

Can a Christian Participate in a Lottery?

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The question is twofold.

It asks whether being a Christian and participating in a lottery are mutually exclusive.

It also asks whether participation in a lottery, though not necessarily soul-destroying, should or must nevertheless be totally shunned by a Christian, or forbidden to a Christian.

Gambling

Since the lottery is a form of gambling, let us first look at gambling in general. To gamble is to play games of chance for money or some other advantage; or to take a risk in order to gain some advantage.

My own association with gambling has been very limited. One occasion I can distinctly remember occurred when I was a teenager. An older cousin and I were in a local bar. Not having any money, I was just standing around. My cousin, being better off, turned from the bar and handed me a penny: "Put it in the slot machine," he said. I put it in the penny machine, pulled the handle, and: Jackpot! Pennies cascaded all over the floor. Though that happened over forty years ago, I still remember it distinctly.

This points up one reason why people gamble. Excitement. The excitement of that long-ago moment, the shock, the attention it got me from the onlookers, was so great that I have not forgotten it.

It was, and I believe still is, a favorite pastime in my childhood community to play cards for money. As a budding theologian I took it on myself once to ask some of my relatives why they played for pennies, nickles or dimes. Why not for matches, or keep score with a pencil. A condescending uncle took pains to explain that it was not done for greed or hope of gain. "It makes it more interesting," he said.

Several years ago we were watching a nature program on TV. There was this common squirrel in a large tree. On the branch just below him a big snake—perhaps an anaconda—was twined. The squirrel showed signs of excitement, agitation, even elation. Perhaps three times he dashed close to the snake's head and struck at it with a paw, leaping away in the nick of time to avoid the snake's jaws. The fourth time he was caught and killed in an instant.

To me, both of these instances show another cause for gambling: the universal urge to escape boredom. The desire to escape boredom makes everyone gamble. We climb the mountain not because it is there, but because we think we won't be bored while doing it. The danger involved in taking the chance makes taking the chance desirable. Thus, we drive too fast; we keep on smoking when we know it will probably shorten our life; we put off preparing a sermon until five o'clock on Sunday morning.

People gamble also in the hope of finding an easy solution to financial problems. A certain percentage of human beings cannot escape from a fairy tale world into cold reality. Tomorrow will be better; luck will change; fortune will smile; my ship will come in. These are the people who give practical persons fits. They will never stop gambling.

Gambling is also done for greed. The urge to gain at the expense of a neighbor is just as prevalent a sin as God's law makes it out to be. Yet, in the case of gambling, I doubt that greed is so prominent a motive as may be thought. If a person is really greedy he should be running the

game, not doing the gambling. Greed is soon thwarted by gambling because the persistent gambler always loses in the end. Even the squirrel got caught when he anted-up once too often.

Like many other pursuits which are commonly accepted by the general public as being relatively harmless, gambling can and does become a total vice for some.

Once, when in Las Vegas for the purpose of conducting a worship service at our mission there, we arrived in town on Saturday afternoon. Like any tourists, we went downtown to see the sights that night. In fact, my good spouse had announced before we got there that she had fifty cents in her pocket that she intended to venture. But when we saw what was going on—little old ladies in tennis shoes, wearing carpenter aprons filled with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of quarters or half dollars, dozens, even hundreds of little old ladies, each one sitting on a stool before a battery of three or four one-armed bandits, using a fast, rhythmical; long practiced motion to stuff the machines and pull the handles, using both hands and with a glassy-eyed, expressionless fixed stare accepting gain or loss, just stuffing, stuffing, stuffing, and making the uninitiated onlooker wonder if it was for this that their husbands or fathers had amassed their fortunes; and slot machines along the checkout lanes of Las Vegas supermarkets, and mothers and children stuffing their grocery change into them; and the moral horrors of the big, brassy, indescribably cheap and chintzy casinos with their cheap and chintzy people we were so completely turned off and aghast that my spouse kept her fifty cents, and added it to the mission offering the next morning. A gift, I venture to say, that brought her as exhilarating a feeling of joy over the rightness of right things as any act she ever performed.

About Lotteries

Lotteries are contrivances by means of which something of value is distributed by chance among persons who have given some form of consideration to participate in the distribution. The distribution of something of value is qualified by the prerequisite that a prize be involved. The presence of a prize depends on inequality of distribution among the various participants.

Thus, when the soldiers at the Cross cast lots over the Lord's robe, they were participating in a lottery. The consideration given was the fourth part of the robe each was entitled to, but which he now ventured. The chance was the fall of the dice or whatever gambling device was used. The prize was the robe.

The only encyclopedia I could find that has a useful article on lotteries is the New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 edition. I believe it will interest you to hear most of this article. I quote:

The word lottery has been traced to the Teutonic *hleut*, which designated a disc or pebble drawn to assist in the making of various decisions and the settling of disputes, the thought being that divine intervention controlled the outcome.

The Romans found the lottery to be a source of entertainment and used it to distribute gifts at social gatherings. During the course of the Middle Ages, however, the lottery underwent a metamorphosis and became recognized as a potential source of income for private enterprise. The merchants of Europe, especially in Italy, adopted the lottery as a means of stimulating the sale of their merchandise, thus originating the commodity or merchandise lottery, more commonly known in modern times as the raffle.

The early sixteenth century witnessed the employment of lotteries by European governments as a means of increasing general revenue, financing public and charitable

projects, and supporting the fine arts. As the popularity of the lottery became more widespread, numerous abuses and fraudulent practices appeared and ultimately resulted in the institution of government controls, some merely regulating, others totally abolishing the lottery. The protagonists of such governmental intervention included merchants and industrialists who complained that the unorthodox method of disposing of goods by lotteries diverted large sums from regular commercial channels. Moreover, socially minded individuals maintained that lotteries were having harmful effects upon the lower classes, and ecclesiastical authorities labeled lotteries as immoral gambling schemes that encouraged sloth, detracted from dependence on the will of God, etc. Nonetheless, almost all modern states (including Russia) have turned to lotteries in some period of their history as a source of revenue.

In the formative years of the U.S. the lottery occupied a notable position in its fiscal structure. While circumstances and a laissez-faire attitude appear to have been responsible for the lottery's initial acceptance, its ultimate rejection in the latter part of the 19th century was determined by public opinion as influenced by sociological, moral, and economic considerations.

For the American colonists, the lottery constituted a socially acceptable method of disposing of merchandise and real estate and raising funds for a variety of causes, charitable, civic, and religious. Moreover, the compulsion of economic necessity and the general lack of moral opposition virtually assured the lottery of both a respectable status and a prominent position in the commercial life of the Colonies.

In the ensuing years a shortage of public funds combined with the war expenditures occasioned by the French and Indian wars and by the Revolution, along with the inability or refusal of the colonists to pay additional taxes, all served as direct or indirect causes for the lottery's continued popularity. The Continental Congress turned to the lottery as a means of supporting the colonial army; the expenses of the Revolution and the repair of its ravages were financed in great part by lotteries.

In the years immediately following the Revolution increasing demands were made by the public for additional services, and the government assumed a host of new responsibilities. Charities came to be viewed as a community objective because of the inability of private charities to meet the needs of progressive humanitarian concern. Resort was therefore had to a plethora of lotteries, which benefited hospitals, schools, charities, transportation, communication, and internal improvements such as bridges, canals, and roads.

The augmented utilization of the lottery generated numerous abuses and managerial misconduct: drawings were either manipulated or not held at all; inferior goods were raffled; tickets were forged or resold after being drawn; a given ticket would be split into fractional shares and resold at great profit to the original purchaser; non-participants in the lottery wagered that a particular number would or would not be drawn ("insurance"). As the perversions became amplified, state and local government interference increased; and bonds, licenses, and periodic reports were required.

At the beginning of the 19th century there appeared two species of entrepreneurs—ticket brokers and lottery contractors—whose coming presaged the transformation of the lottery into a nationwide business and who, paradoxically, were instrumental in its ultimate abolition. The contractors and brokers took the place of volunteer workers and employed promotional and organizational techniques that were later adopted by many types of business concerns: high pressure salesmanship, open accounts, installment accounts, advertising, and the leasing of tickets. As a result the lottery became a lucrative, highly competitive business and a daily preoccupation of large segments of the population throughout the U.S. Several historians have looked upon the lottery, as influenced by the entrepreneurs, as the forerunner of modern investment banking and the genesis of big business in the American economy.

Numerous religious denominations resorted to the lottery to assist in their growth and development; only the Quakers and a few individual clergymen condemned them as immoral. After the mid-1820s, however, the clergy, having become less dependent upon the lottery as a source of revenue, concerned themselves with the potential moral issues involved. During the 1830s the lottery became subject to a mounting wave of criticism due to the prevalent fraudulent practices and the undesirable side effects. The general economic collapse following the Panic of 1837 accelerated the reform movement in all areas and resulted in the outlawing of the lottery in many states. The Civil War, with its many economic demands, afforded the lottery a brief respite; but within a relatively short time the force of public opinion, molded by ecclesiastical influence, resulted in the reaffirmation of state proscription...

There has been a renewed interest in lotteries in recent years. In Congress, lotteries have been proposed as a means of stimulating the purchase of savings bonds, providing for the Veterans Administration, etc. Moreover several states have seriously considered its use. However, with the exception of New Hampshire, where a state-run lottery has been introduced, the legal existence of lotteries is limited to privately run bingos and raffles, and even these are not allowed in certain jurisdictions. End of quote.

Since 1967 about five additional states have sanctioned state operated or state controlled lotteries, among them Illinois. Wisconsin law at present forbids the operation of major lotteries within the state (Chapter 945, State Code). But it does not forbid going out of state to buy lottery tickets, or the importation of winnings into the state. Wisconsin residents do participate in out-of-state lotteries, but there is no way of knowing how widespread this practice is. This is the circumstance, presumably, that led to the assignment of this paper.

An article in Meusel's *Kirchliches Handlexicon*, Leipzig 1894, sets forth the question, "*Wie die Teilnahme an solchem Lotteriespiel vom christlichen Standpunkte aus zu beurteilen ist.*" In reply, the following points are urged: 1. Through participation in lotteries lust for material goods is encouraged, contrary to the warning, I Tim. 6:9 "They that will be rich fall into temptation etc." 2. Through lottery participation that chase after easy gain is practiced that is judged by II Thess. 3:10, "If any would not work etc." 3. In lottery play the desire for easy gain settles its hope on the outcome of blind chance, whereas the Christian ought to trust only in God, Ps. 37:5, "Cast thy burden on the Lord, trust also in him etc." 4. Through lottery play weak characters can squander their entire living, in that they venture more and more in the hope of making a killing, and instead lose all; while the same characters, if "lady luck" smiles on them,

bring various curses on themselves, I Tim. 6:10,"For the love of money is the root of all evil etc."

The article in Meusel also makes the point that the fact that often much more money is realized for Christian and humanitarian causes than an appeal to Christian and humanitarian motives alone would produce, is a sad commentary on the cold-heartedness of Church and society.

Martin Luther recalled the Roman Church's restrictions against gambling in his youth: "When I was a boy all games were forbidden, so that card makers, pipers, and actors were not admitted to the sacraments; and those who played games or had been present at shows or plays made it a matter of confession. (The puritanical strain of some medieval Catholicism is often overlooked.) In a treatise on usury Luther tackled the problem of gambling itself. "Money won by gambling...is not without self-seeking and love of self, and not without sin."ⁱ

The Geneva of John Calvin's day was as vicious in its gambling, prostitution and drunkenness as any medieval town. All this Calvin set himself to sweep away. In his ordinances for the supervision of country churches he wrote: "No one is to play at games that are dissolute, or at games played for gold or silver or at excessive expense, on pain of five sous and loss of the sum staked." Immoderate gambling appears to be his point of attack.ⁱⁱ

The Council of Trent which sought to bring reform to the Roman Catholic Church after the Protestant Reformation gathered and codified the ancient laws against gambling. The clergy were to abstain from unlawful games. No restrictions were addressed to the laity. From this point to the present Roman Catholic thought has considerably moderated on the subject.ⁱⁱⁱ

To the Question

Replies that have been given to the question posed by the theme of this paper by various church bodies are about what one would expect. Since specific answers to the question of lotteries are seldom available, we shall settle for positions taken regarding gambling in general.

The Roman Catholic Church actually has no official position, in the sense that there is no papal dogma or encyclical or Council decision on the subject. The Archdiocese of Washington, D. C., furnishes us with the Catholic moral attitude: "To play games of skill like golf or chess, or games of pure chance like poker or black-jack for a stake, is not in itself sinful. I may lawfully spend my money for recreation and give my neighbor some of it, if they prove more skillful or lucky than myself. A game of poker becomes of interest only when some stake is in sight for the winners. Gambling becomes sinful, if we force a person to play against his will, if we cheat, if we stake money not our own, or use money needed for our debts or the support of our families.

Betting also is not sinful in itself, if the event at issue is really uncertain, if both parties understand the bet in the same way, and if both are prepared to pay if they lose.

But all Catholic moralists are agreed that gambling and betting may lead to grave abuse and sin, especially when they are prompted by mere gain. The gambler usually frequents bad company, wastes much valuable time, becomes adverse to hard work, is strongly tempted to be dishonest when luck is against him, and often brings financial ruin upon himself and those dependent upon him.^{iv}

Greek Orthodox churches are forbidden to hold any games of chance on their premises or at any church-sponsored activities.

Speaking for the Anglican and Episcopal churches, the Lambeth Conference of 1948 said: "The Conference draws attention to the grave moral and social evils that have arisen in many lands through the prevalence of gambling on a vast scale. In view of these evils we urge

that no Church organization should make money by gambling. We depreciate the raising of money by the State or by any organization through sweepstakes and similar methods, however good the object for which the money is raised; and we warn men and women of the danger of acquiring the habit of gambling, which has led in so many cases to the deterioration of character and the ruin of homes.^v

Denominations of the Calvinist group, with their common emphasis on piety in externals, are known to condemn all forms of gambling out of hand. The United Presbyterian Church has said, "No good cause can be promoted by a practice so evil. No person or community is so rich as to be able to afford the resulting deterioration of personal integrity, the poor work habits, the demoralization of family life, the unchristian attempt to get something for nothing or at another's expense. No legislation can make lawful in the eyes of God or before men a practice so immoral." (The General Assembly of 1954.)

The Methodist Church, in one of many statements on gambling, has declared, "The passion to acquire wealth without honest labor, inflamed by widely publicized giveaway programs and the growing movement to legalize gambling in state after state, is a serious concern for Christians. The practice of gambling undermines basic moral law as well as established economic laws. Gambling is a menace to business integrity, breeds crime, and is destructive of the interests of good government."^{vi}

The Church of the Nazarene and the Conservative Baptist Association of America define their opposition to gambling in terms of a purity and morality of life required of genuine Christian discipleship.

So far as I know, no Lutheran church body has taken an official position on gambling and the lottery. The word gambling does not appear in the index of the Triglot.

Can a Christian participate in a lottery?

If we ask the question in the first sense, that to do so would per se exclude one from the Christian faith, hope and family, the answer must be evident. Yes, a Christian can participate in a lottery. Other evidence than mere participation in a lottery would be required to declare one a non-Christian.

When we ask the question in the second sense, whether participation in a lottery, though not necessarily soul destroying, must nevertheless be totally shunned by a Christian or forbidden to a Christian, the answer that should be expected from and should be given by a pastor or any other informed member of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is *no*. His answer to the question would and should be, "Yes, a Christian may participate in a lottery—sometimes."

Under what conditions may a Christian do so? If the lottery is not illegal; if he can afford it; if his participation is controlled and if he is reasonably sure his participation will not give offence to a weak brother.

I am confident that this is the answer that has been or would be given by any Lutheran pastor, congregation or synod who or that is guided by the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. But I am even more confident that this is and ought to be the answer given by any member of our Synod who knows our Synod.

Somewhere in Wisconsin there are two small Lutheran country churches located just a mile apart on the same road. One is a member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; the other, of the Wisconsin Synod. Years ago they were one church, but a controversy arose over whether the farmer members of the congregation who had built new barns could hold a barn dance. Regrettably, the controversy became so sharp that the congregation split over the issue.

Obviously, it was the faction that was in favor of allowing barn dances that left what was the Missouri congregation and formed the Wisconsin Synod church down the road.

Some of you will perhaps remember distinctly, as I do, that back around 1940 the late Prof. August Pieper was giving his Seminary students advice like this for the conduct of their future ministry: “Don’t swat at every fly.” By this he meant, I presume, that if the fly is just sitting there not bothering you, don’t waste your energy; but if it comes in from the barnyard and threatens to sit on your potatoes, let him have it! The human condition is not perfectible in this life, even in the Church; so don’t needlessly wear yourself down in a vain attempt to make it so. You will have more than enough to do swatting the flies that must be swatted. Another admonition of his was that to be a truly evangelical pastor three things are required (as I have previously recalled in a sermon you may have heard): “Know the Bible, love the people, and use Christian tact in the ministry.” The admonition to employ tact implies that, just as in the case of the fly, there is room for discretion, for decision making on moral issues, in the Christian life.

Since participation in a lottery is not stealing, nor necessarily a violation of any other Commandment or of brotherly love, the question of such participation by a Christian is one with the questions of dancing; drinking, going to shows or prizefights, playing cards, smoking, holding church suppers or bazaars, or taking a trip to Acapulco. Any or all of these can be, or be the occasion of, great wickedness. Yet any or all of them are indulged in, or at least may be indulged in, by sanctified Christians of the finest type.

It has been the particular genius of our Synod not to *herd* people. We do not try to drive them. We respect the individual. We do not like to see anyone with any kind of supposed or real authority in the church trying to make his fellow believers grist for his mill, often by taking advantage of their very confidence in him. We reverence the Christian congregation. As pastors, we look at our congregations and say to ourselves, “If there is anywhere on earth a communion of saints, this is it. They are guided by the Lord. They have the Holy Ghost. Don’t try to order them around like children. Don’t always be trying to tell them what to do. Don’t always be talking to them. Listen sometimes. When you talk, tell them what the Lord has authorized and commanded you to speak. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Do we understand why our Synod has never formally adopted any confessional statements beyond the historic Lutheran Confessions? Do we realize why our Synod does not feel itself called by the Lord to rush up to any and every real or supposed breach in the moral dikes of community or nation to stick our fingers or our noses in? So long as we understand what we are, that is to say, what the Lord has made us, we will not trouble ourselves or our people with “taking stands” or “issuing position papers” on subjects in which we have no special competence, or on which the Lord has not spoken, or which he has left to the area of Christian liberty.

ⁱ L. M. Starkey, Jr., *Money, Mania, and Morals*, Abingdon Press, p. 37.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 37.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 36.

^{iv} *Ibid.* p. 90.

^v *Ibid.* p. 94

^{vi} *Ibid.* p. 97.