

AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

**SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE TEAM SPORT ENVIRONMENT
AND ITS APPLICATION FOR CHURCHES**

by

William J. Galipault

A doctoral project submitted to the
Graduate School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Ministry

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“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9, NIV).¹ In 1978, when I came to faith in Christ as a 22-year-old, I truly had no idea what was ahead. I was an athlete who had viewed college coursework merely as a way to stay eligible to play and who had vowed never to back to school. So, a love for learning, two masters, and a doctorate could be nothing more than God’s miraculous transformation, for which I am deeply humbled and appreciative.

There are several people to be thanked for the part they have played in what God has done. My wife, Lisa, has been my biggest supporter, encourager, and prayer warrior. Without her I might have given up along the way. Meredith, Laurel, and Shannon - our daughters - have each walked part of my doctoral journey alongside of me as college students themselves.

Friend, mentor, example, and encourager describe Tim Conrad, who challenged us in 1986 to step out of our comfort zone into missionary service and has continued to walk alongside over the last 27 years. Thanks also to Nelson Cook, Dave Radford, Steve Quatro, and Mark Comeaux who drew me into talks on how to plan and launch a sports

¹ Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are to the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (NIV) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

ministry major at Hope International University, that inspired me to enter the DMin program.

Lastly, to Kent Walkemeyer and the Friends Center at APU, I am grateful for the confidence you showed in me and the scholarships you provided. I am blessed!

ABSTRACT

SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE TEAM SPORT ENVIRONMENT AND ITS APPLICATION FOR CHURCHES

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Doctor of Ministry, 2014
Azusa Pacific University
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This project presents a partial solution to the church's struggle with (or neglect of) spiritual formation by using the competitive team sport environment as a place to make disciples. By analyzing spiritual formation and examining its history in the church, one sees the need and possibility to be creative in fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples. This study examines sport history and how the church has interacted with sport and the team sport environment, discovering it to be an ideal place for spiritual formation. By being intentional in purpose and planning and through the training of coaches, the church can take the culturally relevant medium of sport and leverage it for the kingdom.

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PREFACE

It was not a flash of lightning, but it was a moving realization that my love for and gifting in soccer was something through which God wanted to work to impact not only my own life, but also the lives of people who did not know Him. Visiting a small private girls' elementary school in a Jamaican village, our short-term missionary soccer team had spent time playing games in the courtyard with about 100 uniformed students. The giggles, screams, and laughter as we played seemed like background music for the Holy Spirit as he danced through the hearts of those he was drawing to the Savior. Our post-playtime 'program' consisted of a few songs which elicited a lot more giggles and laughter, a couple of testimonies from my teammates, and a message by Stan Herod, the missionary with whom we were traveling. As he ended his simple presentation of the Gospel, he invited anyone who wanted to receive the forgiveness that Jesus offered and trust him as their Savior, to pray with him. As Stan led out in prayer, all the girls prayed out loud with him – an incredible moment. After he finished the prayer, Stan said something to the effect of, "It was nice that you prayed with me, but I'm sure that some of you just did that to be polite. If you really meant that prayer, could you raise your hand?" About half of the group did.

Until that point in our tour, I was tired, sore, and frustrated by being thumped game after game, sharing the Gospel to crowds that seemed uninterested. I wondered if anything of eternal value was being accomplished by our presence. Of course, I was

looking at the experience as ministry to the lost and not really a spiritual formation opportunity for myself. I was 25 years old but had been a believer for just over 2 years. I was not comfortable sharing my faith and had struggled with even the idea of playing soccer anymore, although I had loved the game since picking it up as a 10-year-old. I had recently quit the amateur team for which I was playing, which was sponsored by a local bar, and had told God that I would never play again, if that was what He wanted. Within weeks I had come across an ad in *Campus Life* magazine looking for Christian soccer players to go on a short-term mission trip to Jamaica, Guatemala, and Trinidad. Although I did not feel that I could be a missionary, I did know that I could play soccer; and so, trusting that God would change me into a missionary, I applied, raised my support, and joined the team.

In those brief moments at the girls' school, looking out at the 50 or so hands raised, it all came together for me. Although I did not see myself gifted as an evangelist or a missionary, I did come to see myself as part of a group effort that God was using to draw people to Himself. The impact of that moment on that trip redirected my life, beginning a now 33-year commitment to follow God in reaching and discipling men and women, boys and girls, in and through the environment of sport.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

Followers of Jesus are meant to experience a full and abundant life, so why is it that so many do not? There is no shortage of opinions and theories to answer that question, but most center around the topic of spiritual formation, or lack of it. American evangelical churches for the past 5 decades have focused more on expanding God’s kingdom by making converts rather than disciples. According to 30 years of research by George Barna, a large number of people have accepted the free gift of salvation, “but without much understanding of the nature, implications and responsibilities associated with that gift.”²

In his book, *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard challenges the church of Jesus Christ, which has in many respects relegated discipleship or spiritual formation to an a la carte side dish on the menu of Christianity. A large segment of Christians experience disappointment with the difference between what they were led to believe about the Christian life and their actual day-to-day experience of it – “the great disparity”. Willard

² George Barna, "The Road Map For Becoming Transformed," *Maximum Faith*, 2011, <http://maximumfaith.com> (accessed October 3, 2013).

considers the church's failure to make disciples, "the great omission", as the reason for this gap. If discipleship has been made optional and not seen as an essential part for which every Christian is called, then it makes sense that the true Christ-life is not being lived by a large cross-section of Christians.³

There is a misunderstanding of what spiritual formation is and a mistaken perception that it is only for "super believers", or special people, instead of realizing that it is expected of and available to every believer. Because there is no concise biblical prescription for spiritual formation, Christians across the centuries have been left to interpret principles found in scripture in culturally relevant ways. However, even among those who have an understanding of what spiritual formation is and how it can draw us closer to God and grow us into Christ-likeness, not many pursue it. Barna observes, "Unfortunately, my research reveals that a majority of believers who figure out where the journey goes, and what it takes to maximize the opportunity God grants us by completing the journey to wholeness, instead choose to settle for a less complete and fulfilling life."⁴ Part of the reason that many Christians do not take part in spiritual formation is that the traditional means of the church for discipling believers is through sermons, classroom teaching, and discussion. Spiritual formation is dynamic. It is training. It is practice. It is not just reading about humility, discussing humility, and listening to the wisdom of someone teaching about humility, but it is humbling ourselves. Seldom is there someone who will not only teach on humility but also live it and take others with them into places/situations that will actually help them grow in and live out humility.

³ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), x-xii.

⁴ Barna, *The Road Map*.

The ramifications of this deficiency in the church regarding spiritual formation can be seen across the spectrum of our churches and society as a whole. They are felt and seen in every area of life: family, business, education, entertainment, as well as hobbies and pursuits such as sport. Willard writes, “Most statistical measures and anecdotal portraits of evangelical Christians, not to mention Christians in general, show a remarkable similarity in the life-texture of Christians and non-Christians.”⁵

In addition to misunderstandings about spiritual formation is confusion about the nature of sport and competition. What, if any, role does our faith have in how (or even whether) we engage in sporting activities? Even within the sports ministry community there is a wide variety of opinions about sport, competition, the Christian’s responsibility, and the way sport can/should be “used” in ministry.

My hope is that this project will spark deeper thought and discussion within the sports ministry community, church leadership, and individual Christian athletes. The goal is that through such thought and discussion we could collectively dispel some of the myths and shallow thinking that have caused sport to be perceived by many church leaders as a lost cause and sports ministry to be viewed as superficial, at best, or altogether dangerous.

Literature Review

In the area of spiritual formation, I am relying most heavily on Dallas Willard and primarily his three works, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, *Renovation of the Heart*, and *The Great Omission*. In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, he laments that modern Christianity has produced many converts but not many people who live as Jesus lived. The focus has been

⁵ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 69.

on doing what Jesus did, such as loving our enemies, giving to those in need, and forgiving those who do us wrong. The problem is that we do not prepare for these situations; rather, we rely on the power of our effort in the moment to sustain us, and we almost always fail miserably. Willard even uses some athletic illustrations. “A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of his body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to act in the manner of Christ when put to the test without the appropriate exercise in godly living.”⁶ He thus identifies the secret of the easy yoke, which is to learn to live our entire lives the way Jesus did. In living as Jesus did, we will be prepared, as he was, for the challenges of the moment where we must do the right thing under pressure.

The remainder of Willard’s book involves identifying the theology of spiritual formation and then making that theology practical through the spiritual disciplines. One aspect of Willard’s theology that lends itself to ministry in the sport environment is that our bodies, rather than being impediments to spirituality, are essential to the process. He identifies the purpose of the body, “People have a body for one reason – that we might have at our disposal the resources that would allow us to be persons in fellowship and cooperation with a personal God.”⁷ We are made ready to act in the moment through submitting our members (bodies) to righteousness by developing habits that will allow us to serve righteousness “automatically” in the moment, rather than automatically serving sin as the unregenerate person does.⁸

⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 4-5.

⁷ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 92.

⁸ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 117.

In *Renovation of the Heart*, Willard asserts that the way to pervasive inner transformation is through small steps that we take with Jesus's help; and this partnership is available to all believers.⁹ He explains our inner life in terms of what controls or dominates our thoughts and actions. The life apart from God has as a hierarchy, Body, Soul, Mind (thought/feeling), Spirit, and God. Body, then, becomes the force that the rest of our makeup serves. In our walk with God the hierarchy is inverted making God the focus of service of all the other parts of our being.¹⁰

Getting practical about spiritual formation, Willard identifies "The General Pattern" of personal transformation as Vision, Intention, and Means. Vision for life as God would have it, His Kingdom, is where we start. After we have the clear vision, we must decide and commit to living that vision. Lastly, we must utilize effective means for the transformation we desire as found in the life and teachings of Jesus, the other biblical writers, and the experiences of God's people, both current and historical.¹¹

Addressing areas that need changing, Willard discusses transforming the mind by choosing not to focus on non-Kingdom things while welcoming and seeking God's ideas and images of the Kingdom. In addition, we can transform our feelings by concentrating on feelings (i.e., fruit) that God would have us display: joy, peace, faith, hope, and love are examples. Another area of transformation comes as we identify our will with God's will which will lead us then to taking increasing control over our bodies, what we pay attention to, what we say, and what we do. As we transform these various areas of our personal lives, the transformation will overflow into the transformation of our

⁹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 10-11.

¹⁰ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 40-41.

¹¹ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 85-94.

relationships and social dimension. This is also an area applicable to spiritual formation of the individual in the team sport environment as we create an atmosphere where transformation is encouraged and enabled.

Although *The Great Omission* is, chronologically, the most recent of these three books, it has the most articulated description of spiritual formation being something at which the contemporary church has failed and why. Willard explains the Great Commission and notes that discipleship/spiritual formation, while central to the Great Commission, has become optional in the church. Although not breaking much new ground, there were a few ideas that were very helpful for my project.

Willard's "Golden Triangle" paints a simple picture of how we can grow spiritually. Each side is essential and works in conjunction with the other two. The faithful acceptance of everyday problems, interaction with God's Spirit in and around us, and practice of spiritual disciplines comprise a description of how we can put on the new self (Col 3).¹² Another helpful idea was his explanation of how grace and effort combine in the process of spiritual formation without erring toward one aspect or the other. Although it was addressed in the other two books, it is here made clear in two short sentences. "Grace is opposed to earning, not effort. In fact, nothing inspires and enhances effort like the experience of grace."¹³

As with Willard's other cited books, *The Great Omission* places significant emphasis on the body's role in spiritual formation. He describes it as a tool for spiritual growth rather than a dead weight that slows us down: "Our part in this transformation, in addition to constant faith and hope in Christ, is purposeful, strategic use of our bodies in

¹² Willard, *The Great Omission*, 26-31.

¹³ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 80.

ways that will retrain them, replacing the ‘motions of sin in our members’ with the motions of Christ. This is how we take up our cross daily. It is how we submit our bodies, as a living sacrifice, how we offer the parts of our body to him as ‘instruments of righteousness’ (Romans 6:13).”¹⁴

From the sport side of the equation, there are a couple of notable influences. Shirl J. Hoffman is Professor Emeritus of Kinesiology at UNC Greensboro. In addition to a very wide and well-respected body of work in kinesiology, Hoffman has spent the last few decades exploring how the Christian faith and the ethics of popular sport can be reconciled. He edited the first real look at the subject, *Sport and Religion*, in 1992; and his latest book, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*, seeks to help Christians look at sport Christianly rather than to unquestioningly accept the secular sports culture as it exists. In *Good Game*, Hoffman focuses on the uncritical way that the church and individuals view sports. Because the church has not thought seriously about sport, sport and Christianity have been fused. It is unfortunate that although the church has felt it has been utilizing sport for its own purposes and, in turn, helping redeem it, the opposite is the reality. The outcome is a “Christianity that has been vetted by the athletic community.”¹⁵ When viewed as a tool to accomplishing some practical good, “the result is that sport played by Christians isn’t different in any substantive way from sport that is taught, celebrated, sold, and used in popular culture.”¹⁶

In the early church, the Jewish Christians wanted nothing to do with the pagan games, be they the more brutal contests of the Romans or the milder races and field

¹⁴ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 85.

¹⁵ Shirl Hoffman, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 14.

¹⁶ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 20.

events of the Greeks. The gentile Christians were less discerning about sport, and it was the church leadership that began to critique sport. “To the early fathers, watching the games risked blurring the lines that distinguished the new faith from the old religion.”¹⁷

Play is an important concept for Hoffman. We are created with the capacity to create, imagine, and enjoy. Sport, like art, music, theater, and other activities allows us to experience play. Hoffman views the competitive nature of sport not as something that is inherent in our human identity, but rather, as the way that humanity has chosen to organize the play impulse.¹⁸ It is the competitive aspect of sport that most often causes a disconnect with the Christian faith. While making play more interesting and bringing it to a higher level of skill, competition also brings participants face-to-face with temptations to jettison Christian principles in favor of worldly ones. Because we are to do all of what we do in the name of the Lord Jesus, it will take great intentionality to compete in a way that honors God and shows love for one’s neighbor (opponent). Although Hoffman clearly sees the dangers in our modern forms of competitive sport, he hopes that by looking critically at sport, at all levels, we can play “Christianly” and lead the way to redeeming sport.

Evan B. Howard has taught and written much on spirituality. Of most importance for this paper was *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, which gives a broad and well-balanced history of the subject. The overall message of the book to me was that there have many and varied approaches to spiritual formation throughout church history. All have had their benefits and challenges; and because there is no biblical normative

¹⁷ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 45.

¹⁸ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 274.

pattern, none can be seen as the best or only way. A few particular areas of this book were very instructional for my project.

His section in Chapter 8 about contexts of spiritual formation shows that different settings provide distinctive advantages or challenges to the process. Considering the sport environment, we will see how its structure and culture can be utilized positively in the pursuit of Christ-likeness. Part of the culture of the team sport environment is the closeness it provides, a community that gives opportunity for us to serve one another and puts us into relationships that can challenge and encourage us to grow.

Another section on agents of spiritual formation helped give insight into the role of the coach in the team sport context. As athletes and parents of athletes, we give our children or ourselves over to a coach, who, in the sport setting, has enormous power (for good or evil). The implications become clear for the need of training Christian coaches to responsibly and effectively take advantage of the influence they are given because of their position.

Solution

One part of the church's overall strategy for spiritual formation should include the environment of sport. It is not a one-size-fits-all medium, and not everyone will be inclined to participate. However, for those who do, it is fertile ground for spiritual growth if tilled with the proper care and intentionality.

Sport, especially the team environment, as a place for spiritual formation can be used across much of the age-spectrum, although it is most effective and has the widest appeal among children through young adult. According to Barna, "We develop our core values, beliefs, and behaviors when we are children. However, very few families,

churches, schools and relationships are focused on facilitating godly transformation among young people. Instead, we end up allowing our children to embrace the objectives of the society we are called to shape; we wind up being shaped by it.”¹⁹

The environment of competitive team sports can offer the church a venue in which to develop relationships with children. It can also teach (by word and example) the truths of the Gospel and give them opportunities to walk in those truths through the laboratory of the sport experience.

Methodology

The primary methodology used in this project is theoretical. I theorize that Christian spiritual formation can profitably occur in a team sport environment. Churches would do well to adopt my principles of spiritual formation and sport for the making of Christian disciples, especially among – but not limited to – children and youth. Secondary methodology includes textual research of the Bible, spiritual formation literature, and literature on the nature of sport and coaching, from Christian as well as non-Christian perspectives.

To address the problem of a lack of spiritual formation in the church, I attempt to define spiritual formation and examine a sample of biblical principles that guide our understanding of it. The principles and the spirit to which we adhere determine the efficacy of our efforts. So often our best efforts done with right motives can, over time, become dry and empty habit. Barna observes, “We somehow overlook the fact that our religious profile is more similar to that of the Pharisees and Sadducees – the very people whom Jesus castigated for living by the letter of the law without embracing its spirit –

¹⁹ Barna, *The Road Map*.

than to that of the early disciples, whom Jesus said would be known by their love and by the fruit produced by their transformed lives.”²⁰

Next is an overview of spiritual formation history in the church. To some, spiritual formation is associated with pagan practices, occult practices, and Eastern religious practices. Because the term “spiritual formation” is widely used, there are indeed groups or individuals, even Christian groups and individuals, who practice spiritual formation in ways that evangelicals consider dangerous. Whether it is centering prayer as a means to union with the divine as practiced by Thomas Keating or the use of imagination or bodily mortification practiced by Ignatius of Loyola, there are customs or methods that cause us to question their validity.

A historical survey of church/sport relations led to an investigation of the sport environment to judge its capacity for training people to become more like Jesus. By studying the dynamics of competition, the team environment, and the coach as spiritual director, a framework for spiritual formation in the sport environment emerges.

By examining spiritual formation theory and sport theory, we discover that the two can be combined to help believers move toward Christ-likeness. With careful and deliberate preparation on the part of the church, sport can be an effective, albeit small, part of the church’s overall plan for spiritual formation.

Research Questions

From the background information on spiritual formation and sport, I attempt to answer two key questions. The first question is whether sport is a conducive or appropriate environment for spiritual formation. Is the nature of sport, particularly the

²⁰ Barna, *The Road Map*.

aspect of competition, such that it would lend itself to the development of spiritual maturity, or is the whole culture of sport so fallen as to preclude any positive spiritual benefit? The follow-up question for the church to ask depends on the answer to question number one. If the answer is yes, then the sport environment could assist us in making disciples of Christ. Then the questions become: How do we utilize sport for spiritual formation purposes? What do we need to emphasize? How must we prepare people to minister? What things must we guard against? If the answer to question one is no, then the questions become: Do we attempt to reform or transform the culture and practice of sport, or do we simply try to protect our congregations from it?

My answer is a resounding yes to the question of whether the sport environment is a viable place for spiritual formation. As I answer some of the follow-up questions, I assert that in utilizing sport for spiritual formation, we can engage in the reform and transformation of the sporting culture.

CHAPTER 2

SPIRITUAL FORMATION: DYNAMICS AND DEFINITIONS

Biblical Foundations

When discussing spiritual formation, there is naturally reference made to discipleship and the similarities/differences between the two. Some have even added Christian education into the mix and distinguished between the three. Of course, because none of these are explicitly outlined and detailed in scripture, there are no absolute definitions or distinctions. Although some have contended that spiritual formation is the broader category under which discipleship would be a part, there are just as many who believe the opposite to be true. I assert that spiritual formation and discipleship are one in the same – both having similar biblical goals of seeing believers grow in both their intellectual and experiential knowledge of God to become more Christ-like in attitude and action at all times and in all areas of life. The next two subsections present scripture passages to illustrate the origin of my idea of spiritual formation.

Colossians 2:16-3:17

In Colossians chapters 2 and 3, we find a vivid presentation of what spiritual formation is not and what it is. Paul, in chapter 2, is writing to a body of believers who are being assailed by teachers tempting them to take their eyes off of Christ, to focus on the collective culture and wisdom of men, described as “the basic principles of this

world” (verse 20). No set of regulations or ceremonies, “shadows” he calls them in verse 17, can help them experience a deeper level of the reality of Christ.

We humans have a meritocracy mindset. With the exception of the occasional lottery winner or reality TV star, we realize that those who reap the greatest rewards work hard for them. Today, as in the first century, there are many Christians who believe that you have to earn your way to God’s favor by making the required sacrifices, by performing the prescribed rituals, or through physical acts of penance. In the face of those who were telling the Colossian Christians that they had to observe certain rites, stay away from specific foods, or follow a checklist of rules and regulations, Paul explains that the path to a deeper walk with Christ is to simply believe and follow him. This was how they began their faith-walk, and this was where their focus needed to remain. He makes clear in this section that the “faith” portion of the faith-walk is primary, but that the “walk” portion is also essential. They work in harmony because they were never meant to be separate. The false teachers saw the keeping of the law as a way of earning a deeper relationship with God. Paul saw the active engagement of pursuing Christ in obedience in the physical life as a way of opening ourselves to more of the grace that God was offering.

In chapter 3, which the NIV has given what I feel is the inappropriate heading, “Rules for Holy Living”, Paul shifts to a positive portrayal of how a closer relationship with Christ looks and the path that leads there. He reassures them that their standing with God is not in question, saying in 3:1-3: “Since, then, you *have been* raised with Christ” – “For you *died*, and your life is *now hidden* with Christ” (*emphases mine*). They have already been forgiven, are adopted into God’s family, and are one with Christ. Because of

that truth, the way to grow deeper into that relationship is not to modify the external or temporal to develop the spiritual; rather, it is to transform the inner and eternal which, as it is accomplished, will better enable us to bring the outward into harmony with it.

The transformation of the inner and eternal begins as we set our hearts and minds on things above, on Christ who sits at the right hand of God and with whom our life is hidden. There is nothing higher than that! In contrast to Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father, are the “earthly things” (3:2) that the false teachers are droning on about – circumcision, ascetic practices, and the “hollow and deceptive philosophy” (2:8) that is being used to promote them. Because their lives have assumed a supernatural, heavenly reality, Paul’s appeal to believers is to not remain mired in the limited, earthly existence pushed by the false teachers. That reality was characterized by striving to fulfill an impossible set of rules to earn something that Paul reminds them they already possess.

Our primary task as followers of Christ is to direct the locus of our identity and power on the objective we desire, which is to become like Christ in the way we think and live. This does not mean, however, that the earthly things (i.e., our actions, habits, and relationships) are to be neglected as meaningless. Paul quickly makes the connection between our inner and eternal life and the outward and temporal manifestations of it. Because we are fixed on becoming like Christ, we must necessarily manage how Christlikeness is displayed in the living of our lives, in the time between when we died to sin and self to follow Jesus and when he appears again and we join him in glory.

It is apparent from Paul’s instruction that the earthly nature is not eradicated when we come to faith in Christ, as he tells the believers that they must “put to death” (3:5) or “rid” themselves (3:8) of the acts and attitudes that currently characterize their lives. As

well, they should “clothe” themselves (3:12) with those attitudes and character that Jesus displays. It is important to note that the believers’ reforming of attitudes and actions is done so that the temporal realities of their lives would reflect the inner transformation that God has already accomplished through Christ’s finished work. The motivation for that is our response to his grace, as well as the desire to grow closer to him.

Romans 12:1-2

In different language than he used in Colossians, Paul communicates much the same message concerning what following Christ is all about. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Romans 12 begins a section on ethics and conduct that ends in chapter 15. Verses 1-2 form the foundation for all the instruction that follows. “Therefore” in verse 1 refers either to the doxology that preceded it in chapter 11 or the totality of Paul’s teaching in chapters 1-11. Either assessment is acceptable to explain the meaning of 12:1-2, although I think that both are in view. The doxology highlights God’s sovereignty, generosity, and majesty, all of which warrant our allegiance and obedience. Likewise, all that has been written about faith, the sufficiency of Christ, life through the Spirit, and how nothing can separate the believer from the love of God, also lay claim to all we are in body and spirit.

Paul pleads with fellow believers in Rome, from his love for them, to give themselves fully to the One whose grace has provided everything for them and whose mercy was evidenced in Jesus taking the sin of the world to the cross. The response to

such mercy is the total commitment physically, mentally, and emotionally, to following God. It really makes no sense, in fact it would be an insult, for us to accept God's forgiveness, the gift of his Spirit dwelling in us, and the inheritance that awaits us, and then spend all our attention and effort chasing after things that are temporary and worthless by comparison. To give ourselves – body and mind – to God is, then, our reasonable or rational service, a more literal translation than “spiritual service” which the NIV uses. Our service is volitional, not coerced. It is purposeful, not mechanical or rote, as much of the Jewish ceremonial law had become.²¹

As to what it means to offer one's body as a living sacrifice, Paul has already described this in Rom 6:13 saying, “Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.” Again in Rom 6:19, “Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.”

Contrary to the thoughts of many Christians today, the body is not dead weight that is warring against us until we die and escape it. Dallas Willard believes that the body has gotten a bad rap in modern Christianity and contends that New Testament teachings affirm that our bodies and spirits are one and not separated. Salvation is of the totality of the individual's life. “The faith of the New Testament is a distinctive life force that originates in the impact of God's word upon the soul, as we see in Romans 10:17, ‘Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through

²¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 112.

the word of Christ,' and then exercises a determinating influence upon all aspects of our existence, including the body and its social and political environment.”²² Our bodies, when directed toward activities that will help us live as Jesus did, are essential to spiritual formation.²³ “Most of what is called ‘character’ (good or bad) in normal human life consists in what our bodies are or are not ‘at the ready’ to do in specific situations where we find ourselves.”²⁴

Following verse 1’s exhortation to “offer your bodies as living sacrifices,” comes a two-part command with the first part expressed in the negative, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,” coupled with the second part expressed in the positive, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Part one assumes that there is a pattern to this present world (literally “age”); and in Paul’s other descriptions of this present age, including 1 Corinthians 2:6, 8 and Galatians 1:4, it is an evil age. The believers had, prior to their conversion, known nothing else and had operated according to, been conformed to, this evil pattern. ‘This age’ is that which stands on this side of what we often call eternity. It is the temporal and transient age. Conformity to this age is to be wrapped up in the things that are temporal. It is to be a time-server. How far-reaching is this indictment! If all our calculations, plans, and ambitions are determined by what falls within life here, then we are children of this age.”²⁵

The answer to the problem of conformity to this world is in the development of another worldview, a heavenly one that will direct our earthly lives to pursue the heavenly goals that are contrary to the goals of the present age. This transformation of

²² Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 41.

²³ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 29-30.

²⁴ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 162.

²⁵ Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 113-114.

life is accomplished by the renewing of the mind, that which the Holy Spirit does but with our cooperation (Acts 15:8-9, Ephesians 5:17-19, 1 Peter 1:2, Romans 2:28-29). As we identify and resist the evil pattern of this world and pursue God's will in knowledge and experience, we can recognize and experience those things that are good and pleasing and perfect. It is the setting of our minds and hearts on things above and the giving of our bodies and minds that are at the heart of spiritual formation.

Definitions

Following are a few definitions of spiritual formation from which I will form a working definition for the purpose of this paper.

Michael Burer, Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary writes, "An act of worship in response to God's mercy and grace...involves the intentional transformation of the character to be like Christ and the intentional transformation of the actions to conform to God's will."²⁶

Dallas Willard, Professor in the School of Philosophy at the University of Southern California writes, "Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself."²⁷ Another view of Willard's is "Spiritual formation in Christ is the process by which one moves and is moved from self-worship to Christ-centered self-denial as a general condition of life in God's present and eternal kingdom."²⁸

²⁶ Michael Burer, "Towards a Biblical Definition of Spiritual Formation: Romans 12:1-2." *Bible.org*, <http://bible.org/seriespage/towards-biblical-definition-spiritual-formation-romans-121-2> (accessed September 12, 2012).

²⁷ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 22.

²⁸ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 77.

Evan Howard, founder and director of Spirituality Shoppe, and Evangelical Center for the Study of Christian Spirituality, considers spiritual formation in this way: “Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional and semi-intentional processes by which believers (individuals and communities) become more fully conformed and united to Christ, especially with regard to maturity of life and calling.”²⁹

For the purpose of this paper, my definition of Christian spiritual formation is: An ongoing process where believers intentionally cooperate with the Holy Spirit to transform their thoughts, values, and actions to become the very thoughts, values, and actions of Christ who indwells them.

I use ‘transform’ because we are each *already* spiritually formed, having received our spiritual formation, for better or worse, from our upbringing, culture, family, friends, and schooling and by what or to whom we have chosen to give our attention, time, and effort. We bring to our relationship with Christ our own individualized set of spiritual baggage. Therefore, the concepts, habits, values, worldviews, and behaviors that have been formed in our lives to this point must be transformed to become the concepts, habits, values, worldview and behaviors of Jesus. To do that we must voluntarily and intentionally put ourselves in places or modes that make it possible for us to be positively transformed. We must place ourselves under the direction of the Spirit and individuals or communities that will further our own desire and effort to know and experience Jesus more fully.

I use the word “become” in the definition instead of resemble or reflect because they carry the subtle meaning that we are only attempting to imitate, mimic, or

²⁹ Evan B Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 268.

impersonate Jesus rather than to actually have the same thoughts and values that would cause us to act in the same way Jesus would.

“Transformation” and “becoming” insure that the resulting action will be authentic and appropriate. There has been a tendency in Christianity to think that by manufacturing or replicating form we will have the substance. Simply doing a prescribed list of good things does not guarantee that we will become more Christ-like (although it *can* help). It is unfortunate that that formula is more often a recipe for disaster. Form without substance can lead to a legalistic religious extremism and cult-like communities.

Themes

Evan Howard identifies two themes or images that help us understand the process by which we reorient our perspective and rehabilitate our lives toward Christ.³⁰ Theme one involves “putting off” and “putting on”. Theme two involves putting the “gospel into practice.”

Earlier we looked at the passage from Colossians 2:6-3:17, and it is from this passage and others that we see spiritual formation as a process of “putting off” and “putting on”. In the Colossians passage Paul is specific about what needs to be taken off: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry,” and “But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (Col 3:5, 8). He is also specific about what needs to be put on, “...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Col 3:12). We find similar language in his other writings and from other New Testament writers as well

³⁰ Howard, *Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 279.

(Eph 4:22, Rom 6:6, Rom 13:14, Jas 1:21, 1 Pet 2:1). These exhortations are not merely encouragement of believers to achieve a level of behavioral modification. The goal is true transformation of the entire person, the death of a previous (lost) way of life and the embracing of a new (redeemed) way of living that encompasses all of who the person is and what he or she does.

What we do not find in scripture is instruction as to *how* one puts to death the bad things and *how* one clothes oneself with the good. Although we find principles and descriptions of what it means and how it looks to have a relationship with God we do not necessarily have a method or plan for how one rids himself or herself of slander or filthy language. There is also no prescribed path to genuine humility or patience. Those paths and methods, says Howard, are for us to discover. “There is room for the wisdom of each generation and each community to discover how theology should best be realized in practice. This is one of the functions of an ecclesial tradition.”³¹

The second theme identified by Howard and the natural outcome of his statement that was just quoted, is that of putting the “gospel into practice.”³² “Broadly conceived, spiritual practice is a cluster of intentional activities concerned with relating to the sacred. Although it may result in extraordinary or miraculous experiences, it generally takes place in ordinary life.”³³ Practices are not only beneficial for individuals but also in communities where the process helps in education and socialization. “We learn new habits of thought, feeling, and behavior in concrete living. And we are socialized into the

³¹ Howard, *Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 281.

³² Howard, *Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 281.

³³ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950's* (Berkeley,

body of Christ, complete with the practices that may accompany a given local expression (or network of expressions).”³⁴

Practice, as described previously, is understood through what are commonly known as the spiritual disciplines. Synonyms for “practice” include training, exercise, preparation, rehearsal, drill, habit, and repetition. So it is not surprising that we sometimes hear these disciplines referred to by other names such as spiritual exercises or soul-training exercises.³⁵ A spiritual discipline, as described by Dallas Willard, is “nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom. When we understand that grace (charis) is gift (charisma), we then see that to grow in grace is to grow in what is given to us of God and by God. The disciplines are then, in the clearest sense, a means to that grace and also to those gifts. Spiritual disciplines, ‘exercises unto godliness,’ are only activities undertaken to make us capable of receiving more of his life and power without harm to ourselves or others.”³⁶

The Disciplines

Scripture provides no exhaustive list of recommended disciplines, although some of the central disciplines that appear on almost everyone’s list are recognized in the practices of Jesus and the early church (e.g., prayer, fasting, worship, and fellowship). Christians throughout the ages have added and discarded disciplines, and grouped and codified them in various ways. Three contemporary lists show the variety (Foster, Willard, and Calhoun).

CA: University of California Press, 1998), 170.

³⁴ Howard, *Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 281.

³⁵ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 26.

³⁶ Willard, *The Spirit Of The Disciplines*, 156.

Richard Foster lists 12 disciplines³⁷ divided into three categories:

- The Inward Disciplines
 - Meditation
 - Prayer
 - Fasting
 - Study
- The Outward Disciplines
 - Simplicity
 - Solitude
 - Submission
 - Service
- The Corporate Disciplines
 - Confession
 - Worship
 - Guidance
 - Celebration

Dallas Willard lists 15 disciplines³⁸ in two categories:

- Disciplines of Abstinence
 - Solitude
 - Silence
 - Fasting
 - Frugality
 - Chastity
 - Secrecy
 - Sacrifice
- Disciplines of Engagement
 - Study
 - Worship
 - Celebration
 - Service
 - Prayer
 - Fellowship

³⁷ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), v.

³⁸ Willard, *The Spirit Of The Disciplines*, 158.

- Confession
- Submission

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, in her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, has a list of 62 disciplines³⁹ that contain those of Foster and Willard and others, including:

- *For example*
 - Accountability Partner
 - Covenant Group
 - Holy Communion
 - Journaling
 - Liturgical Prayer
 - Witness

The Process

The disciplines are not in and of themselves spiritual formation. They are part of a process, a “reliable pattern,” to quote Willard.⁴⁰ We consider how spiritual formation is accomplished, working from the assumption that spiritual formation is needed, possible, commanded by scripture, ongoing, and accomplished by God as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit.⁴¹

The process of spiritual formation, as explained by Willard, is simple in its presentation, although not as simple in its practice.⁴² To grow in knowledge of Christ and to reflect him through daily life requires vision, intention, and means (VIM).

Joey, a boy who loves soccer and watches the exquisite moves of Barcelona’s Lionel Messi, has his vision. As he watches Messi, he sees himself carving through the

³⁹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 11-13.

⁴⁰ Willard, *Renovation of The Heart*, 77.

⁴¹ Donald L. Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1988). See in particular Laurence W. Wood’s presentation of the Wesleyan view of sanctification, 95ff.

⁴² Willard, *Renovation Of The Heart*, 77-91. The following section of the paper is a sport-version of his explanation of the reliable pattern.

opponent's defense, scoring another goal that brings the stadium to its feet. That is a wonderful vision, but if Joey continues to do nothing more than watch television and daydream, then there is little chance that he will ever develop the skills to play for a high level team in a stadium filled with thousands of fans. Sadly, this is the picture of many Christians who look at Christ-likeness as something that is so far removed from possibility that it is not worth getting "off the couch" to pursue. For Joey as well as us, the vision must be a real possibility, however difficult or challenging the process might be.

Once captivated by the vision, we must actually have the intention of realizing that vision and the determination to take positive steps in its direction. When the game on television is over, what does soccer-loving Joey do? Does he head to the kitchen for a snack and forget about the vision until next week's game? Or does he say to himself, "I want that vision to be reality in my life, and I will do whatever it takes to make it happen?" Vision without intention is merely fantasy and shows disbelief that it is even possible. Intention turns the vision into a goal and confirms the belief that it is attainable, even if we do not initially know how or do not think we have what it takes to get there. The good news is that we are not alone in the task of growing in our faith. Although commitment and effort are needed, they are subordinate to, and cooperative with, the work of the Holy Spirit who not only helps give and maintain the vision, but also guides and empowers the process. Once the will is engaged in pursuing the vision, the only remaining question is, "Now what do I do?" The vision and intention need to be focused on a set of measures, methods, or means that will help accomplish the goal or realize the vision.

For Joey, the means include playing soccer, getting on a team where he will get experience and direction under a quality coach, and studying his hero and other players who possess the skills and traits that he would like to have. As he masters the basics, he may also need specialized training for areas in which he is naturally less proficient. The same is true with spiritual formation. We must engage ourselves with the disciplines that will allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and help us develop the skills and character traits that will enable us to live with the same thoughts, values, and actions of Jesus. Also needed is interaction with others on the same path and with those who are ahead of us spiritually. Part of this process is putting ourselves in contexts that will assist spiritual formation and/or under the direction of specific agents of spiritual formation.⁴³ Because no two Christians (or athletes) are the same, there is no one-size-fits-all program for spiritual (or athletic) formation. The disciplines outlined earlier need to be personalized to one's particular set of needs, weaknesses, and any pattern of sin that we discover in our lives.

The principles or themes of spiritual formation we find in scripture are, for us, much like the Ten Commandments were for the Israelites, an outline that they were to practice in the day-to-day reality of life, relying on God for direction. It is unfortunate that over the centuries, the Israelites turned the quest of following God into a list of do's and don'ts and substituted adherence to the list for loving God. Keeping the Sabbath no longer meant resting and reflecting on God's grace and mercy, but it became making sure not to violate any of the multitude of Sabbath day offenses enumerated in the oral

⁴³ Contexts would include: intentional communities such as a church congregation, a small group, or anything similar that would lend itself to positive spiritual formation. Agents of spiritual formation would include: the Holy Spirit primarily but also 'professional' ministers, spiritual directors, godly friends and family with whom we discuss spiritual issues, confess our sins, and are held accountable. See Howard, *Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 270-274.

traditions.⁴⁴ Over time, best intentions can become empty rote. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed the crowds on the difference between the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. This amounted to following a moral checklist, and the righteousness that surpasses it, which means following God's will and seeking his kingdom and his righteousness.⁴⁵ In everything, attitude is important. Spiritual formation is not "trying hard to not do wrong things"; this is not a guarantee in itself that God will be pleased. Willard's appropriately remarked, "The genius of the moral teachings of Jesus and his first students was his insistence that you cannot keep the law by trying not to break the law."⁴⁶ It is the right desire and motivation to do the right things that God is after.

Because there is no normative design or rule of spiritual formation, we must rely on the principles, patterns, and examples of Jesus, his disciples (the first ones as well as those throughout church history), and other biblical writers, asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance to design and engage in practices that are appropriate to us as individuals or communities. What is effective or appropriate with one person or group may not be suitable for another. Indeed, what may be effectual currently may not be so 5 years from now. In *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, Russell Spittler, after discussing the breadth of interpretation as to how God's sovereignty and the believer's

⁴⁴ For example, the prohibition of working on the Sabbath meant that 'work' had to be defined. All kinds of things are classified as work – to carry a burden is work. But when you say that, you have to define a burden. Scribal Law considered the following a burden: enough wine for mixing in a bowl, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put on a wound, paper enough to write a customs house notice on, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen, and on and on William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975).

⁴⁵ It is not enough to 'not murder' someone (follow the moral checklist). To fulfill the law you must have a heart that seeks peace and reconciliation (as God does). It is not enough to 'not commit adultery,' To fulfill the law, one needs to be free from even the desire to look lustfully.

⁴⁶ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 152.

obedience work together to lead to holiness, comments, “Whatever other lessons emerge from these pages, thoughtful Christians may well come to appreciate the varieties of the quest.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Russell P. Spittler, “The Wesleyan View: A Pentecostal Response,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 127.

CHAPTER 3

SPIRITUAL FORMATION: HISTORY AND CURRENT PROBLEMS

Jesus and the Early Church

As even a rudimentary survey of spiritual formation practices over the last 2,000 years would require an entire book, presented here is a brief summary of recurring themes/struggles⁴⁸ and two historical snapshots that will help to understand the present practices and the way forward in the sport setting. A starting point would be Jesus's example of spiritual formation.

Jesus's Example

Jesus's method of spiritually forming his disciples is similar to the way the rabbis of his day disciplined students, but with some glaring differences. This should be no surprise as Jesus came from and was raised in a community with a religious heritage and traditions. Some of the Jewish traditions that influence us even today include temple (building) as center of worship, synagogue (church building or even a small group) as local setting for the teaching (memorization) and discussion of scripture, rituals/feasts as

⁴⁸ Gordon Mursell, ed. *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, from East to West* (Louisville, KY: Fortress Press, 2001), 12. Mursell, on recurring themes: "relationship between corporate worship centered around religious buildings and the individual's personal spiritual life; another ranges from a spirituality centered upon religious activity and ritual acts, sacraments and services, to a more word-based attention to preaching, teaching and scripture; and behind them all the constant tension between a quiet retreat into communion with God and being driven out again to earth spirituality in social action and the politics of the world. These polarities are not alternatives; all of them can be found in the story of Jesus himself and from his own background and context. For even Jesus does not come to us out of a vacuum, but from hundreds and thousands of years of Jewish spirituality and devotion to God."

reference points, sacrifices (giving), and prayer – corporate and individual with prescribed times or patterns.

Jesus's method of spiritual formation mirrored in form the other rabbis (teachers/masters) of the day in that he invited a small group of disciples to live with him as he taught, mentored, and modeled for them what following God meant, that they might be like him (Mt 10:25). He broke with tradition in several key ways. First, traditionally students, having gone through years of study already, sought the particular rabbi with whom they wanted to do further study. Jesus, on the other hand, sought and called those he desired to be his disciples.⁴⁹ Secondly, once the student approached the rabbi, the rabbi tested the student to see whether there was sufficient understanding and promise that the student could become like the teacher. Jesus, once again, did things differently. Some of the men he chose hardly showed great promise to become like the master. They were not the cream of the intellectual crop. Although Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist, John was hardly perceived by other rabbis and the religious establishment as one of their own; and Andrew was not likely 'disciple material' in their eyes. Peter (a fisherman) and Matthew (a tax collector) likely had zero chance of being accepted by the rabbis of the day as disciples, yet Jesus sought them using the same phrase, "Follow me," as the other rabbis used to welcome a student to their yeshiva, their school (literally, "sitting"). "Follow me" was more than an invitation to "hang out" and talk about spiritual things. It was an invitation for the prospective disciple to commit to living with the rabbi, for a period of years and submit to his authority and teaching with the express purpose

⁴⁹ Doug Greenwold, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* (Columbia, MD: Bible-in-Context Ministries, 2007).

that he become like the rabbi.⁵⁰ The students seeking to study under a rabbi were eager to make this commitment. Jesus's disciples understood the commitment for which he was asking when he called them, and they readily left family, friends, and careers to follow him.

The way the first disciples were “spiritually formed” was by being brought into a community where, through teaching, modeling, and practice, they understood and experienced what it meant to follow God. There were several “circles” within the community of followers, and each experienced spiritual formation albeit at a different level. Jesus taught, in the form of sermons/parables, the multitudes at various points in small segments of time. He taught and interacted more in depth with a smaller group of followers who traveled with him for longer periods of time. He called 12 men to be his disciples, and they were with him daily for years. Even within that group of 12 there were three (Peter, James and John – the inner most circle) who saw and experienced more than the others. In addition to these circles were people not considered his followers because either they did not know him or they outright rejected him. These people, also, Jesus sought to draw into relationship.

Jesus, in addition to being the object of worship for those who followed him, was an example of a “spiritual director,” a term that contemporary Christianity has used to describe a person in a one-on-one relationship who gives specific help and guidance to an individual to help the person progress in his or her faith. Jesus went beyond giving guidance and suggestions. He formed his followers by his teaching, his example, and putting them in situations where they put into practice what they learned.

⁵⁰ Greenwold, *Making Disciples*.

A few examples of Jesus's methodology include the following:

- He taught his disciples
 - On the kingdom (Mt 13)
 - On worship (Mt 15:1-20)
 - On prayer (Lk 11:1-13)
- He modeled for his disciples
 - Prayer and solitude: he prayed often – sometimes through the night (Lk 6:12-13), on mountains or in deserted places (Lk 9:28-29, 5:15-16), in public (Jn 11:38-44), as preparation for ministry (Lk 6:12-13, Mt 4: 1-11, 26:36-46), as renewal after ministry (Mt 14:23), for himself (Mk 14:36), for others (Lk 22:31-32, 23:34), for things (Mt 7:7-11), sincerely (Mt 6:1-7), persistently (Lk 11:5-8), confidently (Mk 11:23-24), all in the context of a conversation with, and dependence on the Father
 - Knowledge and use of scripture: in spiritual warfare (Mt 4:1-11), teaching (Mt 5, 22:34-46; Lk 4:16-21), refuting error (Mt 9:9-13)
 - Service: giving his life (Mt 20:26-28), washing the disciples' feet (Jn 13:3-17), feeding the hungry (Lk 9:10-17), healing the sick (Jn 9:1-7)
- He engaged his disciples
 - He involved them in ministry: sending of the 72 (Lk 10:1-17), sending of the 12 (Mt 10:1-16), feeding the 5000 (Mt 14:13-21)

The one succinct statement about life in the early church in the months following the resurrection is found in Acts 2:41-47 following Peter's Pentecost sermon:

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they

continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This is a form of spiritual formation that functioned in the early days of the church in a specific place (Jerusalem) and among a specific group of people (Jews). Once again, the account does not give all the details. People were welcomed or initiated into the body of believers through baptism, a Jewish custom of consecration and commitment.

We can assume that the apostles' teaching was on the life, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus and perhaps some of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah that he fulfilled. Being devoted to "the fellowship" likely refers to their devotion to one another, this group of people, all of whom had responded to the challenge to repent and believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the forgiver of sins, and the giver of the Holy Spirit.⁵¹ The breaking of bread is mentioned both here, where it probably refers to remembering Jesus's death and resurrection through the breaking of bread as he did at the Last Supper, and in verse 46 where it appears to refer more to the common meal that people would share with others.⁵² Prayer is the last of the four specific things listed in verse 42 and although it does not elaborate on the kind of prayer, the sense of the verses leads me to believe that it was corporate prayer as believers gathered together in homes or in the temple courts. When considering study (devoted to the apostles' teaching), fellowship,

⁵¹ A. T. Robertson, *Robertson's Word Pictures of the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/robertsons-word-pictures/> (accessed October 12, 2012).

⁵² Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, eds., *The Comentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/jamieson-fausset-brown/> (accessed August 23, 2013).

celebration (the Lord's Supper), prayer added to service, compassion, and hospitality in verses 44-46, the lists of spiritual disciplines cited in Chapter are evidenced.

Balance

Spirituality is necessarily a balance between the individual and community. It is individual in the sense that we each must choose to follow Christ, commit to obedience, and follow through with appropriate action. No one else can do these things for us, and coercion by anyone brings us into a place of serving people rather than serving God. As well, we each are created as unique individuals with unique strengths, weaknesses, gifts, and needs. Spirituality is communal in the sense that the Christian life, the teachings of Jesus, the instruction of the New Testament writers are, with few exceptions, to be lived in relation to others and cannot be realized in isolation.⁵³

When a person becomes preoccupied with either the individual or communal side of spiritual formation, the entire process becomes hindered. In U.S. culture, the tendency is toward individualism. America's history of rugged individualism and self-sufficiency isolates us from others – even the work of the Holy Spirit – as the individual focuses on what *I* should/must/can do. So much of what we learn is not due to self-discovery but what we see in others, how their experience can inform ours, and the way their example (good or bad) can influence our lives.

Although individualism may be our cultural bent, there are those whose Christian experience is almost exclusively social/communal. They live vicarious Christian lives through their friends, fellowship group, service group, or pastor while their personal spiritual life is starved of any real intimacy with God.

⁵³ examples of this include the 50-60 “one another” exhortations in the New Testament, Paul's insistence in Romans 12:4-5 that “each member belongs to all the others,” and the picture in 1 Corinthians 12 of the body parts needing one another to form the whole, etc.

Balance in the practice of the spiritual life and spiritual formation is something we identify from looking at the scriptures in total or by examining the life of Christ in its entirety or the lives of the first disciples. Jesus pulled away from even his closest disciples to be alone with God to commune with Him. He also trained his disciples and taught them about the kingdom. In addition, Jesus served those around him. He went among the people healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and preaching to those who were far from God. The balance is between the need to strengthen that very personal relationship that each person has with God and the responsibility that each believer has to love one's neighbor as oneself and to be salt and light in a world separated from God. Jesus fasted and feasted. At times, he denied himself food, sleep, or rest to draw close to God or serve others. At other times he joined people in celebrations of daily life, like the wedding in Cana, or the dinners he had with "sinners," as well as the celebrations of God's relationship with Israel through the prescribed feasts of the Jewish calendar.

Once again, the examples of spiritual formation in accounts of the early church, the example of Jesus, and the teaching of the other New Testament writers are instructional in that they show spiritual formation as normative, needed, and even commanded. What is missing, however, are details of just how this all works. Two historical expressions of spiritual formation demonstrate how varied the interpretations of the New Testament declaration are. Also noted are some of the dangers those interpretations hold and how they continue to plague us today.

Two Historical Expressions of Spiritual Formation

Monasticism

The monastic movement cannot be attributed to any one person or historical event; but the Edicts of Toleration in A.D. 311 and the writings of Origen, one of the early church fathers, were influential in its growth. Because of persecution in the first and second centuries being a Christian required a true commitment and willingness to suffer. The world was seen as a hostile place and reinforced the fact that Christians were merely strangers here; this was not their home (Heb 11:13-16).⁵⁴ When Christianity became legal and the world became friendly toward it, it became friendly with the world. The reaction of some was to try and flee the world to pursue God.

Origen's writings on biblical interpretation described the biblical text as a threefold 'sacrament' meant to teach historical realities about God's existence, His moral truths, and the higher mysteries of the divine life, for those whose minds were open to the Holy Spirit's inspiration.⁵⁵ As an ascetical thinker, he believed that we could only know these higher mysteries or that our human spirits could only ascend to God's presence as we managed the desires of the body. "He saw the body and mind and soul as so intimately related that spiritual progress could only take place if the body was disciplined and the mind was purified by study."⁵⁶ Origen's writings also led to a three-stage process of spiritual or mystical growth: the way of purification (purgation), illumination, and union.⁵⁷ It is the order of these three that is troubling and leads to the idea that somehow our acts of asceticism qualify us or earn us an understanding of God and access to Him.

⁵⁴ Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done," *Dallas Willard*, 2012, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=58> (accessed February 2012), 140.

⁵⁵ Mursell, *The Story of Christian Spirituality*, 56.

⁵⁶ Mursell, *The Story of Christian Spirituality*, 57.

⁵⁷ Howard, *Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 249.

Recognizing the many contributions to church and society that have come through monastic orders and that there were some truly great monastics like Anthony and Benedict, Willard still says of monasticism, “...nothing in the history of the Western world has done more harm to the present-day prospects of a sensible and necessary asceticism than the emergence of monasticism as a form of Christian life.”⁵⁸ I realize that living for years on top of a pole is different than taking vows of poverty or chastity. For me the problem with the desert hermits and those whose asceticism was severe is threefold: first, their attempt to flee the evils of the world took them away from the world that desperately needed the presence of true Christ-followers. It is true that Jesus and his followers would sometimes retreat from the crowds, but that was to rest and for Jesus to spend time with just the 12. Jesus himself occasionally went off alone to spend time praying. These retreats, however, were for short periods of time followed by a return to the fallen world and broken people that God wanted to reconcile to Himself. In the pattern of Jesus’s life, there was no shunning of the world because they were his and now our mission field.

Secondly, the asceticism they inflicted upon themselves in no way resembles the simple, uncluttered life that Jesus lived. He and his disciples were ascetics, but the asceticism practiced by many of these early monks was extreme, showing a disdain or hatred of the body. It can only be explained by my third quarrel with the movement: The pattern by which they presumed to grow close to God, purgation – illumination – union, is upside down. As Luther discovered in his own monastic experience, it was faith in the finished work of Christ that brought him into union with God. His appreciation of God’s

⁵⁸ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 139.

grace in salvation led to his understanding of himself as being at once sinful and justified, which then freed him to live the life God wanted him to live, which was in many ways ascetic, with help from the Holy Spirit.⁵⁹ As the God-life is lived and appreciated, our faith in Him grows, leading to greater illumination and a life that increasingly resembles the life Christ lived.

Pietism

The Pietistic movement began as a reform effort within the Lutheran Church partly in reaction to the horrors of the religiously motivated Thirty Years War. However, it was more about moral decadence and a seemingly dead orthodoxy that permeated the church and its leadership.⁶⁰ A “fundamental motif which emerges is the insistence that the reformation of doctrine which was inaugurated by Luther must be carried over into the *reformation of life*. Orthodoxy must be accompanied by *orthopraxis* (“right living”).⁶¹ Philipp Jakob Spener’s *Pia Desideria* contained six recommendations to help reform the church:

1. A more serious attempt to spread the Word of God. Pastors should preach from the entire Bible, and Christians should meet in small groups to study the Bible.
2. The Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers should receive a new emphasis. The differences between the laity and clergy should be minimized. The clergy in particular should recognize that their calling involves Bible study, teaching, reproving, consoling, and a personal, holy life.
3. More attention should be given to the cultivation of individual spiritual life. Love

⁵⁹ Howard, *Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 250.

⁶⁰ Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grantham, PA: Evangel Publishing House, 1996), 18-19.

⁶¹ Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 22.

for God and man should take priority over theological disputes. Knowledge is secondary to practice.

4. Truth is not established in disputes but through repentance and a holy life.
5. Candidates for the ministry should be “true Christians.” Their training should include small groups for devotional life and personal Bible study.
6. Sermons should not show the preacher’s erudition, but attempt to edify believers and produce the effects of faith.⁶²

Although there was an emphasis on practical Christianity, pietism has often been accused of being preoccupied with personal religion with no concern for transformation of culture or institutions. Although there may have been pietist individuals and groups that are guilty of such criticism, separatism was not what the early pietists had in mind. In fact, historical examples are numerous of them taking the lead in reforming prisons, education, abolishing slavery, helping the poor, and engaging in missions. The designation “Pietism” still connotes some negativity causing some contemporary pietists to flee from it; others, like the Evangelical Covenant Church’s Gary Walter, qualify it. While embracing the denomination’s pietist heritage, he adds, “But we are more than simply Pietists. We are missional Pietists. That deeply personal faith calls us to be deeply engaged with the world God loves...”⁶³

Current Problems

In our individualistic, self-centered world, the church in many places is suffering from the idea that spiritual formation is mainly about self-improvement or becoming the

⁶² Author Unknown, "From the Archives: The Pia Desideria," *Christian History Quarterly* Volume 10, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1986/issue10/1029.html> (accessed August 2013).

⁶³ Christopher Gehrz, "Missional Pietists: Lessons from Dale W. Brown and Carl H Lundquist," *The Covenant Quarterly*, August/November 2012, 35-47.

best self. It has caused people to retreat into themselves, individually or in fellowship groups, much as monks isolated themselves in monasteries to focus on personal holiness. The intentionality of seeking God and practicing spiritual disciplines to deepen one's relationship with God with the focus of becoming more like Christ is certainly needed. But if that is as far as it goes, it has stopped short of God's full plan to let our light shine before men (Mt 5:16), that we shine like stars amongst a crooked and depraved generation (Phil 2:15). Like the monks, we have tended to have a bunker mentality that causes us to huddle together with little or no confidence that we can make a difference in the world. We begin to abandon any attempts to influence our culture in general and other people in particular. David Fitch, in his book *The Great Giveaway*, cites a number of areas where he believes the church has surrendered or has let a secular worldview exert influence when the church can or should. Through complicity with modernism, we have relinquished or undermined functions of the church, such as evangelism, leadership, spiritual formation, and moral education.⁶⁴ By adopting practices from secular business, education, and mental health experts, the church has so identified itself with the secular culture that it has ceased to be set apart in any discernible way. One way this has shown itself in the area of sport is that people in the church have latched on to the "sports teaches character" mantra and accepted society's understanding of what character is. Thus, we are reinforcing the sports culture's view of character rather than teaching players to follow Christ.

Like many other renewal movements, Pietism's enthusiastic beginnings turned, in some regions, into hollow legalism within a generation. It is critical that we continually

⁶⁴ David Fitch, *The Great Giveaway* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 13.

revisit and reaffirm the motives of our initial commitments. Also, we must refrain from placing more faith in the disciplines in which we engage than in the Christ to whom we are trying to draw near. Foster comments, “The purpose of the Disciplines is freedom. Our aim is the freedom, not the Discipline. The moment we make the Discipline our central focus, we turn it into law and lose the corresponding freedom.”⁶⁵

When a hitter in baseball is experiencing a slump, the cause is not always apparent. It could be a mechanical problem (vision, muscular), a psychological problem, or perhaps a combination. If mechanics can be ruled out, then coaches may have players make slight adjustments to their swing or change things about their routine. The effect of making small changes is to refocus the player from the slump to the player’s goal: successful hitting. In spiritual formation, the disciplines (mechanics) can sometimes become so familiar that we lose sight of where we want them to take us and we slump. By tweaking our prayer life, our study, or our service, we may be able to regain enthusiasm and reorient ourselves toward following Christ rather than completing assignments or fulfilling duties. If the disciplines (mechanics) are sound, then psychologically/emotionally, small changes may help us refocus.

⁶⁵ Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 110.

CHAPTER 4

CHURCH AND SPORT: HISTORY AND MODERN CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

The words of the Teacher ring as true today as when they were first penned. His point has been further confirmed by the many centuries that have passed with humans still wrestling with the same questions, ever hopeful that there will be new answers.

Looking at the church and sport over the centuries, the questions have remained the same. The problems that cause us to question have grown, however; and the answers, while cycled and recycled, are largely similar. A study even as short as this one is helpful for gaining perspective on the current questions as past answers are considered.

Attitudes Toward Sport in the Early and Medieval Church

The early church was born into a culture that had formerly been ruled by the Greeks and was currently under the Romans. To the Jewish mind, the Greek Olympic sporting tradition was foreign and pagan. They were religious affairs with sacrifices, rituals, and oaths sworn by athletes in front of their pagan gods. That was all the Jews needed to know to reject it outright. Similarly, the Roman gladiatorial spectacles (which were considered sport), where animal fights and prisoner executions were often the warm-ups for men fighting each other to the death, were seen as an affront to Jewish religion and culture. Although there was a Hippodrome in Galilee and other stadia built

by Herod throughout the country, there is no evidence in scripture that religious Jews or the early Christians participated in any of the boxing, archery, racing, or gladiatorial disciplines that he encouraged.

As the church grew westward, the Hellenistic Christians were not so quick to distance themselves from sport. They had grown up with it, and it was part of their heritage and culture. However, the brutality, the association of the events with pagan religion and rituals, and the ethos of these sports (self-aggrandizement, domination of others, meritocracy) were antithetical to biblical principles (humility, love, grace). Subjecting themselves to viewing the barbarity, believers were drawn away from principles of the Christian life. Because of its influence on those entering the expanding church, sport eventually had to be addressed by the early church leadership.

Scripture is silent on the issue of sport. There is neither endorsement nor rejection. Although Paul used athletic language in communicating the Gospel, he does not speak directly to the issue of how the church and its people should look at sport or whether they should participate. His use of athletic language and illustrations have led most of those in the modern sports ministry movement to proclaim that Paul was affirming and endorsing sport as good. Victor Pfitzner argues that the vocabulary of sport used in Paul's day has long since lost any concrete connection to the actual athletic context.⁶⁶ Today, phrases like, let's make sure we have all the bases covered – you better put up a hail Mary – let's take a time out and think this over – time to step up to the plate, are examples of commonly-used athletic terms and phrases without it having any direct

⁶⁶ Victor Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 31.

connection to the actual sports from which they are derived.⁶⁷ In some instances in which Paul was referring to actual sports, it mostly likely was to contrast the temporal with the eternal, showing how much interest and effort are invested in the earthly kingdom while there is so much more at stake focusing on God's kingdom. As the sports ministry movement grows and matures, there is need to guard against taking Paul's references to sport as God's blessing on the Christian's participation in sport.

Some of the leaders of the growing church did address sport directly. Tertullian (c160 – 225), in his work *De Spectaculis*, systematically answered many of the flimsy arguments the laity made for justifying their attendance at the games by invoking biblical principles. To him, the stadium should be seen as no different than the street and concluded, "No where and never is that permitted which is not permitted always and everywhere."⁶⁸ Chrysostom (c347 - 407) warned his congregation, "It is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the Devil."⁶⁹ Augustine (354-430) called circuses, shows, games, and theater the "pomp of the Devil."⁷⁰ The tendency during this period was to condemn sport in its various forms and keep believers as far away from it as possible.

The Medieval church faced some of the same problems as its predecessors but also began to wrestle with the idea of sport and play in a more universal way than did the early church. There was still the problem of whether Christians should attend the jousting tournaments, the gladiatorial contests of the 10th century and beyond. Like the first century spectacles, these had started as military training and devolved into professional,

⁶⁷ The sign outside my church recently read, "We are all in!" This was a proclamation of our commitment to following Christ. It had nothing to do with, nor was it an endorsement of, Texas Holdem poker (from where the 'all in' illustration comes from).

⁶⁸ Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* (Translated by S. Thelwall). New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0303.htm> (accessed January 8, 2012), chapter 20.

⁶⁹ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 63.

⁷⁰ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 48.

bloody, spectator sports. Various councils and church leaders in the 12th century pronounced bans and prohibitions of the tournaments with little effect. In 1312, Pope Clement V issued a ban on the jousts as being a waste of horses, money, and knights, thus hampering preparations for the crusades. He threatened excommunication to all those who participated, sponsored, or attended the tournaments. Four years later, his successor, Pope John XXII, withdrew the ban. Among his reasons: (a) the tournaments were good promotion for the crusades, (b) they were training for knights, collections at the events helped fund local churches, and (c) excommunication of participants would drastically reduce the number of eligible knights needed for the crusades. The tournaments were eventually “Christianized” through the use of religious ceremonies, prayers, and oaths made by the participants of loyalty to God and pledges that they would compete honorably; but there was no real, meaningful change.⁷¹ Note: neither Pope acted based on biblical, moral, or theological grounds.

There also arose popular games that involved large numbers of people, not just the elite or professional. Village games, such as *la soule*, sometimes involved entire towns playing against one another trying to move a ball to a predetermined goal, sometimes miles apart. It was often played during the church festivals; and although it could escalate and result in many injuries, it made the festivals successful, which added to the church coffers. Stoolball (a form of cricket), wrestling, bowling, and tennis were other sports beginning to be played more widely; and it is partially in response to these more popular pastimes that the theologians began to look analytically at sport.

⁷¹ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 50ff.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), in his *Summa Theologica*, taught that most play was morally indifferent and, under the right conditions, could be virtuous. He agreed with Aristotle that play is *autotelic* – that it is something one does only for the pleasure it brings and not for some external end. Although Aristotle would say that an activity that had no end in mind could not be virtuous, Aquinas saw the pleasure experienced through play as having the effect of providing “recreation and rest of the soul” which is what made it virtuous.⁷²

Reformation Developments

During the Reformation period, there was so much change so fast that there is really no one ‘reformation position’ on sport and play. Martin Luther (1483-1546) was said to have loved gymnastics because they exercised the lungs and promoted health. He said that fencing “drives gloom from the heart” and that wrestling “gives full development to the limbs.”⁷³ He is depicted in a life-size diorama at the International Bowling Museum and Hall of Fame, bowling on the single lane beside his house.⁷⁴ Luther’s was a utilitarian view of sport – there had to be some useful end for it to have value. He wrote, “The ultimate objective [of sports] is to keep us from lapsing into other activities – drinking, wenching, gambling...”⁷⁵

John Calvin (1509-1564) was characterized as a stern, self-disciplined workaholic; but his theology “assigned vocational and avocational pursuits to a sphere of life called the *adiaphora*, ‘the things indifferent,’ in which the Christian’s conscience was

⁷² Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica," *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas.summa.toc.html> (accessed January 2012), question 168.

⁷³ Henery Barnard, ed., *German Educational Reformers* (Hartford, CT: Brown and Gross, 1878), 158.

⁷⁴ *History of Bowling*.
http://www.bowling2u.com/trivia/game/history_of_bowling.asp (accessed January 21, 2012).

⁷⁵ Bruce Bennett, "The Curious Relationship of Religion and Physical Education." *Journal of Health, Physical Education and Recreation* 41, no. 7 (1970): 69-71.

to hold sway; discernment was to be guided by general principles gleaned from the Scriptures.”⁷⁶ He accepted some forms of play because the mere pleasure of playing was seen as a valuable end in itself (*autotelic*) rather than having to have some useful purpose. “In the acceptance of the present life we must remember that it is given us not only to use but to enjoy. It is obviously the natural order of things that we should indulge in taking pleasure from those things which God has given us liberally to enjoy.”⁷⁷ Sport and play were to be balanced, without excess and, conversely, rigorous asceticism. The Christian’s desire to glorify God and his mindfulness of eternity were to overcome any temptation that sport might hold. Theologically, sport was seen as something positive for the Christian; but it was still viewed by many in the church with much distrust.

The Reformation brought the sacred and the secular together in a new way. The emphasis on the priesthood of believers and the recognition that one’s work was a calling helped Christians to view the whole world as a cathedral and everything they did as worship. These views go a long way toward addressing current church/sport questions. If a generalization were to be made about how the church during this time period approached sport, then it would be three-pronged: suspicion of sport and varied attempts to keep the believer away from it; if this failed, then efforts to control it would come next; and if control were not possible, then the church would try to somehow attach itself to or use sport for its own benefit.⁷⁸

If progress were made with some of the ideas that resulted from the Reformation, then the momentum was stymied by the Puritan movement. These were very serious,

⁷⁶ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 75.

⁷⁷ John Calvin, “Institutes of The Christian Religion,” *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* <http://ccel.org/calvin/institutes.v.xx.html>, quoted in Hoffman, *Good Game*, 76.

⁷⁸ Allesandro Arcangeli, *Recreation in the Renaissance: Attitudes Towards Leisure and Pastimes in European Culture: 1425-1675* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 72.

scholarly people who examined everything. They agreed with the reformers' ideas about work as calling but went beyond that, stressing the importance of the Christian life as glorifying God through work and service. Stewardship of time became paramount, and anything that distracted one from one's work was considered sinful. The only way a sport or activity might be seen as acceptable was if it helped a person do one's job better.

The wasting of time was not the only basis the Puritans had for rejecting sport and play. They saw the world of sport as an illusionary world, which athletes perceived too seriously and, by doing so, distorted their ethical perspective. The sports world lured people into prideful arrogance, self-glory, and boasting.⁷⁹ By concluding that sport and play were incompatible with religion, the Puritans further secularized sport and made it harder for Christians in the centuries that followed to have any meaningful impact. Sport, from the church's perspective, is pretty much dead and gone until the mid 1800s and the emergence of the Muscular Christianity movement.

Muscular Christianity and Modern Sport

At first a derisive term, Muscular Christianity was a philosophy championed by pastor and novelist Charles Kingsley. He was among others who believed that the Church of England was exulting the feminine virtues to the exclusion of the masculine. He began to write and speak about the need for strong, healthy Christian men, better fit to serve God. His writings advocating natural activities and wilderness pursuits, along with Thomas Hughes's novels encouraging the use of sports, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) and *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861), led churches throughout England and later America to

⁷⁹ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 81.

embrace sport in a way that the church had never done before.⁸⁰ Kingsley's fanaticism was misguided in the sense that godliness was confused with excellence and manliness. Being a good sportsman was equated with being a good Christian. It began to make sport the Gospel. As well, its male-only orientation ignored half the population and seemingly put godliness for women out of reach.

This movement affected the YMCA which, when started in 1844, was hostile to sport, and by the end of the 1880s, had sport as a central part of their program. The churches provided sports facilities and sponsored clubs in various sports. Many of the football and cricket clubs in 1885 England were started by or associated with churches. The YMCA and parish sport were the way modern sports spread.⁸¹ The church now saw sport as an effective way to reach and disciple (at least) young men. There was no real theological depth to the movement, but it appeared to be effective.

During the 1880s, soccer in England was professionalized; and, gradually, sport separated from Muscular Christianity, resulting in what Erdozain calls the "re-barbarization of society". Once again, something that began as sport became commercialized and, in many ways, distorted. The development of spectator sport – viewed as emasculating from the Muscular Christianity perspective because, as a spectator, you are not active – left many sport purists feeling betrayed because what they had tried to develop as a positive impact was being turned for evil.⁸²

Most churches abandoned sport as part of their ministry before the 1920s. The YMCA continued to focus on sport but basically became a secular organization in the

⁸⁰ Dominic Erdozain, "Grace and Play: Christianity and the Meaning of Sport," Regent University, Vancouver, BC, July 25-29, 2011, lecture #4.

⁸¹ Erdozain, "Grace and Play," lecture #3.

⁸² Erdozain, "Grace and Play," lecture #4.

early years of the 20th century, perhaps because of its emphasis on sport. It was not until the 1950s that Christians began to look at sport once again, trying to determine how it could be used in its mission. In 1952, “Venture for Victory” began taking basketball teams overseas for evangelistic ministry. In the 1960s, The Fellowship of Christian Athletes was born. Basketball coach Don McClanen dreamed of the “harnessing of heroes to reach those who idolized them for a life in the Lord.”⁸³ Other groups like Athletes in Action and Missionary Athletes International followed. Along the way, the local church began, once again, to embrace sport.

A Critical Approach

In a world where sport and play are not going away, I believe the two questions the church must answer are: what do we believe about sport, and how do we interact with sport? By addressing the “What do we believe about sport” question, we should have a better understanding of how we should interact with it. We have seen that, historically, Christians have not always maintained a reasoned consideration of sport itself before deciding whether it is something to be rejected or engaged. The pendulum has swung from the early church’s rejection to the modern church’s acceptance, but neither have been fully informed actions. According to Erdozain, “We’ve come to a point where the indiscriminate acceptance of sports by Christians today is just as dangerous as was centuries of the church’s indiscriminate rejection.”⁸⁴

The first century Jewish church did not consider whether the Olympic sports might be enjoyable or beneficial. They rejected them, both the bloody as well as the more tame events, simply because they were foreign or peripherally associated with religious

⁸³ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 137.

⁸⁴ Erdozain, “Grace and Play,” lecture #5.

beliefs offensive to them. Had they examined some of the events, such as running, discus, jumping, or javelin, they may have found some enjoyment or value which may have caused them to consider how they might interact with or co-opt them. As a result, the Christian leaders of the first few centuries spent their energies trying to protect themselves and their flocks from what they deemed the corruptive (cultural) environment of sport. Today, there are few, if any, in the church calling for a boycott of sport; and most churches openly embrace sport as part of their worldview or actually employ it as part of their ministry. Few, however, have looked at sport in a critical way to determine whether it is an appropriate expression of the individual's faith or whether it is suitable as a church activity or avenue of ministry.

I think individual Christians, for the most part, have accepted sport uncritically because of its cultural importance. I believe that most of the laity considers sport as a positive part of culture and not in conflict with Christianity, despite some bad characters. I believe most churches start from, "Sport is here, what do we do?" rather than looking at sport from a biblical perspective and asking whether this is something in which they can/should participate. Church leadership may be a bit more diligent in critiquing some of sport's practices but, on the whole, believe they cannot disregard or ignore sport because of its centrality in American culture. As well, they avoid preaching/teaching against even the darkest parts of sport because to do so would somehow implicate sport as a whole, which would not only offend many in the pews, but also make the church look separatist and out of touch. So do we, as the church, evaluate sport; and if so, then how?

The question about whether sport is a world unto itself or whether it is subject to God's rule and, subsequently, the church's critique, has been considered over the

centuries by addressing the practice some have made of dividing the world into the sacred and the secular. The early church grew in the context of a Platonic dualism that compartmentalized life into the spiritual or eternal and the temporal or physical, with the spiritual being of greater importance. What remains today is the idea that some places, objects, or activities are perceived as not having any religious significance. They are totally outside the scope of the church and its teachings (secular). Moreover, if they are not sacred places, then it does not matter what I do there. Meanwhile, other places, objects, and activities are set apart for religious purposes and for the worship of God (sacred). Although theologians and thinkers from Abraham Kuyper⁸⁵ to A. W. Tozer⁸⁶ to William Cavanaugh⁸⁷ have done their best to show that the Bible does not support the idea of a secular/sacred divide, the church often still looks at things in this way, bending to what culture tries to present as truth. Thus, a Christian displaying decidedly unchristian behavior on the soccer field can justify his actions because “this isn’t church and that’s how the game is played.” Jesus and the New Testament writers clearly teach how a Christian should manage relationships inside and outside the church, money, government, sex, work, marriage, family, food, talents, gifts, and more. Although the Bible does not deliver clear teaching on sport, I believe it gives us everything needed to make an informed decision about whether to and/or how to engage in sport.

⁸⁵ James Bratt ed., *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁸⁶ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1948).
“One of the greatest hindrances to the Christian’s internal peace is the common habit of dividing our lives into two areas – the sacred and the secular. But this state of affairs is wholly unnecessary. We have gotten ourselves on the horns of a dilemma, but the dilemma is not real. It is a creature of misunderstanding. The sacred-secular antithesis has no foundation in the New Testament.”

⁸⁷ William Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 120. “Its only because of our fallen condition that it seems natural not to live eucharistically, to accept the reduction of God and God’s blessing to a small reservation of life called sacred. To be redeemed from our fallen condition means to resist the imagination that would bifurcate the world into sacred and secular.”

Sport and Play

I am not among those who say that God made everything, and He made everything good; thus, He made sport, and sport is good. This theory further states that He made sport perfect, but man messed it up; therefore, if we could just find our way back to the perfect state of sport as God created, then it would be fine. To the contrary, I believe the ways that modern sport is organized and its competition aspect are not God-created but have been instituted by humans. Thus, we need to look critically at sport from a biblical perspective to determine whether it is compatible with the Christian life. Is there any feature of sport that can be identified as coming from God?

The creation account states that God created male and female and pronounced them good. He created them with the ability to move, to work, to imagine, to interact, to create, and to enjoy. Humans, and even animals, seem disposed to play. It is part of how we learn and socialize. So, although I believe that humans invented/created sport, God created us to play (sport, art, music, dance, literature, etc.).

It is the concept of play that helps us develop a Christian view of sport. Play includes activities that are

- Voluntary: if one is forced or coerced to participate it is no longer play.
- Separate: it occurs outside of the ordinary details life, often in its own time and space, and in many ways, it is an imaginary world with its own rules and reality.
- Uncertain: results are not predetermined; players experience a sense of freedom, adventure, and possibility.

- Dispensable: non-serious seriousness, not directed toward external ends, aimed merely at the experience of playing. "...being seriously involved in something we do not interpret as serious business."⁸⁸

These characteristics present sport in its purest form. The play-spirit speaks of innocence, the kind seen in kids riding bikes, shooting baskets, or playing catch simply for the joy of doing so. It is not to determine a winner and loser or to resolve who has more talent. Play is not concerned with bragging rights or multi-year contracts. We do not play to please our parents, to get a college scholarship, or even to benefit our health. To participate for no other reason than the enjoyment of the experience is the essence of play. It is the spirit most of us would like to see in our sporting culture. But the reality is, much of the sport we see around us, from the pros down to T-ball, does not resemble play as we just defined it. This comes, in large part, from the competitive aspect of sport. From the standpoint of definitions, play would cease where competition begins. I hope to show common ground that both play and competition can occupy.

The Problem(?) of Competition

Competition is part of the way humans have chosen to organize and, in their view, enhance play. By making play competitive, there is an added measure of meaning, an extra level of emotion can make sport more or less fulfilling, depending on one's reaction to winning/losing. By making sport competitive, it also has the effect of raising its level and quality similar to the way that goods and services most often become better and cheaper in an environment of competition.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Lewis Smedes and Clifton Orlebeke eds., *God and the Good*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 58. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 275. Karen Salen and Eric Zimmerman eds., *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 128.

⁸⁹ Erdozain, *Grace and Play*, lecture #4.

Because of the human condition after the fall, competition is seen by some as intrinsically problematic, the logical outcome and source of nearly all the ills of sports (i.e., violence, cheating, performance enhancing drugs, and bitter rivalries).⁹⁰ Competitive sport has value in and of itself, but there are inherent temptations/dangers, especially in the face-to-face contact sports. Because competition is between two people or teams, winning/victory tends to become the highest value. “If it doesn’t matter who wins or loses, then why do they keep score?”⁹¹ Because of the zero sum nature of sport (for me to win, you must lose), there is incentive to view your opponent as an enemy, an obstacle to your success, or someone to be dominated or controlled. To win, we must play to the best of our ability; but we also look for and exploit the weaknesses of our adversaries and take advantage of their flaws and faults. Because competition pits one person or team against another we are taught to look for or create whatever edge we can. Consequently, physical or psychological intimidation is often considered “part of the game”. Mark Hamilton of Ashland University remarks that evil in sport is created by making the lower things higher and the higher things lower.⁹² When winning becomes the primary focus of sport, much of the good that sport provides can be eclipsed. Pure “play” is for enjoyment only; and although I do not consider competitive sport as being this kind of play, I do believe that we can engage in competitive sport with a playful spirit.

Competitive sport offers positive outcomes for one’s efforts. Often, the sporting experience is touted as aiding personal development and teaching teamwork, perseverance, respect, determination, and hard work. Sport can teach all those things

⁹⁰ Hoffman, *Good Game*, 145-165.

⁹¹ Attributed to Vince Lombardi.

⁹² Jim Parry, Mark Nesti and Nick Watson. *Theology, Ethics, and Transcendence in Sports* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 33.

when personal development is made the focus of the sporting experience. They do not happen automatically; and if winning is the primary focus, then personal development is often neglected and sometimes undermined completely. Even if we as Christians were to set character development as a primary goal of our sport participation, then we must be careful to not confuse character with the Gospel in the way Muscular Christianity did. Being a team player and a hard worker does not make me a good Christian.

Do Christians play by a different set of rules? Are they held to a higher standard? In many ways, the answer is yes to both. If we believe all of life is sacred, then we will want to compete in a way that brings God glory and is reflective of biblical teachings, and Jesus's example, of how we are to live. By identifying how that looks, we can better motivate and correct players along the way. Do we want to win? Of course, we play to the best of our ability, and I think everyone enjoys winning. But, we do our best within biblical parameters that guide our conduct. We can be serious about our performance without taking the results so seriously. Winning and losing in a game should not be as important as whether or not God is glorified by how we play. The saying, "It isn't whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game" has been maligned over the years; but from the Christian perspective, isn't this what the Bible teaches? God does not call us to be successful, but to be faithful. "One cannot love sport, the body, or competition too much; one can only love them too much in proportion to the other objects of love in one's life. Love for sport must be properly prioritized."⁹³

Does the Christian play at a disadvantage if he or she plays according to biblical standards of conduct? Cheating is defined as acting dishonestly or unfairly to gain an advantage. If the Christian does not cheat, is not willing to intimidate, and sticks not only

⁹³ Parry, Nesti and Watson, *Theology, Ethics, and Transcendence in Sports*, 30.

to the letter but also the spirit of the law, then he or she will definitely play at a disadvantage if playing against a person (or team) that does not. It returns to the question of why we play in the first place. Are we playing simply to play? Are we playing strictly for the wins? Are we playing to develop character? Are we playing “as unto the Lord”? Alasdair MacIntyre’s comments on virtue are appropriate,

Yet notoriously the cultivation of truthfulness, justice and courage will often, the world being what it contingently is, bar us from being rich or famous or powerful. Thus although we may hope that we can not only achieve the standards of excellence and the internal goods of certain practices by possessing the virtues and become rich, famous, and powerful, the virtues are always a potential stumbling block to this comfortable ambition. We should therefore expect that, if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement, although simulacra might abound.⁹⁴

Assessing the Sport Experience

Can we use biblical principles to determine if and how we will participate in sport? Considering sport, there is a temptation to view it all the same. I attempt to differentiate among sports; however, in this study, I refer generically to sport, realizing that golf is not soccer, is not rugby, is not ultimate fighting. Considering various biblical principles, it will become apparent how they will help in the differentiation process.

⁹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

There are a variety of biblical principles upon which we can reference to evaluate whether or not our participation in or organization of sport is positive. For my purposes here, I consider six such principles:

- The mastery principle: (1 Cor 6:12)⁹⁵ Can I participate in this sport maintaining the person I know myself to be in Christ, or does my participation cause me to think and act contrary to biblical teaching and how I would normally think or act?
- The temple principle: (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:18-20) My body is God's temple; God's Spirit lives in me. My body belongs to him and I am to take care of it. Does my sporting experience honor God by caring for my body?
- The benefit principle: (1 Cor 10:23-24) Is my sporting experience beneficial or constructive for me and the lives of people around me? Am I helping myself and others grow toward Jesus or away from him by my participation?
- The glory principle: (1 Cor 10:31) In my play, is my motivation to bring God glory or is it to bring myself glory? Does my play in some way take away from God's glory?
- The fruit principle: (Gal 5:22-23) Is my sporting participation allowing me to grow and/or display the fruit of the Spirit or is it serving to undermine that fruit in my life?
- The love principle: (Mt 22:34-40) Am I successfully carrying out the greatest commandment to love God and love others in my sporting activities?

The references from 1 Corinthians are primarily concerned with problems the believers were having with the use of food and sex. These were not things that were

⁹⁵ Scriptures used in 'Principles' section:

1 Corinthians 6:12 Everything is permissible for me – but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me – but I will not be mastered by anything.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

1 Corinthians 10:23-24 Everything is permissible – but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible – but not everything is constructive.

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Galatians 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Matthew 22:34-40 (here is 37-39) Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself.

immoral in and of themselves. Both are considered gifts from God if used properly and with thankfulness. I see sport in a similar way. God has given us the gift of play; and if used properly, then it can be a great blessing to us and those around us. Used inappropriately, it can be damaging to all involved.

The fact that none of us will perfectly adhere to all these principles makes it possible to debate the application of each one of them. I might say with regard to the fruit principle, “I may have displayed some rotten fruit on the field today, but it was a lot worse six months ago so, praise God, I’m making progress.” With each of the principles, there are degrees to which we can say that we are being faithful, or we are in need of help, or that perhaps it would be best for us to step away from this sport.

Using the six principles, I believe individuals or churches can determine whether or not participation in or organization of a particular sport is appropriate. Going beyond that determination, the principles can guide participation in such a manner that God will be glorified and we will be benefitted, regardless of how our opponents compete. Mark Hamilton comments, “Finally, one must recall the two great commands by Jesus to first love God and then to love your neighbor as yourself (Mt 22:36-39). If sport is to be practiced Christianly and morally and in ways that reduce the multitude of problems and evils in sport, then these two commands must be central to our sporting practices.”⁹⁶ If we can establish that it would be possible to participate in a particular sport as a Christian, then the question for us to consider next is whether or not this environment is conducive to spiritual formation.

⁹⁶ Parry, Nesti and Watson, *Theology, Ethics, and Transcendence in Sports*, 34.

CHAPTER 5

TEAM SPORT AS A PLACE FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Stemming from the Muscular Christianity movement in the mid-19th century, sport and athletes have been a means of evangelization and discipleship in various ways. The YMCA adopted sports and recreation as part of its outreach to young men. Sports, especially team sports, were begun in private schools and universities largely as vehicles through which morality and character could be taught. Christian sports heroes like C. T. Studd, one of the Cambridge Seven, and later, Eric Liddell were featured at meetings in churches and universities where they shared their conversion testimonies and missionary calling. People came to faith in Christ, and many volunteered for missionary service as a result.

Evangelist D. L. Moody saw compatibility between sport and faith and was a promoter of Muscular Christianity. He worked with the YMCA in Chicago beginning in 1861 as one of their missionaries and, eventually, became its president from 1866-1869. Billy Sunday came to faith in Christ during his time as a professional baseball player with the Chicago White Stockings. He began speaking at the YMCA and was recognized by his teammates as being a changed man. His career was not a stellar one; and in 1891, after 8 seasons, he left baseball. He declined a \$3,000 a year contract with his current club in Philadelphia and returned to Chicago where he took an \$83 a month position with the Chicago YMCA. He became the leading evangelist of the early 20th century using

baseball jargon, personal stories, and a highly active preaching style. He was not ministering in baseball, but it was partly his fame of having been a player that drew the crowds to hear him preach. Not all of this do I consider ministry in or through sport but merely ministry related to sport. That is not to say those ministries were inappropriate or unfruitful. But could there be more to sports and ministry? The question that guided this study remains: Is the team sport environment conducive to and appropriate for nurturing spiritual formation?

The Team as Community

As the word “team” implies, the sport setting is a community. Likewise, the communal nature of spiritual formation has been seen over the last 20 years in the Small Group Movement. Maybe the rise of mega-churches highlighted disconnectedness or perhaps there was simply a realization that disciples were not being made. For whatever reason, the Methodist model of groups made a comeback.⁹⁷ It is the idea that people in community, praying together, studying scripture together, helping each other, and seeking God together is a good way to grow people. A team is a small group that likely meets more often than a “normal” small group. The team is also able or forced to become deeper and closer than most small groups. In a team setting, players and coaches have to physically and emotionally interact every time they practice, and that may include competing against one another or helping train each other. They must work together every time they play to play to the best of their collective ability. Often, the players are put in pressure situations to push them beyond where they currently are in their skills, fitness, and understanding of the game. This can elicit the best and the worst in people.

⁹⁷ From chapter 2, “Methodism grew out of a fear that the church (in particular the Church of England) was becoming increasingly shallow, estranged from the power and meaning behind what was now empty liturgy and orthodoxy.”

Either way, it causes people to interact with others (at *their* best or worst), to speak the truth in love, to show compassion, to encourage, and to correct or rebuke. If this is done in an atmosphere where following Christ is a main focus of the team culture, then it becomes a practical training ground for displaying the fruit of the Spirit and living the Christ-life. If we can learn humility, patience, and perseverance, then in those circumstances within the team (small group), it will be much easier to exhibit them in other areas of life as well.

The Team as Laboratory

Willard's VIM (vision, intention, means) is a progression that is not just applicable to spiritual formation but to other areas of life as well, particularly sport. It is the way we work with athletes in technical (skills) and tactical (strategy) acquisition. As coaches, we first paint the picture. For example, we identify, through practice or scrimmage time, a skill that is lacking. It could be anything from how to throw a curve ball to the proper technique for a jump shot. To facilitate skill acquisition, we begin by demonstrating the technique, thus giving the players the vision. The players' intention (i.e., their commitment to pursuing acquisition of the skill) should come from a desire to be a complete player, the best that they can. As coaches, we should constantly be verbalizing this. Sometimes commitment comes from the desire to get more playing time – “if Tom learns this and I don't, I may be riding the bench in the future.” That may not be a *bad* motive for commitment, but it is not the *best* motive. Once the vision is given and intention is encouraged, we move through a progression where the particular skill is practiced in a “static” setting, with no opposition, and no speed requirement, to gain a level of proficiency. Next, a “game related” drill is added, building the speed of the skill

and adding perhaps token pressure on the player. Finally, we provide a “game condition” setting in which they are trying to execute the skill in a scrimmage, at game speed under game-type pressure and opposition. The pitcher is now throwing his curve ball to a batter trying to hit over the fence; the point guard is taking a jump shot with an opponent trying to block it. Once the skill is learned, it still must be practiced, repeated until it becomes part of the player, and he or she can do it effortlessly. As a coach, I constantly see kids in games trying to perform a skill that is beyond them. Their intent is good. They have a vision, probably from watching professional sports on TV, but I have to remind them that if they have not mastered the skill in practice, then they will not be able to do it under the pressures of game conditions. If that is a skill they want to have as part of their repertoire, then they must commit to learning and mastering it before they can successfully use it in a game.

When it comes to developing Christ-like character, most of what passes for spiritual formation in churches is static and, occasionally, a bit of game-related training. We are given the vision of how Jesus displayed the character. We are seldom asked to commit to pursuing that in ourselves, however. More infrequent still are opportunities to practice in static or game-related ways. Typically, we are given the vision and then thrown into the game conditions of the real world, with the expectation that we will succeed because we “know” what to do. Simply telling the players what they should do and then sending them into the game expecting that they will be able to do it would get most coaches fired.

The Team as Enemy of the Status Quo

The environment of competitive sport is all about growing, training, and getting better, so that one plays to one's potential. If you are not getting better, then you are being left behind. That is part of the reason it is such a great place for spiritual formation; improvement is expected and in many cases demanded. As was noted in the introduction, spiritual formation is viewed by a large segment of the church as optional. Our pastors and small group materials generally do a good job of casting the vision and dispensing the information needed to make a commitment to change. Sometimes the challenge is given and people respond. But seldom is there a plan for practical progress and a coach to walk alongside demonstrating, encouraging, and expecting change. In the team setting, if there is no plan for increasing the technical and tactical abilities of the players, and no game plan that will maximize the skills and minimize the weaknesses of each player so that the team as a whole plays better, then I will show you a place where there will soon be a coaching vacancy. In the Christian team setting, spiritual formation can be added to the mix of skills and tactics in which our players are expected to make progress.

The sheer physicality of the sport setting is part of the reason it lends itself so well to spiritual formation. Willard's writing is especially revealing on this point. "Let me be as clear as possible. When we speak of spiritual formation we are speaking of the formation of the human spirit. And the spirit is the will or the heart and by extension, the character. And that, in practice, lives mainly in our bodies. The one reason why the idea of spiritual transformation through being merely preached at and taught doesn't work is because it does not involve the body in the process of transformation."⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Willard, "Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done," The rest of that quote reads, "One of the ironies of spiritual formation is that every "spiritual" discipline is a bodily behavior. We have

The Continuity of the Team

Like students following a rabbi, players voluntarily place themselves under the authority and teaching of a coach. Depending on the setting, they do so committing significant time to being with the coach and team. Time is essential for spiritual formation. The rabbi would have students with him for a number of years. Jesus spent 3 years with his closest disciples. In our ministries, we must have adequate time to work with players. Certainly an hour spent with someone may result in a spiritual breakthrough, which becomes a turning point in his or her life. However, we will not likely have our players 24/7. But to affect significant growth of an individual, it takes time.

Current sports ministry models are geared to reach larger numbers of people in a short period of time. One-time events such as clinics and tournaments give opportunities, usually over 1 to 2 hours, for presentation and challenge in conjunction with a sport activity. Other one-time events that are sport-related, like a Super Bowl party or Night of Champions, will also provide similar presentation opportunities.

A step up from those kinds of events is church-sponsored leagues. These are typically 8- to 10-week seasons with one practice and one game per week. Often, there are prepared practice devotionals that are administered by the coach; and over the duration of the league, a level of relationship can be built with players over the roughly 20 hours spent together. Also, the players get to observe the coach as he or she lives his or her faith over that period of time. A post-season awards night offers a chance to recap

to involve the body in spiritual formation because that's where we live and what we live from. So now spiritual formation is formation of the inner being of the human being, resulting in transformation of the whole person, including the body in its social context. Spiritual formation is never merely inward.”

lessons or themes from the season and give a challenge. The combination of these things makes spiritual formation, at least at an introductory level, a little more realistic.

Another avenue of church ministry is the sports camp. Most often a summer camp, they are typically 5-day, 6-hours per day affairs. Because of the concentration of hours spent with players, the building of relationship is accelerated. At the same time, the need to communicate content and challenge is accelerated. Most of these camps are evangelistic in nature, with Thursday as “invitation day.” The 30 hours of contact with campers during the week helps to build more solid relationships and gives kids more time to observe and learn from coaches. It also gives coaches more time to get to know individuals. Turning that day camp into a resident, overnight camp would bring additional hours of contact with kids through which relationships could be solidified and time for the gospel to be demonstrated and explained.

Our Seahorse ministry has partnered with churches to provide soccer camp experiences for kids over the last 30 years. It has been a joy to see children come to faith in Christ at a camp and then continue to see them year after year. We have seen campers grow up to go on short-term mission trips with us, become players on our college-age elite team, become helpers and coaches at our camps, and even become full-time staff members with ours or other ministries. The camps were small but significant parts of their development in the faith.

A smaller number of churches run club programs in various sports. With a club, the church sponsors and runs a team that would then play in a community league as opposed to a church-sponsored league. Small group aficionados would consider this type of team a closed group because its membership is set at the beginning of the season and

there is seldom any change in or out over the course of the season. The time commitment club players make is substantial.⁹⁹ In addition to the footnoted number of hours a club soccer team is together during a typical year, it is common for a coach to stay with that team for a number of years as they move up in age and competitive level. The sheer amount of time the coach spends with players (and vice versa) should give the church a reason to consider the club option.

Balance in the Team Setting

Like historical spiritual formation, the sport setting is a place where a person can grow both individually (skills, understanding, stamina, character, etc.) and communally (tactics, service, submission, etc.). It is a balance of the two. Each individual has specific strengths, weaknesses, and needs. The coach, in cooperation with the player, must address those individual needs in a way that is appropriate for the player to increase his or her ability to function within the team. A one-size-fits-all mentality will not achieve the desired ministry or athletic results. An overemphasis on the individual will not create a cohesive team, while an overemphasis on the one-size-fits-all treatment of players will not maximize the potential of each individual. The same is true with regard to spiritual formation in the church setting. This is especially true in bigger churches where the need to minister to large numbers of people often leads to a one-size-fits-all approach. The small group movement was supposed to address the numbers problem by having a more intimate approach with a small number of people. Why the small group has not been widely successful, in my opinion, is the paucity of gifted and trained individuals to lead such groups. I will address this premise presently.

⁹⁹ A typical Southern California club soccer team will have a player 40 weeks of the year consisting of approximately 80 practices + 45-50 games + travel (mostly during spring tournament season) = more than 300 hours per year.

The Dynamic of Relational Power in the Team

Any team setting is a relatively controlled environment with well-understood, if not defined, lines of authority and expectations of participants and coaches. Michael Foucault's work on discourse has been applied to the sport environment by showing how culture and tradition have produced the unwritten rules and social practices of sport that often go unchallenged, being seen as discursive truths.¹⁰⁰ One of those unwritten guidelines is that within the team, the coach rules. The coach has tremendous power. He or she controls who gets to be on the team, the kind of activities in which the team will engage during practice, and the kind of environment it will be (i.e., fun and encouraging vs. harsh and demanding). The coach determines the priorities and direction of training. He or she decides who will play and for how long. This is the kind of relational power used for social control that Foucault addressed in his work.¹⁰¹

Players will even put themselves under a coach who is known to be abusive in the manner and methods of his coaching, simply because "he gets results." This was written about in *The Sociology of Sports Coaching* of a French judo club where coaches stimulated interpersonal rivalry among players, provoked them verbally, displayed indifference, entered into direct conflict with players, and openly showed preferences.

A disciplined, authoritarian regime was established by the coaches, where negative feedback was commonplace. So why did the players stay in the context? ... the players tolerated their subordinate status due to the potential rewards gleaned from it. They perceived themselves to be in a culture that could help them

¹⁰⁰ Robyn Jones, Paul Potrac, Chris Cushion and Lars Tore Ronglan, *The Sociology of Sports Coaching* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 29.

¹⁰¹ Pirkko Markula and Richard Pringle, *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 35.

secure their ultimate sporting goals. ... The negative interactions to which the players were subjected, then, were deemed the price to be paid. ... Often, players experiencing this kind of abuse consider it done in their best interest. It was expected and rationalized as part of that culture.¹⁰²

None of us want to see athletes abused or manipulated; and yet, this type of atmosphere is common across the sporting spectrum. Such was the coaching 'norm' in the Czech Republic where I served with MAI for 6 years. As a player on an adult team, I saw and experienced the standard coaching style, one of humiliation, shaming, and belittling of players, both youth and adults, to somehow get a little bit more out of them. It was a very unforgiving atmosphere, even at the youngest levels. At one point, because I had coached at various levels in the States, one of the local Czech youth teams asked me to do a session with boys about 10 years old. My style was positive and encouraging which was considered, by the Czechs, as the total opposite of what a coach was supposed to be. I was not asked to come back.

This illustration and personal experience demonstrate an important truth about the team environment; there is a sociological dynamic where a coach is vested with a lot of power based on the fact that the players depend upon him or her to deliver what they want/need. It could be a starting position, playing time, captaincy, a favorable recommendation, recognition, or simply the status that comes from playing for that club or coach.

Although the coach/athlete relationship is unbalanced as it relates to power, the players are not totally powerless because, in most cases, the coach also depends on them to provide what he or she needs. These needs may be as simple as the desire to see

¹⁰² Jones et al., *The Sociology of Sports Coaching*, 116.

players improve and be successful. They may be less altruistic, perhaps just needing to get enough wins to maintain their job. To recruit more and better players, the coach may have to insure that current players have enough of a positive experience that they would recommend this coach to other players, or at least not speak negatively about him or her. If the coach has a need to succeed (i.e., win games) and there is a player that is absolutely essential to the team's success, then that player may have more power than others and may influence how the coach coaches. The players also have freedom in the sense that they can choose their response to the coach's authority or, ultimately, whether or not they want to be on the team.

In the case of a Christian team with spiritual formation as its purpose, a player may participate in spiritual activities, although he or she may feel compelled or coerced thinking, "If I don't do this, coach won't like me and I won't get to play." In our church programs we can give the vision and provide the means, but it is the athlete himself or herself who must decide if and he or she will commit. Even if committing with less than perfect motives, the athlete will be exposing himself or herself to biblical teaching and practices that may cause him or her to consider doing so for the right reasons. This is similar to the Christian school movement that has attracted many non-Christian families because of the quality of education given, with many coming to faith because of the exposure to biblical teaching and the witness of committed Christian faculty and staff.

The coach's power is especially evident with children's sports. Not only is the coach powerful because he or she is in that position, but he or she is also an adult who most children are taught to respect and obey. In addition, parents do not challenge the coach's power because they, too, have the cultural understanding that the coach rules in

the team setting. Although this point is historically true, increasingly in today's culture, there seems to be a greater willingness to challenge coaching authority, at least at youth levels.

Given that the coach in the team setting has enormous influence, it is important to note that with that power comes immense opportunity as well as responsibility to exercise it properly, wisely, and productively. "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Cor 4:2).

Similarities Between First Century Spiritual Formation and the Team Sport Setting

There are several parallels between the context in which the first century rabbi worked and the one in which the modern coach works. As the rabbi of Jesus's day was seen as the authority of all things spiritual, the coach holds a similar position in the world of sport. Coaches have different styles and varied approaches to their sports. At the higher levels of sport (i.e., club, college, and professional) players sometimes seek the particular coach or program for which they would like to play much like students pursued a particular rabbi. It is also true that coaches recruit players, at least the top talent. At these levels, players must prove themselves via a tryout to demonstrate the necessary skill, experience, and physical ability to be successful in that setting. Unlike the rabbis looking for students that they can train to become like them, modern coaches tend to view athletes from the perspective of, "will this particular player help my program be successful; will they fill the need that I have at point guard, left field, or goalie." This is an area in which a Christian coach or program can be different because of holding an alternate view of success. We must purpose, like the rabbi, to train young men and

women to be, not so much like us, but like Christ - “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

The motivation of players, more importantly for parents of younger players, to choose a coach or program is seldom so they will become like the coach. Players are usually looking for the experience, while many parents are looking ahead and calculating whether this club or coach will help their child, even if they are just 8 or 9 years old, to get to the next level or obtain a college scholarship. Whether or not they want to become like the coach, the players often do. Kids take their cues of how to act in certain situations from the coach. If the coach is yelling at the referee about a call, then the players will, too. As well, when players get older and have the opportunity to coach others, they will have the tendency to adopt styles and methods of coaching they remember from their experiences as players. If a significant coach in their past was a hard-disciplined “yeller”, then they may try to coach in that way, even if it does not fit their personality. Thus, the axiom that “we coach the way we were coached” is quite often an accurate one.

Coaches at many levels have tryouts. They test players to see which ones have the most promise and choose those players they think have the most potential to succeed on the field at that particular level, much like the rabbi looking for the best and brightest students. If we are to do sports as Jesus would, then we will look beyond just the statistics a player posts or how fast he or she runs the 40-yard dash. We intuitively know that success on the field and in the rest of life is determined by more than just physical ability or a certain level of knowledge or skill. The motivation a player brings to the experience and his or her level of character can be determining factors in their success on the field and their impact on the other players. As we accept players into our clubs or programs,

we need to choose players who will appreciate and thrive within the spiritual formation environment that we are providing. Taking a player who is simply looking at the program as a stepping-stone to the next level of play may, though it is not guaranteed, bring some success in our play but could, very probably, stifle the progress of others' spiritual formation by compromising the atmosphere we are attempting to set. We are not looking for perfect players, and we are not always looking for players who profess to be Christians. We are looking for players who we think would flourish within the spiritual environment that we are offering.

The Coach as Rabbi

A first century student would never presume to come to a rabbi with a list of what he wanted to learn and dictate how he would like to learn it. The rabbi determined the course of study and the way it was administered. In the church setting, the development of the sport program's mission, vision, definition of success, training content, etc., will not likely come directly from the coach, unless he or she is part of the start-up; but it will be the coach who is responsible for implementing it. We must make sure that the person or people to whom we are entrusting the program are philosophically "on board" and equipped to implement the plan. It is important to note that coaches have free will to choose whether or not they will coach within the existing parameters and in a manner that reflects the mission and vision that have been set. If we run our programs based on the number of kids we have rather than on the number of trained and qualified coaches we have prepared, then we could hurt the program. For example, if we value and mandate equal playing time for all players and our coach does not, then he or she will (a) comply, perhaps grudgingly; (b) try and circumvent the mandate; or (c) not participate at all. In all

three scenarios, we lose the ministry by the coach's attitude toward the program, by his or her example of trying to get around the mandate, or by potentially having to cancel the program after it has begun.

Just as with rabbi Jesus and his disciples, the coach in the team setting has several circles within his community of followers. There are always a few who are closer to the coach than the others; often it is the captain(s) or key individuals. The coach shares more of his plans with those closest to him, sometimes for their development as leaders, other times so they can help reinforce those plans with the other players. This is the group in which the coach invests the most. It may be because he or she sees the most potential, the most receptivity, or the most need. The rest of the team may be the next circle; possibly there would be a couple of circles in there. This group would get direct access to the coach and be instructed/influenced by him or her. Then, there are the people surrounding the team, church or club personnel, who the coach influences. Even people on the periphery will be influenced by the coach – parents, siblings, officials, and fans. Lastly, there are those outside (i.e., opponents, other coaches, and league officials) who may or may not desire to be influenced by the coach but, nonetheless, are at some level.

In the definition of spiritual formation with which I introduced in Chapter 2, the Holy Spirit was identified as the power behind the process of growth; and our part was to be intentionally cooperating with him. There is also a role for spiritual directors, those whom God uses to influence, model and train. Ephesians 4:11-13, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers (*and coaches*), to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge

of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Regarding spiritual formation in the sport environment, the conversation has been permeated by the coach. The coach directs the players into this cooperative effort with the Spirit. He or she will model seeking to know and be like Christ. Regardless of how good our church sports ministry’s mission and vision statement are, and/or how good our league and training facilities are, if we do not have coaches who are genuinely pursuing and displaying Christ and see their role as spiritual director, then we will not see the kind of fruit we, and God, desire.

Raising the Coaching Bar

One of the criticisms of modern small group ministry is that the relationships created there are just as shallow as in the large, impersonal church. There are certainly small groups that have fostered deep relationships and are models of spiritual formation. I think the reason there is a perception of shallowness is due mainly to the lack of mature leadership. We want to impact as many people as possible, and to do that with eight to 12 people at a time, a lot of groups must be formed. Because we realize that there are not enough mature believers with gifts and training in leading others to spiritual growth, we take the shortcut but gut the program.

For example, as Small Groups and Recreation Pastor at my church, I ran into the same problem in both areas of my responsibilities. As the Small Groups Pastor, I was given the task of fulfilling the senior pastor’s vision of having 100 small groups meeting in homes for our congregation of about 1500 people, where people would be in deep relationships and growing in their faith as they studied and applied the truths from the Sunday sermon. Starting with 25 ongoing groups, we doubled the number of ongoing

(post-campaign) groups through the 40 Days of Purpose campaign, during which we expanded to about 150 groups. The design for the campaign was to have a host and a discussion leader. The host's responsibility was to turn on the DVD teaching segment, and the discussion leader's task was to read the discussion questions from the study guide. To be sure, there were lives that were touched and changed. All of the people involved were challenged by the teaching, and people got to know others in the church, even if only superficially.

So with 25 new groups (after the 40 Days), the question became, "How do we transition these hosts and discussion leaders into people who can lead others into spiritual growth? The bar for "leadership" had been set so low for the campaign that we found it hard to raise it back up. Because we did not want to lose the groups we had, I focused on making it easy for people to lead by writing the weekly lessons and discussion questions, including special background information and help for leaders to actually guide the discussion. It was difficult to get any leaders to come for further training, so we maintained the same format. We even produced several of our own teaching video series for church-wide campaigns, which perpetuated the leadership problem.

I have always believed that whenever people get together to read the Bible, discuss it with one another, and then pray for each other, God would make good things happen. I praise Him that he did! I believe that my failure to adequately choose and train leaders prevented us from having the kind and scope of spiritual formation we had envisioned. The question I still ask is, if we had only started groups where there was a mature, gifted, and trained leader, would we have had more and better fruit in the long

run than we did by making it easy to lead and trying to involve as many as possible? Also, did we stunt the growth of potential leaders by not expecting more of them?

There was a similar situation within the Upward basketball league we were running for kids. Granted, the goal of this 10-week league was not spiritual formation as described in this paper. The hope was to teach and live biblical truths as well as giving kids who did not have a relationship with Jesus the opportunity to do so. The program was so family friendly – developmental in nature, equal playing time for all kids – that we soon had and still routinely have 40 teams each season. That means that we need 40 coaches and forty assistant coaches. Because of this, we had to basically ask for volunteers and take whoever raised their hand to coach. This sometimes meant taking coaches who were basketball savvy but may have been at the same spiritual level as the kids they were coaching. Or it often meant taking the parent who was a Christian but knew little to nothing about basketball.

The coach's training for this league is a 2-hour session going over the materials and rules. The problem was that 2 hours was not enough time to overcome a lack of basketball experience or to impart spiritual experience. The prepared practice devotionals made it a little easier for the less spiritual coaches, although not all used them. The prepared practices made it easier for the non-experienced coaches, although not all understood them. The rules for playing time, strategies, and not questioning officials helped make the games fair and focused on development, although there were coaches who skirted the rules, employed strategies other than those sanctioned, and took issue with calls made by officials! Bottom line is, whenever you get kids reading from the Bible, talking about it, and having fun in a wholesome environment, God will make good

things happen. I know of churches that only have as many teams as they have trained, mature Christian coaches in whom they are confident. Does that result in more and better coaches? More and better fruit? I believe that by adequately training coaches, we can get to a place in which people will want their kids to be part of our programs because they want their kids to become like our coaches!

CHAPTER 6
DESIGNING A PLAN FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION
THROUGH SPORT IN THE CHURCH

Foundation

Why do most churches engage in sports ministry or at least have sports programs? It may be because they see other churches doing it and do not want to be left behind, or they are responding to what people want: sports in a ‘safer’, Christian setting. They may want to be culturally relevant, or they see sport as a way to attract/retain people. They may see it as a possible way of reaching out/evangelizing or potentially for spiritual formation.

The reasons for aspiring to begin sports ministry are subjective and utilitarian in nature, which is why much of what is seen as sports ministry in the church is short-lived, shallow, and less than productive. The first thing needed for successful ministry through sport is an understanding by church leadership of what sport ministry is and is not so there can be clear objectives, planning, prayer, and training to give it the best chance of succeeding. I have provided that foundation in the previous chapters. As church leadership is armed with the understanding of how sport can provide a great venue for ministry and as they become aware of the challenges and dangers involved, they will be prepared to pursue it or at least have a reasoned argument to avoid it. For churches that

are convinced that ministry through sport is something they should consider, several questions need to be answered.

What is Possible?

By having an understanding of sport ministry theory, the church can prayerfully consider what it is they want to accomplish. Evangelism, fellowship, spiritual formation, assimilation, or simply offering a quality program to the community are a few of the directions a church could go with sport. One visual tool for helping us plan and later evaluate our ministry in sport is the McCown Sport in Ministry map (Figure 1).¹⁰³ The map helped us visualize the various ‘target’ audiences for ministry, which helped us design and shape our ministry. The vertical axis of the map is The Spiritual Experience Continuum and uses the Engle scale¹⁰⁴ to show where a person is on the journey toward Christ-likeness. It starts from a (-10), where a person has no knowledge of or framework to understand God, moves through a vague awareness of Christianity (-8), an awareness of personal need for forgiveness through Jesus (-3), to the place where the person changes allegiance to follow Christ (0 or X on the map).

From the point of deciding to follow Christ upward is what we recognize as Christian spiritual formation, the process of growth where one begins to look at the world differently, is incorporated into the church (+3), increasingly reorients areas of life, is involved in spiritual reproduction (+5), and moves toward Christ-likeness (+10).

¹⁰³ Lowrie McCown and Valerie Gin, *Focus on Sport in Ministry* (Marietta, GA: 360 Degrees Sports, 2003), 69-81.

¹⁰⁴ Developed by Dr. James Engel

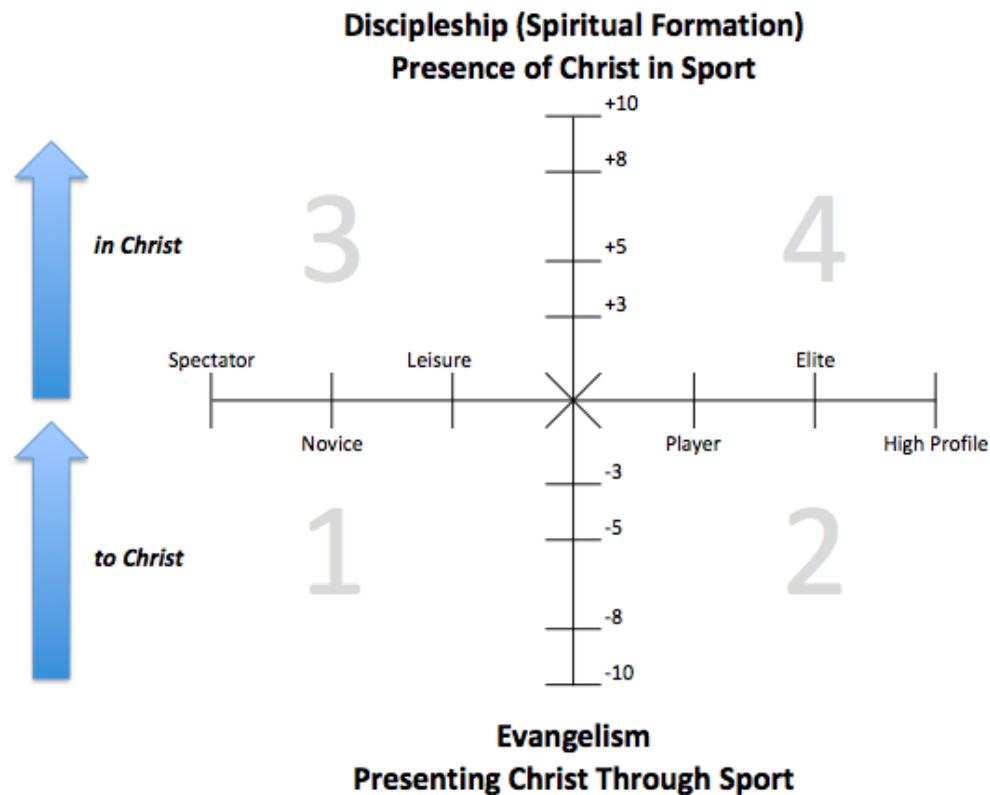


Figure 1. The McCown Sport in Ministry map.

The horizontal axis is The Sport Experience Continuum which identifies where a person is in his or her perspective of sport. It may include ability, but, more importantly, it includes the mindset he or she brings to sport. At the very far left, off the map, would be those with no interest whatsoever in sport. Beginning on the continuum is the spectator, a person who loves to watch sport in person, on television, listen on the radio, or scour the sports section of the newspaper. He or she is a fan and experiences sport vicariously through a team or individual athlete. The Novice has little experience but is actively developing skills at an introductory level. A 5-year-old playing Tee-Ball and a 40-year-old learning golf are both novices. The Leisure participant is one who plays as a hobby. Enjoyment comes merely from participating and the person is not overly

concerned with performance or results. He or she may like the competition but is not dependent on results or performance. Spectator is the largest group, and Leisure is the second largest.

Fundamental differences are found on to the right of the vertical axis where people find their identity in the sport experience. The Player's worldview has sport at the center. Her life is defined by her sport, and she describes herself in terms of her sport. When asked about who he is, a Player would say, "I play football" or "I'm a golfer." Self-image for the Player is based on performance. Good performance = good self-image, poor performance = poor self-image. There is a constant, underlying fear of failure attached to the performance mindset. In ministry to all the groups on this side of the vertical axis, this aspect of performance/self-image is key. We are to find our identity in Christ where we are loved, valued, and declared righteous because of what Jesus did on our behalf and not due to any "performance" on our part. There is a danger for a Christian Player with a performance mindset to view his relationship with God from that perspective of performance, feeling that God's love or approval can only come through how well he "performs" as a Christian.

The Elite has all the same characteristics of the Player. The difference is that the Elite is recognized by fellow players and in the community at-large, as being a level above. The added notoriety brings with it an added level of pressure to perform and greater fear of failure. The Elite player, whether it is a little league standout or an NFL Hall of Famer, will have an even higher focus on individual performance over winning and losing. Elite players tend to risk more, even endangering their own health and safety

to succeed.¹⁰⁵ Relationships within a team setting may become more difficult at this level as the line between competition with teammates for individual playing time, and cooperation, an essential aspect for any successful team, becomes blurred. The Elite is also a bit spoiled. Rules are bent to accommodate her and favors are done to keep her happy. It's a slippery slope that can lead to feelings of entitlement and privilege.

Last is the High Profile, everything the Player and Elite are but with an added level of celebrity. Kobe Bryant, Lionel Messi, and Derek Jeter are High Profiles, but so is the local high school quarterback who has broken all the school records and is being recruited by the NCAA Division I elite schools. Their lives are the focus of people who idolize them or want to be like them or, in some way, want a piece of them. Their privacy, at some levels, is non-existent. Moreover, their level of entitlement is magnified because of their notoriety. The slippery slope here is that they feel so privileged as to be above the rules by which ordinary people have to live. We might say that the High Profile is the Elite on steroids. An ironic description when you consider recent stories about Barry Bonds, Lance Armstrong, Roger Clemens, the 2013 crop of 13 MLB players banned for 50 to 211 games, and others so consumed by their need to perform that they ignore rules and endanger their health to feed their egos and fill their pockets.

For me, the map has been an encouraging tool as it shows that there is no shortage of people to whom to be minister and illustrates the need for various forms of “sports ministry” from (referring to Figure 2) publishing testimonies of Elite and High Profile

¹⁰⁵ Recently the NFL settled (for \$765 million) a class-action suit against the league over head injuries by players who insist that they did not know the risks involved in playing football at that level. It's hard to believe that claim when those players competed for years, hearing the stories and watching what was happening to older players. For the fame, the money and the self-image strokes that playing in the NFL brings, there has never been a shortage of young men willing to take the risk. Jim Otto (Hall of Famer) endured 18 knee surgeries, 2 knee replacements, 32 broken noses, 150 stitches on his face, 30 concussions, and a back surgery in order to keep playing (Selleck 1995). Over training, playing with injuries and performance enhancing drugs are some other ways that athletes endanger themselves.

Christian athletes for the Spectator (1), to running a week of sports camp with an evangelistic theme for the Novice/Leisure (2), to running a church-sponsored club for spiritual formation (3), to individually coming alongside a Christian Elite to help her wrestle with the personal issues of playing at such a high level such as self-image and entitlement (4).

The map has also been a great tool for evaluating ministry. If we look at the map and say we want to do discipleship/spiritual formation with children who are novice-players (above the horizontal axis) and yet the spiritual part of our program consists of

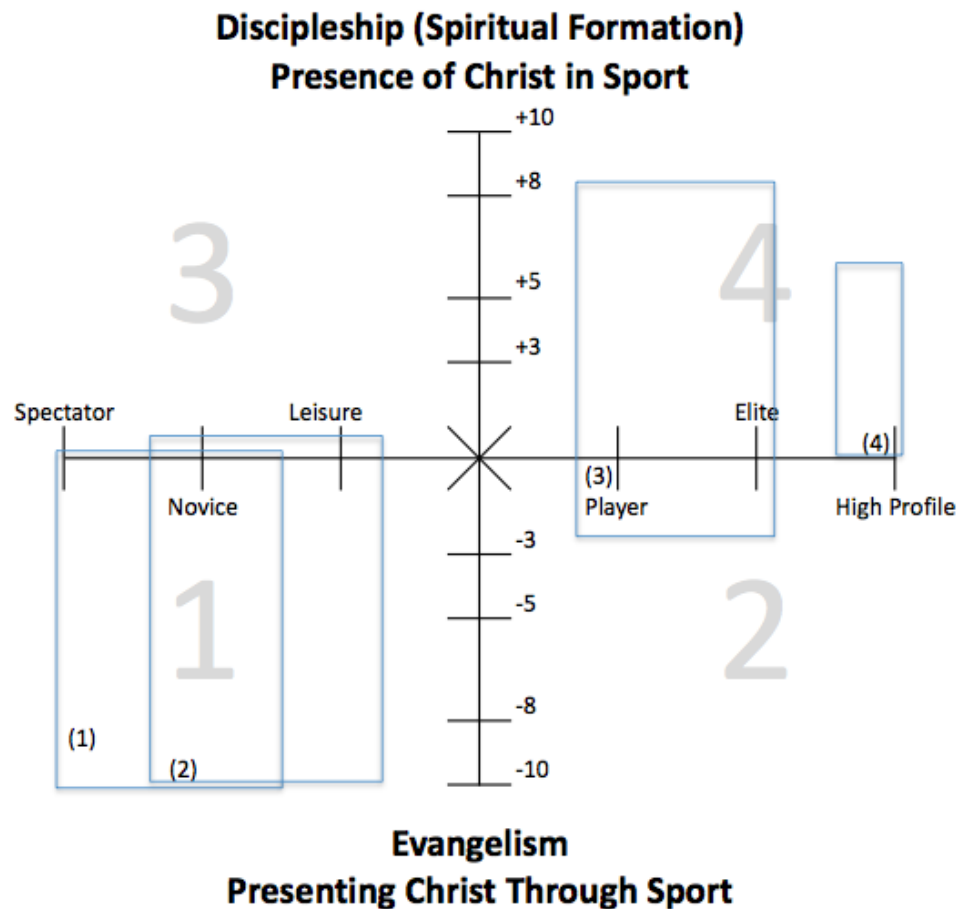


Figure 2. Mapping models of ministry.

walking the kids through a children's version of the four spiritual laws and asking for a decision, the default of most church-based programs, then we have not hit the target and we need to rework our curriculum. That doesn't mean we haven't done important ministry, it simply means that we have not done what we believed God wanted us to do at the outset. If we say that our youth basketball league is an outreach to the unchurched lost in our community (-10 to -5 on the vertical axis) but 90% of our kids come from area churches (-3 to +5), then we must determine how to engage that unchurched part of our community if 10% is not enough¹⁰⁶. That might mean not doing the league at our church gym but doing it at the outdoor courts in a neighborhood where our research has shown a high proportion of unchurched kids.

By using the map in this way, we can have a better understanding at the outset of ministry of what we want to accomplish and a visual to help us evaluate after the ministry or program has been completed whether or not we hit the mark. Considering the various audiences defined on the map, Table 1 presents suggested types of ministry that might be best suited to reaching that segment of people.

How Might Our Sports Ministry Look?

With the basic understanding of the concept of play and a number of biblical principles to help us evaluate the sport experience that we established earlier, we individual Christians and the church can begin to look at how we should interact with sport. Viewing the contemporary church's attitude toward sports from Arcangeli's 3-

¹⁰⁶ The 90% church kids figure comes from actual information I compiled for my church's Upward Basketball program for one specific year. Because the league was "successful" (read lots of participants) it was not changed to attract or admit more unchurched kids and has remained more of a support to the existing ministry of local churches (not a bad thing) than a true outreach league (the intended mission).

Table 1

Ministry Types for Sports

Audience	Ministry Model a Local Church Might Use
Spectator	using the stories of famous Christian athletes personal appearances by these athletes major event strategies (i.e. Super Bowl parties with evangelistic halftime program) sports themed children's book, musical ¹⁰⁷ or movie ¹⁰⁸
Novice	sports camps, clinics, developmental leagues,
Player	competitive church league, club (playing in outside league), high level sport camps
Elite	club, chaplaincy
High Profile	chaplaincy

pronged approach cited in Chapter 4 is revealing. No longer is the church, in general, openly attempting to undermine sport or keep believers from participating. The other two options were to attempt to control sport or, if that failed, to attempt to co-opt it for our benefit. So the question becomes, how can we control sport, lest we be corrupted by it, or how can we use sport to our advantage without seemingly selling out to it?

One way churches have attempted to control the environment of sport is by starting their own leagues, which allows them to set the standards, determine the schedule, and freely communicate the Gospel to players (evangelism and discipleship)

¹⁰⁷ In addition to running sport camps for churches UW Sports Ministry, founder Tim Conrad has also written a soccer themed children's musical as well as a series of children's books.

¹⁰⁸ Sherwood Baptist Church of Albany, GA Pastor Michael Catt believed that his church could "reach the world from Albany, Georgia." The film, *Facing the Giants* tells the story of a struggling football coach who turns to God, trusting Him to do the impossible and challenging his players to do the same. It was written by two associate pastors and was shot for \$10,000 using all volunteer staff and actors -to illustrate its reach, the film opened in October 2006 and by January 2007 it had grossed over \$10,000,000. Regardless of some of the theological implications that I disagreed with, the film shows the possibility of reaching a wide audience using a culturally relevant medium, in this case combining two, sport and film.

and fans (evangelism). Upward Basketball is a para-church ministry that has a program being used with about 400,000 kids through churches. It is a developmental league that insists on equal playing time for all players, does not keep score with the younger players, and provides practice devotionals and coach training. Our church runs an 8-week Upward League for 400 kids from a number of communities within about a 5-mile radius of the church. In the beginning, we had hoped the league would be an outreach to the unchurched in our community; but a check of one season showed that only about 10% of participants had no church affiliation (see footnote).

In addition to practice devotionals, we utilize game half time when the teams are meeting with coaches to give a short message to families who have come to watch. We also have a special night at the end of the season with a slideshow of the season, special entertainment, and an evangelistic message. This approach has worked well, especially for younger children developing in sport. If coaches are properly trained and adopt the vision of the church, then it can be a very powerful experience. Care must be taken, however. You can have a great mission and vision statement for your sports ministry or your church's athletic program, but if you then utilize a volunteer coach who is a friend of a friend – because you had to get somebody and he is a 'good Christian guy' or is simply a breathing, available human being – and this coach has a secular worldview of sport, you can expect secular sport with little, if any, spiritual instruction.

Organizing adult leagues in church is a little tougher, as older players are more influenced by professional sport and have established habits and attitudes. The ministry focus of adult leagues is often simply to give non-Christians exposure to Christians and the church. Another benefit we saw in our church was how our adult basketball league

helped in assimilating guys who were on the fringes of the church by giving them a group of men with whom they felt comfortable. Within that context were relationships that developed through which men either came to faith or grew in their faith. They were drawn into other church functions like retreats and small groups through relationships built on the field or court. The efficacy of these programs really was determined by whether or not there were participants who desired to minister to others. When these participants were present, ministry happened. If there were none, then the program may still have been a quality program where participants connected with others; but little of what we had anticipated as ministry was accomplished.

Another option being utilized by churches, albeit with a little less control, is to organize a team within their church that will play in a secular league. In this instance, they continue to set the standards for the team and can (if they choose to) evangelize/disciple players. Their witness outside of their own team becomes more about how they play the game and how they interact with officials, opponents, and fans. This can be very powerful; and, if it is evident over the course of a season or over years, then relationships can be built with other individuals, teams, and officials through which the Gospel can be shared. Without discipline and a shared vision the team becomes just another team that is not distinct from any other and may do as much harm as good because it has the church name attached to it. Again, leadership is key, as well as having at least some participants who want to minister to others as well as participate in the sport.

Churches that are not able to control sport or have no concept of how a Christian should compete most often will still try to use sport in some way. They may utilize it as a

‘hook’ to draw people into a setting where the Gospel can be shared with no regard for the sport itself. Some other examples are open gym, Super Bowl party, youth sports night, pastor serving as a chaplain for a local team, having a high-profile athlete speak in a service, or simply using athletic illustrations or motifs in a sermon. These are not wrong options depending on what we have chosen as our focus but they do not fully engage sport and utilize the potential it holds.

For this study, I am assuming that the church and its leadership have sought God’s direction through prayer, discussion, and investigation and decided to minister in the area of spiritual formation. This creates the constant need for focused prayer, from the first ideas you have about ministering in sport to the launch of a team or program. Church leadership, whether it is pastoral staff, governing board, sport and recreation committee, or all of them, must be involved in praying for God’s direction in the planning, recruiting, training, and implementation of the program. Once the program is up and running, you can enlist people from the congregation to be praying for specific coaches and players.

Along with praying, we should consider how God has gifted the church with people who have a heart for ministry and aptitude for sport. What happens quite often is that when a church feels the need to minister through sport, the default method of choosing leadership is to find someone in the church who is a coach or has been a standout high school or college player. Finding leaders who are competent players or coaches is a good thing, but it will not of itself assure a successful ministry.

Which Sport(s) Will Best Suit Our Ministry Goals?

When choosing sports/activities as places for ministry, it is good to have an understanding of how various sports lend themselves or prove a challenge to ministry.

The sport chart (Table 2) distinguishes between categories of sports. One designation is between individual and team sports. We talked about the benefits of the team environment for spiritual formation because of its correspondence to the body of Christ and its ability to foster relationships and personal interaction so needed in living one's

Table 2

Categories of Sports

Type	Full Contact	Contact		Non-Contact
<u>Team Sports</u>				
Competitive Side-by-Side				Crew Swimming Relays Track and Field Relays
Competitive Face-to-Face	Football (tackle) Rugby	Soccer Basketball Ice Hockey Field Hockey Lacrosse Water Polo	Football (touch) Ultimate Frisbee Baseball Softball Team Handball	Tennis (doubles) Table Tennis (doubles) Volleyball Badminton (doubles)
<u>Individual Sports</u>				
Recreational (non-competitive)	Martial Arts			Surfing Golf Frisbee Skiing Swimming Bowling Running Archery Canoeing/kayaking Weight Lifting
Competitive Side-by-Side				Track/Field Bowling Swimming Running Ski Racing Golf Canoeing/kayaking Weight Lifting
Competitive Face-to-Face	Boxing Wrestling Martial Arts			Racquetball Tennis Table Tennis Squash Badminton

faith. Individual sports may still have the coach/player relationship but lack the interaction and mutual dependence that team sports provide; thus, it is a less well-equipped laboratory. A second way in which we can distinguish between sports is whether they are recreational pursuits or competitive in nature. The recreational practice of sport is for personal enjoyment or benefit, and it can often be done with no one else involved. Whether it is bowling, swimming, or running, we can do it on our own, competing against no one. We can keep score or record our times to measure our progress against our past performances, but we may not be in competition with others, even if we are running, swimming, or bowling with them. Although recreational sport offers opportunities for learning spiritual lessons and relationships, it, like the individual sports, comes with a scaled down laboratory as it demands less of the participant and is light on the communal element needed for growth.

The flip side of recreational sport is competitive sport. The realm of competition certainly comes with more inherent dangers and temptations (i.e., pride, selfishness, cheating, the tendency to see opponents as enemies, and more), but with them are provided more “real-life” situations, feelings, and challenges. If we can leverage the benefits of competition while addressing the temptations, then it will afford us a great ministry situation. Within the competitive sport designation, we have two types of competition. First is side-by-side sports where we compete against others but do so by playing on our own without our opponent(s) actively playing against us. Bowling, golf, skiing (slalom, downhill), and track and field events are among the side-by-side competitive sports. Of course, when you compete in these sports there is sometimes

gamesmanship involved with those closest to you,¹⁰⁹ but you execute your play on your own. You each have your own ball and your own lane, or you compete one at a time and then compare scores or times. Your focus is, or should be, all about what you can and need to do. A second level of competition is face-to-face competition. Here, you as an individual or team are playing against another person or team; but now there is only one ball, one puck, or one field that you each try to control. In face-to-face competitive sports, you now need to consider not only your own play but also that of your opponent. These face-to-face competitive sports bring large and powerful equipment into our spiritual formation laboratory. Your challenge is no longer merely personal; it has become interpersonal as you are now facing a team or individual who is trying to thwart your every effort to succeed. In turn, you must do your best to succeed while also doing your best to make sure the other person or team does not. This level of competition pushes us more than the side-by-side.

One last way that we distinguish between sports is the area of contact. For my purpose here, I consider contact to mean physical contact with an opponent. There are three categories of contact identified in the chart. The first is non-contact sports. In the side-by-side sports, players take turns or are separated by lanes. There is conscious effort not to impede one another or affect the performance of one's opponent. In some face-to-face sports, like the "net" sports listed in the chart, the players are separated even though they are physically playing against an opponent. The second category we simply name contact sport. In this group are games like basketball and soccer where there is allowed or incidental contact with opponents, but this contact is not central to the sport itself.

¹⁰⁹ My favorite line for my fellow golfer is, "Do you inhale or exhale on your backswing?"

Baseball and softball are about trying to get hits and advance runners around the bases to score runs. There are times when there is physical contact but those times are minimal and mostly incidental. The other sports listed have more contact, but the central theme of these games is to score more goals, or points than the other team. The physical contact is more frequent and sometimes more forceful in these sports which brings an extra level of temptation (to do harm) but also an extra level of opportunity (to play physically but with self-control, staying within the letter and spirit of the laws of the game). The last category I listed is full-contact sport. In these sports, according to my definition, the physical contact aspect is central to the sport. Boxing, martial arts, and wrestling are scored by physical blows, takedowns, or by incapacitating your opponent. I added football and rugby to this list as so much of those games involve physical confrontations. Every play in football has line of scrimmage physical struggle with many plays ending with a ball carrier being tackled. Rugby is similar but without the padding! While still trying to outscore the opponent, the physical nature of these games is why I included them in the full-contact category. There might be good argument to place them in the second category rather than here.

With the face-to-face contact and full contact sports, there is increasing temptation to physically intimidate/dominate or do harm to opponents. Hockey, soccer, and basketball have their “enforcers”. In recent years we have seen football bounty scandals (i.e., rewarding players for incapacitating opponents) appear from the NFL to youth levels. The nature of professional boxing, as opposed to Olympic boxing which is more controlled and much safer, mixed martial arts, ultimate fighting, and to some extent

wrestling, is to bring the opponent to a place where he cannot continue. The object is to pin, knock out, or incapacitate the opponent or cause him to quit, submit, or tap out.

With these descriptions of the various sports, the church leadership can consider which sport(s) they would feel comfortable pursuing and which ones they do not feel would be a good match for them or, for that matter, compatible with the biblical principles presented in Chapter 4. From a spiritual formation perspective, I believe that a competitive non-contact or contact face-to-face team sport would be the most advantageous environment for us to consider (see Table 3). Again, this is assuming that spiritual formation is the desired ministry. This assessment is strictly on the environment and does consider whether the church has adequate and qualified leadership or facilities.

What is Essential to Our Program?

A way of looking at and remembering the process of designing and implementing spiritual formation through sport in the church is to use the acronym PAL. PAL stands for Plan, Atmosphere, and Laboratory.

Plan

The plan for sports ministry in the church includes first and foremost God's plan for each person. As His created beings, we all have the same invitation to become part of God's family and to have an intimate, mature, and eternal relationship with Him. It is God's desire that all people be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4), to be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Rom 8:29), to have an attitude like Christ Jesus (Phil 2), and to attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13). As we read through the New Testament writings, we are challenged to become one with our brothers and sisters in Christ (Jn 17:23), to walk in the light (1 Jn 1:7), and to bear fruit

Table 3

Most Favorable Sports for Spiritual Formation

Type	Full Contact	Contact	Non-Contact
<u>Team Sports</u>			
Competitive Side-by-Side			Crew Swimming Relays Track and Field Relays
Competitive Face-to-Face	Football (tackle) Rugby	<i>Soccer</i> <i>Basketball</i> <i>Ice Hockey</i> <i>Field Hockey</i> <i>Lacrosse</i> <i>Water Polo</i>	<i>Football (touch)</i> <i>Ultimate Frisbee</i> <i>Baseball</i> <i>Softball</i> <i>Team Handball</i>
			Tennis (doubles) Table Tennis (dbls) <i>Volleyball</i> Badminton (dbls)
<u>Individual Sports</u>			
Recreational (non-competitive)	Martial Arts		Surfing Golf Frisbee Skiing Swimming Bowling Running Archery Canoeing/kayaking Weight Lifting
Competitive Side-by-Side			Track/Field Bowling Swimming Running Ski Racing Golf Canoeing/kayaking Weight Lifting
Competitive Face-to-Face	Boxing Wrestling Martial Arts		Racquetball Tennis Table Tennis Squash Badminton

(Jn 15:16). It was Paul's prayer and, I believe, God's plan that believers understand (experience) the entirety of God's love (Eph 3:16-19). The history of spiritual formation in the church is replete with an endless variety of methods, systems, techniques, and rules by which Christians have tried to draw closer to God and better reflect Him in their

spheres of influence, shining like stars in the universe (Phil 2:15). Times change, society changes, methods change, but God's plan for us, His created beings, remains the same.

He wants us to know Him in experience and reflect him with our lives.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, sport is a ministry rich environment, but ministry does not happen automatically. The relationships created through competitive team sports can lead to bad spiritual formation easier than to positive spiritual formation. Even the "character building" opportunities of sport are no guarantee that character will be developed. In today's age, sport is often a means to an end (i.e., notoriety, recognition, scholarships, etc.); and this breeds individualism and self-promotion rather than teamwork and self-sacrifice for the good of the team. Respect for the game, the officials, and opponents can be viewed as old-fashioned because winners bend the rules, "work" the officials, and view opponents as enemies, obstacles to be overcome by any means.

So what is the plan within the realm of sport ministry in the church for cooperating with the Holy Spirit so that God's plan is realized in the lives of those within our care? At the outset, we must realize that we as coaches and administrators cannot control all the variables related to spiritual formation any more than we can control all the elements of the sports we coach and administer. The key to planning our part in spiritual formation, however, is the same as the key to successful coaching: that we do control the things that we can control and do our best to inspire our players to give themselves fully to the task. As coaches, we cannot control how fast, strong, skilled, and tactically aware our opponents will be; but we do have a level of control, certainly not complete control, over how fast, strong, skilled, and tactically aware our players are.

As coaches/spiritual directors we are responsible for preparing those with whom we work for success on the field and in their spiritual lives. To be sure, the individual must buy in, commit, and participate for any success to happen. So our role as coach/spiritual director is to instruct, encourage, and give opportunity to every individual. Spiritual formation instruction consists of biblical instruction on who God is, who we are, how he wants to relate to us and have us relate to Him, and by what means we can do that. Encouragement toward spiritual formation would come from demonstration of personal spiritual formation by coaches/administrators/leaders and fostering relationships between them and players that would enhance the ability to provide opportunities for growth. The opportunities are the challenges we give to players on the team, small group, or individual settings.

In the same way that we tailor our tactics to meet the needs/personalities and skills of our players, we must also tailor a spiritual formation plan to the strengths/weaknesses of those in our care. We do not treat all the same but try to give general guidelines to all and specific instruction to each.

Atmosphere

For the atmosphere of our team to be conducive to spiritual formation, it must be clear to all involved that spiritual growth is a vitally important part of our program. Coaches, assistants, and players must all understand what spiritual formation is and grasp the fact that there is more going on in the program than merely the sport itself. That reminds us of the importance of the coach as the face of the program, the person who determines the day-to-day direction and activities of the team, who sets the tone for the team by his or her actions and method of communicating. Coaches, by sharing their

personal stories of spiritual struggles and progress, help open players up to their own need to grow and put them at ease that those who seemingly have it all together have stumbled, questioned, failed, and faced the same challenges as they may be currently facing.

A second aspect of creating the proper atmosphere is creating and facilitating small groups. Within a team setting, which may include anywhere from 10 (basketball) to 50 or more (football), care needs to be taken to make sure there is a forum in which players are able to engage staff and teammates on spiritual topics and openly share thoughts and questions with the confidence that they will be heard and respected, regardless of stage of spiritual maturity. When players have a chance to share their stories with others in this kind of atmosphere, it opens them up and allows God space in which to work. The players learn from one another's experiences and are challenged to think in new ways. This includes, perhaps especially so, any seekers that might be part of the team. If a team has more than eight to 10 players, then the opportunity for each player to express views or questions becomes limited. Small groups of six to no more than 10 players are the main place where information and experience are processed through discussion and prayer. The groups can be led by the coaching staff and/or some of the more mature players on the team. What we typically do with our Seahorse team is present a topic to the whole team, anything from our identity in Christ to competition or gamesmanship, and then divide into small groups where the leaders are provided with some questions to get things started and some direction for the discussion.

A couple of quotes from players after 3 months with our most recent team are the following: "This was one of the best communities I have had the pleasure to be a part of.

I will honestly miss each and every one of the players and staff I worked with.” “This has been an extremely unique community because everyone was so open and not afraid to share their deepest trials in life. This has been pretty much the start of my real serious relationship with Christ. Thanks Seahorses!!!” (*Player who came to faith in Christ during the season*)

The three sides of Willard’s “Golden Triangle” of spiritual transformation are (a) “the faithful acceptance of everyday problems,” (b) “interaction with God’s Spirit in and around us,” and (c) engagement in the spiritual disciplines.¹¹⁰ It is the small group setting, along with one-on-one opportunities, that provides us the chance to interact with two of the triangle’s sides. Although an individual must choose to open his or her life to the working of the Holy Spirit, we can encourage that by helping our players know who the Spirit is: the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:19) and the Spirit who lives in us (1 Cor 3:16). We can also help them understand what the Spirit wants to do in their lives: to sanctify them (1 Pet 1:2), lead them into all truth (Jn 16:13), empower them to be witnesses (Acts 1:8), and be their counselor and teacher (Jn 14:26). We as leaders, as mentioned earlier, can also give personal witness about our relationship with the Spirit and how he has worked in our lives.

In the small group setting (and to some extent the team setting), we can also take our players into the realm of spiritual disciplines. Within Foster’s list of disciplines,¹¹¹ we can help our players engage in study and prayer (Inward Disciplines), confession, worship, and celebration (Corporate Disciplines). As mentioned earlier, there is no biblical list of spiritual disciplines and no one-size-fits-all practice. Our task in spiritual

¹¹⁰ Willard, *The Great Omission*.

¹¹¹ Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*, v.

formation within the team setting is to expose all players to the practice of the disciplines and to help those who desire to go further with them determine what practices would be best for their particular needs.

Laboratory

A laboratory is a place of discovery, experimentation, observation, testing, proving, and manufacturing. The team sport environment, which includes practices, games, and all the social interaction that comes with them, holds many opportunities to teach/learn spiritual lessons. If we are diligent, then it can be a laboratory where women and men, girls and boys can discover what it means to have self-control, test their patience, or prove (demonstrate) faithfulness. It is a place where coaches can observe players and then manipulate or experiment with situations that will help those players grow in areas where they need to grow.

It is with the third side of Willard's triangle, the faithful acceptance of everyday problems, that the laboratory of sport can be particularly helpful. Everyday life has its share of setbacks, troubles, trials, obstacles, and temptations; but the norm is to try and avoid that which is unpleasant, evade confrontation, and escape conflict – all those things that James says will test us and our faith, develop perseverance, and cause us to seek God for wisdom to overcome trial and temptation. In the sport environment, especially in the face-to-face contact sports, the trials and tests are normal, concentrated, and magnified. We can even manufacture specific challenges for our players to manage and overcome. Beyond the mere presence of the problems, we are able get the most out of the experiences because we have the capacity for real-time analysis and commentary. As coaches, we routinely stop the action during training to evaluate progress, correct players,

or take time to explain concepts to the entire team. We give halftime or post-game evaluations of what the players have just experienced and what changes they need to make to be successful. We call them teachable moments; and whether we recognize them or produce them ourselves, we can communicate lessons to help our athletes play better.

What if we were also to use those moments to make spiritual applications? If, for example, we are studying James 1:2-3 in our small group times and emphasizing the fact that God wants us to approach setbacks, trials, and temptations as opportunities to prove and grow our faith, then can we not reinforce that concept in training or game situations? To help soccer players overcome the temptation to whine at an official that they believe has made a bad call or to become distracted by what they feel was an injustice done to them but missed by an official, I have often created a scrimmage where, as the ref (and not letting players know ahead of time what I am planning to do), I have made one bad call after another or have let obvious fouls go with no call at all. The results are always predictable – the frustration is immediate, the protests are quickly made vocal, and the effort exerted, along with the quality of play, deteriorates rapidly. In a secular, purely sporting situation, the teaching would be that we cannot let a bad official cause us to lose focus on the game because that will give our opponents an advantage over us. In our church sports program, though, where we teach that all of life is sacred and to be lived for Christ (Col 3:17), what a great opportunity to stop the scrimmage, question the players on what just happened, and remind them of James's teaching that these trials and that the unfairness of the situation are opportunities to test where we are in following Christ and to grow us in our faith. If we believe that we are to run (play) in such a way as to win the prize (1 Cor 9:24), then we can look at these injustices and rejoice, not in the trials or

injustices themselves, but in how our faith-walk can be matured if we are looking to Christ in the midst of them. Later, back in our small groups, we can further unpack James's teaching and help our players see that what they learned in the laboratory of sport, for many of them a major slice of the totality of their lives, has general application throughout the rest of their experience. Christ wants them to persevere in faith through struggles with school, temptations in relationships, setbacks at work, or challenges with finances.

Within the laboratory of training and games, we are also able to practice things like submission and service (Outward Disciplines). With a junior high team I recently began to coach, the tradition had always been that the eighth graders would demand "eighth grade privilege" by choosing uniforms first, having the seventh graders bring out and pick up the equipment, being first in line in favorite drills, and the like. We began the season talking about submission and Jesus's statement, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk 8:34); and we considered the life He lived. The message, as summarized by Foster was, "... Jesus calls us to self-denial without self-hatred. Self-denial is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way. Our happiness is not dependent upon getting what we want."¹¹² In addition to using our devotional time before practice to talk about submission, we bring it into the lab. There, no one picks their uniform numbers; rather, the coach distributes them randomly. The captains, usually eighth graders and better players, having been appointed by the coach and instructed as to how submission and leadership go together, are the first ones to practice. They get out the equipment at the

¹¹² Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 113.

beginning of practice, gather it up at the end of practice and (barring an orthodontic appointment or tutoring session) are the last ones to leave. It does not take long for the younger players to catch on and pitch in to help. Captains and, by extension, the older players are to lead by example rather than words; and their role is to help the individual players, usually the seventh graders, grow in their skills and confidence. I tell them they are like assistant coaches and as my job is to serve them, their job is to serve their teammates. The key, of course, is the spirit with which we submit to one another; and that has to be a regular reminder to all as we practice the discipline. Foster instructs, “The moment we make the Discipline our central focus, we turn it into law and lose the corresponding freedom.”¹¹³ With this type of coaching mindset, we see that the seriousness with which we participate in the non-serious arena of sport can lend itself to the forming of responses and habits that can help foster spiritual formation.

¹¹³ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 110.

CHAPTER 7

EQUIPPING OUR COACHES TO BE MINISTERS

When it comes to staffing our church sports ministry, coach's training will, in large measure, make or break our programs. We have spent many hours in prayer, discussion, planning, and preparation for the ministry to be successful; but when it comes to executing the plan, delivering the stated goals, and fulfilling the mission we have set, it is the coaches to whom we entrust our plans and players. That can be a scary thought if we have not prepared them. In Chapter 5, I half-jokingly remarked that a coach who simply told his players what they should do without actually training, practicing, and drilling and then sent them into the game expecting that they would be able to do it, would soon be a coach looking for work. By the same token if we as church staff and sports ministry directors simply tell our volunteer coaches what to do and then give them a team expecting that they will be able to do what we have told them, might we soon find our program defunct or us having to justify its existence?

A Win/Win Balanced Approach

Exchange theory¹¹⁴ tells us that coaches need their athletes and athletes need their coaches. I believe the church should be added into the mix of those having needs to be met. Each gives and each receives – when one or the other is not giving, there is tension. Our coaches must be aware of what the players and the church want from the program. It

¹¹⁴ Jones et al., *The Sociology of Sports Coaching*, 108ff.

may be helpful for the coach to dialogue with church leadership about what he or she is expecting from the experience, as many coaches may not be able to identify what it is.

Kids and, more importantly, parents have desired outcomes for sport participation. For some, the most important thing is to have fun and develop in the sport. Another segment of the population is looking for a more competitive environment. It is common to have parents trying to get their 8- and 9-year-olds into certain clubs because of the success rate they have of their players receiving college scholarships or attending NCAA Division 1 schools. To me, that is a sure way to ruin the sport experience for a child. Until a player is into his or her mid-teens the emphasis should be primarily on “play” as described in Chapter 4; and within that enjoyment mindset, as players get older, they should be developing skills and tactical understanding that will allow them to succeed at the next level should they decide to continue. Regardless of the motivations for players and parents, we must have a balance in our programs so that parents and kids get what they want (i.e., a quality sports experience in a positive atmosphere), and we get what we want (i.e., an opportunity to invest into the spiritual lives of the kids and, by extension, their families).

So, we realize that not every player who comes to our team is coming so that he or she will grow in Christ-likeness. As people get to know our program, it is our hope that more and more *would* come with that intention! Some will come for the level of expertise we have, the sport success that they have seen in others who have played with us, or simply word-of-mouth testimonies of those who had a positive experience with us. For our sports programs to be successful spiritually, we must also be successful athletically, meaning that we must help the players attain their athletic goals while

helping them see the importance of pursuing spiritual goals as well. This is similar to the role of Christian schools that attract both Christian and non-Christian students because of the academic excellence and environment they provide which then gives them the opportunity to spiritually impact the students. This not a “bait and switch” approach, as both the Christian School and our sports programs completely forthcoming about the purpose and content of our offerings.

The flip side of expectations and desired outcomes is from the coach’s perspective. Modern-day coaches, unlike the first century rabbis, are not always in the game to produce players that are like themselves. These days, players try to choose a coach based on what the coach will do for them, not necessarily because they want to become like the coach. Likewise, coaches do not necessarily feel compelled to live/coach in a way that they hope their players will emulate. Coaches have their own set of goals/needs. Coaching may be a career, and the coach is pressured to do that which will insure his or her continued employment. This may cause them to value winning, seen as the way to keep one’s position, in such a way that concern for what is best for the athletes becomes a secondary priority. Character development, while believed to be a benefit of participation in athletics, may be of no concern and may indeed be an enemy to a coach who feels he or she must win, whatever the cost. This is something we need to attend to when recruiting coaches for our church programs, whether developmental or club level. If players are brought into a community where, from the leader (coach), an atmosphere of self-concern prevails, then what will the player learn? What kind of person will this kind of environment produce? To be sure, there is spiritual formation occurring, but it is not positive. There are disciples being made, but disciples of what?

When someone volunteers to coach in our program, do we as church staff/organizers know or care about the coach's motivation for volunteering? We hope and pray that the thing they need (from the Exchange Theory point of view) is the opportunity to serve God by serving the players in our program. If coaches come to our program with a need other than to have an opportunity to minister, then it is our job to envision, inspire, and train.

If we are hiring someone, then we tend to ask more questions and have more expectations than we do when using volunteers. Most church sport and recreation pastors/directors will admit that when there is a great need to fill coaching spots, there are fewer questions asked. To be sure, there are expectations given; but sometimes they are given with little confidence that the coach will or is even capable of living up to them. We walk the fine line of wanting to train our coaches; but at the same time, we do not want to scare them away by putting them through a master's level course of study. We can find balance and encouragement for our coaches, in part, by knowing what motivates them to volunteer.

Motivation and Competence

The motivation for most of our volunteer coaches is that they have a child in the program or that they desire to "give back" and sincerely want to have a positive impact on the kids they coach. Of course, there are a few who serve because they think they will get something out of it – a sense of power and control over running a team, some experience in coaching to see if they might like to do it as more than a hobby, or perhaps to prove something to themselves or others about what they can do.

Many of our volunteer coaches, whatever their motivation, are not sure they have what it takes to be a coach. Whether it is leadership qualities or knowledge of the game, they feel woefully inadequate. They see coaches on TV or maybe at their local high school football or basketball games and may be confused about what is expected of them in our church program setting. As we help them overcome their insecurities, encourage them in their selfless service, or direct (or redirect) their self-serving intent, we make training an important thing in their eyes.

The coach who volunteers because she has a child in the program has a vested interest in wanting the very best program possible for her child. Because we want that as well, it is relatively easy to show that training is necessary to achieve that level of quality in sport and ministry that we desire for our kids. For the coach who simply wants to give something back, we must demonstrate our commitment to providing solid spiritual instruction and a quality sports experience and challenge him or her to that same level of commitment. By expecting quality, we make it logical that coach's training is part of the coaching commitment so that the kids get a quality experience and God is glorified.

Training Imperative

If we fail to train, then we jeopardize the effectiveness and possibly the longevity of our program. At a recent church-sports ministry conference I was part of a group discussion where a couple of guys were sharing about their developmental basketball league for kids. Because it had grown so much, they had the problem of finding enough coaches for the teams and wound up using almost anyone who volunteered. They began to see that some of the coaches would not do the prepared devotional lesson with the kids or they would just briefly mention something about the topic or read a few of the remarks

in the prepared lesson and go right back to practicing. What resulted was that the church staff started asking the volunteer coaches to simply “do an excellent job with the sport” and had the church staff doing the devotionals. This arrangement answered the immediate problem of making sure there were practice devotionals, and it was the easiest “fix” to the problem. But for me, their solution was problematic on two levels. First, they had all but abandoned the idea that they could train coaches to have a ministry impact on the lives of their players. Second, they were separating the sport and ministry. By saying outright that the ministry would be done by the staff apart from the sport experience, they were succumbing to a sacred/secular dualistic paradigm. They were also forfeiting the bulk of their time with the kids by acknowledging that the actual sport experience was not a place where they thought they could minister. Instead, they were entrusting the spiritual formation of the kids to a coach in whom they did not have confidence. There are, hopefully, many of their coaches who will be good Christian examples and who will act and react in ways that will model how a Christian should act/react in sport situations. Hopefully, they will respect the rules, the officials, the other coaches, and the players in a godly manner. By doing things in the way they have chosen, these organizers acknowledged that they do not believe all the coaches can provide this kind of example. Are they, in essence, giving the bulk of the time spent in the league to spiritual malformation, with the hope that the staff can undo any damage done during the few minutes of devotional time they have with the players?

To be sure, there is ministry happening in that program. But it is not happening in the way that the church had envisioned – where coaches would be mobilized and trained to minister to the kids. My encouragement to them was to not give up on the ideal of

having coaches minister to the kids through the sport experience as well as the structured “ministry” times. Even if it is only to train or apprentice a few coaches per season, they will, over time, be more likely to realize their goal. If they continue to rely on staff to “do the ministry”, then they are not creating a model that is reproducible outside of multi-staffed churches. Even in their own church, if staff members are not available, then the ministry will not run. Because the church’s ministry is to equip the saints, this type of staff-dependent ministry is shortsighted and, in light of the equipping mandate, less productive.

I understand the “if it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing poorly” mentality. God can bless our feeblest efforts at ministry; and often for us to begin a ministry, it means that we do not have everything thought out and nailed down. If we wait until we have everything perfect, then we’ll never do it; conversely, if we are going to get one thing right, then it should be insuring that our coaches are on board and thoroughly prepared and supervised. If this cannot be done at the outset of ministry, then it must certainly be a goal that we have with a plan to implement it at least incrementally as we grow the program.

Some have suggested that you do not always have to have a person with both ministry giftedness and extensive sports experience. You can pair individuals, with one serving as head coach and the other as assistant. The key is putting the right one as the head coach. If you have two people, one with sports coaching experience but is young in their faith with no ministry experience and another who is a proven minister with little coaching experience, then it is still best to have the more mature individual serve as head coach. This allows both coaches to be in a training environment where the assistant takes his or her spiritual cues from the head coach while the head coach takes his or her

coaching cues from the assistant. If it is done successfully, then you will possibly have two head coaches for the next season who can train two assistants. The danger is that when you use a coach who is just there to provide sport expertise, you run the risk of sending the signal that it is okay to be part of the team simply for the sport experience, and you cheapen or threaten the ministry. If this approach were taken, then there would have to be an understanding that the situation is not ideal, the ideal situation being a coach who embodies both the spiritual and sport aspects of the program. The coaches-in-training should each be committed to learning the other half of the ministry with the intent of doing it all on their own in the future. My own anecdotal experience with this is that the sport coach most often assumes the control and is seen as the leader, while the spiritual coach has a very minor role because their “ministry time” is usually a few minutes in the middle of practice sandwiched by a prayer at the beginning and/or end of practice.

With a seeming multitude of sports options out there for kids, the church may not be able to corner the market on sports to minister to all players in all sports at all levels. However, the church can find a place supplying quality sports instruction/coaching while providing a plan, atmosphere, and laboratory for spiritual formation (PAL). There are different niches for the church from which they must decide where they best fit, what they would like to pursue, and how God is directing them. Those choices will determine how the program is designed, the coaches needed, and how they must be trained (retrained).

I have suggested that a club sport team or multiple teams has great potential for spiritual formation. If we choose to minister at this level, then it necessitates coaches with

a higher level of sport-specific expertise. It also takes a higher commitment, a higher level of intentionality, and a greater level of spiritual maturity to minister to these players. These coaches may be volunteers but may also be hired coaches because of the level of expertise needed. History and common practice show that, generally, the higher the level of sport – the lower the level of spirituality. I believe this happens because of the increased emphasis put on competition and the perceived need to win. In that atmosphere, the temptations of the dark side of competition are more pronounced. The higher level of competition comes with higher expectations in the world's view. At a more competitive level, parents expect their children to be more highly developed to the point where they are being considered by college coaches as potential scholarship athletes. This is a selling point to parents by clubs, even to the parents of 9- and 10-year-olds. The clubs are also expected to win, since winning brings attention to the players. Winning attracts the better players which, in turn, makes winning easier, which then makes the club look better – and on goes the cycle (or the reverse of it). The success of the club is a goal of the coaches, many of whom are professional in the sense that they earn a living or partial living from coaching. Success, as measured in wins, league championships, tournament appearances/victories, and number of players receiving college scholarships, insures that the coach maintain his or her position or advances within the club or to the “next level”, be it a college or professional coaching position. When winning/success becomes the motivating factor in coaching or playing, the spiritual temperature of the environment cools considerably. What benefit is it for a coach with a success = winning mindset to insist that his players not engage in gamesmanship, trash talk, or “working a referee” to get calls going your way; deliberately trying to hurt or “take out” opponents; or otherwise

trying to break as many rules as possible without getting caught to gain an edge and win? When winning becomes the goal, there is no incentive for coaches or players to submit themselves to the teachings of Jesus and biblical principles regarding a life lived for Christ. There are even those within the Christian sports culture who fall into this same trap by asserting that God receives greater glory from our play when we win. Although the stated goal is to bring God glory, this is done through winning so that winning becomes paramount; and we can easily slide into an “end justifies the means” mentality which exactly reflects much of the secular sports worldview. Unless the initial stated goal of the club/team is to know and follow Christ through participation in the club/team, there will be tremendous pressure to conform to the patterns of this world.

Training Objectives

Part of knowing how we need to train our coaches is asking a question. “What do we want our players to know and how do we want our players to act (or be) after having been part of our program?”

What Do We Want Our Players to Be?

- We want them to be followers of Christ at whatever level their age will accommodate, to see themselves ultimately as ministers, and to enjoy the game in a manner that reflects biblical standards of conduct.
- We want them to be respectful of the game, coaches, referees, teammates, opponents, and fans.
- We want them to be open and attentive to the coach’s instruction – both spiritual and sport.

What Do We Want Our Players to Know?

- We want them to know how to connect with God and have opportunities to do so. These include spiritual disciplines such as prayer, study, confession, worship, celebration, submission, and service.
- We want them to feel/know that they are loved, valued, and important to us and to God.
- We want them to know the basic (or advanced for older players) skills and tactics of the sport so they can enjoy the game.
- We want them to know how to connect their faith to the game so the sport experience is one that is enjoyable to them and gives God glory at the same time.

Knowing what we want our players to know and experience helps us determine what our coaches ideally need to be and know which then informs how we establish a training regime.

What Do We Want Our Coaches to “Be”?

- We want them to be committed followers of Jesus Christ. By this we mean more than that they say they are Christian, more than that they attend “such and such” church. We would like each coach to be active in worshipping with a body of believers, growing in his or her walk, and a great role model for the players and other coaches.
- We want them to have a heart and desire to coach as a way of cooperating with the Holy Spirit and ministering to children. We want them to be child-focused. The sport competencies that we want them to know need to be applied within the context that we are here to form players spiritually (eternal), in character

(lifetime), and athletically (shorter season of life). All three are important and worthy of our best efforts but prioritized in that order.

- We want them to join our program with an openness to grow in all stated areas. We want them to be culture-keepers, people who have bought into the mission and vision of what we are trying to accomplish and who will represent and promote that in our program, in our church, and in our community.

What Do We Want Our Coaches to Know?

- We want them to understand the coach's unique ability/responsibility to be a positive spiritual impact on players and others surrounding the team.
- We want them to understand the spiritual characteristics of the age group that they will coach. What do kids this age comprehend? How do they process concepts about God?
- We want them to understand the physical/mental characteristics of their players, what they are capable of learning (individual skills, team skills, tactics, etc.), and how they learn best.
- We want them to understand the basics skills and rules of the sport they will coach (for our youngest teams) and later, the advanced and more intricate aspects of the game (for our older players). Also, they will need to know how to run age-appropriate practices for their teams. For example for the youngest (5-7 year olds) it should all be about fun, movement, and games with a kind of stealth skill instruction in the background.
- We want them to know how to incorporate biblical teaching and spiritual disciplines into practice and game settings besides doing so in a devotional talk or

study. It is in the laboratory setting of the activity itself that the truths we want to teach are best demonstrated, discovered, and put into practice.

- We want them to understand our church's policies and procedures including (but not limited to) things like child protection, safety, and logistical responsibilities.

This training outline is fitted to the various types of programs and age levels we have.

The training needed for a 3-hour sports clinic is not the same as what is needed for a weeklong camp. In turn, the training needed for a club coach is greater than that needed for the camp coach.

The immediate response of many church sports organizers to these principles might be, "I'm not sure we have any of those coaches in our church, let alone the 20 we need to fill our teams!" That may be somewhat true of most churches but that does not mean that our sports program is doomed. We occasionally find people who are "all of the above", but the reality is that within our churches we have a lot of people who have a heart for ministry, or a knowledge and love of a particular sport, or who are committed followers of Christ, or who are open to whatever God wants and whatever anyone will teach them. The good news is that they are all prime candidates for our sports ministries.

We could set as a goal not to begin our ministry until we have a full compliment of coaches that we are confident meet the criteria just enumerated. This is possible and has been done. There is also the reality that many reading this will be looking at their existing sports ministry that is populated by coaches who do not totally reflect or embrace all that was enumerated. It is a legitimate question for them to ask themselves, "Is our sports program, as it is currently run with the level of coaching we currently have, worth running?" Or there may be some desiring to begin sports ministry, but the idea of

recruiting and training all these coaches before even offering the program seems a pretty daunting task. As stated earlier, it may not be possible to begin a ministry program with fully trained and experienced coaches, but the commitment to such training must be paramount if we desire an ongoing and effective ministry.

If we are in the situation of needing to make progress in training for an ongoing program, then the question becomes, “How can we incorporate training for existing and future coaches?” The answer will be unique for each church, their resources, and desires. Some of the “training” will consist of helping coaches connect with small groups in the church (men’s, women’s, couples, or perhaps a new coaches group) where they can grow in their faith. It might mean meeting with each coach to determine where he or she is spiritually, walking him or her through what it means to be a Christian or a Christian athlete/coach, and helping him or her understand the dynamics of ministry. It may be pre-season training that takes the traditional 2-hour training and expands it to a full Saturday or perhaps a couple of Saturdays. It may be having 15 to 30 minute sessions with coaches before their weekly practices or weekly/monthly coaches’ clinics while in season. For some, it might include encouragement or help to get to outside coaches’ clinics or even coaching license courses offered by the national bodies of individual sports. This is especially important for the coaches of a club program where they will be with the kids for perhaps hundreds of hours and where there are greater expectations (both sport and spiritual) of the coach and program. Another avenue of training is pairing experienced coaches with a new coach serving as an assistant coach for a season before having his or her own team. We have to continually assess our program and the current situation. If we have one spiritually mature and knowledgeable coach, then is it better for us to have her

coach a team, coach a team with an assistant she is training, or perhaps to not coach a team at all but to be coaching several other coaches as they work with their teams? There is no one best way to do this, but it must be done.

If our coaches are not everything we want them to be or do not know everything we want them to know, then it is our task to help them so that they can teach, disciple, and mentor the players. Again, the mandate for the church is to equip believers for works of service. If we currently have coaches in whom we have confidence or are helping produce those kinds of coaches, then we will have more equippers to help with other/future coaches (2 Tim 2:2). In this pursuit of trained and effective coaches, there is no need for us to create entire training programs. There are plenty of resources that churches could use as part of their training program for coaches. These include sport-specific or age-specific guides on how to coach. From the ministry side, they include training from youth ministries on how to minister to children and how that ministry would look for specific ages.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is easy to Monday-morning-quarterback the church's performance in regard to spiritual formation. There is little disagreement that we have not done a great job with our signature task of making disciples. It does not matter whether we attribute that to evangelicalism's narrow focus on conversion, a fear of frightening people away from the church, or something else. For us, the questions are, "Is the criticism justified?" and "If so, what are we going to do about it?" Our consideration of such criticism must be prayerful, and our response Spirit-led. What I have attempted to put on paper here is the result of many years of activity, often uninformed trial and error, and an increasing understanding of spiritual formation and how it can be applied in the place (i.e., the sport environment) where I believe God has put me. I look at these thoughts as the opening few minutes of a soccer match where a team comes out with a flourish to get themselves into the game and to see if maybe they can unsettle their opponent and maybe grab an early goal. After 10 minutes or so, they settle into "their game" and become more methodical in their approach. Hopefully, I am providing the early flourish to get the game going and to help activate the sports-minded church to engage in more thought and more trial and error efforts at providing places, paths, and professors of spiritual formation.

When looking at spiritual formation, we must keep in focus that our objective is not to become better people, less angry, more productive, or even nicer. The goal is that

we know and experience Jesus Christ more fully. All the other things might happen as we do that, but they are neither spiritual formation nor the reason we pursue spiritual formation. I read a thought in Oswald Chambers recently on how abandonment for many Christians is a sanctified business transaction. “Abandonment is not *for* anything at all. We have got so commercialized that we only go to God for something from Him, and not for Himself. It is like saying, ‘No, Lord, I don’t want Thee, I want myself; but I want myself clean and filled with the Holy Ghost; I want to be put in Thy showroom and be able to say – This is what God has done for me.’ If we only give up something to God because we want more back, then there is nothing of the Holy Spirit in our abandonment; it is miserable commercial self-interest.”¹¹⁵ As we undertake the task of helping people grow in their faith to become more like Jesus, we must keep this sentiment at the forefront of our planning and implementation in whatever situation or setting we are working.

Being that there is no prescribed biblical norm for spiritual formation, no authorized setting or fixed steps, it creates endless possibilities to encourage and equip people to flourish spiritually. As all of life is to be lived in and for God, spiritual formation is possible in all settings and situations. I have considered one such setting, recommending that competitive team sports be utilized by the church for spiritual formation. I believe that the social structure of the team and the dynamic of the coach/player relationship, mixed with the ever-present “everyday problems” for the player to “faithfully accept”¹¹⁶ creates a ministry-rich environment for the coach or

¹¹⁵ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1935), 72.

¹¹⁶ the reference here is to Willard’s Golden Triangle which has, as one of its sides, the faithful acceptance of everyday problems. Willard, *The Great Omission*.

church that is prepared to take advantage of it. The intentionality of the church or coach is vital, as sport offers an equal amount of opportunity for both spiritual formation and spiritual deformation/malformation.

The common denominator of a successful program is what I identified as PAL. First, recognizing God's desires for his children and determining what and how we should teach our players, we prepare a plan to spiritually impact those with whom we work. Second, as we communicate that plan to players, share our own spiritual journey, and provide group opportunities to share and discuss spiritual truths, we are creating an atmosphere where growth will thrive. Lastly, as we employ the sport experience as a laboratory to discover and practice spiritual disciplines, we will be making possible a fuller understanding than what can be communicated through traditional teaching/reading based discipleship methods. I will go as far as to say that the true test of whether the environment of sport will be a suitable place for spiritual formation is our ability to use the sport experience, not just the words or word pictures of sport, in helping people toward Christ-likeness.

As Christians, we live in a particular culture. As American Christians we live in a society in which sport is enormously popular whether it's a 3 year old playing YMCA soccer or a couch potato obsessing over a fantasy football team. Like any other aspect of the world in which we live (e.g., business, art, technology, or education), the church must critically evaluate sport to guide its actions.

In *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr wrestled with the Christian's relationship to culture. He offered a continuum from complete separation from culture to total transformation of culture. Although many see the book as outdated, the premise is

still a great place to evaluate where we, as Christians, are in relation to our surrounding culture. The position I found most applicable for this topic was the Christ and Culture in Paradox.¹¹⁷ Here, the realization is that we live in both the kingdom of heaven and the earthly kingdom. We are at the same time subjected to two sets of principles, values and demands. Scripture makes it clear that we must dwell in both simultaneously, but our allegiance cannot be divided. The sporting world, though fallen, is not the moral antithesis of Christianity. There is much there for which we can applaud and about which we can feel good as we participate. We must be cautious, though, not to synthesize the two, as Muscular Christianity did, and understand the continuous tension as we subject ourselves at the same time to the authority of Christ and of the sporting culture. Diligence is needed if we are to correctly perceive where the authority of the sporting culture is antithetical to Christ's teaching. Courage is then needed to act in accordance with our commitment to follow Christ; indeed, this is what spiritual formation is. Although the Christian will be supportive of and respectful to temporal authority, they will, when push comes to shove, side with God when a choice must be made. To many coaches and administrators in the sporting culture, these Christians will be seen as a threat, as people who are not "totally committed" to the program. This will cause them to be subjected to pressure to conform in areas where the paradox is present and may cause them to be excluded from participation altogether. That is the reality with which the Christian athlete (artist, entrepreneur, educator, etc.) must live to compete.

In all of our, the church's, attempts to engage sport, I believe we need to emphasize the play aspect of sport. Whether it is non-competitive, side-by-side, or face-

¹¹⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1951), 149-185.

to-face competition, the focus on the enjoyment of participation should be front and center. This will go far to curbing the abuses of sport often seen. Reminding players and demonstrating as coaches and administrators a hierarchy of good, we must prioritize correctly. People are more important than points, our temples are more valuable than trophies, and God's glory, not ours, should be primary in how we approach the games.

Running a sport club as part of the church's ministry will likely limit the number of individuals to whom can be ministered, but it can greatly increase the quantity and quality of ministry to that group. Jesus preached and taught large numbers of people on occasion and for short periods of time, but he only took 12 into the intimacy of his school of spiritual formation. With the long-term big picture in mind, less became more. Jesus did not train the masses; he trained a relatively small group of leaders. The leaders he trained, to use a sports analogy, were not team owners or general managers; they were coaches. He took them on as players and he did train them to play; but in that context, he was also teaching them to coach. As coaches, they would be the ones with the next group of players/coaches day in and day out, teaching, modeling, encouraging, and correcting. It was the power of the Holy Spirit working in, through, and despite this small group of coaches that turned the world upside down. They were not trained overnight, and the world was not turned upside down overnight. We need not fear that our efforts to disciple through sport are too small-scale to matter or that we need to appeal to the entire church or all youth.¹¹⁸

Game on!

¹¹⁸ The applications I have made in this treatment of spiritual formation may be applicable to other areas of interest such as art, literature, music, drama and the like. Sport is not the only environment that can aid spiritual formation. Hopefully as others see what God can do through sport, they will begin similar ministry within other areas.

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APPENDIX

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IN THE SPIRIT OF THE PLAYER

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IN THE SPIRIT OF THE PLAYER

(Soccer Edition)

This is an outline of an eight-week program for spiritual formation through the team environment of sport. It is meant for coaches, who are the primary minister in the team setting. “Programs” have no power in and of themselves; they are simply conduits through which the real power flows. If programs are administered without relying on the Holy Spirit to do the work of transformation that only he can do, our programs will not be fruitful. They may help achieve some level of behavior modification but will not ultimately transform anyone. Programs that relate biblical truths and principles, when administered by people who have experienced transformation themselves and know how the Spirit can effectively change lives, can be powerful times of self-reflection, seeking God and spiritual growth.

The methodology of this particular nine-week practicum consists of: (1) teaching times where the coach will give definitions, study of biblical illustrations/instruction, sport illustrations, and practical goals to displaying the fruit during training and games; (2) on-the-field training through integration with the sport experience; and (3) small group discussion of both the intellectual and experiential aspects of what was learned in 1 & 2. The small group time always incorporates prayer for one another

WEEK ONE - INTRODUCTION

Done at the beginning of the season or the beginning of this particular study (if it falls in the middle of a season). An overview of Galatians, an explanation of spiritual fruit and how it is relevant to players and coaches as individuals and its importance to the team experience as a whole and, by extension, to our lives outside of sport. This series covers seven of the nine aspects of spiritual fruit. The other two could be easily added.

WEEK TWO - LOVE

Definition: the example of agape love; selfless, generous, unconditional, the very nature of God himself. Love is thought by many to be THE fruit of the Spirit with the rest of the list being various ways that love is expressed or manifested. Sacrifice and self-denial are key thoughts.

Biblical examples/instruction:

- 1 Cor 13 – this passage lends credence to the thought that love is the fruit of the Spirit.
- The Great Commandment: Mt 22:34-40.
- Jn 15:13, no greater love...
- Jn 13:1 (the beginning of the crucifixion/resurrection narrative – Jesus shows the full extent of his love by giving them the example of serving one another and then going to the cross for all men and women, none of who deserved such sacrifice).

How/where this will be lived out in the sport experience:

- Sacrificing oneself for teammates or the team as a whole in the same way we would want others to sacrifice themselves for us.
- Realizing the importance of pushing each other at practice whether or not we actually get to participate in the games.
- Playing out of our preferred position because that is what is needed to benefit the team.
- Taking on a leadership role (which takes more effort).
- Making runs to create space for others or occupy defenders.
- Being the first to get into the wall on a free kick.

How this can be taught, drilled, and reinforced in training/games:

- Acknowledge players covering for a teammate who is out of position or who has been beaten (reinforce with “there’s the love” or question if it’s not being done with (“where’s the love”))
- Asking more experienced players to spend time with a teammate practicing a skill that they are weak in.
- Talking with players about giving up the ball to someone in better position to score or giving up the opportunity to score even if I am in a better position to allow someone much better at scoring to take the responsibility.

Discussion questions:

- What is it about the sport environment that makes it difficult to sacrifice ourselves?
- Have you seen sacrifice within the team this week?
- Has someone sacrificed for you?

WEEK THREE - JOY

Definition: gladness of heart based on the knowledge and experience of God as present in our lives. It is possible in the midst of trials, temptations and the worst of temporal circumstances.

Biblical examples/instruction:

- Jn 17:13-18 – Jesus’s joy was in the relationship with God the Father and that is what he prays for his disciples.
- Phil 4 Paul (a man who suffered unbelievably) was full of joy (gratefulness for all God had done for him and for His presence with him in the midst of those difficulties), his joy allowed him to be content in any situation.
- Lk 10:17-20 – goods things will happen but our joy is not to be in them but in the spiritual reality of our relationship with God.

How/where this will be lived out in the sport experience:

- Thankfulness that God has made it possible for us to play the game when so many cannot.
- Appreciation of being part of a team and the community it provides.
- Realization of his presence with us as we compete and train (in all and every situation).

How this can be taught, drilled, and reinforced in training/games:

- Reminders at the beginning or end of training sessions or games that we are privileged to play the game but more than that because God has loved us and brought us into his family.
- Encouragement to balance the effort we put into getting better and trying to be a starter or winning games with the ability to be content with what we have and the level we are at (tough balance but necessary to try).
- Praise instances where you see players displaying joy.
- Encourage players who are down to see some positive in the situation, affirm them that God sees, knows and affirms them and that the team does as well.

Discussion questions:

- What causes you to feel joyful?
- How do you express your joy?
- What kinds of things have you found steal your joy?

- On a scale of 1-5 where are you in relation to being joyful in your participation on this team?

WEEK FOUR - PEACE

Definition: peace with God (reconciliation), peace with others (harmony and mutual consideration), peace of God (assurance that God gives that he is with us and for in whatever situation we may find ourselves)

Biblical examples/instruction:

- 1 Pet 3:10-11 - we must seek and pursue it and work for it (Rom 14:19).
- Jesus facing the cross – he did not necessarily want to go there but trusted in his Father and went forward.
- Paul's confidence in God's care for him regardless of whether he lives or dies.

How/where this will be lived out in the sport experience:

- Mostly focused here on peace with others and peace of God.
- Trying our best (as far as it depends on us) to live at peace with everyone (teammates and opponents alike).
- Working within the team to make it a peaceful place.

How this can be taught, drilled, and reinforced in training/games:

- Encouraging players to be open with feelings, heading off conflicts by communicating.
- Calling out each other in love as needed.
- Praise instances when players display peace in the midst of stress, or when there is a visible unity among the team.
- Help those struggling with peace in stressful situations to focus on God's help (not necessarily to improve or perform – but to be able to remain calm while giving one's best).

Discussion questions:

- Col 1:15-23 How does Paul, in verse 21, describe the former status of the Christians he is now writing to? How did that situation change? Are there times when you feel you are not at peace with God?
- Eph 5:1-21 Describe what these verses recommend we do to have peace with those closest to us?
- Rom 8:28-39 What does this passage have to say to those who would describe 'peace' as the perfect, pain-free life? What are some of the phrases in this passage that describe where the peace comes from in the midst of real life?
- Where do you think you are at as far as being (1) at peace with God, (2) at peace with others, (3) experiencing the peace of God in your life?

WEEK FIVE - PATIENCE

Definitions: from Webster we learn that patience is more than simply being able to wait for something. It carries some of the following nuances: bearing pains or trials calmly or without complaint, manifesting forbearance under provocation or strain, not being impetuous, steadfast despite opposition, difficulty or adversity.

Biblical examples/instruction:

- Job 13:15 though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.
- Jesus – instances where he held back because it was not the right time, the fact that he waited until he was 30 to begin his ministry, that he put up with the unbelief and selfishness of his disciples.
- Joseph – his perseverance during the time he was betrayed by his brothers and later wrongly imprisoned.

How/where this will be lived out in the sport experience:

- Being able to be gracious when playing with others who may not be at the same level. Faithfully enduring a losing streak, a bad call, an injury, time on the bench etc.

How this can be taught, drilled, and reinforced in training/games:

- Match up better players with weaker players for some drills so that the weaker can show patience in dealing with a stronger/better opponent and that the better player can learn to bear with (and hopefully help) the weaker player.
- Run scrimmage where coach makes a series of bad calls and then deals with the whining, frustration and lack of effort that will result.
- Make lopsided teams or uneven numbers to help players learn patience and how to give full effort even against overwhelming odds.
- Praise positive instances of patience and help others to see that patience is what God wants for us and will help us with.
- Being patient will help us succeed in other things.

Discussion questions:

- How has God been patient with you? (1 Peter 3:8-9, 15 and 1 Peter 1:3-11).
- What is something you are waiting on God for right now?
- Highlight David's patience with God while waiting to become king (1 & 2 Samuel).
- Can you think of someone whose patience you have admired and been challenged by?
- How is patience evidenced in relationships according to these verses? (Pro 19:11 & Mt 18:21-22) How can these principles be helpful in our team?
- On the field how do you think you are doing in regards to patience?
- In what aspect of the game is hardest for you to display patience?

WEEK SIX - KINDNESS

Definition: the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate. It can be prompted by compassion, love, obedience etc. Kindness is action (you cannot be kind simply in your heart – it must translate into action). It is undeserved – we do not do it because someone earned it. It does not look for anything in return – if we are looking for payback what we did was not kindness. It always costs you something – time, effort, money etc. It is good for us – that is not the motivation for kindness but it is one of the results.

Biblical examples/instruction:

- David showing kindness to Jonathan's son Mephibosheth 2 Sam 9:1-13.
- Ephesians 2:7 God's grace displayed in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. Titus 3:3-7 we did not deserve it but kindness came through Jesus and made us heirs of eternal life.

How/where this will be lived out in the sport experience:

- Complimenting teammates (and even opponents).
- Not trash talking and not responding to trash talk.
- Picking up an opponent who's been knocked down.
- Playing the ball out of bounds when an opponent is injured.

How this can be taught, drilled, and reinforced in training/games:

- Recognizing and praising kindness displayed, calling out behavior that is blatantly unkind.

Discussion questions/starters:

- "I expect to pass through life but once. If, therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, for I shall not pass this way again." William Penn (Quaker and founder of the state of Pennsylvania)
- We have very few opportunities to do "great" acts of kindness for others, but scarcely an hour passes that fails to present us a chance to perform some minor and unnoticed word or act of kindness.
- Do you think kindness has any part in the game of soccer? Why or why not? If so, how and where?

WEEK SEVEN - FAITHFULNESS

Definition: doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason.

Biblical examples/instruction:

- It is commitment over time (Mt 25:1-13).
- It is diligence with the task at hand (Mt 25:14-30) – those chosen to receive the 'talents,' all received something at the start that was not their own, they all had the same task, they all had the same opportunities, they were all judged by the

same standard. They differed in their abilities, what they were given to start with. The last servant was not punished for stealing, he was not punished for wasting it, and he was not punished for not having the same abilities as the others but for neglecting to do anything with what he was given.

- Faithfulness is not assessed on what we do not have but on what we do with what we have.
- It is sincerity in service (Mt 25:31-46).

How/where this will be lived out in the sport experience:

- Making the most of what we have been given without comparing ourselves to others (being arrogant or envious).
- Being diligent in the little things.
- Giving the best in training, taking everything seriously.

How this can be taught, drilled, and reinforced in training/games:

- Letting players know what is expected of them – that it may not be what is expected of other players with greater/lesser/different gifts.
- Praising players that are exhibiting faithfulness, challenging players that do not seem to be giving the effort necessary to be their best. (reinforcing these behaviors with “there’s the faithfulness” or “where’s the faithfulness”)
- Comparing physical gifting (height, strength, speed) to help the players know that we are not all equally gifted but that God (and coach) expect the same effort and focus of each one.

Discussion questions:

- What is something other than soccer that you have been committed to for a long period of time? What has been the most rewarding part of that? The most difficult?
- What are a couple of the ‘gifts’ you have received (talents, interests, spiritual gifts etc)?
- What aspect of your game do think could benefit from a little more faithfulness on your part? Don’t hesitate to ask for someone’s help to keep you accountable.

WEEK EIGHT - SELF-CONTROL

Definition: put positively, it is the ability to focus our thoughts, words and actions in order to follow and accomplish God’s will, it implies having a mastery over our desires and impulses in all areas.

Biblical examples/instruction:

- Some positive descriptions of self-control; 1 Cor 9:24-27, 2 Tim 1:6-7 (emphasize the Spirit’s help in self-control), also, contrast Pro 16:32 (positive), with Pro 25:28 (negative).
- Rom 12:1-2 talks about giving ourselves fully (body and mind) with the result being that we will know and do God’s will.

- David displayed self-control when he refused repeatedly to kill Saul even when he had the opportunity and he was being pressured by his followers to do so. He displayed a lack of self-control in his taking of Bathsheba and arranging the killing of her husband.

How/where this will be lived out in the sport experience:

- Exercising restraint in our defensive third in order not to give up set play scoring possibilities or penalty kicks.
- Having the discipline to hold a run until it is needed, having the discipline to make runs whether or not you think you will get the ball.
- Talking positively to teammates, not responding to opponents' trash talk or referees' mistakes.
- Eating the right things, getting the sleep and particular exercise we need.

How this can be taught, drilled, and reinforced in training/games:

- Timing runs into the box for crosses.
- Scrimmages where we want to work one side of the field primarily.
- Not showing for a ball until the pass is on.
- Wide backs opening up when the central defender or keeper has the ball (whether you will get it or not).

Discussion questions:

- What area do you struggle to have self-control in on the field?
- Is there an off-the-field area of your life that you would like to have more self-control over?
- Do you have spiritual goals to guide your actions/activities in the same way your sporting goals direct you to do or not do certain things?