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## To Those Who Would Dig Without a Shovel

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In 1891, James Naismith was faced with quite the quandary. Naismith taught a physical education class at the YMCA Training School (Kosloski). In the middle of winter, he had to find a fun way for the group of men he taught to get their energy out. During the warmer times of the year, their outdoor sports provided an enjoyable way to take a break from sitting still in a class room all day. However, when it was colder, there were no good indoor alternatives. Trying to solve this problem with his physical education class, Naismith stumbled across a solution far better than he could have ever dreamed. He employed the use of two peach baskets and the combination of multiple sports to produce the beginnings of the game that we now know as basketball. It's no secret that Naismith's invention worked perfectly; the class of men—and the whole world, for that matter—loved it from the first second. But Naismith wasn't seeking to create something the men enjoyed purely for the sake of entertainment; he had a greater purpose. In his own words, Naismith created the game of basketball "To win men for the Master through the gym." Naismith recognized his call as a follower of Christ to share the truth with others, but he knew that he was more suited to do that in the gym with a game than on the stage with a sermon. His invention is just one of many examples of the role of sports in ministry, but it had a significant influence in the Church's understanding of just how effective sports ministry can be. Although it may not be the one-size-fits-all solution for ministry, churches should seriously consider the use of sports in their evangelistic ministry. Scripture makes it clear that churches have an obligation to pursue effective ministry, and this obligation finds a primary solution in sports because of its unique qualities and its proven effectiveness as a ministry.

Before we can even begin this discussion, I need to define what I mean by “seriously consider.” I am not arguing that every church in every setting needs to use this kind of ministry, only that it should be a primary consideration of most churches. There is no way to quantify or objectify what this means, but the following analogy should help provide an understanding of my meaning. If an architect were to draw up a plan to build a new house without even considering wood as a potential material to use, he would be considered foolish. Granted, there are times when you build houses without using much wood because that is what the specific situation calls for, but because wood has been repeatedly proven as the ideal material for houses, it would be foolish to leave it out of the equation completely. The situation is similar with sports ministry. Because of its effectiveness, it would almost be foolish to fail to consider using sports as a tool for evangelistic ministry.

In understanding this, there is no better place to turn than Scripture itself, where the obligation originates. Several different passages, commandments, and stories throughout the Bible contribute to a complete view of the Church’s duty to evangelism. It is difficult to have a conversation about evangelism without referencing Matthew 28:18-20, a passage widely recognized as The Great Commission, but it is not without legitimate reason that this passage is so often referenced. The command in these verses is clear, and it is thorough. Jesus, with all the authority in heaven and on earth, says to the disciples, and to the Church by extension, “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” It is important to note here that Jesus does not simply tell the disciples to share the gospel or to tell the world about Christ. Instead, his command is to make disciples and to teach them to observe the commandments. This implies an ongoing process—a relationship, if possible. Therefore, fulfillment of this command involves seeking to establish relationships.

Scripture also makes it clear that the gospel must go to all ends of the earth. In Acts 1:8, Jesus commissions the apostles as his “witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, *and to the end of the earth*” (italics mine). Going back to Matthew 28, this principle is

affirmed, as Jesus includes the command to “make disciples *of all nations*” (italics mine). The Church’s fulfillment of this command, therefore, requires not only establishing relationships, but also reaching every nation with the gospel. But the Church’s obligation to share the gospel goes beyond Jesus’ explicit command.

Regarding the church’s obligation to make disciples, there is an element of faithful stewardship involved. Speaking specifically about the gift of the Truth, Jesus tells Peter, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required.” Tim Beougher, Professor of Evangelism and Associate Dean at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary says it well. He comments, “We have been given no greater gift than the gospel, and we have no greater stewardship than to share that message of good news with others.” The truth of the gospel is a gift whose beauty and power are beyond comprehension. If the recipients of this gift don’t understand that they now have the duty to share that gift with others, they greatly underestimate the value of the gift they claim to have received.

So, what is the solution to this obligation? How should the Church respond? In the ideal world, there would be a way to accomplish both objectives of disciple-making laid out in Scripture. There would be a vehicle that carries the gospel to the ends of the earth and facilitates not only a single opportunity to speak the gospel message, but a continual process of making disciples. Clearly, there is not one single solution—one exclusive method whereby the Church can accomplish these things. However, there is one specific platform for ministry that is uniquely suited to accomplish the objectives of evangelism described by Jesus. Because of its ability to break cultural barriers, its tendency to produce meaningful relationships, and its sheer popularity, sport is an effective tool for biblical ministry in almost any context.

Sport is not limited by language, culture, or geography. If you go to nearly any region of the world and study its culture, sport is nearly guaranteed to be a key component of that culture. Whether people play it, watch it, or talk it, almost everyone is involved in or affected by sport in their society. Tim Tucker, Master of Theology, explains that because “sport transcends all nations, cultures, and languages,

it is therefore a powerful medium through which the Gospel can be taken to the ends of the earth” (“Motivational Factors”, 2). Because of this quality of sport, it has often been referred to as a universal language, another testament of its ability to reach the ends of the earth.

But sports do more than simply taking the gospel to the ends of the earth; they help facilitate an ongoing process of disciple-making by establishing relationships. Meaningful relationships are a natural result of participation in sport. It is not uncommon at all to hear of people who form their most significant relationships through sport. This is because most sports—at least the primary ones used in ministry—demand a collaboration between athletes, which produces a unique bond. The close friendships that often result from godly participation in sports allow for ongoing opportunities to share the gospel and witness to the lost (Tucker and Woodbridge, “A Strategy” 165). A single story I was told by a friend of mine will help to illustrate this value of sport in action.

This friend, whose name is Valmir, played soccer at the highest level for professional teams around the world. His was a typical story of high-level athletes in that he came to a point in his career where he had everything he could dream of. He was the star player on a top-tier team in Belgium. He had everything he thought he could ever want: the money, the fame, the women. Yet one of his friends and teammates didn’t seem to think it was enough. Valmir knew this teammate well, and he knew there was something different about the man. Every time Valmir talked to this teammate, the man would tell him, “You need to meet your best friend.” Valmir didn’t know what the man meant, so he brushed it off. But the teammate kept telling him the same thing on a consistent basis, so finally Valmir asked what he was talking about. The teammate took that opportunity to explain that Jesus was his best friend, and that he needed to meet Jesus because of who He is and all that He has done for Valmir. This is not an unusual story, but it illustrates the power of sports to establish relationships with the lost and to introduce them to Christ through those ongoing relationships. Again, disciple-making is more than just stating the truth, and because of that, relationships are a valuable tool in that process. However, seed-planting is an

important part of evangelism as well. There may in fact be times where the best thing to do is to simply put the truth out there for people to see and hear.

I once heard someone say that the gospel is not a scared little kitten that needs to be kept in a cage and protected; it is a roaring lion that is powerful to change people on its own, and our duty is to let it out of its cage—to put it in front of people and let the Holy Spirit do its work. As Jesus explains in John 17:17, God’s Word is the tool by which the lost will be changed and sanctified. Again, in Romans 10:17, we are reminded that faith must come from hearing the Word of Christ. Sports provide the opportunity to bring this powerful truth to the ears of many who would otherwise not hear it. Because of the large number of people who give their attention to sport around the world, any content presented through sports will be seen by a vast audience (Strzelecki 128). Social media provides a helpful demonstration of just how large of an audience gives its attention to sports and athletes.

Consider Lebron James’ Twitter account, which, as of March of 2018, had 41 million followers on Twitter. Even more impressive is Cristiano Ronaldo’s Facebook page, which, by May of 2016, had 111.4 million likes (Arora et al. 7). The point is clear: sports draw a large crowd, and anything promoted through sports and by athletes will be seen by many people. As Christians, the characteristics of sport listed here should be causing alarm bells to go off in our heads. Sport is present in nearly all ends of the earth, it results in ongoing relationships, and it can be used to present a message to a massive audience. Those things sound a lot like the requirements of evangelism described throughout Scripture.

All of this begs the question, what’s stopping us? Why aren’t we—both the body of Christ as a whole and individual, local churches—already capitalizing on this opportunity to fulfill the obligations of evangelism in such an effective way? Well, in one sense, the Church is already in the process of investing more in this opportunity, but some still hesitate to engage in this form of ministry. Such people have various reasons for their hesitations, but one of the main ones is a lack of resources. Churches fear they don’t have what they

need to undertake any sort of sports ministry program, whether it be facilities, equipment, people, or knowledge. (Tucker and Woodbridge, “A Strategy”, 155). Leaders of local churches look at larger sports ministries that are already up and running and think that they are nowhere near the point they need to be in order to have a sports ministry like that. Their resources and their money need to go elsewhere right now, and they don’t have the necessary people or equipment for a successful sports ministry. At least, that is the reasoning.

The trouble with this thinking is two-fold. The first issue is that no big and established sports ministry starts out big and established. Frankly, it seems a little foolish for a church to compare itself to another church or another organization that has been in the game for years, building to the point it is at now. Consider the organization Ambassadors Football for example. This ministry, born in 1990, began in one city in England because a small group of people had the dream of partnering with churches and Christian organizations to initiate an entry-level soccer ministry (*History*). Today, Ambassadors has offices in 25 different countries and trained leaders in 40 different countries. It doesn’t take a trained staff and a million-dollar budget to faithfully utilize sport in evangelism; it takes a ball and a humble, trusting spirit. Who knows where the ministry will go from there?

The second problem with this reasoning is that evangelism is one of the Church’s sole reasons for existence. If a church doesn’t have resources to invest in evangelism, it had better be because they simply don’t have resources at all, or because those resources are going towards another ministry the church is investing in. However, some church leaders may even disagree with the claim that churches exist for the purpose of evangelism, which is another reason why some would question the involvement of churches in sports ministry on any level. Many believe that the church exists for the sake of those who are already members. They would argue that the first priority of a pastor is his own people; therefore, evangelism to the lost should take a back seat. After all, in Ephesians 20:28, Paul tells the Ephesian elders, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God.” No doubt, the Church is the body of Christ,

and it is for the body of Christ, and pastors are responsible for their people, the body of Christ.

However, this is not a reason to abandon the use of sports ministry, but on the contrary, another reason to turn to it. The Church is called to relationships with each other, and pastors are responsible to consistently encourage their flock in the truth; sports provide more opportunities for all of this to happen within churches. Ministry through sport is nearly as affective within the Church as it is to the lost. But there is a deeper issue with this line of reasoning. Regardless of the order of the priorities, churches are obligated to evangelism, and they are obligated to steward the gift that have been given by sharing it with the lost. Scripture makes this clear. It is wrong to toss this obligation aside, saying that it takes a back seat to other priorities. To do so is to simply choose to ignore clear commands that we have been given in Scripture.

If you take away nothing else, understand this: although sports ministry is not itself the end, it is a helpful tool in accomplishing the task of evangelism. No, it is not the only tool whereby this task can be accomplished, but it is often the most effective one—more often than we give it credit for. If a man is given the responsibility of digging a hole, there are several different tools that might be helpful in this task. The effectiveness of the tool depends on the location where he is digging. There is no one tool that will be the absolute best option in every context; sometimes a jackhammer might be best, and sometimes his hands might be best. However, more often than not, a shovel is the most effective and most available tool for digging holes. I am suggesting that just as wood is used to build houses, and just as a shovel is used to dig holes, so sport should be used to make disciples of all the nations. So, to the churches, I urge you to use sport to break down cultural barriers, to build meaningful relationships, and to draw the eyes of the world to the truth of the gospel. Pick up the tool lying at your feet, and make disciples.

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