

Some reflections on Christian ethics and on making decisions regarding COVID-19 vaccines

Many Christians are hesitant to get a COVID-19 vaccination. Christians who have this hesitancy are therefore often faced with a serious dilemma when they are required to receive the vaccination by educational institutions in which they are enrolled, or by organizations or businesses in which they are employed. There is also a concern that at some point in the future, the civil authorities may require everyone in the country to get a vaccination. As Christians work through the process of deciding what they will do or not do in such circumstances, they should understand that what is in play for them is an intersection of three distinct strands of ethical and doctrinal teaching.

1) We recognize in the fourth commandment, as a general principle, the “paternal” authority of the civil government to regulate and promote public safety and health. So, for example, on the highways there are speed limits and seat belt requirements; chemical companies are forbidden to pollute the environment; food processing companies are required to sell only untainted food. The default assumption is that we will obey and comply with such laws and regulations, unless we are persuaded in our conscience that to do so would be a sin against God's moral law, since "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Otherwise, we submit to the authority of the government, since it is an agency through which God works for our good (see Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17) . This remains the case even if we personally disagree with the government's policies, or are of the opinion that the government's regulations are inconvenient or unnecessary.

2) We recognize in the seventh commandment the right of the owner of a private business or private organization to run his business or organization as he sees fit, and to set forth whatever rules and policies he thinks are best for his employees, customers, and guests. So, if we want to work there or be there for any other reason, we need to respect the owner's rules. If we are unable or unwilling to comply with the owners requirements, then we will not be able to be associated with that business or organization.

3) We recognize in the fifth commandment the personal duty that we each have to protect life and health, according to our vocations. This applies both to our neighbors' (and children's) life and health and to our own life and health. As we consider whether a certain course of action or a certain medical treatment would be harmful or beneficial, we must make sure that we are making this determination on the basis of the best and most accurate information that is available to us. Especially for those of us who are not experts in the medical field, we should consult with knowledgeable and competent physicians and medical professionals whose judgment we trust and in whose competency we are confident.

As someone in his conscience works through what these three strands of ethical and doctrinal teaching have to say to him regarding a certain difficult question that has arisen, he may reach a different conclusion than the conclusion someone else reaches, even if both are following the same criteria in their consideration of what they should or should not do. This is not

because God's Word is unclear, but it is because the practical situation they are each dealing with may be unclear.

Am I thoroughly persuaded, based on my understanding of the science, that a vaccine is safe and beneficial? And would I therefore conclude that the fifth commandment obligates me to get it for the sake of the health and safety of my neighbor and myself, and that I should willingly comply with any requirement that I receive it? Do I think a vaccine is more likely to be safe and beneficial than to be dangerous and harmful? Do I think a vaccine is more likely to be dangerous and harmful than to be safe and beneficial? Am I thoroughly persuaded, based on my understanding of the science, that a vaccine is dangerous and harmful? And would I therefore conclude that the fifth commandment prohibits me from getting it for the sake of the health and safety of my neighbor and myself, and that I should regrettably decline to comply with any requirement that I receive it and suffer whatever consequences may come as a result of that decision?

These are questions that each person must wrestle through in his own conscience, based on his own moral reflection with respect to the teachings of Holy Scripture, and based on his own efforts to acquire pertinent and objective medical information from reliable sources. It may be helpful if one's pastor, or another trusted spiritual advisor, is consulted for guidance in making sure that God's Word is being properly applied in this process. It is important that ethical considerations be evaluated on the basis of God's law, and not on the basis of politics or societal pressure. And it is important that medical considerations be evaluated on the basis of scientific data, and not on the basis of politics or societal pressure.

As someone is guided to make these important determinations in the right way, and in light of the three strands of ethical and doctrinal teaching that are relevant to a Christian's consideration of such issues, his decisions should be respected. What each person's informed conscience guides him to do or not to do, according to his sincere and honest perception of what the fourth, seventh, and fifth commandments require of him in this particular instance, should be respected.

The practical conclusions that are reached through such a deliberative process are in many cases not matters of settled doctrine, but are in the area of casuistry. In matters of casuistry, a carefully-thought-through practical decision on what to do or not to do in any given instance must be made when equally valid obligations under God seem to be in conflict with each other, and the obligation that has the greater weight in that case must be discerned. In matters of casuistry, we may not all agree on the various decisions that are ultimately made. But we should all be expected to agree on the methodology that is to be followed in making these decisions. When someone reaches a conclusion on what his actions will be, after conscientiously following this kind of deliberative process, we can all recognize that conclusion as a valid conclusion, without thereby implying that everyone should or must reach the same conclusion.

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August 18, 2021