



# The Christian Inquirer

Seeking wisdom in an Age of Information

"... with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph 2:20)

"Test everything ..." (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

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No. 16

July 2008

## Lotto nonsense?

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I think it was at a church fete. I was around 12 years old. The game was darts. The board had red, green and white stripes. You could double your money if you landed on the correct stripe. I do not remember the bets. I do remember winning and winning big - for a kid, then. I began with coins and ended with notes. It was exhilarating. A small crowd gathered around and cheered me on. People love a winner.

Would you like to know the secret of my success? The trick is to choose the best game and strategy out of the many available. Consider national lotteries. Do they enable people to pass poverty by or do they pass poverty on? It is not enough to point out that they create millionaires and give to charity. Tobacco giant Philip Morris does that. Philip Morris also destroys people and their capacity to make a livelihood and has spent more on advertising its good deeds than on the good deeds themselves.<sup>1</sup> To know what is going on, one has to see the big picture and for that one has to do the numbers.

## Bad games

Consider the slot machine or so-called one-arm-bandit with its spinning wheels. Whether this is a good game or not turns on what is known as the "expected value." It is a very important concept in gaming. Think of it as the long run average.<sup>2</sup> A game in which your total winnings equal your total losses has an expected value of zero and is called "a fair game." Bandits are designed to give an average expected value of something less than 0. In the long run, players as a group will always lose. Casinos do actually want some to win - but only in the short term. Winning or seeing others win means you will come back to lose in the long term.

Long can be really long. I have written a freeware computer simulator to speed things up. It is called *The Freudian Slot Machine* (see the accompanying screenshot) and is available on my website ([www.mikelanderson.com](http://www.mikelanderson.com)). Instead of pressing a button countless





## **The worst game**

From a Christian point of view, examining the payoff and the expected value is far too narrow. There are other more important things to consider. Take freedom for instance. Would winning a game give one more freedom? Dolores Macnamara won 77 million pounds on the Euromillions lottery. Death threats and kidnap plots have forced her and her children into hiding. All her children have been fitted with a personal alarm.<sup>15</sup>

Or consider being rich towards God. The trouble with winning the lottery is that many people have to lose money they need for you to win money you do not. And it is the very poorest that lose the highest proportion of their income. The National Prevalence study of gambling and problem gambling in South Africa for 2006 found that lowest income regular lottery players spent 7 percent of their income on the lottery compared to 1 percent for high-income regular lottery players.<sup>16</sup>

When governments promote both the Lotto and numeracy one has to ask whether they are innumerate themselves or simply wicked. God takes a very dim view of those that exploit the weak. "Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them."<sup>17</sup> States are culpable before God for making losers out of their citizens through national lotteries. They may improve their coffers, but will lose far more. Perhaps they will inherit a bigger

crime problem. One study found that pathological gamblers are three times more likely to have been incarcerated than non-gamblers.<sup>18</sup> Another compared crime rates in United States counties with and without casinos. The former showed dramatic increases in aggravated assaults, rapes, robberies and other crimes.<sup>19</sup> Or perhaps they will inherit more suicidal citizens. Reviewers of the evidence found that between 13% and 20% of pathological gamblers have attempted suicide.<sup>20</sup>

Just a minute I hear someone say. Scripture says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD"<sup>21</sup>. And did not the disciples of Jesus cast lots.<sup>22</sup> What if I prayed before I gambled? It is true that God is sovereign in all things including the goings on in casinos. It is also true that the ancients gambled. But God never instructs us to follow this example. To pray to win the lottery is to pray that others will lose. "Dear Lord, help me to break even. I need the money" would be a better prayer. But the best prayer is, "Lord enable me to spend my money wisely."

From a Christian point of view, exploiting the weak is the worst possible game because not even death lets you off the hook. "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment..."<sup>23</sup> The worst game to play is to let others lose money so that you can win. At best you end up rich towards men and poor towards God.

## **Why do we play bad games?**

Biologists suspect that our propensity to gamble may be because has some adaptive value in a variable, natural environment.<sup>24</sup> Taking risks opens up new environments and new resources. The trouble is that propensities that are useful in a natural environment can be maladaptive in an artificial one. Being attracted to light works for moths on moonlit nights, but became suicidal after the invention of the candle. Humans are attracted to slot machines like moths to a flame and casino owners are taking advantage of it. Don't get down on yourself if you have struggled with gambling. Instead, confess to God what needs to be confessed. Remember that Jesus died so that all your sins could be forgiven. Try to understand what it going on and look for a better game that rises above mere primal urges.

### **A better game - how to never lose**

The reason for my little bit of success at gambling has little to do with skill or luck. It has to do with my having negligible opportunity to gamble in my formative years and early adulthood. I won because I did not gamble long enough to lose. An even better strategy is not to start. Since casinos and state lotteries do not provide a fair game, the claim that "winners know when to stop" and "you cannot win if you do not play" is more than misleading. It is a lotto nonsense. The wise motto is, "you cannot lose if you do not play". The way to stop losing is to stop playing. There is a much better game out there.

50 cents

### **The best game**

From a Christian point of view the best game is to lose so that others can win. Jesus Christ lost His life so that we could win ours. His example reveals a deep and inspiring truth. To live for God and others is to really live. As He said, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."<sup>25</sup> You could do far worse than lose money from gambling - you could forfeit your soul. The trouble with gambling is that it denies the gospel. It focuses attention on self at the expense of others and for the here and now. How parochial are gambling diversions next to the grandeur of the gospel with its focus on God and others. Forget that piddly game called poker. How about joining a game that began in eternity? "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."<sup>26</sup> Now that is a big game indeed!

Wait just a minute. If losing for others is such a good game, I should buy Lotto tickets because the National Lottery gives to good causes. By this argument, I should support tobacco companies because they give to charity. It is being softhearted and softheaded at the same time. One question to ask of a cause is whether and by how much the good outweighs the bad. It was in the context of giving (of oneself) that Jesus said, "Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as

innocent as doves."<sup>27</sup> It is best to play the best game strategically.

Let us apply this criterion to the Lotto. According to the National Lotteries Board website, for the current seven year license an average of only 30 percent of lottery ticket sales will be contributed to good causes.<sup>28</sup> This is not a very efficient way of giving. Furthermore, you will have given up your freedom to decide exactly on the causes to which to give. And you may not agree with what the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund considers the best causes. It gives a greater percentage to sport and recreation than it does to reconstruction and development. In 2007 it gave more than one and half million rand to the Castle Military Museum.<sup>29</sup> And through the jackpot you would be helping to give the few more money than they really need. Does this match your priorities? The National Lottery is not the best way to win money or to give it away.

But, I hear someone say, you have made gambling look like school homework whereas it is meant to be entertainment. It is about the thrill of the risk and the unexpected reward. Indeed, research has revealed that people engage in risky behaviour such as gambling to escape boredom<sup>30</sup>. The researchers suggest a better way of pursuing excitement - find something to live for. It works. I recall hearing about a novel social programme. They took felons and trained them in dangerous search and rescue operations. Instead of the excitement of a bank robbery, there was the excitement of rescuing people from a precipitous cliff. A former robber explained that he gets a

better adrenalin rush now that he is helping people.

Gambling short-changes people. It is big on promise, but small on delivery. It is unlikely, but at best there is only a monetary reward that is left behind when we enter eternity. Many people do not see the big picture. They are like the soldiers who crucified Jesus – looking down at the lots they cast for His clothes instead of up at Him dying for them.<sup>31</sup> A far greater thing was happening than their little game. If you see the big picture, how about helping another that does not? How about persuading someone to serve Jesus rather than a slot machine? Explain that ultimately, gambling ruins whereas God restores lives. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."<sup>32</sup> Because it involves souls, serving Jesus is far bigger than the national lottery. Decisions taken for Him affect heaven and earth for now and eternity.

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If you found this article helpful please give it to someone else.

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The Christian Inquirer affirms the sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the basis for faith and the importance of testing everything. The Christian Inquirer is a free e-zine published by the Gospel and Information Network. P O Box 218, Betty's Bay, 7141, South Africa.

Co-editors: Dr Andy Potts, Sarah Peacock,  
Rachel Anderson.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harris, D. (2008) Corporate Goodwill or  
Tainted Money? ABC News.  
[http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=131249  
&page=1](http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=131249&page=1)

<sup>2</sup> Bluman, A.G. (2005) *Probability Demystified*.  
McGraw-Hill, New York, p. 83. Formally, the  
expected value is the sum of the product of  
probabilities of the outcomes and the value of  
the outcomes. Ashline, G. & J. Ellis-  
Monaghan (2004) The lottery: A dream come  
true or a tax on people who are bad at math?  
*Primus XIV* (4): 303-314.

<sup>3</sup> This is with an expected value of -14. With  
a better expected value it would just take  
longer - assuming a negative expected value.

<sup>4</sup> [http://ffbookmarks.com/betting\\_  
quotes.htm](http://ffbookmarks.com/betting_quotes.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.iht.com/articles/2000/11/  
18/booksam.2.t.php](http://www.iht.com/articles/2000/11/18/booksam.2.t.php)

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Goldberg, M.H. (1994) *The  
complete book of greed*. William Morrow & Co.,  
New York, p.224.

<sup>7</sup> Committee on the Social and Economic  
Impact of Pathological Gambling (1999)  
*Pathological Gambling: A Critical Review*

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National Academy Press, Washington, D.C.,  
p. 244.

<sup>8</sup> Ayres, I. (2007) *Super Crunchers: How  
anything can be predicted*. John Murray  
Publishers, London, pp. 30-31.

<sup>9</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lottery>

<sup>10</sup> Stewart, I. (1996) It Probably Won't Be  
You," *Times Higher Education Supplement*,  
April 12.

<sup>11</sup> The probability of winning the 6 pick  
lottery can be calculated from the formula for  
combinations ( $nCr = n!/r!(n-r)!$ ). With  $n=49$   
and  $r=6$ ,  $nCr = 13,983,816$ .

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nsc.org/research/odds.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~chance/  
chance\\_news/recent\\_news/chance\\_news\\_12.0  
3.html#item7](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~chance/chance_news/recent_news/chance_news_12.03.html#item7)

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Viner, B. (2008) The set of odds  
that all gamblers ignore. The Independent  
[http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/colu  
mnists/brian-viner/brian-viner-the-set-of-  
odds-that-all-gamblers-ignore-782516.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/columnists/brian-viner/brian-viner-the-set-of-odds-that-all-gamblers-ignore-782516.html)

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/  
tm\\_objectid=16592986&method=full&siteid=9  
4762&headline=lotto-millions-exclusive--the--  
77million-curse-name\\_page.html](http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/tm_objectid=16592986&method=full&siteid=94762&headline=lotto-millions-exclusive--the--77million-curse-name_page.html)

<sup>16</sup> The lowest income group earned less than  
R800/month. The highest income group  
earned more than R12000/month.  
[http://www.responsiblegambling.co.za/medi  
a/user/documents/NRGP%20Prevalence%20S  
tudy%202006.pdf](http://www.responsiblegambling.co.za/media/user/documents/NRGP%20Prevalence%20Study%202006.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Proverbs 22:22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Grinols, E.L. (2000) Casino gambling  
causes crime. *Policy Forum* 13(2)1-4.

<sup>19</sup> Grinols, E.L. & D. B. (2001) Mustard  
Measuring industry externalities: The curious  
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- <sup>20</sup> Petry, N.M., and C. Armentano (1999): Prevalence, assessment, and treatment of pathological gambling: a review. *Psychiatric Services* 50:1021-1027.
- <sup>21</sup> Proverbs 16:33.
- <sup>22</sup> Acts 1:26.
- <sup>23</sup> Hebrews 9:27.
- <sup>24</sup> McCoy, A.N., and Platt, M.L. (2005). Risk-sensitive neurons in macaque posterior cingulate cortex. *Nature Neuroscience* 8: 1220–1227.
- <sup>25</sup> Matthew 10:39.
- <sup>26</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9.
- <sup>27</sup> Matthew 10:16.
- <sup>28</sup> <http://www.nlb.org.za/nldtf.asp>
- <sup>29</sup> <http://www.nlb.org.za/upload/AnnualReports/Annual%20Report%202007.pdf>
- <sup>30</sup> Gosline, A. (December 2007/January 2008). Bored? *Scientific American Mind*, 18(6), 20-27.
- <sup>31</sup> John 19:23-24.
- <sup>32</sup> John 10:10.