

Christian Ethics Case Study: A Church's Response to a Proposed Casino

By Matt Morris

It is said that adversity doesn't make one's character, adversity reveals character. In Jesus' parable comparing the home built upon sand versus the one upon rock, the one constant was the storm. In life, it will storm. What will be revealed? The words of Professor Arthur Dyck, formally of Harvard Divinity School, provide prophetic warning, "We engage in moral reflection to avoid moral tragedy." Moral reflection directs our gaze to the foundation on which we have built. Moral reflection challenges our assumptions and prepares our responses. Our next steps are chosen long before we move our feet. Concerning the specific circumstances for the church and community described in the Case Study, the storm of unemployment and compromise rage. As this community of faith reflects upon the Scriptures, its Christian heritage, and the wisdom of personal experience, they will see that they have built upon the firm foundation of Christ Jesus. Their identity as a Christ community provides clear guidance that will encourage them to reject the casino proposal, continue to provide resources and reconciliation to a struggling community, work hand in hand with fellow community organizers, and share hope in the midst of troubling times. To live with this identity is to follow Christ's footsteps.

When issues become clouded with multiply fears and concerns, it is difficult to clearly see the next step to take. Regular reflection on the Scriptures opens the heart of God to the reader. Learning and loving God's heart changes us, embedding the will and desire of God into

our heart through the person of the Holy Spirit. As we contemplate, meditate, and memorize the Scriptures, the clouds will not matter. By then we will be walking by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

The Scriptures offer several important insights into God's heart concerning this community and the casino proposal. From chapter one of Genesis we learn the value and purpose of humanity. Honored as the lone bearer of God's image, God calls humanity "very good." Humanity possesses an intrinsic value that we must honor and protect. Additionally, Genesis reveals our purpose as co-creators and care-takers of God's creation. Humanity was created to participate in the work of creation. Though sin has tarnished our ability to clearly reflect God's image and has added burden to the task of work, it has not fully removed this innate instinct to know our creator and grow as persons as we honor God and creation. It is through work that our gifts and skills are expressed as our identity as God's children of faith is shared. Work possesses a spiritual value when it creates, cares for creation, and honors God (Volf 131).

This particular community is struggling to find its way through the clouds of unemployment and population decline. Because of the value of work to a person, but also the over-value place by a sinful society, many who lost their jobs will struggle with identity concerns and frustration. Additionally, as the younger adults move away to find employment opportunities elsewhere, the older community faces the pain of abandonment and the fear of extinction (Lysaught 272). These powerful forces can create desperation that can lead to dangerous compromise.

The casino proposal offers false hope. It will provide jobs, recreation, and a new and energetic identity to an aging town. Yet the hope it offers conceals dangers. Whether gambling is intrinsically sinful should not distract us from the damage to persons, families, and entire communities that accompany casinos: gambling addictions, prostitution, rise in substance abuse, theft. These consequences, though often hidden, must be exposed and weighed against the prospective benefits.

Though the casino offers jobs, the work will lack the value persons need. Though often indirect, these jobs will harm the community by taking advantage of people's weaknesses. These occupations lack the creative and care-taking aspects of the work for which humanity was intended. The recreation provided will only darken the heart as instant wealth becomes the sole objective. This distortion will carry into the broader community as persons pocket opportunities to share in hopes of striking it big. These tragic results will create a community identity that possesses glitz and glamour while covering a hallow cavern of broken people (Miles 73).

The church, consisting of individuals who share valid concern for their community, must remember their identity as Christians. In assessing the teleological mode for moral reasoning, it is clear that Scripture and their Christian heritage articulate an ends contrary to that proposed by the casino. This path should be avoided because the purpose of humanity is larger than mere employment and financial security. Love of God through loving and caring for the whole person must be their wider goal. Whether expressing a classical or consequential teleological argument, the scales are tipped to rejection of the casino for the right and greater good for

both individual and community. Determination to find or create work that meets these ends should take precedent.

Additionally, claiming an identity found in Christ translates into a pledge of obedience to the principles and laws articulated through the Scriptures. These laws, commands, and principles not only clearly discourage practices that lead to harm but unabashedly encourage actions that offer care. Above mere handouts, this care requires personal identification with the helpless and hopeless as the church addresses needs and concerns seen from the poor's vantage point. Though they might be encouraged to consider the casino's offer of employment as help to the poor, the call to care for neighbor requires a broader understanding of both help and hope. Knowing Christ's commands for care and the financial and personal harm attached to the poor in association with casinos, the deontological mode for moral reasoning encourages these church faithful to reject the casino proposal in obedience to Christ.

Both modes of moral reasoning point to the negative rejection of the casino proposal while also encouraging the positive avenue of community care through innovative job development projects and compassion ministries. These positive steps honor God and offer work, whether volunteer or paid, that build the humanity of the individual and community. Additionally, these creative steps forward open opportunities for dialogue and relational interaction with the broader population of the community. These bonds formed through a common vision may build bridges for deeper consideration of a life devoted to Christ for both the Christian and non-Christian alike (Meilander 267).

Addressing the concern of some towards working with active members of the homosexual community, they must remember Christ's clear association with sinners. However,

they must first recognize themselves as the sinner whom Christ has befriended. As slaves to sin all human action is tainted by sin's powerful influence. Only through Christ's gift have any found their freedom. The principles and themes of Scripture clearly articulate rejection of sexual activity outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage. They must not turn their backs to Christ's command to be holy. Yet as person's freed by Christ they must live this new freedom as loving companions to those still in shackles to sin (Hays 390). They can share a common vision, pursue a common goal, and work hand in hand with all whom Christ loves without compromising principles of holiness. In fact, a Scriptural understanding of holiness requires it.

These stands against the casino and for active participation in community service with all members of the town may not be popular. The church must not return condemnation. Instead, they conscientiously share and prepare with and for those in need. In this way they remember their identity as Christians, children of God, and care-takers of creation. As this church has prepared through moral reflection in worship and educational ministries these many years now they must walk the trail they have cleared. If this stand ultimately translates into the closing of the church and possibly the demise of the community, then it was a principled stand worth the cost of faithfulness. Though a church might close the body of Christ will remain strong and vibrant. Success is faithfulness. Faithfulness is determined steps of obedience in the midst of the storms of desperation. May every storm reveal faithfulness.

Bulletin Insert

Desperation presents a compelling argument for compromise. Yet it is in those exact moments of fear and uncertainty that we find out how deep, strong, and rich our Christian community of faith truly is. As our town suffers through prolonged unemployment exasperated by an exodus of our youngest and brightest, our community of faith must respond with care and compassion. Even as we struggle to meet our own ends, we must respond to the real and tangible needs of those around us. When wolves invade masquerading as shepherds, we must offer our wisdom and voice to cry the alarm and point to the true Shepherd. For years this church has offered help to the helpless and hope to the hopeless through our vibrant faith in Jesus Christ. Now that the struggle seems the greatest we must not turn our backs to the truths we have so faithfully lived and proclaimed. Created as care-takers, let us not allow opportunities for momentary monetary security over-rule our call to build up and care for all in God's creation by participating in activities that have a proven track-record of damage and moral decay. We know the dangers associated with casinos, even when weighed against the potential good. The short-lived boon of employment will be followed by broken wallets, persons, and families. The truth is we must do all the good we can while avoiding all the bad we can. Our community needs the wisdom we have learned, practiced and proclaimed. We need not be bull-horns blaring condemnation nor unruly protestors warning of coming doom. We can offer relational compassion through wisely offered concern. We can work together to support local industry while pursuing job creation that uplifts its customers and employees alike. We can prepare places for education, rehabilitation, and reconciliation. We can become beacons to hope as we demonstrate how a community can care for and progress when it lives by the principles of a Christ Community. Our survival as a church does not depend on full pews but our faithfulness to live in Christ in the midst of desperation. Let our

neighbors see that though a storm rages, our faith and future are secure. Welcome them into Christ's shelter.

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