

Ethicists say COVID vaccines are moral to use

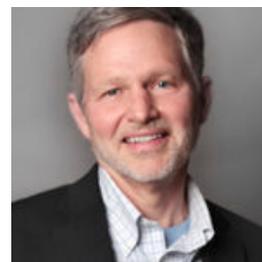
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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Christian ethicist and physician Jeffrey Barrows plans to get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it is available. So does Albert Mohler, theologian and president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

But many of their fellow evangelicals may pass.

A Pew Research survey in September found that fewer than half of Protestants (43 percent) said they definitely or probably would get the vaccine. That includes about a third of white evangelicals (38 percent) and Black Protestants (32 percent). Catholics (57 percent) and nonevangelical white Protestants (54 percent) were more likely to say they would get vaccinated.

Seventy-one percent of atheists and 68 percent of agnostics, on the other hand, were ready to be vaccinated, but only 48 percent of those who are “nothing in particular.”



Dr. Jeff Barrows
(Courtesy photo)

“We have seen the polls looking at how many people are willing to take the

vaccines and we're very concerned the number is much lower than it should be," said Barrows, senior vice president of bioethics and public policy for the Christian Medical & Dental Associations.

Barrows said the leading vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna appear to be both effective and ethical. That would make them important tools in combating the coronavirus pandemic, which is why the Christian Medical & Dental Associations encourages their use.

"It's our recommendation that Christian health care professionals administer these vaccines, and it's our recommendation that Christians consider taking them," he said.

Vaccines controversial in recent years

Vaccines have become increasingly controversial in recent decades, as a combination of politics and concerns about the use of cells derived from abortions in making vaccines have sown distrust about their effectiveness, safety and morality. Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 have added to the confusion.

"There are various wild conspiracy theories that are out there that are just completely off the wall," he said. "I don't know how they even get started. And I don't even want to repeat them because they're just so wild."

But Barrows said ethical concerns would make some Christians balk at being vaccinated.

The vaccine from AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford used HEK293 cells originally derived from tissue from an aborted fetus in the 1970s, according to a report from the Charlotte Lozier Institute, an affiliate of the Susan B. Anthony List, which opposes abortion.

The vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech, as well as one from

Moderna, only used cells derived originally from fetal tissue in some of their confirmation testing, not in the vaccine's development.

Barrows said that while he is pro-vaccine and is excited about the recent COVID-19 vaccine news, it would be better if pharmaceutical companies stopped using cells like HEK293. That would make it easier for Christians and others who oppose abortion to accept the vaccines.

"On the one hand, we are saying these vaccines are important," he said. "We definitely recommend that people consider taking them. But in the future, we'd like to see pharmaceutical companies move a different direction."

Catholic bishops say vaccines are moral

In a memo obtained by Religion News Service, two leaders of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said both the Moderna vaccine and one from Pfizer and BioNTech were moral. The memo followed Bishop Joseph Strickland's claim—made in mid-November after Moderna reported that preliminary data showed its vaccine to be 95 percent effective—that the vaccine was immoral.

"Unborn children died in abortions and then their bodies were used as 'laboratory specimens,'" the bishop of Tyler wrote on Twitter. "I urge all who believe in the sanctity of life to reject a vaccine which has been produced immorally."

According to *America* magazine, Bishop Joseph Brennan of the Fresno (Calif.) Diocese said he would not be able to take a vaccine "if it was developed with material from stem cells that were derived from a baby that was aborted, or material that was cast off from artificial insemination of a

human embryo.”

The memo from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, written by Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend and Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, said: “Some are asserting that if a vaccine is connected in any way with tainted cell lines then it is immoral to be vaccinated with them. This is an inaccurate portrayal of Catholic moral teaching.”

Rhoades chairs the bishops’ committee on doctrine. Naumann chairs the committee on pro-life activities.

Good outweighs the bad

Brian Patrick Green, director of technology ethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, said the good done by a vaccine in preventing the spread of a deadly disease can outweigh ethical concerns about the sourcing of cells used in research.

In the case of HEK293, he said, a principle called “remote material cooperation” with evil applies. Those cell lines originally were produced from an abortion, he said, which was wrong. That abortion, however, took place nearly 50 years ago, and there is no direct-line connection between the abortion and the current research.

The two bishops who labeled the vaccines as immoral did not check their facts or Catholic teaching, Green said.

“That’s unfortunate,” he said.

Mohler took much the same line. The use of fetal tissue obtained from abortion in medical research is immoral, he said, but “there is no activity related to abortion in the present that is any way associated with the use of these vaccines,” he said.

Molher recommends Christians who hold anti-abortion views get the COVID-19 vaccine. He said that Southern Seminary's health service would distribute the vaccine if the school is given access to it.

Show concern for neighbors' welfare

Churches, said the CMDA's Barrows, at times have been too concerned about their religious freedom and not concerned enough about the welfare of their neighbors. He said that the CMDA put out suggested guidelines—including social distancing, wearing masks and avoiding large group gatherings—for churches as they began to start meeting again over the summer.

Some large churches, he said, ignored those suggestions.

Barrows also worries that because COVID-19 affects people so differently and many people who get the virus are asymptomatic, Christians don't take it seriously enough.

"This is a deadly virus," he said. "It makes many people very sick."

Barrows said that he and other CMDA members worry that if COVID-19 spreads too quickly it could overwhelm the health care system. That hasn't happened yet but could in the future.

For now, he suggests churches voluntarily stop meeting—out of concern for their neighbors—that Christians follow CDC guidelines for social distancing and mask wearing, and that they get vaccines when they are available.

"We don't want people to wait until somebody they know and love is deathly ill in the hospital to take this virus seriously," he said. "That's when you're waiting too long."