



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Grace of Neighborhood Baseball Parks  
(*Sports*, pp. 28-39)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# The Grace of Neighborhood Baseball Parks

Something is essentially right about a culture that produces a thing so fundamentally good as the game of baseball. Yet in our suburban sprawl we have built “stadiums on steroids” to fund the runaway economics of professional sports. How can we return to building neighborhood ballparks, from the big leagues to Little League, which are centers of community life?

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:1-3

### Meditation†

Every sport has its *kairos* moments, when as spectator or player, one becomes childlike again, or experiences the grace of human excellence, or bonds with complete strangers, or feels as if *chronos* time – the slow march toward death – is suspended.... [A sport] can become a signal of transcendence, a window into a world full of mystery and meaning.

This vague and elusive “signal of transcendence,” has a name for the Christian, who is not at all surprised to find this One even in the corrupt world of sports: “All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist” (Colossians 1:16-17). He is the one who “fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:23).

*Mark Galli*

### Reflection

Look closely at any built environment – the design and durability of public and private buildings, the layout of streets and freeways and sidewalks, the existence of parks and neighborhoods (or lack thereof) – and you will learn a lot about the character of the people who formed it and, in turn, are being formed by it. When we reflect as Christians about sports in this series of studies, we should examine the built environment for athletics in our cities.

“In the Christian view,” architect Philip Bess writes, “both the world and our selves are (in this order) *good, fallen* (i.e., in a state of disorder such that on our own we are incapable of fulfilling the purpose for which we have been created), and *redeemable and perfectible through the agency of divine grace*.” From this perspective, he asks, how should we think about baseball parks in our cities – of their nature and purpose, and ours?

- ▶ *There is a fundamental goodness to baseball*, Bess notes, for it is “a game that can be played well by persons of virtually any body type, and that also requires the most careful balance between both highly visible individual responsibility and achievement, and the communal purposes of a team.” He feels we are blessed with a complex economy that “allows good baseball players to devote themselves to baseball full time” in order to become better and achieve excellence.
- ▶ *Yet not all is well with baseball at its highest levels*. Our society’s “ideals of ordered liberty and equality of opportunity are mocked



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by our rampant consumerism and individualism at home, and by our mindless imposition of these latter vices abroad in the name of our allegedly most blessed way of life," warns Bess. "We have become a therapeutic culture that values celebrity and privilege over virtue; and this is reflected in the recent state of our National Pastime." One symptom of this disarray is the new larger and plusher baseball stadia isolated in "entertainment zones" of dying downtown districts. Bess believes "baseball's intrinsic and self-evident goodness is *best* when it occurs within the confines of an enclosed park in a traditional city neighborhood."

- ▶ *New professional baseball parks could contribute to good city neighborhoods.* "Cities and towns are cooperative human enterprises...to promote the best life possible for their citizens, and the fundamental unit of town planning and urban design is the neighborhood. The moral, economic, and environmental benefits of traditional neighborhoods are...designed primarily for *the walking human being*." Our challenge is to build baseball parks that are "neighborhood-friendly." They enhance and help create traditional, mixed-use neighborhoods where young and the old, singles and families, the working classes and the wealthy, can live together.

### Study Questions

1. Describing baseball as a "signal of transcendence," Philip Bess writes, "if only for a while, we step out of ordinary time and into eternity—at the very least into an altered sense of time, but sometimes into a genuinely blessed state of timelessness. It is this transcendent dimension of all play, including baseball, which makes us care about our games...." Have you ever experienced in sports what he is describing?
2. Do you agree with Bess that some flaws of America are evident in the condition of professional baseball today? Are these flaws evident other sports as well?
3. Bess identifies ten characteristics of a good city neighborhood. In your opinion, which of these are most important? Does your community share these features?
4. Can a major baseball park, or other sports facility, be the hub of a healthy neighborhood rather than a 'don't-build-it-in-my-back-yard' eyesore? How can Bess's eight "imperatives" lead to parks that enhance or help create a neighborhood?

### Departing Hymn: "Blest Be the Tie that Binds" (vv. 1 and 2)

Blest be the tie that binds  
our hearts in Christian love;  
the fellowship of kindred minds  
is like that to that above.

Before our Father's throne  
we pour our ardent prayers;  
our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,  
our comforts and our cares.

*John Fawcett (1782)*

*Tune: DENNIS*

# The Grace of Neighborhood Ballparks

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 3 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on how the built environment of sports – using professional baseball parks as an example – reflects who we are and helps shape who we become.
2. To discuss the intrinsic good of sports as “signals of transcendence.”
3. To consider how we should build sports complexes in order to enhance and help create good city neighborhoods.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sports (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Blest Be the Tie that Binds” locate the familiar tune DENNIS in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

“A friend came to visit me from out of town, and we arrived early to see a night game at Wrigley from my regular upper deck behind-home-plate cheap seats,” writes dedicated Chicago Cubs fan and architect Philip Bess. “The weather was warm, the ivy on the wall was green, the active twilight sky was purple and orange and pink, Lake Michigan visible to the east was turning a steely gray, the grills were fired up on the rooftops across the street, the el-train would clatter past every five minutes or so, the teams were just about to begin play, and the ballpark and the neighborhood were working together like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. And my friend, taking it all in, turned to me after a long silence and said, simply: ‘This is perfect.’”

Unfortunately this graceful “dance” between ballpark and neighborhood is increasingly rare as we replace neighborhood baseball parks with colossal structures that only wealthy suburbanites can afford to visit. What do the new coliseums reveal about our sprawling cities?

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give the group discernment to see how the flawed cities we are building reflect the disorder of our lives.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Hebrews 12:1-3 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

Most of the contributors to the *Sports* issue have discussed the nature of sports, their role in our society, our

attraction to them as athletes and fans, and how they are forming (or deforming) our character. Philip Bess guides our Christian reflection in a new direction as he evaluates the built environment of sports in our cities. Since he is a Chicago Cubs fan and a stadium architect in the forefront of the New Urbanist movement, Bess focuses on the professional baseball “stadiums on steroids” built in America over the last fifty years. Encourage your group to discuss his ideas in relation to other sports as well.

You might extend this study by discussing a Christian perspective on the built environment more generally with these resources in the *Cities and Towns* issue of *Christian Reflection*: Eric O. Jacobsen, “The New Urbanism” (pp. 28-36); Lee Hardy, “Dysfunctional Cities: Where Did We Go Wrong?” (pp. 11-19); and Philip Bess “The Church Building as a Sacramental Sign” (pp. 74-82). For more information on New Urbanist architectural and urban design projects near you, see the Congress for the New Urbanism Web site ([www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org)). You can see Mr. Bess’s new urbanist baseball stadium projects at Thursday Associates ([www.thursdayassociates.net](http://www.thursdayassociates.net)).

### Study Questions

1. In the meditation, Mark Galli describes the “signal of transcendence” in sports as a *kairos* moment, when “as spectator or player, one becomes childlike again, or experiences the grace of human excellence, or bonds with complete strangers, or feels as if *chronos* time—the slow march toward death—is suspended....” Encourage members to discuss whether they have experienced something like this as an athlete or fan.
2. Philip Bess names these flaws: (1) our ideals of ordered liberty and equality have been distorted by consumerism and individualism; (2) we value celebrity and privilege over virtue; (3) we believe we can escape life’s unpleasantness by moving away from the poor.

The first is seen in Major League Baseball’s “years of unjust and ruinous labor relations that entailed among other things: racial segregation until 1947; baseball’s notorious ‘reserve clause’ that bound players to the team that signed them for a year after their previous contract had expired; the 1970s rise of the Major League Baseball Players Association, arbitration, and free agency; collusion on the part of wealthy team owners in the mid-1980s; and four work stoppages in twenty two years, including an August 1994 season-ending strike by the then arguably equally wealthy players.” The second is seen in the scandal of players using steroids and other performance enhancing drugs. The third is evident in our building new baseball stadia in downtown “entertainment zones” rather than established or new neighborhoods. This reflects “the suburban cultural bias that cities are good places in which to be entertained, but only poor people and childless adults would actually live there.”

Do members see these flaws reflected in other professional or college sports?

3. Bess explains ten characteristics of a good urban neighborhood: it has a discernible center, is pedestrian friendly, has a variety of dwelling types, has stores and offices located at or near its center, has an elementary school to which most young children can walk, has small parks and other recreational facilities dispersed throughout, has small blocks with a network of through streets, places buildings close to the street, utilizes its streets for parking, and reserves prominent sites for civic buildings [e.g., for religion, government, education, the fine arts, or sports] (pp. 35-36). Small towns and traditional urban neighborhoods typically have most of these features; suburbs have few or none of them. These features create space for a human community that encourages walking and interaction among neighbors.
4. Rather than being a “stadium on steroids” surrounded by acres of parking, a neighborhood-friendly sports complex would have these features: contribute to the overall urban design, be located in a mixed-use neighborhood, be designed to fit into the existing site, function as a civic building with appropriate architectural embellishment, make cars adapt *to the culture and physical form of the neighborhood*, maximize *the use of pre-existing on- and off-street parking* (and distribute rather than concentrate any new required parking), create housing and shopping *development opportunities in the vicinity of the ballpark*, keep the *ballpark footprint smaller and more neighborhood-friendly* by locating non-ballpark specific program functions in buildings located adjacent to rather than within the ballpark (p. 36).

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.