

# G<sup>a</sup>MbLing

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# Gambling

## Introduction

For the third time in American history gambling<sup>1</sup> has swept our nation, becoming a part of the weekly—and even daily—routine of millions of Americans.<sup>2</sup> The current gambling boom is unlike any other for its size and for the way in which it has become a part of the fabric of American life.<sup>3</sup> Gambling has now become America's new national pastime, dwarfing other forms of entertainment in this country. Indeed,

gambling is now bigger than baseball, more powerful than a platoon of Schwarzeneggers, Spielbergs, Madonnas and Oprahs. More Americans went to casinos than to major league ballparks in 1993. *Ninety-two million visits!* Legal gambling revenues reached \$30 billion, which is more than the combined take for movies, books, recorded music and park and arcade attractions.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *gambling* may be defined as follows: “the betting or staking of something of value, with consciousness of risk and hope of gain, on the outcome of a game, a contest, or an uncertain event, the result of which may be determined by chance or accident or have an unexpected result by reason of the bettor's miscalculation.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1993 edition, 5:104. In the United States today there are five main forms of gambling: bingo, lotteries, pari-mutuel betting, off-track betting, and casinos. Under the Organized Crime Control Act of 1970 (PL 91-452), the term *gambling* includes, but it is not limited to, pool-selling; bookmaking; maintaining slot machines, roulette wheels or dice tables; conducting lotteries, policy, bolita or numbers games; or selling chances to these games. Mark A. Siegel, Alison Landes, and Carol Foster, eds., *Gambling: Crime or Recreation?* in *Information Plus*, Wylie Texas, 1994 ed., 16.

<sup>2</sup> The first “wave” of legal gambling began during the period of the 13 colonies. Lotteries became widespread, until finally Andrew Jackson's efforts led to their prohibition in the 1820s and 1830s. The second wave came with the opening of the Western frontier and post-Civil War lotteries in the devastated South. The Louisiana lottery scandal of the 1890s and Victorian morality caused the games to be outlawed once again. The third wave began in 1931 when casino gambling in Nevada was decriminalized. In the 1930s and 1940s race tracks were licensed and in the 1950s bingo and social gambling became legal. In 1963 the state lottery was again permitted. I. Nelson Rose, “Gambling and the Law: Endless Fields of Dreams,” *Christian Social Action* (July/August 1994), 4. See Siegel, Landes, and Foster, eds., 2–5, for the details of this history.

<sup>3</sup> In his chapter on “McGambling: Electronic Betting and the Future of the Industry” in *The Luck Business* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), Robert Goodman observes that “electronic gambling machines are the fastest-growing sector of the [gambling] industry” (123). The legalization of “video lottery terminals” (VLTs) or “video poker” in some states has “effectively created thousands of minicasinos in urban, as well as in remote rural areas” (VLTs in restaurants, convenience stores, truck stops, etc.) (125). On the horizon, Goodman predicts, is at-home interactive television betting and, courtesy of the information super-highway, “the legalization of at-home cable television betting” would give the gambling industry “access to a powerful new technique to further influence people's gambling behaviors” (134). See also Jim Impoco, “Laying Off Bets on the Internet,” *U.S. News & World Report* (January 15, 1996), 60.

<sup>4</sup> Gerri Hirshey, “Gambling Nation,” *New York Times Magazine* (July 17, 1994), 36.

It is predicted that by the turn of this century virtually all Americans will live within a four-hour drive of a casino.<sup>5</sup>

A significant change in attitude on the part of government has contributed to this recent resurgence of gambling in American life. As a matter of public policy, government no longer merely *permits* some forms of gambling; it now actually *promotes* the practice.<sup>6</sup> Among the reasons given for this change is the desire of state and local governments to raise needed revenue without increased taxation—a more “painful” and less politically popular alternative.<sup>7</sup> “To these grateful constituencies, gambling is no longer a sin, but a saving grace.”<sup>8</sup>

The legalization of gambling and its promotion by state and local governments has in turn contributed to a major shift in public attitudes. Polls now reveal that for a majority of our citizens the taint of sin formerly attached to gambling has faded—“after all, if the state government urges that a person gamble, how bad can it be?”<sup>9</sup> Despite the moral misgivings of some, “gaming” (as gambling is now called, especially by its promoters) is regarded as a form of recreation by increasingly large numbers of people.

Efforts to legalize gambling in recent years, though in nearly every case successful, have been met regularly by voices of opposition, including those former gamblers who have experienced the personal and family tragedies it can bring. Increased crime, the growing problem of compulsive gambling, rising divorce rates, child abuse, the regressive effects of gambling on the poor, the negative impact on existing local economies, government dependency, and false expectations regarding the generation of state revenues are among the numerous reasons cited to show that gambling is more injurious to our society than it is beneficial. Despite these objections, gambling for a majority of Americans has lost its former stigma as an evil tarnishing the moral character of those who indulge in it. As one writer put it in connection with the popularity of state lotteries: “Alchemizing vice into virtue, state lotteries glamorize the same activities that could [have gotten] you five years in the slammer.”<sup>10</sup> Gambling establishments

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Rose, 4.

<sup>7</sup> In 1988 Congress passed the “Indian Gaming Regulatory Act” (IGRA, PL 100-497), which permits “Indian tribes [to] have the exclusive right to regulate gaming activity on Indian lands if the gaming activity is not specifically prohibited by Federal law and is conducted within a State which does not, as a matter of criminal law and public policy, prohibit such gaming activity.” Siegel, Landes, Foster, 10. Native American tribes are now playing a major role in the expansion of casino gambling throughout the country, and gambling revenue on Indian reservations is expected to increase dramatically in the years ahead.

<sup>8</sup> Hirshey, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Siegel, Landes, and Foster, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Welles, “America’s Gambling Fever,” *Business Week* (April 24, 1989), 113.

themselves are charged with lobbying legislative assemblies to “de-stigmatize” the practice.

The gambling industry’s efforts to broaden its appeal are, no doubt, contributing to its growing public acceptance. Extravagantly designed casinos are being advertised as family vacation centers. Many offer low-cost rooms and meals, theme-park entertainment and free day care. “The name of the game ... is who gets the walk-in,” one casino/hotel owner explains, boasting that his establishment has the “better mousetrap.”<sup>11</sup>

In light of the current situation, what are we as Christians on the basis of biblical teaching to say about gambling? In the paragraphs that follow we wish to offer a response to this question, which hopefully will be useful to pastors, congregations, and others called upon to provide guidance in this area. We recognize that the Holy Scriptures do not specifically address gambling,<sup>12</sup> but this does not mean that they are silent about various issues that arise in connection with this topic. God’s Word has much to say to those who are gambling (or who are thinking about engaging in this practice) and to those involved in its promotion. It is our purpose in the discussion below to review these concerns in light of scriptural texts pertinent to the issue. The first section addresses concerns related to gambling as a moral issue. The second section provides brief counsel regarding a proper theological approach to the question.

<sup>11</sup> Hirshey, 43.

<sup>12</sup> While no biblical text refers specifically to gambling, the practice was present in the ancient world. “Dice with numbers on four sides have been found in Egypt dating thousands of years before Christ. In the ruins of Pompeii, gaming tables have been discovered. Tacitus, the Roman historian who lived about A.D. 100, noted that gambling was very common among the tribes of Germany.” *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Carl F. H. Henry, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 258. Casting lots was common in ancient times and is mentioned at numerous places in the Scriptures, but it cannot be regarded as a “game of chance” akin to the modern practice of gambling. By casting stones on the ground or drawing them from a receptacle, the lot was used for such choices as appointing tribal lands (Num. 26:55); choosing a king (1 Sam. 10:20–21); choosing sacrificial animals on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:7–10); choosing courses of temple services for priests, singers, and gatekeepers (1 Chron. 24:5; 25:8; 26:13); and for the appointment of Matthias as apostle (Acts 1:26). The soldiers also cast lots for the garments of Jesus (Mark 15:24). See F.D. Gealy, “Lots,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 163–64 and W. Dommershausen, גורל, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren and trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 50–56. In fact, in some references the casting of lots is described as a divinely sanctioned means of ascertaining God’s will. In Joshua 18:6, 8, Joshua cast lots “before the LORD our God” to apportion land for seven tribes of Israel. At Proverbs 16:33 we are expressly told, “the lot (גורל) is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the LORD.”

# A Biblical Perspective

## Moral Concerns about Gambling

### 1. Gambling encourages the sins of greed and covetousness.

The New Testament contains repeated warnings against “all active striving for the increase of material possessions as a means of security,” as if the meaning of life is to be found in the acquisition of money.<sup>13</sup> In response to someone requesting a ruling on an inheritance, Jesus stated pointedly: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15 NIV). At its root the sin of greed is idolatry (Rom. 1:23–25; Col. 3:5), and since it is so crassly *egocentric* it is predictably destructive of human relationships, and it is deserving of God’s judgment (Rom. 1:29). Just as tragically, the desire to be rich is potentially destructive of one’s very own person (physically, as well as spiritually) (1 Tim. 6:9–10).

When grasping for what belongs to one’s neighbor becomes the focus, the ninth and tenth commandments of the decalogue apply: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”<sup>14</sup>

Since gambling by its very definition is the betting or staking of something of value for the hope of gain, and because it is often a focused desire to obtain wealth for its own sake,<sup>15</sup> the potential for sin and spiritual harm to oneself and to others is present. Christians may disagree about the relative danger of one form of gambling over against another (and finally each will have to examine his or her own heart in the matter), but gambling by its very nature exposes the one who engages in it to the sins of greed and covetousness. Its consequences dare never be underestimated.

<sup>13</sup> Gerhard Delling, “πλεονέκτης,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 6, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 271.

<sup>14</sup> *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Franzmann wrote, “It is ultimately not a question of how much a man seeks to have—Jesus is not imposing a ‘rule of poverty’ upon his disciples—but how deeply a man is concerned about having.” *Follow Me: Discipleship According to St. Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961; *Concordia Heritage* series reprint, 1982), 57.

## 2. Gambling promotes the mismanagement of possessions entrusted to us by God.

The power either for good or for ill resides in the use of our possessions. Our possessions and money are very important in this life, for they allow us to allocate economic goods for the well-being of our neighbor and for the preservation of our own life. Our money serves as a means to defer personal consumption for morally praiseworthy ends: caring for family, friends, the community, the nation, the needy in our midst, etc.<sup>16</sup> Its irresponsible management can also cause harm in the lives of others. At the same time, money or goods (which might otherwise be given to our neighbor) can serve as a means to enable us with a good conscience to care for our own person and to do so in ways that are equally praiseworthy. But again, because of our sinful nature, the danger always lurks that we will manage our possessions and money purely out of self-interest.

A consistent scriptural theme is that the use of our possessions and the means to obtain them are subjects of God's concern and come under His call for accountability. Our use of what God has entrusted to us is not "discretionary" in the sense that we are free to do with His gifts as we please. In the parable of the rich man in Luke 12, it is the rich man's claim—repeatedly affirmed—that what he has received belongs only *to him* to use as he pleases that places him in jeopardy. He must indeed learn the provisional character of human possessions, and that to lay them up "for himself" means that he is not rich toward God (Luke 12:21).

To be "rich toward God" in God's economy is no mere abstraction, but does in fact involve the use of God's entrusted gifts for purposes pleasing to Him. In the strictest sense, God wills that we *manage* what He has given to us in ways that both glorify Him and serve our neighbor.<sup>17</sup> Both tables of the Law, summarized by Jesus, have application here: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37, 39).

It is precisely at this point that the potential for abuse lies so close at hand among those who gamble. To care for one's family and for those who are in need, especially in modern economies, requires fiscal responsibility. Gambling's ostensible purpose is financial enrichment, and yet it almost always leads to financial loss.<sup>18</sup> That loss almost always impinges directly and in harmful ways on the well-being of those whom God calls us to care for and to love.

<sup>16</sup> See David A. Krueger, "Play money," *Christian Century* (November 11, 1992), 1022.

<sup>17</sup> The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16 indicates that the rich man's refusal to share the good things he has received in this life with the poor man Lazarus is an element in the reversal that takes place as a result of God's judgment.

<sup>18</sup> Curt Suplee of the *Washington Post* has pointed out that "statistically you are seven times more likely to be hit by lightning than to become a millionaire in state lotteries." Quoted in Joe Atkins, "The States' Bad Bet," *Christianity Today* (November 25, 1991), 21.

Proponents of gambling sometimes defend the practice by pointing out that since there are many areas in life that involve elements of risk (e.g., business ventures, investments, farming), gambling cannot be condemned without also passing judgment on all risk-taking ventures. To be sure, there are elements of “risk” involved in all human decision-making, for it is not possible fully to possess in advance the wisdom of hindsight. However, our Creator has provided us with the gift of reason and the knowledge, despite our limited vision, to make decisions based on the given patterns of His created order. It is precisely because of this limited vision that we are repeatedly urged to place our trust in the Lord, who provides for those who look to Him (Ps. 145:15–16) and in everything “works for good with those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). Gambling involves taking risks of a different sort, for the focus is entirely on beating the odds. In games of chance it is not possible—however skillful one may have become in “improving” the odds—to make a *reasonable* choice based on what we know about the way in which God provides for His creatures. It is therefore also extremely difficult, by the very nature of the case, to make the responsible decisions required of one who seeks to be a faithful manager of this life’s goods.

### **3. Gambling undermines absolute reliance on God for His provision.**

Opponents of gambling often argue that the practice appeals especially to the nonaffluent members of our society. They point to the studies that indicate that gambling appeals to the poor among us who end up wagering a greater percentage of their incomes.<sup>19</sup> Gambling’s appeal, it is observed, is based on the illusory promise and the desperate hope of a big win, for it seems to offer the only “real” hope for many to better their lives. Less able to sustain loss, the poor thus bear the heaviest burden.

While we may agree that gambling, however voluntary, victimizes the poor, this does not mean that the temptations that lead to abuse are peculiar to them. The same “gnawing dissatisfaction” with the “current level of provision” given by God dwells in the hearts of rich and poor alike.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Atkins cites a New Jersey study which found that more than one-third of families with incomes of less than \$10,000 spend one-fifth of their incomes on lotteries. He also points to a study of the Maryland lottery that showed that people earning less than \$10,000 annually buy more tickets than any other income group (21).

<sup>20</sup> See David Neff and Thomas Giles, “Feeding the Monster Called ‘More,’ “ *Christianity Today* (Nov. 25, 1991), 19. Martin Franzmann writes: “Things can master not only the man who is intent upon living well but also the man desperately concerned about living at all” (Franzmann, *Follow Me*, 57).



We are reminded here of Luther's comments on the First Commandment:

Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trusts and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man also has a god—mammon by name, that is, money and possessions—on which he fixes his whole heart. It is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and property feels secure, happy, fearless, as if he were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, he who has nothing doubts and despairs as if he never heard of God. Very few there are who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and cleaves to our nature all the way to the grave.<sup>21</sup>

Gambling's powerful appeal is the hoped-for windfall. For those who succumb to its allure, gambling breeds discontent with the present condition—a state of mind that the Scriptures trace to a lack of trust in God's gracious provision (Heb. 13:5; cf. 1 Tim. 6:6–10; Phil. 4:10–13).

#### **4. Gambling works at cross purposes with a commitment to productive work.**

God places value on all fruitful labor. In Old Testament wisdom literature, in particular, indolence or sloth is held in derision (see e.g., Prov. 10:26; 19:24; 21:25; 22:13; 26:14; Eccl. 10:18). Idleness is scorned in the Scriptures not merely because it brings poverty to one who is lazy (Prov. 6:6–11), but because it also withholds the product of one's labor from the common life. In the New Testament the apostles condemn idleness and commend work because labor is the means through which one carries out social responsibilities (Eph. 4:28; 2 Thess. 3:6–13; cf. 1 Thess. 4:11; Titus 3:1; 1 Cor. 4:12)—obligations that are especially important within the Christian community. Work is not glorified for its own sake, nor does it establish human worth before God. But it should serve as a sign that one's life is not turned in on self but is oriented toward the good of another.

Because gambling promises financial gain without work, the temptation to indolence and the neglect of productive labor is very real. The financial strains placed on families because of gambling are too common to ignore. Indulgence in other amusements, of course, can bring similar deprivations to family and community, but the get-rich-quick enticements of gambling make it an especially dangerous threat to the welfare of others.

<sup>21</sup> Large Catechism, I, 5–9 (Tappert, 365–66).

## 5. Gambling is a potentially addictive behavior.

There is a sobering realism in what the Scriptures say about the power of greed and the dangers it brings. Greed has the potential of bringing a person “under an ungodly and demonic spell which completely separates from God through serving an alien power”<sup>22</sup> (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9–13). The language of Jesus “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24) certainly indicates that money or possessions, through an inordinate desire to have them, have the power literally to “own” a person.

Gambling falls into the category of behaviors that have the potential to become addictive.<sup>23</sup> Obviously, not everyone who gambles becomes addicted to the practice and we would caution against premature and uninformed judgments in this regard. Nevertheless, the problem of compulsive or pathological gambling has now afflicted significant numbers of those who gamble, and it is expected that the incidence of the problem will become higher as gambling and its availability increase.<sup>24</sup> Addictive behavior can become extremely difficult to overcome without the help of others. The Christian community’s love and support, and its use of the means of grace as God’s power for healing and restoration, offer hope for those under such a burden.

<sup>22</sup> Delling, 271.

<sup>23</sup> According to the American Psychiatric Association “pathological gambling” is the “chronic and progressive failure to resist impulses to gamble, and gambling behavior that compromises, disrupts, or damages personal, family, or vocational pursuits.” Pathological gambling has similarity with other addictive behaviors and can be diagnosed according to certain criteria. Henry Lesieur, a member of the board of directors of the National Council on Problem Gambling and of an American Psychiatric Association work group on disorders of impulse control, reports: “The American Psychiatric Association is proposing new diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling for inclusion in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. Maladaptive behavior is indicated by at least four of the following: 1) preoccupied with gambling—preoccupied with reliving past gambling experiences, handicapping or planning the next venture, or thinking of ways to get money with which to gamble; 2) needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money in order to achieve the desired excitement; 3) is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling; 4) gambles as a way of escaping from problems or relieving dysphoric mood—feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression; 5) often returns another day in order to get even (“chasing” one’s money) after losing; 6) lies to family and others to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling; 7) engages in illegal acts such as forgery, fraud, theft, or embezzlement, committed in order to finance gambling; 8) has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of gambling; 9) relies on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation caused by gambling (a “bailout”); 10) repeats unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling.” Henry R. Lesieur, “Compulsive Gambling,” *Society* (May/June 1992), 43–44. See also Archibald D. Hart, *Healing Life’s Hidden Addictions* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Surveys have indicated that before casinos approximately two percent of the total American population suffered from a gambling disorder. In some states, however, the percentages have increased markedly since the explosion of the casino industry. *Helpline*, A Publication of SSM Behavioral Medicine, St. Joseph’s Health Center, St. Louis, January/February, 1995.

## 6. Gambling threatens the welfare of our neighbor and militates against the common good.

The scriptural command to love and to do good to all (1 Thess. 3:12; 5:15) also carries with it the reminder that “love does no wrong to a neighbor” (Rom. 13:10). How Christians are to conduct themselves toward their fellow human beings, both within and outside of the Christian church, may be “summed up in this sentence,” says St. Paul: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Rom. 13:9). Christians, therefore, will always be concerned about social practices that encourage wrong or bring harm to others, and that inevitably make onerous, and even destroy, the common life of society.<sup>25</sup>

Consider what Robert Goodman, in his book *The Luck Business*, calls “problem gambling.” He details the enormous social costs of problem gambling and concludes thus:

By examining the combined costs which are produced by the behavior of problem gamblers, including bankruptcies, fraud, embezzlement, unpaid debts, and increased criminal justice expenses, researchers [estimate] ... the yearly average combined private and public costs of each problem gambler have ranged between \$20,000 and \$30,000 in 1993 dollars, with some reports as high as \$52,000.<sup>26</sup>

Goodman adds that “even more disturbing than the enormous financial costs of increased gambling is the rise of human tragedies that have followed in the wake of government promotions of more opportunities to gamble.”<sup>27</sup> The climate has now been created where “ordinary people” are enticed into activities leading to personal and family trauma, and even in some cases to the loss of human life.<sup>28</sup>

Those who are concerned about the well-being of their neighbor have good reason to question the appropriateness of participating in an industry that brings such loss. And, this is to say nothing of the moral evils that often cluster around the quest for easy money and so easily trap the unwary (viz., prostitution, sex shows, drug dealing, drunkenness, money laundering by criminals, and corruption of public officials).<sup>29</sup> In the face of

<sup>25</sup> This document does not take up the posture of the corporate church with respect to gambling as a political issue. For a discussion of the ways in which an issue such as gambling might possibly be addressed by the church in the public square, see *Render unto Caesar ... and unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1995, especially pages 55–90.

<sup>26</sup> Goodman, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>29</sup> Krueger, 1022. See also Robert Goodman and Brett Martin, “The *Real* Economy of Legalized Gambling,” *Christian Social Action* (July/August 1994), 8–11; Lee Ranch, “We’re Selling Out to a Bunch of Looters?” *Christian Social Action* (July/August 1994), 12–16.

such threats to the common good, the sober reminder of the apostle Paul seems especially fitting: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise ... because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15–16).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Gambling itself (even if one should win) may also cause offense to fellow Christians in the body of Christ—illustrating how complex moral judgments in this area can become (cf. 1 Cor. 10:23–30; Romans 14).

## A Pastoral Perspective

### Freedom, Legalism, and the Christian Life

From the foregoing discussion the question arises, if gambling holds so great a potential for abuse, why not simply declare it a sin and condemn it in all its forms? A word of caution, however, is in order.

Some Christians have taken the position that certain behaviors (such as any form of dancing, smoking, alcoholic consumption, the cinema, card games, certain forms of music, and the like) are sinful *because they can (and often do)* lead to sinful behavior. Such a way of proceeding is reminiscent of the thinking of religious leaders of Jesus' day. The rabbis built a so-called "fence around the law" in order not to commit a sin by oversight and in so doing they placed terrible burdens upon God's people.<sup>31</sup> The Scriptures themselves, however, warn against the tendency (which God's people throughout history have not always successfully resisted) to teach "as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:9). Where God's Word does not clearly declare a certain behavior sinful, we must refrain from binding the consciences of others. We must neither take away from nor add to Scripture.<sup>32</sup> (It should also be noted that such a "fence-building" procedure, which becomes fascinated with regulating the believer's life in minute detail, also is in grave danger of falling prey to a Gospel-denying legalism, which makes "godly behavior"—that is, the avoidance of evil and the doing of good—the standard for a right relationship with God.)

<sup>31</sup> Of this "fence around the law" D. S. Russell writes: "Sometimes ... laws arising out of prevailing custom became established which could not find justification in the Torah, but authority would be given to them on the ground that they formed a 'fence round the Torah' (Pirke Aboth 1.1). This 'fence' consisted of cautionary rules, such as that forbidding not simply the use but even the handling of tools for the Sabbath day. Thus a man would be halted before he found himself within striking distance of a breach of the law of God. In such ways the Torah was made more and more the centre of the people's life." D.S. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 65. See also Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 82.

<sup>32</sup> Dr. Francis Pieper wrote in this connection, "*the church has ... no power to legislate beyond the Word of God.* It can command only where God has commanded in His Word." Under no conditions is the church "to allow liberty where Scripture commands and, on the other hand, never to command anything where Scripture is silent." Quoted in Theodore Graebner, *The Borderland of Right and Wrong*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 40.

Employing a logic similar to the rabbinic form of reasoning and with application to the issue of gambling, some today may be led to argue that, though the Scriptures do not speak directly to the matter, because of the attitudes, desires, and habits that gambling so strongly encourages and promotes, it is virtually impossible for an individual to gamble without sinning. The implication then drawn is that every act of gambling must be declared sinful and prohibited to those who wish to call themselves Christians.

To safeguard the principle of Christian liberty, and in faithfulness to the *sola scriptura* principle, we must refrain from declaring that each and every act of gambling is in and of itself contrary to the Word of God and therefore sinful. This is not to diminish the potential for wrongdoing in the lives of those who gamble, but it is to say that individuals will need to exercise careful discernment in light of the scriptural concerns such as those raised in this document.<sup>33</sup> In the words of St. Paul, “you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another ... I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:13, 16).

Mindful of the Gospel’s power to renew hearts and minds, pastors and congregations will help individuals develop a sense of personal responsibility regarding the use of the gifts God has entrusted to them. This involves such dimensions of the Christian life as the examination of motives, proper management of time and possessions, and faithfulness in vocation and family life. The church’s ministry to persons troubled by the problem of gambling in their personal lives must be centered in the Gospel of forgiveness, for it is ultimately only the grace of God revealed in His Son that is able to liberate them from the temptations that so easily beset those who gamble. Our sins are forgiven in Christ, including the sins of greed and lovelessness toward others. Through the power of His Holy Spirit, God helps us to open our hearts in love and kindness, for He is at work in us both “to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

<sup>33</sup> It may be asked, for instance, whether less institutionalized types of gambling such as penny-ante poker, sporting event office pools, golfing for a small wager “just to make it interesting,” etc., involve the same degree of potential abuse as the more institutionalized methods (such as slot machines, roulette, lotteries, video poker, etc.) referred to previously in this document. Small-stakes games may be seen as less problematic, since they are not normally engaged in to make money in any meaningful sense. That is to say, such activities tend to have as their focus the game itself and not the money associated with the game—though, of course, those who bet token money “just for fun” should be aware of the temptation to ignore the dangers that actually do exist and must evaluate their activities in light of the scriptural principles discussed in this report.





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