

Americans OK with IVF, divided over embryo destruction

By Aaron Earls

Lifeway Christian Resources

U.S. adults support in vitro fertilization (IVF) in general but are more divided about destroying embryos created in the process.

The assisted reproductive technology procedure involves fertilizing an egg with sperm in a laboratory dish and then implanting the egg in a woman seeking to get pregnant. Around 2% of births each year in the U.S., or almost 100,000, involve IVF, according to the CDC. Because the process frequently involves creating numerous fertilized eggs that are often not implanted in the womb, IVF has sparked reactions from both political and religious bodies.

The Alabama Supreme Court ruled the embryos created in the process should be legally protected under state law. At the 2024 Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Annual Meeting, messengers from churches approved a non-binding resolution that encourages Southern Baptists to consider the ethical implications of assisted reproductive technologies. The resolution noted that IVF “routinely generates more embryos than can safely be implanted, thus resulting in the continued freezing, stockpiling, and ultimate destruction of human embryos.”

Public support for IVF

Still, most Americans, even most Christians, remain supportive of IVF. Around 4 in 5 U.S. adults (82%) say IVF is morally acceptable, according to Gallup. One in 10 believe it is

wrong. The more someone attends religious services, the more likely they are to see IVF as morally wrong. But even among those who attend weekly, 63% say the practice is morally acceptable while 25% believe it's wrong.

U.S. adults also want couples to have IVF as an option. Seven in 10 Americans (70%), including 63% of white evangelicals, say having access to the technology is a good thing, according to Pew Research.

A 2022 Lifeway Research study found 35% of Americans believe human life begins at conception. Similarly, Pew found around a third believe "human life begins at conception, so an embryo is a person with rights." Even among those who say that statement describes their view extremely or very well, 59% believe access to IVF is a good thing, 13% say it's a bad thing, and 27% aren't sure, according to Pew.

Jason Thacker, an ethicist who advised the 2024 SBC Resolutions Committee, said the recent resolution articulates points of consensus among Southern Baptists amid a range of views on IVF.

"Navigating the deep pains and realities of infertility can be quite daunting and overwhelming," Thacker told Lifeway Research. "While the desire for children is both good and godly, we must think deeply about the ethical complexities of artificial reproductive technologies. This is especially true with the routine practice of IVF as it relates to both the sanctity of life—no matter the stage of development or location—as well as God's good design for marriage and procreation. Just because we can do something doesn't mean we should."

Divisions over embryo destruction

While the Gallup and Pew Research studies demonstrate most Americans see no problems with using IVF to have children, Gallup's follow-up question shows there's more division over

the treatment of the “excess embryos.”

Around half (49%) believe destroying frozen embryos created by IVF is morally acceptable. Another 43% say it is wrong, and 9% aren't sure. Like with support for IVF overall, the more someone attends religious services, the less likely they are to see the destruction of embryos as acceptable. In this case, however, most weekly churchgoers believe destroying frozen embryos created during IVF is morally wrong.

In an op-ed for *WORLD Magazine*, Andrew Walker, an ethics professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and co-author of the SBC's resolution “On the Ethical Realities of Reproductive Technologies and the Dignity of the Human Embryo,” argued the “blasé approach to IVF” of many evangelicals follows from the church's failure to disciple people on how to consistently apply a belief that embryos are persons bearing the image of God.

He contends IVF has two central moral problems. “First, it disrupts the bodily connection that Scripture depicts as the exclusive context for conceiving children,” he writes. The second issue is the question: “What should be done with excess embryos whose development remains suspended in a refrigerated state?”

U.S. adults who seldom or never attend religious services are generally accepting of embryo destruction. Most (55%) believe it's acceptable, while 39% see it as wrong. There's a more even split among those who attend nearly weekly or monthly—44% say it's morally acceptable and 47% believe it's wrong. Most of those who attend weekly (54%) believe destroying the embryos is wrong, while a third (33%) think it's acceptable.

Similar sentiments exist among those asked about extending legal protections to human embryos, as the Alabama Supreme Court ruling did. Half of Americans (51%) oppose the idea, and 43% are in favor of it.

Among those who seldom or never attend religious services, almost twice as many oppose such a law as support it (62% v. 34%). Again, there's a divide among those who attend nearly weekly or monthly – 47% favor extending legal protections to human embryos and 45% oppose. Weekly churchgoers are most supportive of such a law, with 62% backing a law to give human embryos some of the same legal protections as people and 30% opposing.