

**Principled Leadership
and the allure of Hitting it Big**

by

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In recent days, information has come to the fore of the community where I live concerning gambling and the proposal of a state-sanctioned casino only miles from my work and home. I've listened to my neighbors and to people in our community, as well as speaking with elected officials in both local and state government. Now, to no real surprise, there is the question of the perspective from the "faith community" to the proposal. A few observations are in order.

The Background:

As I attended a community information meeting, it became clear that something appears amiss. The Legislature of NC is considering the *de facto* approval of casino gambling in our state by tying such to the budget being proposed for adoption by our state officials. By tying this decision to a budget bill, it appears that legislators, even those espousing conservative values, will have cover (at worst) or reason (at best) to support the measure without ever directly affirming the issue of casino gambling.

It was notable, I believe, that every official on the program made a point to positively assert that he did not gamble. Not even as entertainment.

It was stated that this "entertainment" initiative was intended to bring much needed jobs to our community. Everyone can applaud the effort to bring well-paying jobs to our area. Further, I understand that these same legislators have experienced great difficulty in drawing other comparable jobs through economic development efforts. No one who cares about our community can desire the continuance of the status quo as it relates to jobs.

It is also claimed that many North Carolinians are already engaging in casino entertainment but are simply traveling north to Virginia to do so. The locating of a casino would purportedly stem the tide of people traveling from our community and spending their hard-earned dollars elsewhere.

Finally, and perhaps the statement bearing the least amount of credibility on its face was the assertion that the purpose of this initiative was not primarily about "the money." I say that this statement lacks credibility for several reasons, not the least of which is its proposal in the state's budget bill.

The Issue at Hand:

So how should a church such as the one I lead feel toward state sanctioned gambling and the locating of a casino in our community? Further, how should I as a pastor (or any follower of Jesus) respond to the potential of this new industry when considering our community's current

economic conditions, the mandate from the Lord to pursue flourishing, and the weightiness of unintended (but predictable) consequences?

Let me say very clearly that there is no direct prohibition to gambling or games of chance in Holy Scripture. I do believe that the Scriptures teach that one should work and work hard to provide for himself and his family (Genesis 3:19, Proverbs 31:27, 2 Thessalonians 3:10, et.al.). The Scriptures do speak of being faithful and accountable managers of resources entrusted by God (Psalm 24:10, Luke 16:1-13), and the traditional understanding of the church would certainly hold that proceeds from employment are God's resources (Proverbs 3:9, Psalm 50:7-12). However, for one to contrive a rationale for a dogmatic response from these principles would be a bit of an overreach in my opinion. We should not claim for the Bible what it does not claim for itself in wholesale prohibition of gambling.

Furthermore, the legislation of morality is a fool's errand. Even if it were possible to legislate morality, no one could earn righteousness or favor with God. There is no value as it relates to one's right standing with God.

Finally, the position of fear is a patently untenable position for a Christian. To build a claim based on a perspective that we are "afraid" of the seediness or crime or loss of property values, etc. is to declare fear as a Christian's master. Fear is not a gift from God (2 Timothy 1:7). As I recently reminded my church, Abraham lived in Sodom's neighborhood and Jesus conversed with demons. There is nothing to fear for the follower of Jesus.

One caution for Christians is endeavoring to not baptize preferences as God's law. Not "wanting" a casino in the community is a reasonable and good desire. I do not want a casino in my city. I see only a moderate potential benefit in economic development and a host of predictable human costs.

Position-

I am speaking as one believer in Jesus. One pastor of one congregation in one city at one moment in time. At the same time, I believe that this position is not only tenable, but is the only true and proper posture for a Christ-follower who is walking in concert with the Holy Spirit.

While our community needs economic development, the choice to bring good jobs is not binary. If the choice is: Bring a casino and employ our neighbors, or leave our neighbors unemployed, then it would be a cruel position to assert that Jesus wished for our neighbors to suffer. There is another option: our elected officials can press toward good jobs that avoid the human costs inherent with proceeds from a casino. It may take longer. It may take additional investment in education, training, infrastructure, and public-private partnerships to do so. As citizens of our community, we should enthusiastically support efforts to do so even if such efforts require additional revenue through taxes. In the matter before us, I believe that this is a more responsible decision. As I have encouraged economic development as part of God's good design and gift for human flourishing, **I applaud the desire of elected officials to bring jobs while**

urging them to reject less advantageous opportunities for those jobs that will best serve our community.

This issue has been brought forward in a manner that lacks transparency. If it were a good initiative and one that legislators could proudly sign onto, then why bury it in the state budget bill forcing legislators to choose between funding essential services or opposing this initiative? Good and helpful things do not have to be buried in budget bills. **I urge our legislators to bring a clean and transparent bill to a vote in both the Senate and the State House and allow every elected official to go on record.**

The very nature of this Casino entertainment industry is built on helping people "lose" money. No one truly believes that our city needs more entertainment to overcome our boredom. Since there are no goods exchanged in the gambling practice, all profitability comes at the cost of *taking* from someone. In fact, teams of engineers, psychologists, and designers worked long and hard at their craft to ensure that someone sitting at a gaming terminal wants to continue to press the "bet" button until all his funds are depleted. I do not disparage an industry for this. It is very clear to any "thinker" who pauses long enough to do so...that the companies controlling the casino want to gather maximum profits and that can only happen if they entice patrons to experience significant loss. **I urge our community to stand against such capitalistic opportunism that results in loss to so many of our neighbors.**

Other costs to the community also exist. Perhaps some very nice restaurants and retail shopping stores are brought with the casino. Is that an effort to bless our city by the developers? Of course not. It is a move intended to gain market share from other restaurants and stores. The desire for new restaurants will have a direct cost to established local businesses. In a symbiotic relationship evident in the development approach, the restaurants and shops are intended to draw customers who may then visit the casino. The inverse is true as well. I wish my city had more and better options for restaurants. However, I am not willing to harm my neighbors to get them. I will simply continue to drive to Wilson, Raleigh and beyond, or enjoy the present selection of local cuisine.

There are also the inflationary costs to consider. If the casinos pay higher wages, then other businesses in our community will have to raise their wages to compete for workers. The additional costs will be passed on to consumers: those who patronize the casino and those who simply live in its shadow. Someone will have more spending power. I do not believe that person will be the casino worker, the citizen of our community, or other local businesses. That money is headed to an unknown corporate headquarters somewhere; but, it will not reside in North Carolina for very long.

Finally, there is the cost to families. This issue came up at the information meeting I attended. Someone asked an official who would help those who became addicted to gambling. The response was benign and non-committal given the hypothetical nature. I will propose the answer. I will be there on the front lines. My church will be there on the front lines. So will the other churches and pastors of our city. We will be helping families who lack basic resources

because someone enticed them to drop twenty more dollars into a machine or at a card table. We will counsel couples through domestic disharmony because of the allure or addiction of gambling that has been introduced in their families. We will be with generations of people who will choose a “job” in this service industry because of good pay in the short-term, when they could have used their God-given abilities to produce something that promoted flourishing. We will be with the grieving families who’s loved one, in a stressed-out moment, hit the blackjack table and began to win a few hands while the drinks flowed...and then got into a car for his last time due to alcohol impairment. Rest assured, the one to help these suffering families will not be the corporations bringing in the profits. **The high toll to our citizens demands that we seek better jobs in other arenas that promote flourishing not suffering.**

Some say, “live and let live! Who are we to tell people what to do with their money and entertainment.” That is a very libertarian perspective. While I agree that we cannot effectively legislate morality, I will also say that our government seeks to do so all the time. We do not allow people to snort cocaine. We do not sanction brothels. We do not even permit someone to drive their own car without demanding they wear a seat belt (purportedly to save one’s life in an accident when they are incapable of making such a decision to do so on their own). The question is, “Where do you draw the line and who draws it?” I think that question could be answered by principled leadership of elected officials in our government who are accountable at the next election. In such a case, put the initiative up for a clean and public vote. **I would humbly and kindly remind every official, there is a God and He sees the heart at its core. Further, He judges every deed and every word. To whom much is entrusted, much is required (Luke 12:48). There are no unaccountable votes.**

Additionally, there are no libertarian Christians. Every follower of Jesus rightly has an agenda. It is Jesus’ agenda. With the Apostle Paul, I may gladly agree that everyone has free agency but with my free agency, I am obligated to seek to change the opinions, perspectives, and activities of others...seeking to see them become followers of Jesus as well. I want people to flourish because Jesus wants them to flourish. I want my city to prosper because the Lord wants the people within it to have their needs met in dependence on Him, and He is the One who establishes the government, the city, and the people it serves as an instrument of His sovereign rule.

Some may ask, “Is this the position of Englewood Baptist Church?” I wish the Lord would grant me the ability to speak on behalf of the more than two thousand members of our church. I cannot. Our church family is diverse and may have a diversity of opinions on this matter. At the same time, I will do all within the span of my control to persuade and challenge the followers of Jesus that I shepherd to think and act in concert with this position...while simultaneously seeking to persuade those beyond my church to act consistent with this position as well. It is, in my estimation, the only way to promote true flourishing in a faithful and dependent manner that honors God for His provision above all else.