



# Theological Reflections on Gambling and the National Lottery

## Preamble

Conference 2012 passed the following resolution:

*The Conference affirms its opposition to all forms of gambling. However, in light of the increased move by government to meet its social responsibility through lottery-sourced funding, Conference resolves to permit Missions and other Church bodies to apply for lottery-sourced funding under the following circumstances:*

- *for specific projects that enhance work alongside those in need,*
- *when all other potential sources of funding have been exhausted,*
- *and where such projects help in addressing issues of injustice and deprivation in our society.*

In light of this resolution and the widespread concern expressed throughout the Connexion regarding gambling in general and lottery in particular, the General Committee sensed that two areas needed further reflection. Firstly, to explore more fully the alternative sources of funding which churches and community projects might access. The Connexional Finance Committee is taking on this task. Secondly, to explore more deeply the theological issues around gambling, lottery funding and money.

## Introduction

Notwithstanding the increasing complexity and growth of the gambling industry, the Methodist Church in Ireland has traditionally given a lead in opposing gambling in all its forms. It is regarded as a sinful activity with harmful social consequences and thus reflects neither love of God nor neighbour.

Our present legislation states:

**10.67** *Gambling of every kind is expressly forbidden in all Methodist Church buildings; and further:-*

*(a) The raising of funds for Methodist Church purposes by means of raffles, gaming or by any method which involves gambling is not permitted under any circumstances.*

*(b) Raffles are not permitted in halls, schools, institutes or other premises forming part of our Church buildings.*

*(c) Guessing and other competitions which involve the method or principle of the raffle are also excluded.*

It has been argued that para. 10.67 (a) refers only to raising of funds “for Methodist Church purposes” and not to the expenditure of such funds. Is this a valid distinction? Does it not follow that if funds cannot be raised by gambling “for Methodist Church purposes” applying for and accepting lottery funding is in fact breach of this regulation? It has further been



argued that this particular paragraph does not (and cannot) legislate for monies generated outside the Methodist Church and that the question of the use of such funds is a separate issue.

But consider then these extracts from United Methodist Church *2008 Book of Resolutions, Gambling*:

- The Church should promote standards and personal lifestyles that would make unnecessary and undesirable the resort to commercial gambling—including public lotteries—as a recreation, as an escape, or as a means of producing public revenue or funds for support of charities or government.
- The Church's prophetic call is to promote standards of justice and advocacy which would make it unnecessary and undesirable to resort to commercial gambling—including public lotteries, casinos, raffles, Internet gambling, gambling with an emerging wireless technology and other games of chance—as a recreation, as an escape, or as a means of producing public revenue or funds for support of charities or government.
- In practice, this means that United Methodist churches should not raise funds through methods such as raffles, lotteries, bingo or drawings for door prizes or through games of chance such as bingo.

Some argue that the investment in the Stock Exchange is gambling and can have harmful consequences for society. Is there a substantive difference between gambling and investing?

Merriam-Webster's defines "investing" as : "to commit (money) in order to earn a financial return." Secondly, it is defined as: "to make use of for future benefits or advantages". For "gamble", the first meaning is "to play a game for money or property" and the second is "to stake something on a contingency." An investor is buying a stake in a company with the hope that their money will make a return over several years. A gambler plays a game hoping to double or triple their money in a very short period of time, a day, a week at the loser's expense. Certainly, some investors turn it into a gamble by buying and selling on the basis of "hot tips" and rumours with the hope of making a "fast buck". A wise investor is hoping that over time the company will be successful, profitable and give its shareholders dividends thus the obligation on any Christian to invest ethically and sensibly.

It is true that lots were cast in the bible. The practice of casting lots (cleromancy) is mentioned 70 times in the Old Testament and three times in the New Testament. The exact method is unknown but they were most likely sticks of various lengths, flat stones or some kind of dice. The closest modern day equivalent would be that of flipping a coin.

Some examples from the Old Testament include God allowing the Israelites to cast lots in order to determine His will for a given situation (Joshua 18:6-10; 1 Chronicles 24:5,31), the sailors on Jonah's ship (Jonah 1:7) and the determination of various offices and functions in the temple (1 Chronicles 24:5, 31; 25:8-9; 26:13-14).



The three recordings of casting lots in the New Testament are: Luke 1:9 (choosing Zechariah to enter the temple to burn incense); Matthew 27:35 (the Roman soldiers deciding who would get Jesus' garments) and Acts 1:26 (the apostles deciding who would replace Judas).

Immediately following the choosing of Mathias in Acts 1:26, is the story of Pentecost (Acts 2 ff). After that event there are no more records in scripture of the use of casting lots. Rather, it seems, the very early church became dependent on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to guide and lead, and not chance.

Although for the most part Christians have not used chance to make decisions, over the years some have. For example, in the Eastern Orthodox Church this method of selection is still occasionally used. In 1917 Metropolitan Tikhon was elected Patriarch of Moscow by the drawing of lots. German Pietist Christians in the 18th Century often followed the New Testament precedent of drawing Lots to determine the will of God. This was often done by selecting a random Bible passage. While cleromancy is dependent on the laws of the universe such as position and force, God's ability to intervene with those laws, a miracle, can never be ruled out. We have a record of his intervention in cleromancy in Acts 1:26.

Does this mean that seeking out the voice of the Holy Spirit by chance, whether it be throwing a dice or flipping open the Bible, is to be recommended for the Church today?

Consider the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as the Methodist approach to theological reflection. It involves Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience. The model recognises the God-given gift of our intellect, the wisdom of those who went before us, the heart-warming experience as well as Scripture as helpful and important tools to seek out God's will for us, the church and the whole of His creation.

In Hebrews we hear the author say: *"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son."* (1:1-2) In Paul's prayer for the Romans he says: *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit"* (Ch. 15:13) and how he urges the church *"to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."* (Ch.12: 1-2)

These verses lead us into a relationship with God's Son, and to hear His direction through the gift of the Holy Spirit. God has now become more relational and personal than anywhere else in Scripture so the Church no longer needs to look at impersonal ways of hearing Him, such as through the cleromancy, but rather through a relationship with Him bound by the ties of the Holy Spirit.

Some New Testament Guidelines for making decisions should include:

- Willingness to acknowledge one's weaknesses and vulnerability and act with humility as a reflection of Christ's nature (Phil.2.2-8).



- Willingness, if necessary, to take risks and face the unpredictable.
- Expectation that the Spirit will speak through everyone regardless of whether or not they agree with one's viewpoint.
- Willingness to respect and listen to the contributions of all.
- Belief that God grants gifts to all people and that we can only function effectively within the Church with the help of fellow Christians (1 Cor. 12.12-27).
- Confidence and trust that God has a vision for the Church (Eph. 5.17).
- Dependence on the Holy Spirit's guidance in seeking God's vision for the way forward (Acts 15.28).

.There follow some reflections under three headings: historical, theological and moral.

### **Historical**

The early Methodists, including Rev John Wesley, influenced by the Puritans, were opposed to "gaming". Some Westminster divines argued that a person participating in gambling was in breach of all Ten Commandments! In Sermon XLIV on the use of money, Mr Wesley sums up the implicit Christian view when he counts gambling as a means of gain inconsistent with love of neighbour. In Sermon LII he refers to gamblers "who made a trade of seizing on young and inexperienced men, and tricking them out of all their money...not a few of these (were constrained) honestly to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, and the labour of their hands."

In 1930, the Methodist Church in Ireland, with the Irish Council of Churches, opposed the creation of the Hospital Sweepstakes in the Irish Free State, rejecting the raising or use of the proceeds of gambling for Church work and "philanthropic purposes." The Methodist Church also campaigned against the introduction of the National Lottery in the United Kingdom in 1994.

It is known that the largest percentage of persons purchasing lottery tickets comes from those on low incomes. The Lottery has been described as a "tax on the poor" who grasp at the chance to escape the poverty trap. By denouncing the Lottery our Church has expressed the biblical "option for the poor" and has tried to set an example for the sake of the urban poor. In the 1931 Conference, opposition to the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes was regarded as an "unmistakable witness on the part of the Church." James 2 v 17 reminds us that "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

Our Church made significant statements about gambling in 1931, 1951, 1958, 2003, 2007 and 2012 and is concerned about the spread of internet gambling. Methodists are urged to abstain from gambling and to minister to those addicted to or victimized by the practice. Our Church's prophetic call is to promote standards of justice and advocacy that make us



question the need to resort to gambling as a recreation or escape, or as a means of providing public revenue or funds for the support of charities or Government.

### Theological

Two key questions need to be addressed. Is money neutral? Can money be redeemed? Let us first be reminded why Christians are opposed to gambling. Archbishop William Temple famously outlined four theological reasons why gambling is wrong in itself.

1. God leaves nothing to chance.

To make chance the arbiter is to subvert the God-given moral order and, thus, the stability of life. According to the Bible, God is the God of order who leaves nothing to good fortune. He provides all that his people need. We are not to trust our luck. We are to rely fully on God's providence.

2. Gambling contradicts the biblical principle of stewardship.

Before God we are not proprietors and owners but caretakers and stewards of all that we have. What we possess is not our own, it belongs to God. We have it on trust. Gambling involves needlessly risking what belongs to God. In due time, we will render an account to God for our stewardship.

3. Gambling promotes self-interest.

It is anti-social as it seeks to profit from someone else's loss. The winner's pleasure is had at the expense of the misery of the losers. A spirit of self-interest cannot cast out selfishness. It runs contrary to our calling which is to deny ourselves and to love our neighbour. Jesus commanded in Luke 6v31 "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

4. Gambling appeals to covetousness.

The Bible promotes reason, responsibility, skill and justice. Gambling undermines these. Covetousness is condemned in the Commandments and by the teaching of Jesus.

We could add that gambling causes havoc to individuals and families. The danger of addiction is strong. Christians are sometimes called upon to sacrifice their own freedoms for the sake of others, especially children, who are susceptible to harm from engagement in particular activities.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10 v 23, 24 "I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others."

#### **Is money neutral?**

Scripture does not condemn money as sinful but the love of money is clearly condemned; "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6 v 9, 10.)

Whilst John Wesley condemned gaming – likening it to the activity of fraudulent tradespeople, he also believed that "The fault does not lie in money, but in them that use



it.” Rather, says Wesley, money “is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked... It is therefore of the highest concern that all who fear God know how to employ this valuable talent.”

### **Can polluted money be redeemed? - JPurdy**

If you were offered the gift of a used car which you knew to be stolen, would you accept it? The answer is “No.” Much less would you ask for it! To do so would make you complicit in the theft. If, as gambling impact studies suggest, the Lottery is an “unjust” and “regressive” tax then it is theft by another name.

To redeem something (in theological terms) **means to change its nature**. By using its proceeds, we are not redeeming the evil means. The Church is not in the business of “laundering” lottery money; we would rather **slay the evil monster** that produces it.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that by accepting lottery funding, some churches are *de facto* signalling their approval for gambling and in effect **blessing the National Lottery**, notwithstanding the widespread misery it causes.

Perhaps our church needs to repent that we have not **vehemently** opposed the evil of gambling, or that we have not been willing to pay increased taxes to do good and promote social justice.

## **Moral**

### **Can the end ever justify the means? J Purdy**

Philosophers have been reluctant to allow that “the end justifies the means”. Methodists follow their founder who said: “We are not allowed ‘to do evil that good may come.’” The opposition of the Conference to the raising or use of funds from gambling, inside and outside our church buildings, was ably expressed in the 1931 Conference by Rev R Lee Cole: “It [i.e. The Conference] feels that it cannot be right to seek an end, however useful, by means which are evil and that permanent good will never be secured by immoral methods.” Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, said: “God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply.”

**John is revising this section for our consideration**



## Conclusion

The lottery as 'a thinly disguised and unjust tax' and it is argued that there is no biblical basis for relying on chance for income, either through gambling or applying to an unjust structure for monies.

Notwithstanding the current recession and austerity measures, as a Church, theological integrity should not be sacrificed in favour of pragmatism or economic expediency. St Paul said: "I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (Acts 24 v 16.) Prior to the National Lottery being introduced in the United Kingdom in 1994 firm assurances were given that funding derived from the Lottery would be additional to and not a replacement for statutory funding. These assurances have largely been ignored and increasingly funding for various projects is derived solely from Lottery funding; hence the social outreach of the Missions and Circuits of MCI has been severely limited.

We must also not forget, as the UMC says in its *2008 Book of Resolutions*, Gambling, "The Church has a key role in fostering responsible government and in helping persons develop health and moral maturity that will help them break free from unhealthy and damaging addictions such as gambling."

***Council on Social Responsibility***  
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