

People in our country and around the world “know” that sports is a “big deal.” It is a big deal because people pay lots of attention to sports, and it is a big deal because sports generates a whole host of cultural forces of upheaval and cohesion. You may have heard some of the strange stories of people being killed in international soccer matches because of a referee’s bad ruling. You’re probably aware of how important the Olympic Games have been for the countries who compete in them, and for those who host them. In fact, the revenue of most individual professional sports around the world is in the hundreds of millions of dollars; revenue reflected in the salaries garnered by the best players—multi-year contracts of up to nine figures. From the enjoyment of fans, the performance of players, the opportunities of owners, to the revenue of cities, the politics of states, and the glory of nations—the “big deal” that is sports presents a powerful agency of building culture in all of its material and ideological facets. Sports is a *culture-building endeavor*.

It is the culture-building nature of sports that I wish to focus on tonight. We would all have it as a goal, not only to conceive a Scripturally sound vision for what is the Trinitas Christian School athlete, but also to achieve that vision for ourselves and for the future generations of our school. The reality is that no vision of sports culture starts from a blank slate, but the people must seek their part in whatever great commission they receive from their master. For Greeks, the mastery of the body and mind. For Romans, the conquest of human disorder. For Christians, building the house of God. And for Christians, in Christ we are given a new nature, a new mind, and a new vision with new directives for spreading God’s blessings as far as the curse is found. But regeneration does not remove entirely the remains of the old nature, with its lingering beliefs, values, and

habits. Nor does regeneration remove the corruption from the world and culture around us. We remain a church militant in the midst of Greeks and Romans and others, and we are not yet the church triumphant. The Scriptural vision of sports culture must find its nature and its directives in Scripture, but we also must combat the remaining corruption of the sports culture we are replacing—in ourselves first and foremost, and in the world in which we live, too. In other words, we have to discipline ourselves to use sports in a manner pleasing to God if we would disciple the nations to do so.

It may come as a shock when we compare the proportion between our attention to and valuation of sports and the prominence of sports in the Bible. In fact, I've found only three passages of Scripture that speak directly of sports:

1. Philippians 3:14 – Paul's pressing toward the goal (as athletes do) for the prize of Christlikeness
2. 2 Timothy 2:5 – Paul's urging Timothy to compete (as an athlete) for a crown in his ministry
3. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 – Paul's command to the Corinthians to run the race (as athletes do) to win the imperishable crown by disciplining themselves so as not to bring shame upon the gospel.

In each of these passages sports is used metaphorically, that is, as a way of speaking about the nature of disciplined striving. Other metaphors would have sufficed, and in fact did suffice, for in 2 Timothy Paul also uses military and agrarian metaphors to carry the point.

By learning that the Bible's only use of sports is as a helpful, but non-essential analogy for spiritual discipline, we also learn something far more important and interesting. Sports aren't essential to the building of Godly culture. Let me say that again.

Sports aren't essential to the building of Godly culture. This is true no matter how much we like to defend the values and virtues one can learn from participating in sports. For the enculturation of the same values and virtues, if they are indeed Godly, are provided for without recourse to sports—and we know this *by the Bible's own testimony*. For the Bible is a book about building God's house, and its testimony about sports looks more like a swatch for comparing the colors of spiritual discipline than the scaffolding holding up the Church until Christ's return.

“But, Mr. Butcher, you said sports are culture building.” So I did. “Then, if the Bible's place for sports doesn't have much to do with building God's house, then what does sports have to do with Godly culture?” The answer is, and I mean this quite soberly, as much as our liberty determines. And this is why what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians has everything to do with sports, especially sports in our present culture, even though sports is just a metaphor in the passage. The Corinthian passage is about liberty and idolatry; about the freedom and bondage of the conscience; about self-service and self-sacrifice. Because sports is a major cultural influence in our time and place, we must try to understand what sort of culture-building sports is accomplishing, and what role and what prominence sports ought to play in the formation of Christian culture. For while Christian culture is about building God's house, that building effort necessarily transforms the culture of the world around us as the house grows in its size and prominence.

Certainly we are at liberty to participate in and enjoy sports as a bodily pleasure and a gift from God. Sports is a positive good. Yet if the culture we are creating through

our use of sports is proclaiming a false gospel of self-promotion, the unbiblical exclusion of members in our community, an ungodly love of material gain, or idolatrous worship to the hindrance or abandonment of godly worship—in other words, if our use of sports looks no different from the world—then we ought to obey Paul’s command to the Corinthians and radically redefine our understanding of and participation in these liberties. “All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. (1 Corinthians 10:23-24) Would we be willing to set aside our sports, in order to remove all stumbling blocks from the advancement of the gospel amongst ourselves as well as the world?

We, who recognize that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit and that our persons are made in the image of God, have a much greater right to the enjoyment of and participation in the physical activities of sports. We’re free; freer than any unbelievers, to enjoy the gifts of God. Yet sports are, perhaps, the dominant idol of our current culture, which means our own consciences are at risk of being tempted to idolatry—sports lovers are all at risk of being weaker brothers here and stumbling into sin. To what extent does our own engagement with sports as Christians promote the well being of others in our churches and in our communities? Does our participation in sports lead us into habits of selflessness and brotherly affection for *all* the members of our community (not limited to those “on the team”)? Does our use of sports promote unity within the liturgical elements of the Christian life—the speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; the caring for orphans, widows, and strangers; the teaching, reproof, correction, and

training in righteousness through the Word of God? Does our participation in sports expand our repertoire of skills for worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ above all else? Each of these questions deserves more than a moment's meditation, and I urge you all to come back to them later. For now, I can only give you a snapshot of what we want to avoid, and what we want to pursue.

In his book *Family-Driven Faith*, Vodie Baucham tells the story of a father who came to him in desperation over the fact that his son, who had once been the model Christian kid growing up, was falling apart in college. The boy who had regularly attended worship, been active in his church youth group and outreach groups, got good grades, and even went on a mission trip as a sophomore in high school had stopped going to church, begun failing his college classes, and had been kicked off the baseball team for using anabolic steroids. How was it that this seemingly exceptional young Christian could become an exceptional disappointment? Here is what Baucham then relates:

“Over the next several days he and I unpacked the situation and dealt with some very tough issues. I am not suggesting that this case is cut-and-dry, but we did find some very familiar patterns. First, Thomas's lack of commitment in spiritual matters was not as strange as it seemed. As I talked with his father, I learned that Thomas was more than just a naturally gifted ballplayer. This kid had been playing ball since he was six and started private instruction at nine! He had been part of a travelling squad at age twelve and was an all-star at every level. This man and his

wife had gone to great lengths to see to it that their son became the best baseball player he could be.” (34-5)

Baucham goes on to tell how Thomas’s family frequently skipped church for weeks and even months at a time in order to travel and play baseball games during the summer and fall. Thomas’ father spared none of his resources to ensure Thomas’s baseball success—time, money, instruction, skill camps, and so on. In short, the most vital training that Thomas was receiving from his parents had more to do with the fear and admonition of baseball, than with the fear of the Lord. The father expected others to train his son to be a disciple of Christ. Although none of them would have had any problem reciting with affirmation, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, you shall have no other gods before me,” the patterns of their lives revealed that their commitment to God and His commandments had a rival, and that rival was winning over their hearts and subsequently the life of their son. The exercise of Christian freedom became training for bondage to sin.

If you find yourself thinking of ways to excuse this story as an exception, or to extenuate in some way the individuals of the story or “people like them,” then, my friends, you are in a dangerous place, and I would caution you to consider what priorities you truly hold in your own lives. If such a story scares you and causes you to wonder whether or not you are idolizing sports, then you are in the right posture to hear what I still have to say.

Sports are good. I love sports. My father loves sports. You should love sports too, since it is one of God's good gifts to us. Sports have been a part of my life since my earliest memories, and they have been a source of both great joy and grievous temptation into sin as I grew up playing football and basketball and baseball; even walking on and playing baseball through college. But as much as I love sports, it is at once sobering and liberating to meditate on the truth that God's kingdom has no need of sports to disciple the nations, or to build up and preserve the purity of Christ's Bride, or to gain mastery over the flesh. There are many and far more important activities worth our longing pursuit and our mind's meditation, and if we are choosing sports over them, we will bring shame to our proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we will fail in our duty to our brothers and sisters. All things are lawful for us in Christ Jesus, but not all things are edifying. Any Christian, and any Trinitas Christian School athlete needs to internalize the Biblical proportions afforded to sports and consider carefully the nature of his or her pursuit of sports. And before I finish tonight, I want to come back to a Scriptural vision of sports culture. I want us to leave with a positive vision.

Scripture says that a culture thrives when it obeys the law of God. In sports, this means that the special things God demands of us for Himself must come first. It also means teammates are putting one another before themselves, and their classmates, teachers, parents, and churches ahead of their team. It means not only seeking to outdo one's opponents on the playing field, but also outdo one's opponents in showing honor to them. Let me just put a few examples before us, and then I'll be done.

“I know Mt. Carmel Christian School plays dirty, curses us under their breath, and has no sense of honor for their opponents, but I also know that Proverbs 20:3 says, “It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling,” so instead of being provoked to anger, I’m going to either keep my mouth shut, or open it to praise and encourage my opponents when they do what is well done.”

“I am the best striker on the team, and I usually get the most reps in practice to get ready for the game, but I know the Proverbs 14:21 says, “Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor,” so I’ll give some of my extra reps to our weakest striker, so he can improve under the proper training of the coach and other players.”

“I’m on the basketball team, and we get to leave ten minutes early from the last class of the day. I am trying extra hard to get everyone to class as early as possible, and keep everyone as focused as possible, because I recognize that my teachers and administrators are like the righteous man of Psalm 37:26, “[Who] is ever lending generously, and his children become a blessing,” and I want to bless my teachers by keeping our class on task.”

“I play volleyball, and I have practice two days a week, which means I’m not home as much to help around the house, or spend time with my family. I am striving to be extra efficient in my homework, and I am giving up more “personal time” to give my family more of me when I’m home, because I believe Proverbs 13:4, which says, “The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.”

“The school and its families rally around us during our games, and they help us raise money so that we can play. We decided to surprise some of our families, by taking the team down to their church and helping them clean it up, because we want to be like the Christians in Acts 4:32, “[Who] were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.”

I could go on and on with more of these kinds of examples—and if I had the time, I would bring the parents and coaches into the mix too! I continue to hope and pray that we will further redefine the way sports is cultivated at Trinitas Christian School. We have a big challenge, since the world raises athletes into disproportionate focus in its idolatrous worship. With that battle in mind I close with Colossians 3:13-16, which is as good a summary as I could find of what a Trinitas Christian athlete should be:

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”