

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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THE LITURGY OF SPORTS

by Gary North

Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway (I Cor. 9:24-27).

This is an Olympics year, to be held in Atlanta. More than any other event, the Olympics games are a world event. Around the world, men's attention will soon turn to television screens broadcasting events watched by a billion people. This happens for no other regularly scheduled event, although the world soccer championship, also held every fourth year, comes close, and for similar reasons.

I don't like the Olympics. I know too much about their origin. The Olympic games of classical Greece were political events, which is to say religious events. Men competed nude before exclusively male crowds, running races in the name of their cities and their cities' gods. The greatest performers achieved the status of heroes. A hero in Greece was a religious figure: a man who was said to become a god after his death. Winning at the Olympics was important. Winning big was eternally important. Classical Greece was perverse in many ways, but the suggestion that a man could become a god because of his sports ability was not just perverse; it was silly. Men have always wanted to believe that man can earn his eternal salvation, but to think that a man can run his way into divine status is right up there with the Big Bang as a truly stupid idea.

When the Olympic games were revived in 1896, the West had already begun to move back toward paganism. The revival of the Olympics was part of this transformation. The coming of organized sports as a widespread cultural phenomenon has been an aspect of the secularization of culture. In the United States, for example, collegiate sports had been introduced by desperate college administrators in the 1870's. They used sports competition between college teams as a way to shift student enthusiasm away from campus rioting. We think of the late 1960's as the era of campus rioting, but almost a century earlier, it had been a major problem. Rioting was an assault of students against the boredom and irrelevance of classical education and the incompetence of those who taught it. Such boredom and incompetence had been a complaint by students for many centuries, but now it had become violent. Harvard and the other colleges introduced collegiate sports in the same

era that they introduced the elective system. Educated men were rapidly losing faith in the integrating power of classical education. They wanted to cut their ties with the past. A new, evolutionary, progressive, technological, better organized era was dawning. Organized sports were seen as part of this development: men's ability to beat existing records in the name of their communities.

The Doctrine of Representation

The biblical doctrine of representation says that every man is represented judicially before God by one of two men: Adam or Christ. Either Adam's sin is imputed judicially by God to a person or else Christ's perfect humanity is imputed. There is no third choice. To use the analogy of a race, life on earth is a two-man race. Each of us is represented by one of two runners. Your representative finishes either first or last. So do you. There are no second-place or third-place medals.

Men want to avoid thinking about time and eternity in terms of judicial representation before the throne of God. The stakes in such a race are too high. The doctrine of judicial imputation is too theocentric. It places too much authority in the declarative acts of God. So, men seek to be represented in other ways. The most popular ways are corporate more than individual. Men gain representation by participating in corporate liturgy.

Somebody must represent the public. Politics is a popular means of representation in democratic societies. We have seen more than our fair share of messianic politicians in this humanistic century, each promising the advent of a golden age. But the public's faith is waning in political salvation.

The Olympics and Paganism

Two of the most powerful propaganda films ever made were directed by Leni Riefenstahl. She was Hitler's movie maker. She produced pro-Nazi films against her will, she now claims (she is still alive). Hitler made her do it, she claims. We might call this "failure of the will" - hers, not his. "I was just following orders!" Her most famous films are *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938). The first was a political film, which covered the Nazi Party's 1934 mass rally in Nuremberg. More than any film ever made, this one shows that messianic politics is both corporate and liturgical. The film's religious overtones but inescapable.

Olympia was a movie about the 1936 Olympics, held in Berlin. The film celebrated the perfection of the athlete's body. The spirituality of supreme physical performance is a visual theme of the whole movie, from its opening scenes. She was being faithful to both the Nazis' ideology of the blood covenant

and the classical Greeks' tradition of athletic excellence.

The Olympics awards medals to winners, but never without the flying of national flags. The athletes represent political entities. Athletes win for themselves and for their countries. The gold medal winner gets to hear his national anthem played in honor of his victory. He stands on the highest step in a three-step place of honor.

When Tommy Smith (gold medal, 200 meters) and John Carlos (bronze) stood with their right fists raised in a defiant black power salute in 1968, they brought opprobrium on their heads. White Americans were outraged. That, presumably, was one of the goals of the two men, not to mention the tenured state college professor of sociology who put them up to it. But why such outrage? Why should anyone have cared? Because the two were announcing to the world that they were not running for America; they were running for their race. They were literally sticking their fists in the faces of American viewers. It was a powerful symbolic gesture. You can find a photo of them in most photobook collections of America in the 1960's.

The Olympic games are still political. Prior to the fall of Communism, they were intensely political. The 1972 games were the worst in this regard. Arab terrorists killed Israeli athletes. Americans still believe that biased referees stole the game from the U.S. basketball team and awarded it to the Russians by failing to honor the time clock.

Why do people care? Not because of the actual performances as such. What about that one athlete who proves that, at one moment in history, he is the best in the world? A few of them are remembered a month later, but not many. Some of the sports are not even understood by the public. (An image of a girl dancing around, waving what looks like a pair of crepe paper streamers, comes to mind; the name of the sport doesn't.) What matters to most people is the total number of points that their nation receives at the end of the games, or the victory of their team over some national rival. That was what mattered in classical Greece, too: which city won. The gods of a victorious athlete's city were honored in those games. The god known as the State is honored today.

Sports and Representation

The South had no public schools until after the Civil War. Today, they are part of the South's way of life. Support for state universities in the South is derived more from the voters' enthusiasm for winning football teams than from Nobel Prize winners on the faculties. This is reflected in the won-loss records of Southern universities compared with Nobel Prizes granted.

In recent decades, we have seen a new phenomenon: the rise of the professional athlete as a public representative. This has paralleled the waning of faith in politics. "All politics is local," said the late Tip O'Neill. Spoken as a Boston Irish pol! In fact, the Presidency is the focal point of American politics - "the greased pig of American politics," as Ambrose Bierce wrote a century ago in his cynical *Devil's Dictionary*. But as men have become skeptical of Presidents, they have become skeptical of politics generally. Meanwhile, they have become sports fanatics.

Men cheer for sports teams that they believe in some way represent them. Professional sports teams are seen as repre-

senting entire cities, though rarely towns. An urban fan is an emotional participant in the affairs of his local major league team. He sees himself as part of a larger enterprise. If his team wins, he wins in some emotional sense. If his city's team is the best, someone may notice him, he may think. "We really did well yesterday," he tells his male companions after a vicarious victorious day on the playing field.

Fans are generally postmillennialists. Generation after generation, there are people living in Chicago who actually believe the Cubs will win the National League pennant next year. Nothing can undermine their unshakable faith, i.e., "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Texas Ranger fans, however, do seem to be amillennialists.)

The appearance of the multi-millionaire professional athlete is a very recent phenomenon. It has taken place since the mid-1960's. In the United States, only major league baseball provided significant income opportunities to athletes prior to World War II, and only to white superstars like Babe Ruth. (When it was pointed out to Ruth by a reporter that he had made more money in 1930 than the President of the United States, he replied: "I had a better year than he did." He was correct.)

Why professional sports? Why now? Because the United States is suffering from a collapse of covenants. There is no escape in this life or the next from the doctrine of covenantal representation. This representation is both personal and corporate. Deny either aspect of representation, and covenantalism becomes lopsided or even perverse.

Professional football has become the most representative professional sport in the United States. Why? First, because the number of games is limited. Each game counts for more in the outcome of the league's standings. Second, and more important, because the games are usually played on Sunday. Monday night football is an anomaly: the one national game each week that has no competition from the other teams in the league. Sunday games are an alternative to attending church services. Watching televised professional football on Sunday has become a form of communion. Men get together weekly to celebrate the sport's sacraments, beer and pizza. They cheer or moan, depending on the outcome of the "big play."

Fundamentalist churches have to re-schedule their services whenever the city's big game overlaps the normal time of worship. Or members rush home immediately after the service. The Super Bowl is shown on big-screen projectors in churches on the final Sunday evening. The evening turn-out is the best of the year.

Conclusion

I won't be watching the Olympics this year. I didn't watch them four years ago, either. Of course, I don't have an antenna on my TV set. This makes watching TV difficult. But I lost interest in the Olympics in 1972. The political overtones finally got to me. I don't remember watching any live event since then - not even the "Dream Team" in 1988, when they allowed professional basketball players onto the court. I suppose watching that team beat, say, a bunch of 5' 9" Japanese players was a thrill to some viewers, but not to me. If they ever stop totalling up national points, I'll start watching the games again. But not on Sundays.

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