



An Encapsulated Theology of Sports Ministry

Introduction

While the Bible says many things about life, it doesn't speak directly about sport or sports ministry. While there are sports analogies and illustrations there's not a single text in the Bible that teaches us what we should or should not believe about sport. That's because God didn't invent sport - people did. But while God didn't invent sport, He did create us. He made us with the capacity to tackle, hit, sprint, leap, dance, dive, lift, throw, kick, swim, and more. So what's God's view of sport and how do we develop a theology of sports ministry?

Answering the above question isn't straightforward. When the Bible doesn't specifically address a human activity, general biblical principles need to be identified and purposefully applied. Thus to develop a comprehensive theology of sports ministry, consideration needs to be given to who God is, who we are, and God's purpose in creating us. On these matters there's a great deal in the Bible that's applicable to sports ministry.

In the encapsulated theology of sports ministry that follows, consideration will be given to why a theology of sports ministry is important, what sports ministry is, the biblical principles undergirding sports ministry, the focus of sports ministry, the history of sports ministry, the culture of sport, the church reaching the people in their community through sports ministry, sports ministry evangelism, sports ministry discipleship, and Scripture Union's sports ministry core values.

Motivation

If sports ministry isn't explicitly mentioned in the Bible, then why should we bother trying to figure out a theology of sports ministry?

First and foremost, because it's God's plan to redeem and reconcile every tribe and tongue and people to Himself. God wants all of His people to go into all the world to proclaim to all people in all life situations that He wants all people "to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4) because "Christ Jesus gave himself as a ransom for all people" 1 Timothy

2:6. That is, without a theology of sports ministry we'll fall short in effectively loving and leading all people to saving faith and fullness of life in Christ Jesus.

Secondly, because good theology leads to good practice. Without a substantive understanding of God's view of sport we don't know how to apply our faith in the realm of sport. If we don't know how to apply our faith in the realm of sport, then we can't fulfill God's Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) and Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). Here's a compelling reason for sports ministry: God wants us to display the grace and mercy of Christ Jesus through everything we say and do. The good things that God requires of us are "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" Micah 6:8. This should be the reality in the home, the school, the workplace and the sporting world. God wants us to be fair, be loyal in love, and take Him seriously in life generally. We should honour Him on the sports field, court, pitch, track, or course. Every sports venue, community centre, gym, sports camp, arena, sports club or stadium are places where we can find opportunities to use our time and talents to bring glory to Christ Jesus.

Thirdly, because sport itself has value (1 Timothy 4:8). Sport is a legitimate and useful activity because God wants us to glorify Him in and through our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20, Romans 12:1), learn to compete according to the rules (2 Timothy 2:5), not be lazy (Hebrews 6:12a), discipline our bodies (1 Corinthians 9:26-27), and do everything for His glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). That said, we should note that sport is short-lived and has limited value in the context of eternity. Nonetheless, sport is a means to an end, i.e. for people to know and grow in the way of Christ Jesus.

Definition

Before we define sports ministry, we should understand what sport is: Sport is all forms of physical sensory activity that may be competitive or non-competitive in nature, may be casual or organized, may take the form of play or a game, may be done by individuals or teams, and may or may not involve equipment, apparatus, animals or machines. The benefits can include physical fitness, social interaction, mental, and spiritual well-being. It provides opportunities for people to develop discipline, cultivate cooperation and teamwork, learn leadership skills, grow in confidence, handle competition, deal with disappointment, and foster tolerance and respect.

So what is sports ministry? For some it may be putting sport and religion together. For others it may be when a church invites the un-churched people from the community to use its gym, or when a Christian plays a game with a non-Christian. And for others it may be a well-known Christian athlete sharing his/her testimony at a big event or function. But one-off meetings aren't sports ministry in and of themselves, and simply playing a game or sharing a facility with

non-Christians also aren't sports ministry if they're not part of a deliberate long term comprehensive vision and plan that includes an evangelism and discipleship strategy.

Here's a working definition: *Sports ministry is intentionally valuing and utilizing the medium of sport to connect people with Christ Jesus and His Story.* As such, it's initiated and empowered by a merciful God who wants to reconcile, through salvation and faith in Christ Jesus, all people to Himself. And it's carried out through God's people in the world of sport as they love others as Christ loves them (Ephesians 5:2), share God's Word (evangelism), and help one another become more like Christ Jesus (discipleship).

In order for sports ministry to happen, a Christian sport participant or spectator must share the Gospel (through actions and words) with a non-Christian sport participant or spectator. Sharing the Gospel shouldn't be an add-on to the activity of sport, but should be fully integrated into every facet of the activity. Sports ministry also includes a Christian sport participant or spectator helping other Christian sport participants or spectators follow the example of Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:1).

So, Christ Jesus and His Story needs to be integrated into everything. Any sport activity or program organized by Christians, to be sports ministry, must include the Gospel message in ways that make it clear for participants or spectators how they can receive and know Christ Jesus personally. Otherwise, the Christian activity or program is no different to the community centre down the road.

Focus

According to Lowrie McCown and Valerie Gin, sports ministry can be divided into four areas of focus:

- ministry to the people of sport (evangelizing people who have not been reached with the Gospel and discipling people who are Christians)
- ministry through the people of sport (through people who know Christ as Lord and Saviour, i.e. Christians sharing the Gospel with non-Christians or Christians discipling Christians)
- ministry in the activity of sport (evangelism through Christians who are playing a sport with non-Christians)
- ministry through service in sport and through sport activity (through Christians who exercise compassion and respond to social issues by helping and caring for the needs of others)

Principles

Here are ten seminal biblical principles informing sports ministry:

1. We should bring glory to God through the medium of sport. "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone [including sports people] who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" 1 Peter 3:15.
2. We should actively seek to bring people to Christ Jesus utilizing the medium of sport. "And whatever you do [including sport], whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" Colossians 3:17.
3. God is the creator and what He created is good (Genesis 1:21, 1 Timothy 4:4). God created us to rule over this earth (Genesis 1:26) and has given us the capacity to play and enjoy what is good.
4. Our gifts, talents and abilities come from God. Our natural and physical abilities, as with our spiritual gifts, should be used to serve God and bring Him glory. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" Romans 12:1.
5. The physical and the spiritual have equal importance and significance. "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" Colossians 1:16-17.
6. There are parallels between sport and the life of faith. Consider the positive metaphors and analogies in Isaiah 40:31, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Galatians 2:2, Galatians 5:7, 1 Timothy 4:8, 2 Timothy 2:5, 2 Timothy 4:7-8, Hebrews 12:1.
7. Christians are physically and spiritually equipped (Hebrews 13:21) to enter into the world of sport and be salt and light (Matthew 5:16) for the glory of God. "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" Philippians 4:13.
8. Being a witness and ambassador for Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17-20), both locally and further afield, is part of the general call and commission (Matthew 4:19) to every Christian connected with sport. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" Acts 1:8.

9. Satan opposes sports ministry because he fights against anything that connects people with Christ and His Story (John 10:10a, 1 Peter 5:8). Satan will actively work through seen and unseen forces to undermine and destroy sports ministry (Ephesians 6:12). Everyone involved in sports ministry needs to "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" by putting "on the full armour of God" in order to "take a stand against the devil's schemes" Ephesians 6:10-11.
10. Being filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), living a life modelled on the Word of God (James 1:22), and humbly and prayerfully (Philippians 4:6-7) trusting God to empower us in everything we do and say in sports ministry, is both essential and foundational. "My help [in sports ministry] comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" Psalm 121:2.

History

The view of sport held by the church is a chequered history marked by mixed feelings and beliefs. Depending on the era, the church has swung between supporting and suppressing Christian involvement in sport. On the one hand, the church has appreciated sport for how it provides opportunities to connect people with Christ Jesus and honour Him with our bodies. On the other hand the church has taught dualism (valuing the spiritual more than the physical), or viewed sport as having little or no value. When dualism is the dominant view, sport is considered sinful or participation in games is curbed.

In recent decades the relationship of the church with sport has been more positive, but not without concerns. The idolizing of sports stars, sport played on Sunday, and the popularity of sport over faith in Christ Jesus, have been distressful for the church, and in some cases, resulted in disengagement. However, the church is presently more engaged than disengaged in sport and views it as an opportunity to testify and reach the world with the love of Christ.

Organisations like Christians in Sport, Atletas de Cristo, International Sports Coalition, Athletes in Action, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and many others epitomize the high worth attached to sports ministry.

Culture

Because of the global nature of sport, it's both an all-encompassing and provocative influence in our world. Almost every country and people group are impacted by sport. In fact, sport is slap-bang in the mainstream of life. So much so, in many ways it's its own culture with rituals and idioms that people generally understand regardless of their ethnicity, politics or religion.

Sport is one of the few things that people largely have in common. As such, it provides a meeting ground for people from different backgrounds or circumstances. Nelson Mandela said, "Sport has the power to unite people in a way little else can. It breaks down the racial barriers, it laughs in the face of all kinds of discrimination. Sport speaks to people in a language they can understand." This "power to unite people" through sport should not be underestimated. At its best, sport helps people overcome socio-economic barriers, gender bias, religious or political beliefs, and different types of disabilities. All told, sport is a language that rises above all languages, and a common experience that builds bridges that bring people from diverse cultures together.

Church

Local churches are ideally made for sports ministry. Every church is composed of people who watch or play sport (about 80% of people watch, play, coach, referee, or facilitate sport). Moreover, every church is located in a town, community or suburb where people participate in or watch sport. Thus to reach these people with the love of Christ the church doesn't have to train its people to be sport people, they already are. And it doesn't have to go far, it just has to go to where the people are playing or watching their games (Matthew 9:37-38).

The church shouldn't sit in the stands or stand on the sidelines. God's plan is that "through the church" (Ephesians 3:10-11) all people would "be saved [evangelism] and come to a knowledge of the truth [discipleship]" 1 Timothy 2:4. That's what God wants. What we have to ask ourselves is, "Will we do what He wants us to do?" If the answer is affirmative, then we need to do what it takes to invite people to be saved and teach them God's Word.

While there are many ways to invite people to be saved and teach them God's Word, every church should consider sports ministry as a key component in their evangelism and discipleship strategy. There are very few bridges linking churches with their communities. Sport is one of the bridges, and when a church uses this bridge it invariably reaches the lost and opens the door to church growth.

One of the reasons why sports ministry is such a good fit for local churches is because it's geared to being more incarnational (emulating the example of Jesus by going to where people are). However, there's a problem. Many churches are cocooned in their comfort zones and expecting people to come to them (an attractional paradigm). Yet it doesn't work that way. God doesn't tell non-Christians to go to church, but He does tell Christians to go to the non-Christians. Rather than trying to attract a crowd, the church should take the better option, to go to where the crowd is! We're to "go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation"

Mark 16:15. As Bryan Mason says, "The church is still 'here' and unbelievers are still outside the church, but the clarion call needs to end with 'we are coming' rather than 'you're welcome'."

Evangelism

Different religions, politics, philosophies of life, socio-economic factors and value systems tend to polarize people. In order to evangelize people whose belief system or worldview is different or opposed to a biblical worldview, we must find common ground. Three things connect, rather than divide us. They're food, music and sport.

Sports ministry is an innocent first touch in reaching people of all ages. That's because sport has no generation gaps and naturally brings people together to share a common language and common experience. The shared language and experience is what generates numerous opportunities for sharing the Gospel.

Evangelism requires the following: We must capture people's attention, cultivate dialogue, connect with a person's mind (intellect) and heart (emotions), share the Good News, and trust God to save them. As a strategy, connecting with people through sport is a natural non-threatening way to do evangelism. That's because the sport being played or watched is the initial focus of attention, which then becomes what people are chatting about, which in turn lays the groundwork for relational trust to be developed and the story of faith in Christ Jesus to be shared.

Of course, the basic methodology in the above paragraph is meaningless if we simply aren't willing to build relationships by going and playing a game of neighbourhood soccer or going to watch a local high school basketball game. Evangelism only gets off the ground when we're "prepared to give an answer" for the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15) and are ready to do whatever it takes to reach our neighbours with the love of Christ Jesus. Our motivation should emulate Paul's example. He said, "I have become all things to all people [including sports people] so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" 1 Corinthians 9:22-23.

Discipleship

Every sports ministry plan should include a strategy for helping people run the race of life. Once someone has come to faith in Christ Jesus he/she needs to start training. There can be no turning back. We must help new Christians get their eye on the goal so they can strain to win the prize for which God has called them heavenward in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14). If we're not doing this, we've dropped the ball.

Discipleship requires three key components - teaching, training and transmitting (2 Timothy 3:16).

Teaching consists of instruction from God's Word. The teaching should major on and strengthen belief in who Christ Jesus is; thereby developing a person's confidence and equipping him/her for the work God has for them (2 Timothy 3:17).

Training consists of acting on God's Word. "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" James 1:22. God's Word shouldn't go in one ear and out the other. We've got to learn, through practice, how to be Nike Christians, i.e., "Just do it!"

Transmitting consists of being an example of God's Word. It's the walk lining up with the talk. It's mentoring and modelling the life of Christ Jesus. It's being a living epistle so that others have an authentic coach and example to emulate. "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" Proverbs 27:17.

Discipleship isn't a one off event. It's a process that should continue through a Christian's life. Sports ministry discipleship therefore requires the foundations of Bible engagement, prayer, fellowship, and sharing the Gospel with others, to be intentionally integrated into every facet of a Christian's involvement and identity in sport. Simply, every Christian in sport should be helped to grow in faith and play in a way that brings glory to Christ Jesus.

Core Values

Based on the encapsulated theology, here are Scripture Union's sports ministry core values:

1. We value sports ministry as an effective strategy for connecting children, youth and families (of all ability levels) with Jesus and His Story.
2. We value Bible engagement as an integral component of sports ministry.
3. We value the local church as our partner in community evangelism through the medium of sport.
4. We value the local church as our partner in discipling children, youth and families who, through the medium of sports ministry, have come to faith in Christ Jesus.
5. We value high standards in sports ministry and strive to inspire, inform and help others do sports ministry well.
6. We value sports ministry as the framework within which to conduct summer day camps, outreach events, weekend camps, Camp in a Box, KidsGames, leagues, Cup of Nations, festivals, and major event outreach.
7. We value training young adults in sports ministry through a 10 week internship based on an apprenticeship model.

8. We value church volunteers and staff, and equipping them to do sports ministry through various forms of coaching, mentoring and resourcing.
9. We value the creation of contextualized sports ministry resources that can be used as practical tools for connecting children, youth and families with Jesus and His Story.
10. We value sports ministry training workshops as a way to equip others in sports ministry.
11. We value sports ministry networks, are committed to helping form, and facilitate these networks.
12. We value being part of the Sports Movement and openly sharing and collaborating with the members of the Sports Movement to accomplish common ministry objectives.
13. We value working collaboratively with all agencies, movements, denominations or entities who contribute, support, or advocate for sports ministry.
14. We value sports ministry as a regional, national, and international approach to sharing the Gospel with all elements of society.
15. We value sharing our vision, knowledge, skills, and sports ministry expertise with others, so that the kingdom of God is advanced and glory is given to Christ Jesus.

Recommended Resources

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