

THE CHURCH AND THE REFERENDUM

“And say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Matt. 16:18

“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word, that they all may be one that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”

John 17:20-21

“To gamble or not to gamble ... that is the question! Or perhaps it may be re-stated, to gamble or not to gamble, this is the question which is the subject of much discussion in the Christian community in The Bahamas today. There can be no doubt that this matter of the stance to be taken by those called to exercise leadership in the Church is one of the most controversial to take place in the history of the Church in The Bahamas. Indeed, this writer can remember no issue on which there has been such widespread controversy and disagreement in the Church in all his life! Indeed, the Bahamian public, in general has watched with amazement as the clergy in this nation have engaged in open debate on the way ahead. And the debate within the church appears to be becoming more and more intense as the date of the referendum draws nearer. Why is this matter proving so highly controversial at this time? Is it to be expected that Christians should differ so much on this “burning issue”? What will be the long-term effect upon the Church and community by this bitter controversy which is unfolding? Our purpose is to answer or suggest answers to these questions in this contribution to the current debate in the Church on gambling in general and the referendum in particular. For, it is essential that we have a proper perspective on this issue.

First and foremost, let us consider “gambling” in terms of Christian ethics, especially the ethical teaching of the Bible. Now, generally speaking there are two categories of actions in Christian ethics - those which may be described as “categorical imperatives”. This expression was coined by Emmanuel Kant (1724-184), the German, Christian philosopher, who is recognized as a leading authority in the field of Christian ethics. To this category belong those ethical principles which are deemed to be of universal and eternal validity. Concisely, they are not to be violated under any circumstances. What is very important for us to note here is that they are so recognized not only by Christians but by authorities of all major religions - Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and even Rastafarianism.

Some years ago, the leading theologians of the world’s major religions convened in Chicago to consider just this matter!

They came up with five principles governing behaviour which they all agreed to be of universal validity:

Reverence for God, the deity, the supreme being

Respect for parents /responsibility for of one’s family (fob persons in

Respect for life (i.e. the prohibition of murder)

Respect for the property of others (prohibition of theft)

Respect for marriage (prohibition of adultery. Note that some religions permit polygamy, having more than one wife. All agree, however, that sex outside marriage is adultery).

In the case of the teaching of the Bible, these principles "are implicit in its main moral code - the Ten Commandments and the Sermon On The Mount. (Exodus 20; Matt. 5-7). Jesus summed them up in the command to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:28-32).

Now alongside these categorical imperatives, there are laws and rules governing behaviour, which are not specifically mentioned in the major ethical codes of the Church. This means that the theologians of the Church, on the basis of these principles, must determine what should be the stance of the Church. It is submitted that gambling belongs to this category. Since the theologians of the various branches of Church hold differing positions, then it is inevitable that they should "come up" with varied positions on gambling and, indeed, other behaviors which belong to this category - the use of alcoholic beverages, the so called "gay marriage", etc. While then Christian moralists are united when it comes to the categorical imperatives, they do have different positions when it comes to those forms of conduct which are not specifically prohibited in the moral codes of the Bible. Accordingly, it is submitted that it is not surprising that Christians are not united when it comes to the matter of gambling.

Careful examination of the varied positions taken by the clergy in The Bahamas on gambling reveals that there are at least four which can be discerned. For this is a very complex moral issue, with fine distinctions between the various positions, nuances and attitudes being taken. And what is very disturbing here is that even within the same denomination the clergy are not always in one accord!

These are

- i. Rejection**
- ii. Temperance**
- iii. Accommodation**
- iv. Acceptance/approval**

i. Rejection "Gambling Is Evil Vote No!"

First, there are those theologians and pastors, who hold tenaciously to the position that gambling, in all its forms, is inherently evil. They are, therefore, strongly of the opinion that Christians should vote "no" to both questions of the proposed referendum on gambling. Concisely, on the basis of their interpretation of the teaching of the Bible, they declare that gambling should not be legalized and, consequently, the Commonwealth of The Bahamas should not have a national lottery.

The President of The Bahamas Christian Council, the Rev. Dr. Rainford Patterson, a Minister of the African Episcopal Methodist Church, youthful, articulate dynamic churchman, and the President of the Grand Bahama Christian Council, along with their counter parts in other Family Islands, have all "gone on record" as being opposed to legalizing gambling in The Bahamas.

Moreover, the Methodist Church, the Communion of this writer, has always been strongly opposed to gambling, and, indeed, was in the forefront to the introduction of casino gambling back in the fifties when this move was strongly promoted by the late Sir Stafford Sands. Interestingly enough, prominent Bahamian Attorney Maurice Ginton, himself a staunch Methodist layman, clearly stated the Methodist stance on gambling in a seminar held at St. Paul's Methodist Church early in

November 2012AD. Emphasizing that Methodists should not even countenance participating in gambling of any kind!

Those, then, who hold to this position, do so entirely on moral and religious grounds, arguing that it is in violation of belief in divine providence and trusting in God to provide for one's needs, that it encourages greed and idleness, and, in the final analysis, it is incompatible with the law of love as taught by Christ. Specifically, one cannot truly love his/her neighbour while gaining at his/her expense, the essence of gambling.

Amongst the leading advocates of this group are Pastor Lyall Bethel, influential pastor of Grace Community Church; Evangelist Dr. Rex Major, Pastor Emeritus of Grace Community Church; Dr. Myles Munroe, the influential, internationally known President of Bahamas Faith Ministries International; Pastor Cedric Moss, the Rev. Dr. Anthony Carroll and Bishop Walter Hanchell. This position, however, has been most unequivocally championed by Pastor Alan Lee, brilliant Biblical scholar and spiritual leader of Calvary Bible Church, who has declared "gambling is sin!"

ii. Temperance "Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide"

Now, clearly to be distinguished from those who hold that gambling is inherently wrong and therefore is to be prohibited (like theft, adultery, murder, categorical imperatives) is the position of those who hold that gambling is not necessarily evil, or rather, it becomes evil when done in excess or becomes addictive.

This stance is best elucidated by examining the second great universal principle of human behaviour - respect for parents/concern for the welfare of one's family vis-vis gambling. In this regard, the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Huggins, when serving as President of The Bahamas, Turks & Caicos Islands Conference of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean & the Americas, was highly critical of gambling as "detrimental to Christian home and family life". The position of those who hold to temperance then becomes abundantly clear.

For instance, if a man who makes a big salary first meets all his family obligations - paying mortgage/rent, providing food and clothing for his family, paying school fees and utility bills - and then spends a few dollars on gambling, there is nothing wrong. If, however, he gets his pay cheque, gambles it away without paying the family bills, then in this case, gambling becomes evil.

This is, indeed, the position which has been espoused by the prelates of two major denominations - the Anglican and Roman Catholic Communion. Thus, both the Rt. Rev. Laish Boyd, Lord Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of the Bahamas, Turks & Caicos Islands, and the Rt. Rev. Patrick Pinder, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of The Bahamas, Turks & Caicos Islands have clearly articulated this position, wherein gambling is regarded as "a matter of conscience".

Here again a knowledge of the theological background of the prelates is most illuminating. In the case of Catholicism moral theology draws heavily upon the profound comprehensive theological summa of Dr. Thomas Aquinas. In the case of the Anglican Communion, it is most important to point out that the most brilliant exponent of the power of

conscience was Bishop Joseph Butler, Bishop of Durham (1692-1752). The prevailing rule, then of those who hold to temperance re gambling and other issues such as "drinking" and even "gay marriage", is "let your conscience be your guide".

Accordingly, the members of these major communions (with thousands of members and adherents throughout the length and breadth of the archipelago) have not been advised to vote either "yes" or "no" but to vote according to their conscience!

iii. Accommodation/Abstinence “You have a right to vote ‘yes’ or ‘no’

Now the position of accommodation is no doubt the most complex and hardest to explain. Essentially, those who hold to this position are against gambling "in principle". However, they recognize that there are many who do gamble and see nothing wrong with it, many of them being Christians. It places high priority on pragmatism!

Now, it is precisely to this group that Bishop Simeon Hall belongs! It merits most careful articulation and attention to detail as he has been both vilified/ostracized by some while idolized by others!!!!!!

Those who attended or watched on TV the opening rally of the "vote yes" group on Friday, January 4th., may have noticed that Bishop Hall began by declaring unequivocally that he had no intention to patronize "web shops" or participate in national lottery! Theological bombshell!

The dead silence which prevailed when he began his address indicated that the crowd was taken by surprise as they anticipated that he would begin by exhorting them to vote “yes”!

He went on, however, to explain his position. He claimed that everyone should have the right to vote on the Referendum according to their conscience. (Here then his position is very close to that of the Roman Catholics and Anglicans, although he is Baptist!). Continuing, Bishop Hall noted the propensity of Bahamians to gamble and cited the economic factors which are involved. Concisely, then, Hall, while abstaining from gambling, recognizes the right of those who do gamble to do so. While, then, himself, abstaining from gambling, he is prepared to accommodate those who would like to gamble.

iv. Acceptance “Gambling can be beneficial - vote ‘YES’ to all!”

Finally, there are those in the Church who are in full support of the proposal of “the powers that be” that gambling should be legalized and taxed, and by the same token, that a national lottery be established. The leading and most outspoken advocate of this position is the Rev. Dr. Philip McPhee, Pastor of Calvary Baptist Church. An avid sportsman, who participates in most out island regattas, Dr. McPhee has long touted the economic benefits of a national lottery. He holds that the web shops should be legalized and that a national lottery should be established that they should be taxed with the revenues being used especially for the promotion of sports, which are often financially challenged. This, of course, is in keeping with Dr. McPhee’s strong support of sporting activities. The Clergy, then, who have “come out” in advocating this position, join with Mrs. Theresa Moxey Ingraham and others in calling upon the Bahamian community to vote “yes” in the coming Referendum.

There are just two comments which this writer would like to make. First and foremost, it cannot be of benefit to the cause of Christ in this nation for the Clergy to be in open conflict on this matter. For, as has been

demonstrated, virtually from time immemorial, Christian theologians have held differing positions on gambling. What all must understand is that inevitably there will be differences of opinion on gambling. So those who hold a particular position, need simply to state it clearly without engaging in condemnation of those who do not share their opinion. Here the position taken by Rev. Dr. Anthony Carroll, President of The Bahamas Baptist Missionary and Educational Council, is most exemplary. In the programme on gambling, he stated the official position of his church without condemning the clergy of his own denomination who are in favour of voting “yes”!

The second comment has to do with the suggestion that if one is in favour of legalizing gambling, then one might as well also legalize theft, murder, rape, etc. It is submitted, that this is not correct as the latter are regarded as moral imperatives. We must not commit what moralists call “the naturalistic fall”. The gambling is not a moral imparity.

You see, when theologians and pastors openly engage in bitter debate, even going to the point of denouncing each other in public, the Church as a whole loses much of its credibility in the eyes of society and its members become very confused. Realizing that there are, indeed, varied positions on gambling, the Clergy need only state their position without taking issue with that held by other "members of the cloth". For, mutual respect is essential for the advance of the Kingdom of God in these islands. Absolutely!!!!!!

It is suggested, therefore, that that delightful, most profound proverb, which has guided churchmen in many ecumenical exercises, should be the watchword of Christians as the people of our young nation (on the threshold of celebrating forty years as a sovereign state in charge of its

destiny under God) prepare to vote in the referendum on gambling,
come January 28th:

"In essentials unity,
In non-essentials liberty
In all things charity"!