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JUST PLAY:
ON BEING FULLY HUMAN IN SPORT

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Amy Gray Bird
August 2018

Approved by _____
Rev. Dr. Joel Biermann Advisor

Rev. Dr. Charles Arand Reader

Rev. Dr. Timothy Saleska Reader

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To my parents who raised me to take seriously both faith and sport.

“For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.”

Irenaeus

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
ABBREVIATIONS	ix
ABSTRACT	x
CHAPTER ONE	1
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER TWO	5
THEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY'S VIEW OF SPORT	5
CHAPTER THREE	9
THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS TOWARDS A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH AND SPORT	9
HOW IS AN ATHLETE JUSTIFIED BEFORE GOD?	9
TWO KINDS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS	11
VOCATION.....	13
LEISURE.....	16
LEISURE TOGETHER.....	25
LEISURE + LOVE	26
GOD'S GLORY IS A HUMAN BEING FULLY ALIVE	29
GOSPEL OR LAW?.....	36
CHAPTER FOUR.....	39
MISINTERPRETATIONS OF FAITH IN SPORT	39
EMPHASIS ON CONSCIOUS AWARENESS OF GOD IN SPORT	41
DIVINE WORSHIP.....	43

PLAYING WITH 110% EFFORT	48
NOT FOR GOD.....	50
VOCATION.....	52
CHAPTER FIVE	58
CONCLUSION.....	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	61
VITA.....	64

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considered what it means to be an athlete who puts her teammates ahead of herself.

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Being born to two competitive athletes and faithful Christians, I believe the makings of this paper have been in my blood from the beginning. I am forever indebted to my mom and dad for bringing me to the waters of baptism and raising me in the faith while also coaching me in basketball and attending as many of my sporting events over the years as possible regardless of their location. Thank you for showing me love that was never based on my athletic performance and continually pointing me to Jesus whose victory for me is eternal.

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Soli Deo Gloria!

ABBREVIATIONS

LW	Luther's Works
SC	Small Catechism
WA	Weimarer Ausgabe edition of Luther's Works

ABSTRACT

Bird, Amy, S.G. "Just Play: On Being Fully Human in Sport." Master's thesis, Concordia Seminary, 2018. 73 pp.

Is competing in competitive sport worthy of a Christian's time, energy, and resources? If so, how does one compete in a God-pleasing way? Certainly, several factors are at work here, but to gain a theologically faithful understanding of sport this paper considers two concepts as vital: the Lutheran doctrine of vocation and the concept of leisure as articulated by Catholic moral theologian Josef Pieper. This thesis considers both vocation and leisure and explores how when taken together vocation and leisure clarify the application of the two kinds of righteousness for a Christian athlete and equips that athlete to make wise and faithful decisions regarding her participation in sport. Ultimately, this thesis argues that a life lived to the fullest is one practicing the ongoing rhythm and balance of both vocation and leisure.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Meet Jordan¹, a 6'3" wiry right-handed pitcher from a family of high-level baseball players. When he chose to go to Concordia University Wisconsin for college, playing baseball was a top reason why.

Meet Ariel², a power hitter and crafty softball player. She led her team to the state tournament as a senior in high school and dreamed of one day playing college ball.

Both Jordan and Ariel would begin their college careers with eyes set on athletic success. They faithfully attended pre-season workouts and were transforming their freshmen bodies into that of collegiate athletes.

Jordan and Ariel are also Christians, who consider their faith in Jesus Christ to be the most important part of their lives. As they continued through their freshmen year, their Christian faith was tested and refined. Jordan would change his major from exercise physiology to pre-seminary studies. Ariel invested more and more of her time singing in a praise band and serving in women's ministry.

As their faith continued to flourish that year, Jordan and Ariel each reached the same conclusion: to quit their respective collegiate sport. Somehow, in their minds, investing the time and energy necessary to compete in their respective sports seemed contrary to their faith in Jesus.

¹ This profile is based on a real person and experience. Name has been changed.

² This profile is based on a real person and experience. Name has been changed.

They didn't like the people they became when they played sports. They were competitive and aggressive. Jordan didn't want to deal with the locker room conversations. Ariel didn't like how mean she could become on the field. It would be easier, they thought, to remove themselves from these settings and pursue their faith without distractions. Each seemed to believe that one could not be serious about both one's faith and one's sport. It seemed more appropriate to study theology, spend time with other believers, and serve as leaders in campus ministries; such activities were deemed more faithful, Christ-centered, and fitting for those serious about their faith.

These were the sort of stories I heard my sophomore year of college as a transfer student to Concordia, the newest member of the women's volleyball and basketball teams. Training and competing in two college sports placed high demands on my time and energy. It was taking a toll on my body, and I was contemplating quitting basketball to focus on volleyball and the rest of my life as a student. As an active Christian, I was also getting to know the "campus ministry crowd" who sincerely counseled me with the wisdom of Jordan and Ariel's stories and others like them. I seemed surrounded by godly men and women who had resolved to choose the more righteous way of living by quitting their sport to focus more fully on Jesus.

Certainly, God can and does call athletes to hang up the cleats to pursue something else. Such may have been the case in each of the vignettes described above. I do not pretend to know the plans God has for either Jordan or Ariel. They may well have been faithfully following God's lead when each quit his or her respective sport. While I don't know exactly what God may have been calling these athletes to do, I do know that these stories stirred a series of questions in my mind: Can I be an athlete and also take my faith seriously? Is sport inherently evil, a means for great temptation, and best to be avoided? Do college sports require too much time and energy

that would better be used leading a Bible study or prepping for a mission trip?

I would confidently venture to say this line of questioning crosses the mind of most “serious” Christian athletes³ at some point in their careers. Is it morally “okay” for me to compete at a high level? If not, what is a better use of my time as a follower of Jesus? Perhaps I, too, should give up playing so I can devote more time serving in the church.

In the profiles above, each student (myself included) was raised in a Lutheran home. We had been confirmed in the faith but were lacking a proper understanding on the doctrine of vocation. Luther consistently lifts up the work of a nursing mother, plowing farmer, or crafting shoemaker as more important and worthier in the sight of God than the vocation of priest, monk, or nun.⁴ Doing the work God has given you to do for the benefit of your neighbor is the mark of active righteousness in the world. This is good and pleasing to God. And yet, while the doctrine of vocation is part of the church’s teaching, there seemed to be a disconnect for Jordan, Ariel, and myself as we considered our lives in the world of sport. Whether we could articulate it or not, each of us was wrestling with deep theological issues touching on questions about life’s purpose, the meaning of vocation, and how to live faithfully as Christians.

“All our life and work must be based on God’s Word if they are to be God-pleasing or holy,” writes Martin Luther in his Large Catechism explanation to the 3rd Commandment.⁵ So,

³ A note here: I recognize some are put off by the term “Christian athlete”. The word, “Christian”, is a noun, not an adjective. Faith is not a box by which to categorize things but rather one’s identity in Jesus permeates and affects all parts of life. Furthermore, as Dr. Gene Veith points out: “There is no distinctly Christian way of being a carpenter or an actor or a musician. Christian and non-Christian [workers] do pretty much the same thing” Gene Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002) 68. And again, “There is not a ‘Christian’ way to be a carpenter, as opposed to being a non-Christian carpenter. Nevertheless, one fulfills his vocation in faith, while the other rejects God and prefers to be completely on his own” Veith, *God at Work*, 154. However, for the sake of space and grammatical flow, I will use this term from time to time. By doing so, I’m speaking specifically of athletes who find their identity in Christ alone; they are redeemed children of God who have the vocation of athlete. This paper does not specifically address those whose identity is founded elsewhere.

⁴ WA 10/3:382.

⁵ Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran*

what do Holy Scripture and our Lutheran Confessions have to say regarding a God-pleasing life in sport? Is playing sport an appropriate use of our time and talent? Is there value in competing? Certainly, several factors are at work here, but to gain a theologically faithful understanding of sport, this paper will consider the interplay of two key Christian teachings: one well-known to Lutheran readers—the doctrine of vocation, and one likely much less familiar—the concept of leisure. Therefore, I will explore both a Lutheran understanding of vocation, as well as the work of Roman Catholic moral theologian, Josef Pieper, on the subject of work and leisure, and show how when taken together, these two teachings help clarify the work of a Christian before God and before the world, providing much needed direction for Christians in sport.

Church (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 399.

CHAPTER TWO

THEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY'S VIEW OF SPORT

As illustrated in the opening vignettes, it is not uncommon for Christians to consider what role sport should play in their life of faith. It can be easy to point out the “dark side” of sport littered with corruption, cheating, steroid abuse, and a “win at all costs” mentality. Similar to Jordan and Ariel, many Christians have recognized the presence of sinful thoughts and actions within themselves as they compete and are led to wonder if sport is a greater source of temptation than God-pleasing living.

These questions and debates aren't new for American Christians in sport. From the founding of this country, Puritans and Reformed Dutch have disdained sport as idleness and clouded with anti-Christian qualities. American clergy joined in the warnings in the nineteenth century condemning sport for its “violence, destruction of friendships, fanaticism, exposing one's body unnecessarily to physical injury, gambling, the temptation towards lust, and using sport to escape more pressing responsibilities of Christian citizenship.”¹ Physical fitness was only seen as a means to maintain good health and strength in carrying out work tasks. Sport was nothing more than a distraction from that work and an unwise use of time. However, as immigrants who were less disparaging of sport made their way to America in the 1840s along with a rising American culture energized by the Industrial Revolution, the American church began to make a place for sport under the tem “muscular Christianity.” Muscular Christianity

¹ Steven J. Overman, *The Influence of the Protestant Ethic on Sport and Recreation* (Aldershot, England: Avebury, 1997), 29.

first began in England in the 1850s by Christian socialists, Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, and soon found its way into the United States. Muscular Christianity promotes the Christian's involvement in sport and physical activity by linking bodily exercise to the health of the soul. In this line of thinking, sport is described as a means to achieve the ancient Greek goal, *mens sana in corpore sano*, "a sound mind in a sound body."² Sport could be used to develop character and teach morals. Soon, YMCA's, YWCA's, fraternities, sororities, and service clubs began promoting athletics as a means to teach young people—especially young men—good, moral character.³

Ironically, the Puritan work ethic which once saw sport as idleness began to praise sport for fostering moral character and keeping people out of trouble. By the mid-20th century, American Christianity had largely accepted sport for its means of character development. In 1954, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes was formed with many other sports ministry organizations emerging right behind. In 1971, Billy Graham even endorsed muscular Christianity in an article published by *Sports in Society* saying, "The Bible says leisure and lying around are morally dangerous for us. Sports keeps us busy; athletes, you notice, don't take drugs. There are probably more committed Christians in sports both collegiate and professional, than in any other occupation in America."⁴ While I'd be curious to check Graham's facts on that, his sentiment represents the popular view of sport in American Christianity as positive grounds for developing good behavior.

² James Mathisen, "From Muscular Christianity to Jocks for Jesus," *The Christian Century*, January 1–8, 1992, 11.

³ Mathisen, "Muscular Christianity," 12.

⁴ Jay Coakley, *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*, (St. Louis: Time Mirror-Mosely College Publishing, 1986), 322.

This is the culture into which present-day athletes and sports ministers—those caring for the spiritual needs of athletes—have been formed. The key to validating participation in sport is its refining process on the athlete with the goal of developing discipline and good character. This refining process includes forward progression in the sanctified life with the understanding that the hardworking Christian athlete can curb sin and increase righteous living. This is what can make sport well-pleasing to God and worthy of a Christian's time and energy according to muscular Christianity's influence. Whether consciously aware of these cultural influences or not, it is no wonder that when Jordan and Ariel recognized their lack of moral progress in sport they began to question whether they should still be engaged in such activities. What value is sport for the Christian if no process in sanctification—that is growing in Christ-like character—can be recognized? Is there any other value to participating in sport for the Christian; or were the founding people of this country right that sport was devil's play and better left untouched?

Scripture and our Lutheran Confessions have much to say about these ideas of muscular Christianity and the theological conclusions that shape sports ministry today. To begin, muscular Christianity seems to overlook what is truly well-pleasing to our heavenly Father and the way that a believer is made right before Him. Following Scripture and Confession, I contend that God is well-pleased with His children when they live according to His design by enjoying both their vocational work along with times of leisure, both receiving God's gifts and caring for the people and world around them.

While the athlete can benefit from the positive character development and camaraderie sport provides, no amount of reps or drills will ever be able to straighten out the sinful nature

inside each person that is, as Luther puts it, *incurvatus en se*, “curved in on oneself.”⁵ This side of Christ’s return we will always be riddled with sin, unable to completely escape. St. Paul describes the struggle every Christian endures: “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”⁶ Muscular Christianity—or any activity—cannot do what only faith in Jesus can do: cleanse a sinner of his sins and present him blameless before God. I doubt most American Christians would disagree with this. However, the role of Jesus in the life of faith and the freedom Christians receive when living before the world is not always properly applied into muscular Christianity’s influence on the world of sport as I will further explain throughout this paper.

⁵ LW 25:291–292.

⁶ Rom 7:15.

CHAPTER THREE

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS TOWARDS A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH AND SPORT

How Is an Athlete Justified Before God?

To begin, I need to clearly state how an athlete *is* made right before the Father. It can become so commonplace for Christians to confess, “We are saved by grace through faith,”¹ that we overlook how offensive grace really is. Let me remind you, it is very offensive.

Acknowledging we are saved only and fully by believing that Jesus died on the cross and rose again to pay the price for our wrongdoings and earn the way for our salvation means we have to forget about our own actions—both the bad and the good. The beautiful reality of God’s love is that it’s unconditional and infinite. It doesn’t change. But for the athlete who has been conditioned by the principle that increased effort leads to better performance which in turn, yields more playing time, praise and success, this is altogether foreign. It doesn’t make sense.

Moreover, grace insults the athlete’s work ethic that is constantly striving to get better. Seemingly innate to the competitive athlete is the drive for self-improvement and success. Athletes put in hours of hard work training and conditioning, caring about their bodies and nutrition while putting in rep after rep to get the techniques and plays down just right. There is a hunger and thirst to succeed, to see our team on top, to win. The formula for success in the world of sport goes something like this: the harder I work, the more focused I train, the more single-minded and determined I become, the better I am and the more I succeed. This formula has its

¹ Eph 2:8–9.

place in sport, as we will discuss, but has no bearing on our “success” before God. So, to tell an athlete that the biggest victory in life—one over sin, death, and the power of Satan—can’t be accomplished by an extra set of reps or a slight tweak to his technique is almost irrational. The idea that your skill sets and contributions aren’t what determine your value in the eyes of our Creator is dumbfounding. After all, that’s how your free throw percentage increases or how a coach decides who starts the game. Grace does not make sense in this world.

The truth is, how well an athlete does or does not compete holds no bearing on his justification before God. Before God, we are declared “good” because of Jesus. No sinful or foolish action I do can lessen the Father’s love for me. Just the same, no perfect, holy, highlight reel performance can increase that same love. This is because God already loves me fully and perfectly. This is good news for the sinner but for the sanctified believer, it can sometimes be hard to swallow. How does the thief on the cross who professes Christ in his dying breath receive the same love and mercy as Mother Theresa who spent her entire life devoted to the care and well-being of the most vulnerable? Grace is offensive.

But it is also the best news for the athlete.

Our loving Father out of His great goodness and mercy chooses to evaluate athletes not according to their assist-to-turnover ratio or even, by their growing development of moral character but by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God’s economy of grace is very different from the economy of meritocracy athletes find in the world of sport. This grace is the Gospel. This is how the athlete—and every person—is saved. We are justified by grace through faith in Jesus. Game over.

Two Kinds of Righteousness

And yet, there *is* a place for the athlete to speak about the way she competes and trains,

seeking to do what is right, working hard, and living according to God's will. This has no bearing on salvation but is no less significant to our life in Christ. Recognizing the distinction between how we are made right before God and how we are to live before the world is imperative for the Christian in the world of sport. Luther's teaching on the Two Kinds of Righteousness provides us a structure for sorting out our place before God and the world.²

Before God (*coram Deo*), we are made right through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In relation to God, "the human posture is one of pure receptivity."³ We do nothing but receive His good gifts of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. The Gospel reigns in this realm. The *coram Deo* relationship is eternal and marks our spiritual righteousness through Christ. It's all grace.

God is pleased with us only and fully as He sees us dripping in Christ's blood, not our own. God's pleasure towards us has nothing to do with our efforts as a Christian or as an athlete. God is pleased with us because of Jesus. Period. When He looks at the Christian athlete, the Father is pleased not because of her extraordinary performance dedicated to Christ but because when He sees her competing, He sees Jesus.⁴ In seeing Jesus, He sees His dearly loved child with whom He is well-pleased.⁵

Before the world (*coram mundo*) though, extraordinary performances reign as king. As the Christian considers her life before the surrounding creation, she lives according to God's will, that is, His Law. Here all athletes and all humans have no excuse for passivity but are

² WA 40:46.

³ Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 66.

⁴ Heb 9:15.

⁵ Matt 3:17.

expected to actively engage the people and world around them to “do the good works which God has prepared in advance for us to do.”⁶ Here, we can talk about conditioning and training and extra reps and nutrition. Considering our purpose before the world, it is absolutely appropriate and necessary that we talk about good works, living as God has designed for us. This is what it means to be His creature and to live in His creation. We do this most fully when we see these good works not as a means to earn favor with God but rather as ways of stewarding what He has given us and serving our neighbor. God is glorified when we live as His children before the world.

In our *coram mundo* reality, we seek to love and serve our neighbor. This is our purpose on earth. We assert the privileges and platforms our vocations may provide for the benefit of the weak and oppressed. We recognize the gifts God has given to us in creation including the continuation of those gifts in the development of culture and civilization—gifts in which sport and competition can also be found.⁷ Modern-day theologian, James Hunter explains, “The gifts, resources, and influence one stewards are not one’s own to use as one wishes but rather they belong to God: they exist under his authority, and believers are held to account for how they steward them.”⁸ We will be held accountable for how well we steward what God has given us for the benefit of our neighbor. This has no bearing on the state of our salvation, but it is a reflection of how well we carry out the good works God has prepared in advance for us to do. With this in

⁶ Eph 2:10.

⁷ Niebuhr defines culture as “the sum of all that has *spontaneously* arisen from the advancement of material life and as an expression of spiritual and moral life—all social intercourse, technologies, arts, literature and sciences” H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951), 31. And, again, “Culture is the ‘artificial, secondary environment’ which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organizations, inherited artifacts, technical processes and values” Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

⁸ James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 68.

mind, we do seek to be the best athletes we can be. We do work hard and improve our skillsets. We serve our teammates and respect our coaches, officials, and opponents. For this is what it means to steward the gift of sport, to use it as it was designed to be used. Even more than stewarding a gift, sport creates opportunities for vocational service and leisure with God and creation.

Vocation

The word, “vocation” comes from the Latin word, *vocatio*, meaning “calling.”⁹ For Luther, vocation refers to the work God has given His children to do here on earth for the sake of other creatures.¹⁰ It is not limited only to occupations but includes any station or relationship in life that brings an expectation of tasks to be fulfilled for the good of the surrounding creation. Gustaf Wingren, explaining Luther’s teaching, describes the inclusivity of vocation as “anything that involves action, anything that concerns the world or my relationship with my neighbor”¹¹ as a valid vocation for a Christian.

It is important to stop and consider the question: For whom are our vocations? Is the purpose of caring for others to serve God or man? Luther teaches that, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.”¹² Therefore, while God instructs us to love others, He does this for the need of our neighbor, not Himself. Our vocational work rightly belongs *coram mundo*, not *coram Deo*. This idea is imperative for both legitimizing the stations and vocations we have in life as real work God has called us to do while also not over-spiritualizing our work

⁹ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1957), 1.

¹⁰ Wingren, *Vocation*, 2.

¹¹ Wingren, *Vocation*, 5.

¹² Wingren, *Vocation*, 10.

in life as something worthy of heaven or done for “God’s sake.” Vocations are simply the ways we live as God has created us to live. They aren’t done to earn His favor or our salvation but to live as His dearly loved children in this world that He has created. Therefore, when we recognize the vocations we have been given, “which serve the well-being of others, [we] must not entertain the slightest doubt of God’s pleasure, but believe the gospel.”¹³ We carry out our vocations confident of God’s pleasure in us. Why? Because of the Gospel; we are robed in Jesus’ righteousness.¹⁴

By the very nature of being human, we have been given vocations. Since before God we do not need to worry about being “good enough” or earning favor in His eyes, we can instead focus our energy elsewhere. Wingren explains, “Our only care ought to be what we should do with all the good that God has made, so that it may benefit our neighbor.”¹⁵ To consider our vocations we need to look no further than our neighbors, that is, the relationships in which we are placed as daughter, sister, cousin, or friend. We are coworker, student, neighbor, and most relevant for this paper: athlete, teammate, opponent, and coach. Properly fulfilling our vocations does not gain us favor with God but is simply what it means to be human as God intended. We look to benefit our neighbor because that’s most fundamentally what God created us to do. The creation account sheds light on God’s intentions for creation. After creating man, God instructs him to (1) have dominion over the plants, animals, and all of creation and (2) be fruitful and multiply.¹⁶ All of God’s commands to man are others-focused, caring for the creation around him. This is God’s

¹³ Wingren, *Vocation*, 4.

¹⁴ Is 61:10.

¹⁵ Wingren, *Vocation*, 8.

¹⁶ Gen 1:26–28.

intention for us in vocation: taking care of our neighbors, both fellow humans and the world in which we live.

The Ten Commandments also echo God’s desire for man to live in right relation with the world and among all people. Commandments 4-10 are explicitly dedicated to how we are to treat others with respect and love. Even the First Table of the Law (Commandments 1-3) are given for the benefit of our neighbor. To have no other gods, honor God’s name and keep the Sabbath are not for God’s benefit as if He needs our honor and rest but are simply a description of what it means to be a creature who acknowledges his Creator. God doesn’t need this for His own well-being but we do need it for ours as we remember who God is and how that affects and directs our lives. Consequently, the impact this has on our lives impacts our neighbors. We are witnesses to them of what it looks like to live as God’s creatures—people who are in right relationship with their Creator because of grace in Jesus and trust and follow God’s will for their lives.

Still, recognizing our sin-stained thoughts, words, and deeds, we daily repent that our hearts are indeed turned inward on our own desires and gains. Despite our best intentions, we do not think of our neighbor’s benefit but of our own gain. We do not care for creation but for our own comfort. So we repent knowing, “God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”¹⁷ Encouraged and strengthened with God’s forgiveness in Jesus, we strive all the more to freely live out our vocations for the wellbeing of others. For through our vocations, “God’s creation work moves on.”¹⁸ Through us, God continues His “work of love” in creation.¹⁹

¹⁷ 1 John 1:9.

¹⁸ Wingren, *Vocation*, 9.

¹⁹ Wingren, *Vocation*, 9.

Leisure

While no one book or person can speak on behalf of an entire global movement of sportspeople, *What the Book Says About Sport*, written by Stuart Weir, the director of the UK's influential sports evangelism organization, Christian in Sport, represents a predominant thought in modern day sports ministry. While I am critical of parts of his book that pit sport against formal worship and highlight an athlete's effort as the means to please God, it remains a helpful resource touching on several topics relevant for the Christian in sport. Perhaps most helpful for the present task are his words regarding a Christian's purpose in and enjoyment of sport. Weir recognizes athletic talents and abilities as gifts given by God "to be used for our enjoyment and God's glory."²⁰ He is at least half right, though his emphasis on "God's glory" could, as I will show later, cause some difficulties. Nevertheless, building on his idea of athletic gifts as a means for enjoyment and the honor of God, I will argue that athletic talents and abilities are gifts given by God to be used for our leisure and according to His vocational purposes for us. Moreover, all of the life of a believer can be summed up in the rhythm of fulfilling vocations and enjoying leisure. When the two are taken together, the fullness of life is experienced.

Validating both vocation and leisure as equally necessary and good for the life of God's creatures may well be an unpopular, or at least unrecognized point of view. Most often, scholars argue for vocation or leisure to be of higher importance than the other. The present thesis seeks to demonstrate how the two concepts might be viewed as equally important and complementary. Neither should be understood as primarily a means to an end that would empower or favor the importance of the other. Rather, as stated above, when the two are taken together as a unit, the

²⁰ Stuart Weir, *What the Book Says* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2000), 29.

fullness of life is experienced. We will begin by turning to Scripture to explore these two concepts (1) vocation: doing the work God has called you to do and (2) leisure: enjoying the gifts God has given to you.

When considering how one is to live as a follower of Jesus, the teachings of two passages recorded back-to-back for us in Luke 10 shed great light.²¹ The first passage is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. When a lawyer asks Jesus who his neighbor is in order to know whom he is to love, Jesus replies with a startling truth: every person—especially the one close by who is in need—is his neighbor with no exceptions. Therefore, everyone we come in contact with is a person to love and serve. Each relationship gives us opportunities to care for another no matter how great or small. Paul echoes this sentiment of a life marked by love and service for others explaining that we are to use our Christian freedom not to serve ourselves, but “through love [to] serve one another.”²² This reality implies a life consumed by loving others as prepared for us by God.

Christ’s teaching in response to the lawyer’s question stands in stark contrast with the passage that immediately follows the parable. After answering the lawyer, Jesus and the disciples go on their way to the home of Mary and Martha, two sisters and good friends of Jesus. Martha is busy fulfilling her vocational duties of hospitality in serving her guests. Mary, however, isn’t helping at all but is simply sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to His teaching. Martha is frustrated her sister isn’t helping in the work. However, Jesus reprimands Martha, not Mary, explaining that Mary had chosen the “one thing necessary,”²³ as she sits and listens to Jesus.

²¹ Exact reference is Luke 10:25–42.

²² Gal 5:13.

²³ Luke 10:42.

So which is it? As we consider our created purpose in creation, we are presented with two seemingly contradictory ideas. Are we created to carry out tasks God has given us to do for the good of others; or are we created to be still and listen to Jesus? Rather than falling into the trap of aligning with one idea or the other and then contending against the other option, I submit to you the richness of joy and the fullness of life that is found in answering “both/and.” We are both to carry out acts of service for our neighbor and take time to stop, rest, and listen to Jesus. The one aspect of life cannot be properly fulfilled without the other.

Again, the creation account provides our starting point. Here, we see that God models for us cohesion between work and rest as He works by creating the world in six days and then intentionally resting on the seventh.²⁴ Why does God rest for a day? We know He never grows tired or weary.²⁵ He does not rest for His own needs but as a way of setting a rhythm of life in creation. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th century Lutheran theologian, explains, “[Rest] is never the rest of a lethargic God; it is the rest of the Creator. It is no relinquishing of the world, but the ultimate glorification of the world which is gazing upon the Creator.”²⁶ Bonhoeffer defines Sabbath rest in light of the resurrection as the day of “victory”, “dominion”, “perfection”, “transfiguration” and “for us, the day of worship, the day of hope looking towards the day of final rest with God”.²⁷ From the beginning, we see how God has wired creation to both work and rest, demonstrating and honoring both activities as vital for life.

Much literature has been written throughout Christendom on how Christians are to

²⁴ See Gen 1–2.

²⁵ Is 40:28.

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 45.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, 46.

approach the Sabbath. Some argue Christians are to maintain the same kind of honoring of the Sabbath day as the Jews do. Others believe in light of Christ's resurrection that the Sabbath is now the first day of the week (Sunday). Still others believe that Christ has fulfilled the need for Sabbath and argue it is no longer relevant or necessary to follow.²⁸ In light of Jesus' atoning work on the cross, I submit to you that the heart of the creation account is not legalistically to pin down the meaning of the text as a six to one ratio of work versus rest. For while the Sabbath served a legalistic purpose in the life of the Israelites, in Jesus, we know our Sabbath rest. Sabbath is no longer confined to a day but is embodied in a Person and our relationship with that Person.²⁹ In a very real sense, whenever and wherever we find delight in Jesus and creation, we are participating in Sabbath rest. We are created to live restfully in this delight in Christ while also working heartily to care for our neighbor. We live most fully when we practice this ongoing rhythm. Both the doctrine of vocation as ably presented by Wingren and his heirs, and Josef Pieper's description of leisure are in play here and provide a balance, one to the other. To be fully human, living the fullest life, is to embrace both the hard work of our many vocations as well as the delight of restful joy in our Creator and Savior.

In our 21st century North American culture, the majority of people, even Christians, undoubtedly err on the side of emphasizing work over and above rest. It is not uncommon for devout Christians to busy themselves in lives of service. We know our lives should be marked by the good works God has for us to do in caring for our many neighbors. Whether admitted or not,

²⁸ A consideration of the detailed arguments relating to understanding the Sabbath lies outside the scope of this paper. It is enough to recognize my use of the relational aspects of Sabbath as a celebration and restoration of the Creator/creature relationship. For further exploration of these ideas, see Christopher John Donato, *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2011).

²⁹ See Heb 4.

there is the impression that a believer is a “better Christian” when her schedule is filled with volunteer opportunities and ministry meetings. American Christians busy themselves doing God’s work so much so that Max Weber, a sociologist and philosopher, coined the term “Protestant work ethic” in the early 1900s to describe the hard work and discipline so invariably characteristic of Protestants.³⁰

Weber elaborated on this idea and in his 1934 study on capitalism and the protestant ethic, he highlighted the adage, “One does not work to live, one lives to work.”³¹ This follows the same line of thinking as the 18th century German reformer, Nikolaus Zinzendorf, who wrote, “One does not only work in order to live, but one lives for the sake of one’s work.”³² Almost 100 years after Weber’s study was released, no one bats an eye at this idea; it describes the world in which we live. Josef Pieper notes, “We even find some difficulty in grasping that it [the idea that we live to work] reverses the order of things [in creation] and stands them on their head.”³³ Placing the priority on work over Sabbath rest or leisure is not the order in which we were created to live. However hard it is for us to grasp that man does not, in fact, live to work, the obsession with work has not always been the natural disposition for man. In fact, I will argue it should not be.

Therefore, the words of twentieth century theologian, Josef Pieper, ring uncomfortably in our ears. Pieper points us to Aristotle who contends that “leisure is the center-point about which everything else revolves.”³⁴ Aristotle understood that, “We are unleisurely in order to have

³⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 67.

³¹ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1952), 20.

³² Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 222.

³³ Pieper, *Leisure*, 20.

³⁴ Pieper, *Leisure*, 21.

leisure.”³⁵ Significant to note in this quote is the term “unleisurely”. The Greeks were so oriented around leisure as the focal point of life that Aristotle doesn’t even use a word for “work” in his statement beyond calling it “unleisurely”. This further emphasizes the value these Greeks placed on leisure.

Pieper makes the uncommon argument that the Greeks were right, and that we, today, have the orientation backwards. The Greeks, Romans and even people of the Middle Ages, Pieper contends, would consider our obsession with work to be as absurd as we think their own lack of emphasis on work to be.³⁶ For our purposes here, we do not need to dive into why or how this shift has occurred, but can simply recognize that this is our contemporary reality. The rhythm of our 21st century life is to work five or six days in a row and then—maybe—take a day off to rest so we can go back to our work again. Rest is viewed as a means to an end that allows us to continue to do what is “really” important—work. Rather, Pieper describes that part of what it means to be human as embracing not only or even primarily what can be seen as “useful” (work) but also, leisure.

What is leisure? At the heart of leisure is celebration. “Celebration is the point at which the three elements of leisure come to a focus: relaxation, effortlessness, and superiority of ‘active leisure’ to all functions.”³⁷ Celebration is “man’s affirmation of the universe and his experiencing the world in an aspect other than its everyday one.”³⁸ Said another way, “Leisure embraces everything which, without being *merely* useful, is an essential part of a full human

³⁵ Pieper, *Leisure*, 20.

³⁶ Pieper, *Leisure*, 22.

³⁷ Pieper, *Leisure*, 65.

³⁸ Pieper, *Leisure*, 65.

existence.”³⁹ These ideas of leisure provide the necessary “other half” of humanity’s purpose and help us reclaim the rhythm of life God established for us in creation. Pieper helps us by identifying a legitimate, key part of human existence as non-work, that is, leisure.

Fighting the work-to-live mentality, Pieper proposes that we do not rest only to be able to work again as if work is of greater importance than rest. No, for rest is not rest at all if it is only serving work’s agenda. Pieper explains, “Leisure cannot be achieved at all when it is sought as a means to an end, even though that end be ‘the salvation of Western civilization’.”⁴⁰ Rather than continuing in a work-to-live mentality, Pieper urges us to follow God’s established rhythm of creation where we both work and rest. To only value work or to misuse the gift of leisure misses the mark of a life lived to the full.

Pieper doesn’t stop with just acknowledging rest as “celebration” but further defines leisure at its purest as more than just lack of activity, but as a relationship that is most fully realized in worship. Pieper explains:

[I]f celebration is the core of leisure, then leisure can only be made possible and justifiable on the same basis as the celebration of a festival. *That basis is divine worship...* Now we cannot conceive a more intense affirmation of the world than ‘praise of God’, praise of the Creator of this very world... The most festive festival it is possible to celebrate is divine worship.⁴¹

Worship is the highest form of leisure because it is the celebration of the Creator of the world, the Giver of all gifts we enjoy in creation.

Our celebration of divine worship is a foretaste of paradise, a glimpse into the wedding feast prepared for us.⁴² Our liturgy rightly grasps this as we sing, “This is the Feast of victory for

³⁹ Pieper, *Leisure*, 70.

⁴⁰ Pieper, *Leisure*, 72.

⁴¹ Pieper, *Leisure*, 65.

⁴² Rev 19.

our God!”⁴³ Leisure is bound up intimately with worship. In worship, we celebrate our victory in Jesus and are refreshed in His body and blood. This celebration is whole in itself. Worship is not a means to an end. Just as rest cannot be rest if it is a means to an end, so too, the “celebration of God in worship cannot be done unless it is done for its own sake. That most sublime form of affirmation of the world as a whole is the fountainhead of leisure,” says Pieper.⁴⁴

Furthermore, like all of leisure, worship is not something that can be obtained. “Worship is either something ‘given’ ...or it does not exist at all.”⁴⁵ In worship, we experience the Divine serving us. Through the proclamation of the Word and reception of the Sacraments, we are bathed in Christ’s richest blessings of forgiveness of sins and the promise of life everlasting. The sweet news of the Gospel causes us to delight. Bonhoeffer echoes this idea: “Rest means completion, it means the perfection and peace of God in which the world rests, it means transfiguration, it means turning our eyes absolutely upon God’s being God and towards worshipping him.”⁴⁶ There is rest, peace and joy in this pure reception and reflection of God as God. This is leisure at its highest.

While leisure is at its fullest in worship, we experience it in derivative forms whenever and wherever we witness and celebrate God’s delight in creation. Celebrating the gifts of creation given to us by the Creator is also a legitimate part of leisure. One need not even be a Christian to be able to discern the good gifts of creation. This kind of leisure is not limited to Christians only but can be enjoyed by all people as fellow members of creation. C.S. Lewis explains that God

⁴³ The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 155.

⁴⁴ Pieper, *Leisure*, 72.

⁴⁵ Pieper, *Leisure*, 73.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 45.

did not primarily create man so “that we may love God (though we are made for that too) but that God may love us, that we may become objects in which the Divine love may rest ‘well pleased.’”⁴⁷ Lewis helps us expand Pieper’s understanding of leisure by emphasizing the love we receive from God throughout His created world. God created man so that He could love and even serve us, that is, so we can experience His gift of leisure—both in worship and in creation.

We recognize this reality every time we confess the Apostles’ Creed. Martin Luther’s explanation to the First Article expounds upon the ways in which the Father “richly and daily provides...all [we] need to support this body and life” throughout our experience of creation.⁴⁸ God shows us His “fatherly, divine goodness and mercy” for our creaturely lives by caring for the health and wellness of our body, mind, and soul and by providing for our physical and temporal needs like clothing, shelter, food, family, and protection.⁴⁹ With the words from both Luther and Lewis in mind, we realize man is not the center of creation; God is. Recognizing God as the provider and sustainer of life frees us from worry and fear to rest instead in God’s faithfulness as our God and our reality as His children. It allows us to enjoy leisure.

As we consider all the ways in which God provides for and sustains us in this life, the response of leisure quickly invades and permeates every aspect of a life well-lived. In all of creation, as we recognize and receive God’s love towards us, we experience the peace and joy of leisure. This expansive reach of leisure into all areas of life includes the peace and joy that can be found in the reception and development of our athletic gifts and abilities. As scholars have adequately explained, sport is a gift of creation through the development of culture and

⁴⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 1940), 41.

⁴⁸ SC, Creed; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 354.

⁴⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 354.

civilization. Furthermore, our athleticism, sound mind, and healthy body are also gifts from God. Recognizing the Giver of these gifts guards us against prideful bragging and jealous comparing. Trusting that God purposefully gives to each of us good gifts in this life brings rest and enjoyment in those gifts.

Luther concludes his explanation to the First Article with our response to God's freely given gifts to us: "For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him."⁵⁰ We do this fully when we are humans as God intended: as we serve our neighbor in our vocations and celebrate God's grace in leisure. As we carry out our vocations, we obey God and serve our neighbor. As we acknowledge God as God and us as His creatures, we thank and praise Him in the experience of leisure. We also thank and praise God for the gifts given to us as humans by using them as they are intended to be used; in other words, to live as we have been created to live. For the athlete, that means to joyfully embrace running and jumping and throwing and shooting and hitting and catching and all that you do knowing that in doing so, you are celebrating leisure in and through the gifts and life God has created for you. Sport is certainly an avenue for sweet leisure in the celebration of the gifts of God's good creation but it's more than that. Sport is also an opportunity for vocational work.

Leisure Together

Just as it was not good for Adam to be alone,⁵¹ so too, we are not to experience leisure by ourselves. Leisure is not intended to only be a private moment between Jesus and myself. Communion with God is intended to be a shared experience with Jesus, myself, and all of

⁵⁰ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 355.

⁵¹ Gen 2:18.

creation. Worship affects both our vertical relationship with God as well as our horizontal relationships in creation with those around us. Jesus makes this interconnectedness clear when He instructs the disciples to leave their gift at the altar to first go and be reconciled with their neighbor before returning to worship God.⁵² Worshipping God affects both our relationship with Him and our relationships with those around us. Likewise, the fullness of leisure cannot be achieved without the presence of our neighbor. As our triune God lives in community,⁵³ so we are also to live in community with each other. This cross-section of worshipping God in communion with our neighbor is the richness of leisure.

Wherever community is found, there is work of one's vocation or more likely vocations to do. The virtue of proximity—simply sharing the same space as another person—puts one in relation to other creatures and therefore, entails the responsibilities of vocations. We will further consider vocation in sport below; for now, it is enough to notice how interconnected leisure and vocation are. In the life of a Christian, one cannot be done without the other—and should not attempt to be done without the other! Taken together, leisure and vocation provide freedom and joy for the life of a follower of Jesus.

Leisure + Love

Just as our neighbor is needed for our experience of leisure with God, so too, is the neighbor imperative for our life *coram mundo* marked by vocational service. Living an others-focused life marked by respect and honor of the neighbor is made manifest by faithfully living out the vocations each person has been given. This is the central focus of our *coram mundo*

⁵² Matt 5:23–24.

⁵³ Gen 1:26, Acts 7:55, Phil 1:2, etc.

reality. An article on stewardship provided by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod explains the idea of serving our neighbor for the sake of our neighbor: “Christian service, then, is marked not by a driving obsession to ‘do something for Jesus,’ nor with a fundamental compulsion to express love and gratitude to God by doing good works. Rather, the Christian does good works in an effort to meet the needs of the neighbor, period.”⁵⁴ Love and service is what we have been created to do as we care for creation and those within it.

The correlation between the Father’s love and grace for us—on full display in our receptive experiences of leisure—and our love for others—actively worked out through our vocations—reflects our twofold purpose in life: delighting and serving, resting and working, enjoying leisure, and loving others.

As Martin Luther says, “Behold, from faith thus flows forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one’s neighbor willingly.”⁵⁵ The Christian response to God’s grace is faith toward God and love toward one’s neighbor. Our life is never about ourselves but about receiving what God gives in faith and then serving our neighbor through our good works. In other words, we respond to God’s grace by believing, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we will have life in His name.”⁵⁶ It also means we believe Jesus when He summarizes all of God’s commands for us as loving God and loving our neighbor.

Loving is the action or “work” at the center of God’s will for His people. It’s what we are supposed to do with our lives. We discover this in light of Jesus’ teachings and with the help of

⁵⁴ Office of National Mission—Stewardship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Stewardship: A Theological Perspective*, 6.

⁵⁵ *LW*, 31:367

⁵⁶ John 20:31.

the Lutheran Confessions. The Formula of Concord explains that the Law of God existed before the Fall as God's guiding instructions for how Adam and Eve were to live life.⁵⁷ The Law still serves a place in the lives of redeemed believers today by "light[ing] their way"⁵⁸ to live as God designed. If we understand the Law to be God's will for our lives, then understanding the center of the Law reveals God's greatest desire for His people.

Jesus teaches that all of the Law and the Prophets are summed up in loving God and loving others.⁵⁹ Jesus' twofold command gives light to the thesis undergirding this paper: the fullness of life is found in loving God and loving others through the ongoing rhythm of leisure and vocation. These concepts are not mutually exclusive but rather work together even playing off of one another. For we show God love by both delighting in Him, that is, by joyfully receiving what he gives (leisure) and by keeping His commands (carried out in work/vocation). And what does He command? That we believe in Jesus (leisure/worship) and love one another (work/vocation).⁶⁰ This brings us full circle: we love God by doing what He commands which is to love others. And how do we love others? By living as God has created us to be, which includes both vocations and leisure. The more we reflect on the relationship between the twofold greatest commandment (love of God and love of neighbor), the more we will see how completely interconnected they are. This liberates and empowers the Christian to faithfully live as she has been created to be. Both leisure and vocations are gifts given to us from God. These aren't gifts to keep to ourselves and bury in the sand.⁶¹ Rather, in order to use these gifts, we actively live in God's love and

⁵⁷ Ep VI.2; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 502.

⁵⁸ Ep VI.4 in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 502.

⁵⁹ Matt 22:36–40.

⁶⁰ John 6:29 and Matt 22:36–40.

⁶¹ See Matt 25:14–30.

grace to do the work God intended for us to do.

This basic thought is so significant, and perhaps so unfamiliar, it deserves a concise restatement: Man has been created both to delight in His Creator as well as to carry out vocational work. One is not above the other but rather the two work in tandem in our Christian life and feed off of each other. It is impossible to enjoy the full abundance of the life God intends for us as His creatures without this balance. Living in this twofold reality is what it means to be fully human.

God's Glory is a Human Being Fully Alive

So how does this twofold reality impact the athlete? Much of American Christianity has validated sport by quoting Paul's words that in 'whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.'⁶² Therefore, it is argued, when the Christian competes, he competes for the glory of God. This raises a lot of questions around what is meant by "the glory of God" and how one does anything to God's glory. Assumptions vary across Christendom. Therefore, it's a term worth taking time to unpack from a Lutheran perspective.

As we have described above, many Christians assume that playing for God's glory means worshipping God through elite performance prompting intimate surges of pleasure in sport. But, if such a personal, internal, "spiritual" connection with God does not align with God's intentions for man to live for the sake of the other and to worship God in *community* as we've described above, what, then, do these verses have to say about playing for God's glory? I believe they perfectly describe the dynamic relationship that exists between bringing God glory and serving our neighbor.

⁶² 1 Cor 10:31.

Humans bring God glory not through pious feelings or a mystical experience of the divine but simply by living as God created them to live. As the early church father, Irenaeus, says, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”⁶³ Similarly, Luther concludes “that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian.”⁶⁴ The very essence of what it means to be a Christian is to experience leisure (being “in Christ”) and practice vocation (serving our neighbors).

Jesus beautifully describes our life in this world in His famous “Sermon on the Mount,” a countercultural sermon all about how to live as a follower of God who loves others. He says: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”⁶⁵

Jesus compares humans to a light. Light by its very nature cannot be hidden by darkness. Furthermore, it is absurd to put a light under a basket. Light serves no purpose under a basket; rather, lights are created for stands to “give light to all in the house.”⁶⁶ These verses urge Christians to recognize who we have been created to be and to use the gifts we have been given accordingly. The gifts and abilities we have been given are not for ourselves but for the benefit of others. Like the light Jesus describes, our gifts are not to be hidden under a basket but set on display. Why? “So that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in

⁶³ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325. Vol. 1* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1918), 490.

⁶⁴ LW 31:371.

⁶⁵ Matt 5:14–16.

⁶⁶ Matt 5:15b.

heaven.”⁶⁷ Just as a light used according to its created purpose lights up a dark space, so we, when using the gifts we’ve been given according to their created intentions, live as God purposes. The display of gifts, abilities, or good works is not for our own glory but by performing them, by living according to how we have been created, we reveal the glory of our Father, the Creator and Giver of our life and talents. So how do we do everything for the glory of God as Paul instructs? By living as God has created us to live.

With this understanding in mind, let’s consider the text around which verse thirty-one of 1 Corinthians 10 was written. In this passage, Paul is instructing the Christians in Corinth on how to live among their unbelieving neighbors. While the scope of this paper does not allow for in-depth exegetical work on this passage, we can readily gather that Paul’s point to the Christians here is to do whatever needs to be done to serve the neighbor.⁶⁸ The guide in determining how Christians are to live faithfully comes not in verse 31 but in verse 24: “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”⁶⁹ This is what instructs Paul’s summary statement in verse 31 that in whatever decision you make—to do something or not do something— do it all for the glory of God. So, how do we know what will bring God glory? That which is in the best interest of the neighbor as directed by the will of God for His creatures is what brings God glory.

Of course, if there was ever an example of living for the glory of God by doing what is in the best interest of his neighbor, it is found in Jesus. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection most eloquently display the glory of God as God made the fullness of His glory known to us in a

⁶⁷ Matt 5:16.

⁶⁸ 1 Cor 10:23.

⁶⁹ 1 Cor 10:24.

human being, the Word made flesh.⁷⁰ In the Garden of Gethsemane, we see the anguish of Jesus before the Father as He obediently chooses to do what is in the interest of others—to go to the cross—even at the great cost of humiliation, betrayal, isolation, and death. Yet in His crucifixion and glorious resurrection, God’s glory is indeed most fully revealed. Christ put the greatest need of the whole world—its salvation—in front of His own human comfort and interests. In doing so, Jesus most clearly reveals the glory, victory and power of the Father. This is Jesus living out the fullness of humanity.

So what is in the best interest of our neighbor in sport? The Latin root of the word “compete” literally means “to strive together.”⁷¹ “Competition [is a way] to maximize our gifts and perform to the best of our ability.”⁷² As iron sharpens iron,⁷³ so one athlete sharpens another when engaged in competition. We serve our neighbor and glorify God by refining our talents and abilities. Stewarding the gifts we have been given is part of what it means to live as God has purposed for us and will be expounded upon in a later section. When we use the gifts we’ve been given, we are like a lamp on a stand. When we compete against others, we strive together. There is a mutual refining process. In the height of competition, opponents bring out the best in one another by pushing each another to be the best athlete—the best creature—they can be.

Fulfilling a vocational calling is not segmented to one part of life marked as “sport” but affects the person as a whole including her other vocations. What happens on the court also affects the whole of a person off the court. For example, a surge of energy and enthusiasm

⁷⁰ John 1:14.

⁷¹ Weir, *What the Book Says*, 69.

⁷² Weir, *What the Book Says*, 69.

⁷³ Prov 27:17.

following a win can renew an athlete's patience when caring for a younger sibling or in persisting to learn a challenging concept in school. Similarly, a season-ending injury can sideline a player both physically as well as emotionally resulting in social isolation, depression, or lower motivation in the classroom or workplace. While self-seeking motivations to succeed in sport can also be at play here, I believe on a theological level, that an athlete enjoys a surge of joy not only because of the rush of endorphins or an increase in popularity among peers but also because there is joy in living as God has created you to be. Experiencing joy in one part of life carries over into all of the others; it all ties together with how you have been created as a child of God. The same concept holds true as you use your giftings in other vocations. Utilizing the gifts God has given in one area of life can have a positive effect on the rest of your life as a child of God. In utilizing your gifts, the lamp on the stand continues to shine.

Please understand here that the size of the flame shining is not what matters. While the comparison of athletic abilities is needed for a coach to determine who to put in the game, when it comes to the vocation of athlete and his enjoyment of God's leisure, playing time does not dictate outcome. What does matter is that your gifts are in use and your neighbor is served, be it your fellow teammate as you bring them water from the bench or the referee as you respect his ruling of the play or the child in the stand learning from you what it looks like to compete with integrity. Light can be seen in the darkness regardless of its size. By simply being what light is created to be, it shines. So too, by simply being whom we have been created to be, God's gifts in us are on display and our neighbor is served. God is glorified through the use of our talents in our vocations for the sake of the other.

Serving others is not the only reason to participate in sport, of course. In fact, we should be leery of those who suggest that love of the neighbor is the only right reason to engage in

competition. Obviously, athletes compete not just to serve someone else, but also because competition brings the athlete great joy; and in a very real sense it is a way to experience leisure as Josef Pieper describes. We celebrate leisure in sport in multiple ways as we delight in God's gifts of creation given to us in our bodies, athletic ability, and the aspects of the sport itself. Lincoln Harvey, assistant dean and systematics professor at St. Mellitus College in London explains the correlation of sport and creation:

Christians have always understood the whole of creation to be for the glory of God. The sun, moon and stars, the mountains, trees and animals, all in their own way are singing the praises of God. This means we must say that these things – at some level – are not for nothing. They are instead for the glory of God. Given that sport is part of the created order, surely it must also be for the glory of God.⁷⁴

Building upon Harvey's idea of sport being part of the created order, this thesis goes one step further with the help of Josef Pieper to include sport, like the rest of creation, as a vehicle and place for the celebration of leisure. Pieper says, "In leisure, man too celebrates the end of his work by allowing his inner eye to dwell for a while upon the reality of the Creation. He looks and he affirms: it is good."⁷⁵ It is the rich idea of leisure in action as we take in God's good creation around us in the smell of a freshly cut field or the bounce of a wooden floor under our sneakers. We celebrate the essence of leisure when we marvel at the laws of physics in play as the hitter contacts the baseball at the right angle and speed to send it arcing high over the outfield wall. Leisure is also apparent as we enjoy and praise God for deep bonds with teammates and coaches. All of these things are good, pleasurable, leisurely gifts from God. In celebrating these gifts, we can celebrate the Giver and His creation. Thus, we give God glory. This is leisure in sport.

⁷⁴ Lincoln Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 94.

⁷⁵ Pieper, *Leisure*, 49.

I would also contend athletes can experience an illogical kind of leisure even in the height of competition as they fulfill their vocation of athlete. This fits with Pieper's understanding of leisure as being in sync with God and His creation. Pieper describes leisure not as "non-activity" or compete "tranquility" but "like the tranquil silence of lovers, which draws its strength from concord." When an athlete is at his best, the game can seem in slow motion. Despite physical exhaustion, his supply of energy seems limitless as adrenaline pumps through his body. There is an extra spring in his step and power in his hit. His soul is refreshed through this experience of leisure. There is also great vocational joy in competing, in being a teammate, in participating in the game as it has been designed to be played as I have described above. The results of the vocation of athlete are also good gifts to celebrate. They are also a byproduct of leisure. Both leisure and vocation work in tandem.

As I've described, God's glory can be found in the giving of a gift from the Creator to His creation. God receives glory in sport without—even, despite—our attempts to spiritualize competition. Sport played by the Christian athlete does not need to be doused in prayer, sandwiched between group devotions, or merely considered as a way to develop good character for sport to be justified as honorable. We don't need to downplay winning, or play without keeping score. We don't even have to justify sport as only a great opportunity for evangelism and relationship-building in order for God to receive glory. Sport shines God's glory because it is a pure gift from the Creator given to His creation. As Harvey says, "Sport is only to the glory of God because it is for no reason other than itself. He allows this balletic self-standing. That is his generosity. That is his glory. And that is precisely what is so amazing about sport. It is not for

God. It *is* simply the graceful creature.”⁷⁶ God needs nothing from our athletic play. It is simply His gift to us to live out and enjoy in His creation. As Harvey describes it, “[Sport] is graced creatures living out grace.”⁷⁷ This frees the Christian athlete from self-righteous guilt or despair. We are free to compete because we are free to enjoy and delight in God’s gifts to us. No strings attached.

Gospel or Law?

The thought that may be shocking to the Lutheran ear is the emphasis on being “leisurely.” Many Lutherans have embraced Luther’s doctrine of vocation wholeheartedly and the results have served us well and produced much good.⁷⁸ Work in God-given vocations has been rightly celebrated by Lutherans. However, one should be wary of limiting the doctrine of vocation only to work-oriented outcomes without also being able to situate vocation within the context of leisure. As I mentioned above and will further explore, strange as it may seem to some, I believe that leisure and vocation are complementary and even that leisure can be experienced in the doing of vocation.

The idea of experiencing leisure in vocation is contrary to much of our traditional teaching on vocation which relies heavily upon 20th century theologian, Gustaf Wingren. Wingren, author of *Luther on Vocation*, offers a synthesis of Luther’s teaching on vocation. It accomplishes much that is good.⁷⁹ However, while further exploration lies beyond the scope of this paper, Wingren is

⁷⁶ Harvey, *Theology of Sport*, 96.

⁷⁷ Harvey, *Theology of Sport*, 94.

⁷⁸ In Lutheran circles, the work of Gene Veith has played an influential role in the modern-day application and acceptance of the doctrine of vocation. For further reading, see Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002).

⁷⁹ It’s even relied upon positively throughout this thesis.

also a product of his time and falls prey to the Law-Gospel reductionist trap.⁸⁰ Believing that the only use of the Law is to kill and destroy, he appears to struggle to talk about the Law in a positive light as a guide for our Christian life or having the ability to bring pleasure as we carry out our vocations. This is in direct contrast of the author of Psalm 119 who writes the longest chapter in the Bible on the praise, delight, and longing admiration of God’s Law. The psalmist says, “In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.”⁸¹ For this psalmist and devout follower of Yahweh, the Law holds high value and apparent joy.

Instead of allowing for the possibility of delighting in our vocations as we live as God commands, it seems that Wingren looks to the Gospel to carry more of the load that rightly belongs on the Law’s shoulders. The Gospel is the proclamation of God’s favor on us because of the forgiveness of our sins through faith in Jesus. Period. While this most certainly brings us great joy, and leads us to a life of faith, the Gospel itself is freely given with no “next step” requirements to ensure its validity. It is the Law, not the Gospel, that lays out how God wants His forgiven children to live. After preaching the Gospel to an adulterous woman by pardoning her sins, Jesus instructs her with the Law to “go and sin no more”.⁸² This is a proper correlation between the Law and Gospel. The woman was rightly condemned by the Law, pardoned by Jesus (Gospel) and then instructed how to live as one redeemed (Law). However, placing the

⁸⁰ For more information on Law-Gospel reductionism, read: David S. Yeago, “Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal,” *Pseudepigraphus* (July 22, 2016), <http://www.pseudepigraph.us/2016/07/22/gnosticism-antinomianism-and-reformation-theology-reflections-on-the-costs-of-a-construal/> (accessed June 15, 2018).

⁸¹ Ps 119:14–16.

⁸² John 8:11.

Gospel as motivation to “do good” (e.g. “Because Jesus forgave me, I will...”) misuses the message of forgiveness of sins—which rightly comes with no strings attached—and overlooks the legitimate use of the Law as a guide for the life of the believer. This proper teaching between Law and Gospel should be evident throughout this thesis as we explore Christian motivation to play sport. While some Christians use the Gospel as motivation to compete in sport, I will argue that we compete and perform good works simply because that’s what God has called His children to do as described through His Law for His creation.

With this Law/Gospel distinction in mind, recognizing the interconnectedness between living as God has created a person to be according to his vocations as explained by the Law and that person experiencing God’s love in the gospel-suffused celebration of leisure, I contend that the Christian athlete can experience both leisure and vocation in the world of sport. Leisure is not limited to our *coram Deo* relationship of reception from God. We experience the same sort of peace and joy before God when we live as His creatures in our *coram mundo* reality. There is peace and joy that comes from living as God has intended. In our vocations—in our vocations as *athletes*—we can experience both leisure and service.

CHAPTER FOUR

MISINTERPRETATIONS OF FAITH IN SPORT

“Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”¹ This beginning of the Westminster Shorter Catechism provides the overwhelming influence and foundation for much of American Evangelicalism’s motivation to engage in sport. Through sport, the athlete can glorify God. It is a way to offer worship and praise. This, they profess, is admirable, righteous reasoning to compete. By making sport a “living sacrifice” or “spiritual act of worship”² as Paul urges as marks of the Christian life, the questions that challenge sport as an appropriate use of time and energy are answered. Presenting your body as a living sacrifice is holy and acceptable to God. Sports chaplain, Roger Lipe, illustrates sport as a living sacrifice:

No human enterprise more requires the presentation of one’s body as a living sacrifice as does sport. The daily process of training, practice and competition is certainly sacrificial, and I would submit holy and pleasing to God...It is such because it is empowered by the sportsperson’s desire to declare his love for, devotion to and the greatness of his God. It is worship just like the expression of the musician, painter, dancer, preacher, writer or sculptor.³

Competition provides a unique combination of mind and body, of heart and strength, allowing the athlete to experience holistically what presenting one’s body as a living sacrifice could be.

However, some have argued that this understanding of sport as a spiritual act of worship that is so prevalent in American sports ministry is actually wrong. Rather than aligning sport

¹ The Orthodox Presbyterian Church. “Shorter Catechism,” accessed February 9, 2018, <https://www.opc.org/sc.html>.

² Rom 12:1.

³ Roger Lipe. *Free to Compete: Reflections on Sport from a Christian Perspective* (Grand Island, NE: Cross Training, 2013), 102.

with worship, Professor Harvey seeks to provide a theology of sport by countering these ideas with the reasoning that worship and sport are not the same but rather completely separate.

Whereas worship is for the Creator, playing sport is for the creature. Sport is not for Jesus but for us. While this may sound almost unchristian, I believe he is onto something. Harvey explains:

Worship is the liturgical celebration of who God is. Sport is the liturgical celebration of who we are. There is a world of difference between the two. But worship and sport do belong together in some sense, not least because they are both – in distinction from the necessities of life – radically free. We freely worship God for his intrinsic glory, just as we freely play sport to celebrate our intrinsic meaning.⁴

Harvey's argument provides a new curveball challenging the standing narrative and at least at this time, is an uncommon view of worship and sport. While his thought suggests a hopeful direction that I will build upon, some of his conclusions lack clarity and more troubling, may go too far in contrasting sport as wholly separate from faith.

For example, it is strange how far Harvey goes to differentiate between worship and sport without recognizing that other hobbies, interests, and skillsets such as music, drama, or art could also be included in the same category as sport. There is nothing that uniquely qualifies sport as a distinct "liturgy" separated from the rest of the human experience. Still, Harvey's assertion that the purpose of sport is not for what Christians can get out of it but for the joy of sport itself does provide an important opening for further consideration.

In light of the current practice of American sports ministry and Harvey's insight on sport and worship, I will suggest and discuss three common misconceptions which have manipulated sport in an attempt to make it spiritually pleasing to God by (1) an emphasis on conscious awareness of God in sport, (2) sport as a replacement for church and (3) effort and intensity as

⁴ Harvey, *A Brief Theology*, 108.

the grounds for spiritual sacrifice.

Emphasis on Conscious Awareness of God in Sport

Some sports ministers contend that sport can glorify God through the integration of the Gospel in competition. In his book, *Focus on Sport in Ministry*, Lowie McCown says:

The demonstration, experience, and integration of the gospel in the activity of sport is as valuable as proclamation of the gospel...[W]e need to think of ways to integrate faith seamlessly into our sport experience and connect God to all aspects of our lives – on and off the playing fields.⁵

And again he avers, “Placing Jesus as the center of all our activities is the solution to fragmentalization [sic] and shattered lives.”⁶ I appreciate and support this desire to not compartmentalize life into a sports box and a Jesus box. And, Hebrews 12:1 comes to mind as we are called to fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith. Jesus should be at the center of all of our activities and life, no doubt, including sport. However, I fear an overcorrection, and have personally experienced what might be named the over-spiritualization of sport. What follows is an account of how one effort to make sport overtly spiritual played out during a national camp for college athletes run by the nation’s largest sports ministry effort, Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

In 2014, I attended a weekend conference for college athletes in which we were being encouraged as athletes and as Christians. In an attempt to support us and shape us athletically and spiritually, we were encouraged to view every athletic drill as an opportunity for worship; that is, worship, as in opportunities for praise to God. Melding the two ideas as we knew them, this meant yelling, “Hallelujah” and “Thank you, Jesus,” as we ran through layup lines slapping

⁵ Lowie McCown and Valerie Gin. *Focus on Sport* (Marietta, GA: 360 Sport, 2003), 166.

⁶ McCown, *Focus on Sport*, 167.

hands and rebounding the ball.

I don't doubt the leaders' intentions were genuine. They were seeking to integrate praise to Jesus into the routine activities of an athlete. In doing so, however, I actually felt more fragmented and torn. I was focusing on catching the ball, dribbling with speed and finishing a left-handed layup with agility and precision all the while reminding my lips to be saying "churchy phrases" like "Alleluia!" between strides. It was unnatural and disjointed. People were dropping passes and missing easy shots because their focus wasn't on the technique of the sport. Others were forgetting to shout praises so we'd stop and do the drill over so everyone would be "worshipping". How ironic that a drill seeking to instill worshipping God with our bodies in sport still tried to describe worship in a traditional way of singing/speaking praises to God. In short, it was a schizophrenic mess.

Still, there is good to take away from this experience. For, we *should* fight dualism and the compartmentalizing of life. It is important to view ourselves holistically connected as mind, body and spirit and give equal value to all three. We should view the use of our bodies in the activities of this life as a spiritual act of worship, a way of living out the vocations God has given. Yet, while this Christian sports camp tried conceptually to speak holistically, practically speaking, this approach led to an emphasis on our abilities and actions outside the realm of sport. In order to worship God on the basketball court, I needed to exalt His name as if I were in a church pew. Somehow, simply playing the game wasn't enough. The message this conveyed is that I had to be more than a lamp on a stand doing what a lamp on a stand does. I had to do more than be an athlete competing in sport; this was insufficient without also verbally praising Jesus while competing.

We must be careful not to overlook the deep-seated pietistic thinking that only validates

sport when the athlete is consciously seeking God and finding direct and literal ways to praise Him during competition. This includes making the mindful effort to “play hard” as the justification of sport played for Jesus as I will later discuss. Instead, sport can be and is a glorifying act to God simply by playing the game as it’s supposed to be played. For in doing so, we are fully human: enjoying the gifts God has given us and using them in our sport-related vocations. Enjoying leisure and fulfilling our vocations is honorable and pleasing to God because it is living life as He has designed for us to live. And when creatures do what they are created to do they glorify and worship God (how else do hills clap their hands and mute stars give praise to God in Psalm 148?) We need not overcomplicate it—or demean the praise inherent in vocations by trying overtly to “spiritualize” them.

Divine Worship

Another misconception of sport as pleasing to God that works in the opposite direction is the de-emphasis of formal worship for an emphasis on worship in sport. Because God created the body (and every physical thing), participating in physical activities, it is argued, is just as good and right as “spiritual”⁷ activities. Therefore, it is concluded, sport is a good gift from God and worthy of our participation. With all of this I completely agree. Sadly, though, in order to legitimize sport in Christian culture as a worthy use of time and resources, some have gone too far by suggesting that competing in sport for the glory of God is a justifiable means for worship in line with attending church on Sunday morning — if not better!

“If God made everything and there is nothing sacred or secular, then to worship God is to

⁷ Spiritual here is used to describe activities traditionally associated with faith like prayer, Scripture reading, attending church, etc.

worship him with all that you are, with all your heart and mind, and if you're doing that in sport it's the same as saying your prayers," states Stuart Weir, director of Christian in Sport.⁸ If worship is defined as giving praise and honor to God, then it can be argued that attending a church service can take a backburner to stewarding your athletic gifts through sport. The athlete can praise God through his play, and some would say this is even better than praising Him through off-tune singing or half-hearted listening to a sermon.

Stephen Altrogge's book, *Game Day For the Glory of God: A Guide for Athletes, Fans, & Wannabees*,⁹ sums up the sentiment about worship through sport this way: "Sports aren't about us but about Jesus. Our intensity on the football field or tennis court should be fueled by a passion to please and honor Jesus Christ."¹⁰ This quote should already sound off some alarms in our head as we consider Harvey's quote above and remember sport as a vocation means its purpose is for the benefit of our neighbor, not Jesus. We'll get to that. But for now, let this quote help paint the picture of sport as replacing formal worship, and we'll continue with this line of thinking.

While we can and do worship God in the faithful use of the talents He's given us, we must also be leery of a slippery slope here. My fear is how Weir's argument of sport as worship is interpreted between his hearers' ears. Worshipping God by faithfully stewarding the gifts He's given you is not the same as going to worship, that is, gathering with the community of believers to hear God's Word and receive His Sacraments.

From a Lutheran understanding, there are two uses of the term "worship:" the broad sense

⁸ Weir, *What the Book Says*, 101.

⁹ Admittedly more of a devotional than academic resource, but it accurately represents the common thought.

¹⁰ Stephen Altrogge, *Game Day For the Glory of God: A Guide for Athletes, Fans & Wannabees* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 54.

of the word in which all of the life of a Christian is included and the narrow sense of the word which focuses on the specific times the community of believers gathers together to receive God's good gifts. Both kinds of worship are essential to the Christian life. However, we must be careful when we start using the same term to express both uses interchangeably. Yes, all of life is worship, and so we rightly worship God when we use the gifts He has given us in sport. This is good and honorable. However, the broad sense of the term cannot and must not replace the narrow sense of the term, "worship," or the full richness of God's grace is lost.

Here's an example of how the terms get confused. Throughout his book, Weir cites Eric Liddell, an Olympic Gold medalist runner and Christian missionary as the litmus test for competing as a form of worship. Liddell's life is chronicled in the 1981 movie, *Chariots of Fire*. In it, Liddell is quoted as saying after winning a race, "God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure."¹¹ From that, Weir concludes:

[S]port is part of God's creation and is therefore good. Eric Liddell's "When I run, I feel his pleasure" is a thoroughly biblical view. It follows from this that it cannot be argued, in absolute terms, that attending church is better than playing football. . . . If sport is part of God's creation, then God can (and must) be worshipped on the sports field as much as anywhere else.¹²

I, too, have experienced the pleasure that comes from competing in sport at its finest. I believe there is a place to talk about this pleasure according to the ways we have previously defined "leisure" and "vocation" in this paper. Most certainly, participation in sport can and does bring us pleasure akin to the enjoyment we experience in other parts of God's creation. However, this is not the same as the highest form of leisure as Pieper describes it that can be experienced solely

¹¹ *Chariots of Fire*, directed by Hugh Hudson (Warner Brothers Pictures, 1981), DVD.

¹² Weir, *What the Book Says*, 99.

in the Divine Service.¹³

As sacramental Christians, Lutherans have an advantage in our grasp of this narrow sense of the word “worship.”¹⁴ As a Lutheran Christian, I recognize worship is not something I do for God but something He does for me. In the Divine Service, the Divine (God) is literally serving me. He gives me His good gifts of Word and Sacraments. I am refreshed anew with the forgiveness of sins and the sweet proclamation of the Gospel. Rightly understood, in this narrow sense of the word “worship,” I cannot worship on the field of competition or anywhere in creation apart from where God’s Word and Sacraments are present and proclaimed because worship is not about what I do with the gifts God has given me, but about receiving what He gives to me. God promises to work in and through His Word, the waters of baptism and the bread and wine of communion. Following God’s promises, the Divine Service in the midst of God’s people is where I go to receive His sacramental gifts of faith and life everlasting.

So, no, playing football is not the same as attending church. Simply because an athlete is better at jumping than singing does not mean he is exempt from gathering together with God’s people. For singing – or any other “church activity” – is not the mark of worship; receiving the Bread of Life is.

Not only is worship about God giving us His divine service, it is also a time regularly to gather together with the community of God’s people to encourage each other and spur each other on towards love and good deeds as the author of Hebrews urges us to do.¹⁵ Remember our previous discussion on the role of community in experiencing leisure. Worship is not primarily

¹³ Pieper, *Leisure*, 65.

¹⁴ Frankly, if I were a non-sacramental Christian, I could not argue much with Weir’s conclusion that we worship God in all that we are so playing and praying are the same.

¹⁵ Heb 10: 23–25.

intended to be done individually. As a life lived rightly is not one for yourself but for your neighbor, sometimes going to church is seemingly not for your benefit but for the benefit of someone around you. Your neighbor needs the good news you have to share with them perhaps through a reassuring smile, encouraging word or knowing hug, or simply by occupying the pew in front of them. Determining you don't "need" to attend worship because you can personally connect with God in another way is short-sided, selfish and contrary to the biblical call to gather together.

Not attending worship neglects our vocational responsibility to be in community with others and to care for our neighbor. As a member of Christ's body, I don't get to choose when or how I want to show up in the lives of others. For "we are one body in Christ and individually members of one another."¹⁶ The ear doesn't choose to hear whenever it feels like it but as vibrations hit the canal, sound enters and the ear passes along the sounds to other parts of the brain to interpret the sounds as words. The ear does this without "choosing" because that's just what it means to (1) be an ear and (2) be connected to the rest of the body. So we, too, have been given gifts—talents we possess. We, too, are connected to others through our relationships and vocations. We are made for community with others.¹⁷ It is like hiding a light under a basket for me to deny others my contribution to the body during the time of worship simply because I don't recognize my mutual need for their contributions in my own life.

To summarize, yes, worship can be used to describe the whole of our life as a Christian. Yes, disciplining our athletic bodies as living sacrifices is honorable and pleasing to God. However, that does not give sportspeople a free pass not to attend worship. Worship in the

¹⁶ Rom 12:5.

¹⁷ Gen 2:18.

narrow sense of the term describes our reception of God’s promised gifts of faith and life everlasting which takes place within and through the mutual edification of the body of believers. Worship (narrow) is not defined by my ability to sing or my greater ability to run. A deficit or abundance of gifts does not preclude or exclude me from worship because worship is about what God does for me, not about how I present my gifts to God. Therefore, choosing to not go to worship is significant because it is choosing not to receive God’s life-giving, faith-strengthening good gifts where He has promised to be present—in His Word and Sacraments.

Playing with 110% Effort

Thirdly, sport as a spiritual act of worship has been distorted by an emphasis on the amount of effort exerted by the athlete as grounds for God’s “pleasure.” By seeing athletic talent as a gift of creation, sports ministers contend we are to steward athletic abilities, using our gifts faithfully.

McCown says:

The Lord has given us the gift of sport and we need to be actively involved in doing whatever we can to not only produce a good return for the Master but to enjoy the opportunities we have to utilize the gifts. The reward for faithful servanthood is sharing in all that the Master has.¹⁸

This line of thought is promising as it recognizes both the vocational responsibility to steward God’s gifts for the sake of the neighbor as well as the leisure component of sport which is caught up in enjoying the opportunities of delighting in God’s gifts given to us. Athletic abilities are indeed gifts to steward. Using and developing athletic abilities should be viewed as part of our task or responsibility in caring for all of creation and faithfully fulfilling our vocations.¹⁹

The parable of the talents is often used as encouragement and motivation to invest in the

¹⁸ McCown, *Focus on Sport*, 157.

¹⁹ Weir, *What the Book Says*, 26; and Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, 77.

athletic gifts God has given so that when the Master returns, He will be pleased, and the servant rewarded.²⁰ The young athlete is inspired, then, to work hard and make the most of what she has been given so God will be glorified through how she competes. This is an appropriate use of the parable. However, the common pitfall occurs when the effort or level of intensity of the servant becomes the grounds for honorable worship. Often, the athlete's intensity in competing or strong work ethic in practice becomes imperative for qualifying competition as an honorable act of worship according to this line of thinking. Altrogge describes the popular sentiment: "We can glorify God through the pursuit of excellence, and excellence only comes through hard work. God isn't glorified by halfhearted, mediocre efforts. So work hard in practice, not for your own honor and praise, but for the glory of God."²¹ Others also emphasize the need to play "with all your heart", referencing Colossians 3:23, for sport to be done in a God-honoring way. This leaves me as the Christian athlete wondering, "How do I know when I'm playing with all my heart (especially knowing I will not have a unified heart this side of eternity)?"²² At what level or standard does my amount of effort please God on the court? Too often sport ministers seek to free sportspeople from the prison of a performance-based identity where their value and worth is dependent on how well they last played only unintentionally to entrap them in another, more righteous-sounding prison where their value or worth is dependent on how hard they play to the glory of God.

Weir uses this same line of thinking as counsel for the Christian deciding whether or not to play sport on Sunday. Weir acknowledges there are no easy solutions to Sunday sport and

²⁰ Matt 25:14-30.

²¹ Altrogge. *Game Day*, 38.

²² Ecc 7:20; Jer 17:9.

concludes, “Whatever decision you take, go for it with all your might.”²³ Again, the amount of “might” used in the decision to use your gifts to the glory of God seems to be the deciding factor whether an action is justified or not. The effort exerted during a task is what counts. It is in line with the adage, “‘A’ for effort,” meaning you are awarded an excellent grade based on the amount of effort you exert.

So how do we know when we’ve gone at something deserving an ‘A’ grade? How do we know when we perform with all of our heart? How do we know when we have given everything in our athletic effort? How do I know when my efforts have been God-pleasing? Is it pleasing to God if I gave 90% effort? 99%? And what do we make of the voice in the back of our head that tells us we could have given a little bit more? Even when I play with what I think is all of my heart, soul, mind, and strength, it can still come up short and cause me to wonder if I really gave it my all. As an athlete, these questions haunted me, and I suspect that my experience is hardly unique to me.

Not for God

As noted above, Harvey’s book, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, published in 2014, offers a differing thought that begins to grasp the idea of sport not being played as a way to glorify God but rather as an expression of what it means to be His creature. Harvey makes the bold claim that sport is *not* for the glory of God but for sport itself. He contends: “Christians should simply play sport for sport, not for the opportunities it presents, be they health, wealth, or evangelistic stage. With sport, these things are secondary.”²⁴

²³ Weir, *What the Book Says*, 103.

²⁴ Harvey, *A Brief Theology*, 113.

It is true that for many Christians—athletes and otherwise—sport is seen primarily as an opportunity for evangelism and outreach. Sport provides the environment for relationships to form, trust to build and meaningful conversations to take place between believers and unbelievers. Sports evangelism, using sport as a means to share the Gospel, is how Christians have validated participation in sport in America for over 75 years. Sports evangelism can be a very effective approach to ministry. However, this is a secondary use of sport, as Harvey defines it. Using sport as a witnessing opportunity, a way to make money, or to keep one’s body in shape are all secondary outcomes of sport. According to Harvey, they are all fine aspects of sport but they are using sport as a means to an end. Unorthodox as it may sound, I believe Harvey points us in the right direction. What I am interested in pursuing is the idea that sport can be of worthwhile value for people and culture aside from other, typical, legitimating purposes (the most relevant of those for the Christian being evangelism and outreach). Rather, I believe sport is a valid part of the life of a Christian because it is part of what makes us fully human.

For Harvey, Christians should play sport for the sake of sport and not for a secondary reason as described above because sport is an “unnecessary but meaningful activity.”²⁵ By “unnecessary but meaningful activity,” Harvey argues that the purpose of sport is the game itself and not something beyond it.²⁶ This idea deserves a closer look.

While not essential to staying alive, it is hard to imagine a person who has never engaged in the act of play²⁷ at some point in life. Even animals such as lions, monkeys, and dolphins have

²⁵ Harvey, *A Brief Theology*, 83.

²⁶ Harvey, *A Brief Theology*, 68.

²⁷ While not exactly one in the same, sport and play are certainly closely related.

been observed playing although no “biological benefit” comes of it.²⁸ This has perplexed researchers for years. For while tasks like eating and sleeping are necessary for a person’s (or animal’s) existence, play appears to have no necessary function. A person does not primarily “get” something from play. There is no “need” to play sport.²⁹ This is what Harvey means by the term, “unnecessary”.

And yet, humans play. Even more, humans often play according to a set of rules. While the rules of any particular game may appear arbitrary, they serve a distinct purpose: the rules keep the game running appropriately and to its end. We know this to be true because a game fails to make sense when someone does not abide by the rules. The rules matter. So while an unnecessary activity for remaining alive, sport also carries with it inherent meaning for those involved within it. The purpose of the game “only makes sense within itself.”³⁰ With this in mind, Harvey rightly asserts that sport is an unnecessary but meaningful activity.

However, Harvey stretches the idea too far by then concluding that sport therefore has its own intrinsic purpose independent from the rest of life.³¹ While sport can be seen as an unnecessary but meaningful activity, it’s not quite *autotelic*,³² meaning, its purpose is entirely independent, not contingent on anything else, nor anything else contingent on it. Certainly, sport, like all of life, is interconnected to and affects other parts of life and culture. Still, Harvey’s description of sport as an opportunity for “creatures living out grace”³³ is a helpful one that can

²⁸ Harvey, *A Brief Theology*, 63.

²⁹ Harvey, *A Brief Theology*, 65.

³⁰ Harvey, *A Brief Theology*, 67.

³¹ Harvey, *A Brief Theology*, 69.

³² “Autotelic” means own (*auto*) purpose (*telos*).

³³ Harvey, *A Brief Theology*, 94.

be further expanded in light of vocation and leisure.

Vocation

Beyond these distinctions between “types” of worship or the amount of energy exerted in a living sacrifice, it is fitting also to address what happens when we don’t experience leisure in sport at all. While sport can be filled with elated highs, it can also be the source of devastating lows. Can participation in sport still be well-pleasing to God even when it isn’t a source of pleasure as Weir describes or an opportunity for worship in the broad sense of the term? What happens when sport does not bring us an enjoyment of God’s gifts in creation? Let me share a personal story from my sports career to explain what I mean.

I had to face my idea of “playing for the glory of God” head-on during the end of my college career. Giving God honor and praise in my playing, as I had been trained to do by the Christian athletic culture, was relatively easy when my team was enjoying the winningest season in school history as we were during my junior year³⁴—when the gym is packed and fans are cheering, when we came out on top of every close match and were connecting with each other. Of course, God must be pleased with this kind of “living sacrifice.” After all, we were competing hard, winning and even getting along off the court.

In light of leisure and vocation, we were greatly enjoying God’s gifts to us in the use of our athletic abilities, team cohesion, and enjoyment of the game. We effortlessly fulfilled our vocations as player and teammate, student, roommate, and friend as we worked out together, studied together, and encouraged each other on and off the court. The team was gelling. We were in the sweet spot of sport where leisure and vocation interconnect in a delightful and pleasurable

³⁴ At that time.

way.

Nothing could have prepared me for the following season my senior year. When you're used to winning, the thought of having a losing season the next year doesn't even cross your mind. Sure, we were losing a strong senior class. No, I didn't think we'd have a repeat of the previous standout season. But I sure didn't anticipate us following up the winningest season in school history with its losing-est season. Yet, that's exactly what happened.

My senior season caused me to think. How does God receive glory and praise when, in my estimation, there is nothing worthy of praise in my team's performance? How is God glorified when the team is unable to connect and is quite simply, outmatched by its opponent? How does my performance bring God glory when I'm injured and on the bench? Sure, I can muster up a smile and cheer on my teammates. I can train myself to display positive outward actions, but God and I both knew my heart. It was anything but cheerful.

I realized if my performance dictates the glory God receives, I'm in big trouble. It's easier to feel like I'm glorifying God when I'm high-fiving teammates and complimenting them on their good play. It's much harder when team cohesion means a team run before a Saturday morning home game up to the dorm room of a freshman teammate who had been irresponsible the night before and hadn't shown up to the gym. Where is God's glory in these moments when it seems the only way He'd receive glory is in spite of me or my team? There had to be something more grounded and enduring than my unreliable ability to play hard, I thought.

I began to wonder how to know when I feel God's pleasure in competition. Is it when I'm having a perfect game and every movement seems easy, my teammates and I are connecting, we're competing hard, encouraging one another, and come out on top of a closely matched game? Certainly, those are some of the highest points in sport that bring a surge of adrenaline-

fueled pleasure. It's a sweet thing. But is that the only time when I feel God's pleasure and can, therefore, deem it worthy worship? What about when we lose terribly? Play terribly? Or get injured and don't play at all? Grounding the basis of worshipping God on whether or not I feel God's pleasure during my athletic experience or if I thought my performance was worthy of praise to God brought me little to no comfort.³⁵

The answer is found in the proper understanding of leisure and vocation in sport. Certainly, I can and do bring praise to God when I use the athletic gifts He has given me on the court to carry out my sport-related vocations and play the game as it has been designed to be played. Perhaps not as obvious, I also had opportunities for leisure and worship in sport as God continued to pour out His gifts to me. My recognition of leisure in sport did not make it any less present just as my recognition of the existence of God does not determine if God is real or not. Leisure is not dependent on our recognition or enjoyment of these good gifts. Whether or not we recognize the "opportunities for enjoyment," as McCown says, does not negate the existence of the gift or the rightness of the activity that practices and celebrates those gifts.

In the light of leisure and vocation, my time on the court and with my teammates was still a valuable use of my resources and energy because in my role as a senior and captain, I had vocational work to do and the gifts of leisure to receive as a result of a life rightly related to both Creator and creatures. Whether on the court or from the injured list I was still surrounded by other people and therefore had opportunities to love and serve my neighbor. Captain's meetings with my head coach turned into opportunities for prayer as his wife underwent a difficult medical condition. Hours spent in rehab allowed me conversations with an Athletic Training student

³⁵ I do not wish to mitigate feelings of pleasure as a legitimate part of our Christian experience but feelings alone provide no sure foundation upon which to ground our faith. They are subjective, constantly changing and provide little assurance during times of doubt or despair.

going through a tough breakup and unsure about her future. As a senior among many freshmen players, I had the opportunity to model what it means to be a student athlete who competes hard, is serious about academics, and places the highest priority on faith. I walked with a freshman player through an unplanned pregnancy and supported another one who was set to play until she received news that she had leukemia. I tutored underclassmen in Spanish and went on coffee runs with my fellow seniors as we discussed what life after volleyball might look like. I was keenly aware of some of these vocational opportunities at the time and sought to intentionally love and serve my neighbor through them. However, other moments did not seem to hold any extraordinary significance at the time; I was simply doing what a teammate does as I shagged loose balls during practice, remained faithful in my weightlifting and conditioning routine, handed out water or towels, or maintained good grades in my classes. Looking back, I can now see some ways in which God worked in and through me in those moments—both significant and ordinary—to strengthen my faith toward Him and express love toward my neighbor. Still, I can't and don't know how God was present and active throughout the entire experience, but I cling to His promises that He is always present with His children and works all things for their good according to his plan.³⁶ Whether consciously aware or not, God can and does work through the vocation of athlete both to strengthen faith and to give the athlete opportunities to care for those around her. I was refreshed in leisure during moments of athletic competition and the daily renewal of grace and forgiveness as I continued on in sport.

These experiences only further illustrate the lamp on a stand metaphor. Whether conscious of my actions or not, simply by being a fellow volleyball player on my team, I was given

³⁶ Rom 8:28, Is 43:2, Matt 28:19–20.

opportunities to love and care for others. The lamp shines on the stand because that's simply what a lamp is created to do regardless of its location or condition. By being part of a team and fulfilling my role on that team I had built-in opportunities to care for others. I could live in God's design for a life marked by Christian service thus making my participation in sport as a legitimate vocation integrated intimately into the rest of my Christian life. This is a good and valuable use of my time and talents. I discovered that I didn't need to quit my sport to focus on "ministry-related" activities to rightly use the gifts God had given me and to care for others.

In addition, sport remained a form of leisure as a celebration and cultivation of my relationship with God's creation. I learned a valuable lesson about leisure that year. Recognizing God's gifts to me was relatively easy when it led to success and prosperity. It was much harder—and all the richer—to recognize God as still pouring out blessings when it did not seem to lead to athletic or "earthly" success. Yet God's richest gifts to us are those leading to forgiveness, life, and salvation. The Law did its work on me, convicting me of my sour attitude and lack of trust in God's plan and provision for my senior season. The Spirit led me to the cross and empty grave where the greatest victory ever won came at the cost of excruciating pain and physical exhaustion, betrayal, and abandonment from loved ones and climaxed in triumph over a seemingly unbeatable opponent in death. My senior season helped ground my identity and worth as a baptized child of God over and above any athletic accolades. With this distinction in place, nothing on or off the court could shake my determination and peace. Living in the nexus of leisure and vocation as an athlete is most certainly a spiritual act of worship to our Creator—it's an expression of what creatures are created to do.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

So what counsel can we give Jordan, Ariel and competitive athletes like them as they consider both their life in Christ and life in sport? The same encouragement due all people considering their vocations and stations in life. Where there is vocational work to be done for the benefit of the neighbor and leisure to celebrate from our giving Father and His creation, there is a life of rich purpose and meaning to enjoy. The terms “serious Christian” and “serious athlete” can go together. It is possible to compete intently while embracing the fullness of life as a child of God in His creation.

So how, then, does a Christian athlete compete? As one freed to compete. When we have a strong grounding in our identity as loved, redeemed children of God, we are freed to be the best sportspeople we can be, using the gifts God has given us to the benefit of those around us and resting in sweet communion with God and creation. When our performance doesn't determine our value or even the worthiness of the worship we give God, we can compete without fear, comparison, or misplaced self-worth. We can worship God as we participate in the celebration of leisure, our delight in God, His truth, and the joys of His creation.

Dear athlete, you are marked and redeemed as a child of God in your baptism. You are freed from the obsession to perform as a means for gaining acceptance or proving your worth, even your worth as a Christian. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, you are freed to perform as a steward of what God has given you and for the care of your neighbor. And there is work for you to do. Go about your vocation of athlete with dedication, persistence, and joy as

you meet the needs of others and receive gifts from God. Join in saying, “It is good.” This is life to the full.

Does the Christian look different from any other athlete? A Christian brings glory to God by playing the game according to the rules. The Christian competes with integrity, discipline, and intensity—not because God is displeased with mediocre effort but because we have a vocational opportunity to steward the gifts we have been given and serve our neighbor. This does not earn us extra favor with God but is simply what it means to live as His redeemed child. The Christian does not need to be concerned about appearing spiritual by performing spiritual exercises on the court such as pointing up to the sky, taking a knee to pray or offering an “Alleluia!” after a great play—although those are all fine things to do. To be a Christian athlete, one simply plays the game, enjoying the riches of creation freely given by the Father.

So just play! Competition is not evil or a waste of time or talent.

Just play! Don’t consume your thoughts and actions with how to “look” like a Christian in sport. Instead, focus on playing the game according to its rules to the best of your ability and to the benefit of those around you.

Enjoy the reception of God’s gifts to you in the air in your lungs and the bounce in your step; in your coordination between eyes and hands, in your enjoyment of teammates and coaches, in your fierce battle with opponents, in the embrace of a parent or fan, in the fair call of an official who keeps the game moving towards its telos. Enjoy sport. It’s God’s good gift to you for your enjoyment. It’s pure gift. You don’t deserve it. You don’t earn it. But you do steward it. Make use of it; develop it.

At the same time, recognize that the life of a Christian is marked by service towards others. This is not in order to be justified before God or to prove to other Christians what a devout

follower you are; it's simply how God has created humans to live. Take your vocational responsibilities seriously. Care for those around you. Push your teammates to be better. Honor your coaches. Respect officials. Compete with integrity. Let the light on your stand shine brightly. You are free. Enjoy what it means to be a human fully alive, finding your life beholding God.

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