

COVID-19 Addendum to CRPC Vaccine Paper, 5/20/2021:

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the most significant global health event of the last 100 years, responsible for more deaths in the United States than all its 20th century military conflicts combined. In order to avoid the inundation of the healthcare system and minimize loss of life, the structure of public life, businesses, and institutions have been markedly disrupted. Public assemblies have been curtailed, educational systems interrupted, and the normal rhythms of human relationship have been shattered. These dynamics have reinforced pre-existing inequities, with historically underprivileged groups bearing a greater burden of illness, job loss, financial insecurity and death. The church, while seeking to faithfully execute its calling to evangelism and discipleship (Matthew 28), has found its patterns of worship and relationship altered as it balances neighborly responsibility (1 Cor 10: 32-33, Col 4:5), differences in conscience (Romans 14-15), public health guidance (Romans 13), and protection of its medically vulnerable members (1 Cor. 12).

From the earliest days of the pandemic, the societal response to COVID-19 has been complicated. Federal, state and local institutions interacted with private organizations, the healthcare system, and businesses through a patchwork of varied and often discordant mitigation approaches. Rapidly changing science and public health recommendations further complicated the situation, leaving many feeling confused and conflicted about the best way to move forward. Additionally, individuals' experiences varied widely based on age, occupation and household composition, leading to increasingly divergent perspectives and impacts as cases increased and restrictions wore-on. Even among local churches, masking and worship practices varied widely between congregations. As the pandemic continued, the high transmissibility and case-fatality rate of COVID-19 made it likely that public health containment strategies alone would not suffice to prevent a catastrophic surge of cases and deaths when the most disruptive mitigation measures were lifted. It is in the context of this complex situation that public health institutions presented a potential COVID-19 vaccine as a tool to minimize casualties when public life resumed. Now, the availability of such vaccines has been met with significant discussion and their reception has been mixed, both inside and outside the church.

We acknowledge that the discourse around vaccines is emotionally charged and bound-up in the challenges and social dynamics of the last year. While recognizing the unique circumstances of each individual and affirming their freedom of conscience, the Session of City Reformed Presbyterian Church believes that currently available evidence supports the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines and that scripture offers a wealth of guidance as members consider their vaccination choice.

In its 2016 paper on childhood vaccination, the Session of City Reformed outlined its understanding of biblical principles pertaining to vaccination, objections to vaccination, discernment of source material, and the significance of individual choices in the context of corporate life. We encourage members to review the original vaccine paper in its entirety. Although the specific circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination development/rollout process are novel, the guidance from our original vaccine paper remains relevant and continues to represent essential biblical teachings for Christians considering the COVID-19 vaccine.

Although the broad scriptural considerations remain unchanged, we acknowledge that specific challenges require nuanced discernment and careful application. At all times, the advisability of a medical intervention is informed by the tension between its safety and therapeutic outcome. Additionally, the choice of both action and inaction have implications that impact personal and corporate life. All of these factors warrant consideration: what seems to be a personal choice has inevitable effects on others.

In comparison to other currently available vaccines, the development and evaluation of COVID-19 vaccines have been compressed by the urgency of the situation. Research, testing and approval processes which normally take years have been reduced to months. Additionally, mRNA and adenoviral vector technology, while in development for over a decade, have not previously been manufactured or administered on a population-wide scale, prompting some to voice concerns over unanticipated long-term complications or rare serious side effects. Although over 6 months of real-world data have demonstrated a remarkably high degree of safety and efficacy, we must acknowledge that no one can predict the long-term implications of these products with absolute certainty.

While not dismissing the possibility of unforeseen problems with COVID-19 vaccines, we believe such concerns are outweighed by the imminent threat of harm, both personal and societal, if the pandemic continues in its natural course. Healthcare systems around the world have experienced catastrophic failure, leading to further loss of life and family

structures. Children miss critical educational opportunities, often in ways that accentuate pre-existing inequality. Isolation and financial stress have led to a sub-pandemic of mental health and substance use disorders.

It is in the context of these considerations that the Session of City Reformed counsels the congregation to consider their choice: a choice about personal risk that affects the risk of others; a choice about personal security that affects the livelihood and opportunities of our neighbors; a choice that involves both caring for our own bodies and the other members of Christ's body.

In all these things, we are called to remember the basis of our ultimate hope: the finished work of Christ, applied by grace in God's mercy. Although our identity in Christ will impact our decisions, it is not defined by them. We do not seek to create distinctions in our congregation based on vaccine status, and all are valuable parts of Christ's body, bought with his blood, endowed with dignity and purpose, joining together to worship, and sharing the hope of eternal life together with God. As the writer of Hebrews encourages: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works...encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10: 23-25)