

A Christian response to COVID-vaccine doubts

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As Christians we express our love for God by showing love to our neighbour and, as Christ taught us in his famous parable of the Good Samaritan, “our neighbour” means anyone we meet, irrespective of their relationship to us. Clearly, loving our neighbour includes not putting them at risk of harm, and we are being told that an important way of protecting those in our community, as well as ourselves, during the current Coronavirus pandemic, is to be vaccinated. Three questions have, however, been circulating that seem to undermine this advice. Is it real? Is it safe? Is it right?

The first question doubts the reality of the pandemic by suggesting that either the pandemic is a hoax or there is a conspiracy to inject the world’s population with some kind of microscopic tracking device in order to control people. Such bizarre ideas spreading on social media, entirely without evidence or rational foundation, are readily debunked by going to trusted and competent advisors. In any case, most of us know the reality of Covid, having had a relative or friend affected by the disease. As Christians we have a responsibility to seek and tell the truth.

The second question questions the safety of the vaccine by raising concerns about the speed of its development and possible side-effects. The fact that effective vaccines have been developed within one year of the appearance of the coronavirus is indeed remarkable, but the work did not begin just when this virus was first detected in December 2019. Scientists have been studying viruses and how to produce vaccines for many years and the basic technologies had already been developed so that researchers were ready to apply them once the nature of the coronavirus was analysed. Nonetheless, the scientists, medics and others who produced the vaccines and ensured they were tested properly have done a remarkable job and deserve our thanks and praise for their dedication and hard work. It has also been a cause of thanksgiving that the vaccines have been proven to be remarkably free of adverse side-effects. As vaccines are meant to teach our immune system about a real infection, the aim is to stimulate the immune system to recognise and respond to the Covid virus. This can cause, for some people, a few mild symptoms that for many will go unnoticed and, only extremely rarely, people who are highly allergic (and therefore have an alerted immune system) might have more severe symptoms. No medication can ever be completely 100% free of risk since humanity is so diverse and rare reactions can happen. The key, however, is in understanding the relative risk compared both to other risks we take every day and compared to the benefits to ourselves and others. It is not 100% safe to travel by air or in a car and yet most of us take such risks without much thought. We take medicines such as paracetamol or aspirin in spite of the fact that there is a very small risk to our health by taking them. The COVID-19 vaccines have been found to be safe in the same way as other vaccinations and health treatments and protect from the much bigger risk of a real infection with the virus. Therefore, anyone who is worried can be reassured that it is safe to be vaccinated. If anyone is concerned about a specific precondition that they have, their GP will be able to advise them on their personal risk.

The third question – is it right? – is more complicated and involves our individual conscience. The problem has been raised by claims that the development of the vaccines involved the use of tissue from an aborted human embryo, in either the production or the testing. How should a Christian, or anyone concerned about the morality of abortion, decide whether or not to use something derived from a morally debatable action? It is important, first, to be clear about some facts. No tissue from

embryos is used in the production of any of the current vaccines. What happened was that some tissue from a single embryo, aborted for unknown reasons, over 50 years ago was used to create a “cell line”. This process creates a source of new, but not entirely identical, cells that can go on replicating almost indefinitely. All biomedical research depends on cell lines that mimic the biological reality in our own cells. Most of these cell lines were made from cancer cells that originate from real patients, only very few cell lines were once made from an aborted embryo. Nevertheless, all of these cell lines still are an extremely valuable and indispensable resource. Most medicines, vaccines and even potential cures for cancer could not have been developed without such cell lines. The question is therefore, is it morally acceptable to benefit from an act that one may believe to have been immoral? The abortion issue is complex and Christians, in good conscience, can take different and opposing views. For those who are willing to approve abortion in some circumstances, such as to save the life of the woman bearing the embryo, then using some of the tissue to achieve a good end, may be entirely acceptable. Others, who believe all abortions are immoral, face a more complex decision. In some ways the problem may be a choice of the lesser of two evils. In other ways, it involves deciding to what extent we can isolate ourselves from the world which engages in all sorts of immorality. Should we, for example, object to the use of chemotherapy to treat cancer because its effects were discovered from the use of poison gas developed to kill people? Would it be right to deny the treatment to a loved one or any other “neighbour” because of how it was obtained? It must surely be the loving thing to do to bring good out of a particular circumstance without, in general, using the end to justify the means.

No two moral issues are identical and the issue for Christians concerned about the abortion issue, in respect of the vaccine, is how to decide between two principles. The first is Christ’s call to love and protect “our neighbour” and the second is to respect life in all its stages of development. We cannot change the past nor completely isolate ourselves from a world of people so affected by sin. We can, however, choose the better outcome for those for whom we are now responsible – the vulnerable elderly, those with underlying health conditions and others most at risk from COVID-19. This directs us to encourage Christians to take the vaccine for the greater good. Ultimately, however, the choice is a matter for our individual conscience before God, let us pray that we make the right choice.

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