

Not a Betting Man

Recently I was asked what I thought about whether Christians should feel free to play card games that are usually associated with gambling. I thought about that for a while, and finally arrived at this answer:

“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.” (Romans 14:20-21)

In other words, start with the ancient issue of meat sacrificed to idols. Transfer to our modern day the timeless principle of self-restraint for others' sake. You will conclude that many of the things that we Christians often freely join the world in enjoying, we'd do better to stay away from.

For example, seeing the widespread devastation that the abuse of alcohol brings into families all around me, I don't use alcohol as a beverage. I don't believe any American Christian should. Period. Our church covenant holds forth that conviction, and expresses our common agreement that we will all limit our freedom in that specific way – for the good of those around us.

In the same way, seeing the spreading cancer of legalized and even government-sponsored gambling in our land, and hearing the repeated horror stories of families bankrupted, marriages destroyed, children left in poverty by gambling addictions, I have a very simple response: I don't want anything to do with anything that even smells like gambling. Period. Neither should you. Neither should our church.

I don't play the lottery. It is a predatory stealth tax on the desperate poor and those who can't do simple math. It is a loser's game, even for those who “win.” The testimony of the woman whose husband won the largest lottery payout in history is telling: “It has just about destroyed our life.”

I realize that just about every card game was at one point in history a betting game, and that almost every board game includes some form of dice – originally gamblers' tools. But let's be sensible. I'm not saying that we need to be so restrictive as to refuse any game whatsoever.

What I am saying is that, in the case of those kinds of games that are widely used for gambling in our land today, we should abstain. I'm sure that somebody, somewhere, bets on UNO... but nobody thinks of UNO as a betting game. I know there are plenty of people who play poker or join sports pools just for fun... but everybody knows where those games came from and how they're normally played. Usually, there's money on the table.

If you object that the Bible nowhere expressly forbids gambling itself, let alone non-betting participation in “gamblers' games,” my reply is this: the Bible nowhere expressly forbids slavery, either. In fact, even in the New Testament, slavery is assumed to be merely a fact of life. But Christians came to see that slavery was (and is) totally contrary to the spirit of Christ's gospel. Today there is widespread – nearly unanimous, in fact – agreement among Christians around the world that holding slaves is unacceptable behavior for a Christian. The same could be said about polygamy, or wife-beating: nowhere expressly forbidden in the NT, but still clearly contrary to the spirit of the gospel, and clearly addressed by NT principles – and so unacceptable for us as believers today. The absence of an indisputable “thou shalt not” isn't the same thing as a “go right ahead.”

The very best you can say about gambling is that is entertainment for those who are too lazy or cowardly to play games of pure skill, and pitifully poor stewardship, to boot. It would be more fair to say that it is participating in and even supporting an activity that is destroying families far and wide – all for our own amusement.

Gambling, in short, is not for Christians. Nothing that even hints of gambling will find a place in my life. And it's my conviction that there should be nothing that even hints of it in our church.

Am I saying that I'm hereby forbidding the members of our church from...(yada, yada)? You know that I have no authority to tell you how to resolve such issues in your own life. That's what you have the Word and the Spirit for. All I'm saying, as your pastor, is this: please think about what you do. Think about what it might encourage others to feel free to do. And ask yourself what you really want.

I heard a brother express this principle in the most simple and yet powerful way today. He mentioned how so many people talk about what they gave up when they became believers: the booze, the broads, the whatever. This brother said, "I didn't give up anything when I came to Christ. I just traded up for things that were far better."

Do you get it? There are far better pleasures than the fun of a few tawdry games. The pleasure of living carefully, limiting your freedoms for the good of others, choosing your fun with the Kingdom in mind, is far, far better.

Why not just trade up?

© Christopher Gudmundsson, 2005