

Gospel and Sports

Because of the most recent attention given to Tim Tebow and Jeremy Lin, pundits continue to ask what is the proper relationship, if any, of sports to religion? Although a perennial issue, as Christians, we must first ask: How is the gospel relevant to sports?

As Christians, the meaningfulness of sport to our Christian faith cannot be based on what sport considers best. **IDOLATRY!** Like the mocking purple robe of Jesus' passion, we do Jesus an injustice when we act like the power of his gospel is in need of human glory to make it credible. This fundamentally shifts the gospel from Jesus to how the gospel enables sportspersons to achieve the goals of sport, such as success, winning, discipline. Whether intentional or not, Christian ministers and athletes have on occasion (falsely) assumed that winning augments God's glory, in that winning connects with what sport fans demand—believing that this makes the gospel agreeable to its audience—yet, it forgets that by virtue of its divine origin the gospel is *already* relevant to all creation. Therefore, the gospel's relevance springs not from sport but from God's gift and power in Jesus Christ.

How then *does* the gospel story relate to sports? To see this, we look to the saving work of Christ: incarnation, death, and resurrection.

Incarnation. Christ incarnate vindicates that our human bodies are good, good enough that the Son of God took on a human body. So, we can say with Eric Liddell that when we run we feel God's pleasure. In sum, that by striving, sweating, and feeling in sport, we experience what God meant for us (in part) when he gave us physical bodies.

Death. Jesus' death atones for sin and reconciles all of creation to God. The glory of the cross says, "No!" to our outrageous and hopeless attempts to justify ourselves in sports. His death publicly exposes and condemns all of the sporting world's abuses of God's intention for the human body, all of sports' spiritual, moral and relational lies like pride, envy, idolatry, violence, disrespect, greed, cheating, taunting, preening, and the vitriol and anger of coaches and parents.

Resurrection. The resurrection renews and reorients this earthly life to God and his preferred future. That means, sport as an embodied activity is a "playground" teeming with treasures waiting for us to discover and to enjoy freely and responsibly as God's people. As prodigals, we are liberated so we can inhabit sports with others as serious embodied tests while recognizing ultimately that this is only a game.

In the film *Field of Dreams*, it was prophesied "If you build it, he will come." We confess as the church that God's Spirit has built his dwelling in our bodies. Manifest His presence in sport and they will come!

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