

Are State Lotteries Immoral? (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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“Don’t smoke, chew, or run with girls that do” is a popular adage in some Christian circles today. Christians are concerned about what God thinks about their behavior. They are also concerned about what men think. Of course, any true Christian who struggles with pornography will not herald his addiction, but in many places Christians will seek to cover up arguably less egregious activities like drinking alcohol, smoking cigars, or even gambling now and then. These practices are often viewed as taboo—even when used in moderation. Paradoxically, Christians are able to openly indulge in overeating or overspending on cars, clothing, and entertainment devices without chagrin. Gluttony and profligate spending seem to be more acceptable sins among believers than other excesses, creating a (widespread) inconsistency of thought about what is appropriate Christian behavior.

In my last column, I argued that the state lottery is the best tax because it is a voluntary, even if it is a “stupid tax” paid by the fatuous and the ignorant. That is the public policy side of the issue. But the “moral side” deserves to be developed as well. In doing so, we might consider a classification of Christian practice highlighting four items: pornography, wine, Milky Way candy bars, and prayer.

The broad headings of this arrangement (noting an assignment of each of the four items) would be: [A] “never permissible” (e.g., pornography) and [B] “permissible”. Category B could be further divided into three sub-classifications: [1] “permissible in moderation” (e.g., wine), [2] “always permissible unless there are extenuating circumstances” (e.g., Milky Way candy bars), [3] “always permissible without qualification” (e.g., praying or preaching the gospel). These categories are especially apropos in terms of our entertainment choices, and in terms of the public policies we would support or criticize.

Category A practices, such as viewing pornography, are relatively easy for Christians to identify and eschew. They are, obviously, always sinful. At least I cannot think of any general, legitimate use for something like pornography (although I would be willing to entertain an argument to the contrary if

someone wanted to make one). In a word, Category A items are *intrinsically* evil themselves or are part and parcel of an institution that is intrinsically evil. The scriptural rule regarding such practices would seem to be summed up in I Thessalonians 5:22, I Peter 2:11 and Romans 12:21: “Abstain from every form of evil”, “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war

against the soul” and “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (NKJV). In his January 11, 2003 article in *World*, “Wages from Sin”, Pastor John Piper seems to place playing the lottery in this category. I think he is mistaken. There is nothing intrinsically evil about either the purchase or the entertainment provided by the lottery ticket. Whether or not the lottery as an institution is evil is more intriguing, but to condemn any voluntary action that is not specifically condemned by the Scriptures (such as gambling or lotteries) is probably imprudent and may well be an encroachment upon Christian liberty. Indeed, the institution of the lottery, at least insofar as it is by nature a game based on probability like the casting of lots, is mentioned in the Bible without condemnation (e.g., Leviticus 16:8; Joshua 18:6-10; I Samuel 14:42; I Chronicles 24:31, 25:8, 26:13-14; Nehemiah 10:34, 11:1; Jonah 1:7; Proverbs 16:33; Acts 1:26). It was even used (apparently) to determine the will of God.

The Scriptures seem to indicate that Christians may use alcoholic beverages like wine and beer in moderation (e.g., John 2:1-11, 4:46; I Timothy 5:23, etc.). Thus, Category B1 practices would be permitted up to a point, beyond which (e.g., inebriation) the practice becomes sinful. Although there might be some people who abstain from Category B1 practices because of past excesses or because it would cause another to stumble (cf. Rom 14:13-21), they would not be considered evil in general but are essential *amoral*. I would include buying lottery tickets among the many Category B1 practices, which may provide genuine enjoyment or entertainment value when used in moderation. Certainly, a family that spends \$5 per month on lottery tickets is not going to harm itself financially any more than a family that spends \$5 per month at Blockbuster video. Like any form of entertainment, the value of which is always deter-



mined by subjective individual preferences, Category B1 practices provide some value to the participants. Just because I am not very entertained by renting and viewing *Mary Poppins* or by playing skee-ball in an arcade does not mean that they do not entertain others. Is there a point at which expenditures for entertainment for a Christian turn into excess? Of course there is, but that point is *not* usually a bright line that can be objectively determined by onlookers. The scriptural rule regarding such practices (or Christian liberties) would seem to be summed up in I Corinthians 6:12 and Romans 14:4: “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” and “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.”

Category B2 practices are never sinful in and of themselves. It is not wrong to buy candy bars—Baby Ruth, Milky Way or otherwise—in general. However, if a person is overweight, buying candy might be sinful because it compounds his gluttony and lack of self-control. It might also be sinful for cavity-prone people to buy candy. In either of these cases, issues arise involving caring for our bodies (cf. I Corinthians 6:19-20). Moreover, in large enough quantities, partaking of Category B2 practices could entail poor stewardship, lack of wisdom, or defective priorities. How much of God’s money should we waste? The scriptural rule regarding such practices would seem to be summed up in (among other places) I Corinthians 4:2, 9:27 and 10:23: “Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful”, “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” and “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify”. (*To be continued...*)