

EGGS Briefing paper for GS2125 Advertising and Gambling

Introduction

This short paper aims to be a resource in conjunction with GS2125.

On Saturday afternoon the Bishop of St Albans will move on behalf of the Ministry and Public Affairs Council:

That this Synod, noting the greatly increased levels of gambling advertising and research showing significant levels of gambling by children:

(a) call on Her Majesty's Government to reduce the quantity and pervasiveness of gambling advertising and introduce a mandatory levy on gambling firms to fund independently commissioned research, education, and treatment programs;

(b) encourage churches to be an open place for people who have problems with gambling to seek support; and

(c) ask churches to support initiatives which educate children and young people about risks related to gambling.

Gambling: a Christian viewpoint

The Christian Institute describes gambling as "any activity in which wealth changes hands, mainly on the basis of chance and with risk to the gambler. Such activities include betting, fruit machines, lotteries, casino games, scratchcards and card games. Creative effort, useful skills, and responsible investment are not integral factors."

This is a helpful definition in defining the 'classical' scope of gambling. The Bible itself, perhaps surprisingly, says little directly about 'classic' gambling - there is no commandment saying 'Thou shalt not gamble' - but it does have much to say about our motivations and our attitude to money as we live as Christians in the world with its uncertainties. For instance:

"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Luke 16:13)

"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." (1 Timothy 6:10)

Also, gambling can be seen as a way to 'get rich quick' and avoid work: *Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.* (Proverbs 10:4).

Clearly the scope of these warnings and commands goes far beyond areas classically seen as gambling. For instance, in a world where much is uncertain, most of us have to make financial decisions where the outcome is uncertain - even banks can collapse!. Indeed, our economic system requires people to take risks - in return for potential rewards - whether as investors or as purchasers. At what point might a 'responsible' investment or purchase 'become a 'bit of a punt', and then 'an unethical gamble'? Discuss!

Within the classic scope there are also complexities: to give an example, in a spare afternoon I might go to a local race-course with, say, £30 in cash for betting. I might have a enjoyable time with some friends, enjoying the atmosphere, the skills of the horses and jockeys, betting £5 per race, with a chance I might win enough back to cover my round of drinks. Is that an intrinsically unethical way to spend an afternoon? Discuss !

It's important to note that Jesus does not call us to avoid risks in life - quite the opposite in many ways !! - so we do have to think through these issues carefully. Perhaps two important principles to recognise are (1) that money has a power to it that can seek to supplant the kingdom of God both in the world and in our hearts; and (2) as humans we all are often weak: I may intend to gamble just £30 at the races, but at the racecourse the advertising, perceived 'thrill', and desire to impress my friends may lead me to gamble more in practice.

Christians may have different views about where to set boundaries, but as well as these areas of personal conscience gambling undoubtedly exerts a huge human cost to our society; for many the 'buzz' of gambling can turn into addictions that destroy lives. Gambling is therefore not merely an area of personal conscience but also one where government and society rightly imposes legislation and other controls through public policy.

The human costs of gambling, GS2125, and ideas for EGGs contributions

It is this human cost, and especially the cost to children and young people, who are increasingly being drawn into gambling, that is in view in bringing GS2125 to Synod. The motion is brought on behalf of the Ministry & Public Affairs Council, although St Albans Diocesan Synod supported an identical motion last year. Begambleaware.org, reports that 1.1m people are reported as problem gamblers. The Gambling Commission recently reported that 55,000 children between 11-16 are as problem gamblers - a quadrupling in 2 years - and that that 450,000 children gamble regularly.

Recognising the undoubted influence of advertising on these very concerning figures, GS2125 calls on the government to increase restrictions on advertising, and calls on churches to be both places of help for those with gambling problems, and to support initiatives to educate children and young people about the risks. This motion ties with the 'Can we have our ball back' campaign from begambleaware.org to influence government policy in this area.

My hope is that EGGs members will warmly support this motion. It may be that some might wish to strengthen the motion by amendments: I am not a member of the MPA Council and do not have an inside line but my 'best guess' is that the scope of the Begambleaware campaign will be a factor in deciding which amendments will be welcomed and which resisted.

Other ideas how EGGs members may contribute are:

- bringing insights about these issues from professional or Christian ministry
- sharing personal stories of people who have received freedom through the ministry of churches or Christians (with permission where appropriate).
- examples of Christian ministries in their locality or beyond that educate in these areas.
- perhaps some theological or biblical insights into the issues around gambling

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