

The COVID-19 Vaccine and Abortion

Once you've decided you *can* safely accept the COVID vaccine when your turn comes [following John Wyatt's talk], the next question is whether you *should*. Is it ethically acceptable?

For those who haven't heard yet, this question is to do with the story that several of the new vaccines, including the Oxford AstraZeneca one, have been developed using an immortalised cell line that was derived from an aborted fetus.

First off, what are the facts of the case?

- Yes, this is true. The Oxford vaccine and several other vaccines *were* developed using fetal cells obtained from an abortion.
- The abortion took place in 1973 in the Netherlands.
- The cell line derived from the kidney of that baby – known as HEK 293 – has been used in developing and testing countless vaccines and treatments over the decades, and indeed in other uses like [developing artificial sweeteners](#).
- *There are no fetal cells in the vaccine* – you won't be injected with cells from an aborted baby.
- Some other COVID vaccines, like the Pfizer one, were not *developed* using this cell line, but did use it in some of the testing phase.
- There is no link with modern day abortions – developing these vaccines didn't and doesn't require any more abortions to take place.

So how should Christians – like me – who want to respect all human life, before and after birth, respond to this? How do we balance the large numbers of lives that would be saved by an effective vaccine against ethical concerns about how it has been derived?

There is no simple answer to this question. Each Christian needs to weigh it in their own conscience and make their own decision – and we need to respect the decisions others come to and learn to 'disagree agreeably' when we differ.

Here are some factors to think about as you make your decision:

1) Ends don't justify means

We could look at this and say, 'Yes, the original act was evil, but so much good has come out of it that the good outweighs the bad'. That is never a biblical or moral justification for evil. In philosophy it is called 'consequentialism', and is a theory that says there are no inherently good or bad acts. You can only tell whether something is good or not by what it achieves, what its outcomes are. That is not a biblical understanding of morality.

As Christians we do believe that taking an innocent human life is wrong, regardless of what good it can produce. It is right to be aware of the facts and to grieve the loss of that life and so many others.

Whatever you decide about the vaccine after today, I don't want you to go away thinking 'Maybe abortion is OK sometimes if it brings about greater good'.

2) We can't un-know what we know

Second, we cannot un-know what we now know as a result of evil practices in the past. For example, a lot of what we know about the management of hypothermia comes from evil experimentation on Holocaust prisoners. We can't forget that knowledge – in fact, it would be immoral to offer poor treatment because we refuse to acknowledge the better treatments.

Similarly, it could be immoral to put vulnerable people at risk because we refuse to use a vaccine purely because of its association with past wrongs.

3) Are you *cooperating* with or *complicit* in evil?

It is wrong to participate in evil. The Hebrew midwives in Egypt at the time of Moses' birth refused to comply with Pharaoh's demands that they kill all the baby boys. But we are much further removed from the evil than they were. Where should we stand?

The following explanation of cooperation with evil is taken from an article in [The Public Discourse](#).

Moral philosophy classically thinks about cooperation with evil in two ways: material or formal.

Formal cooperation involves directly willing the evil at hand, and thus is always wrong (like hoping more aborted babies would be made available for research).

Material cooperation does not involve *directly willing evil*, but providing some form of material support (perhaps renting a building to an abortion provider).

Material cooperation can be *remote* or *proximate* depending on how close it is to the act.

Taking the AstraZeneca vaccine can be described as doubly or even triply remote – we are very distant in time both from the abortion and from the extraction of the original cells. We are remote in intention from those who then used the cell line – many of them having no idea that it came from an abortion (my housemate is a biochemist and is familiar with that cell line, and has used it, but thought it was derived from cancer cells), and our only intention in using the vaccine is to do good, not evil.

Unfortunately, living in a fallen world as we do, it is almost impossible to avoid benefitting from evil actions of others. Once we are aware of the wrong, it is right to think twice, to judge whether there is an ethical alternative and to weigh up the balance of wrongs.

Jesus *invited himself* to tea with Zacchaeus. He knew that the food Zacchaeus served him was bought with the proceeds of Zacchaeus' theft from his own people. His was a much closer moral complicity with that sin, but we know Jesus never sinned, so we can take comfort that if we benefit from this remote association with sin, we ourselves do not sin.

4) Does this *perpetuate* evil?

Another significant factor to consider is whether this action *perpetuates* evil. If I buy clothes from a shop that I know uses slave labour in its production lines, even though I

don't *intend* that wrong, and I am very remote from it in terms of both distance and the length of the supply chain, *I enable that shop to continue* using that supply chain and therefore to keep enslaving people.

Accepting this vaccine does not cause or require any more babies to be aborted, so you are not perpetuating evil to accept it.

5) Is there any other option?

There are vaccines being developed that have not used cells from aborted fetuses at any stage. The Pfizer one, which *was* looking positive from an ethical point of view, I now understand *has* used the HEK 293 cell line in some of the final testing stages. There *are* others that are completely 'clean', and you can see a list of them [here](#), but I am not aware of any that are close to being licensed.

If you are still concerned about taking either the AstraZeneca or the Pfizer vaccines, consider what John has been saying about the balance of risks. Does loving our neighbours and serving the greater good mean, in this instance, accepting the vaccine, while asking the government to ensure it seeks alternative means of developing and testing treatments that don't have the same origin?

6) God can bring good out of evil

We serve a powerful, gracious, redeeming God. He can turn around the deepest evil and use it for good and for the glory of his name.

We've already talked about how Jesus ate with Zacchaeus, benefitting from the wrongs he had done.

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul helped the believers in Corinth think through whether or not it was OK for them to eat food sacrificed to idols. I think there are a lot of similarities between that situation and our current one. The Gentile believers had been told not to eat food sacrificed to idols (in Acts 15), but by 1 Corinthians 8 it had become something that was up to everyone's own conscience.

They mustn't actively sacrifice to idols, or intentionally collaborate with such sacrifices, but if there were times when the gospel would be better served by eating with non-believers, and eating tainted meat was unavoidable, Paul said it was allowable.

When talking about the ritual washing that the Pharisees were criticising him and his disciples for, Jesus said that what goes into a body doesn't defile a person, but only what comes out of it (see Matthew 15:11). Obviously he didn't mean no-one needs to wash anything any more, but on the moral level, the things you consume don't put sin into you. Sin is a heart issue.

The principle in 1 Corinthians 8 is of loving others, not putting any barriers in the way of them following and serving the Lord, and caring more about them than about our own rights and desires. What would that look like for you in this situation?

7) And finally, are we straining out gnats and swallowing camels (Matthew 23:24)?

Over 200,000 abortions are performed in the UK each year. That's around 550 per day – and it could be even more this year with the greater pressures on families and their health and finances, and the ease of getting pills to have an early medical abortion at home. Are we as concerned about that as we are about this one baby who died nearly 50 years ago?

Are we regularly doing whatever we can to advocate for, pray for, support and volunteer with initiatives that offer women in crisis pregnancies help to be able to keep their babies?

Are we supporting organisations like Christian crisis pregnancy centres which are providing skilled counselling and non-judgemental support for women considering or affected by abortion?

Have you responded to the Scottish and English government consultations on whether or not to extend the abortion-at-home provision? The links are below, including the link to the submission CMF has made to the Scottish consultation (we're still working on the English one), to give you some ideas of the sorts of points you might want to make. Please don't simply copy and paste it – it will carry much more weight if you answer in your own words.

Scottish consultation (closes 5 Jan 21): <https://consult.gov.scot/population-health/early-medical-abortion-at-home/>

CMF's submission to Scottish consultation (for reference only): <https://bit.ly/CMFScottishConsultation>

English consultation (closes 26 Feb 21): <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/home-use-of-both-pills-for-early-medical-abortion>

In conclusion, cell lines derived from the tissues of aborted fetuses have saved countless lives. We have all undoubtedly benefitted from them. When we become aware of a moral wrong, our culpability *does* change, but in this instance CMF's position is that there is negligible moral complicity with the act itself or the practice of abortion in general for a member of the public to accept this vaccine.

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