it. The mRNA (which is fragile, and therefore must be kept at low temperatures) then disappears from the body within 72 hours.^{iv} The spike proteins themselves are estimated to last up to a few weeks,^v and no more are made because the mRNA no longer exists.

The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines do not utilize fetal cell lines in the production of the mRNA. However, they did use the fetal cell line HEK 293 for their research and development phases to demonstrate that a human cell could accept the mRNA and produce the spike protein. Now that the testing process is complete, these vaccines make no further use of the fetal cell line.

Johnson & Johnson (viral vector vaccine)

While mRNA vaccines deliver information for developing the COVID spike protein to our cells through mRNA, viral vector vaccines utilize a modified version of a harmless virus (a vector) to accomplish the same task. Scientists insert genetic material from the COVID-19 virus into the vector virus, which then delivers it to the cell of the person receiving the vaccination^{vi}. This genetic material then teaches the cell how to make copies of the spike protein. Just as with the mRNA vaccines, the body recognizes the protein and develops antibodies against it.

The Johnson & Johnson COVID vaccine makes use of the PER.C6 fetal cell line in its production phase. The modified virus is grown in the fetal cells, then stripped of all fetal tissue before it is injected into the person as a vaccine.

The morality of the vaccine

Because the mRNA vaccines used fetal cell lines for testing only, they are generally considered to be less morally compromised than the vector vaccines. However, the obvious question is this: should we take vaccines that have *any* connection to abortion?

This question is often countered with another question: have you taken other vaccines that have a connection to abortion? After all, other vaccines have similar connections to abortion, such as those for rubella, Hepatitis A, and chicken pox. The common answer, of course, is that “We didn’t know about the

abortion connection.” The obvious response should then be this: “Would you take those vaccines now or allow them for your children?” Christians must seriously think through this before deciding on the COVID vaccines.

Another issue to consider is what moral evil is taking place when we take the vaccine. I have seen no reports that the original abortions leading to the fetal cell lines in question were performed for the purpose of providing vaccines. Could the argument then be made that some good came from the tragic deaths of those infants? These abortions have already happened whether we take the vaccine or not. Some Christians will then take the vaccines with a clear conscience, while others will fear that the success of the vaccines, whether real or perceived, will encourage further abortions in the name of public health.

With this information in mind, the taking of the vaccine is a matter of conscience between God and the Christian. Do we think that in taking the vaccine that we are in some way contributing to or supporting the original abortion? If so, we should refrain for conscience sake. If not, we are free to take it.

Paul’s words to Corinth in I Corinthians 10:23-33 may be helpful here. The one who sees no issue with putting something in his body is fine to indulge. But there may be others who would be set back in their Christians lives through it. Because of that, it is best to refrain from discussion of personal use of the vaccine when we do not know the feelings of those around us.

One of the arguments used in favor of the vaccine and against pro-life Christians who reject it because of its link to abortion is that it creates a “moral contradiction.”^{vii} While these people are concerned about an aborted fetus from decades ago, they have little or no regard for the lives they put in danger around them every day by their refusal to get the vaccine or wear a mask. This argument, however, does not take into consideration what are likely more prevalent reasons for refusing the vaccine: lack of belief in the perceived hype of COVID, questionable efficacy and long-term effects of the vaccine, and the vacillating proclamations of government officials that they claim are “based on science.” In short, the same “experts” continuously contradict themselves, leaving us to wonder what we should believe. In such a state of doubt, many prefer to postpone injecting a new substance into their bodies.

THE BODY IS THE TEMPLE

Some Christians may refuse to take the vaccine because of the biblical teaching that “your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit” (I Corinthians 6:19). While the context concerns sexual immorality, the point remains: our bodies are owned by God and dedicated to His service. Because of that, a Christian may be hesitant to inject a questionable substance into his body.

The rebuttal to this argument is usually to point out that we often put unknown substances into our bodies—everything from Big Macs to nicotine. Even breathing can potentially harm us. However, that rebuttal fails to take into account distrust of the “experts” that push (and even mandate) the vaccine and the speed at which it was produced and approved.^{viii}

CONTRIBUTING TO FURTHER EVIL

An argument can be made that taking a mandated vaccine against one’s will contributes to further evil in that the government will continue to extend its reach into the personal lives of citizens. We may ask, “When and where does this stop?” While vaccine mandates may be seen as nothing more than a public

health issue, we can easily observe the government's encroaching increasingly deeper into our everyday lives. With that comes the forfeiting of religious freedom. Our forefathers realized this during the American Revolution, when many members of the clergy, known as the "Black Robed Regiment," encouraged parishioners in the overthrow of the British.

As we have seen, government often has no problem issuing mandates to churches in the name of public safety. Some pastors were arrested for holding services during the 2020 pandemic while big businesses continued to operate and a blind eye was turned toward the massive crowds that assembled to burn cities in the name of social justice.

Astute Christians understand that if the proverbial camel is allowed too much space under the tent, the religious freedoms recognized and guaranteed in our Constitution will be gone forever. It is not hard to envision that as a reality.

A NOTE ABOUT VACCINE HESITANCY

Those who refuse taking the COVID vaccine are often referred to as "anti-vax" fools who naively believe far-right social media memes over science. While this may be the case with some, it is in no way indicative of the whole group. Many other reasons exist that cause people to be hesitant about receiving the vaccine.

1. Bona-fide religious conscience

As mentioned above, there are those who have legitimate concerns over the use of the vaccine based upon their religious beliefs or other issues of conscience.

2. Concern over the efficacy and long-term effects of the vaccine

There simply has not been enough time to evaluate the long-term effects of the COVID vaccine. Regardless of constant assurances from recognized experts, many prefer to wait until the dust settles and we are assured which vaccine is the most beneficial, how many doses are actually needed, and if any long-term complications arise.

3. Conflicting statements from experts

Since the beginning of 2020, we have been treated to an onslaught of expert opinions that were "based on science," yet constantly changed. We were told that we should not restrict travel from China, then that we should. We were told that the coronavirus was not something we needed to worry about, then that it was the deadliest pandemic since 1918. We were told that masks are unnecessary, then they were mandated to save lives. We were told that we must sanitize all surfaces, then we found out that COVID travels by air. We were told to stand six feet apart, then it changed to three. We were told that herd immunity could be reached at 60-70%, then Dr. Fauci changed it to 80% when he realized we might actually reach it.^{ix} We were told that to save lives, small businesses had to close while large businesses could stay open. Most egregiously, churches were closed and non-conforming pastors were arrested, while thousands of people could safely assemble to burn a city in the name of social justice.

The equivocation in these opinions has betrayed the fact that not all decisions are based on science, but sometimes just on the best guess of the “experts.” So, you can see why many would be hesitant to jump on the vaccination train. If so much up to this point has been changed, there may be some concern that the vaccine recommendations may change. In fact, we have already seen plenty of breakthrough cases and heard of new variants that may not be affected by the vaccines. The possibility of booster doses has also been broached. Some people might want to wait it out before they decide what they really should believe.

So, should Christians take a religious exemption to the vaccine? The answer, in my opinion, is that it depends on one’s conscience. Some Christians will evaluate the information and take the vaccine. Others will reject it. We each are responsible to God for how we respond to the information we are given.

Notes

ⁱ “You asked, we answered: Do the COVID-19 vaccines contain aborted fetal cells?” *Nebraska Medicine*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.nebraskamed.com/COVID/you-asked-we-answered-do-the-covid-19-vaccines-contain-aborted-fetal-cells>.

ⁱⁱ “COVID-19 Vaccine and Fetal Cell Lines,” LA County Department of Public Health, April 20, 2021, http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/Coronavirus/docs/vaccine/VaccineDevelopment_FetalCellLines.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ “What’s Different about Messenger RNA (mRNA) Vaccines for COVID-19?” Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, January 12, 2021, <https://www.mskcc.org/coronavirus/what-s-different-about-messenger-rna-vaccines-covid-19>.

^{iv} Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, “What’s Different.”

^v “How long do mRNA and spike proteins last in the body?” *Nebraska Medicine*, July 2, 2021, <https://www.nebraskamed.com/COVID/where-mrna-vaccines-and-spike-proteins-go>.

^{vi} “Different types of COVID-19 vaccines: How they work,” Mayo Clinic, August 27, 2021, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/different-types-of-covid-19-vaccines/art-20506465>.

^{vii} John Kleinsman and Graham O’Brien, “COVID-19 Vaccines and their Link with Abortion – A Christian Moral Perspective,” Christ’s College, <https://christcollege.com/assets/Uploads/Ethical-Issues-Covid-Vaccines.pdf>.

^{viii} Note that mRNA and vector technologies are not new, which contributed to the speed of the vaccines. However, there is a basic distrust of government that leads some to fear that the vaccines have not been adequately tested.

^{ix} Donald G. McNeil Jr., “How Much Herd Immunity is Enough?” *New York Times*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/24/health/herd-immunity-covid-coronavirus.html>.