

IVF regulations a 'wild, wild west' despite Trump executive order

WASHINGTON (BP) – Evangelical ethicists are urging policymakers to tap the brakes on in vitro fertilization (IVF) expansion despite an executive order by President Donald Trump and widespread enthusiasm for the practice.

“Instead of rushing to expand or subsidize these technologies, our leaders need to ask better questions about this entire field of medicine,” said Brent Leatherwood, president of the SBC’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. “For example, does this truly build a culture of life, or undermine it? How is it that an entire industry has been allowed to spring up without oversight and regulation? Are we plodding down a path towards designer babies and disposable lives? Some estimates show there are over 1 million preborn lives frozen in clinics across the country; is there a pathway for these children to live? Are there ways to bring all of this into alignment with God’s design for procreation and the family?”

Leatherwood’s comments followed a Feb. 18 executive order by Trump directing his administration to submit a list of policy recommendations “on protecting IVF access and aggressively reducing out-of-pocket and health plan costs for IVF treatment.” The administration’s goal, Trump stated, includes “easing unnecessary statutory or regulatory burdens to make IVF treatment drastically more affordable.”

Polling shows IVF popular among the American public, including Christians. Seventy percent of Americans say IVF is a good thing, according to a 2024 survey by the Pew Research Center. Majorities of white evangelicals (63 percent), black Protestants (69 percent) and Catholics (65 percent) agree.

An SBC resolution last summer urged thoughtfulness in the use of IVF. It “call[ed] on Southern Baptists to reaffirm the unconditional value and right to life of every human being, including those in an embryonic stage, and to only utilize reproductive technologies consistent with that affirmation especially in the number of embryos generated in the IVF process.”

An ERLC research paper cited by Leatherwood in his comments to Baptist Press seems to go further. It notes concerns about “the way IVF is routinely conducted now, which includes over fertilization of eggs without a clear plan for implantation, freezing of leftover embryos, and even the destruction of these human embryos once a couple has succeeded in getting pregnant or no longer desires to keep them.”

The research paper states, “Christians should in general oppose IVF because by its very nature it separates procreation from sex and treats children as products rather than people. Though we should be hesitant to call it sin, it is morally ambiguous enough to be problematic and should be discouraged as a matter of wisdom and prudence.”

Yet pro-lifers’ concerns over IVF have not led, in most cases, to calls for banning the procedure. Instead, they urge regulation by government and discipleship by churches.

Andrew Walker, an ethics professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said he personally opposes “any policy that expands access to IVF.” But public policy goals should be realistic, recognizing most Americans support IVF.

“We should be hoping for policies that tightly regulate the IVF industry,” said Walker, chairman of the 2025 SBC Resolutions Committee. “What people don’t understand is that IVF is kind of the wild, wild west of the artificial reproductive technology regime. There are so few controls and regulatory policies around it.”

IVF providers should be required to report the number of frozen embryos they create, Walker said. Additionally, he recommended regulations limiting the number of embryos created with each IVF cycle and restricting IVF to genetic parents only, which “would prevent homosexuals and surrogates from getting involved.”

In churches, Walker said, gentleness should be the watchword for discipling believers in the realm of reproductive technologies.

“Great delicacy needs to be taken on this issue before you bring the hard hammer of truth,” he said. “People who are accessing IVF, I would believe, are doing it under the auspices of a pro-life human dignity ethic and a pro-child ethic. In world where we have a fertility crisis, wanting to bring children into the world is an applaudable good thing.”

Pastors and other church leaders should consider asking questions such as, “Are you aware of all the extenuating consequences that are involved in IVF?” Walker said. “That’s where I think there is a massive knowledge gap.”

In 2022 alone, more than 400,000 IVF cycles were reported in the U.S., according to data compiled by The World and Everything in It podcast. With an estimated 10 embryos per cycle, that yielded approximately 4 million embryos. Yet fewer than 100,000 live births were reported through IVF that year. “That means roughly 3.9 million other embryos were either frozen, destroyed, or discarded or died in some other way.”

Such data has provoked strong reactions from some pro-life leaders, including Lila Rose, president of the pro-life group Live Action.

“No one is entitled to a child at the cost of denying the humanity and rights of countless others,” she said in a statement to RNS. “A compassionate society must work to support families while upholding the dignity and protection of

every human being – born and preborn. President Trump and our other leaders should champion ethical, life-affirming fertility options that protect both mothers and children.”

Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, took an approach to IVF like Walker’s. He urged the Trump administration to regulate IVF. “The Trump administration can address the infertility crisis in America in a way that is morally and scientifically sound, enabling many more Americans to experience the beautiful gift of children,” he said according to RNS.

Southern Baptist ethicist Jason Thacker advocated compassion for couples facing infertility and caution within the Trump administration as it explores public policy options.

Trump’s “executive order is right to acknowledge the realities of infertility and the centrality of family formation in a flourishing society, but just because we can do something does not mean we should,” said Thacker, an ERLC senior fellow and assistant professor of philosophy and ethics at Boyce College.

“Unfortunately, this order does not account for the numerous bioethical concerns related to the dignity of the human embryo and the sacredness of the marital union between man and woman. We all must slow down to consider the ethics of assisted reproductive technologies – especially IVF – as it relates to the dignity and care of these children created outside the natural union of man and woman. There are deeply concerning issues in the practice of IVF that pro-life Christians need to slow down and consider in our age of technological hubris,” he said.

Leatherwood’s bottom line is similar.

“Southern Baptists affirm the desire to build families, and we grieve that infertility has plagued so many couples, including couples in our own churches,” he said. “From the moment of conception, every child is a gift from God, inherently

valuable, worthy of protection and care, and possesses the right to be born, not contingent upon the mechanism by which they were conceived. This is why we cannot turn a blind eye to either the ethical problems posed by in vitro fertilization that make the whole process morally hazardous or the countless preborn lives that are lost through the practice itself.”