Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life

The call for Christians to be a faithful presence in sport has never been more urgent. Concerned by the state of sport and the failure of the broader Christian community to engage the sport culture, The Sport and Christianity Group, a small gathering of coaches, theologians and academics met in Raleigh, North Carolina in January 2013. The intent was to draft a “Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life” affirming a Christian position on sport that would be endorsed by the global Christian community. Additional revisions of the Declaration were made at follow-up meetings in Waco, Texas in June 2013 and in Grand Rapids, Michigan in June 2014 based on feedback the group solicited from individuals and focus groups.

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Sport enriches life. The urge to play sport is a divine gift, a vibrant, God-honoring pursuit in the lives of Christians regardless of race, gender, physical and intellectual ability, or sexuality. But like all such gifts, without purposeful stewardship it can be separated from its divine intent. This call to stewardship is essential in a society where sport is often distorted by moral relativism and an unhealthy fixation on winning. Compounding this problem is the human tendency for our love of sport to easily morph into idolatry.

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This Declaration on Sport and the Christian Life is intended to encourage dialogue and action by Christians and leaders of Christian institutions. The Sport and Christianity Group calls for all Christians to stand with us in this effort to be a faithful presence in the world of sport by endorsing these principles.

1. Sport has a legitimate place in the Christian life. Sport has its basis in a divinely-given impulse to play and deserves a rightful place in Christian living. People play sport primarily for the love of the game, the thrill of competition, and the sense of community that comes from participation. When played and watched in faithfulness to God sport occupies a legitimate place as part of the created world and helps express our relationship to God and to one another. When passion for sport exceeds passion for Christ or the work of His church, or when sport becomes all-consuming and commitments such as worship, service, and family are diminished, sport poses a challenge to the consecrated life. In light of who God is and who He calls us to be, we must examine and order our affections and priorities regarding sport.

\[37\] Rom 12:21  
\[38\] Eph 5:8-10.
2. Sport touches all dimensions of human life. God created humans as holistic, unified creatures. Sport engages us, not only bodily, but mind and spirit as well. It can powerfully affect our emotions, mental states, and spiritual lives. Our experiences in sport can, at times, uplift as well as disappoint us. When sport is viewed only as a physical activity, participants miss important transcendent moments that engage one’s entire being.

3. Sport can be a means of spiritual formation. Christians acknowledge the bodily dimension of spirituality and practice faith in and through sport as embodied people. Like aesthetic endeavors, sport can remind us that God is the source of all strength, grace, and beauty of movement. Sport can help focus our attention on the reality of God and our humanness in special ways offering formative experiences in which God communes with us. When sport is approached self-indulgently and apart from the wisdom of God, spiritual growth is thwarted, hindering our formation.

4. Sport can glorify God. To glorify God is to reflect the will and way of Christ in everything. Thus, the quality of the Christian’s play and participation should be distinctive, marked by Spirit-informed virtues including love, hope, faith, patience, kindness, humility, self-control and other fruit of God’s Spirit. Success in sport competition can help garner public acclaim for oneself, one’s team, one’s community, or one’s country. These forms of glory should not be confused with bringing glory to God.

5. Competition is an essential element of sport. In competition, players test their skills and strategies in an environment of uncertainty and drama. Competition provides opportunities for personal growth, friendship and enjoyment, and can lead to maximum athletic performance. During games, relationships are characterized by a playful antagonism in which competitors elevate their own interests above those of their opponents. This playful antagonism is central to the concept of sport. However, when winning becomes an end in itself it can breed resentment and may dishonor God. Tactics and environments that persuade players, coaches and fans to supplant playful antagonism with mean-spiritedness have no place in a Christian approach to sport.

6. The true value of sport is inherent in the experience itself. We can delight in our role as Christ-followers in the world of sport and understand that our behavior in contests is a form of witness to the kingdom of God. Our experience in sport reveals our playfulness, our desire to be excellent, and our desire to belong. When the human experience of sport is subverted to other ends, for example, as a means of commerce, a way to achieve fame, publicity, money, or personal glory, attention is diverted from the importance of the sport experience itself.

7. Sport has many benefits but they are conditional. When we do sport well it has the potential to improve health, develop social and familial relationships, strengthen moral character, foster positive life habits and civic engagement, and act as a vehicle for peace, reconciliation, and the witness of the good news of Jesus Christ. But these effects are conditional. Their realization depends upon the moral and symbolic meanings we give to sport as well as the motivations of the participants. It should not be assumed that sport, irrespective of these considerations, will have its intended beneficial effects.
8. God created our bodies for His service and our enjoyment. Sport can promote physical health and well-being and encourage the stewardship of our bodies. At the same time, sport entails a risk of injury and the potential for abuse. Sometimes sport encourages violence as part of a competitive strategy and elevates the probability of injury beyond a reasonable level. An unhealthy pursuit of excellence can encourage the use of questionable training habits and harmful performance-enhancing practices. The human body is a reflection of the image of God and such practices should not be condoned.

9. God does not favor one player or team over another. In a Christian view of sport God is acknowledged as Father of all who compete. All players, coaches, and fans – regardless of team affiliation – are created in the image of God and are deserving of Christian goodwill, kindness, and love. God should not be portrayed as favoring one competitor over another. When the culture of sport encourages us to think of our opponents as less than human, less honorable, less deserving of Christian love, or less loved by God than ourselves, it is a sign that sport has gone awry and is not serving its divine purpose.

10. Christian virtues are revealed in behaviors that go beyond obeying the rules. Rules governing sport define how games are to be played and ensure a measure of fairness in competition. By joining the game, players implicitly agree to follow the rules. Therefore, Christians should not seek ways to circumvent the rules governing sport contests. Yet, Christians are bound by a higher calling, not only to obey the rules, but to apply self-imposed behaviors upholding the witness of Christ even when such acts might work to their competitive disadvantage.

11. Sport programs are a vital component of Christian education. Sport is an effective complement to classroom knowledge when wisely integrated into Christian schools and universities. Participating in sport can lead students to truth and assist them in developing a mature faith. This requires careful thought and planning with an eye toward educational outcomes. When institutions disproportionately emphasize sport or yield the purpose and practice of sport programs to those interested only in winning, they undermine the educational promise of sport.

12. Sport is powerful. Sport inspires us with displays of grit and grace. Competitive drama moves us in ways that few other forms of entertainment do. Watching sport can be a means of celebrating God’s creation and goodness, leading to a spirit of hope and joy. Left unchecked, passion can lead to obsession. The power of sport has the potential to cloud spiritual discernment and invite both idolatry and the neglect of self, family, and church.

* Among those involved in the Sports and Christianity Group were:

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