Sporting excellence and God's plan for the nations

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August 2020

Appreciating a biblical theology of sport

Christian views on the value of sport arise from the Creator's interest in the goodness of the body and his pleasure in observing our astonishing physical capabilities. Those views continue as we appreciate how sporting analogies provided a compelling pattern for the early disciples, since several portions of Scripture describe the Christian life using athletic terminology. This is particularly the case in these excerpts from the Apostle Paul, whose love for athletics is clear, since sporting references are a persistent theme in his communications:

> *"... if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace ...."* (Acts 20:24).
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> *... if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according the rules. ...* (II Timothy 2:5).
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> *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day...* (II Timothy 4:7-8).
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> *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.* (I Corinthians 9:24-27).
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> *... I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 3:13-14).
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> An additional non-Pauline reference is found in the Book of Hebrews:
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> *... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.* (Hebrews 12:1).

Furthermore, the shepherd boy David was physically fit, having tackled wild animals in defence of the sheep, and he further threw off the armour and ran toward the enemy Goliath:

> *... David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear ...* (I Samuel 17:34-36).

Individual sporting excellence and the Christian faith

Sporting excellence has been greatly used by God to commend the individual's Christian faith. In this way sporting heros such as the famous cricket player C. T. Studd impacted their generation.

One of the most superb examples of Christian excellence in sport was provided by Eric Liddell, whose story was portrayed in the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*. Eric Liddell was a remarkable athlete. In a race betweeen Scotland and France race, he fell, hesitated as he thought he was disqualified, was urged by a steward to keep going, and he closed a 20 metre gap to win the race.

His faith was clearly demonstrated by his words and actions, and was commended by his sporting excellence and his convictions. Strangely, he loved to run with his head tilted up. Asked how he knew where to run, he would reply: "The Lord guides me".

As a matter of Christian conscience, Eric Liddell refused to run in his chosen event (the 100 metre race) in the 1924 Paris Olympics because the heats were held on a Sunday. Great public pressure came upon Liddell to set aside his faith-based objection to running on a Sunday, and he was vilified as a traitor. The Prince of Wales (who became King Edward VIII) personally attempted to persuade Liddell to set aside the objection. On the day of the heats, Liddell spent the time preaching in a Paris church.

Unable to run in his chosen event, he opted to compete in the 400m race. As he entered the stadium, he was given a slip of paper containing words from the Bible, where God says: *"Those who honour me I will honour"* (I Samuel 2:30). Though he was not expected to run well in this event, he broke the Olympic record and won the race by a five metres, securing the gold medal for Britain. So the hero who had been vilified as a coward and traitor, was again hailed as a hero! His favourite hymn was *Be still my soul* (a remarkable choice for such fast moving individual). He then quit athletics and ministered in China - eventually dying as a prisoner of war.

Sporting excellence and God's work to build up nations

Sporting excellence, in the person of the great cricketer Sir Donald Bradman, was instrumental in Australia's role as God's means of bringing justice to the oppressed people of South Africa. One of the most well-loved and influential figures in Australia and internationally during the nineteenth century, Bradman initially had no difficulty with Australian cricketers playing a South African team chosen on a racial basis, by a minority race which dominated South Africa - though Bradman was aware of considerable opposition to this tacit approval of the Apartheid regime. He once stated that "Politics should not come into sport". But he was sufficiently open-minded and even-handed as to give attention to that a human rights group raised with him.
He asked to be briefed by the anti-apartheid protest movement, and then made a visit to South Africa to investigate personally the situation. In a historic meeting with South African Prime Minister Vorster, he was informed that blacks were inferior and unable to cope with playing cricket. Bradman asked the Prime Minister whether the Prime Minister had ever heard of Gary Sobers (the great cricketer from the West Indies).

Having reversed his position, Bradman, as head of the Australian Cricket Board, stopped the South African all-white cricket team touring Australia in 1971, and he issued a simple statement to the media: "We will not play them until they choose a team on a non-racist basis". Prime Minister Whitlam made the ban government policy in 1972. Such actions put such great pressure on the Apartheid regime that it never recovered, and were therefore instrumental in God's work of bringing justice to the oppressed blacks of South Africa, along with a civic system that better respected the individual worth of each citizen regardless of race. It is a good example of the people moving before the government moves. However, it took 22 years before South Africa sent to Australia a team whose players were chosen for the quality of their skill, not the colour of their skin.

Applying the gospel in sporting contexts

Since Australia is sports-crazy, it makes good sense to utilise that inclination and harness it for the gospel. Hence Christians do well to involve themselves in sporting activities as a means of reaching non-believers. This may involve God's people coaching school sports teams and thus developing connections between children, their parents and the church.

We may also highlight such things as the statue of Christ the Redeemer towering over the mountains of Rio which hosted the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, or draw attention to video of the Fijian Olympic rugby team members who sang a hymn and wept as they won gold in those games.

As the London 2012 Olympics drew to a close, a Christian outreach group called *More Than Gold* hosted the inaugural "Legacy Award" breakfast in honour of Eric Liddell. The organisation seeks to enable local churches to engage with big sporting events around the world.