

Testimony before the House and Senate Study Committees on the Preservation of the HOPE Scholarship Program

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**Armstrong State University - Armstrong Center Auditorium
13040 Abercorn Street
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The Georgia Baptist Convention represents 1.3 million Baptists and almost 3,600 congregations. During the 2014 annual session of the Georgia Baptist Convention in Macon, Ga., messengers went on record, as they have done 20 times since 1963, opposing every form of gambling, because all gambling jeopardizes the moral integrity of our state. (See 2014 Resolution - <http://gabaptist.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/resolution-on-gambling.pdf>)

I have been told that the only way to win this debate on whether or not to further expand gambling is to only use intellectual arguments. I was further told that to use moral arguments based upon the Bible would insure certain failure.

I come to you today telling you that outside of the Bible we as Baptists have no authority that is greater for our reasoning. Everything we do or don't do as Christians is based upon what God says through His Word, the Bible. The only true wisdom is that which comes from God.

Furthermore, as Christians we are commanded to stand and defend the weak, the defenseless and the needy. Matthew 22:39 tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that is hard to do if we are seeking pleasure and profit at the expense of someone else's pain and loss.

Dr. Adrian Rogers said it best when preaching a sermon entitled "What is Wrong with Gambling." He said, and I quote, "don't expect to find a verse in there that says, don't play Blackjack." I would further say that we won't find a verse that says don't throw dice or don't bet on a horse. But, what we will find are principles that guide our thinking and determine our choices and our beliefs - choices and beliefs that reveal our character.

Dr. Rogers further indicated that gambling is unlike any other kind of money-making endeavor. Although gambling is considered risky, and rightfully so, business ventures, buying stocks and bonds are also risky. The difference lies in the fact that gambling depends upon there being losers. That's the difference. There will always be losers. And, I say to you today that the biggest losers will be the children in the state of Georgia, the very ones who are the supposed beneficiaries of this proposed expansion of gambling.

Legalizing more vices in our society by justifying it as a way to raise funds for children and education is especially egregious when it is a proven fact that gambling has such a negative effect on children and families. While proponents argue funds will help our children, the real

consideration is, "What are we actually teaching our children when we legalize more gambling, when we encourage people to throw their money away in hopes of an exceedingly rare possibility of winning?" This is a vice that preys on those who can least afford to throw their money away. A great number of people have to lose in order for someone else to win. Some father, some mother will have to lose. And, who will lose the most? I tell you, the children will. Yet, the proponents of expanded gambling say it is to benefit the children.

Creating jobs and raising funds for education is a bad rationale for attempting to legalize immoral behavior in our state. We cannot become sold on the idea that the end always justifies the means. It is as if many have become convinced that we can favor money over morality and that somehow morality will still win out. When are we going to realize that using this kind of logic could justify any sin, if it is perceived as a means for creating jobs and raising funds for education? Money simply cannot always be the bottom-line in legalizing vices in society.

What are we going to end up calling these kinds of proposals... "Horses for Hope"? , "Cash from Casinos?" Will it one day be: "Money from Marijuana" or even, God forbid, "Pennies from Prostitutes"?

Think about the costs already on our society by tolerating strip clubs and the proliferation of pornography. Statistics show that human sex-trafficking is increased in the locations around these clubs. Estimates are that it takes as much as \$80K to \$100K a year to rehabilitate just one of these children rescued from this industry. Last year legislation, called the "Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Children Fund," passed the Ga General Assembly. This action reinforces my point that we are failing to see the cause and effect of these kinds of social ills on our children. Jesus himself said, It would be better that a millstone be tied around someone's neck and they be cast into the depths of the sea, than to cause one of these little ones to stumble! Just one!

Surely there is no one here today that thinks the sex-trafficking industry will be diminished in any way, by bringing casinos into our state. I declare to you that it will be just the opposite!

Pari-mutuel betting and casinos for Georgia are a bad bet! It has been proven in other states that these forms of gambling have many devastating effects on the moral and social climate in their communities. The societal costs of gambling are substantial.

The risks include such consequences as:

- 1) The break-up of families because gamblers are twice as likely to divorce as non-gamblers,
- 2) An increase in local crime by at least eight percent, within five years or less, after the establishment of a casino.
- 3) Local job loss because local citizens change their spending habits,
- 4) An increase of bankruptcies.
- 5) An increase of child neglect and domestic violence.

Not to mention the fact that, once the gambling industry is allowed to operate legally in our state, its lobbying power will grow to such a level that it will be virtually impossible to counteract! Also, once the State of Georgia allows Class III gambling, this would open the door for any Indian tribe to venue shop for property to open casinos on land that would be taken out of the governance of the State and off the local tax digest.

Any reasonable person can see that Georgia CANNOT afford, morally or economically, to have any further expansion of gambling in our state.

I would go on further to say that that it cannot be afforded politically in our state. In the 2012 straw poll conducted during the Republican primary, the results were basically 50/50 for or against casino gambling. Bottom-line: There is no clear overwhelming mandate from registered primary voters to expand the most dangerous kind of predatory gambling on our state!

Our Georgia Baptist Churches are deeply engrained into every facet of Georgia Community life. As a result of that, I can assure you that legislators voting for the advancement of expanding gambling, (even through allowing constitutional amendments to that effect) will not be viewed in a favorable light, especially during an election year. It is my moral obligation and my responsibility as the Georgia Baptist Convention's Public Affairs Representative to communicate to every Georgia Baptist church the voting records of legislators who vote for advancing the exploitation of our most vulnerable citizens through such predatory gambling as have been presented in these hearings. It is my desire to be able to say that at the Gold Dome, men and women of integrity stood strong and declared with their vote that the children of Georgia are our most precious resource and because of that we will do everything in our power to protect them and insure their future. We will protect our state from further forms of gambling to insure the protection of our children.

All of you here today on this committee are respectable people with an extremely high moral responsibility to recommend to the citizens of this state what you honestly believe is right. Please be careful listening to those whose first responsibility may be in making money for themselves. There are too many in the gambling industry who stand to gain much, at the expense of many.

Years ago, the former director (Virgil Peterson) of the Chicago Crime Commission said, "Gambling produces no wealth, it merely redistributes it from the hands of the many into the hands of the few."

Please do not recommend more gambling in Georgia. We cannot afford it!

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