

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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TRAINING TO LOSE

By Gary North

Paul used the simile of the athletic contest on several occasions. "I press toward the mark of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:14). "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain" (I Cor. 9:24). At the end of his career, he wrote: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Tim. 4:7-8). The requirement that Christians press hard, overcoming their own weaknesses, pains in the legs, and pessimism, is the focus of Paul's concern. He assumed that his readers have a tendency to become passive, and he warned them against this evil.

The athlete has to train before he enters the race. He must discipline his body and his will, in order to be fully prepared for the exertion of the contest. The contest has winners and losers, and the Christian is not supposed to be a loser. This means that he must enter into the contest with self-confidence, enthusiasm, and a strategy for victory. He is not to spend time looking over his shoulder to see how far he has come from the starting-point, or how well his competitors are doing. He is to look straight ahead at the finish line, pacing himself so that at the end he will have spent all of his reserves. He should give the race everything he has—emotionally, physically, and strategically.

If we look at modern Christianity, we find very little of this sort of training for life's race. Christians act as though victory is achieved passively, as if the race were not worth training for, as if the hope of victory were not part of the motivating factors in running. If we were to regard modern Christianity as a training program, and if life were viewed as a race, how would we judge the success of the program? Would we conclude that modern preaching has raised up a generation of skilled athletes who are ready for the competition? Or would we have to conclude that the program has produced a lot of overweight, undermotivated weekend joggers who would collapse half way to the finish line?

The Psychology of Victory

Back in the early 1960's, Sonny Liston was the heavyweight champion in boxing. Before his fights with Floyd Patterson, he would stare down Patterson, giving him the "whammy" with his eyes. He was a fearsome-looking mauler, and Patterson couldn't cope with the aura of invincibility displayed by Liston. But young, brash, supremely confident Cassius Clay wasn't intimidated at all. He predicted victory, the same way that Joe Namath predicted victory in the famous professional football game between the New York Jets and the Baltimore Colts. That

brashness rubbed off on Namath's teammates, and they beat the "invincible" Colts. People who regard their likelihood of success as nil generally don't succeed. They are no match for those who do believe they can and will win.

The Communists are winners. They have an eschatology of victory, as F. N. Lee's book, *Communist Eschatology*, demonstrates so well. (Box 13, Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, \$15.) They believe themselves to be the vanguard of the proletariat, the cutting edge of inevitable historical progress. They have captured the minds of generations of university students in the Third World, as well as the minds of intellectuals all over the world, precisely because they offer a success doctrine. As Prof. Ludwig von Mises noted in 1922, "Nothing has helped the spread of socialist ideas more than this belief that Socialism is inevitable. Even the opponents of Socialism are for the most part bewitched by it: it takes the heart out of their resistance." (*Socialism* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, (1922) 1962], p. 282.) The Communists, as the most consistent, disciplined, and ruthless of the socialist parties, have triumphed politically because they can point to a supposedly scientific proof of the economic inevitability of their movement.

This same kind of optimism has accompanied successful Christian churches over the past two millennia. When Christians faced Rome, they knew that they were protected from institutional defeat, no matter how bad the persecutions might become. By the third century, the Roman Empire was disintegrating—economically, militarily, politically, and above all, spiritually. The Christians had a practical, dynamic, optimistic religion, while their opponents were increasingly paralyzed. The Christians won. (On the nature of the conflict, see the crucial book by Charles Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1940], which is still in print and is regarded as a classic by scholars of the late Roman West.)

Yet this optimism has been compromised in certain historical eras. At the end of the Middle Ages, European Christianity faced multiple crises. The weather of the early 14th century had produced years of famine (1315-17); the bubonic plague struck (1348) and kept returning, generation after generation. (The last great outbreak was in London, in 1665, which was followed by the great London fire the following year, and this fire destroyed the plague-carrying fleas on the flea-carrying rats.) The pessimism of the era is seen in its art, as Johan Huizinga shows in his study, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, [1924]). Smaller groups of wandering preachers, especially the Lollards, began to challenge the stodgy traditionalism of the late-medieval Church, and the Reformation met with broad public support when it struck

Europe in the 16th century. The formal religious structures of the medieval world were transformed. The Puritan movement of the 17th century completed the transformation in the Anglo-Saxon world, and in its early years (up to 1660), it was marked by its optimism concerning the earthly future of Christian institutions.

Measuring Success

What keeps an athlete in constant training? The hope of reward. Why does he think there is a relationship between private effort and public victory? Because he can measure his performance. He sees on the clock or the measuring tape the difference his training makes. He can also see the difference it makes with the competition. He has a standard of performance set by himself and the competition, and they all have a standard of measurement.

The modern Christian churches have systematically abandoned their faith in an earthly set of standards by which men's performances can be judged. Their faith is summarized in the slogan, "No creed but the Bible, no law but love." The slogan is a creed, of course, when the content of preaching is devoid of concrete, external, measurable standards, then the congregations are set adrift in an age of philosophical relativism. The Marxists believe they have proper standards in the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, and in China, in the writings of Mao. They believe they have valid standards of evaluation. They are able to make an appeal to men who are sinking in the relativism of modern thought.

The measurement standards are given to us in biblical law. We know when we have deviated from these standards. The Bible also teaches that societies that strive to conform themselves to the criteria of biblical law will experience outward successes—prizes, if you prefer—that are visible to the performers and onlookers (Deut. 28:1-14). There is a **predictable relationship**, on the average, between **conformity to the standards** and **economic growth**. Not that every decent man will get rich, or that every sinner will become poor, but that in some visible manner, the population as a whole will benefit from outward conformity to the law of God, and it will suffer from the rejection of that law-order.

This leads us to a much-ignored aspect of theology. If the athlete looks to his performances, evaluating himself in relation to others, as well as in relation to the fixed standards, he has to perform. He has to take steps—very fast steps if he happens to be a runner or jumper—in time and on earth. He has to test his performance in practice, before the race. He has to keep running against the clock, or jumping against the tape, in order to evaluate his abilities. If he is training for one major contest, like the Olympics, he uses performances in preceding races to judge the quality of the competition. Or if he is only in one contest, the preliminary heats provide him with the comparative data. But the main point is this: the training must be rigorous, and the race involves a strategy. It is not a hypothetical training program. He does not get in shape by merely reading books about running. Watching television broadcasts of races is not a program for victory. The heart of successful training is directed, self-disciplined, informed activity, not passivity.

Is it reasonable to assume that the proper way to train for, let alone actually run, a race is to ignore outward performances? Is it sensible to imagine that men who want to win a race are content to run without a strategy? Furthermore, if we are talking about a success-minded professional athlete, would we imagine that he would train alone, without a coach? Why would

anyone enter a race without determining beforehand what the rules are, what past performers have accomplished, what the training program involves, what coaches expect, and what kind of obstacles are likely to appear on the track? Yet modern Christianity has informed its adherents that these obviously preposterous assumptions are precisely those which ought to be assumed by the faithful. There are few "coaches" (ministers) who train men to win.

Imagine a runner who trains in private, but who never enters a preliminary race. He goes completely on faith, always assuming that he is in top shape, but never experiencing "the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat" in preliminary trials. He never learns how to pace himself. He never becomes a master of his sport under the pressure of full competition. He goes into the race with minimal training, little idea about the rules, no hope of visible, external victory, and with no minor victories behind him—only a string of random events, or even worse, a long string of visible defeats. Imagine also that his coach has told him that he can expect no victories in the preliminaries. All his training will produce nothing but losses. In fact, all the training by all of those ever coached by him has led to visible losses, and what's more, all "true" coaches in the past have produced nothing but losers. However, he is told that when the final event is run, and gets his one great opportunity, he will be a winner.

Would you think it might occur to the athlete to try to locate a coach with another approach to training—a more positive approach? For there **are** other schools of coaching. There are trainers who can convince an athlete that he has a good shot at the gold medal, if he just trains hard enough, and has confidence in himself, and is able to stay on the track until the finish. Furthermore, these other coaches have produced winners in numerous preliminaries. These coaches can point to a positive relationship between coaching, training, and victory in the preliminary races—visible, measurable victories. Wouldn't you expect athletes to seek out trainers whose athletes have produced that proverbial "track record"?

Fast Tracks, Slow Christians

Where are the victories? In which areas of life have the Christians produced incomparable records? Only in linguistics, where evangelicals have learned the laws of language in order to produce more effective translations of the Bible. In order to proclaim the supposed orthodoxy of external defeat for covenantally faithful believers, the translators have been forced to become winners in their field.

Why do Christians have an inferiority complex in the midst of a disintegrating humanist culture? Because they are told from their childhood that Christians cannot win, that there is only a negative relationship between hard work and cultural influence. They are told that the true winners are losers here on earth. They are told that Satan is the world's greatest coach, and that his team has the fast runners. In short, they are told that the lawless, rebellious, relativistic perspective of Satan and his host produces external successes, meaning that there is a positive relationship between sin and earthly conquest, between rebellion and victory.

Why, then, did David, the apple of God's eye, establish the foundations of Israel's kingdom, and Rehoboam and other high-tax statists tear them down (I Ki. 12)? Why did Israel get carried off by the invaders when Israel was ruled by blasphemers, and why did the nation return under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah? Why weren't the godly men losers in Old Testament times? Think about it?

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