

# Should Christians reject a Covid-19 vaccine?

*Christian ethicists are warning that vaccines are being developed using tissue from aborted babies*

(By Heather Tomlinson, in Christianity Magazine, November 2020)

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Some say that the Covid-19 pandemic will not be over until a vaccine is readily available. This puts huge pressure on scientists to develop and distribute an effective inoculation as quickly as possible. Many laboratories across the world are trialling a potential cure now.

As the coronavirus crisis brings with it major economic problems, especially for poorer countries, a vaccine may be urgently rolled out once pronounced safe by clinical trials – or even before. But some voices are opposed to mass vaccination. Like all current social issues of importance, the subject is plagued by conspiracy theories, fake news and extremes of opinion, and it can be hard to distinguish truth from falsehood. There is, however, at least one very real ethical issue for Christians: many of the potential vaccines are being developed using human cells that originally came from babies aborted in the 1970s and 1980s. They include the experimental vaccine being developed by the UK's AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford as well as that of Johnson and Johnson subsidiary Janssen.

The use of such cells is standard practice scientifically, and many other vaccines and medicines share this ethical problem. The potential for a Covid-19 vaccine to become compulsory in many nations including our own, means the ethical issues are expected to become hotly debated. And while many Christians would be opposed to the use of aborted tissue in a vaccine's development, it could also be argued there is a moral trade-off between this reality and the potential to protect millions from death or harm caused by the disease.

## LOBBYING GOVERNMENT

Some pro-life groups are very clear about their opposition to the proposed vaccines. "Ask your MP and MLAs to demand the Government stop funding Covid-19 vaccines that are being developed using cell lines from babies killed by abortion," states a leaflet from Northern Irish charity Precious Life. It also says compulsory vaccination would be "an infringement of your civil and religious liberties and human rights".

SPUC, a leading British pro-life charity, wrote to the Government early in the pandemic to ask for priority to be given to vaccines that do not use cells from aborted tissue in their development.

## LOOKING THE OTHER WAY?

Christian ethicists appear to be united on the principle that if a vaccine becomes available that has not been developed using aborted tissue, then it should be preferred by all Christians. But if this is not the case, what should Christians do? Should we simply 'look the other way' and focus on the greater good?

## WE CANNOT AVOID SOME DEGREE OF COMPLICITY WITH EVIL

Dr Helen Watt, senior research fellow at the Anscombe Bioethics Centre in Oxford points out that healthcare professionals or those living with vulnerable adults may feel that by not taking the vaccine, they are putting others at risk. "Such individuals should make their views on use of foetal cell-lines known to the health authorities...in the hope of raising awareness and helping to change the brutal culture in which abortion products are so widely used," she argues.

A similar approach is advised by other ethicists, including Professor John Wyatt, currently president of the Christian Medical Fellowship and a long-recognised expert on medical ethics in the evangelical community. He says: "If there is a choice to have an alternative vaccine which is equally effective but which hasn't been derived from a human fetal cell line, then this will be the preferable approach. And as a Christian community we can raise our voice with the Government to argue that alternative vaccines should be made available once they have been shown to be safe and effective." Wyatt identifies the dilemma as part of a category of conundrums Christians have been grappling with for centuries: "It's a recognition that by our very engagement in human society, we cannot avoid some degree of cooperation or complicity with evil, in a fallen world."

#### FOLLOW YOUR CONSCIENCE

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales decided in September that the decision to use a 'tainted' vaccine should be a question of an individual's conscience. The statement issued said Catholics should "voice their concerns about the origin of vaccines and argue that research and funding should be directed to sourcing a vaccine in an ethically sound way". But if a decision is made to not use the vaccine due to a moral conviction that it is wrong, "the person must make other provision to mitigate the risk of harm to the life or health of others and to his or her own life and health", it said.

#### A PLEA FOR GENEROSITY

Another tricky ethical issue that has been raised is whether poorer nations could afford the vaccine. Pope Francis has argued that a successful and safe Covid-19 vaccine should be "universal for everyone".

"If rich countries use all the available vaccine to protect only their own populations they will be extending the life of the pandemic everywhere," says Professor Wyatt. "Will Christian voices be raised to fight for global justice and generosity in vaccine distribution? Or will this become yet another example of rich world selfishness, greed and abuse of 'widows, orphans and immigrants'?" If a vaccine using aborted tissue is chosen for global distribution, or if a vaccine is limited only to the global north, Christians may be left with at least one serious moral conflict. In a world where values are increasingly less influenced by Christianity, dilemmas such as these are likely to become ever more commonplace.

*HEATHER TOMLINSON is a freelance journalist*