

GAMBLING

A Social Document of the
ULCA



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

A Series of Statements of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1936, 1956

1936: Minutes, 10th Biennial Convention, ULCA, p 377.

We request pastors and church leaders to urge upon Christians the need for conscientious avoidance of everything that bears any taint of the gambling spirit; to be scrupulously careful that all money-raising efforts of their respective congregations or auxiliary organizations be scriptural and therefore above reproach in this respect; to seek the repeal of all legislation that legalizes gambling; and to use every Christian means within their power to destroy this foe, so destructive of the moral fibre of our civilization.

1956: Adopted by Board of Social Missions. Reported in Minutes, 20th Biennial Convention, ULCA, pp. 1127-28.

Gambling and the Christian Life

The heart of the Christian faith is the belief that Christ came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. That central fact guides and determines all Christian judgment about moral and social problems. We are not our own; we are bought with a price. Being joined to Christ through faith, we are to serve our fellowmen as a "little Christ."

All this is reflected in one specific ethical teaching of St. Paul that has meaning for decision about gambling. In Ephesians 4:28, St. Paul writes: "Let him that stole steal no more; but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." Here the essential principle is that men are to work to produce the wherewithal to meet human need. Rather than steal, men are to give of themselves in service.

Admittedly, gambling is not often considered stealing, for usually the victim is aware of the risk he takes. However, gambling is an effort to get for one's self, without earning it, what another possesses, and for which he usually has had to work. It is closely akin to stealing and violates the Christian teaching about work and service to the neighbor.

The commandment, "Thou shalt not covet," also makes clear the biblical teaching that men are not to seek their own material advancement at the expense of others. In contrast, gambling is an effort to gain without making commensurate contributions

of work. Because gambling violates this commandment and the spirit of service, it ought to be condemned and to be held up to the closest scrutiny as to its social consequences.

In actuality, gambling has led to corruption of the police and public officials. It has led to the "fixing" of both professional and amateur athletic contests. It has provided a source of income for criminals and racketeers, thus enabling them to prey upon legitimate business enterprises. Even in time of war, gambling led to the diversion of essential war materials to perpetuate and expand the gambling enterprise. By its strange fascination some people are led to steal and commit other crimes in order to continue in its grasp. It diverts income sometimes needed for family budgets to wasteful activities. Thus gambling undermines basic social health, and strengthens both the selfish spirit in men and the criminal element in society.

It is sometimes said that small wagers in friendly games of chance are essentially harmless. These should be judged as to whether they bear the taint and spirit of gambling or not.

Of more serious import is the argument that gambling, perhaps through a lottery, is permissible if the purpose is to raise funds for needed government activities. Experience has shown that in many cases such government sponsored gambling generally leads to corruption and to the introduction of illegitimate gambling controlled by criminals.

Moreover, the effort to raise public funds by gambling usually means that those least able to pay are the ones who provide the funds. Proper taxation, on the other hand, would draw upon those best able to stand the financial burden of needed public programs.

A third argument advanced by the supporters of gambling is that it is needed to provide funds for charitable and religious purposes. Rather than build a sound basis of support in the understanding of human need and the love of man for God and neighbor, a short cut is used that stimulates a person's desire for selfish gain as the basis for raising funds. Such a step is a sure way to destroy the basis for long-range charitable undertakings. It is an obvious denial of Christian responsibility, and will weaken the sense of vital stewardship upon which the church must depend for its real support.

It is such convictions as these which led the United Lutheran Church in America unanimously to adopt the motion:

We request pastors and church leaders to urge upon Christians the need for conscientious avoidance of everything that bears any taint of the gambling spirit; to be scrupulously careful that all money-raising efforts of their respective congregations or auxiliary organizations be Scriptural and therefore above reproach in this respect;

to seek the repeal of all legislation that legalizes gambling; and to use every.. . power to destroy this foe, so destructive of the moral fibre of our civilization.

Men and women who have answered Christ's call to loving service one of the other will reject such short cuts and seek, through a deep sense of stewardship for all life's activities, to achieve the goal of mutual aid and support, and thus witness to the reality of Christian faith and community.