

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
21-22 January 2012

As many of you know, I have announced my retirement as Grace University's President, effective 30 June 2012. An important aspect of my retirement is the decision to end the radio edition of Issues in Perspective. The last radio broadcast of "Issues" will be the weekend of 28-29 January 2012. However, I will continue writing the weekly edition of Issues in Perspective, which you can access at www.issuesinperspective.com. (The archive of past editions of Issues will remain at that site.) Thank you for being a faithful listener and supporter of "Issues." To have had this radio ministry for nearly twenty years has been one of the joys of my life. I hope that you will continue to read Issues in Perspective at the website, www.issuesinperspective.com.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

The Pernicious Nature of Gambling

Once again, the pernicious issue of gambling is raising its ugly head in the state of Nebraska, the state in which I live. State Senator Paul Schumacher has stated that he may sponsor a constitutional amendment to allow gambling, so Nebraska will not continue losing gambling revenue to neighboring states that permit casinos. It is important to refresh our collective memories on the nature of gambling and its indisputable effects on culture and society. Over the last twenty years, the growth of the gambling industry has been staggering. Increasingly, more and more states are legalizing all forms of gambling. It is on several Indian reservations, and the respective states are now utterly dependent on revenue from some form of gambling. The gambling industry is a huge, worldwide business. According to *The Economist*, in 2009, the total revenue from gambling worldwide was \$335 billion. That percentage total breaks down as follows:

- Casinos--31.2 %
- Sports betting--5 %
- Bingo, etc.--5.4%
- Lottery products--29.6 %
- Non-casino gaming machines--21.6 %
- Horseracing--7.2 %

The same magazine makes this insightful comment: "The odds of winning the jackpot in America's richest lottery, Mega Millions, are one in 176 million. Euro Millions, available to players in nine western European countries, offers slightly better odds: one in 76 million. Roulette players, on average, will hit their number once in 36 or 37 attempts. Poker players' chances of being dealt a royal flush are much the same as being struck by lightning." Despite such overwhelming odds, Americans still gamble and are doing so at stunning rates. Further, government is now involved in state-sponsored gambling as a matter of public policy.

What is the case against gambling? How can we as Christians be good citizens and expose the pernicious nature of this growing pastime for Americans?

- First of all, a few thoughts on gambling as a goal of public policy. It seems to me that immoral means have never led to moral ends. We are no longer skimming the profits from a criminal activity—we are putting the full force of government into the promotion of moral corruption. Quite frankly, gambling promotion has become a key to states balancing their respective budgets. But it is wrong for the state to exploit the weakness of its citizens just to balance the budget. It is the most unfair and painful form of “painless” taxation. The money is not coming from a few big bookies but from the pockets of millions of its citizens. The states have become as hooked on gambling as a source of revenue as any compulsive gambler betting the milk money. Gambling feeds a get-rich-quick illusion that debilitates society, and thereby causes individual ruin, despair and suicide. Therefore, gambling corrupts the state and its citizens that both seek “a piece of the action.”
- Second, how does state-approved gambling impact people’s lives?
 1. Legalized gambling sidetracks a great deal of money. The amounts that people spend on gambling equals or exceeds the total amount given to religious organizations and/or the total amount spent on elementary and secondary education.
 2. Legalized gambling handicaps a lot of people. The number of compulsive gamblers in the US is about 5 to 7 % of the population. Gambling behavior is usually associated with poverty, marital strife, job loss, homelessness and hunger.
 3. Legalized gambling victimizes vulnerable members of society—women, youth and ethnic minorities.
 4. State-sponsored gambling also seems to break down the resistance of people who would not otherwise gamble. Gambling addiction has risen precipitously since legalized gambling began several decades ago.
 5. State-sponsored gambling has promoted materialism and the fantasy of a life of luxury without labor.
- Third, it is difficult to fit gambling into a Christian worldview. There are several reasons:
 1. Gambling encourages the sin of greed and covetousness.
 2. Gambling promotes the mismanagement of possessions entrusted to us by God.
 3. Gambling undermines absolute dependence on God for His provision.
 4. Gambling works at cross purposes with a commitment to productive work.
 5. Gambling is a potentially addictive behavior.
 6. Gambling threatens the welfare of our neighbor.

In short, it is difficult to view gambling—either private or state-sponsored—as a positive. It is one of the most telling signs of a civilization in dysfunction and decline, one of the more discouraging aspects of our postmodern world. Hence, the evidence is in—gambling is another factor contributing to cultural decadence. But it is pursued by individuals and by the respective states with greater vigor and greater passion. There is perhaps no greater sign of cultural declension that that!!

See *The Economist* (10 July 2010), pp. 3-5—“Special Report on Gambling”; *Christianity Today* (25 November 1991), pp. 16-21; and www.lcms.org/.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

Tim Tebow and Evangelicalism

Jon Meacham, associated with *Time* magazine and an important American writer on religious issues, has written that Tim “Tebow is perhaps the most significant Evangelical Christian in the country. Depending on your point of view, his rise is a thoroughly American story of honest conviction or of ostentatious piety, of faith and family or of aggressive sectarianism. Tebow’s witness is the latest chapter in a decades-old Evangelical movement to transform America.” Meacham is correct in his observations and in this *Perspective* I want to make several observations about the Tebow phenomenon.

- First, some background on Tim Tebow. Born in the Philippines, he is the son of Baptist missionaries. His mother rejected recommendations to end her life-threatening pregnancy with an abortion. Doctors called his birth a miracle. Tebow was home-schooled in Florida and played high school football and then played football at the University of Florida, where he placed biblical citations—John 3:16 or Philippians 4:13—on black bands beneath his eyes. He has made much of his commitment to purity before marriage and affirms his virginity. In a 30-second commercial paid for by Focus on the Family during the 2010 Super Bowl, Tebow and his mother told the story of his birth and her choice not to have an abortion. Today, he is the quarterback for the Denver Broncos and is best known for his habit of dropping to one knee and lowering his head in prayer. That action has now turned into a new verb in American English—“tebowing.” In fact, in a recent article I read, there were photographs of people “tebowing” on Mount Kilimanjaro, in Afghanistan, in Mexico, at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, at the Parthenon in Athens, in Sudan, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and in New Zealand.
- Second, what has been the impact of Tebow on American culture? (1) Meacham argues that Tebow represents a new phase of evangelicalism, a phase he calls the “Platform.” Tebow’s remarkable passing game and last minute touchdown passes have catapulted him to broader fame in the world of sports. At the 2010 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, Tebow offered the closing prayer: “Thank you for bringing together so many people that have a platform to influence people for you.” Meacham contends that “*Platform* is a big word with Tebow: it comes up again and again in his public remarks and in his memoir *Through My Eyes*. The preaching of the Gospel—the living of the Gospel—is moving from pulpit to platform, from church to culture. The next Billy Graham, if there could be such a thing, may come not from the ranks of traditional preachers or ministers but from sports or entertainment.” Because of his “Platform” and the number of people that see him, he is possibly a much more influential Messenger of the Gospel than any active evangelical cleric today. (2) When Tebow placed John 3:16 in black below his eyes during a University of Florida game, there were 92 million Google searches for this Scripture passage. His Twitter feed—full of Bible verses and his signature symbol, GB2 (God Bless + Go Broncos=GB2)—

spreads an Evangelical message to some 800,000 followers, as his Facebook page does to 1.3 million subscribers. (3) Tebow has also, not surprisingly, become the object of scathing remarks and mockery by Saturday Night Live, and countless other critics. Tebow-hatred among the secular media will grow and that fact should not surprise us.

- Third, Danny Wuerffel has served as a powerful role model for Tebow. Micheal Flaherty and Nathan Whitaker report that Tebow's parents made it a point to introduce Tim to Danny Wuerffel while he was still playing at Florida. Both families understood that football provided a platform that could be used to talk about their faith. Wuerffel was drafted by the New Orleans Saints in 1997 and played three years for that team. During that time Wuerffel began volunteering with Desire Street Ministries, which tries to improve the lives of families by re-vitalizing neighborhoods—providing assistance to residents, tutoring children, and supporting parents and schools. In 2003, after his career in football, he and his wife went into full time ministry with Desire Street. Tebow now brings, at his own expense, disabled young men and their families to each game he plays and spends a significant amount of time with them before and after the game. He learned much about genuine expressions of his faith from Danny Wuerffel. Flaherty and Whitaker write that “such mentoring by Christian men is one of the most inspiring and least understood stories in sports. Super Bowl winning Coach Tony Dungy has been lauded—and criticized—for his work with individuals like Michael Vick, the NFL quarterback jailed for running a dog-fighting ring.” Tebow was mentored by Danny Wuerffel and that changed his life.
- Finally, a thought about prayer. Quite a few people have asked me about Tim Tebow's prayers. Is he praying for God's blessing on his playing? Is he praying that God would enable him and his team to win? Should we pray to win an athletic contest? Does God take sides in an athletic contest? I do not know what Tebow is actually praying when he kneels. He says that he is engaging in prayers of thanksgiving, not that God would intervene in the game for his team. But the Tebow phenomenon does raise this issue of God answering our prayers. In answering this question about praying and God's answers, I am drawn to Jesus' teaching on prayer in His Sermon on the Mount, the fullest account of which is in Matthew 5-7. Two major comments about prayer:
 1. In Matthew 6:5-15, Jesus makes it quite clear that our praying is to be personal (v. 6). We do not pray to be noticed by others. Our acts of praying are conversational and personal, not for the benefit of others. One writer has defined prayer as a “dialog between two people who love one another.” I like that! Second, Jesus says that our prayers are to be purposeful (v. 7). Meaningless, memorized words are not what God wants. We are to talk with Him about our needs, our goals and even about all of our hurts. In His model prayer (what we sometimes call the Lord's Prayer), we see just that. We address God as “Father,” pray for our daily needs, pray for a spirit of forgiveness for those who do wrong against us, and pray for His kingdom (i.e., His values, His ethic and His rule) to come to earth. Finally, we pray with a proper perspective (v. 8). Indeed, Jesus declares that “your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.” This provides a key clue to why we pray: We do not pray to give God information; He is omniscient. He does not need the information; He craves the relationship that prayer

manifests. Our practice of praying is personal, purposeful and with a proper perspective. It is one of the key dynamics of our relationship with the living God.

2. In Matthew 7:7-11, Jesus enlightens us on how God answers prayer. In vv. 7-8, He declares with certainty that God hears and He answers prayer. Whenever we talk with Him we have the certainty that He hears us and that He will answer. Then what kind of answer can we expect? God will never answer with an inappropriate answer (v. 9) or a dangerous answer (v. 10). His answer will always be a good answer, best suited to our needs and to His purpose for our lives (v. 11).

I do not know all God is doing in Tim Tebow's life. Every indication points to his genuineness and his authenticity. As Jon Meacham observes, he is using his platform as a football player to represent Jesus Christ. He is also an effective role model for countless young men. He could be used by God to declare with profound simplicity the essence of the Gospel. My prayer is that Tim Tebow will remain faithful and committed to, as he often says, "His Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

See Micheal Flaherty and Nathan Whitaker in the *Wall Street Journal* (13 January 2012) and Michael Medved in *Ibid.* (14-15 January 2012); and Jon Meacham in *Time* (9 January 2012), pp. 40-42.