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Clarence Peters

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Achieving Witness in Christian Recreation

By CLARENCE PETERS

“WHETHER, therefore, ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”¹ Thus the Apostle Paul instructs people in witnessing. And the Lord Jesus said to His own: “Ye shall be witnesses unto Me.”² Whatever Christians do, their entire life is to be a witness that God lives in them, that God has made them different than they were in their unconverted state. As Pastor Albert L. Abrahamson, evangelist of the Young People’s Luther League of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, puts it:

“Ye shall be witnesses to Christ’s power to forgive sin, witnesses to His friendship, witnesses to the new life He promises and gives, witnesses to His victory over sin and temptations in our lives, witnesses to His lordship in our daily living, our choices, our recreation, our homes, everywhere, witnesses to the glorious hope of eternal life with Him.

“This is the great privilege of the child of God. It is only God’s child who can bring this witness. It is only he who lives in the intimate, vital, daily fellowship with Jesus who can witness of what He promises and does. Your pastor, your church, your Luther League are constantly concerned that you Leaguers should not be satisfied with a sort of mental assent to Jesus’ lordship, but that your relationship to Him should be vital, genuine, personal. This relationship is realized only by the one who honestly faces his own sinfulness, confesses it, and believes that Christ has atoned for his every sin. ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin’ is a truth he knows by experience.”³

“Let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before God; yea, let them exceedingly rejoice,”⁴ the writer of the Psalm writes to God’s people. It is pleasing to God that those who are His disciples should also be happy and should enjoy their activities. It is particularly also in doing the things that Christian people enjoy that they can give evidence of the faith and love in their hearts. Hence recreation need not be a nega-

¹ 1 Cor. 10:31.

² Acts 1:8.

³ Albert L. Abrahamson, “Greetings from Our Luther League Evangelist,” from the *Idea Kit for 1949* of the Luther League of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

⁴ Ps. 68:3.

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tive thing. It need not be an activity in which one engages because one does not know anything more worth while to do. It is not merely an activity which might keep children and young people out of trouble.

Recreation has been defined as "any leisure-time activity in which we engage voluntarily in order to find pleasure and relaxation from the effort and tension of the every day routine of necessary work and prescribed duties."⁵ It may be said, then, that recreation involves doing something by choice which is different from the daily work or duties. It is "a refreshment of strength and spirits after toil; a diversion or a mode of diversion."⁶

RECREATION OF A CHRISTIAN

The Christian in his recreation will want to avoid such activities as are harmful to his body, soul, or mind. He will want to avoid such things as may destroy or weaken his faith, compromise his relationship to his Savior, or give offense to his fellow men. He will bear in mind the words of the Apostle Paul: "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient."⁷ The Christian will remember that the Christian religion demands the allegiance of the whole man, not only of a part of him. Everything that he does must be done to the glory of God. The Christian who realizes that his religion seeks the total sanctification of body, mind, and soul will know that his recreation also revolves in the Christian frame of reference. The Christian's recreation must, then, conform with Christian principles in every detail and express the truth of fellowship with Christ and with fellow Christians.

THE GOAL OF CHRISTIAN RECREATION

Christian recreation, besides providing pleasure and relaxation and diversion from the round of daily duties, has as its purpose the development of the whole personality, of the total man, the exercise of spiritual muscles, the witnessing that Christ is Lord. The Christian religion has always demanded that the whole man, the total personality, must be given to Christ. It has always insisted that all things must be done to the glory of God.⁸ Such was also the reputation of the Christians among the heathen. Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, near the turn of the first century, wrote to Emperor Trajan concerning the Christians: "They [the Christians] affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or

⁵ Prof. O. H. Theiss in *Christian Growth*, page 19.

⁶ Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

⁷ 1 Cor. 6:12.

⁸ 1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17; 1 Pet. 4:11.

their error, was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to (do) any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.”⁹

Christian recreation must, therefore, be within the area of that which is acceptable to Christ. It must witness to that which is in the heart of the Christian. What we do for purposes of recreation must be just as Christian as our churchgoing, our worshiping, our Bible reading.

When the whole man is ignored, when, for example, a person says that you have to have your fling once in a while, that you have to do in your recreation as is customary at the time among others, then he has opened up the whole sphere of his life to principles which contradict the truth which he confesses as a member of the Christian Church. His witness is no longer Christian. In reality he testifies that his religion is not very important. No part of a Christian's life is religiously indifferent or neutral or of no positive value. This is true of recreation also.

It is entirely possible to train wrongly through recreation. “Whenever we play a game which ridicules a member of our group, we are not operating within the Christian frame of reference with other people, and especially with other members of the body of Christ.”¹⁰

A remarkable opportunity for witness is given in sports. But here opportunities for witnessing to the power of the Christian religion are often lost by an exaggerated emphasis upon winning, encouraged by the awarding of prizes and the resulting bitter competition. The sad result of such recreation is that the player receives training which is a denial of those Christian truths which he has been taught about Christianity in action. If we stress merely the winning, we witness that our principle is that it does not matter how we win, and thus we teach wrong values. Such training is not merely neutral, it is hostile to the integration of the total personality into Christ. As a result of this over-emphasis on competitive sports, the youth societies sometimes are not interested in a balanced youth program. They see little reason to support the Walther League program as indicated by their opposition to topics, Bible study, and a more socialized type of recreation. Chris-

⁹ Pliny, *Letters to Trajan*, II, page 403.

¹⁰ O. H. Theiss, *Christian Growth*, pages 21, 23.

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tianity teaches that everything must be done to the glory of God, even if it is a basketball game, volleyball, or any other sport.

Awards and prizes also frequently teach wrong values. Motives cannot be measured. They are hidden in the heart. Because we cannot measure the values of attitude and motives, we measure things which we can measure, and for these we award prizes. For example, one child attends Sunday school regularly because the parents insist, even though he does not want to attend. Another child wants to come each Sunday, but the parents interfere. When we give an award to the one child, we do not further his Christian training, nor do we teach right values to the other. These values dare not be ignored in recreational activities either.

Because in Christian recreation we are seeking the glory of God as our goal, it is necessary that the way in which we do this be just as thoroughly Christian as the activity itself. Through recreation also, the individual must be trained and developed for better service to God our Father and our Savior Jesus Christ.

WHAT KIND OF RECREATION MEETS THE GOAL?

It becomes an important question in this study, what kind of group-recreation provides the greatest opportunities of making these Christian values real for the participant.

The recreation which gives the greatest opportunity for witnessing to the power and effectiveness of the Christian religion is the type which provides for mutual participation and interaction among all the members of the group. Such results are achieved in the circle or play party games. The more a game provides for interaction within the group, the more are the opportunities for the practice of the Christian principles of social relationships. Group play of this type also provides the opportunity for training in the Christian way of solving problems. Every group game is really an experience of this type. In a Christian group all problems must be solved in keeping with Christian principles. Unless this is conscientiously done, the group will obviously not receive training in the exercise of Christian principles. If, for example, one player is permitted to cheat, even though he may think it is a good joke, these positive Christian values are lost to him and to those who know of the cheating. The problem of the game is the problem of every member and is to be solved by the full contribution of every member. In this co-operative way the Christian fellowship is to function as members of the body of Christ.¹¹

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12.

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In the group play here thought of this principle is applied. The problem it presents is not solved until solved co-operatively by the entire group. This kind of group game also provides training in living when the principle is followed that the highest enjoyment is found by the group and by each individual of the group by playing the game within the rules of that game. The group must function within the scope of such rules even as this must be done for the fullest enjoyment of Christian fellowship and Christian living in all the experiences of the Christian life. This type of play teaches that forgetting oneself is essential for real happiness and inner delight, for the full enjoyment of co-operative play depends upon losing ourselves in the achievement of the group goal, the solution of the group problem. A game of this type furthermore teaches that an individual under the psychological stimulus of group participation and interaction develops abilities beyond his accomplishments when he thinks and acts alone. "A group of people playing or working together is always more than the sum of its individuals."¹² Christian recreation thus becomes an integral part of Christian growth. It is a witness of the lordship of Christ in the hearts and lives of the participants.

Another form of recreation possessing the possibilities for group integration and the development of individual resources through group interaction is the drama. Community singing is another recreational activity of high group value when it is carried out in keeping with the principles of group integration.

Christian people who include Christian recreation in their activities will carry on such activities to the glory of God. They thus grow in their own Christianity, and they witness to all who see them that Christ is a power in their lives no matter what they do. Such witnessing helps to break down prejudices, so that ear and heart may be the more receptive when the message of the living Christ is brought. This principle has been well stated in one of the publications of the Luther League of the Augustana Synod:

"League meetings provide the young people and sometimes others in the church with an opportunity to come together for an evening of devotions, Christian fellowship, and entertainment. More and more some type of recreation is being included in such meetings, and extra socials are finding a permanent place in the regular schedules of many leagues. All rural people enjoy wholesome play. Although they have been working hard all day, they never seem to be too tired for even the most active games. And such an evening, well planned, can also do

¹² O. H. Theiss, *Christian Growth*, page 24.

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much to interest the young people in the community who are outside of a church in the work of the League and the church. Recreation, in this case, may even be responsible for introducing young people to Christ, the Friend of youth."¹³

What are some of the goals for which our Church might well strive in achieving witness in Christian recreation among the youth?

The Church ought to train recreational leaders who understand the opportunities for the exercise of Christian principles in Christian recreation and who are trained to teach young people to play and to enjoy recreation of this type.

The Church ought to set up a training program in youth work at our seminaries and teachers' colleges, including in this training of the pastors and teachers the creative view of Christian recreation. One of the Lutheran churches in America has for several years provided a semester course in youth work for its ministerial students. Likewise Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, offers an elective credit course in youth work. The two Concordia Teachers Colleges of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod give some guidance and instruction in youth work.

The Board for Young People's Work of the Missouri Synod and the Walther League ventured into a new area when they conducted a Youth Workers' Conference at Druce Lake, Illinois, in June, 1948. During the first week experts in the field of group work, drama, group singing, recreation, worship, addressed the group, and opportunities were provided to "learn by doing." During the second week members of our own Church conducted a Lutheran Service Volunteers' school with the group.

A similar training program is carried out in our Church for the youth in the Lutheran Service Volunteers' schools. Plans are now being made for the sixth season. Almost 3,000 Lutheran young people have attended these schools. They study the Bible. They are trained in worship, group singing, group play, with the application of the Christian principles described in this paper, and opportunities are given to practice the truths which have been placed before them.

Congregations can give a powerful Christian witness in the community by opening their parish halls to the youth of the community for a program of Christian recreation. Granted that trained leadership is highly desirable, yet such a program carries tremendous potentialities, and congregations would be wise to consider the possibilities of such a program.

¹³ Carlson-Malm-Petersen, *Countryside Crusading*, page 34.

To set up a program of Christian recreation as described in this paper, it is necessary to set up group standards. This is the job of the leadership. When people see your group, they should see that group living Christian principles.

Recreation thus should give evidence of Christian principles operative in the lives of the participants, because Christ is their Lord. It thus becomes a witness to all who participate and who see it. Thus, of Christians engaged in Christian recreation the Apostle Paul would write: "Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men."¹⁴

St. Louis, Mo.

A FEW ARTICLES AND BOOKS ON RECREATION

ABC of Youth Work. See articles on Athletics, Entertainment, Fun, Games, Play, Play Party Games, Recreation, Singing. Walther League, Chicago, Ill. \$2.00.

Boyd, Neva, *Social Group Work.* The University College, Northwestern University, Chicago, Ill.

Peters, Clarence, "Christian Youth Looks at Recreation," in *Lutheran Education*, Vol. 84, No. 4, pp. 220—228. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo.

Slavson, S. R., *Recreation and the Total Personality.* New York Association Press, New York, 1946. \$3.00.

Theiss, O. H., "Recreation and the Young People of the Church," in *Christian Growth*, Discussion Guide and Manual, pp. 19—25. Walther League. \$1.00.

A FEW BOOKS OF GAMES AND SONGS

Boyd, Neva, *Handbook of Games.* H. T. FitzSimons Co., Inc., 23 E. Jackson Blvd., Chicago 4, Ill. \$2.00.

Harbin, E. O., *Phunology.* Walter H. Baker Co., Boston. \$1.85.

Harbin, E. O., *Fun Encyclopedia.* Cokesbury Press, Nashville, Tenn. \$2.75.

Rogers, Julia Anne, *Parties and Programs for Parents Days.* National Recreation Assn., 315 Fourth Ave., New York. Paper, 50 cents; cloth, \$1.00.

Rohrbough, Lynn, *Handy and Handy II.* Co-operative Recreation Service, Delaware, Ohio. Each, \$2.50.

Sing Again. Walther League. 20 cents.

Zanzig, A. D., *Singing America.* C. C. Birchard and Co., Boston. Vocal ed., 25 cents; accompaniment ed., \$1.00.

For further information on recreation, games, group singing, write to the Walther League, 875 North Dearborn St., Chicago 10, Ill. Also consult the *Workers Quarterly*, published by the Walther League.

¹⁴ 2 Cor. 3:2.