

An Ancient Vice

In our neo-pagan, relativistic, North American society gambling has become an increasingly socially acceptable form of entertainment. Even Christians are not immune from the temptation to gamble. According to an Angus Reid poll, 50 percent of all regular churchgoers in Canada gamble at least once a month. Poll analyst Don Posterski notes that regular attendees of more conservative or evangelical churches are less likely to gamble, but 20 percent still gamble monthly.

Gambling is seen as a quick way to gain wealth without having to work for it. Its proponents invariably seek to focus our attention on the mind-boggling sums of money that can be won. But this dazzling megabucks potential is motivated by greed. Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-81) called gamblers monks of greed, dedicated wholly to its service, with the green baize tables for an altar on which to set out the sacrificial offerings of coins and banknotes. Evangelical theologian Kenneth S. Kantzer defines gambling as "an artificially contrived risk, taken for selfish gain at another's expense, with no constructive product as its goal."

Gamblers have gone to extremes in their hope to win. CBC news reported that a man went to an Ontario casino wearing diapers, afraid to lose a chance to win if he leaves to go to the washroom. This fear is common. The 18th-century Lord Sandwich is supposed to have invented "sandwiches" so that he would not have to get up from the gaming-table for a meal

History of Gambling

Gambling is an ancient destructive vice. Dice have been found in Egypt dating thousands of years before Christ. Ancient Brahman hymns indicate that great herds of cattle, in what is now India, were won or lost 1,500 years before Christ on the outcome of chariot races. Gaming tables have been discovered in the ruins of Pompeii; a western Italian city destroyed by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. Ancient Rome had a great passion for gambling. The Roman satirist Juvenal (60-140 AD) said that it was not a purse that men brought to the gambling tables; it was a treasure chest. The emperor Nero played for high stakes with dice. The Roman historian Tacitus (56-120AD) noted that gambling was very common among the tribes of Germany.

The British are noted for their passion for gambling. Playing cards were introduced in the 15th century and were early used for gambling by all classes in the towns. By the 18th century, upper class society gambled extensively, and for high stakes. The government itself (till 1826) encouraged gambling through national lotteries. Sir John Bland, M.P., (d .1755), squandered his entire fortune at Hazard in a night's play. The dramatist, and politician Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816) ruined his finances by heavy gambling. Sports, especially horse-racing, has always had gambling as one of its main attractions. In the 18th century, cricket with its heavy betting and wild partisanship drew great crowds. In our century, the most popular of all forms of gambling is the football pool.

The United States began as a gambling nation. George Washington, the first US president declared, "Gambling is the child of avarice, the brother of iniquity, and the father of mischief." But he was not consequent as he kept a full diary of his own winnings and losses at the card table. It was not until the end of 1910 that American reformers succeeded in banning nearly all forms of gambling. But since 1978, it has made a breathtakingly rapid comeback. *Christianity Today* (May 18, 1998) reports that in 1997 Americans legally wagered more than \$550 billion, which is more than three times the revenues of General Motors, the largest corporation in the US.

Government Sponsored

In an age of the "nanny" state, governments have become heavily involved in sponsoring gambling to finance projects or reduce their debts. They claim that whatever form of gambling they legitimize, it will reduce the citizen's tax load. But this argument is spurious at best. For example, after more than half a century of casino revenue, the state of Nevada still finds it necessary to levy a 5 percent sales tax on all retail services. Tom Watson comments, "The citizens of lottery states find they pay as much in taxes as they ever did; their state just spends more."

Gambling has become Canada's fastest growing government-sponsored industry. Governments have become addicted to profits from gambling schemes. They debase and demoralize their citizens for their own financial gain. Government need for cash during the 1976 Olympic Games and the economic recession of the early 1990s led to changed attitudes. Once a criminal offence, gambling is now a provincial regulated matter. Manitoba allowed the first commercial casino in 1989. Lotto-Quebec, the provincial lottery company that owns the Montreal casino, originally estimated its annual net profit at \$50 million from a daily attendance of 5,000. But *Macleans Magazine* (May 30, 1994) reported that crowds were more than twice that size – and revenues nearly tripled. In 1995 Canada's provincial and territorial governments took in more than \$4.5 billion from lotteries, casinos and the one arm bandit video-lottery terminals (VLTs).

The amount bet on every form of gambling in Ontario is staggering. In 1995-96, Break-Open tickets sucked \$1 billion out of Ontario pockets. In 1997, gambling revenues from casinos were up 64-per cent to \$329 million. (These figures represent 20 per cent of the total take. For example, this means that the total money spent in casinos in Ontario alone in 1997 was \$1.65 billion.) The new casino set up in Windsor in 1995, a native-run facility called Casino Rama in Orillia, and a government run facility in Niagara Falls contributed their millions to government revenue. For example, on opening night in Niagara Falls in December 1996, 29,000 people arrived to try their "luck." Anti-gambling groups want to make gambling an issue during the next provincial election. Alberta receives a higher percentage of revenues from gambling than any other province. Gross receipts from ticket lotteries, VLTs, and casino gaming terminals or slot machines, totaled \$2.1 billion for 1995-96. The average Albertan puts more money - \$ 214 per year into gambling than any other Canadian. And then to think that until 30 years ago government involvement in gambling was not heard of as lotteries and casinos were

illegal in Canada. And it wasn't until 1985 slot machines and VLTs began to gain government approval.

Lotteries

A popular form of gambling is the lottery. It never ceases to amaze me that the busiest place in a shopping mall is the booth where lottery tickets are sold. Governments consider lotteries a great source of revenue at a time when people are psychologically set for a "tax rebellion."

Lotteries have a long history. In 1609 the Dutch city Gouda used lotteries to raise funds for its hospital and old age home. The British government raised regularly vast sums by popular lotteries: even the building of the Westminster Bridge (1736) and the founding of the British Museum (1753) were financed chiefly by this means. In early American history, colonial legislatures authorized frequent lotteries to raise funds for the paving of streets and harbours. Even churches were erected throughout the American colonies - paid for or subsidized by lottery profits. In 1776 the First Continental Congress sold lottery tickets to finance the Revolution.

But lotteries are not a painless way to increase government revenues. They are grossly unfair. They exploit those who are particularly vulnerable to the promise of a sudden financial windfall. Dave Toyce, head of World Vision Canada, says that studies show that most lottery money comes from the poor. A Texas Baptist official observed, "A lottery is the sale of an illusion to poor people who view it as the only possibility for breaking out of the cycle of poverty they live in."

Governments exploit the impact of a few vivid lottery winners. Their advertisements seduce the public into perceiving a lottery ticket as having greater earnings potential than it actually does. Largely on account of government-sponsored promotions, Canadians now believe that gambling is largely harmless, and certainly not immoral enough to warrant prohibition. The government ads never show the testimony of losers who lost their proverbial shirt in their attempt to win. The odds against winning are astronomical. Some have figured that a person is 3.5 times more likely to be killed by lightning and five times more likely to be eaten by a shark than he is to win a government lottery jackpot!

Opposition to lotteries has not been wanting. The Puritans already condemned the running of private lotteries, for "though this or that particular man may be a gainer, yet it would puzzle any man to tell what necessary or convenient uses of humane society, where the lottery is opened, are at all served."

Social Impact

Social acceptance of gambling has resulted in tragically poverty-destroyed families and individuals by gamblers who have become obsessed with their game of chance, nothing else and no other people matter anymore. James Forrest, Alberta Director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, commented that "Gambling is the last business

a government should be involved in.... The government can't protect people from themselves, but at the same time they shouldn't be offering the temptation."

Compulsive gamblers, a largely anonymous lot, may resort to stealing in order to get betting money. They live a cloistered inner life and lie to guard their secret addiction. They are always optimistic and never seem to learn from losing. They can't stop while winning. They go deeply in debt to keep up with their habit. A 1997 Alberta study found that more than a third of the province's gambling revenues came from the 5 percent of the population who are problem gamblers. Studies show that those most at risk of becoming addicted to gambling are youth, native people and lower-middle class citizens who believe that gambling provides a shortcut to solve their economic problems and provides a financially secure future. The consequences of such foolhardy thinking? Job loss, strained family relations, broken marriages, and suicides are common. Given a choice some women have said that they would rather see their husbands drink than gamble.

Gamblers Anonymous (GA) was founded to help gamblers overcome their addiction. Requirement for membership is the desire to stop gambling. GA has also a Gam-Anon for wives of gamblers to help them to understand their husbands' problem and how to help them. A testimony given at a Gamblers Anonymous meeting says it all: "We talk about those awful years that are behind us, of borrowing money and stealing and embezzling, of living day by day behind a facade. But what we really think about is this – we think of the love we lost and the love we were unable to find, and the love we were unable to give."

Christian View

The Biblical view of work and stewardship rules out gambling. We are stewards of the money entrusted to us and are responsible to God for the way we handle it. Gambling is an effort to gain money without pain, earnings without effort, a transfer of unearned wealth. It diverts love due to God to a god of one's own making. It is idolatry, the worship of Mammon, a rival of God (Eph.5: 5). Dr. Abraham Kuyper observed that gambling is rooted in superstition. He wrote that gambling and similar types of games encourage belief in the effect of a mysterious fate on our lives. Gambling encourages the belief that chance determines the results. This goes against the Biblical teaching that God alone governs the affairs of people and nations. In other words, a gambler denies the providence of God. (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, q.a.27)

Canada's Churches

Although Christian opposition to gambling has not been consistent, church bodies have voiced their protest. In 1997, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) published a paper entitled *Gambling. A Bad Bet*, which sharply criticizes gambling's negative impact on society, on families, the economy, and denounces the dependency of government, charities and community groups on gambling as a source for revenue. The paper declares gambling an un-stewardly use of God-given

gifts. It also declares the gambling habit as "an insidious form of evil which takes advantage of the poor and disadvantaged and undermines a healthy and just society." It also chides Christians who fail to see the "dark spiritual dynamic behind gambling." It calls upon Christians to become "passionately opposed" to gambling.

The United Church of Canada, the nation's most liberal mainline Protestant denomination, has called for a federal inquiry into the social, economic, and legal impact of gambling. But to convince governments to give up their quick and sure source of revenue is a tough assignment. Bonnie Greene, program director of the Division of Mission in Canada of the United Church, points out that "the governments have bellied up to the bar and have been snookered into believing that this is a way to raise easy money." The bishop of a Roman Catholic diocese in northern Canada even banned bingo in his jurisdiction when he realized that some people were spending their grocery money on gambling. In Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, CRC pastor Rev. Phil Stel led the successful movement for the removal of the VLTs from the town. He said that the anti-gambling effort has "certainly gone far beyond our expectations." Because of the success of the anti-gambling movement, some churches in Alberta had to do some serious soul searching. While churches and ministerial associations were demanding the removal of VLTs, some were at the same time taking millions of dollars from the Alberta Gaming Commission for various projects in their parishes. Premier Ralph Klein called this hypocritical. How can one protest while taking funds? Anglican bishop Barry Curtis rightly said. "We can't have it both ways. If we receive (VLT and gambling) money, we will have to remain absolutely mute."

In 1997, Jim Wallace, pastor of South Calgary Community Church, listed more than 100 churches which had received a combined total of \$ 3.7 million since 1993 - Alliance. Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United and others. But Alberta churches are not alone in accepting gambling money. Ontario's Trillium Foundation has funded organizations such as Vision TV, Canada's "religious" channel, and the Church Council on Justice and Corrections. The latter received \$21,000 in 1996-97. Some churches have now concluded that it is wrong to accept funds raised through gambling. In a few cases, church leaders have turned down their share of gambling *receipts*. For example, St. Stephen's Ukrainian Catholic parish council returned the \$80,000 earmarked to help fund a \$1.8 million cultural centre. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army once argued that it was okay "to use the devil's money to do the Lord's work." But this is no longer the case today. The Salvation Army has now a policy against using money from lottery sources.

Conclusion

What should Christians do to oppose gambling? They are admonished not "to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Tim. 6:17). The most responsible action for the Christian is total abstinence, setting a right example by opposing any

form of church-sponsored gambling, by increasing voluntary giving to charities, and by fostering cooperation with groups protesting the opening up of casinos, government sponsored lotteries, and VLT's. Churches should have nothing to do whatever with gambling, which has reached the proportion of a devastating social menace. They also should offer help to gamblers through pastoral counseling and referral.

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