

THE MORAL¹ STATUS OF GAMBLING

I. INTRODUCTION

The document hereby placed before the church seeks to respond the resolution 90.2.17 ("To Provide Education on the Evils of Gambling") adopted at the 1990 convention of Lutheran Church–Canada, which directed the Commission on Theology and Church Relations "[t]o perform a study on the biblical implication of gambling as it relates to stewardship."

The core (but not the whole) of our task is to determine whether 'gambling' is invariably to be reckoned a moral evil which should be shunned by Christians and roundly condemned by the church, or whether a milder judgement should be rendered on this practice. Should the second approach be adopted, does it then follow that 'gambling' is to be considered a morally neutral activity which falls within the realm of Christian liberty? Or does it rather belong in an ambivalent grey area located in the borderland between right and wrong, in which case its ethical status can only be determined with reference to the subjective intentions and life situation of those persons who engage in 'gambling'?

II. 'GAMBLING' DEFINED

Gambling may be defined as the determination of the possession of money, or money-value, by an appeal to an artificially created chance, where the gains of the winners are made at the expense of the losers and the gain is secured without rendering in service or in value an equivalent of the goods obtained. Thus the playing of a game of chance wholly for amusement is not gambling. Insurance, which is a statistical reduction of the risks of chance, is not gambling. The acceptance of a gift, though it is literally "money for nothing," is not gambling because there is no appeal to chance. Gambling may be *gaming*, that is, playing for money in a game of chance; *betting*, that is, staking money on an event of which the outcome is doubtful; *lotteries*, that is, the distribution of prizes by lot or chance; and *pools*, which combine

¹ The adjectives 'moral' and 'ethical,' and their corresponding nouns, are here used synonymously to denote the theory and practice of right (in distinction from wrong) conduct.

the latter two.²

This concise definition of gambling has the advantage of making possible a sharp demarcation between 'gambling in the strict sense' (i.e., *gaming, betting, lotteries, and pools* with which alone we are here concerned) and 'gambling in the broad sense' with which we have to do when a metaphorical use of language seeks to describe a variety of situations in which risk is involved. Health and life insurance, the uncertainties of farming, and certain aspects of capitalist investment are analogous but not identical to the gambling which takes place in *gaming, betting, lotteries, and pools*.

III. GAMBLING UNDER SCRUTINY

Whatever private opinions individual Christians may form on this matter, the church is well advised to refrain from issuing blanket condemnations of gambling as such (i.e., *gaming, betting, lotteries, and pools*.) Scripture is silent on this question and no commandment of the Decalogue speaks directly to this area of human activity. There are, however, grounds for caution with respect to certain forms of gambling. These can be found in the penumbra (i.e. shadow) of the Decalogue, in the Christian's vocation, and in the church's concern for the welfare of the community.

A clear distinction should be made between certain kinds of *gaming*, on the one hand, and other kinds of *gaming*, along with *betting, lotteries, and pools*, on the other. The former, which often involve the gain of small sums of money, occur informally as a brand of entertainment in the context of social recreation. Card playing among friends can hardly be construed as a social evil deserving of the church's scrutiny. This form of gambling will therefore receive no further attention in this document. The latter are, however, different in at least two respects from harmless social gambling. Gambling for gain involves (1) certain persons organizing business enterprises for the purpose of making the maximum profit at the expense of other persons, and (2) consumers eager to acquire disproportionate gain in return for a small outlay of money.

Since gambling for gain is an activity freely entered into by persons who decide to devote

². Edward Rogers, "Gambling," in: John Macquarrie ed., *Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967) 135.

a portion of their resources to such projects, this sort of activity may not be denounced as a *blatant* infringement of the seventh commandment. What is freely surrendered in hopes of disproportionate gain is certainly unwisely spent, for the Christian should manage his resources in view of the glory of God, the good of his neighbour, and the discharge of his own vocation. While sums of money spent in gambling are not strictly speaking stolen, nevertheless, since those responsible for gambling enterprises are involved in deliberate exploitation of the gullible public, a case can be made for gambling's falling under the rebuke of the seventh commandment ("nor get [my neighbour's goods] by false ware or dealing.")

Those involved on both sides of gambling are surely motivated primarily by the vice of covetousness and therefore stand convicted of breaking the ninth and tenth commandments. The prevalence of gambling in our society is nothing more than the tip of the iceberg to which St. Paul referred when he wrote that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (I Tim. 6:10).

The permissive and even encouraging attitude of Canada's federal and provincial governments towards gambling is understandable from the viewpoint of secular authority. Gambling does not involve a breach of the peace, and its widespread commission has the advantage of enhancing the revenue! Moreover, the proceeds of gambling are often times directed to what are deemed worthy ends.

The church's perspective only partly overlaps, however, with that of the state. Through her administration of the means of grace, the church aims for people to glorify God, which involves much more than merely keeping the peace. Furthermore, the church's concern for the good of the human person extends to the (sometimes unhappy) consequences of (lawful) activities. In the event that immoderate or compulsive gambling leads a person to neglect the duties inherent in his vocation, this activity has plainly become a sin to be repented and amended. It is hard to understand how involvement in gambling could be reckoned among those works which God has prepared beforehand for His children to walk in (Eph. 2:10).³

³ *Gambling*, a report issued in February 1996 by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, argues with the aid of many Scripture references, that gambling "1. ...encourages the sins of greed and covetousness; 2. ...promotes the mismanagement of possessions entrusted to us by God; 3. ...undermines absolute reliance on God for His provision; 4. ...works at cross purposes with a commitment to productive work; 5. ...is a potentially addictive behaviour; and 6. ...threatens the welfare of our neighbour and militates against the common good (6-12).

The science of ethics distinguishes between a duty-based (*deontological*) and an ends-based (*teleological*) method of approach. *Deontological ethics* is based on man's *duty*, which Christians ascertain mainly on the basis of the Decalogue. *Teleological (or consequentialist) ethics* determines the good or evil quality of an action on the basis of its envisaged results.

Great dangers lurk in a purely teleological approach to ethics. When pursued in the absence of belief in the Creator God and acceptance of His immutable law, this method has led to the prevailing mindset of 'situation ethics' which lies at the root of our present moral collapse.

Provided its limitations are kept in view, however, the teleological approach does have a valuable, albeit subordinate, role to play in Christian ethics. While gambling mainly inhabits a grey area in the borderland between right and wrong from the viewpoint of deontological ethics, it appears in a more unfavourable light when viewed from a teleological perspective. The poorest members of society are often those most addicted to gambling. Many recipients of pension and welfare cheques endanger their own and their dependents' welfare by squandering their slender resources in hopes of escape from their economic straits. Since organized gambling exacerbates the misery of some of Canada's most vulnerable citizens, it is not a form of activity which can be cheerfully recommended to Christians.

The glad tidings proclaimed by the church can only astonish the natural man who lives for the immediate gratification of his appetites and who assumes that what a man *is* flows from how much he *has*. Gambling is certainly infected by the covetousness that pollutes so much of fallen human existence. Our Lord attacked this whole mindset of Adamic man with His saying that, "...a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk. 12:15).

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