



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Would Jesus Wear Face Paint?
(Sports, pp. 40-47)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Would Jesus Wear Face Paint?

Being a fan captivates our imaginations, brings us great joy, and partly constitutes our identities. The satisfaction of victory is intoxicating and the camaraderie with other fans in defeat is ennobling. But are there moral limits to the exuberance of fandom?

Responsive Prayer

God, we spend more energy, time, and money on our sports culture, than we do in service to you. We even worship favorite sports stars and teams.

We fail to see you because of our blind allegiance to our team.

Our priorities and focus are out of sync with your calling.

God, help us see sports and the gifts of athleticism as ways of creating community, caring for our bodies as your temple, and serving you.

Help us through sports and athletic competitions serve one another and your kingdom rather than our own. May we glorify you and not ourselves. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 2:5, 20-26

Meditation†

The word fan, a shortened form of fanatic, comes from the Latin word *fanaticus*, meaning “inspired by a deity, frenzied.” That word derives from *fanum*, Latin for “temple.” The word’s use continues to be true to its etymology.

Brian D. Ellison

Reflection

When they keep cutting corners in training and competition, athletes who play in the most significant games will lose: “no one is crowned without competing according to the rules” (2 Timothy 2:5b). Discipleship is like that, Timothy learns: there are “rules,” boundaries beyond which Christian faithfulness is impossible. Harboring impure “passions,” relishing “senseless controversies,” and bashing your opponents are a few of them (2:22-25).

Geoff Bowden invites us to reflect on moral boundaries for our actions as sports fans. “Anticipating the big game, strategizing with other fans before the game, watching our team play well under pressure, experiencing the sense of unity with all of the team’s fans, celebrating after their wins, and even debriefing or complaining after their losses can be a blast,” he writes. But when it comes to being a fully committed fan in a partisan atmosphere, he wonders, “Is there a moral line that Christians should not cross?” Bowden offers this guidance for carefully judging each situation:

- ▶ *Our highest commitment is to Christ and those he loves, not to our sports team.* “We are to model God’s love, first and foremost, for others,” Bowden notes, by serving enemies as well as friends. In our deeds and words we are to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand. This is why “we must not act or speak [as fans] in any fashion that places obstacles for others to hear the good news. If we preach service but only consume, we have muted the good news. If we preach justice but ignore the maimed and oppressed, people will not see the rule of God operate in our lives.”



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- ▶ *A sports event is like a theatrical play.* How can we serve our enemies if we ardently root for our team or player to win (and the other to lose)? Bowden suggests that a sports event is an “artificial” environment in which athletes and fans play specific roles. As fans, “we engage in the drama along with the players, and our passions should be restricted to the artificial confines of the competition itself. Our hostility toward the other team is contrived, a product of the artificial drama in which we engage,” he writes. “Outside the boundaries of the competition, our moral responsibilities to our opponents – the other team’s players or their fans – is to serve them in pursuit of the highest good. Inside the artificial drama, we do not suspend Christian ethics; rather, we clearly remember that the joy of the drama of competition is not the highest good, and must be subordinated to the highest good.”
- ▶ *In our sports enthusiasm, we should not undermine the higher goods of discipleship for ourselves or others.* The Apostle Paul’s admonition to care for those with a weak conscience (1 Corinthians 8:1-12) applies here. Bowden concludes, “We are free to cheer vigorously for our team at the game and let others know where our sporting allegiances lie, but when the opportunity arises to chide a referee or mock opposing players and fans (even if it is in the spirit of playful competition), we must beware of how others perceive our actions! Our highest moral obligation is to Christ and to the fulfillment of the ethics of his kingdom, and not loyalty to our team.”

Study Questions

1. Discuss some widely accepted fan activities that Christians should avoid. Why are these behaviors “over the line”?
2. For Geoff Bowden, how are sports events like theatrical plays? What does this imply about the ethics of being a fan?
3. Discuss Stephen Carter’s view that Christian fans should “try to create conditions in which the athlete with the greater skill and dedication is the one who will prevail, rather than adding to the opposing team the artificial impediment of our catcalls and jeers.” Do you think Jesus would wear face paint?

Departing Hymn: “Take My Life, and Let It Be” (vv. 1 and 3)

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee;
take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of thy love;
take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my will, and make it thine, it shall be no longer mine;
take my heart, it is thine own, it shall be thy royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure store;
take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee.

Frances R. Havergal (1873)

Tune: MADRID (Carr)

† Brian D. Ellison, “This is My Bratwurst, Broken for Thee,” *re:generation Quarterly* 7:3 (Fall 2001), available online at www.ctlibrary.com/rq/2001/fall/7316.html.

Would Jesus Wear Face Paint?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review our behavior as sports fans.
2. To examine three guidelines for evaluating our fan behaviors from a Christian perspective.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 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 “Take My Life, and Let It Be” locate the familiar tune MADRID in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

In an essay on “Sports Mobs and Madness,” Yale law professor and novelist Stephen L. Carter has written, “The notion of ‘let the best person win’ is, I suppose, an old-fashioned one, but Christians are bound by an old-fashioned religion. Surely we sports fans best display our love of neighbor when we try to create in the stadium conditions in which the athlete with the greater skill and dedication is the one who will prevail, rather than adding to the opposing team the artificial impediment of our catcalls and jeers. True, there will always be a degree of home field advantage – we will always root harder for the team that has for so long commanded our affections – but there is a world of difference between buoying up one team and dragging down the other” (quoted in *Sports*, p. 65).

Carter is correct that there is a world of difference between enthusiastically supporting our favorite team and tearing down the opposing one, but is it always clear (in the heat of athletic competition) when we have crossed this moral line?

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the responsive prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read 2 Timothy 2:5, 20-26 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

Geoff Bowden develops three guidelines for enthusiastic fan behaviors. First, the good things that we enjoy as

fans—winning, friendship with other fans, loyalty to a team or sport, and a sense of identity—must be ranked below our highest good, which is becoming fully human as we become like Christ in all of our activities. Second, we should think of sports events as artificial environments, somewhat like theatrical plays, in we play a role. This allows for favoritism toward our team and good-natured hassling of opponents as part of a “performance.” Finally, we should avoid fan behaviors (even those justified as part of a performance) which become barriers to others’ faithful discipleship.

Bowden’s defense of enthusiastic fan behaviors (within the guidelines above) is in some tension with Stephen Carter’s view that as Christians we should “try to create in the stadium conditions in which the athlete with the greater skill and dedication is the one who will prevail, rather than adding to the opposing team the artificial impediment of our catcalls and jeers.”

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to discuss wrong behaviors not only at sports events (use of foul language to intimidate players or referees, inconsiderate treatment of opposing fans, inappropriate taunting and jeering, interference with athletic play, encouraging false judgments about play, and so on), but also beyond the sports events (denigration or inappropriate teasing of opponents’ fans, preoccupation with sports talk, harboring anger or envy toward opponents’ fans, being vainglorious about the success of one’s own team or player, and so on). Geoff Bowden reminds us, “Jesus does not prep us to be successful in a competitive environment, to win at all costs, to dominate opponents. The opposite is true: he teaches us how to help others [including our enemies] survive.”
2. “In much the same way that patrons go to the theater to see a play, sports fans go to competitions to see players assume roles, act within the confines of a given set of rules, and engage in dramatic conflict. While we may know the outcome of a theatrical play or opera (because we have read the script), in sporting events the outcome is always unknown, which greatly heightens the sense of drama,” Bowden writes. As fans we are *participants* of a sort in the drama. “Our role is to love our teams and players because of their performances on the field of play, and not (usually) for the ways in which they live the rest of their lives. We engage in the drama along with the players, and our passions should be restricted to the artificial confines of the competition itself. Our hostility toward the other team is contrived, a product of the artificial drama in which we engage.”

The rules of fan participation allow or, even, encourage us (like an actor) to feel, say, and do things that we would not do in real life. Nevertheless, “outside the boundaries of the competition, our moral responsibilities to our opponents—the other team’s players or their fans—is to serve them in pursuit of the highest good. Inside the artificial drama, we do not suspend Christian ethics; rather, we clearly remember that the joy of the drama of competition is not the highest good, and must be subordinated to the highest good.”

Encourage members to examine Bowden’s analogy. Are there significant differences between sports and theater? Can we easily “turn off” the “artificial” fan behavior when we want to, or does it bleed over into the stadium parking lot, our place of work, our family life, our congregation, and so on? Are the nature of the “drama” and our roles as fans significantly different when we shift our attention from professional to college, high school, or children’s sports?

3. Stephen Carter believes it is permissible to “buoy up” one’s favorite player or team, but not to “drag down” the opponent. We may “root harder for the team that has for so long commanded our affections” in order to provide for them a “home field advantage,” but our role in the drama (to use Bowden’s analogy) is to create conditions in which the best athlete or team wins. Would Carter encourage as much enthusiastic “artificial” fan behavior as Bowden would permit?

Would Jesus wear face paint? Consider the merits of Bowden’s answer: “I think he would. But he would also walk that extra mile to show opposing fans and athletes that the importance of victory pales in comparison to the riches of the kingdom of God.”

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.