A Religious Perspective on the Vaccine: Part 2, When Science Meets The Fall **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Tuesday, 25 May 2021 - 07:06



Read time: 14 minutes
My previous article looked at the wonders of vaccines “at face value”. However, we do not live in a perfect world, but rather a fallen world; one tainted by sin and suffering. This affects our efforts to subdue and rule the earth; including our scientific endeavours, including those in developing vaccines. The lines between what is good and wholesome, and what is not can become difficult to distinguish from one another.

From a Christian viewpoint, perhaps the most serious charge against the vaccines is that some of them used the stem cells from aborted foetuses in the making of the vaccines. For this reason, this is the first objection that I will address.

WARNING: I am not a medical doctor, biologist, biochemist, or a bioethicist, although I do hold a master’s degree in science in another field. I tried to make sure that whatever I write here is true, even if drastically simplified. If there is any doubt, please consult with a doctor or a person who specialises in a relevant field, such as biology.

There are people whose biology is one in a million—perhaps one in a billion. One such person is James Christopher Harrison from Australia (known as “the Man with the Golden Arm”. His blood—it was discovered—contains special antibodies useful in the treatment of Rhesus disease, which can be fatal. Becoming a regular blood donor, Harrison made over a thousand donations in his life. It is estimated that millions of people benefited from his unique blood.

Harrison’s story is a happy, ethically unambiguous one. Other stories, however, are far more complicated.

HEK 293 and PER.C6

There are a handful of “immortal” human cell lines in existence. Such cell lines, under the right conditions, replicate perfectly, making them an unchanging factor when running multiple or repeated experiments. They are also easy to grow. This significantly speeds up research into anything related to human cells (medicines, cancer research, reaction to radiation, aging, etc.).

Two of these rare, known cell lines (known as HEK 293 and PER.C6), come from the remains of two aborted foetuses1. These cell lines were also used in the development of most of the currently available COVID-19 vaccines.

The ethical dilemma is, should Christians who are pro-life take vaccines or medicine derived from the remains of aborted foetuses?

As someone who has been vocally pro-life on this website numerous times, I am aware that I may be under the spotlight for what I say on this topic. Some people, such as John Piper, take a hard line [2] against any vaccines or medicines developed using cell lines from aborted foetuses. On the other hard, the Vatican (whose official position is famously staunchly pro-life), is more lenient [3], allowing Roman Catholics to take such vaccines, while warning that this position is not an endorsement for abortion whatsoever.

Considerations

At the outset I want to say that I am not going to prescribe to my readers a specific course of action. For some people this is a black-and-white issue. For others, it is much more nuanced. I will say that, same as the Vatican, that whatever I say should not be construed as an endorsement of abortion. I only wish to offer perspectives. People are free to take those perspectives into consideration or not.

The first thing to be clear about is that the vaccines are developed from these cell lines: they do not require a constant stream of babies to be aborted to provide “parts” or “ingredients” for the production of vaccines. The reason why HEK 293 and PER.C6 have become so significant is not because of their origins (aborted foetuses), but because they are *unique and rare*. The researchers would have been equally happy and productive to have them from any source, ethical sources of course always being preferred. Equally important to realise is that these children were not aborted *so that* research could be conducted on them. Their tissue arrived at the laboratories for study irrespective of how they met their deaths.

Secondly, while these cell lines are extremely rare, the ones mentioned above are not the only ones available to scientists. There is also HeLa, which came from Henrietta Lacks, while she was undergoing a diagnosis for cancer treatment. However, it should be noted that even the use of the HeLa cell line is not uncontroversial from an ethical standpoint. To insist that, for example, HeLa should have been used in the development of the vaccines instead of HEK 293 is to oversimplify the issue. (There are other cell lines, but the total is tiny, and the cell lines tend to be from different organs, making each one suitable for different kinds of research.)

The reality is that biomedical research can be complicated, and ethical standards and practises have changed over the years. Human tissue samples may have been considered “biomedical waste”, and consent may not have been legally (or even ethically) required. Biomedical researchers receiving such “waste” may not even necessarily have had the knowledge of whether such “waste” came from an aborted foetus, or from a stillborn child2. A foetus does not necessarily go from an abortionist’s practice straight into a laboratory: a long chain of people could handle the tissue. Any one of them could have conscientiously objected to what they were asked to do, but anyone of them also could have been ignorant of the reality, all while we are too eager to label such people as being “complicit in abortion”.

Let us consider a (born) child who is murdered by her mother. Her mother does give consent, though, that her child’s organs may be used for transplants. (The child was still a minor and so her parents or legal guardians would need to give consent for organ donation.) The child’s organs are promptly transplanted to that of a dying child, ultimately saving that child’s life. Can we say that the child’s whose life was saved, or her mother (who consented to the transplant), or the doctors who performed the transplant are complicit in the murder which occurred?

This is not the only version of a comparable ethical dilemma with which we can come up with, but I am going to restrict us to this one to not carry on

ad nauseam.

I think that this scenario is, at least, morally ambiguous. It should check any knee-jerk reaction we may have to the vaccines. That is not to say we cannot arrive at some conclusion ourselves, but some thoughtfulness is necessary. It requires some thought, and hopefully compassion for someone who ends up thinking about it differently.

If someone claims that likening this story to that of HEK 293 is false equivalence, I would say that they are disingenuous about seeing the unborn as the same as the born. The main point of many pro-life people is that the unborn and the born are the same, apart from location and level of development. But if we want to start dishing out taboos simply because the word “abortion” occurs somewhere in the tragic story, then we are not treating the unborn and the born the same: then we have created a new category where the unborn is slightly elevated above the born. I do not believe this is right. In doing so, one is no longer “pro-life” for the sake of individual lives, but one is rather fighting for an ideology: the means have become more important than the end.

I offer two more perspectives. The first is the use of language such as “these cell lines come from a foetus that was aborted decades ago” (which I have read a couple of times) is devious. While factually correct, this phrasing seems to minimise the loss of life which had taken place and never should have. We can say that these cell lines have replicated countless generations since they were “harvested”, we can speak of the many lives which have been saved, and the much good which has been done, but we can never forget the tragic loss and cost at which they came. Using such language to distance us from this reality in order to justify our conclusion also is not right.

Yet it is equally abhorrent to use the abortion debate to reinforce and justify whatever biases one may already have against vaccines.

My final observation is that we must be careful of a slippery slope. Vaccine research is “high profile”, therefore we come to know about things such as the HEK 293 and PER.C6 cell lines, and from where they came. But the origin of many medicines and treatments are ethically dubious. If you feel convicted that you should not benefit from vaccines because they are immoral, then you must be prepared to give up much more. If you are, I commend your convictions. I hope that you, however, will show grace towards those who believe that what came from a place of evil can be redeemed for good.

The Religious Perspective on the Vaccine

Piper quotes Scripture for the Christian to consider when making a decision about the vaccine. Certainly Christians should take the Scripture (and the context of passages) into consideration when making a difficult decision. We must also be careful not to be legalistic: that we become so focussed on keeping ourselves “pure” that we become blind to the bigger picture; that we do not live the letter of the law at the cost of the spirit of the law. I am not saying this is the case in advocating against the vaccines for ethical reasons, but the danger is there. Of course there are times to draw lines in the sand and to refuse to cross them. But what we see is that Christians do draw these lines differently on this topic, and we need to think carefully before becoming belligerent about it.

What some people may have difficulty understanding is that Christians are not necessarily utilitarians: two abortions do not justify the saving of two billion lives. Neither, would I say, are Christians strictly deontological (that is, that there are rules which decide whether an action is right or wrong). Christians view the world through particular lenses: that of creation, fallenness, and redemption. Rather than being guided through rules or consequences, Christians are guided by conscience and the gospel, through sanctification, and, properly, the Holy Spirit. This is difficult to quantify or put into a neat ethical theory.

Being legalistic may lead to another quality of the Pharisees which Jesus criticised: hypocrisy. If we take it upon ourselves to reject vaccines because the cell lines of aborted foetuses were used in their development, are we going to be consistent in exercising our ethics? Will we reject our smart devices, which have likely been produced with near slave labour (whether from mining rare earth

metals or the factory conditions in which they were assembled), or which use software to invade your privacy (and that of millions of others) in order to sell you more things, and perhaps even government surveillance? Are we going to reject any service or product that comes to us through minimum wage workers in places where such wages do not allow the workers to live a decent life? Are we going to reject other medicines and treatments with ethically ambiguous origins? This would be a great burden to bear. Or, perhaps, even so, the Amish have been right all along for being sceptical of technology and approaching it critically3. Then we should have the integrity to follow their example wholeheartedly, and not selectively.

Even if we do all these things, are we going to lay them on others? And if we do, crucially, what are we going to do to help them bear that burden (Matthew 23:4)?

Perhaps my perspectives in this article have been skewed in one direction, but I want to emphasise that this is not something for which I can prescribe an answer. For the thoughtful Christian who wrestles with this dilemma, there is one thing to remember: if we make a decision in *good conscience*, and it is wrong in the grand scheme of things, God is gracious and quick to forgive. That does not give us licence to do what we want and ask for forgiveness later. But it is a reality in which each Christian earnestly seeking after the heart of God can rest.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul is writing to the Corinthians about what food is acceptable to be eaten and what not: some people approached the topic with a strict set of rules, while others did so thoughtlessly, justifying themselves in the process. Perhaps we should take Paul's words into careful consideration, and ask ourselves whether our concern over what we put in our bodies is a question of our personal holiness, or a question over what is good for others. Perhaps this is less about being right or wrong, and more one about being wise.

> Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.
> Give no occasion for stumbling, whether to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the assembly of God;
> even as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved.
>
> 1 Corinthians 10:31–33

- 1. HEK 293 originated approximately in 1972. There is some speculation that HEK 293 could possibly have come from a stillborn infant whose mother then consented to having the remains donated to medical research. However, the prevailing view is that HEK 293 most likely comes from the remains of an aborted foetus. PER.C6 comes from a foetus who was aborted in 1985. The former cell line was taken from the kidneys, and the latter from the eyes.
- 2. In South Africa, as recently as only last month, parents of stillborn children gained the right to receive the remains of their children for burial [4]. Before then, stillborn children were considered "medical waste", and were incinerated, or could perhaps (especially in previous years) have been used for biomedical research. Fewer than two years ago, an acquaintance of mine and his wife had to undergo a lengthy and traumatising procedure to legally acquire the remains of their stillborn child so that they could bury them.
- 3. The Amish do use certain modern technologies, e.g. carbon fibre chassis for their horse-drawn buggies, but scrutinise any technology before deciding it is acceptable to adopt it.

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