

## ABSTRACT

### Equipping Christian Families with a Distinctly Christian Framework for Evaluating and Engaging Youth Sport

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This project represents an attempt to find a constructive, pastoral way to approach the topic of Christian families' involvement in youth sport. Six Christian married couples with at least one child involved in youth sport participated in a seminar designed to familiarize them with the Christian redemptive-historical drama and to teach them how to use creation, fall, and redemption as interpretive lenses through which to evaluate youth sport. Pre-intervention and post-intervention interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed. The purpose of this project was to equip Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport.

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Equipping Christian Families with a Distinctly Christian  
Framework for Evaluating and Engaging Youth Sport

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By  
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and to Dr. John White, my academic supervisor, who taught me, among other things, to see the intrinsic value of sport as a good gift from our Creator that is to be enjoyed fully and freely without reservation and without feeling that we must instrumentalize sport in order to justify its worth. Drs. Vang, Killough, and White, thank you for investing in me as a student, respecting me as a colleague, and loving me as a friend and brother.

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Finally, to my children and my wife, thank you. Besides trying to figure out youth sport as a pastor, I am also trying to figure it out as a parent. Evangeline, Trey, Annabelle and Emma Faith, I am grateful to God for you, and I want to do right by you as a daddy. Part of that is figuring out to what extent and in what manner our family should be involved in organized youth sport. This project is as much for you as it is for anyone else. Emily, words are not adequate. Three seminars in Waco. Two weeks in New York. Countless late nights in the office. I love you, and I am looking forward to getting back to being the husband and father you and the children deserve.



## DEDICATION

To my wife, Emily.

To our four children: Evangeline, Trey, Annabelle, and Emma Faith.

## CHAPTER 1

### Statement of the Problem

#### *Problem Statement*

Roughly 35 million children between the ages of 4 and 14 are involved in youth sport.<sup>1</sup> In a 2013 study of congregational decline, the most cited reason for decline was “competing Sunday activities,” and youth sport was near the top of the list of those competing activities.<sup>2</sup> Youth sport is ubiquitous, and Christian families clearly place a high value on participation in youth sport, sometimes to the detriment of their church involvement and spiritual development.

Church leaders have responded to the cultural phenomenon of modern American youth sport and to Christian involvement therewith in a variety of ways. Responses range from wholesale accommodation to outright rejection, neither of which is adequate. Church leaders struggle to find constructive, pastoral ways to address Christian families’ involvement with youth sport, and many Christian families seem to act in a manner consistent with dominant cultural expectations, rather than making sport-related decisions that reflect a distinctly Christian understanding of the meaning and value of sport.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven J. Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Steve McMullin, “The Secularization of Sunday: Real or Perceived Competition for Churches,” *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 1 (2013): 47, accessed on August 27, 2018, DOI: 10.1007/s13644-012-0089-7.

### *Purpose Statement*

Church leaders must find a way to address youth sport pastorally because Christian families are and will continue to be involved in youth sport. It is the purpose of this project to equip Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport. By equipping Christian families with this framework, they will be able to make sport-related decisions informed by a biblical and theological understanding of the meaning and value of sport.

### *Definitions*

The following list of definitions is offered for clarity, so that the reader understands the underlying assumptions the author has regarding specific terminology used in this project. This list is neither exhaustive nor should it be considered authoritative beyond the scope of the present work. All definitions are composite in nature, having been gleaned from the author's interaction with extant literature in the field.

Culture – the beliefs, values, and customs of a group of people

Cultural activity/endeavor – an activity/endeavor that is an embodiment or manifestation of culture; e.g., “youth sport” is a cultural activity/endeavor

Cultural phenomenon – a cultural activity/endeavor that has gained widespread popularity; e.g., “modern youth sport in America” is a cultural phenomenon

Cultural mandate – the idea that humankind is to work with what God has already created, bringing out its latent potential in a way that contributes to human flourishing and glorifies God

Flourishing – overall welfare and wellbeing of the human person

Youth sport – primarily refers to pre-adolescent, pre-varsity athletics

Intrinsic – belonging to the nature of or deriving directly from a thing itself

Extrinsic – something produced as a result; a byproduct

Psychosocial – related to psychological and social dimensions of human development

True/Healthy Competition – etymological understanding of competition as “striving with,” rather than “striving against”

Decompetition – understanding of competition that sees opponent as enemy to be vanquished; primary aim is victory, often at all costs

### *Rationale*

This project has both a general and specific rationale. The general rationale grows out of observations made concerning the American church’s relationship with sport. Sport is ubiquitous in America. A number of cable networks provide twenty-four hour sports coverage. The top five universities in 2017 generated a combined gross sports revenue of \$971,680,889.<sup>3</sup> The combined net worth of the top five most valuable American professional sports teams in 2018 was \$19.4 billion.<sup>4</sup> An estimated 98.2 million people watched the Super Bowl on television this year, which was down from the record-setting 114.4 million viewers in 2015.<sup>5</sup> Professional athletes attain celebrity

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Berkowitz and Christopher Schnaars, “NCAA Finances,” *USA TODAY Sports*, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://sports.usatoday.com/ncaa/finances/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kurt Badenhausen, “Full List: The World’s 50 Most Valuable Sports Teams Of 2018,” *Forbes*, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2018/07/18/full-list-the-worlds-50-most-valuable-sports-teams-of-2018/#46217bd76b0e>.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Levin, “Super Bowl Ratings Fall to 11-Year Low, Slipping below the 100 Million Mark, Nielsen Says,” *USA TODAY*, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2019/02/04/super-bowl-liii-hits-11-year-ratings-low-nielsen-says/2773220002/>.

status, and they are idolized and emulated by countless American boys and girls. One may recall a jingle from the early 1990's, touting the phrase, "I wanna be like Mike," which captured the imagination and ethos of a generation of children, all of whom dreamed of being the next Michael Jordan. Then, there was Tiger Woods, whose tracks have left an indelible mark on the American sporting landscape, as well as on the American psyche. Who could forget the image of two-year-old Tiger toddling onto the set of the *Mike Douglas Show*, teeing up a golf ball with his father's help, taking a full backswing, and making solid contact? Mark Hyman suggests that "for the millions of parents watching—and tens of millions who have heard about it over the years—it sent a powerful message: it's possible to turn your kid into a champion if you start early enough."<sup>6</sup> If wanting to "be like Mike" captured the imagination and ethos of a generation of children, then Tiger Woods' rise to fame captured the imagination and ethos of a generation—or more—of parents. Sport is ubiquitous in America. It somehow touches virtually every life and every aspect of life. Americans clearly love their sports, and Christian Americans are no exception.

Shirl Hoffman states that evangelical Christians, on the whole, have uncritically embraced sport and have displayed a reticence to "wrestle with the difficult task of understanding sport and its relationship to their faith."<sup>7</sup> This uncritical embrace has led to the rise of what Frank Deford labeled "Sportianity," which Hoffman defines as "a concoction of triumphal evangelism blended with worldly Darwinian competition, and

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Hyman, *Until It Hurts: America's Obsession with Youth Sports and How It Harms Our Kids* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Shirl J. Hoffman, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 13.

crafted appeal to those for whom a love of athletics frames their lives.”<sup>8</sup> Years of observation in pastoral ministry have led me to believe that Hoffman’s assessment is not off the mark, and I have found there to be very little, if any, discernable difference between Christians’ attitudes toward sport and those of non-Christians. This is true with sport, in general; it is also true with youth sport, in particular.

With regard to youth sport, Christian parents tend to have the same aspirations for their children as do other parents, and Christians appear to be involved in youth sport with the same frequency as others, often to the neglect of their families’ spiritual commitments and to the detriment of their families’ spiritual development. Church leaders have struggled to respond in a constructive, pastoral manner. On one end of the spectrum, some choose the path of accommodation, offering worship services and Bible studies at alternate times. On the other end of the spectrum, some take a hard line against youth sport, decrying its evils and imploring Christian families to stop worshipping at the altar of sports. Neither wholesale accommodation nor outright rejection are adequate ways to address youth sport. For the church in America, finding a third way is critical.

There is also a very specific, personal rationale for this project, which grows out of observations made over the course of nearly twenty years of vocational Christian ministry. When children are young, many families are heavily invested in the congregational lives of their respective churches. As children grow, they find more opportunities available for their children to be involved in extracurricular activities, and youth sport is the primary extracurricular activity in which most of them are involved. I have observed the following pattern on numerous occasions: as children’s involvement

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14.

with youth sport increases, a family's involvement with the congregational life of its church declines. There was a time when Christian families did not have to make these choices because there were no youth sports on Sundays or on Wednesday nights. That time has passed, and youth sporting events and practices often conflict with churches' scheduled programming. It is becoming increasingly the norm that, when there is a scheduling conflict between church activities and youth sport, youth sport takes precedence, almost without fail. Observing these repeated patterns led me to become cynical toward sport, and my sense of frustration grew because I simply did not know how to address the issue.

It was easier to decide how not to address the issue. Accommodation was never an option, neither practically nor on principle. Practically, the churches I have been involved with lack the resources to facilitate worship and Bible study in alternate time slots. On principle, accommodation failed to teach people to take seriously the lordship of Christ and to take seriously their faith commitments as followers of Christ. Rejection was becoming a tempting alternative, but the route of rejection fails at two levels: it fails to take people's genuine love of sport seriously, and it fails to appreciate the inherent goodness of sport. Furthermore, I also knew that rejection would drive a wedge, which would ostracize people and jeopardize the potential for me to have future pastoral influence with them. Realizing that neither accommodation nor rejection were adequate options for effecting positive, long-term change, finding a third way became critical on a very specific, personal level.

This project represents an attempt at finding a third way, which is the way of equipping. More specifically, I can equip myself to make Christ-honoring decisions for

my own family, since I have young children involved with youth sport and, in so doing, can hope to set an example for others to emulate. Beyond equipping myself and setting an example, I can also equip other families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport, so that they can make sport-related decisions informed by a biblical and theological understanding of the meaning and value of youth sport.

### *Research Question*

Since the purpose of this project is to equip Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport, the inquiry into the effectiveness this project will be guided by the following research question: What effect will equipping Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport have on the meaning and value they ascribe to youth sport?

### *Significance of the Project*

As noted above, roughly 35 million children in America between the ages of 4 and 14 are involved in organized youth sport. Christian families appear to be involved with the same frequency as others and seem to adhere to dominant cultural attitudes and expectations, rather than making sport-related decisions that reflect a distinctly Christian understanding of the meaning and value of youth sport.

This project has the potential to equip Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport. Regardless of the decisions they make hereafter, those decisions will have been made on the basis of a biblically- and theologically-informed understanding. Such is the nature of the equipping



ministry. People will have been given tools and will have been taught how to use them. It will be incumbent upon them to put those tools to good use.

Beyond its significance for their engagement with youth sport, the project has the potential to affect participants' engagement with other cultural activities, as well. The framework they will be given is tailored to youth sport but can be adapted and used as a lens through which to view any cultural phenomena. Furthermore, the project has the potential to affect not only the participants but also those within their sphere of influence.

Finally, since church leaders continue to struggle to find adequate responses to the cultural phenomenon of modern youth sport in America, and since there is a need within the church for a better framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport, this project has the potential for much broader significance. One can hope that other church leaders will be able to adapt and use this project in their own settings, equipping the Christian families with whom they have influence to make Christ-honoring decisions regarding youth sport.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Biblical and Theological Foundation

#### *Introduction*

In seeking biblical guidance for evaluating and engaging the cultural activity of youth sport, one is at a disadvantage from the outset. The Bible contains no specific directives regarding sport. The apostle Paul uses sporting metaphors in his epistles, but he uses them in a primarily illustrative manner. One such instance is 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, where Paul employs imagery from the Greco-Roman sports of running and boxing. In context, Paul's point has to do with the determination, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice that mark his ministry, but one can extrapolate a broader application about the need for these attributes in the Christian life more generally. If the principle of authorial intent has any bearing on one's hermeneutic, then 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 is not a text about how Christians are to engage sport. At most, it touches the topic of Christian engagement with sport tangentially and may offer "another paradigm for interpreting and engaging ethically the lived experience of sport itself," which is an argument John White makes, but White also contends that "this metaphor is unable to stand as the organising [*sic*] image for a theological ethic of sport."<sup>9</sup> If White is correct, then no single Pauline sporting metaphor can be used as one's organizing image. Furthermore, even when one considers all of Paul's sporting metaphors in toto, one still lacks both an organizing image for a theological ethic of sport and sufficient ground upon which to build a

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<sup>9</sup> John B. White, "John Paul II's Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27: A Paradigm for a Christian Ethic of Sport," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2012): 74.

theology of sport, a position taken by Robert Ellis, who concludes, “It will be wishful thinking to imagine that it (one’s theology of sport) may be grounded firmly on the athletic metaphors of Paul alone, and a broader biblically informed view of play must now be taken as a next step.”<sup>10</sup> Ellis and others have taken that next step, scouring the biblical corpus for material having to do with play, since sport is a subcategory of play. This is a useful approach, if one’s primary aim is to articulate fully a biblical theology of sport. The present task, however, is finding biblical guidance for engaging youth sport as a cultural activity, a task that seems to require one to adopt or construct a theological framework.

Since at least the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the redemptive-historical narrative arc of scripture has been utilized as a grid or lens through which to evaluate and engage culture. In 1951, H. Richard Niebuhr brought the topic of Christian cultural engagement to the forefront with the publication of *Christ and Culture*. At times, Niebuhr’s work has been the target of sharp criticism, especially from those with Anabaptist theological leanings. John Howard Yoder critiques Niebuhr’s work on three levels: the level of definitions and logical consistency, the level of the adequacy of Niebuhr’s typology, and the theological level.<sup>11</sup> Criticisms notwithstanding, Niebuhr’s portrayal of “Christ as Transformer of Culture,” does take into account the broad-sweeping redemptive-historical narrative of the Bible; i.e., creation, fall, and redemption from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. When one

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 139–140.

<sup>11</sup> Craig A. Carter, “The Legacy of an Inadequate Christology: Yoder’s Critique of Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77, no. 3 (July 2003): 391–392, accessed March 19, 2019, <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=txshracd2488&id=GALE|A202919448&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>.

adopts the creation-fall-redemption narrative arc of Scripture as one's evaluative lens, one takes into account that all humankind is in bondage to sin, and all human cultural endeavors are subject to the corrupting effects of the sin. The fall, however, does not abrogate the inherent created goodness of humankind or of human cultural endeavors; what was good has not become evil but has, instead, been perverted by the corrupting effects of the fall. The work of redemption, then, can encompass not only the liberation of individual human persons from bondage to sin but also the liberation of human culture from the corrupting effects of the fall. The net effect of adopting such a view is that, as Christians engage culture, they do so with an eye toward the redemption of culture, actively working to minimize the corrupting effects of the fall and to maximize the creational goodness of the particular cultural endeavor.<sup>12</sup>

Part One will trace the redemptive-historical narrative arc of scripture, offering exegetical analysis and theological reflection. Part Two will offer a description of the cultural phenomenon of modern American youth sport and will, then, use the themes of creation, fall, and redemption as hermeneutical lenses through which to evaluate both the cultural activity of youth sport and the cultural phenomenon of modern American youth sport.

### *Part One: The Creation/Fall/Redemption Narrative Arc of Scripture*

#### *Creation*

The storyline of scripture begins with the affirmation that God alone created everything out of nothing. Genesis 1:1 affirms, "In the beginning, God created the

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<sup>12</sup> A recent example of this type of cultural engagement can be found in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, et al.

heavens and the earth.”<sup>13</sup> The central proposition of this opening and foundational verse of the Bible is that God alone is Creator, and God creates *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Tremper Longman summarizes its theological import: “Everything that exists, animate and inanimate, comes from God and depends on God.”<sup>14</sup> The Hebrew word for “create” here is *bara*. Gordon Wenham notes that, “as with the word ‘create’ in English, there is a stress on the artist’s freedom and power—the more so in the Hebrew as the word is used solely for God’s activity.”<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Terence Fretheim observes that *bara* “is never connected with the material from which a thing is made, like other verbs of making and forming,” and, by the time Second Isaiah was composed, “the word seems to have become a specialized designation for the divine creation,” stressing “the extraordinariness and effortlessness of God’s creative activity, as well as the fundamental newness and uniqueness of that which is brought into being.”<sup>16</sup> So, while there is debate about the precise definition and theological ramifications of *bara*, the weight of evidence suggests that creation out of nothing is, at the very least, implied by the use of *bara* in Genesis 1:1, and, as John Walton points out, “Later Scripture supports our belief that God also made all of the matter of which the cosmos is composed (and that he made it out of nothing, Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 11:3).”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>14</sup> Tremper Longman, III, *Genesis*, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 34.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 14.

<sup>16</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation, Fall, and Flood: Studies in Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 55.

<sup>17</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 71.

Nothing exists apart from God's creative decree. Roger Olson comments, "God spoke or commanded the universe into existence with everything in it—both material and spiritual. The whole heavens and earth that together comprise everything that exists outside of God came into being from God's command."<sup>18</sup> It is not that "all of God's creative work was direct and immediate, occurring at the very beginning of time."<sup>19</sup> Instead, as Millard Erickson notes, "God's creative activity includes not only the initial creative activity, but also his later indirect workings. Creation does not preclude development within the world; it includes it."<sup>20</sup> The affirmation that creation includes development within the world will have bearing on one's understanding of the origination and development of youth sports.

God not only created everything but also saw that every created thing was good. The word "good" is used seven times in Genesis 1. Six times, the phrase is repeated: "God saw that it was good" (1:10, 11, 18, 21, 24). The seventh time, it says, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (1:31). The sevenfold usage of "good" to describe God's creative work indicates (a) God's immense delight not only in the product of creation but also in the act of creating and (b) the inherent goodness of every created thing. Regarding God's delight in creation, Wenham states, "God the great artist is pictured admiring his handiwork."<sup>21</sup> Erik Thoennes concurs and adds, "The overwhelming artistic variety we see in creation indicates that there is not only an

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<sup>18</sup> Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 160.

<sup>19</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd Edition. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 340.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>21</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1:18.

intelligent designer behind it, but also a playful artist. The sheer variety of tastes, colors, sounds, textures, and shapes in creation indicate anything but pure utilitarian motivation by its creator. God is both skillful architect and creative artist.”<sup>22</sup> Fretheim explains, “The word ‘good’ carries with it the ideas of beauty and purposefulness. It is, on the one hand, an aesthetic statement (not being defective). On the other hand, it conveys the idea of order, purpose, direction.”<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to imagine God not feeling a sense of delight upon seeing the first sunrise, the first flower in bloom, or the first human faces. It is even more difficult to imagine God not feeling a sense of delight as God looked upon the whole creation, knowing that everything had come out just the way God intended it. In the sense that the product of creation brings God delight, creation is good.

God also delighted in the act of creating. Building on the work of Johann Huizinga, Hugo Rahner, and Jürgen Moltmann, Robert Ellis recognizes God as *deus ludens*, the God who plays or the playful God. One finds biblical warrant for the theological construct *deus ludens* in Proverbs 8:22-31, where Wisdom speaks:

<sup>22</sup>“The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.  
<sup>23</sup>Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. <sup>24</sup>When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. <sup>25</sup>Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, <sup>26</sup>before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. <sup>27</sup>When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, <sup>28</sup>when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, <sup>29</sup>when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, <sup>30</sup>then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, <sup>31</sup>rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.

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<sup>22</sup> K. Erik Thoennes, “Created to Play: Thoughts on Play, Sport, and the Christian Life,” in *The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports*, ed. Donald L. Deardorff and John B. White (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 87.

<sup>23</sup> Fretheim, *Creation, Fall, and Flood*, 59.

Ellis points out, “The character of wisdom appears separate from but alongside ‘the Lord’ at creation.”<sup>24</sup> Rahner makes the following observations:

Here, in a poetic dramatization, the Wisdom of God is regarded as an hypostasis, which is with God and on which the Creator of the world casts his delighted eye, as he brings visible things into being... This Wisdom “makes play before him”, or rather, to be more exact, “before his face”; it plays like a carefree child, and in its movements the Creator of the world beholds the loveliness of the world he is to fashion.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that Wisdom had an active role in creation: “beside him, like a master workman.” As Wisdom worked alongside the Lord in creation, Wisdom was “daily his delight,” and Wisdom is said to have been “rejoicing before him always.” Likewise, Wisdom is said to have been “rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.” The words “delight” and “rejoice” indicate God’s pleasure in the act of bringing forth creation.

While it is beyond the scope of this project to delineate all interpretive possibilities for Proverbs 8:22-31, as early as the fourth century, the Cappadocian Father, Gregory of Nazianzus, identifies the Wisdom of Proverbs 8 with the Logos: “For the Logos on high plays, stirring the whole cosmos back and forth, as he wills, into shapes of every kind.”<sup>26</sup> This is, presumably, the same Logos mentioned in John 1:1-3, where the Logos is undeniably Jesus, God the Son, the second person of the Trinity. If one accepts Gregory’s premise, one finds that, in creation, the triune God was, indeed, at play.<sup>27</sup> Citing Moltmann, Ellis states, “Creation has ‘the character of play, which gives God

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<sup>24</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play*, 143.

<sup>25</sup> Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 19–20.

<sup>26</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play*, 144.

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 1:2 affirms that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”



delight.”<sup>28</sup> Creation is “playfully made,” and the delightful play of God in the act of creating constitutes another aspect of “creation’s present goodness.”<sup>29</sup>

Creation is “good” in the sense that God delights not only in the product of creation but also in the act of creating. Additionally, creation is inherently good, simply by virtue of the goodness of its Creator. Like the English word “good,” the Hebrew word for “good” (*tob*), has “a broad range of meaning,” but this “Hebrew term as used by the Israelites is more closely related to the mind and opinion of God than is the English word.”<sup>30</sup> Wenham goes on to explain, “God is preeminently the one who is good, and his goodness is reflected in his works.”<sup>31</sup> If, in fact, God created all things, then “ultimately the character of creation must be completely attributed to God and necessarily reflects the character of God. If God is good, then creation must be good.”<sup>32</sup>

As part of creation, humankind is inherently good, but special treatment is given to God’s creation of humankind in Genesis 1:26-28:

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” <sup>27</sup>So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup>And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

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<sup>28</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play*, 142.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>30</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1:18.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> A. J. Conyers, *A Basic Christian Theology* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 51.

Nothing else is created in the image of God, only humankind. Victor Hamilton asserts, “Any approach that focuses on one aspect of man—be that physical, spiritual, or intellectual—to the neglect of the rest of man’s constituent features seems doomed to failure.”<sup>33</sup> The reason they are doomed to failure is that the human creature is depicted in scripture as having unity of being. One sees this in Genesis 2:7: “Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” It does not state that God formed the man’s body but, rather, that God formed the man, after which God breathed into the man “the breath of life” (i.e., animating spirit). Fretheim explains: “The material of which man as a living being is made is called flesh. This is animated by the ‘soul,’ which is the principle of life. But they cannot exist separately.”<sup>34</sup> Commenting on the tradition of the church, Philip Turner notes that “all persons are by nature a psychosomatic unity. They are not simply spirit. They are not simply a mind. They are not simply a body. They are not a mind and a body and a spirit. They are a living unity of all three.”<sup>35</sup> While one may speak of constituent aspects of the human person in terms of body, mind, and spirit, it would be improper to limit the application of the *imago dei* to anything less than the whole human person.

Although the author of Genesis does not define “image of God,” Fretheim proposes, “Throughout the ancient Near East the function of an image was to represent

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<sup>33</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 137.

<sup>34</sup> Fretheim, *Creation, Fall, and Flood*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Turner, “Human Nature and Goodness,” *Anglican Theological Review* 61, no. 1 (January 1979): 42.

someone... So man is placed on earth as God's representative."<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Longman asserts that one should "understand the 'image of God' on analogy with the ancient practice of ancient Near Eastern kings setting up images of themselves throughout their realm," and that "like a statue reflects the presence and power and authority of a king, so human beings reflect the glory of God."<sup>37</sup> Based on traditional ancient Near Eastern usage of "image of God," it seems best to understand that humankind is both a representative of and a reflection of God on earth.

As representative, humankind is charged to "subdue" and "have dominion."

There is a linguistic and thematic link between Genesis 1:26-28 and Psalm 8:5-8:

<sup>5</sup>Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. <sup>6</sup>You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, <sup>7</sup>all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, <sup>8</sup>the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

Erickson comments, "The conclusion is then drawn that verse 5 is equivalent to the statements in Genesis 1 that the human was created in God's image."<sup>38</sup> As R. R. Reno observes, "The capacity for dominion is an aspect of the *imago dei*."<sup>39</sup> At the very least, the charge to "subdue" and "have dominion" over the earth implies functional stewardship of creation. As Dennis Hollinger points out, this stewardship entails both a co-creating role and a co-caring role:

Only God creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, but God grants to humans a kind of co-creating and co-caring role for the rest of creation. Because all of creation is good, this "dominion" is not a coercive pillaging for one's own selfishness but

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<sup>36</sup> Fretheim, *Creation, Fall, and Flood*, 65.

<sup>37</sup> Longman, III, *Genesis*, 36–37.

<sup>38</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 466.

<sup>39</sup> R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 54.

rather a tender care so that the needs of all humans might be met and that we might experience joy, aesthetic pleasure, and creativity in our stewardship of the good resources of the earth.<sup>40</sup>

Hollinger emphasizes the “co-caring” role of this stewardship; others highlight the “co-creating” role. Understanding that creation encompasses much more than the natural physical world, Al Wolters traces the trajectory of creation *ex nihilo* to some its logical consequences:

In the biblical view, creation is everything which God has ordained to exist, what he has put in place as part of his creative workmanship. To be sure, this includes the great variety of physical entities and processes, and the enormous diversity of flora and fauna that God has created “according to their kind,” but it also encompasses much more. Creation includes such human realities as families and other social institutions, the presence of beauty in the world, the ability to appreciate that beauty, the phenomena of tenderness and laughter, the capacity to conceptualize and reason, the experience of joy and the sense of justice. An almost unimaginable variety of objects, institutions, relationships and phenomena are part of the rich texture of God’s creation.<sup>41</sup>

Creation, as it existed at the end of day six, was pregnant with potential. Everything that could ever someday exist—including the cultural activity of youth sport—was already latent within God’s good creation. James Davison Hunter notes, “The goodness of his creation, then, was anything but inert. It was dynamic, vibrant and full of latent promise.”<sup>42</sup>

Seeing congruity between Genesis 1:26-28 and Genesis 2:15, theologians have identified what is often referred to as the “cultural mandate.” In Genesis 2:15, after God creates the man, God places him in the garden to “work it and keep” it. Regarding the

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<sup>40</sup> Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2002), 72.

<sup>41</sup> Albert M. Wolters, “The Story: Creation,” *Comment*, Spring 2010, accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/creation/>.

<sup>42</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

word for “work,” Harry Alan Hahne explains that it “suggests making changes, organizing and managing the natural world for the benefit of humanity, not simply keeping all of nature in its raw, wild state.”<sup>43</sup> Creation is not merely to be left as-is; God intends for humankind to do something with it. Hunter explains, “These are active verbs that convey God’s intention that human beings both develop and cherish the world in ways that meet human needs and bring glory and honor to him. In this creative labor, we mirror God’s own generative act and thus reflect our very nature as ones made in his likeness.”<sup>44</sup> As those created in the image of God, representing God and charged with stewarding God’s creation, humankind is given the responsibility of being co-creators with God, working with what God has created, developing creation’s latent potential in a way that contributes to human flourishing and bears witness to the glory of the Triune God.

The idea that humankind represents God is closely linked with the idea that humankind reflects God. While it is beyond the scope of this project to imagine all the ways in which humankind might reflect God, two things bear mentioning: the impulse to create and the impulse to play. When humankind works with what God has created to develop creation’s latent potential, humankind is living out of its deepest identity as those created in the image of a creative God. As Creator, God is both *deus faber* and *deus ludens*, a God who works and a God who plays. While there is obviously an orderly, utilitarian concern as God creates, there is also an evident concern for enjoyment and aesthetics. Humans, too, work at creating things that are useful (buildings, automobiles,

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<sup>43</sup> Harry Alan Hahne, “The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning,” *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* Apocalyptic Vision (2010): 24.

<sup>44</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 3.

toothbrushes, etc.), but they also create things and develop activities that are beautiful or simply enjoyable. Music, art, and theater fall into the latter category, as do the games people play; playing games is not a utilitarian endeavor. Play is something done for its own sake or for the enjoyment of doing it. The same could, perhaps, be said about God's act of creation. God did not have to create, and, yet, God chose to create and also took great delight in creating. There is even a sense, as was mentioned earlier, that God was "at play" in creating everything. So, when humankind plays, humankind is living out of its deepest essence as those created in the image of a playful God.

God alone is Creator, and God creates *ex nihilo*. Nothing exists apart from God's creative decree, and everything God has created is good, including that which was latent in creation. Humankind is created in the image of God, which means humankind is both a representative of and a reflection of God on earth. As representative, humankind is charged with stewarding creation and drawing out its latent potential in fulfillment of the cultural mandate. Humankind also reflects the nature of God, and of particular concern to this project are the ways humankind reflects God's creativity and playfulness.

### *Fall*

As one traces the storyline of Scripture, one quickly finds oneself in the second movement in the narrative arc: the fall. In Genesis 3, the story takes a terrible turn. Sin enters the world, and through sin comes death. God's perfect creation was indelibly marred by humankind's willful rebellion against the good intentions of the Creator, and the effects of the fall continue to reverberate in human experience, human cultural endeavors, and even creation itself. What one finds in Genesis 3 is, in Wenham's words,

“both paradigmatic and protohistorical.”<sup>45</sup> It is paradigmatic in that it describes the experience of every human person; it is protohistorical in that it describes the way in which sin entered human history, the consequences of which are apparent both in the unfolding of human history and in present human experience.

Genesis 3 chronicles a conversation between the woman and the serpent, who is said to be “more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made” (3:1). While the text offers no further clues regarding the serpent’s identity or origin, the serpent has traditionally been identified as Satan or an agent/emissary of Satan.<sup>46</sup> In verse 1, the serpent asks the woman a probing question: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?” The very nature of the question “casts aspersions on God’s character,” suggesting that God is “stingy with his provisions” and is “being unfair by placing limitations on His creatures.”<sup>47</sup>

The woman replies, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die’” (3:2-3). God had previously forbidden them from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil but had not forbidden touching it. In response to the woman’s answer, the serpent casts a second aspersion on God’s character: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:4-5). Bruce Birch et al suggest that the phrase “God knows” (3:5) is a tipping point in the temptation:

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<sup>45</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1:91.

<sup>46</sup> Revelation 12:9; 20:2.

<sup>47</sup> David K. Naugle, “The Story: Fall,” *Comment*, Spring 2010, accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/fall/>.

This claim highlights the fact that God has not told the humans the full truth. And the question is thereby raised as to whether God, having kept something from them, indeed something that seems beneficial, could be fully trusted with their best interests ... Can they trust that not all “benefits” are for their good? The primal sin may thus best be defined as mistrust of God and God’s word, which then manifests itself in disobedience and other negative behaviors (e.g., blaming).<sup>48</sup>

Having had their trust in the goodness of their Creator shaken, the man and woman both eat of the fruit (3:6). As Longman is careful to point out, 3:6 indicates that the man was not only present but also “witnessed the entire interchange without speaking or acting,” and “the bottom line is that both are equally culpable for the first sin against God.”<sup>49</sup>

Their eyes are opened, as the serpent promised, but “all they saw was their own nakedness and their unfitness to meet the creator.”<sup>50</sup> Upon seeing their nakedness, they sew fig leaves together, making loincloths for themselves, and, upon hearing God walk in the garden, they attempt to hide among the trees. At this point, shame, fear, and guilt have entered the human experience. Wenham notes the “stark contrast” between “the couple’s unself-consciousness” and their “ludicrous efforts to hide themselves in the trees and clothe themselves with fig leaves.”<sup>51</sup> They are now using the good things God has created and provided to ensure their flourishing as a shield behind which to hide from their loving Creator.

When God asks, “Where are you?” the man replies that he was afraid because he was naked, and he hid himself (3:8-10). God, then, asks who told them they were naked

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<sup>48</sup> Bruce B. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 55.

<sup>49</sup> Longman, III, *Genesis*, 65.

<sup>50</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1:89.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:88.



and whether they had eaten the fruit of the tree (3:11). God's persistence in being present and questioning the humans indicates that the "Creator of the universe... does not leave the humans alone or walk elsewhere" but "seeks a response from the fearful and ashamed human beings," who "move to the 'blame game' rather than confession."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, "a simple yes would have gotten the matter out into the open," but the man "points the finger of blame at his spouse—*she ... gave me*—and at God—*the woman whom you placed by me*."<sup>53</sup> The woman, in turn, blames the serpent.

Although no word for "sin" has been used, sin is clearly in view, and God's claim that "in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" proves true. Conyers comments on the nature of sin:

When Paul said the "wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), he was making a very apt analogy. It is not that death results eventually as a consequence, any more than wages are paid at retirement! Instead, one works and is paid as the work is done, week by week, or month by month. Just so, death is the consistent daily payment for sin, because to sin *is* to die.<sup>54</sup>

Upon eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the man and woman "know" evil in a participatory and experiential way, signaling the death of their innocence and resulting in fear, shame, and guilt. They also experience relational death, which is manifest both in their relationship with one another and in their relationship with the rest of creation, and it is evidenced by the ensuing blame game. Further, they experience spiritual death—alienation/estrangement from God—which seems not so much a punishment as a consequence. Their estrangement from God is evident before God

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<sup>52</sup> Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 56.

<sup>53</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 194.

<sup>54</sup> Conyers, *A Basic Christian Theology*, 80.

pronounces any “curses” or expels them from the garden: the man and woman cover themselves with fig leaves and attempt to hide from God among the trees. Physical death will come, but it will be a delayed consequence.

Hamilton’s comment on verse 16 gives one an overall frame of reference for what has taken and continues to take place:

Quite clearly this verse, and the ones immediately following, teach that sin has consequences. It is less clear whether God describes or prescribes these consequences. In other words, are these negative consequences engineered directly by God, or is God simply informing the woman the way it is to be from this moment on? ... The point that is apparent is that sin and disobedience do not go unchecked and unchallenged.<sup>55</sup>

While this is the overall point to be taken from these “curses” as a whole, it is necessary for this project to examine one curse in particular. In 3:17 God says to the man, “Cursed is the ground because of you.” The curse upon the ground apparently extends to all of creation, which leads the apostle Paul to affirm in Romans 8:20-21 that creation “was subject to futility” and is in “bondage to corruption.” Before examining the corrupting effects of the fall on creation, one needs to see the universality of sin and its corrupting effects on humankind and human culture.

According to Birch et al, Genesis 3 “describes the ‘originating sin,’ and the chapters that follow speak of a process by which sin became ‘original,’ that is, universal and inescapable (no genetic understandings are conveyed).”<sup>56</sup> Because the term “original sin” is often misunderstood, Erickson avoids its usage, preferring, instead, to speak of sin as “universal” and “inescapable.”<sup>57</sup> Sin is, indeed, universal and inescapable, as are the

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<sup>55</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 200–201.

<sup>56</sup> Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 53.

<sup>57</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 566ff.

effects of sin, but the question of how sin became universal and inescapable is a matter of debate. Longman makes the following proposal:

[T]he idea that we inherit a sin nature, guilt, and death from Adam (and Eve) does not derive from the Old Testament or from Paul, but from the thinking of Augustine. Now Augustine was one of the greatest theological thinkers of all time, but he was not infallible. Augustine got off to a bad start by mistranslating the Greek of Romans 5:12 which properly rendered says ‘just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, *because* (*eph hō*) all sinned.’ Augustine translated “because” as “in whom” (*in quo*), thus changing Paul’s point that we all are guilty because of our own sin to the idea that we are all guilty because of Adam’s sin.<sup>58</sup>

This runs counter to centuries of Reformed doctrinal formulation, but, if Longman’s assessment of Augustine’s mistranslation is accurate, then his understanding of the universality and inescapability of sin seems more befitting of the narrative flow of Genesis 3-6, which culminates with the declaration, “The Lord God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (6:5). This summary of humankind’s state highlights both the extensiveness and the intensiveness of sin. Humankind is not only universally and inescapably sinful, humankind is also thoroughly sinful. This does not mean humankind is as bad as it could be. Rather, no aspect of human existence, including the deepest intentions of one’s heart, is exempt from or immune to the corrupting effects of sin.

With modification to the statement of Birch et al, one might say Genesis 3 shows the “originating sin,” but there is no process whereby sin becomes “original.” Instead, Genesis 4-6 demonstrates that sin is, from the moment of the fall onward, universal and inescapable. While one may crave to know the *how* and the *why*, theological speculation

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<sup>58</sup> Longman, III, *Genesis*, 72.

about how or why sin became universal and inescapable may, finally, be a fruitless endeavor. The biblical assumption is simply *that* sin is universal and inescapable; one is never told, explicitly, *how* or *why* this came to be the case. That sin is now a universal and inescapable human trait and tendency is an assumption held by the biblical writers, especially Paul, whose letters are often considered the premier resource for hamartiological insight.

Since humankind is universally, inescapably, and thoroughly sinful, then humankind is also universally and inescapably subject to the effects and consequences of sin. Likewise and by necessity, human cultural endeavors bear the marks of sin. Noting that Cain is depicted as the builder of the first city (Genesis 4:17) and that this is evidence of cultural development, Fretheim states, “Since sin has entered the human race, all the subsequent progress in civilization is not progress away from sin (it leads to no utopia!), but progress accompanied by sin. It is *sinful* man who advances. He carries his sin with him.”<sup>59</sup> Human cultural developments and endeavors, including youth sport, will always be tainted by the corrupting effects of sin. This is true not only because they are produced and participated in by sinful human creatures but also because the entirety of creation itself is corrupted by sin.

In Romans 8, the apostle Paul states that “creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (8:19). The reason creation waits eagerly is that “creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it” (8:20). This is a reference to God’s curse on the ground in Genesis 3:17. When Christ comes again, “creation will be set free from its bondage to corruption” (8:21). So, the

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<sup>59</sup> Fretheim, *Creation, Fall, and Flood*, 101.

present state of creation is one of “futility” and “bondage to corruption.” Olson makes this summary statement:

*...creation is fallen under a curse and needs supernatural healing (redemption).* Two passages of Scripture especially clearly confirm this: Genesis 3 and Romans 8. The Genesis passage quotes God the Lord informing Adam and Eve of a curse that has fallen upon the ground because of their disobedience. The Christian church has always interpreted that as referring to a distortion of the goodness of the created order evidence in life depending upon death and in great suffering and tragedy built into the very fabric of the world as it exists after the fall outside the garden. The apostle Paul confirms this in Romans 8:18-24 where he writes of creation being subjected to “futility” (NASB, NRSV) and “bondage to decay”—a curse from which it will be freed in the future “glory” when Christ returns.<sup>60</sup>

Just as no person and no aspect of human personality remains unaffected by the fall, there remains not even a single cubic millimeter of creation that is untainted by the corrupting effects of sin. It is worth recalling that “creation is much broader than we tend to think of it.”<sup>61</sup> Creation includes not only physical and spiritual realities but also concepts, ideas, and institutions. Ultimately, any conceivable thing with which humankind might work in fulfillment of the so-called “cultural mandate” owes its existence to God.

However, since the fall has affected all creation, these things are also subject to and tainted by the corrupting effects of sin. As a human activity, as a human cultural development, and as a part of creation, youth sport is in bondage, subject to the corrupting effects of sin, and one can see sin at work in youth sport when, for example, competition and winning are so highly emphasized that all semblance of play disappears, when competition sours and becomes a matter of winning at all costs, or when youth sport functions antithetically the human flourishing of young athletes.

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<sup>60</sup> Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, 162, italics original.

<sup>61</sup> Albert M. Wolters and Brian Dijkema, “*Creation Regained at Thirty*,” *Comment Magazine*, April 16, 2015, accessed February 11, 2019, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/creation-regained-at-thirty/>.

A final word is necessary regarding the image of God and the goodness of creation. Neither the image of God in human persons nor the goodness of creation is utterly abrogated by the fall. Three specific biblical texts confirm that humankind still bears the image of God. In Genesis 9, after God preserves Noah and his family from the flood, God implicitly affirms the image of God in humankind, when he reissues a truncated form of the cultural mandate: “And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth... And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it’” (Gen. 9:1, 7). Additionally, in 9:6, God explicitly affirms the image of God, when he “gives Noah the authority to establish the death penalty for murder among human beings” because “God made man in his own image.”<sup>62</sup> The New Testament also affirms that human beings are still “made in the likeness of God.”<sup>63</sup> Based on these texts, Wayne Grudem concludes, “After the fall, then, we are still in God’s image—we are still like God and represent God—but the image of God in us is distorted; we are less fully like God than we were before the entrance of sin.”<sup>64</sup> Similar logic should be applied to the goodness of creation. The Apostle Paul affirms the ongoing goodness of creation: “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”<sup>65</sup> Although the goodness of creation has been distorted by the corrupting effects of sin, creation does, nevertheless, retain its inherent goodness.

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<sup>62</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 444.

<sup>63</sup> James 3:9.

<sup>64</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 444.

<sup>65</sup> 1 Timothy 4:4.

It seems fitting, then, to characterize all of creation as good-but-fallen and the image of God in all human persons as present-but-distorted. If humankind retains the image of God, and if creation retains its inherent goodness, these affirmations will necessarily impact the way one evaluates and engages the cultural activity of youth sport. At the same time, one must also recognize that the fallenness of humankind and the corrupting effects of sin will also affect the way one evaluates and engages the cultural activity of youth sport. The way forward both for humankind and for human culture is found in the hope of redemption.

### *Redemption*

The third act in the biblical narrative is redemption. While discussions of creation and fall can be limited primarily to a study of the first few chapters of the book of Genesis with a few other texts brought into consideration at certain points, no such concentration of data exists for the theme of redemption. Instead, one will need, first, to recognize that the entire project of redemption finds its center in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is himself the Redeemer sent from God. The biblical drama reaches its climax in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and there is a sense in which the rest of human history represents the outworking of God's project of redemption and the subsequent subduing of God's enemies.<sup>66</sup> If one views the first few chapters of Genesis and the last few chapters of Revelation as the bookends of human history, then redemption finds its *telos* in the full restoration of all things: redeemed humanity, human culture, and even creation itself. This does not represent a return to a literal Eden but, rather, a return to God's initial good design and intentions for creation.

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<sup>66</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15:25.

Because of the Christ-event, humankind can experience redemption in the present through faith in Christ. In Colossians 1:13-14, Paul affirms that God “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins,” and, in Ephesians 1:7, he affirms that in Christ “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.” Both indicate restoration of one’s relationship with God. Alienation from God is a consequence of the fall. As long as one abides in the present world, one remains in a fallen world, a world subject to the corrupting effects of sin. Nevertheless, through faith in Christ, one can experience present redemption in the sense that one’s relationship with God is restored through faith in Christ.

Additionally, present redemption through faith in Christ guarantees full restoration in the future, both for redeemed human persons and for all creation. In Romans 8:18-23, Paul links the redemption of humanity with the redemption of all creation:

<sup>18</sup>For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup>And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Paul describes humanity’s future hope as “adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Douglas Moo asks, “How can Paul suggest that we yearn also for our ‘adoption as sons’? Has he not said that we have already been adopted (8:16)?” He answers, “Yes, we are God’s children already—justified, reconciled, and brought into his family. But we



are not yet God's children in the way that we one day will be—possessing the full inheritance, enjoying perfect holiness in resurrected bodies, and glorified.”<sup>67</sup> Presently, one experiences redemption as restoration of one's relationship with God. Because of this restored relationship, one will experience the redemption of the body, which is the “impartation of life to the mortal body (cf. 8:11) so that it is raised from the dead and is no longer a corruptible body but one that is incorruptible and immortal.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Paul's Hebraic view held that “the body cannot be separated from the I of man.”<sup>69</sup> So, when Paul speaks of the redemption of the body, he is not merely referring to eternal corporeal existence; he is also referring to the full restoration of the whole human person, which Karl Barth calls “the restoration of the ‘I’, the ego that can here and now only perish.”<sup>70</sup>

Paul also states that “creation waits with eager longing for the sons of God to be revealed” (8:19), and, until this unveiling takes place, the “whole creation” will continue to groan “together in the pains of childbirth” (8:22). Although human beings are part of creation, Paul is referring here to “all subhuman creation.”<sup>71</sup> “Eager longing” goes with “the pains of childbirth,” and together they create “a vivid metaphor of suffering that has a joyous outcome.”<sup>72</sup> Creation suffers now because it was “subjected to futility” and is in

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<sup>67</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 267.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 439.

<sup>69</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 1062.

<sup>70</sup> Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959), 101.

<sup>71</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 266.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

“bondage to corruption” (8:20-21). “Subjected to futility” indicates that “creation has not fulfilled the purpose for which it was made,” and “bondage to corruption” indicates that creation is subject to “decay and death, which pervade the natural world.”<sup>73</sup> This subjection and bondage has come upon creation through no fault of its own, which is indicated by the phrase “not willingly, but because of him who subjected it” (8:20). One will recall God’s curse in Genesis 3:17: “Cursed is the ground because of you.” D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments, “All this has come upon creation involuntarily as the result of the voluntary sin and rebellion and fall of man. The creation has done nothing to produce this. It is man who did the something that has produced it.”<sup>74</sup> Creation suffers “futility” and “bondage to corruption” because of human sinfulness.

Just as the creation’s fall is linked with the fall of humankind, so also is creation’s redemption linked with the redemption of humankind. When the children of God are revealed and believers experience redemption of the body, “creation itself will be set free ... and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (8:21). At that time, subhuman creation will experience full restoration to its original state. It will no longer be “subjected to futility” but will, instead, fulfill the purpose for which it was made. It will no longer experience “bondage to corruption” because “God will one day set the created world free from the decay that mars everything after the fall of human beings into

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<sup>73</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 436.

<sup>74</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Exposition of Romans 8: 17-39: The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 53.

sin.”<sup>75</sup> The future redemption Paul envisions here is one of full restoration “that will engulf the entire cosmos and reverse and transcend the consequences of the fall.”<sup>76</sup>

Paul’s view of redemption as full restoration in Romans 8 is consonant with the apocalyptic vision found at the end of Revelation. In Revelation 20, one finds that “the devil who had deceived them” is “thrown into the lake of fire,” as are “Death and Hades” (Revelation 20:10, 14). This represents the point at which God’s enemies are finally and utterly vanquished. Immediately following this, in Revelation 21-22, one finds the final outworking and fulfillment of God’s project of redemption:

<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup>He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup>And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”<sup>77</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup>through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup>No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. <sup>4</sup>They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup>And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 267.

<sup>76</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 437.

<sup>77</sup> Revelation 21:1-5a.

<sup>78</sup> Revelation 22:1-5.

These texts portray the *telos* toward which the work of redemption is moving. It is not that creation will be destroyed but, rather, that it will be redeemed and fully restored.

Christopher J. H. Wright comments on the biblical vision of restoration:

[T]he final vision of the whole Bible is not of us escaping from the world to some ethereal paradise, but rather of God coming down to live with us once again in a purged and restored creation, in which all the fruit of human civilization will be brought into the city of God (Rev. 21:24-27). The ‘splendour,’ ‘glory,’ and ‘honour’ of kings and nations, of which this text speaks, are constituted by the combined product of generations of human beings whose lives and efforts will have generated the vast store of human cultures and civilizations. All this will be purged, redeemed and laid at the feet of Christ, for the enhancement of the life of eternity in the new creation.<sup>79</sup>

Everything God initially intended for creation, the vision God had for creation, when God saw that everything was good, will one day become an eternal reality because God will purge all sin from creation. Noticeably, the movement in Scripture is not from garden to garden but from garden to city. Humankind will not return to Eden as it was but will take part in a fully restored creation, which takes into account fulfillment of the cultural mandate. Wright explains:

God plans to redeem all that he has made, and included within that will be the redemption of all that we have made with what God first made—that is, our use of creation within the great cultural mandate. Of course, all that we have done has been tainted and twisted by our sinful, fallen human nature. And all that flows from that source will have to be purged and purified by God. But that is exactly the picture we have in both Old and New Testaments. It is a vision of redemption, not of obliteration.<sup>80</sup>

This should be good news for those struggling to connect their faith with their sport (or their work). Rather than relativizing and minimizing human cultural endeavors with reference to more “spiritual” pursuits, this particular vision of the eschaton imbues all

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<sup>79</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, “Following Jesus in a Globalized Marketplace,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31, no. 4 (October 4, 2007): 324–325.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

sorts of human endeavors with their “own value and eternal significance, not just because of our understanding of creation and the mandate it laid upon us, but also because of the new creation and the eschatological hope it sets before us.”<sup>81</sup> If this vision of future redemption as restoration is adopted, then Christians are able to participate fully in youth sport, perhaps even giving those who do not know Christ a foreshadowing of what youth sport will one day be like and can, to an extent, be like in the present.

### *Part Two: Description and Evaluation of Youth Sport*

In this section, one will find a description of modern youth sport in America, as well as a multidisciplinary approach to evaluating the cultural activity of youth sport, in general, and the cultural phenomenon of modern American youth sport, in particular, through the hermeneutical lenses of creation, fall, and redemption. Warrant for utilizing a multidisciplinary approach can, perhaps, be traced back as far as Augustine, who advised “every good and true Christian” to “understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master.”<sup>82</sup>

#### *Description of Modern American Youth Sport*

According to the Aspen Institute’s Project Play, 69.1% of U.S. children ages 6-12 played an individual or team sport at least one day during the year in 2017. Only 23.9% participated in “high-calorie burning” sports on a regular basis, and 17% were involved in

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>82</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.18.28, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine>.

no sport activity during the year.<sup>83</sup> Steven Overman estimates that around 35 million children ages 4-14 participate in organized youth sports.<sup>84</sup> While it is impossible to know exactly “how many preteens actually play organized sports on a regular basis, clearly such participation has become a common rite of childhood.”<sup>85</sup> Whatever else one may observe about youth sport, the primary observation is that sport is ubiquitous among American youth.

In addition to its ubiquity, one may also observe its expense. While youth sport spending varies from family to family, “Some estimates place the annual spending for the average American family’s annual spending on sports for their children above \$2,000 with some parents paying out more than \$10,000 each year.”<sup>86</sup> According to a 2017 TD Ameritrade survey cited in USA Today, 63% of American families spend \$100-\$499 per child each month on youth sports, 18% spend \$500-\$999, 11% spend \$1,000-\$1,199, and 8% spend over \$2,000 per child each month.<sup>87</sup> While these numbers might, at first glance, seem to represent the high side of youth sport spending, they, nevertheless, bring to light a discrepancy in sports involvement between lower income families and those possessing more discretionary income. Gains in youth sport participation “are from among kids from upper-income homes who can better afford the growing fees associated

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<sup>83</sup> *State of Play 2018: Trends and Developments* (The Aspen Institute: Project Play, 2018), 3–4, accessed February 26, 2019, [https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2018/10/StateofPlay2018\\_v4WEB\\_2-FINAL.pdf](https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2018/10/StateofPlay2018_v4WEB_2-FINAL.pdf).

<sup>84</sup> Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Michael Shafer, *Well Played: A Christian Theology of Sport and the Ethics of Doping* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 159.

<sup>87</sup> Adam Shell, “Why Families Stretch Their Budgets for High-Priced Youth Sports,” *USA Today*, September 5, 2017, accessed February 26, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2017/09/05/why-families-stretch-their-budgets-high-priced-youth-sports/571945001/>.

with youth sports,” and there has been a decline for each of the last three years in sport participation among children whose household annual income is less than \$50,000.<sup>88</sup> The rising cost of youth sport has drawn the attention of such national publications as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and TIME magazine. According to a 2017 report in TIME, “the nation’s youth-sports industry has grown by 55% since 2010” and “is now a \$15.3 billion market.”<sup>89</sup> Journalist Mark Hyman has also published a book called *The Most Expensive Game in Town: The Rising Cost of Youth Sports and the Toll on Today’s Families* (2012). The rising cost of youth sport corresponds with a general shift toward privatization, professionalization, early specialization, and year-round sports.

Although not the case in every locale, the overall trend has been toward the privatization of youth sport. Whereas many neighborhoods and communities once had a single team or league rooted in the community and open to all children, travel and elite sports are increasingly common and are becoming the norm in many places. Travel and elite sports are cost-prohibitive and highly selective. They are cost-prohibitive because the upfront team or league fee is greater than the cost of playing in a local recreational league, equipment is not typically provided for the players and must be provided at the family’s expense, and many of the games are played out-of-town, sometimes over the course of 2-3 days, which equals an increase in cost for the families involved. In addition to the “natural selection” that takes place (i.e., those who will not or cannot spend the time and money, as well as those who simply are not interested), travel and elite sports are more intentionally selective. Rather than being open to every child in the

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<sup>88</sup> *State of Play 2018: Trends and Developments*, 2.

<sup>89</sup> Sean Gregory, “How Kids’ Sports Became a \$15 Billion Industry,” *Time*, September 4, 2017, accessed February 26, 2019, <http://time.com/magazine/us/4913681/september-4th-2017-vol-190-no-9-u-s/>.

neighborhood or community, these teams tend to consist of children from a smaller circle of peers, and the coaches seek out players they perceive to be more talented.

Intentionally or not, the net effect of travel and elite sports is a shift toward the privatization of youth sport.

The privatization of youth sport runs in tandem with the professionalization of youth sport. Shane Murphy suggests that a key role of youth sport in American culture is promoting talent development:

The massive system of youth sports in America is the vehicle for identifying, developing, and delivering talented athletes to adult sporting organizations, such as the various professional leagues and the Olympic sports. For professional sports to survive, and for American teams to be competitive in events such as the Olympics, there must be a way of identifying the most talented youth athletes and training them until they have the skills to compete at the highest level. Only the best will make it to the top. What happens to the rest is not the concern of those who run high-level sports.<sup>90</sup>

Noting, again, that the youth sports industry is a \$15.3 billion a year market, it is clear that many parents are willing to spare no expense, fueled by the hope that their child may one day play high-level sports. These expenses include but are not limited to private coaching/training, batting cages and pitching machines, professional-looking attire, professional-grade gear, and, in extreme instances, a personal talent manager/promoter. While the amount of money spent on youth sport is a good barometer of its professionalization, the core issue is “the degree of seriousness and importance given to” youth sport.<sup>91</sup> Families spend the money—and the time—because they take sport

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<sup>90</sup> Shane Murphy, *The Cheers and the Tears: A Healthy Alternative to the Dark Side of Youth Sports Today* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 5.

<sup>91</sup> Jonathan J. Brower, “The Professionalization of Organized Youth Sport: Social Psychological Impacts and Outcomes,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 445, Contemporary Issues in Sport (September 1979): 39, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1042953>.



seriously and ascribe great meaning and value to them. As early as 1979, sociologist

Jonathan Brower identified the trend toward professionalization:

Children in organized sports are fast approaching the professional model. True, the young athletes do not get paid salaries from their teams, but they do help generate significant amounts of money for their leagues and associations. Moreover, organized youth sport often becomes an activity in which high-level performance and a “polished show” is expected ... It is the results of the game and the statistics generated over a season that help make youth sports resemble the professional sporting scene. Winning is the name of the game to the serious competitor and many coaches definitely fall into the serious category.<sup>92</sup>

Of course, it is not only coaches who fall into the “serious” category; many parents do, as well. Although Brower was writing forty years ago, the trend toward professionalization has continued and, likely, hastened. In 2009, Dan Gould, director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University, made the following observation:

Contemporary parents ... frequently come to believe that their worth as parents is reflected in their children’s athletic success—success which, in accordance with the elite entertainment sport model, is defined simply by winning, trophies, medals, national rankings or the acquisition of scholarships. This belief causes many youth sport parents and coaches to soon forget that sport is about the love of the game and the physical, mental and social benefits derived from participation. Sadly, it should come as no surprise to note that the “professionalized” approach to sport has drifted from professional environments, to collegiate, high school, and ultimately to youth sports.<sup>93</sup>

If this is, in fact, the prevailing ethos in the world of youth sport, and all indications seem to point in that direction, then it seems only logical that the trends toward privatization and professionalization would also be accompanied by trends toward early specialization and year-round sports.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>93</sup> Daniel Gould, “The Professionalization of Youth Sports: It’s Time to Act!,” *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine* 19, no. 2 (March 2009): 81, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://insights.ovid.com/crossref?an=00042752-200903000-00001>.

A number of experts in the field suggest that early specialization is increasingly the norm. Journalist Mark Hyman, who has written book-length critiques of youth sport from both a financial perspective and a child development perspective, points out that “a few years ago, the age of entry in most rec leagues was seven or eight” but “has dropped to four in many communities and, startling as it seems, eighteen months in others.”<sup>94</sup> Recognizing that early entry into organized sports does not necessarily entail early specialization, it certainly does nothing to discourage it and may even encourage it, since many parents believe single-sport specialization is necessary in order for their children to participate in athletics at higher levels.

Overman, a retired professor of Physical Education at Jackson State University, states, “Specializing in a single sport has become the norm for many American children, often with their parents’ blessing,” and “focus on a single sport now begins at age six or earlier for many children.”<sup>95</sup> Robert Malina, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education at the University of Texas, makes this observation:

Statistics documenting the trend to specialization are difficult to specify, but the following is an increasingly common observation: “A growing number of coaches, parents, and children believe that the best way to produce superior young athletes is to have them play one sport from an early age, and to play it virtually year-round.”<sup>96</sup>

As Malina notes, there is quite often a connection between early specialization and year-round sports. Generally, where early specialization takes place, year-round sports naturally follow. However, it is not always the case that those who play sports year-

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<sup>94</sup> Hyman, *Until It Hurts*, 17.

<sup>95</sup> Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids*, 82–83.

<sup>96</sup> Robert M. Malina, “Early Sport Specialization: Roots, Effectiveness, Risks,” *Current Sports Medicine Reports* 9, no. 6 (November 2010): 364, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://insights.ovid.com/crossref?an=00149619-201011000-00014>.

round specialize in a single sport. There are many young multi-sport athletes who play virtually year-round, jumping from one sport to the next with very little down time between seasons, and, in some cases, the season of one sport overlaps or runs concurrently with another. For instance, recreational soccer leagues often overlap with recreational American football leagues in the fall of the year, which is followed almost immediately by basketball season, which is followed almost immediately by baseball or softball season. Then, there are golf, tennis, swimming, gymnastics, dance, and a number of other youth sports to consider. If children want to be involved in sports year-round, or if parents want their children involved in sports year-round, there is almost certainly an opportunity for them to do so.

In observing the cultural phenomenon of modern American youth sport, one sees that sport is ubiquitous among American youth and that youth sport has become a multi-billion dollar a year industry, indicating that parents are willing to spend substantial percentages of their annual income on their children's sports. One also notices trends toward privatization and professionalization, which are accompanied by trends toward early specialization and year-round sports. In some cases, young athletes play a single sport year-round, while others play multiple sports on a year-round basis.

### *Evaluation of Youth Sport through the Lens of Creation*

Viewing youth sport through the lens of creation, one must, first, affirm the inherent, essential goodness of youth sport. In Part One, the doctrine of creation was developed along the lines of creation *ex nihilo*, the goodness of creation, the image of God in humankind, and the cultural mandate. The existence of youth sport must, ultimately, be attributed to God. With the exception of sin and evil, all things owe their

existence to one Creator. Because creation reflects the character of its Creator, youth sport is inherently and essentially good. Of course, youth sport did not, strictly speaking, exist at the end of the sixth day of creation, but the potential for youth sport was latent within creation. The origination of youth sport, then, came about when human beings, made in the image of a creative God, worked with what God had already created, developing it and bringing out its latent potential. As youth sport continues to develop, the same principle applies: humans made in the image of a creative and playful God continue to mold and shape youth sport, further developing it and bringing out its potential.

At this juncture, two caveats are in order. First, whether those human beings were/are consciously aware of the theological ramifications of what they were/are doing is immaterial; the image of God—albeit distorted by the fall—is universal in humankind, carrying with it the creative impulse and the impulse to play. Second, affirming the essential goodness of youth sport is not the same as affirming the goodness of every iteration of youth sport. Stated another way, youth sport is good, but not every single thing humankind does with youth sport is good. On this point, Al Wolters’ distinction between “structure” and “direction” is helpful:

[S]tructure refers to the order of creation, to the constant creational constitution of any thing, what makes it the thing or entity that it is ... It designates a reality that the philosophical tradition of the West has often referred to by such words as *substance*, *essence*, and *nature*. Direction, by contrast, designates the order of sin and redemption, the distortion or perversion of creation through the fall on the one hand and the redemption and restoration of creation in Christ on the other. Anything in creation can be directed either toward or away from God—that is, directed either in obedience or disobedience to his law. This double direction applies not only to individual human beings but also to such cultural phenomena as technology, art, and scholarship... To the degree that these realities fail to live up to God’s creational design for them, they are misdirected, abnormal, distorted. To the degree that they still conform to God’s design, they are in the grip of a

countervailing force that curbs or counteracts the distortion. Direction therefore always involves two tendencies moving either for or against God.<sup>97</sup>

One can add youth sport to Wolters' list of cultural phenomena that may be directed either toward God or away from God. As one looks at youth sport through the lens of creation, one can affirm the goodness of what Wolters calls the "structure" of youth sport; i.e., its essence and its creational design. Once again, although youth sport, strictly speaking, did not exist at the end of day six of creation, the potential for it did exist, when "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). In speaking of the goodness of youth sport, one can speak of its intrinsic value, as well as of its extrinsic benefits, but the former should always take precedence over the latter. The primary, first-order goods of sport are intrinsic to sport itself, while the extrinsic benefits are second-order goods.

Theologians of sport speak of sport as *autotelic* and *autocharatic*. Lincoln Harvey proposes that sport "is *autotelic*," having "its own (*auto*) purpose (*telos*) and enjoying a relative independence from the rest of life."<sup>98</sup> Commenting on Harvey's theological description of sport, John White notes that insisting on the autotelicity of sport "preserves the integrity of sport because its purpose and value are internal to the practice itself."<sup>99</sup> Whatever the primary goods of sport may be, they are intrinsic to sport itself. Shirl Hoffman begins to bridge the gap between autotelicity and autocharaticity in stating that, "when athletes have mastered a skill, they and those of us who watch them

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<sup>97</sup> Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 59.

<sup>98</sup> Lincoln Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport* (London: SCM Press, 2014), 69.

<sup>99</sup> John B. White, "Sacramentally Imagining Sports as a Form of Worship: Reappraising Sport as a Gesture of God," *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (February 2018): 96, obtained from author via email on March 20, 2018.

receive no intrinsic reward other than the unique human experiences derived from playing and watching.”<sup>100</sup> One of these “unique human experiences” is enjoyment.

People play and watch sport because it is an enjoyable experience.

Robert Ellis questions the use of *autotelic* in describing the nature of sport and prefers the term *autocharatic*:

The fact that Mozart was paid for all his work, and indeed that he wrote quite specifically to pay his bills and clear his debts, does not stop his work from being regarded as masterful nor did it prevent Barth seeing in it a truly playful spirit. Bernard Suits’ vision of work was that any activity that was enjoyed for its own sake could be regarded as play and that in Utopia (perhaps now we might call it Playtopia?) everyone would be occupied in activities that were enjoyed for their own sake. This could include stamping out a widget, molding clay into a vase, writing a sonata, changing a washer, and writing a theological paper, as well as playing tiddlywinks or baseball. The language has changed subtly here. Rather than speaking of play as being an *end* in itself (autotelic) we are speaking of play as being something that is *enjoyable* for its own sake. Borrowing the Greek word for joy and delight, *chara*, we might therefore describe play as *autocharatic* rather than *autotelic*. We play because we enjoy it for its own sake. In fact, the autotelic nature of play does seem to me open to question, or at least to qualification... We all do things for multiple reasons. Generally, as well as all the other reasons, we play sport because it is fun, because it is autocharatic.<sup>101</sup>

Ellis’ preference for autocharatic seems based on his observation that human beings “are complicated creatures,” who “rarely do anything for one reason, even when the thing we are doing may constitute its own reason.”<sup>102</sup> Ellis’ observation about humankind’s multifarious reasoning for participating in sport does little to prove that autocharatic would be a better descriptor of sport than autotelic. It seems more accurate to say autocharaticity is an element of autotelicity, rather than something separate from it, since

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<sup>100</sup> Hoffman, *Good Game*, 267.

<sup>101</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play*, 266.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

the joy and delight one receives from sport are derived directly from the experience of sport and are, therefore, intrinsic to sport itself.

This discussion leads one to the very heart of the nature of sport. Sport exists at the nexus of play and competition. If either is missing, then the activity can no longer be considered “sport.” Remove the competitive element, and it becomes just a game.<sup>103</sup> As one begins to tip the balance more heavily toward competition, the play element is proportionately diminished, until it is finally possible for one to lose all sense of the autotelicity or autocharaticity of sport. One might be competing in an athletic event, but one would hardly be playing sport, since one would no longer be doing it for its own sake or for the enjoyment derived from the experience itself.

Thus far, what has been said could just as easily be said of video games or dominoes, but neither of these constitute “sport.” One further qualifier, therefore, is necessary to distinguish sport from other types of competitive play: “sport is an embodied contest of physical and mental exertion.”<sup>104</sup> Some serious gamers and domino-players might argue that their activities meet this criterion, as well. Admittedly, the line between what can and cannot be properly called “sport” are a bit blurred, and whether something qualifies as “sport” may, finally, have to be determined in the mind of the participant.

One can see the intrinsic value of youth sport when it is a manifestation of play. Since the mid-twentieth century, Christians have begun to address play as a topic of serious theological inquiry. Hugo Rahner offered the first serious theological treatment

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<sup>103</sup> Even when a single player is involved, such as a lone golfer on the course, there is still an element of competition, in that one is competing against the course and/or against oneself (i.e., one’s previous score).

<sup>104</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play*, 128.

of play in *Man at Play* (1967). He describes play as “an activity that is undertaken for the sake of being active, meaningful but directed towards no end outside itself.”<sup>105</sup>

Elsewhere in the book, he introduces the language of “meaningful but not necessary” to describe play.<sup>106</sup> In *The Christian at Play* (1983), Robert Johnston points out that play is “non-utilitarian, yet productive” and that, in play, there is a “non-instrumentality which is nevertheless productive,” which seem to be Johnston’s ways of saying that play is autotelic and that it is meaningful but not necessary.<sup>107</sup>

More recently, Hoffman, Ellis, and Harvey have dealt specifically with sport from a theological perspective, and they all subsume sport under the larger heading of play. In *Good Game*, Hoffman invites readers to reimagine sport as a non-essential leisure activity and as an autotelic experience. As a non-essential leisure activity, sport can give one “a few moments of freedom to shed the camouflage of natural man, to polish up the *imago Dei*, to regain spiritual balance, and to recover a sense of who he or she really is.”<sup>108</sup> Clearly, Hoffman is getting at the meaningful-but-not-necessary aspect of sport. As an autotelic experience, sport is not to be instrumentalized, and Hoffman draws parallels between sport and music and between sport and fine dining:

Trying to justify sports on instrumental grounds is as misguided as trying to justify symphony orchestras on grounds that they develop endurance in the muscles of violin players or justifying meals at three-star restaurants because of the superior nourishment found there. Playing the violin may indeed improve muscular endurance, just as eating at restaurants can nourish, but these hardly get at the reasons why violinists play and why people visit fancy restaurants. Orchestras enrich our lives through the sense of listening and gourmet meals enrich through taste, just as sport enriches our lives through moving and

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<sup>105</sup> Rahner, *Man at Play*, 7.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>107</sup> Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 42.

<sup>108</sup> Hoffman, *Good Game*, 266.



watching. In the end, it is the experience that counts, and this alone is sufficient reason for the Christian's involvement.<sup>109</sup>

It would seem, then, that the very experience of sport itself has intrinsic value. Just as the experience of music or fine dining often brings about a sense of joy, delight, and existential fulfillment, so also does the experience of sport. The reason sport brings about this sense of joy, delight, and existential fulfillment is that human beings are created to play.

In *A Brief Theology of Sport*, Harvey warns against adulterating sport's autotelicity: "The incorporation of external agendas into sport pollutes sport, because it is radically autotelic."<sup>110</sup> Like Rahner, Johnston, and Hoffman, he also sees sport as meaningful but not necessary: "When we play—unnecessarily but meaningfully—we are living out our deepest identity as unnecessary but meaningful creatures."<sup>111</sup> Some may be uncomfortable with the direction Harvey takes his theology of sport, finally placing sport in a category all its own, distinct from every other human activity. He goes so far as to say, "Sport is understood to be the only thing that is *not* worship... Sport is only for sport. It is the one thing that is not directed to the glory of God."<sup>112</sup>

Erik Thoennes disagrees: "God tells us that every part of human experience has the potential to be glorifying or dishonoring to him... So if I can eat a peach or drink a root beer float to the glory of God, I must be able to play to his glory as well."<sup>113</sup> White

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 267–268.

<sup>110</sup> Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, 89.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>113</sup> Thoennes, "Created to Play: Thoughts on Play, Sport, and the Christian Life," 97.

pushes back against Harvey's dichotomy between worship and sport because it "effectively cuts worship off from ordinary endeavors such as sport."<sup>114</sup> Harvey's well-intentioned gesture may unwittingly place him in the category of those who operate with and promote a dualism that "carves up reality into different realms" and "fails to integrate and coordinate this-worldly activity with the sacred."<sup>115</sup> Though one may disagree with Harvey's conclusion, there is much to affirm, including his insistence upon sport's autotelicity and its nature as a meaningful-but-not-necessary activity, as well as his assertion that, when people play, they are living out their deepest identity. Harvey says, "Simply put, we reverberate with ourselves. We chime with our being."<sup>116</sup> Sport is not something people must do; it is a purely elective activity. Yet, when people participate in sport, they often find it quite meaningful, experiencing a sense of joy, delight, and existential fulfillment. This is because human beings are created to play. The impulse to play is woven into the fabric of human existence. When given the opportunity to "play" sport, young people are able to be who they really are, to live out of their core identity as creative and playful creatures created in the image of a creative and playful God.

As a manifestation of play, the experience of sport itself is intrinsically good, in that the experience itself brings about a sense of joy, delight, and existential fulfillment. Noting that sport exists at the nexus of play and competition, one also sees the intrinsic value of youth sport when it is a manifestation of healthy or "true" competition. Daniel Dombrowski points out that the word "competition" comes from the Latin

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<sup>114</sup> White, "Sacramentally Imagining Sports," 106.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>116</sup> Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, 84.

*competitionem*, which means “to strive *with* someone else, rather than *against* someone else.”<sup>117</sup> A view of competition that remains faithful to this etymological understanding is true, healthy competition. David Light Shields and Brenda Light Bredemeier concur:

When it is true to its etymology, competition is an enjoyable quest for excellence. When we strive with our opponents in a contest, we bring out the best in each other through presenting a worthy challenge. Competition involves a contest of skills that reflects a seeking of excellence together.<sup>118</sup>

In healthy competition, the parties involved—whether individuals or teams—are opponents, but they are also and more importantly partners engaged in a mutual quest for excellence. They agree, almost as if by covenant, to push the other to the limits of human potential in pursuit of excellence.

When asked to look back over her career and recall one of her fondest matches, former tennis great Chris Evert mentioned a match she lost to Martina Navratilova:

What is fascinating is that despite having the best win-loss record of any professional tennis player, the match she named was one that she lost. Why would she select such a match? The reason was this: it was because the two of them had pushed each other to the very boundaries of human performance. The fact that she had happened to lose was far less important than the exhilarating experience of pushing up to the very limits of human possibility.<sup>119</sup>

Evert recognized that, although she lost the match, she played her best tennis and pushed Navratilova to play hers. In healthy competition, the quest for excellence matters more than winning, and so does the attitude with which one competes, otherwise known as sportsmanship. According to Dombrowski, the key idea in sportsmanship is “respect”:

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<sup>117</sup> Daniel A. Dombrowski, “What Is Sport? What Should It Be?,” in *Youth Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Patrick Kelly (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 19, italics original.

<sup>118</sup> David Light Shields and Brenda Light Bredemeier, “Reclaiming Competition in Youth Sports,” in *Youth Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Patrick Kelly (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 116.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

*Respect for opponents* involves an adherence to both the golden rule (to treat others as you would like to be treated) and the silver rule (to not treat others as you would not like to be treated). It would also seem to involve an opposition to trash talking or gamesmanship. *Respect for officials* means that any discourse with referees (if there is such) should be conducted with civility. *Respect for coaches* is reciprocally related to coaches' respect for players: both are necessary in any morally defensible version of youth sports. *Respect for teammates* is obviously important, especially in team sports where coordinated activity is crucial. And finally, *respect for the game* involves a willingness to abide by the rules of the game and to pursue bodily excellence in a way that is consistent with the spirit of competition.<sup>120</sup>

In healthy competition, the competing parties view one another as partners, who have agreed to push one another in the mutual pursuit of excellence, doing so in a spirit of sportsmanship, showing respect for the opposing party, officials, coaches, teammates, and the game itself. Admittedly, this is an idealized vision of competition, but in true, healthy competition, outcome matters far less than the experience itself, which has its own intrinsic rewards: a sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and existential fulfillment.

One can see the intrinsic value of youth sport when it is a manifestation of play and when it is a manifestation of true, healthy competition. Using Wolters' terminology, the structure (i.e., creational design) of youth sport is such that participants are able to experience a sense of existential fulfillment simply by virtue of engaging in the activity. Additionally, the structure of youth sport is such that it holds potential for extrinsic benefits that contribute to human flourishing. One should recall that these benefits result from and are byproducts of participation in youth sport; they are not intrinsic to the experience itself. One should also recall that youth sport merely holds the potential for these extrinsic benefits; participation does not automatically guarantee positive outcomes.

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<sup>120</sup> Dombrowski, "What Is Sport? What Should It Be?," 23–24.

Although the following is not exhaustive, the extrinsic benefits of youth sport fall, generally, into three categories: physical, psychosocial, and moral.

The biblical portrayal of the human person is as a living unity of mind, body, and spirit. As Erik Dailey notes, “Everything that makes up humans—our minds, our thoughts, our souls, our feelings, our languages, and our physical bodies—is part of creation.”<sup>121</sup> As part of creation, the human body—though affected by the fall—is inherently good, something worthy of honor and care, and to neglect care of the physical body would be to despise one of God’s good gifts. Participation in youth sport can aid in the “maintenance and improvement of the physical body.”<sup>122</sup> Parents can and should feel good about their children being involved in a physical activity, rather than watching television, playing video games, or spending hours staring at a smart phone or tablet.

In addition to physical benefits, youth sport also has potential psychosocial benefits. From the vantage point of the social sciences, youth sport provides opportunities for children to learn teamwork, personal responsibility, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills; all of these things can be developed/learned through participation in youth sport. Sport psychologist Shane Murphy highlights the sense of belonging that can also result from involvement in youth sport:

We know that people derive a large part of their identity from belonging to various groups, such as national, ethnic, and work-related groups. As some traditional group associations, such as organized religions and local community groups, have lost their widespread membership, affiliation with a sports team has come to offer a way to belong ... Children enjoy this aspect of organized youth

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<sup>121</sup> Erik W. Dailey, *The Fit Shall Inherit the Earth: A Theology of Sport and Fitness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 11.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

sport, and their delight in receiving team uniforms and adopting team names is evidence of this.<sup>123</sup>

Murphy has touched on a longstanding Christian conviction: human beings are created for relationships and have an innate desire to feel loved and accepted. Youth sport provides an opportunity for adults close to the game (i.e., coaches and parents) to help children develop the social skills necessary for forming and maintaining healthy relationships, and it also provides them with opportunities to facilitate healthy group dynamics, so that all children on the team feel that they truly belong.

Potential moral benefits of youth sport are found in its power as an ethic-forming, identity-shaping practice. Sport philosopher Graham McFee has proposed the idea that sport can function as a “moral laboratory,” in that it provides a setting in which persons can learn moral lessons within the confines of a system that already has a codified set rules and in which the consequences of failing to abide by those rules are, typically, much less severe than in real life.<sup>124</sup> Whatever the merits of McFee’s argument, the term “moral laboratory” seems useful. Participation in sport does not guarantee positive development in one’s ethic or identity, but it does provide a laboratory, of sorts, in which adults close to the game can monitor and influence the ethic and identity of young athletes. Nick Watson and John White recognize sport “as *potential* places of learning and virtuous character development, in which athletes can learn about different forms of

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<sup>123</sup> Murphy, *The Cheers and the Tears: A Healthy Alternative to the Dark Side of Youth Sports Today*, 35.

<sup>124</sup> Graham McFee, *Sport, Rules, and Values: Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Sport* (London: Routledge, 2004), 140, accessed March 12, 2019, <http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=114965&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

love, patience, compassion and self-sacrifice.”<sup>125</sup> However, as Hoffman points out, “the operative word is *potential*,” a sentiment with which Watson and White both agree.<sup>126</sup> Sport has tremendous power as an ethic-forming, identity-shaping practice, for better or for worse.

Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith has gone to great lengths to show the way in which human beings are molded and shaped by their habits and rituals, those things done again and again on a consistent, repeated basis. Drawing on the Aristotelian ethical tradition, he writes:

As Aristotle put it, when you’ve acquired a moral habit, it becomes second nature. Why do we call things “second” nature? Our “first” nature is the hardwiring that characterizes our biological systems and operates without our thinking about it. At this very moment, you are not *choosing* to breathe. You are not thinking about breathing... “Nature” simply takes care of a process that hums along under the hood of consciousness. Those habits that become “second” nature operate in the same way: they become so woven into who you are that they are as natural for you as breathing and blinking. You don’t have to think about or choose to do these things: they come naturally ... You don’t have to think about it; it’s who you are.<sup>127</sup>

Smith’s concept begins to bridge the gap between ethic and identity. Simply by being involved in youth sport on a consistent, repeated, habitual basis, young athletes are acquiring moral habits. Youth sport is not just something they do; it is also doing something to them. The moral habits they acquire—whether good or bad—are becoming second nature to them, becoming ingrained in who they are. Dombrowski shows both sides of the coin:

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<sup>125</sup> Nick Watson and John White, “C. S. Lewis at the 2012 London Olympics: Reflections on Pride and Humility,” *Practical Theology* 5, no. 2 (July 6, 2012): 162, accessed on March 12, 2019, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1558/prth.v5i2.153>.

<sup>126</sup> Hoffman, *Good Game*, 162, italics original.

<sup>127</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 17.

...the cliché that practice makes *perfect* might be profitably replaced with the saying that habitual practice makes *permanent*. That is, the habits that are inculcated into young athletes, for good or for ill, tend to have a lasting effect such that ignoring these habits is morally perilous... Youth sport *might* help children and adolescents develop into responsible citizens and into admirable adults. But it might do the exact opposite, too, especially if we adults who are in charge of youth sports allow the play spirit to evaporate altogether from competitive events.<sup>128</sup>

While many still claim that participation in sport instills virtue and builds character, it is more accurate to say of youth sport that it reveals character and provides adults close to the game with opportunities to instill virtue and mold the identity of young participants. One additional preliminary word is necessary regarding the identity-forming power of youth sport. It is, finally, possible for young athletes to begin seeing themselves primarily or even solely as athletes and to have no sense of their own identity apart from the sport(s) in which they are involved. A fuller treatment of this aspect of identity formation will be undertaken when examining youth sport through the lens of the fall.

As a created reality, youth sport is inherently and essentially good. The intrinsic value of youth sport is seen when it is a manifestation of play and when it is a manifestation of true, healthy competition. The goodness of youth sport can also be seen in its potential to produce secondary, extrinsic benefits, specifically related to the physical, psychosocial, and moral development of young people (i.e., to their flourishing as human persons). Returning, once again, to Wolters' terminology, the structure of youth sport is good, but the direction in which youth sport is taken is not always good, which now leads to an evaluation of youth sport through the lens of the fall.

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<sup>128</sup> Dombrowski, "What Is Sport? What Should It Be?," 23.



*Evaluation of Youth Sport through the Lens of the Fall*

Viewing youth sport through the lens of the fall, one must begin by affirming the fallenness of all humankind and all human culture. In Part One, the discussion of the fall was developed along the lines of sin's universality and inescapability, as well as the universality and inescapability of sin's consequences and corrupting effects. The corrupting effects are both extensive and intensive, not only affecting all humankind and all human culture but also affecting them to the core. This is not to say things are as bad as they could be but, simply, that no aspect of human life or human culture is exempt from or immune to the corrupting effects of the fall. It was further established in Part One that, because of human sin, all of creation is under a curse, in bondage, and subject to the corrupting effects of the fall.

As a human activity, as a human cultural development, and as part of creation, youth sport is fallen. Among the growing number of those decrying the condition of modern American youth sport, there are surprisingly few Christian voices, a phenomenon Adam Metz observes: "As the voices critiquing the current state of youth sports in the U. S. grow louder, the lack of outspoken Christians at the forefront of these discussions becomes more striking."<sup>129</sup> Evidence of the fall abounds in the present iteration of youth sport in America, but the discussion here will be limited to themes set forth in the previous section: play, competition, and the potential for physical, psychosocial, and moral extrinsic benefits.

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<sup>129</sup> Adam D. Metz, *Elite? A Christian Manifesto for Youth Sports in the United States* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 129.

If the intrinsic value of youth sport can be seen when it is a manifestation of play, then effects of the fall are seen when the play element of youth sport is significantly diminished. In Overman's critique of the privatization of youth sport, one can see the way privatization diminishes the play element:

In some residential areas, spontaneous games and free play have virtually disappeared. Kids in the inner cities find fewer places to play ball. Youth sports are both a reflection of the society in which we live and mirror the kind of society we would like to have. In a culture that values achievement, organized sports offer an indicator of children's accomplishments while play doesn't. But this priority has a downside. The emphasis on elite competition has created a gap between physically active youth and sedentary youth.<sup>130</sup>

The venues in which children might participate in youth sport freely or at minimal cost are disappearing, and many simply cannot afford to play travel or elite sports. With travel and elite sports increasingly becoming the norm, youth sport is becoming more privatized, which preempts a substantial percentage of the childhood population from engaging in youth sport as an experience of play.

As noted earlier, privatization is linked with professionalization, and professionalization, at its core, has to do with the degree of seriousness and importance given to youth sport. One can see that connection in Murphy's critique:

One of the best things about youth sports are that they are participatory—children who play are actively involved. Yet even by the time children are nine or ten, there is a push toward the selection of the “best” athletes, who get the chance to keep playing, while the “not so good” athletes are discouraged from playing or encouraged to watch the good athletes. This tendency becomes stronger as children get older.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids*, 7.

<sup>131</sup> Murphy, *The Cheers and the Tears: A Healthy Alternative to the Dark Side of Youth Sports Today*, 35.

As the ethos of professional sport trickles down, more and more, to the level of youth sport, two things happen: many children are no longer able to participate, and youth sport becomes increasingly performance-oriented. As youth sport becomes performance-oriented, the play element is significantly diminished:

By nature, children's performance is inconsistent; it varies from day to day. The child athlete, regardless of skill, faces the inevitable hazard of experiencing failure in the eyes of adults. Eventually, the child may stop trying ... Athletes have admitted to faking injuries because they can't deal with the pressure from their parents to constantly achieve ... Ultimately, stress hampers the child's ability to grow and develop. Young athletes become more concerned about avoiding errors and avoiding criticism from adults or teammates, than enjoying healthy competition and developing their skills. When constant pressure to perform is imposed on children, they lose their playfulness at an early age, and this void may carry through their lives.<sup>132</sup>

The more performance-oriented youth sport becomes, the more stress young athletes feel. As Overman points out, this stress inhibits young athletes' ability to experience youth sport as play. As a manifestation of play, youth sport is inherently good. Anything that significantly diminishes the play element of youth sport, then, is a move away from God's creational design for youth sport as an intrinsically good experience of play. Depriving young people of these play experiences also robs them of an opportunity to live out of their core identity as those created in the image of a creative and playful God.

It was noted earlier that sport exists at the nexus of play and competition, and, while it is true that the intrinsic value of youth sport can be seen when it is a manifestation of healthy, true competition, it is equally true that the competitive element represents a challenge. On one hand, competition can be overemphasized to the

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<sup>132</sup> Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids*, 130–132.

detriment of play; on the other hand, the competitive element of youth sport can easily devolve into what Shields and Bredemeier call “decompetition.”<sup>133</sup>

It is difficult, if not impossible, to hold play and competition in perfect balance. However, the current state of youth sport in America suggests no imminent possibility of overemphasizing the play element. Instead, one sees an overemphasis on competition and winning in youth sport. Metz observes:

Winning and losing are clearly crucial aspects of sports, but to limit the purpose of sports to the outcome of its contests is to severely undermine a much deeper philosophical and theological rationale that so enamors us to our games ... Competition has come to serve as the foundational and organizational principle of sports at all levels in the United States, and it has done so largely to the detriment of play.<sup>134</sup>

Likewise, Michael Shafer demonstrates theologically how an overemphasis on competition devaluates the intrinsic goodness of youth sport:

[W]hen we ignore the playfulness of sport we fail to appreciate its fundamental quality and thereby do not experience sport in its fullest sense. The ability to play is an innate capacity given to us by God. This ... does not mean we cannot play in seriousness though it is worth cautioning that the earnestness of our sport must not be confused with competitive self-interest. When we disregard sport as a gift, as often happens in the “win at all costs” doctrine, we fail to participate in sport in the way God intended. The inability to enjoy sport in a spirit of play comes as a result of taking the external awards of sport too seriously... The contemporary sports culture has replaced the leisure of sport with the intense desire for victory and, a far more serious indictment, so have many Christians. A Christian theology of sport calls us to recover the spirit of play as we enjoy sport for the sake of leisure<sup>135</sup>

One can see in Shafer’s analysis that an overemphasis on competition and winning comes as a result of taking the external awards of sport too seriously. So, even though it has

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<sup>133</sup> Shields and Bredemeier, “Reclaiming Competition in Youth Sports,” 116.

<sup>134</sup> Metz, *Elite? A Christian Manifesto for Youth Sports in the United States*, 18.

<sup>135</sup> Shafer, *Well Played*, 225.

been said that professionalization has to do primarily with the degree of seriousness and importance given to youth sport, it may actually be the case that youth sport—as sport—is not taken seriously enough. Dombrowski points out that, in American culture, “sport is not viewed as a species of play but as an integral part of the economy” and, as such, “is not taken seriously enough,” noting that, “if the prime purpose of sport is to generate capital, then the sport activity has taken a back seat.”<sup>136</sup> To overemphasize any potential outcome (e.g., winning) or byproduct (e.g., revenue) of sport is to subjugate the intrinsic value of sport to its extrinsic outcomes or byproducts, thereby relegating the experience itself to a place of secondary importance.

This subjugation is seen any time youth sport is instrumentalized as a means to other ends, regardless of the nobility or ignobility of those ends. When winning becomes the most important thing, it is because an instrumental view of youth sport is in play, pun intended. League championships, MVP awards, the adulation of others, college scholarships, and even opportunities to share the gospel may come as a result of youth sport, but to elevate any of these potential outcomes to a place of primary importance is to denigrate the experience of youth sport and devalue its worth as an inherently good gift from God.

The instrumentalization of sport may also reflect one’s view of other meaningful-but-not-necessary activities and, perhaps, even one’s view of God. If one instrumentalizes sport, then one might just as easily instrumentalize other meaningful-but-not necessary activities. One might attend worship services, for instance, only because one believes worship produces particular extrinsic benefits, or one might be part

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<sup>136</sup> Dombrowski, “What Is Sport? What Should It Be?,” 21.

of a congregation only because one finds it socially advantageous. If one views participating in worship or in the life of a congregation this way, it may belie one's view of God as that of a cosmic vending machine; i.e., one puts something in with the hope that one will get something in return. If one does not "get something out of it," then one may no longer see the value in it and, therefore, no longer honor God as God. Even if one does not view God as a cosmic vending machine, one may appreciate God only as *deus faber* and not at all as *deus ludens*. God not only showed utilitarian, pragmatic concerns in the creation of the cosmos but also showed a concern for enjoyment and aesthetics. Even those things which may not seem particularly useful are part of God's good creation and, as such, have intrinsic value.

Furthermore, when winning becomes the most important thing, youth sport is at risk of devolving into decompetition. Healthy, true competition consists of two (or more) parties agreeing to strive *with*—more so than *against*—one another in the mutual pursuit of excellence. In this pursuit of excellence, they display sportsmanship, which is characterized by respect for opponents, coaches, officials, teammates, and the game itself. Part of respecting the game is a commitment to winning. The integrity of youth sport—as sport—depends on both sides playing to win, but only because winning is "directly tied to the players upholding the stated objective of a game."<sup>137</sup> If one does not play to win, then one is a spoilsport, who has sullied the game. If, however, one breaks or goes beyond the rules of the game in order to win, then one is a cheat, who has equally sullied the game. Both the spoilsport and the cheat show a lack of respect for the game, but Johan Huizinga's observation, made three-quarters of a century ago, is still apropos: "It is

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<sup>137</sup> Metz, *Elite? A Christian Manifesto for Youth Sports in the United States*, 19.

curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport.”<sup>138</sup>

This is likely so because the commitment to winning trumps the intrinsic value of youth sport as a manifestation of play and true competition, a contrast seen in the chart below:

*Table 6.1. Competition and decompetition: A summary*<sup>139</sup>

	<i>Competition</i>	<i>Decompetition</i>
<i>Deep Metaphor</i>	Partnership	War/Battle
<i>View of Opponent</i>	Enabler/Partner	Enemy/Obstacle
<i>Motivation</i>	Love of the game (Intrinsic motivation)	Use of the game (Extrinsic motivation)
<i>Goals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning/Mastery</li> <li>• Pursuit of personal best</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domination/Conquest</li> <li>• Pursuit of superiority</li> </ul>
<i>Focus</i>	Process (Contesting)	Outcome (Winning)
<i>Focus of Sportspersonship</i>	Fair, respectful, safe play	Literal rule obedience (unless excused by informal norms)
<i>View of Rules</i>	Imperfect guides to fairness and welfare	Partially tolerated restraints
<i>View of Officials</i>	Contest facilitators	Opponents
<i>Emotional Tone</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive emotions predominate</li> <li>• Play and seriousness in balance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative emotions predominate</li> <li>• Seriousness crowds out play</li> </ul>
<i>Whose interests are served?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual interest</li> <li>• The “common good”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-interest</li> <li>• The good of the victor</li> </ul>
<i>Ideal Contest</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balanced opposition</li> <li>• Tension, drama, story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dominated contest</li> <li>• Certainty</li> </ul>

At the heart of one’s view of competition lies what Shields and Bredemeier call a “deep” or “root” metaphor: “Decompetition originates when the contest is interpreted through a root metaphor of a *battle* or *war*. Drawing from the war metaphor, the main goal of the decompetitor is to emerge from the battle victorious.”<sup>140</sup> Once the deep/root metaphor of

<sup>138</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Routledge, 1949), 11.

<sup>139</sup> Shields and Bredemeier, “Reclaiming Competition in Youth Sports,” 118.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, italics original.

battle or war takes hold, winning becomes primary, and it is all but inevitable that competition will devolve into decompetition.

Additionally, when winning becomes the primary objective, the temptation for ethical compromise becomes stronger: “If winning is highly desired, so the argument goes, maybe we need to excuse or overlook the ethical limitations of decompetition. Maybe it is an ethical compromise that needs to be taken to get to the victory stand.”<sup>141</sup> There is not only a greater temptation for ethical compromise but also a temptation to mistreat others who are made in God’s image, since they are, in the view of the decompetitor, adversaries to be vanquished or mere obstacles to be overcome.

In its structure (i.e., essence and creational design), youth sport is inherently good, particularly as a manifestation of play and true competition, as well as for its potential to contribute to the human flourishing of young athletes via extrinsic benefits. However, the current state of youth sport in America suggests it has been taken in a direction inconsistent with God’s creational design for youth sport, and evidence of the fall can be seen in the privatization and professionalization of youth sport, the overemphasis on competition and winning, and the devolving of true competition into decompetition. Further evidence of the “fall” of youth sport can be seen in the way it sometimes functions antithetically to the human flourishing of young athletes with specific reference to their physical, psychosocial, and moral development, and, when youth sport functions antithetically to the human flourishing of young athletes, it denigrates their value as persons created in the image of God.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 126.



The trends toward privatization and professionalization have been accompanied by trends toward early specialization and year-round sports. The latter two trends have led to a rise in overuse injuries and early burnout/dropout among young athletes.

Overuse injuries are simply those injuries caused by repetitive use. Hyman reports, “Each year, as many as half of all youth sports injuries are the result of overuse.”<sup>142</sup> He also notes “what makes overuse injuries so frustrating”:

First, unlike traumatic injuries—dislocations, hyperextensions, and other mishaps—injuries caused by overuse are easily prevented. By introducing variety, moderation, and rest into an everyday sports routine, a child’s risk can be cut to nearly zero. Second, adults are the great enablers of overuse injuries. Where we go, ruptured ligaments and chronic tendonitis inevitably follow.<sup>143</sup>

Overman diagnoses the main causes of injuries among young athletes as “(1) immature bones, (2) early specialization, (3) poor training or conditioning, (4) overtraining, and (5) insufficient rest after injury,” making specific comment on early specialization:

Early specialization remains a particular concern, as do overscheduling and excessive training. Playing one sport constantly from an early age intensifies muscle imbalance in young athletes. Parents who push their kids into a single sport in hopes that their youngster will become a star may undermine this goal by placing the child at undue risk of injury.<sup>144</sup>

All of this is detrimental to the physical—and, likely, the psychosocial—wellbeing of the young athletes involved. Patrick Kelly notes the reason young athletes are especially susceptible to overuse injuries:

Children’s bodies... are *not yet mature enough* to handle the kind of year-round training that goes with specialization in one sport. Parents and coaches encourage early specialization in the hope that the young person will gain an advantage over

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<sup>142</sup> Hyman, *Until It Hurts*, 65.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>144</sup> Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids*, 96–97.

others when competing for college athletic scholarships or (if everyone's dreams come true) for positions on elite-level or professional sports teams.<sup>145</sup>

Here, one sees twin realities merging to create the perfect scenario for overuse injuries: the still-developing bodies of young athletes and the overzealousness of adults close to the game. Given that children's still-developing bodies are distinctly vulnerable to overuse injuries, one might think that adults close to the game would proceed more judiciously. Instead, "parents and youth sport promoters tend to steer children into intensely competitive sports that make inappropriate physical demands on their developing bodies."<sup>146</sup>

In addition to an increase in overuse injuries, there is an astonishingly high early dropout rate among young athletes. According to John O'Sullivan, founder of Changing the Game Project, 70% of children involved in organized youth sport drop out by the age of thirteen.<sup>147</sup> In an article called "Why Kids Quit Sports," O'Sullivan cites the primary reason for dropout:

The #1 reason kids quit is because sports is no longer fun. In a 2014 study for George Washington University, researcher Amanda Visik interviewed numerous youth athletes and asked them why they played sports, and 9 out of 10 said the #1 reason they played was it was fun! The children in the George Washington study defined fun as trying their best, being treated respectfully by coaches, parents and teammates, and getting playing time. They listed eighty-one characteristics of fun, and winning (#48), playing tournaments (#63) and practicing with private trainers (#66) did not finish high on the list. If your young athletes are not having

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<sup>145</sup> Patrick Kelly, "Youth Sport and Spirituality," in *Youth Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Patrick Kelly (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 137, italics for emphasis.

<sup>146</sup> Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids*, 95.

<sup>147</sup> John O'Sullivan, *Changing the Game: The Parent's Guide to Raising Happy, High-Performing Athletes and Giving Youth Sports Back to Our Kids* (New York: Morgan James, 2014), 17.

fun, they will eventually walk away, regardless of talent or how good their team or coach is.<sup>148</sup>

Whether because they burn out from early specialization and year-round sports or simply because they have grown weary of the hyper-competitiveness of youth sport, seven out of ten children are choosing to call it quits, walking away from organized youth sport because they no longer find it to be an enjoyable experience. In so doing, they also forfeiting any potential physical benefits of youth sport, along with any psychosocial or moral benefits it may hold.

A few potential psychosocial benefits of youth sport were outlined earlier, but youth sport also has the potential to inhibit or malform the psychosocial development of young athletes. Hyman points out that some young athletes develop eating disorders:

Athletes in so-called thin-build sports such as running, swimming, figure skating, and diving are eager to measure up to the expectations of adults around them... Eating disorders are distressingly common among female players, especially those who reach the highest rungs... But male athletes aren't immune. In sports in which maximum performance and ideal body weight are linked—crew, bodybuilding, running, wrestling, and football—they are, in fact, just as vulnerable as the female athletes.<sup>149</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, there are sports that require athletes to “bulk up,” especially linemen in American football. This is true in college and high school football, but it is also true in youth football. Hyman reports, “Of 653 players, ages nine to fourteen, playing youth football in Michigan, 45 percent are overweight or obese, according to a study published in the *Journal of Pediatrics* in 2007.”<sup>150</sup> Besides the

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<sup>148</sup> John O’Sullivan, “Why Kids Quit Sports,” *Changing the Game Project*, May 5, 2015, accessed March 16, 2019, <http://changingthegameproject.com/why-kids-quit-sports/>.

<sup>149</sup> Hyman, *Until It Hurts*, 100–101.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

obvious physical health risks of obesity, these young athletes are developing eating habits that are likely to last a lifetime, long after their time as young, active athletes is over, and their metabolisms have long since slowed down.

In addition to an unhealthy obsession with body image or body weight, along with unhealthy attitudes toward food, there is another phenomenon directly related to the psychosocial development and flourishing of young athletes: child abuse. The following excerpt from Overman is lengthy but eye-opening:

While physical abuse and overt violence are relatively discernible, psychological abuse can be more subtle... Abuse of young athletes is likely to occur when adults lose the ability to differentiate their own needs from those of the child. The athletic child becomes an implement exploited by adults to attain their own goals... The competitive youth sports environment normalizes abuse as it disempowers the athletes. Parents are led to believe that emotional abuse by coaches is the price that their child has to pay to compete. The sports setting doesn't negate the fact that it's still abuse... Abuse is defined as a pattern of physical, sexual, emotional, or negligent ill-treatment by a person in the role of caregiver or mentor that results in actual or potential harm to the child... Child athletes are abused by coaches, trainers, parents, and occasionally by fellow athletes... The National Youth Sports Safety Foundation ... defines emotional abuse to include name-calling, making fun of someone, putting someone down, saying things that hurt feelings, yelling at, rejecting, ignoring, and forcing a child to participate in sports. This list isn't exhaustive. Mistreatment of child athletes encompasses a wide range of actions that include undue pressure to achieve, degrading initiation rituals, hazing, physical punishment, and denial of sufficient rest and medical care—among other behaviors previously discussed... How often does abuse occur in youth sports? Is it the norm or the exception? The National Alliance for Youth Sport reported in 2001 a study that some type of verbal or physical abuse of athletes by coaches or parents occurs in 15 percent of youth sports contests. An earlier survey conducted by the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission found that almost half of the youngsters involved in sports reported that they had been called names, yelled at, or insulted by a coach; a fifth had been pressured to play with an injury, and some had been pressured to hurt an opposing player; one in six had been hit, kicked, or slapped, and one in thirty sexually harassed or abused.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids*, 137–138.

Given the fallenness of humankind and of youth sport, it is, perhaps, not entirely surprising that some abuse happens in youth sport, although every single instance of child abuse is regrettable and despicable. What is surprising is the frequency with which it happens and that it has come to be accepted as normal and, even, normative. That parents would stand idly by, expecting such treatment of children or, worse, participating in the abuse of young athletes is deplorable and runs counter to the creational design of youth sport as a vehicle for promoting the psychosocial development of children.

Recalling that it is an ethic-shaping, identity-forming practice, and recalling that practice makes permanent, rather than perfect, youth sport is a medium through which the wrong morals can be instilled, just as easily as the right ones. Parents bear the primary burden of ensuring that their children's ethic and identity are shaped and formed properly, rather than misshapen and malformed, through the child's experience of sport. Prior to adolescence, parents are the primary influencers in a child's life, and, even after children enter adolescence, parents continue to play a pivotal role. Throughout the entire developmental process, parents "serve as models for observational learning ... and help to interpret experiences for their children," and "children develop beliefs in their abilities, create and maintain certain expectations of themselves, and acquire sport-related value systems based primarily on the influence of their parents."<sup>152</sup> Nicole Lavoie further states that, "when parents create a motivational climate in which love, care, and attention are contingent on performance, children worry about making mistakes, believe success comes without effort and is constructed primarily around winning and outperforming

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<sup>152</sup> Nicole M. Lavoie, "Parents as Partners in Youth Sports," in *Youth Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Patrick Kelly (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 277.

others, and will be less likely to attain positive youth development outcomes.”<sup>153</sup> When adults close to the game—especially parents—make youth sport performance-oriented, it not only detracts from children’s ability to experience sport as play but also shapes children’s identity in such a way that they come to see themselves, primarily, as performers, whose identity and sense of self-worth are contingent upon how well they perform. If winning is what seems to matter most to parents, or if winning is what it takes to garner the affection of the adults children most trust, admire, and respect, then it is only natural that children would tacitly acquire an ethic that justifies winning at all costs.

In spite of the continued proliferation of the myth that sports build character, no academic research exists to justify that claim. Common sense dictates that, if sports build character, those who have participated in sport longest would have the most virtuous character. Present experience and observation confirm that this is not the case. Instead, Overman mentions a “significant body of counterevidence to the claim that sports build character,” citing numerous studies and examples.<sup>154</sup> Simply put, youth sport does not build character; it reveals character. It reveals the character of the players, but it also reveals the character of the adults close to the game, a character that is observed and, most often, emulated by young athletes. When adults close to the game behave in morally questionable or downright objectionable ways, one can hardly expect any better from young athletes.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>154</sup> Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids*, 17.

Youth sport is good, but youth sport is also fallen. As a human activity, as a human cultural development, and as part of creation, youth sport is in bondage, subject to the corrupting effects of the fall. As one observes modern youth sport in America, one sees evidence of the fall in the way the play element is diminished and in the way true competition devolves into decompetition. One also sees evidence of the fall in the way youth sport sometimes functions antithetically to the human flourishing of young athletes, inhibiting or malforming their physical, psychosocial, and moral development and denigrating their value as persons created in the image of God.

If there is a single factor primarily responsible for the current state of youth sport and exacerbating the fallenness of youth sport in America, it is what John O’Sullivan has dubbed the “adultification” of youth sport, which he defines as “the introduction and prioritization of adults’ needs and values over those of the child.”<sup>155</sup> Twenty years ago, Shane Murphy recognized the trend toward “adultification,” although he did not use the term: “Parents and other adults are the ones who organize these programs, run them and coach the children, and show up to watch. Youth sports are for adults as much as for children—perhaps more so.”<sup>156</sup>

Prior to World War II, very few parents were involved in their children’s play experiences; they either were not interested or did not have time. Moreover, there were few opportunities for children to be involved in organized youth sport. Social agencies such as the YMCA/YWCA and the Boys and Girls Club facilitated some youth sport

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<sup>155</sup> John O’Sullivan, “The Adultification of Youth Sports,” *Changing the Game Project*, March 18, 2015, accessed January 2, 2019, <http://changingthegameproject.com/the-adultification-of-youth-sports/>.

<sup>156</sup> Murphy, *The Cheers and the Tears: A Healthy Alternative to the Dark Side of Youth Sports Today*, 28.

experiences, and, apparently, there were also some school-sponsored interscholastic athletic competitions for children, although the pervasiveness of school-sponsored athletics for children remains in doubt. In 1938, members of the American Association for Health and Physical Education gathered in Atlanta, GA, for an annual convention, where they adopted the following resolution:

Inasmuch as pupils below the 10<sup>th</sup> grade are in the midst of the period of rapid growth, with the consequent bodily weaknesses and maladjustments, partial ossification of bones, mental and emotional stresses, physiological readjustments, and the like, be it therefore resolved that the leaders in the field of physical and health education should do all in their power to discourage interscholastic competition at this age level, because of its strenuous nature.<sup>157</sup>

At that, time, schools began to heed their advice, and school-sponsored interscholastic athletic competition for children began to wane. The same year, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards act, limiting the workweek to forty-four hours. Two years later, on June 26, 1940, Congress limited the workweek to 40 hours, giving parents significantly more discretionary time, but America entered World War II less than eighteen months later.

After World War II, parents became more involved with their children's play experiences, and they started organizing sports leagues for their children. Since that time, organized youth sport has grown and evolved into what it is today. Murphy comments "Over the years, participation in organized sports programs has increased, and the amount of involvement by parents has blossomed."<sup>158</sup> The increase of adult involvement,

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<sup>157</sup> E.D. Mitchell, ed., "Two Important Resolutions," *The Journal of Health and Physical Education* IX, no. 8 (October 1938): 488, accessed on March 17, 2019, Google-Books-ID: aBUoAAAAMAAJ.

<sup>158</sup> Murphy, *The Cheers and the Tears: A Healthy Alternative to the Dark Side of Youth Sports Today*, 32.



however, is a double-edged sword, which can be seen in the following statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics:

When the demands of a sport exceed a child's cognitive and physical development, the child may develop feelings of failure and frustration. Even with coaches available to teach rules and skills of a sport, children may not be ready to learn or understand what is being taught. Furthermore, many coaches are not equipped to deal with the needs or abilities of children... Because most youth sports coaches are volunteers with little or no formal training in child development, they cannot be expected to correctly match demands of a sport with a child's readiness to participate... Nonetheless, coaches may still try to teach what often cannot be learned and blame resulting failures on shortcomings of athletes or themselves. Parental or adult supervision of children's activity is usually considered to be desirable. However, in organized sports, inappropriate or overzealous parental or adult influences can have negative effects. Adults' involvement in children's sports activities may bring goals or outcome measures that are not oriented toward young participants. Tournaments, all-star teams, most valuable player awards, trophies, and awards banquets are by-products of adult influences. Despite good intentions, increased involvement of adults does not necessarily enhance the child athlete's enjoyment. The familiar image of a parent imploring their 5-year-old to "catch the ball," "kick the ball," or "run faster" is a reminder of how adult encouragement can have discouraging effects.<sup>159</sup>

Few would make the case that organized youth sport is necessarily a bad thing or that adult involvement in youth sport is necessarily a bad thing. Even fewer would make the case that parents spending more time with children is a bad thing. Nevertheless, the historical progression of youth sport in America has led to a situation in which adults have completely overtaken youth sport. Overman chronicles this takeover and draws the following conclusion:

As children train more intensely, they spend more time under adult supervision and coping with adult-imposed agendas. Instead of games being adapted to the level of children, children are expected to adjust to playing sophisticated adult games... What adults want from youth sport clashes with what children want. Children want to achieve their own goals, not adult goals. They want to play, not sit on the bench and watch others play. They want to compete without the harsh

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<sup>159</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness and Committee on Social Health, "Organized Sports for Children and Preadolescents," *Pediatrics* 107, no. 6 (June 2001): 1459–1460, accessed March 17, 2019, [pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/107/6/1459](http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/107/6/1459).

criticism and the constant pressure to win. But for the most part, what children want from sports has been overshadowed by what adults want.<sup>160</sup>

Children share no culpability in the current state of organized youth sport in America.

Adults have slowly but surely taken over. The “adultification” of youth sport has adulterated God’s creational design for youth sport, orienting it far more toward competition than toward play and turning opportunities to manifest true competition into displays of decompetition. Furthermore, while youth sport has the potential to contribute to the flourishing of the young people involved, much of the time it functions in ways that run counter to the physical, psychosocial, and moral development of children, thus denigrating the image of God in them.

#### *Evaluation of Youth Sport through the Lens of Redemption*

Phil Vischer, creator of VeggieTales, tells of a Saturday when his parents came to watch their grandchildren play. Phil’s thirteen-year-old daughter was playing volleyball, his nine-year-old son was playing baseball, and his seven-year-old daughter was playing soccer. All three had games that day. Phil recalls, “By 3PM we had covered three kids, three sports, and much of the western suburbs of Chicago.” Phil’s parents asked, “Is it like this *every* weekend?” Phil replied, “No, sometimes it’s worse.” Phil later reflected on the situation: “We have become a sports family. I’m not exactly sure how it happened... I guess it rather snuck up on us – like the cat that follows you home.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Overman, *The Youth Sports Crisis: Out-of-Control Adults, Helpless Kids*, 31.

<sup>161</sup> Phil Vischer, “The Death of Play? One Man’s Journey into the World of Suburban Youth Sports-Mania,” Blog, *Phil Vischer*, last modified November 15, 2004, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://philvischer.com/blog/the-death-of-play/>.

His experience reflects the experience of thousands of American families. To be sure, some parents have counted the cost and understand precisely what they are signing themselves—and their children—up for, and they are quite willing to make the requisite sacrifices. So many others have, like the Vischer family, become “sports families” but are not exactly sure how it happened. They find themselves stuck in the hamster wheel of modern American youth sport, disillusioned and not entirely certain about where this all leads. John O’Sullivan suggests it is a “race to nowhere” that “does not produce better athletes” but, instead, “produces bitter athletes who get hurt, burnout, and quit sports altogether.”<sup>162</sup>

There is, however, hope for the redemption of youth sport. If adults are primarily responsible for the orientation of youth sport away from its creational design, then the selfsame adults also have the capacity to reorient youth sport back toward its creational design. God has a plan for the future redemption of all human cultural developments. In the age-to-come, God will remove all sin from the equation, lift the curse under which creation suffers, and will restore every single human cultural development to a state of creational goodness, both with respect to essence and with respect to design. If this is what youth sport will be, someday, then this is also the end toward which Christian adults can and should work in the present. Even knowing that sin, sin’s consequences, and sin’s corrupting effects will be an ever-present hindrance this side of the eschaton, Christian adults can and should, with the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, take the lead in bringing redemption youth sport, making strident efforts to minimize the

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<sup>162</sup> John O’Sullivan, “The Race to Nowhere in Youth Sports,” *Changing the Game Project*, March 25, 2014, accessed March 19, 2019, <http://changingthegameproject.com/the-race-to-nowhere-in-youth-sports/>.

corrupting effects of the fall and bringing it back into alignment with God's creational design for youth sport.

As one begins to think redemptively about youth sport, one needs to consider that privatization and professionalization significantly diminish the play element in youth sport. Participating in youth sport is becoming a luxury. Venues where children could once play at little or no cost are disappearing; almost gone are the days of the sandlot. Travel and elite sports, which are cost prohibitive and intentionally selective, are taking their place. Providing more opportunities for more children to play at little or no cost will be a step in the direction of redeeming youth sport.

Consequently, the move away from the sandlot toward more highly competitive travel and elite sports has led to youth sport becoming more performance-oriented, which places additional stress on young athletes, and stress inhibits young athletes' ability to experience sport as play. It seems the organizers of youth sport in America have largely adopted what sport sociologist Jay Coakley calls "the power and performance model," over and against "the pleasure and participation model."<sup>163</sup> According to Hoffman, some of the characteristics of the power and performance model are "antagonistic relationships," "aggressive domination of opponents," "the setting of records," "pushing bodies to human limits," and "rigid selection systems based on ability," and the power and performance model "thrives on a full-throated drive to win."<sup>164</sup> In contrast, the pleasure and participation model emphasizes "enjoyment through personal expression, health and well-being, empowerment through physical experiences, inclusive

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<sup>163</sup> Jay J. Coakley, *Sport in Society*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 94.

<sup>164</sup> Hoffman, *Good Game*, 231.

participation, democratic decision making, and interpersonal support rather than hardnosed competition.”<sup>165</sup> Hoffman concludes, “Only someone with a severely skewed view of the gospel taught by Jesus and the apostles would conclude that the worldview of the PPM (power and performance model) better exemplifies the gospel’s fundamental core than the pleasure and participation model.”<sup>166</sup> Before one decries the pleasure and participation model as an instance of the “everyone-gets-a-trophy” mentality, one may stop to consider whether the trophies were the children’s idea or the adults’ idea. In addition to providing more opportunities for more children to play, moving youth sport in the direction of redemption will also include placing the game back in the hands of those for whom it was initially designed, so that they can enjoy the pleasure of participating in youth sport as a manifestation of play, rather than being driven by adults to compete.

Besides considering the way privatization and professionalization diminish the play element in youth sport, one will need to consider the overemphasis on competition and the devolving of true competition into decompetition, as one thinks redemptively about youth sport. The above comments regarding the pleasure and participation model are also applicable here. The adults organizing youth sport experiences for children will need to make a conscious effort to keep play and competition in balance and to keep their own competitive drives in check, recalling that these children are still very much in the process of learning the game and forming an opinion about themselves and about the game. Every youth sport experience creates a feedback loop for young athletes, influencing their self-image and their view of the game either positively or negatively.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

With 70% of children dropping out of organized youth sport by the age of thirteen, something is amiss.

In order to move youth sport in the direction of redemption, adults will not only need to adopt a pleasure and participation model but also need to focus on process, rather than outcome, making sure the emphasis is on skill development and not on results or rankings. Placing the emphasis on skill development in early years will help ensure that children are able not only to enjoy the immediate experience of youth sport in the short-term but also to enjoy playing and competing at higher levels in the ensuing years. Sport psychologist Shane Murphy displays this contrast in terms of “ego orientation” and “mastery orientation.” An ego orientation entails wanting “to win and do well” because it will make one look good, while “losing is to be avoided at all costs” because it will hurt one’s “self-image of being a successful athlete.”<sup>167</sup> A mastery orientation, on the other hand, entails wanting “to become excellent” in a sport.<sup>168</sup> For one with a mastery orientation, playing one’s best is more important than winning, and a victory is bittersweet if one did not play one’s best. Murphy concedes that an ego orientation can be “a driving force for achievement,” but it needs to be tempered “by some degree of mastery orientation.”<sup>169</sup> He makes the following assessment of competitive orientation in youth sport:

Competitive experiences teach children about the ego orientation approach to sports. It is natural to develop this viewpoint, to compare ourselves to others. But it is also crucial that children learn a mastery orientation toward sports. Without this viewpoint, sports are likely to become an unhappy experience. With a

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<sup>167</sup> Murphy, *The Cheers and the Tears: A Healthy Alternative to the Dark Side of Youth Sports Today*, 139.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 151.

mastery perspective, young athletes can learn to judge their own progress, to set their own goals, and to take satisfaction from growth, even when defeats occur. The essence of a mastery orientation is that it allows young people to think critically and independently about their own performance. This is a vital skill to have, in both sports and life.<sup>170</sup>

This is also not to be confused with the idea that everyone should get a trophy. Instead, it places the emphasis on skill development and skill mastery in the pursuit of excellence, rather than on the final score of the game or the stats one accrues during the season. If the adults responsible for organizing youth sport will focus on process rather than outcomes and instill a mastery orientation in young athletes, it will help keep play and competition in balance, and it will help keep healthy, true competition from devolving into decompetition.

As one thinks redemptively about youth sport, one will also need to consider that youth sport sometimes functions antithetically to the human flourishing of young athletes with specific reference to their physical, psychosocial, and moral development. In recent years, medical professionals, physical education instructors, and child development experts have begun to speak up about the potential detrimental effects of modern youth sport on children's physical, psychological, and social development. Those who specialize in sport ethics, philosophy of sport, and theology of sport—not to mention church leaders—have begun to speak up about the potential detrimental effects of modern youth sport on children's moral and spiritual development. One will, no doubt, continue to hear the discordant cacophony of voices shouting from the sidelines and the stands, but, as one seeks to move youth sport in the direction of redemption, one should also

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 151–152.

listen to the harmonious chorus of voices calling out from the fields of medicine, physical education, child development, ethics, philosophy, and theology.

Finally, thinking redemptively about youth sport and moving youth sport in the direction of redemption will require the reacquisition of a Christian imagination. Metz supposes that Christians today suffer from an acute lack of imagination, especially with regard to engaging youth sport:

Perhaps the biggest obstacle for Christians when it comes to the many challenges presented by youth sports is our lack of imagination. Our ability to imagine is directly tied to our ability to play. As youth sports have institutionalized and become hyper-organized and hyper-structured, many Christians seem to have lost their ability to see beyond the structures currently in place ... When we begin to open our eyes to God's purposes for sports we will breathe new life into our communities and into our young people—something the church is uniquely positioned to help lead.<sup>171</sup>

The redemption of youth sport requires not only a thorough examination of *what is* but also a reimagining of *what could be*. For Christians, reimagining *what could be* should always be done in light of *what will be*. In the age to come, God will redeem and restore all creation, including sport, and it is in light of this theological certainty that Christians can creatively reimagine and actively work toward the redemption of youth sport in the present age.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the Bible lacks any specific directives regarding youth sport. Therefore, it is necessary to construct or adopt a theological framework for evaluating and engaging modern youth sport as an American cultural phenomenon. Since at least the mid-twentieth century, the redemptive-historical narrative arc of scripture has been

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<sup>171</sup> Metz, *Elite? A Christian Manifesto for Youth Sports in the United States*, 170.



utilized as a framework for cultural evaluation and engagement. After tracing the themes of creation, fall, and redemption through scripture, these were, then, used as hermeneutical lenses through which to examine youth sport. Through the lens of creation, youth sport is good, both in its essence and its creational design. Through the lens of the fall, youth sport is terribly flawed, in bondage to the corrupting effects of sin. Through the lens of redemption, youth sport does not lie beyond the scope of God's redemptive plan but is part of that which God intends to restore and, as such, is something Christians can and should be involved in, working to orient youth sport back toward God's creational design for youth sport and imaginatively reconsidering what youth sport could be in the present in light of what sport will be in the future.

## CHAPTER 3

### Method

#### *Introduction*

Christian families need a better framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport. This conviction grows out of years of pastoral observation both of particular congregations and of the broader church in America. The researcher determined that a seminar would address this issue by equipping Christian families with the requisite tools to make biblically- and theologically-informed decisions regarding their involvement with youth sport. The purpose of this project, then, was to equip Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport and to teach them how to use this framework when making sport-related decisions.

#### *Description of Intervention*

The intervention of this project consisted of a seminar that lasted approximately four and one half hours, during which the researcher made presentations, facilitated discussion, and interacted with participants. The researcher also displayed video presentations of experts in the field of youth sport, as well as presented participants with scenarios for evaluation and discussion. The seminar was designed to familiarize participants with the following elements:

- *The current state of youth sport in America:* Outside of one's localized context, one may not have any knowledge of what is going on in the broader context of youth sport in America. The participants were made aware of what the "big

picture” of youth sport on a nationwide scale. The researcher presented statistics regarding youth sport in America, and the video presentations provided additional details about the state of youth sport in America.

- *The creation-fall-redemption narrative arc of scripture:* Even if one has a fairly thorough knowledge of scripture and a basic Christian orientation toward life, one may not realize that scripture follows a basic plotline consisting of three basic acts: creation, fall, and redemption. The researcher guided participants through this narrative flow and directed them toward pertinent passages of scripture. The researcher also instructed participants on the way the narrative arc of scripture corresponds with the outline of human history.
- *How to use the creation-fall-redemption narrative arc of scripture as a hermeneutical lens for cultural evaluation and engagement with specific reference to youth sport:* The researcher gave participants instruction on how to examine youth sport through the lenses of creation, fall, and redemption. The researcher invited them to consider what is inherently good about youth sport: its extrinsic benefits and its intrinsic value. The researcher invited them to consider where they see manifestations of the fall in youth sport; i.e., where youth sport has gone wrong and has deviated from God’s creational design and intent for youth sport. The researcher also invited them to consider their role in moving youth sport toward the direction of its essential, created goodness, both with respect to their own families’ sport-related decisions and with respect to the teams/leagues in which they participate. The researcher facilitated discussion,

during which participants were able to practice utilizing this lens, as they reflected on their own experiences with youth sport.

- *The perspectives of experts in the field of youth sport:* Even if one played sports as a child, and even if one's children have been playing for several years, one still may not have been exposed to the perspectives of those who are considered experts in the field. These perspectives include the fields of pediatrics, sports medicine, child development, and coaching. A growing number of experts from these fields have observed youth sport trends for a number of years and have begun calling for change. The researcher felt that participants needed to be familiar with these perspectives, so that they can make well-informed decisions. Then, after listening to each expert perspective, the researcher also facilitated group discussion about how these perspectives can be understood through the lenses of creation, fall, and redemption.

### *Research Question*

The inquiry into the effectiveness of this project was guided by the following research question: What effect will equipping Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport have on the meaning and value they ascribe to youth sport?

### *Description of Method*

The researcher chose a qualitative research approach for this intervention. Qualitative research is appropriate because it is “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they

attribute to their experiences.”<sup>172</sup> The specific methodology employed was the structured interview. Before the intervention, the researcher conducted structured interviews with participants to establish a baseline from which to work, and the researcher was able to discern emerging patterns when comparing participants’ responses to one another. After the intervention, the researcher conducted structured interviews to obtain comparative material by which to gauge any changes in the meaning and value particular participants ascribed to youth sport, and the researcher was also able to discern emerging patterns when comparing participants’ responses to one another.

### *Role of the Researcher*

The researcher designed and implemented the intervention, designed and conducted interviews, compiled and analyzed data, and selected participants for the intervention. During the intervention, the researcher acted as a presenter and facilitator of discussion. As the “primary instrument for data collection and analysis,” the researcher admitted certain “biases that might have an impact on the study” but also held that these very perspectives were indispensable for conducting this particular project.<sup>173</sup> The researcher has a vested interest in the topic, since the researcher has children involved in youth sport and is the pastor of many families whose children are involved in youth sport. The researcher could not “eliminate these biases” but tried to identify them

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<sup>172</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 5.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

and monitor the way they may have been “shaping the collection and interpretation of data.”<sup>174</sup>

### *Obtaining the Sample*

The sample was non-probabilistic, purposive, and criterion-based. The sample of participants for this intervention was drawn from those meeting the following criteria:

- *They have at least one child involved in youth sport:* Since the project concerns youth sport, this was a logical necessity.
- *They are actively involved in a local congregation:* That families have a Christian background and a basic Christian orientation are logical necessities. The assumption is being made that active participation in a local congregation entails both a Christian background and a Christian orientation.

The researcher selected the sample based on the foregoing criteria, but the researcher also admits an element of convenience sampling involved in the process. Simply put, participants had to live close enough to participate and be available to participate in the intervention. The researcher compiled a list of potential participants, reached out to them, gave them the pertinent details regarding the project, and made inquiry about their availability and willingness to participate. The sample size was twelve and consisted of six married couples with one of those couples acting as a reserve.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that roughly 8,500 people live in Hamilton County, TX. Roughly 85% of the population is “white alone,” roughly 12% of the population is “Hispanic or Latino”, and roughly 1% is “Black or African American alone.” The remaining 2% of the population comes from other racial and/or ethnic

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

backgrounds. The male:female ratio in Hamilton County is roughly 1:1.<sup>175</sup> Of the persons participating in this project, eleven are white, and one is Hispanic or Latino. The male:female ratio of the participants is 1:1. While the results generated by this research may be fairly reflective of Hamilton County, TX, the results of this research cannot be considered generalizable findings.

### *Entering the Field*

As the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Hamilton, TX, the researcher has had a presence in the field since June 1, 2015, and knew the participants personally. The researcher's children are also involved in youth sport and have played on the same team or in the same league as some of the participants' children.

### *Data Collection*

The researcher conducted structured interviews with participants both before and after the intervention (see Appendix B). The pre-intervention interviews were conducted approximately one week before the seminar, and the post-intervention interviews were conducted during the week after the seminar. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

### *Data Analysis*

The researcher analyzed participants' responses to interview questions by indexing and coding each interview transcript. With both pre- and post-intervention interviews, the researcher sought to isolate and identify emergent patterns, and, with post-

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<sup>175</sup> "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Hamilton County, Texas," accessed June 1, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/hamiltoncountytexas/PST045218>.

intervention interviews, the researcher sought to note any changes in the meaning and value particular participants ascribed to youth sport.

### *Data Reporting*

The researcher's aim was to record and report the findings of this project with utmost integrity. Chapter Four contains the findings of the research, and Chapter Five contains conclusions drawn from these findings.

### *Ethical Issues*

Prior to conducting any research or implementing the intervention, the researcher submitted the Non-Human Research Determination Form to Baylor's Institutional Review Board, and it was determined that this project does not meet the definition of human subject research; specifically, it will not generate generalizable findings. To avoid the complications of working with minors, no one under the age of eighteen participated in this study, and the researcher took measures to ensure that each participant was treated with dignity and respect. Participants' responses to questionnaires and interview questions were held in strictest confidence by the researcher, and electronic copies were stored on a password protected hard drive. The researcher gave each participant a verbal explanation of what to expect and obtained verbal consent from each participant. The researcher has also made every effort to guard the anonymity of participants.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Summary of Results

#### *Introduction*

This project sought to equip Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport. The inquiry into the effectiveness of this project was guided by the following research question: What effect will equipping Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport have on the meaning and value they ascribe to youth sport?

The researcher selected six couples who met two criteria: they had at least one child involved in youth sport, and they were actively involved in a local congregation. Because these participants came primarily from one congregation, the results of this study cannot be considered generalizable findings.

After enlisting the participants, the researcher conducted a pre-intervention interview with each couple, in order to establish baseline data. Analysis of these interviews yielded three pre-intervention findings. The intervention consisted of a seminar that lasted four and one half hours, during which the researcher made presentations, facilitated discussion, and interacted with participants. The researcher also displayed video presentations made by experts in the field of youth sport and offered participants various scenarios to consider for evaluation and discussion. After the intervention, the researcher conducted a post-intervention interview with each couple, and analysis of these interviews yielded three primary findings and two secondary findings. What follows are the findings of this study.

### *Pre-Intervention Findings*

#### *Pre-Intervention Finding One: Participants focused almost exclusively on the extrinsic benefits of youth sport.*

In chapter two of this project, the researcher identified the extrinsic benefits of youth sport as second-order goods that are neither intrinsic to nor guaranteed by participation in youth sport. Yet, an analysis of the pre-intervention interviews yielded the finding that participants focused almost exclusively on the physical, psychosocial, or moral benefits of youth sport. All twelve participants mentioned the extrinsic benefits of youth sport.

When asked what goals they had in mind for their children and what they hoped their children would take away from the whole experience of youth sport, Sarah said, “Responsibility, respect, teamwork, integrity, perseverance, give and take.” Her husband Charlie added, “How to lose the game and lose the season and take that and do a good job, be a good loser, if it doesn’t go your way.” When asked what they thought was good or bad about youth sports, Sarah responded, “Learning that what you put into something, you’ll get out of it normally. And learning to listen to different authoritative figures with different personalities ... and being responsive in a positive manner to them.” When asked what factors they take into consideration when making sport-related decisions, Sarah responded, “We look to the future ... and is this a life skill that you’re learning?” For Sarah and Charlie, the psychosocial and moral benefits of youth sport are clearly important, which was also the case for Frank and Mary.

Frank said, “My whole goal for them would be to realize that if they don’t try, they won’t know. So put forth the effort. And to build that self-confidence ... because

our daughter beats herself up, and I don't know of another way outside of letting her do sports that she can build her self-confidence." Mary added, "Overall, I think it builds good character. It does teach you to be able to get along with others." In addition to the psychosocial and moral benefits, Frank and Mary seem to value the physical benefits of youth sport. Mary said, "We're a pretty athletic family. We like to go outside and work in the yard. We've done bike rides as a family. We like being outside and keeping our kids active."

The interview with Arthur and Susan revealed that they, too, value the physical benefits of youth sport. When asked simply to describe their family's current experience with youth sports, Susan's response included, "I really like youth sports because it encourages physical activity, and I want him to get out." As a child, Susan was, in her own words, "pretty sedentary," and, reflecting on her experience with youth sport, she said, "It got me motivated to get up and get out and do something in a way that nothing else could." Identifying similar tendencies in her son, she said, "He's just not real motivated to go out and do anything," to which Arthur added, "He likes playing soccer." Susan continued, "Yeah, he loves it. He's like a different kid when he's out on the soccer field." Arthur concluded, "Other sports that he participates in, he does it because he wants to be part of the crowd and hanging out with his buddies, and that's okay. When he gets older he may decide that he's not a sports guy ... But in the meantime, we really hope that we can teach him to be a little bit more active and get healthy in his lifestyle."

The interview with Mitchell and Nina yielded one of the more insightful comments about the potential moral benefits of youth sport. When asked what is good or bad about youth sport, this was Mitchell's response:

I would say it's an opportunity to learn life lessons in a format that is enjoyable instead of painful. Most of the lessons you learn after you get out of high school, they're learned in a painful way with monetary or emotional—sometimes significant monetary or emotional—consequences that may or may not have consequences that last multiple years, if not your whole career. Sports is a microcosm where you can learn some of those lessons without those long-term consequences and in a format that is enjoyable without the pressure of real life.

Whether Mitchell realizes it or not, his reasoning reflects McFee's concept of sport as a “moral laboratory,” which is the idea that sport provides a setting in which persons can learn moral lessons within the confines of a system that already has a codified set rules and in which the consequences of failing to abide by those rules are, typically, much less severe than in real life.<sup>176</sup>

In all, responding to various questions about the meaning and value of youth sport, participants revealed that their primary focus was on the extrinsic benefits of youth sport. Recurring themes were physical activity and fitness (physical benefits), self-confidence and self-esteem (psychological benefits), teamwork and friendship (social benefits), and life lessons and character (moral benefits). While these extrinsic benefits are good, they are neither intrinsic to nor guaranteed by participation in youth sport. In fact, youth sport sometimes functions antithetically to the physical, psychosocial, and moral development of children. In chapter two, the researcher argued that, when this happens, adults close to the game (i.e., parents and coaches) are primarily to blame.

*Pre-Intervention Finding Two: Participants recognized that adult behavior is a major factor in the way children experience youth sport.*

In chapter two, the researcher identified influence from adults close to the game (i.e., parents and coaches) as a major factor in the way children experience youth sport.

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<sup>176</sup> McFee, *Sport, Rules, and Values*, 140.

Analysis of pre-intervention interviews yielded the finding that participants recognized that adult behavior is a major factor in the way children experience youth sport. All twelve participants mentioned adult behavior in pre-intervention interviews.

When Mitchell and Nina were asked what they considered good or bad about youth sport, this was Mitchell's reply:

There are certain places where perfectly rational parents do not understand how much they're embarrassing themselves by the way they're behaving about their kid's game. That side of adulthood is to me one of, if not the only negative of youth sports ... But they don't need to see a parent have to be escorted out of the gymnasium for instance, because they're just cursing up a storm at a referee about a travel call that wasn't made or whatever the case may be on an eight foot goal with a bunch of first and second graders. That side of youth sports, I wish kids never had to see.

Nina added, "It's the parents that get so wrapped up in it that they're reliving their days, or they are so invested in it that they're teaching a poor behavior. They're giving a poor example of how to conduct yourself." Their response is representative of the others. Four out of the six couples interviewed explicitly identified negative adult behavior as something that was bad about youth sport.

When interviewing Alton and Hannah, Alton said, "We've had a couple instances where, not really the kids, but maybe the parents got out of hand." Hannah responded, "Parents are a lot of the negative. There's no need to throw a hissy fit. There's no need to throw things and yell. No scholarships are riding on peewee sports. I think it sets a bad example for the kids." Alton agreed, "The negative would definitely be the parents ... Most of my negative dealings have been with parents and not with kids. I would say 98% parents, 2% kids." However, bad parental behavior, in general, is not the only negative adult behavior influencing the way children experience youth sport.

Charlie and Sarah identified pressure from both parents and coaches as another negative influence. Sarah said, “There is way too much pressure put on them way too early in the game.” Charlie elaborated more:

Whether it comes from parents or coaches, that is probably the biggest negative for youth sports period that we see. I would say hands down. It becomes, for those kids when they start off playing, it’s fun, and then it quickly after a year or two or three, it quickly evolves into a serious, serious job, business for them. Whether it’s their parents that are pushing them so hard or their coaches that are pushing them so hard, and sometimes both.

Charlie had made the connection between adult pressure and the way children experience youth sport, but Sarah made the connection even more clearly, saying, “That puts a lot of different emotions on the child that they can’t handle. At this point in the game, we have seen the maturity of those children are not able to handle those pressures right now.”

Just as adults can negatively influence the way children experience youth sport, they can also be a positive influence. Several respondents identified support and encouragement as desirable adult behaviors. In the interview with Frank and Mary, she pointed out that some children need additional support and encouragement because they do not receive those things from their own parents: “I try to encourage them as much as I can ... Especially in this town, there’s a lot of kids that their parents, they could care less what happens with their kid. It’s kind of a babysitter. So, to have the patience to deal with those kids, when you know that they’re not going to get any help at home, and they’re not going to get that encouragement.”

Greg and Cathy, likewise, underscored the value they place on parental support. He said, “I see my role as being supportive for the kids.” Then, Cathy made the following comment:

I have this selfish desire to want to stay home and just send him off with the boys. But I can't do that because our son's going to look over and not see me. And my mom was there for every single practice, every single meet I ever had, and my grandpa would come and my dad would come if I'd ask them to. But I just was raised always to have a supportive parent there.

In addition to highlighting the supporting role of parents, Cathy's comment reveals a dilemma that youth sports parents face. Parents want to be there for their children, but they often feel stretched or torn between competing desires and loyalties. Mitchell and Nina have stepped in and taken a decisive role in determining what is, ultimately, best for their children. She said, "We can't keep up with our kids anymore. So time was a big factor for us. We want to maximize the amount of time that we have together in order for our kids to be successful and to be the people God wants us to be in the community."

*Pre-Intervention Finding Three: Participants displayed a lack of consistency in the way they imagined the relationship between faith and sport.*

In the pre-intervention interviews, the researcher asked participants the following question: "How does your Christian faith and/or your church life influence your family's involvement with youth sports?" Responses were greatly varied. Charlie and Sarah mentioned the faith it takes to participate in youth sport without worrying excessively about the potential for injury. Frank and Mary mentioned that they like to "relate Christian morals back to sports," noting the need to exemplify good Christian character while participating in youth sport. They also mentioned encouraging their children to pray for the ability to deal with difficult situations they face in youth sport. Alton and Hannah talked about the "patience and forgiveness" they needed to display as parents of young athletes. Mitchell and Nina highlighted several things, including the way their faith is "intertwined in all of the sports" they do, the need to "show your faith" in the way

you treat other people, and the need to pray for the ability to “show what Christ wants us to show.” Arthur and Susan try to remember that their children “are God’s kids first,” and they try to bring their faith to youth sports all the time. Greg and Cathy remind their children to thank God for the gifts of their able bodies and strong hearts, and they want to teach them to be an example in everything they do, including playing youth sports.

While there was some degree of commonality across the participants’ responses, there was nothing resembling a single unifying element that would have tied them all together.

### *Significance of Pre-Intervention Findings*

1. It is significant that participants focused almost exclusively on the extrinsic benefits of youth sport because this indicated the need for a shift in participants’ thinking about the meaning and value of youth sport from an almost exclusive emphasis on youth sport to an understanding of youth sport that values it as an intrinsically good experience.
2. It is significant that participants recognized the influence of adult behavior on the way children experience youth sport because adults are primarily responsible for the current state of organized youth sport, and adults bear the primary responsibility of orienting youth sport back toward God’s creational design for youth sport.
3. It is significant that participants lacked consistency in the way they imagined the relationship between faith and sport because it confirmed the need for a more comprehensive, distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport.



### *Post-Intervention Primary Findings*

*Primary Finding One: The intervention was effective in enhancing participants' understanding of the relationship between faith and sport.*

The inquiry into the effectiveness of this project was guided by the following research question: What effect will equipping Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport have on the meaning and value they ascribe to youth sport? The keywords associated with this finding are “distinctly Christian.” Christian families appear to be involved in youth sport with the same frequency as others and seem to adhere to dominant cultural attitudes and expectations, rather than making sport-related decisions that reflect a distinctly Christian understanding of the meaning and value of youth sport. Analysis of the post-intervention interviews yielded the finding that the intervention was effective in enhancing participants' understanding of the relationship between faith and sport. It was clear that all participants had begun to reflect critically on this relationship and had made progress toward an approach to youth sport that is distinctly Christian.

Charlie and Sarah were candid about their previous inability to make an explicit connection between faith and sport. She said, “If our children have a problem with something else, we tell them, ‘Go pray about it,’ or ‘Go read your Bible and try to find it.’ And youth sports, whenever they come home with a problem, we don’t say that. I don’t know why there’s that disconnect, but I hope to make it more prevalent now.”

Frank and Mary have begun to imagine youth sport as part of God’s good creation. Mary said, “I think about kids playing yard ball. You just grab a bunch of kids and go out there and play, and you don’t think about who you’re playing against or who’s

going to win ... But sitting and explaining to the kids, ultimately, when sports were all originally created, this was the goal.” She also mentioned the importance of being able to explain this to their own children: “It’s sometimes a far stretch thinking God made sports, but with the way you explained it, it kind of makes sense. It’s something that kids can easily wrap their heads around ... I think everything needs to go back to your faith and somehow relate. So I think it was really good the way you tied it all together.”

Alton and Hannah have also begun to imagine sport as part of God’s good creation and have begun to think about youth sport in light of the Christian redemptive-historical drama. Alton said, “I never thought about it in terms of God created it. For that environment to be available through God’s creation is good. I never looked at it that way, and I really thought about it afterwards. The stuff that we use to make us better people today, God created all that.” Hannah added, “I never would have, without going to the seminar, thought about youth sports with the fall and redemption stuff. That would have never entered my mind.” When asked to elaborate, she said, “I guess now you can just be more aware and recognize and try to help avoid, if you can, any of the fall part ... Just be more aware to try to make sure it stays in a good direction.”

Five out of six couples specifically mentioned using one’s athletic abilities to glorify God, a response that came up only briefly in two pre-intervention interviews. When asked about their goals for their children’s involvement in youth sport, Sarah said, “Teach them that you’re doing this for him. He gave you the ability ... You need to go and use what he gave you to the best of your ability to make him proud.” Charlie added, “Win or lose, how they play the game. They need to play the game, they need to be a good winner, a good loser for him ... No cheating. Play within the rules, play by the

rules. And then if you win, that's great. If you lose, that's fine. But you need to act appropriately." Charlie and Sarah have articulated that God is glorified by the effort one gives and by the character one displays, regardless of the outcome of the game.

Greg and Cathy articulated a similar sentiment. She said, "With sport, I think if they grow into a talent and can show that, then they can recognize that as a gift from God ... Not take credit for what they've been given, but to glorify the Creator and how he made them." Greg concurred and said, "Think about how we do things, and we use the gifts that we have to be the absolute best we can to give God glory, to glorify him, whether we get any glory, whether anybody else notices or not. I guess God's glory isn't always based on other people's approval."

Arthur and Susan, likewise, mentioned the confidence they feel as a result of knowing their children are doing things that glorify God. He said, "We realized that we want to exercise those gifts that God gave us in the way God intends us to. And when you look at it like that, you get to, 'Oh, yeah, this is a great decision.' We know because we can see how it's supposed to work. Some confidence behind that decision."

Mitchell and Nina articulated most clearly the way their enhanced understanding of the relationship between faith and sport will affect their decision-making. Nina said the seminar made her more aware of what God wants her to do, and then explained:

Those two things you kept saying. What's the purpose? To enjoy it, to enjoy God's creation and, then, to glorify God. So that's kind of stuck in my head. Now, whenever we are debating what sports we're going to participate in or how much time we're going to spend on track and basketball and karate, whatever we spend time on, it makes me think, "Okay, are we going to enjoy it, and are we going to glorify God?" How are we going to make those two goals?

Nina's response indicated not only an enhanced understanding of the relationship between faith and sport but also a shift in the meaning and value they ascribe to youth sport.

*Primary Finding Two: The intervention was successful in shifting participants' emphasis from the extrinsic benefits of youth sport to its intrinsic value.*

The inquiry into the effectiveness of this project was guided by the following research question: What effect will equipping Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport have on the meaning and value they ascribe to youth sport? The keywords associated with this finding are "meaning and value." In the pre-intervention interviews, participants focused almost exclusively on extrinsic benefits, when speaking of what is good about youth sport. While the potential extrinsic benefits are good, they are neither guaranteed by nor intrinsic to youth sport; they are second-order goods. Sport is autotelic, meaning that its primary purpose and value are intrinsic to sport itself. Analysis of post-intervention interviews yielded the finding that the intervention successful in shifting participants' emphasis from the extrinsic benefits of youth sport to its intrinsic value. Ten out of twelve participants spoke about the intrinsic value of youth sport.

Mitchell and Nina had previously focused on the potential moral benefits of youth sport. When asked how the intervention affected what they thought was good or bad about youth sport, Nina said, "The first thing that I would have said is, 'It teaches you life lessons,' but you know what I think really is the best thing is seeing those kids have fun.'" She went on to tell about an athletic practice she oversaw earlier in the day. A child did something wrong, but, rather than getting upset, she decided to have fun with it.

She described the “joy and laughter” of the children and said, “Then not only them experiencing that, but as the adults getting to experience that with them.” At another point in the interview, she indicated that they had previously been preoccupied with “just trying to develop a good athlete,” and she said, “We wanted to give them the best chance to be as successful as possible in high school and to go on to college and walk on, if they want to.” She concluded, “Those other things were there. They just weren’t to the forefront. They weren’t a priority, and now those are our two reasons to do it. Those are our two priorities: Are they having fun and enjoying life or enjoying the sports, and are they working to the best of their ability to glorify God?”

In Greg and Cathy’s post-intervention interview, she related a similar incident. She coaches their son’s team, and she said, “This last week, I’ve lightened up on my darling son, who is not strong in this sport, but I want him to be. I want him to love it, and I want him to participate in it his whole life ... And so as an amateur coach for youth sports right now, it has helped me see how important it is to make it enjoyable for them, first and foremost.” Greg, too, wants their children to find the enjoyment in playing various sports: “Just knowing the game, have a familiarity with different games and sports and the different athletic ability that each type requires. And then also for it to be a long-term thing, not doing anything that would make them part of the 70% statistic.” Greg was referring to the statistic that 70% of children drop out of organized youth sport by the age of thirteen. In the intervention, he learned that the reason most of these drop out is because they no longer enjoy it.

Charlie and Sarah also made the connection between the dropout rate and children’s enjoyment of sport. She said, “I think the statistic about how many kids quit

by thirteen and the reason behind that need to be out there. That was very eye-opening ... I had no idea.” Charlie mentioned that soccer was his favorite local youth sport because it is fun. In Hamilton, TX, children can play in a recreational soccer league up to the age of fourteen. He said, “It’s fun because it’s lower level, and it’s over with. That’s it. And for that reason, it is fun. It’s just a lot more innocent game than what happens up on the hill.” In Hamilton, TX, when people say, “Up on the hill,” they are referring to the Hamilton Independent School District, which does not currently have junior high or varsity soccer. Sarah interjected, “And a bunch of the parents don’t have a clue what’s going on, so they can’t say anything.” Interestingly, the youth soccer league in Hamilton, TX, has roughly the same number of participants as the youth basketball and youth baseball leagues, even though these two sports have junior high, junior varsity, and varsity iterations.

Frank and Mary spoke at length about their newfound conviction that youth sport should be enjoyable and fun. Responding to a question about the way the intervention might have affected the goals they have in mind for their children, Mary said, “I’m going to say really making sure we put the emphasis on fun. Kids just want to have fun. Even though we know this, I think we kind of lose track of ‘the ultimate goal really is for these kids to have fun.’” Since the intervention, Frank had taken time to reflect on his own behavior at his children’s games. He said, “I think that from here on out, I’ll be more of a spectator, instead of a sideline coach because I think that possibly I yell too much on the sidelines. And it’s more to encourage them. But just to sit there and enjoy watching them play.” Mary added, “I think we’ll do a whole lot more just watching and just making sure we tell them we love watching them play regardless of how the outcome is.”

Frank and Mary had made a vital connection. From this point on, they want to avoid behaviors that might jeopardize their children's enjoyment of youth sport. More explicitly than any other participant, Frank perfectly articulated God's creational design for youth sport as an intrinsically good experience: "It was just designed for them to have fun and enjoy the game. I think the experience of all of it. I was talking to an employee of mine, and if they don't take anything, the experience is worth it. I truly believe that. I think that the experience makes it worth it." Frank and Mary have a renewed understanding of the meaning and value of youth sport. They, along with the other participants, came to see the value of youth sport as an intrinsically good experience, a perspective with which they had not previously been equipped.

*Primary Finding Three: The intervention was successful in better equipping participants to navigate the experience of youth sport.*

The inquiry into the effectiveness of this project was guided by the following research question: What effect will equipping Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport have on the meaning and value they ascribe to youth sport? The keyword associated with this finding is "equipping." The success of the intervention rests, finally, on whether participants felt better equipped to navigate their respective families through the experience of youth sport. Analysis of the post-intervention interviews yielded the finding that participants felt better equipped to navigate the experience of youth sport. All twelve indicated the feeling of having been equipped.

Several participants indicated that the intervention fortified things they already thought or believed to be true. Charlie and Sarah used the words "upheld" and

“solidified.” Alton and Hannah used the words “confirm” and “reaffirm.” Arthur said, “I think it really helped articulate the ideas that were within us anyway and gel those things.” He and Susan also spoke of the empowerment they felt. She said, “It made me feel more empowered to say, ‘This is a guideline I agree with, and now I’m going to apply it to my life,’ where before, it was like, ‘I just kind of have a gut feeling this is what we need to do.’” Arthur added, “We were already thinking along those lines. This just reinforced the decisions we’ve made in the past and gave us a little bit clearer picture of really why we were doing those things.” Having an intuition already, they now feel better equipped with the perspective and rationale they need to act confidently and decisively.

Mitchell and Nina highlighted the usefulness of the seminar in giving them a better perspective and a more precise evaluative lens. She said, “I really enjoyed the seminar. I think it’s very useful. It changes your mind and puts your mind into a different ... you’re looking at things in a different perspective and a different lens.” Mitchell had already been thinking through the concepts of age-appropriateness and developmental readiness, but the intervention augmented and helped clarify his understanding:

I do wish I’d thought this through more thoroughly in this manner sooner. Because when you have kids, you don’t really ask them if they’re ready. And we agreed to start coaching and assisting and helping and all this stuff with them for sports primarily because we were afraid of what would happen if we didn’t. But it’s made me realize that I don’t remember the perspective of my six year old, my seven year old, my eight year old, very well ... And so I wish I’d done a better job of reflecting and trying to tailor the experience more to them ... When I had a first grader, it would have helped me just to have that on my mind as we started it because, when we’re all remembering our experiences, unfortunately, we remember the teenage years better than we remember the six, seven, and eight year old years.



As Nina and Mitchell described their feeling of being better equipped and empowered to navigate the experience of youth sport, the researcher observed that they showed concern for the way their new perspectives might benefit not only their own children but also other children. The intervention had affected them as parents of young athletes, but it had also affected them as youth sport coaches.

### *Post-Intervention Secondary Findings*

*Secondary Finding One: Participants indicated a desire to see a similar seminar implemented and mandated in their local youth sport organizations.*

For all twelve participants in the study, this was the first time they had been exposed to many of the perspectives offered in the intervention. Several participants used the term “eye-opening” to describe what they had experienced. Because of their experience in this intervention, two participants mentioned that a similar seminar would be a good idea for parents and coaches, and eight participants specifically mentioned that a truncated version of the seminar should be implemented as a mandatory requirement for local youth sport administrators, coaches, and officials.

Sarah said, “Both of us talked about how we wish that it could be implemented as a requirement for parents and coaches to listen to before they can sign their kid up. Before their child can play youth sports, they should have to go through a simplified version.” Charlie added, “It needs to be, I mean honestly, it really needs to be implemented. For anything to change, it’s going to have to be implemented.”

Mary said, “I think it’s good for athletes and coaches to sit through, even just a couple of the videos, to open their eyes ... If they started with that, it would start the seasons off looking through a different set of lenses ... You kind of get back to focusing

on ‘let the kids have fun.’ Then, they can decide if they want to continue coaching or not.”

Hannah said, “It’d be great, if you coach any kid at all, to sit through that, to hear the videos, to hear the experts, to hear those kids say, ‘I hate when you do this’ or ‘This is all I need you to do.’ It’d be great if they would.” Alton added, “I would love to see that as a mandatory deal through any youth sports ... Locally, if you’re going to be in charge of a league, this should be mandatory.”

Nina said, “If you want to be a volunteer coach, then you have to go to the sports seminar ... And if somebody really wants to coach, then they’ll go through it. If they don’t want to do it, then they won’t go through it.” Mitchell added, “It actually would be really good for that. It might need to be condensed into a more tight timeline, but actually that’s a great idea.”

*Secondary Finding Two: Participants indicated a desire to be actively involved in the redemption of youth sport.*

Participants not only indicated a desire to see positive changes in their local youth sport organizations but four out of six couples expressed a desire to be active in bringing about positive change in their own local youth sport leagues, changes that would orient youth sport back toward God’s creational design for youth sport.

In their capacity as youth sport coaches, Mitchell and Nina are going to be even more cognizant of the way they conduct practices and interact with children. Arthur has a renewed appreciation for the influence of adults on youth sport: “I understand a little bit more now that we play a larger role in youth sports than I would’ve thought. What we say and do is a lot more impactful than I would have thought initially.” Mary sounded

hopeful that she and others would follow through on advocating for positive change: “If it takes off the way that we talked about us really wanting to make a commitment and really do this ... I think that it could happen.” Arthur expressed a desire to lead by example: “I feel a little bit more empowered to be in the community and be that voice of Christianity. And have the tools necessary ... have a toolbox that is easy to digest and understandable that we can use for everybody, bring this thought process and this mindset to other people ... I want to lead by example in that area.” Greg identified what took place during the intervention as the potential beginnings of a movement: “It’s interesting how that became a movement in there in a small group of people. A spirit moved people to take action. They wanted to form groups and start doing things.”

### *Conclusion*

This project accomplished its stated purpose of equipping Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport. By participating in an equipping seminar, participants displayed an enhanced understanding of the relationship between faith and sport, came to identify the primary goodness of youth sport in terms of its intrinsic value, and felt better equipped, even empowered, to guide their respective families through the experience of youth sport. Participants also indicated a desire not only to see positive change in their local youth sport leagues but also to be part of the solution that would bring youth sport back in line with God’s creational design for youth sport.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion and Reflection

#### *Summary of Findings*

The purpose of this project was to equip Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport. The inquiry into the effectiveness of this study was guided by the following research question: What effect will equipping Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport have on the meaning and value they ascribe to youth sport? Pre-intervention interviews confirmed both the researcher's hypothesis that Christian families often adhere to dominant cultural attitudes about youth sport and the need for a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport. Participants focused almost exclusively on the extrinsic benefits of youth sport, which is what the dominant culture had conditioned them to do, and participants displayed great variance in the way they imagined the relationship between faith and sport. Additionally, participants recognized that adult behavior is a major factor in the way children experience youth sport, a finding about which the researcher is hopeful.

Six couples participated in an equipping seminar, after which participants demonstrated an enhanced understanding of the relationship between faith and sport, as well as a heightened appreciation for the intrinsic value of youth sport. Participants also indicated that they felt better equipped and empowered to navigate the experience of being involved in youth sport. In addition to these primary findings, participants also expressed a desire to see participation in a similar seminar mandated in their local youth

sport organizations, and participants indicated a desire to be actively involved in the redemption of youth sport.

### *Theological Significance*

The primary theological significance of this study lies in the way it reconnects the lived experience of youth sport with its essential, created goodness and with God's creational design for youth sport. During the intervention, participants were presented with a vision for youth sport rooted in the theology of creation that was set forth in chapter two. God created everything *ex nihilo*. Youth sport exists and is, therefore, part of God's creation. God's estimate of creation, including youth sport, is found in Genesis 1:31: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." None of the participants had ever conceived of sport as part of God's good creation and, therefore, had never considered that God might have a creational design for youth sport.

Since youth sport did not, strictly speaking, exist at the end of the sixth day of creation, participants were guided to the so-called cultural mandate found in Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." James Davison Hunter points out, "These active verbs convey God's intention that human beings both develop and cherish the world in ways that meet human needs and bring glory and honor to him. In this creative labor, we mirror God's own creative act and thus reflect our very nature as ones made in his image."<sup>177</sup> The *imago dei*, the cultural mandate, and God's creational design for youth sport were explained in simple terms. As the participants were led through this vision of youth sport rooted in a theology of creation, they began to make the connection between God's creational design

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<sup>177</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 3.

for youth sport, the *imago Dei*, the cultural mandate, and their own role in shaping the experience of youth sport into something that makes life better (i.e., contributes to human flourishing) and glorifies God.

Later in the intervention, as participants were invited to view youth sport through the lens of creation, they were asked to start with youth sport's extrinsic benefits. Participant responses in pre-intervention interviews revealed an almost exclusive emphasis on the extrinsic benefits of youth sport. Unwittingly, participants had sought to justify the goodness of youth sport by instrumentalizing it in the service of producing physical, psychosocial, or moral benefits. Even though they valued youth sport, they valued it for the wrong reasons. They did not value youth sport "as sport" but as a means to other ends. One participant intimated that, the moment youth sport was no longer valuable in producing desired outcomes, their child would no longer participate.

After considering the extrinsic benefits of youth sport during the intervention, participants were asked to set those aside and consider whether youth sport might still be good, even if all of its extrinsic benefits were removed. Like art, music, theater, and fine dining, sport is an autotelic, meaningful-but-not-necessary activity, the rewards of which are intrinsic to the experience itself. As Hoffman writes, "Orchestras enrich our lives through the sense of listening and gourmet meals enrich through taste, just as sport enriches our lives through moving and watching. In the end, it is the experience that counts, and this alone is sufficient reason for the Christian's involvement."<sup>178</sup>

Through the intervention, participants came to see the intrinsic value of youth sport, and they came to understand that its intrinsic value is directly tied to the experience

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<sup>178</sup> Hoffman, *Good Game*, 268.

of play. Human beings were created to play. They find the experience of play to be enjoyable, delightful, fulfilling, and enriching. This is the case because human beings are made in the image of a creative and playful God. God is both *deus faber* and *deus ludens*; a God who works and a God who plays. While the terms *deus faber* and *deus ludens* were not used during the intervention, the notion that the play element of youth sport is what makes the experience enjoyable, delightful, fulfilling, and enriching for children resonated with participants. It resonated with them because they see the way their children's faces light up when they lose themselves in the moment and are enraptured in an experience of play.

The dominant culture (i.e., twenty-first century American culture) conditions people to value youth sport primarily for things that are extrinsic to youth sport. For some, that might mean physical, psychosocial, or moral benefits. For others, it might mean medals, trophies, or accolades. For others, it might mean sponsorships, scholarships, or the chance to participate in athletics at the "next level." In each case, the essential, created goodness of youth sport is overlooked in favor of its instrumentality in achieving some other end. However, youth sport is inherently, essentially good as part of God's creation, and God has a creational design for youth sport. Post-intervention interviews revealed that participants had begun to reimagine youth sport as an autotelic, meaningful-but-not-necessary, intrinsically rewarding experience of play and healthy competition that contributes to human flourishing and glorifies God. In the words of one participant, "If they don't take anything, the experience is worth it."

### *Practical Significance*

This project equipped Christian families in Hamilton, TX, to navigate the lived experience of youth sport. In Hamilton, TX, Christian families are involved in youth sport just as frequently as those who are not Christians. Pre-intervention interviews revealed that participants' basic expectations of and attitudes toward youth sport reflected those of the broader culture. The intervention phase of this project successfully equipped six Christian families with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport. One couple's response articulated well one of the practical aims of the seminar. They said they now have a "tool" that will help keep them on track.

Besides equipping Christian families in Hamilton, TX, to navigate the lived experience of youth sport, this project also empowered them to take their newfound perspective into the community. Several participants mentioned that they would like to see a truncated version of the intervention implemented as a mandatory qualification for local youth sport administrators, coaches, and officials. Others mentioned the sense of personal empowerment, a sense epitomized by one participant's comment: "I feel ... more empowered now to be in the community and be that voice of Christianity."

Finally, this project addressed the topic of Christian involvement in youth sport in a constructive, pastoral way. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul stated that one purpose of church leaders is to "equip the saints for the work of ministry."<sup>179</sup> The intervention phase of this project was successful at equipping Christian parents for the work of ministry both within the context of their own families and within the context of the larger community in which they live.

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<sup>179</sup> Ephesians 4:12.



### *Broader Significance*

Beyond its significance for participants' navigation of the lived experience of youth sport, this project also has the potential to affect their evaluation of and engagement with other activities. The framework presented in the intervention was tailored to youth sport. With some critical reflection, one might just as easily apply it to other activities, a task that at least one participant has already begun to undertake: "This lens can be used for just about everything we do, whether it's piano lessons or horseback riding ... or whatever. Whatever is occupying your time, this is a good way to think about it."

Since this project represents a successful approach to addressing youth sport in a constructive, pastoral way, it stands as a model for other church leaders. Christian families will continue to be involved in youth sport, sporting events will continue to conflict with church events, and some Christian families will continue to prioritize athletic endeavors over spiritual development. Church leaders will continue to wrestle with these realities and will continue to struggle with devising adequate strategies for addressing them. As was argued in the introduction, neither accommodation nor rejection are adequate ways to address Christian families' involvement with youth sport. While this project leaves plenty of room for improvement, it can easily be adapted to one's own ministry context and employed as a constructive, pastoral approach to the cultural phenomenon of modern youth sport in America.

### *Further Research*

The *imago dei*, though marred by the fall, is universal among humankind. The redemptive-historical drama of creation, fall, and redemption, is universally shared by all

Christians. If the theological vision of youth sport presented in this project does, in fact, represent God's creational design for youth sport, then it is, in theory, universally applicable to all youth sport everywhere. Future studies should be undertaken to see what effect a similar intervention might have on people in other cultural contexts, since the cultural experience of those who live in Hamilton, TX, is not universal.

Youth sport has tremendous power as an ethic-forming, identity-shaping practice. Practice does not make perfect; practice makes permanent. Sport is not just something people do; it is also doing something to them. Through repeated, habitual engagement in youth sport, young athletes are acquiring an ethic and an identity. A potential longitudinal study would consist of measuring the impact of sustained engagement in Christian spiritual formation practices on the ethic and identity of young athletes.

Since, prior to adolescence, parents are the primary influencers in a child's life, whatever attitudes and behaviors parents display toward sport are likely to be mirrored by their children. Another potential area of study would consist of measuring the degree to which children's attitudes and behaviors reflect that of their parents with regard to both church involvement and youth sport. This research could dovetail into a longitudinal study measuring the impact of sustained engagement in Christian spiritual formation practices on parental attitudes and behaviors toward both church involvement and youth sport.

### *Conclusion*

As part of God's creation, youth sport is good in both its essence and its design. God's creational design for youth sport is that it should be an autotelic, meaningful-but-not necessary, intrinsically-rewarding experience of play and healthy competition that

contributes to human flourishing and glorifies God. Because of the fall, all human participants in youth sport—athletes, coaches, officials, and spectators—are subject to the corrupting effects of sin, and youth sport itself, as part of creation, is under a curse and subject to the corrupting effects of the fall. When competition and winning are overemphasized to the detriment of functions antithetically to the physical, psychosocial, or moral development of young athletes, then youth sport falls short or misses the mark of God's creational design. Yet, there is hope for the redemption of youth sport. God's redemptive plan includes the full future restoration of all creation to its original design. Since sport is part of creation, then it will presumably be redeemed and fully restored along with the rest of creation. In light of this future redemption, Christians can and should, with the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, actively work in the present to bring redemption to youth sport, reorienting back toward God's creational design.

For Christians, the redemptive-historical drama of creation, fall, and redemption is the metanarrative—the big story—under which all other stories are subsumed and into which they all fit. This project has demonstrated the way in which youth sport fits into the Christian redemptive-historical drama and the way in which creation, fall, and redemption can be utilized as hermeneutical lenses through which to view the cultural activity of youth sport, in general, and the cultural phenomenon of modern American youth sport, in particular. The six Christian couples who participated in the intervention gained a better understanding of the Christian redemptive-historical metanarrative, and they were equipped with a distinctly Christian framework for evaluating and engaging youth sport. They felt equipped and empowered not only to navigate their own families

through the lived experience of youth sport but also to be “salt and light” in their spheres of influence, ready to advocate for positive changes in their local youth sport organizations, changes that will, ultimately, reorient youth sport back toward God’s creational design.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## Institutional Review Board Determination Letter

**BAYLOR**  
UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD – PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH

**NOTICE OF DETERMINATION OF NON-HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH**

Principal Investigator: Roy Dabbs  
Study Title: Equipping Christian Families with a Distinctly Christian Framework  
for Evaluating and Engaging Youth Sport

IRB Reference #: 1419258

Date of Determination: 03/29/2019

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The above referenced research project has been determined to not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the IRB according to federal regulations at 45 CFR 46.102(e) & (f). Specifically, the project will not generate generalizable findings.

The following documents were reviewed:

- Non-Human Research Determination Form, submitted on 03/28/2019

This determination is based on the protocol and/or materials submitted. If the research is modified, you must contact this office to determine whether your modified research meets the definition of human subject research.

If you have any questions, please contact the office at (254) 710-3708 or [IRB@baylor.edu](mailto:IRB@baylor.edu)

Sincerely,

Deborah L. Holland, JD, MPH, CHRC, CHPC  
Assistant Vice Provost for Research  
Director of Compliance

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OFFICE OF THE VICE PROVOST FOR RESEARCH

One Bear Place #97310 • Waco, TX 76798-7310 • (254) 710-3708 • FAX (254) 710-7309 • <http://www.baylor.edu/research/irb/>

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions

#### Pre- Intervention Interview Questions

1. Please provide a brief overview your family's current experience with youth sports. (e.g., types of sports, extent of involvement, weekly schedule).
2. What goals do you have in mind for your child when it comes to youth sports? (i.e., what do you hope they take away from the whole experience?)
3. How would you describe yourself as a "youth sports parent"? (i.e., how do you understand that role?)
4. What would you say is good or bad about youth sports?
5. Tell me how your Christian faith and/or your church life influences your family's involvement with youth sports.
6. What are the key influences surrounding your involvement with youth sports? (i.e., how do you go about making decisions related to youth sport, and what factors play a role in your decision-making?)

#### Post-Intervention Interview Questions

1. In what ways, if at all, has your experience in this seminar impacted the goals you have in mind for your child when it comes to youth sports and what you hope they take away from the whole experience of youth sports?
2. In what ways, if at all, has your experience in this seminar impacted the way you understand your role as a "youth sports parent"?
3. In what ways, if at all, has your experience in this seminar impacted what you would say is good or bad about youth sports?
4. In what ways, if at all, has your experience in this seminar impacted how your Christian faith and/or your church life has the potential to influence your family's involvement with youth sports?
5. In what ways, if at all, has your experience in this seminar impacted how your family makes decisions related to your involvement with youth sports?
6. Do you have any final comments about the seminar or its effect on your thinking about youth sports?

## APPENDIX C

### Presentation Notes

#### **Equipping Christian Parents to Navigate the World of Youth Sports**

First, I want to thank all of you for agreeing to participate in this seminar. I know it's a time commitment for you, and I really appreciate it. As you know, this is a requirement for me to finish my doctorate. But, more importantly, this is something I'm passionate about. I wouldn't have spent the last year, year and a half studying this stuff if I didn't think it was important. It affects me, as a pastor and a church leader. For the last 15 years, I've struggled to figure out a good way to address the topic of youth sports, and so this represents an attempt at doing this. But not only does it affect me as a pastor....

It also affects me as a parent. I have 4 young children of my own. So my wife and I are in the same boat as all of you, trying to navigate the world of youth sports. When our children started playing sports, I realized I was lacking something.

Even though I played sports as a child from t-ball all the way up through high school sports (football and golf), and even though I was raised in church and in a Christian home (my dad was a pastor), I didn't feel like I had a good grasp on the relationship between my faith and my sports. After high school, I played a little tennis and a little golf for a few years. I went on to complete two degrees in theology, and I've been in vocational ministry since I was 20. Still, didn't have a good grasp on the relationship between my faith and my sports.

Then, we started having kids, and our kids started playing sports, and I realized, "We've got to try to figure this thing out." Because it's one thing to be involved in sports yourself, but it's another thing when your kids start playing. Am I right? So, as a parent, our focus changed from, "How does our faith go together with our sports?" to "How does our faith inform and influence our decisions related to our children's involvement with sports?"

Again, looking back to my own upbringing, I feel like my parents set a good example, but, still, as a parent, I felt like I needed something more. I felt like what I needed was an explicitly Christian biblical grid, or framework, or lens for evaluating our family's involvement in youth sports, so that we could make Christ-honoring decisions as parents.

And so here's what I've done for the last several months. I've tried to develop that framework, that lens. When we start looking at the Scriptures for guidance on how to do youth sports, we don't find just a whole lot that's just right there on the surface. There's no chapter and verse that says, "Thou shalt" or "Thou shalt not," specifically related to how we do youth sports.

In fact, the only times the Bible mentions sport, it's when the Apostle Paul uses sports as an illustration or example. And then there's one verse in Hebrews that talks about running the race with endurance. Other than those, sports are never even mentioned in the Bible.

So, what do we do? For me, what I had to do was zoom out. I had to look at the big picture of Scripture. And I had to realize the Bible is one big story. And it's a story of



Creation, Fall, and Redemption. We're going to talk more about that in a few minutes, but here's what's important right now. As I studied this, I came to realize we can use this Big Story of the Bible as a grid, a framework, a lens for evaluating youth sports and our families' involvement in youth sports. Literally, every decision we make as parents, related to youth sports, we can run it through this filter of Creation, Fall, and Redemption.

I've chosen you because you're active and involved in a local church, you're raising your children in church, and you're raising them in a Christian home. And I've chosen you because you have children who are involved in sports. That's what this is all about for me. It's about how we, as parents, can continue to help our children develop spiritually, and, at the same time, help them develop their athletic potential and have a good, positive experience in youth sports. It's about learning to make wise, healthy, Christ-honoring decisions as parents, related to our families' involvement with youth sports.

So, here's the main purpose of this seminar. I want to equip you. I don't want to tell you what to do. I don't want to tell you how to run your family's business. That's not my place. I simply want to equip you. I want to give you some tools, some things that I hope will help you as you navigate the world of youth sports and as you make decisions related to your family's involvement in sports.

For my part, most of the information I'm going to be giving you will be coming from an explicitly Christian biblical perspective. That's my area. I'm a pastor. That's what I do. But, at the same time, we're going to hear from some other perspectives today, as well. The videos we'll be watching together and some of the handouts I'll give you to look at will be coming from other perspectives. They're not coming from an anti-Christian perspective, but they're looking at youth sports from a different angle. I'm looking at it from a Christian biblical angle; they're looking at it from the angle of pediatrics, child psychology, child development, physical education, and so on and so forth. To paraphrase something St. Augustine once said, "All truth is God's truth." I believe we find some very good things in these other perspectives that help us, as Christian parents, make wise, healthy, Christ-honoring decisions for our families.

That pretty well sets the stage for what we're going to do today. Do you have any questions so far?

### **Video: "Let's Not Overcomplicate Our Kids' Sports" (1:10)**

<https://youtu.be/reimgAw6ZhU>

### **Youth Sports in America**

- According to the Aspen Institute "Project Play," nearly 70% of children ages 6-12 play an individual or team sport.
- Steven Overman, retired college PE professor, estimates about 35 million children ages 4-14 play organized youth sports.
- It really is hard to get solid numbers on this stuff, since so many kids play multiple sports, but here's the bottom line:
- Lots and lot of kids play sports.
- It's almost like playing sports is a rite of passage in America.
- Not every kid plays sports, but the majority of them do.

### **What do youth sports look like in Hamilton?**

- I don't know all the numbers or all the information, but here's what I've got.
- Our peewee flag football league had 74 kids, ages 6-12
- The soccer league last fall had around 200 ages 4-12
- Little Dribblers had right at 200, 1<sup>st</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade
- The HCYAA t-ball/baseball league has 220 ages 4-14
- The HCYAA softball league has 52, ages 6-15
- We also have some kids playing basketball in the fall and in the spring
- Plus, a few kids do gymnastics, tumbling, or competitive cheer. I don't know exactly how many.
- I also don't know what the numbers look like for travel baseball.
- When I run the numbers for sports participation against enrollment numbers at the school, well over half the kids in Hamilton participate in organized youth sports.
- So, the things we're talking about today don't just affect us and our own children; they also affect well over half the children in Hamilton, TX.

Is there anything you'd like for me to go back and clarify?

### **Video: The Truth about Sports Parents (4:30)**

<https://youtu.be/u2LR4c3JsmU>

- As you listened to these children, what do you feel like they really wanted and needed from their parents?
- What are they trying to communicate in terms of what they want/need from their parents?

### **Creation, Fall, and Redemption in Scripture**

I mentioned earlier, when I started searching the Scriptures for guidance on “how to do youth sports” as a Christian family I kept coming up empty. It wasn't until I zoomed out and looked at the bigger picture that I found something helpful for me, as a parent.

When we start thinking about the big story of the Bible, we see it unfold in three acts: creation, fall, and redemption. The story of the Bible is the story of human history on earth. Genesis 1 and Revelation 22 are the bookends. At the beginning, everything is awesome. At the very end, everything is awesome. But there's a whole lot of not-so-awesome in between.

From the beginning of time, God has been writing the drama of history in three acts: creation, fall, and redemption. In the beginning, everything was awesome. Things were exactly the way God intended them to be. Then, the Fall happened and messed everything up. Sin entered the world, and everything changed. Every person is affected by sin, and all creation is affected by sin. But, then, Jesus came. Jesus is the Redeemer. And when Jesus came, we entered the third act: redemption. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God began to bring healing and restoration. Through faith in Jesus, we can experience redemption, in the sense that our sins are forgiven, and our relationship with God is restored. But, one day, when Christ returns, everything will be awesome again. In fact, the vision at the end of Revelation indicates that things will be even more awesome than they were in the beginning.

So, right now, we're living in an in-between time; there's some overlap between act 2 and act 3. The third act—redemption—has already started, but the second act---the fall---isn't fully over yet. We can already experience aspects of redemption, but, at the same time, we still have to deal with the effects of sin and the fall.

## Creation

Let's think a little more about the first act—creation—and what it might mean for youth sports.

**Genesis 1:1** – In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

- Who created everything?
- Other than sin and evil, is there anything God didn't create? If it exists, who is ultimately responsible for its existence?
- Do youth sports exist?
- Who is ultimately responsible for the existence of youth sports? Ultimately, who is the Creator of youth sports?

Of course, we know God didn't directly create youth sports. At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation, there was technically no such thing as youth sports. But, God embedded the potential for youth sports in creation. Everything that would ever exist, God embedded that within creation. Albert Wolters said, "In the biblical view, creation is everything which God has ordained to exist, what he has put in place as part of his creative workmanship... An almost unimaginable variety of objects, institutions, relationships, and phenomena are part of the rich texture of God's creation." There's just nothing out there of which we can say, "God didn't create that." So, youth sports are part of God's creation. You know what else is part of God's creation? Human beings, and human beings have a special place in creation.

**Genesis 1:27-28** – <sup>27</sup>So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup>God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Here we find three things.

- **First, God created human beings in his image:** That means we are, in some ways, a reflection of God. Sin came along and messed a lot of that up, but we're still a reflection of who God is.
- **Second, God created human beings to be in community:** That's hinted at here, and then in Genesis 2, it says, "It is not good for a person to be alone." Sin comes along and messes up our relationships with other people, but God created us to be in community.
- **Third, God created us to fulfill his purposes:** Right here, at the very beginning, God gave human beings a to-do list. Be fruitful and fill the earth. Subdue the earth and rule over creation. The words *subdue* and *rule* carry the idea of stewardship over creation. Are youth sports part of creation? Yes, so we're stewards over youth sports. But the main point is that God created us to fulfill his purposes. But, then over in Genesis 2:15, it says this: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." There are two things going on in this verse: working the garden and taking care of the

garden. The way I understand it, the garden is representative of all of creation. James Davison Hunter said this: “These active verbs convey God’s intention that human beings both develop and cherish the world in ways that meet human needs and bring glory and honor to him. In this creative labor, we mirror God’s own creative act and thus reflect our very nature as ones made in his image.”

- Let me break that down. One of the reasons God put us on this earth, one of God’s purposes for us is that we work with what God has already created to bring out its potential in a way that contributes to human flourishing (makes human life better) and glorifies God.
- A good example of this would be modern medicine. Open heart surgery didn’t exist at the end of day 6. But someone came along and worked with what God created to develop the procedure we call bypass surgery.
- Of course, for our purposes today, youth sports is the main example. God embedded the potential for youth sports within creation. Somebody came along, some human being created in God’s image... came along and worked with what God had already created to develop youth sports.
- And human beings continue to work with and develop youth sports. The state of youth sports is not static; it’s dynamic. Youth sports keep morphing and changing, depending on what we do... especially we adults who are close to the game do... the way we organize youth sport experiences for our children and the things we, as parents and coaches, teach children by way of example. We have an effect on the state of youth sports.

Before we get into a discussion of the Fall, we need to highlight one more aspect of creation.

**Genesis 1:31** – God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

- What does God think about creation?
- When God created this world, it was perfect in every way. It was especially perfect for human habitation. Six times prior to this, it says, “And God saw that it was good.” Each time, it’s right after God has done something that will contribute to human flourishing, something that will make human life on earth better. God created this world in such a way that we would have literally everything we need, not only to survive but also to thrive and flourish. And that includes all those things God embedded within creation, the things that people would later come along and develop.
- So, are youth sports part of creation?
- If so, then what is God’s estimate of youth sports?

As a created reality—as part of creation—youth sports are “good.” They are intrinsically, inherently good. The stuff of which youth sports are made is good. At the same time, youth sports also serve a good purpose within creation. According to God’s creational design, youth sports exist to make human life on earth better, and they exist to glorify God. But do youth sports always make life on earth better, and do youth sports always glorify God? Why is that? It’s because of what happens in Genesis 3.

## The Fall

In Genesis 3, we come to the first major turning point of the drama, which segues into act 2. We call it the Fall. God’s enemy—Satan—tempts the first humans, and they

disobey God. At this point, sin enters the world. The corrupting effects of sin affect all human beings, and they also affect all of creation. We're not going to read all of Genesis 3, and I'm not going to retell the story. But I do want to point out the way sin spreads in Genesis 4-5. By the time we get to **Genesis 6:5**, it says this: **The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.**

What a contrast between that and what God sees in Genesis 1:31, where God looks at all he has made and sees that it is very good. Based on Genesis 6:5, we know that, from the time of Adam and Eve onward, every person is sinful. Over in the NT, the Apostle Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." There's not a single person on earth who's exempt from the effects of the fall. But, again, it's not just people. The Bible says creation is affected by the Fall.

**Romans 8:20-21** says creation was "subjected to frustration, not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it." It also says creation is "in bondage to decay."

- What's he talking about? In the back of Paul's mind is the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. In Genesis 3:17, God says to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you."
- So, because of human sin, creation is under a curse. That's what it means in Romans 8, when it says creation is "subjected to frustration" and "in bondage to decay." All creation is under a curse; all creation is affected by the fall.
- God created a perfect world. But, because of human sin, nothing in all creation is exactly the way it should be.
- Human beings still bear the image of God, but human beings are also fallen, corrupted by sin.
- Creation is still good, but it's also fallen; it's under a curse and corrupted by sin.

What does this have to do with youth sports?

- Who participates in youth sports?
- Are those people fallen and sinful?
- Are youth sports part of creation?
- As part of creation, are youth sports affected by the fall?

Do youth sports always make life on earth better? Do youth sports always glorify God? Why not? Because, even though youth sports are "good," they are part of a fallen creation and the people who participate in them are fallen human beings. God has a plan and a purpose for youth sports. They're supposed to make life on earth better, and they're supposed to glorify God. But, because of the Fall, youth sports often fall short or miss the mark of God's creational design for youth sports.

## Redemption

Thankfully, there's a third act: redemption. Jesus, the Redeemer, comes to earth. In the second major turning point of the drama, which segues into act 3, Jesus goes toe to toe with Satan and defeats Satan. When that happens, the ultimate outcome is decided. God wins. Full redemption is guaranteed. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God begins to bring healing and restoration. Redemption is here already, but redemption is not here fully. When Christ returns, full redemption will be here. No more Satan, no more sin, no more disease, death, or decay.

Right now, we're living in the in-between, where act 2 and act 3 overlap. We still have to deal with the realities of sin and the corrupting effects of the fall, but we also get to experience redemption now, in the form of a relationship with God through faith in Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

For me, what I'm about to say has been the hardest thing for me to wrap my head around, so hang with me. If we fast-forward to the very end of the book, in Revelation 20, we find God's enemy, Satan, thrown down, utterly vanquished. Right after that, it says even death is destroyed. At that point, we reach the final resolution of the original conflict that started in Genesis 3. Then, in the last two chapters of the Bible, we read about the new heavens and the new earth. We have this picture of creation that is fully redeemed and restored. There are no angels on clouds playing harps. Instead, we see the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Coming down to where? Earth! The picture of creation in Genesis is a garden. But, the picture of redemption here is a city. There are no cities at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation. And yet we find ourselves in a city at the end of Revelation. This implies that God's plan for redemption includes things human beings have developed over the years, as they have worked with what God created. It implies God intends to redeem and restore human cultural developments, including things like sports.

If this is true, then there may very well be sports in heaven or the new creation, and there's not going to be any sin. The Bible says creation will be free from the curse. Revelation 22:3 says, "No longer will there be any curse." So, all the things that have been under a curse—all creation—will be redeemed and fully restored. From that point on and for all eternity, everything will fulfill God's original, creational purpose and will function according to God's original, creational design.

If there are sports in heaven (the new creation), if there are youth sports in heaven (the new creation), they will be free from the curse of sin, fully redeemed and restored. They will function the way God always intended for them to function. They will make life in eternity better, and they will glorify God.

Again, this has been the hardest thing for me to wrap my head around, and yet I do believe it's faithful to the biblical portrait of redemption. The scope of God's redemptive plan includes not only the salvation of human souls but also the restoration of all creation. If youth sports are part of creation, then God's plan for redemption may very well include youth sports.

What difference does it make in the here and now?

- As we think about youth sports, our families' involvement with youth sports, the way we communicate with our kids about youth sports, the example we set related to youth sports, the environment we create for youth sports...
- As we think about literally every possible thing related to youth sports, we can imagine what this would look like if it were done God's way, according to God's design.
- What would youth sports look like without the corrupting effects of sin?
- And, then, we can ask, what would it take to begin bringing redemption to youth sports?

- I don't mean using sports as a platform for evangelism. That's fine, but that's not what I'm talking about here.
- Imagine what youth sports would look like without the corrupting effects of sin and the fall, and then start moving youth sports in that direction.
- When we do that, when we start bringing redemption to youth sports, we're literally bringing a little slice of heaven to earth.

***That's a lot, but I'll stop here and ask if you have any questions.***

Right now, we're about to watch a video by John O'Sullivan. John has become one of my favorite writers and speakers over the last year. He played high school, college, and professional soccer. He coached soccer at the high school level and the college level. He worked as a trainer for a professional soccer team. And all along the way, he's been involved in youth soccer. In 2012, he started an organization called the "Changing the Game Project," whose mission is to ensure that we return youth sports to our children and put the "play" back in "play ball." He's going to say this in the video, but he's not in favor of "everybody gets a trophy" just for showing up. I hope you'll enjoy his talk. I know I did.

***As you listen, be thinking about how to answer these questions:***

- 1) As he described youth sports, where did you see the "goodness of creation" shining through in youth sports?
- 2) What parts of his talk about youth sports could be understood in terms of the "image of God"? (human beings reflect who God is; human beings were created for community; human beings were created to fulfill God's purposes)
- 3) As he describes some of the problems associated with youth sports, how might we think about these in terms of "the Fall"?
- 4) What are John and his organization doing to contribute to the "redemption" of youth sports?

### **Video: Changing the Game in Youth Sports (14:01)**

<https://youtu.be/VXw0XGOVQvw>

(allow time for answers and discussion)

### **Using CFR as an Evaluative Lens**

So, what we just did was think about youth sports in terms of creation, fall, and redemption. The "big story" of the Bible. At the beginning and the end, everything is awesome. Everything is just right. Everything works the way God intends for it work all the time. There's no sin, no death, no pain, no frustration, no sickness, no hurt feelings over a bad performance, a bad call, or the outcome of a game... none of that. At the beginning and the end, everything is awesome.

But, in between, there's a whole lot of not-so-awesome because of the Fall. Sin messes everything up. It messes human beings up, and it messes all of creation up. Things aren't the way they're supposed to be... because of sin.

Jesus, the Redeemer, came to earth, went toe to toe with Satan and defeated Satan. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God started bringing healing and restoration, but full redemption—full restoration—will become a reality when Christ

returns. Right now, we're living in that in-between time, where act 2 and act 3 overlap. We get to experience redemption through faith in Christ, but we still have to deal with sin and the effects of the Fall. When Christ returns, that's when God will make everything right. Act 2 will be completely closed out, and act 3 will be reality for all eternity.

In the meantime, our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to allow Christ to start bringing redemption to youth sport through us by actively working—in the power of the Holy Spirit—to restore youth sports to their original purpose and design.

Youth sports exist, which means God is the Creator of youth sports. Youth sports are part of God's "good" creation. God has a plan, purpose, design for youth sports. As a created reality, youth sports are intended to contribute to human flourishing; they're supposed to make life better. And youth sports are supposed to glorify God. That is God's creational intent for youth sports.

So, again, our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to work—in the power of the Holy Spirit—to bring redemption to youth sports, to bring youth sports in light with God's plan, purpose, and design for youth sports, so that youth sports make life better and glorify God. The question is, "How do we do this, and where do we even start?"

## Lenses

- Slides of different "lenses"
- Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, said, "We see the world, not as it is, but as we are—or as we are conditioned to see it. When we open our mouths to describe what we see, we in effect describe ourselves, our perceptions, our paradigms."
- In other words, we all see the world through a set of lenses. Everything we experience in life, we filter through those lenses. A lot of times, we don't even realize we're doing it because it's second nature to us. But we're filtering and interpreting every experience through a set of lenses.
- The most common lens we filter things through is the lens of our own personal experiences.
- Madeleine Kunin, former governor of Vermont, said, "We see the world through the lens of all our experiences; that is a fundamental part of the human condition."
- At least for me, I'm always thinking back to my experiences with sports growing up, and I'm using that as a filter or lens to evaluate the experience my children are having. I'm always saying, "Well, when I was growing up, we did it this way." Do you ever do that?
- There's really no way to get away from filtering things through the lens of our own personal experiences, and that's okay.
- But what if we could add another lens to that? And what if we could consciously choose to use another set of lenses, when we look at youth sports?
- I have no idea who Renita Siqueira is, but I love what she said: "We see the world through the lenses we choose."
- On one hand, our own personal experiences with youth sports are inevitably going to affect how we understand youth sports, and our own experiences in life are inevitably going to affect our decision-making about youth sports.
- But, on the other hand, our own personal experience doesn't have to be the only set of lenses through which we filter our families' involvement with youth sports.



- God has given us the capacity to adopt another set of lenses and to view and filter youth sports through those lenses. We can do this with all aspects of life, but we're focusing on youth sports.
- And the lenses we're going to put on are the lenses of creation, fall, and redemption. We're taking this big picture story of the Bible, and we're using it as a set of lenses through which to filter and evaluate youth sports.
- I think you'll find the concept fairly easy to pick up on, but learning to do this on a consistent basis, well, like anything else in life, it takes practice to get good at it.
- We already did it with the John O'Sullivan video.

**So, let's start with the lens of Creation.**

- When we look at youth sports through creation-colored lenses, we're basically looking for goodness. We're looking for what's "good" about youth sports, or we're looking for places where the essential, inherent goodness of youth sports shines through.

What's good about youth sports? Where do we see the "goodness" of youth sports? There are two basic categories. The fancy words are intrinsic and extrinsic, and I'm going to try my best to explain.

It's easier to start with extrinsic and work back from there. We're talking about the external benefits that come as a result of being involved in sports. Good things that sports can produce.

In the interviews, I asked, "What's good or bad about youth sports?" Specifically, now, we're thinking about the extrinsic benefits, the positive benefits that can result from being involved in youth sports. You named a lot of these in the interviews.

(Allow time for them to answer; might supplement their answers with the following)

- Physical fitness
- Life lessons
- Socialization
- Self-esteem
- Family time / activity

These are all good things that can result from being involved in youth sports. They are part of the goodness of sports. These fall into the category of what we call "extrinsic" benefits. They're outcomes, byproducts of being involved in youth sports.

The other category is what we call "intrinsic value." When we talk about the "intrinsic value" of youth sports, we're looking for what's good about the experience itself. We're not thinking about a result or a byproduct. We're thinking strictly about the experience itself. What makes this experience good?

There are lots of extrinsic benefits that come from being involved in youth sports. But, even if all those things were removed from the equation, youth sports would still be good. The experience itself is inherently good. It has intrinsic value.

Shirl Hoffman compares it to the experience of going to a concert or eating at a fancy restaurant. He says, "Orchestras enrich our lives through the sense of listening and gourmet meals enrich through taste, just as sport enriches our lives through moving and watching. In the end, it is the experience that counts."

My wife and (female participant) went to a concert in Waco a few weeks ago. (Female participant), would you say that was a good, enriching experience? Would you say that experience was good primarily because of anything it produced or anything you learned from it? I'm going out on a limb here. I'm sure you and my wife walked away with a closer friendship because of the time you spent together. But even then, would that concert still have been a good, enriching experience if the social aspect was removed from the equation?

The point I'm trying to make is this: some things are just good. Something about the experience itself is just good. It has intrinsic value. Like art, or music, or theater, or fine dining. Their goodness isn't necessarily tied to their practical value. It's just an enjoyable, delightful, fulfilling, enriching experience.

Youth sports fall into the same category. Yes, there are positive benefits. Those positive benefits are good. The fact that youth sports can produce those positive benefits is part of God's creational design and intent for youth sports.

But, at the same time, even if you stripped all those away, youth sports would still be good... because the experience of playing sports is enjoyable, delightful, enriching, and fulfilling. Or at least it should be.

The key word there is "**playing**." What's the #1 reason kids play sports? Because it's fun. Playing is fun. It's enjoyable, delightful, fulfilling, and enriching. From a Christian perspective, the reason we enjoy playing, the reason we delight in playing, the reason play is a fulfilling and enriching experience is because God made us that way.

Micheal Shafer says this: "When we ignore the playfulness of sport, we fail to appreciate its fundamental quality and thereby do not experience sport in its fullest sense. The ability to play is an innate capacity given to us by God."

The intrinsic value of youth sports is directly tied to the experience of play. The play element of youth sports is what makes the experience delightful, enjoyable, fulfilling, and enriching for children. But what about the competitive element? You can't have sports without competition. We'll get to that. But there's one more thing I want to say about the intrinsic goodness of youth sports.

Youth sports are supposed to make life better AND glorify God. They make life better by producing all these extrinsic benefits and by giving us a wonderfully enriching experience. And that experience can also glorify God.

One of my favorite lines about sports is in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, which is based on a true story. Eric Liddell was Scottish. His parents were missionaries in China, and he also felt called to be a missionary in China. He tells his sister Jenny that he's going back to China. She's ecstatic. But, before he goes back to China, he's going to train and compete in the Olympics. She doesn't like that one bit. She feels like he's neglecting his true calling. Then Eric Liddell says this: "Jenny, you've got to understand. I believe that God made me for a purpose, for China. But he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give that up would be to hold him in contempt." Eric Liddell understood that his running glorified God. God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give that up would be to hold him in contempt.

I also think about a sign that hung on the bathroom wall at my in-laws' house. It said, "If God made you a duck, then be a duck. Swim fast and strong, and don't get bent out of shape if you waddle when you run."

Whether God made us a runner or a swimmer or a ball player or whatever... God is glorified in us when we exercise our God-given talents and abilities. That is also part of the intrinsic value of youth sports.

So, that's a look at youth sports through the lens of creation.  
Any questions?

**Video: Make youth sports more about fun (5:01)**

<https://youtu.be/CZ-vOEe8yK0>

Dr. David Geier is an orthopedic surgeon and sports medicine specialist. As you listen to him talk, be thinking about these 3 questions:

- 1) Where do you see the “goodness” of youth sports in what he’s saying?
- 2) Where do you see evidence of the fall in his description of youth sports?
- 3) In what ways do his recommendations contribute to the redemption of youth sports (making youth sports a wholesome, healthy, fulfilling, enriching experience for children)?

**Now, let's take a look at youth sports through the lens of the Fall.**

- When we look at youth sports through fall-colored lenses, we're looking for what's wrong with youth sports. We're looking for manifestations of the fall in youth sports, places where the fall affects and corrupts youth sports. We're looking for places where youth sports deviate from God's creational design or intent for youth sports.

Again, when I interviewed you, I simply asked, “What do you think is good or bad about youth sports?” But, as Christians, we really have a very specific framework for understanding good and bad, right and wrong. We understand it in terms of sin and the corrupting effects of the fall.

I always feel like I need to be careful when I talk about sin and the effects of the fall. Let me tell you right now what I don't mean. I am in no way suggesting that the bad things that happen in sports happen as a direct result of our personal sin or our children's sin. What I am saying is that we are broken, fallen human experience participating in a broken, fallen human experience, in a broken, fallen world.

When youth sports go bad, when the corrupting effects of the fall become apparent in youth sports, where do we see it more often: in the kids or in the adults? Most of you, when you started talking about the negatives, you mentioned things that had more to do with the adults than with children.

Interestingly enough, John O'Sullivan says the same thing. He believes the main thing wrong with youth sports is what he calls “adultification” of youth sports. That's when the adults who are close to the game—the parents and coaches—prioritize adult wants and adult values over the things children need and the things children value.

He says adultification is “creating a generation of burned out, beat down kids who walk away from sports.” What's the #1 reason kids play sports? Because it's fun. What percentage of kids walk away from sports by the age of 13? 70%. Why do they quit? Why do they walk away? Because it's not fun anymore. And, most of the time, it's not fun because it becomes more about the adults than the kids.

Adultification is when the adults who are close to the game—parents and coaches—put adult wants and adults values ahead of what children need and what children value.

So, let me ask you, where have you seen adults turn youth sports into a negative experience for kids?

- Things they've done?
- Things they've said?
- Ways they've organized a game or league?

Other than adult behaviors, what is some other evidence of the fall that we see in youth sports? (allow time for responses before moving on to...)

- Injuries
  - If this were a perfect world, no one would ever get hurt. We know that, in heaven, there will be no pain. But, in the here and now, we get hurt. Our kids get hurt. And that's all part of it.
  - Does the way they sustain those injuries matter?
  - For instance, you take a kid who gets hurt on a fluke play, an accidental injury, they twist their ankle rounding first or something like that. That's one kind of injury, and there's not much we can do about those. Those are called acute injuries.
  - But there's another type of injury called an "overuse injury." And those injuries are 100% preventable.

### **Video: How We Can Change Youth Sports Culture (14:23)**

<https://youtu.be/UrlPuRfoGdY>

Let's listen to Dr. Heather Bergeson, a pediatrician who specializes in youth sports injuries.

- 1) Where do you see the "goodness" of youth sports?
- 2) Where do you see evidence of the fall in youth sports?
- 3) What is she (and the Positive Coaching Alliance) doing to redeem youth sports, to make this a wholesome, healthy, fulfilling, enriching experience for children?

We've looked at youth sports through the lens of creation. We've looked at it through the lens of the fall.

### **Now, let's look at it through the lens of redemption.**

When we look at youth sports through redemption-colored lenses, we're basically asking, "What are we going to do about it?" What are we going to do, specifically, to redeem youth sports and bring it in line with God's creational design and intent for youth sports? What are we going to do to make sure youth sports are a healthy, wholesome, fulfilling, enriching experience for our children? To make sure youth sports make life better and glorify God? I'm going to start the conversation with two things about competition.

One of our great challenges, as adults, is keeping play and competition in balance. There is a play element in youth sports, and there is a competitive element in youth sports. And we have to keep these two things in balance.

The vast majority of the bad adult behavior stems from the competitive side of youth sports. If there weren't a competitive element, parents and coaches probably wouldn't get so riled up about it. But, at the same time, that competitive element is essential. It's what makes sports what they are. If there were no competitive element, we probably wouldn't bother.

So, we've got the play element, on one hand. And we've got the competitive element, on the other. One of our great challenges, as adults, is keeping those in balance.

- If the scales get tipped toward play, who's usually the one doing that: the kids or the adults?
- What happens when the scales get tipped to heavily towards play?
- If the scales get tipped more toward competition, who's usually the one doing that: the kids or the adults?
- What happens when the scales get tipped too heavily towards competition? We lose the joy.

One of our challenges, as adults, is keeping those two things in balance: play and competition.

The second thing is making sure we teach our children a good, healthy view of competition, a view of competition that is compatible with our Christian faith. We want our children to be exposed to competition. We want them to learn what it's like to win and lose. Because so much of life involves competition. But, as Christians, there is a way to compete that glorifies God, that doesn't compromise our Christian faith and Christian values. There's a way to compete that puts the glory of Christ on display. And then, there is a way to compete that doesn't.

Go back to Eric Liddell: "God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give that up would be to hold him in contempt." Eric Liddell competed in the 1924 Olympics, and in so doing glorified God. God made him fast, and he used that to glorify God by training his hardest and then going out there and being the absolute best runner that he could be. Even if he hadn't won the race, God would've still been glorified. With a healthy view of competition, our athletic endeavors glorify God.

The word "competition" literally means to strive *with* someone, rather than *against* someone. I want you to think about what that means for our view of competition. (Handout) In a healthy view of competition, we understand this is a partnership. We're partnering with each other to push one another to be the best we can be. The opposing team isn't an enemy that we must destroy; the other team is our partner. Without that other person or that other team, we couldn't have a competition.

In this view of competition, our primary goal is not to destroy the opposition. Our primary goal is to be the absolute best we can be, whether that's in track, or cross country, or baseball, or basketball, or golf, or tennis. It takes other people pushing us to bring out the best in us. And so we agree to push one another to be the absolute best that we can be in that sport. This view of competition is more about the pursuit of excellence than it is about winning or losing. If we train hard, go out there and give it our all, if we push the other team to play their best, and they push us to play our best, then, at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter as much who wins and who loses... because we both did our absolute best in the pursuit of excellence.

**Chris Evert** is one of the best female tennis players who ever lived. After she retired, a reporter asked her to think back over her career and recall her fondest match.

She thought about and told them about a match she lost to Martina Navratilova. Chris Evert had the best win-loss record of any professional tennis player, and yet she said that a match she lost was her favorite match. Why? Because in that match, she and Martina Navratilova pushed each other to further than they'd ever been pushed before. For Chris Evert, the fact that she lost the match didn't matter a whole lot in comparison to the way she played that day. She played better in that match than in any other match throughout her whole career.

It's all about where we place the emphasis in competition. If we place all the emphasis on winning, it's just a short step from there to "winning-at-all-costs," and the end justifies the means. Whatever it takes to win. You can play a horrible game, but as long as you win, it doesn't matter. Does that glorify God? You can cheat or use performance-enhancing drugs, but as long as you win without getting caught, it doesn't matter. But does that glorify God?

However, if we place the emphasis on giving it our all in the pursuit of excellence—the way Eric Liddell did—then we are putting our God-given talents and abilities on display in a way that glorifies God, regardless of the outcome of the game. We want to win, but, more than that, we want to be excellent at that sport. That's what it was about for Eric Liddell. He wanted to be the absolute best runner he could be for the glory of God.

So, the two big challenges we face, as adults are keeping play and competition in balance and making sure we teach our children a healthy view of competition that is compatible with our Christian faith, so that our children can go out there and compete for the glory of God.

I'm sure you've got some questions. (Allow time)

What else can we do to redeem youth sports?

What else can we do to maximize the essential goodness of youth sports and minimize the corrupting effects of the fall?

(Allow time for participant responses)

(Time did not allow for showing this video, but some participants said they watched it later)

### **Video: Sucking the Fun out of Youth Sports**

<https://youtu.be/KZnrEQ4T-YQ>

The last video we're going to watch together is by a guy named Mike Terson. Mike is a regular guy, but he's got a really unique background. He works for the Park District in Buffalo Grove, IL, a suburb of Chicago.

- 1) Where do you see the "goodness" of youth sports in what he's saying?
- 2) Where do you see evidence of the fall in his description of youth sports?
- 3) In what ways do his recommendations contribute to the redemption of youth sports (making youth sports a wholesome, healthy, fulfilling, enriching experience for children)?

## APPENDIX D

### Participant Listening Guide

#### **Equipping Christian Parents to Navigate the World of Youth Sports**

- I. Introduction
- II. Video: “Let’s Not Overcomplicate Our Kids’ Sports”
- III. Youth Sports in America & in Hamilton
- IV. Video: “The Truth about Sports Parents”
  - a. What are they trying to communicate in terms of what they need/want from their parents?
- V. Creation, Fall, and Redemption in Scripture
  - a. Creation
    - i. Genesis 1:1
      1. Albert Wolters: “In the biblical view, creation is everything which God has ordained to exist, what he has put in place as part of his creative workmanship... An almost unimaginable variety of objects, institutions, relationships, and phenomena are part of the rich texture of God’s creation.”
    - ii. Genesis 1:27-28
      1. Genesis 2:15 (work & take care of)
        - a. James Davison Hunter: “These active verbs convey God’s intention that human beings both develop and cherish the world in ways that meet human needs and bring glory and honor to him. In this creative labor, we mirror God’s own creative act and thus reflect our very nature as ones made in his image.”
    - iii. Genesis 1:31
  - b. The Fall
    - i. Genesis 6:5
    - ii. Romans 8:20-21
  - c. Redemption
    - i. Revelation 21-22
  - d. Q&A
- VI. Video: “Changing the Game in Youth Sports” (O’Sullivan)
  - a. General comments/feedback
  - b. As he described youth sports, where do you see the “goodness of creation” shining through in youth sports?
  - c. As he describes some of the problems associated with youth sports, how might we think about these in terms of “the Fall”?

- d. What are John and his organization doing to contribute to the “redemption” of youth sports?
- VII. Through the lens of Creation
  - a. Extrinsic Benefits
  - b. Intrinsic Value
    - i. Shirl J. Hoffman: “Orchestras enrich our lives through the sense of listening and gourmet meals enrich through taste, just as sport enriches our lives through moving and watching. In the end, it is the experience that counts.”
    - ii. Micheal Shafer: “When we ignore the playfulness of sport, we fail to appreciate its fundamental quality and thereby do not experience sport in its fullest sense. The ability to play is an innate capacity given to us by God
- VIII. Video: “Make Youth Sports More about Fun” (Geier)
  - a. General comments/feedback
  - b. Where do you see the “goodness” of youth sports in what he’s saying?
  - c. Where do you see evidence of the fall in his description of youth sports?
  - d. In what ways do his recommendations contribute to the redemption of youth sports (making youth sports a wholesome, healthy, fulfilling, enriching experience for children)?
- IX. Through the lens of the Fall
  - a. Adultification of youth sports
  - b. Other ways adults have turned youth sports into a negative experience
  - c. Other evidence of the Fall?
- X. Video: “How We Can Change Youth Sports Culture” (Bergeson)
  - a. General comments/feedback
  - b. Where do you see the “goodness” of youth sports?
  - c. Where do you see evidence of the fall in youth sports?
  - d. What is she (and the Positive Coaching Alliance) doing to redeem youth sports, to make this a wholesome, healthy, fulfilling, enriching experience for children?
- XI. Through the lens of Redemption
  - a. Two great challenges
    - i. Keeping play and competition in balance
    - ii. Maintaining a healthy view of competition
  - b. What else can we do to redeem youth sports?
- XII. Video: “Sucking the Fun out of Youth Sports” (Terson)
  - a. General comments/feedback
  - b. Where do you see the “goodness” of youth sports in what he’s saying?
  - c. Where do you see evidence of the fall in his description of youth sports?
  - d. In what ways do his recommendations contribute to the redemption of youth sports (making youth sports a wholesome, healthy, fulfilling, enriching experience for children)?



	<i>Healthy Competition</i>	<i>Not-so-healthy Competition</i>
<i>Deep/Root Metaphor</i>	Partnership	War/Battle
<i>View of Opponent</i>	Enabler/Partner	Enemy/Obstacle
<i>Motivation</i>	Love of the game (Intrinsic motivation)	Use of the game (Extrinsic motivation)
<i>Goals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning/Mastery</li> <li>• Pursuit of Excellence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domination/Conquest</li> <li>• Pursuit of Superiority</li> </ul>
<i>Focus</i>	Process (Contesting)	Outcome (Winning)
<i>Focus of Sportspersonship</i>	Fair, respectful, safe play	Literal rule obedience (unless excused by informal norms)
<i>View of Rules</i>	Imperfect guides to fairness and welfare	Partially tolerated restraints
<i>View of Officials</i>	Contest facilitators	Opponents
<i>Emotional Tone</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive emotions predominate</li> <li>• Play and seriousness in balance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative emotions predominate</li> <li>• Seriousness crowds out play</li> </ul>
<i>Whose interests are served?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual interest</li> <li>• The “common good”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-interest</li> <li>• The good of the victor</li> </ul>
<i>Ideal Contest</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balanced opposition</li> <li>• Tension, drama, story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dominated contest</li> <li>• Certainty</li> </ul>

### **Bonus Material**

#### **R.O.O.T.S. – We respect the:**

R – Rules: don’t bend the rules to win

O – Opponents: A worthy opponent is a gift that forces us to play to our highest potential

O – Officials: We treat officials with respect, even when we disagree

T – Teammates: We never do anything that would embarrass our team on or off the field

S – Self: We live up to our own standards, regardless of what others do

#### **E.L.M. Tree of Mastery**

Effort ... you put in

Learning ... new skills

Mistakes ... are essential to master your sport and improve

### **Helpful Links**

- [www.positivecoach.org](http://www.positivecoach.org)
- [www.changingthegameproject.com](http://www.changingthegameproject.com)
- [www.ilovetowatchyouplay.com](http://www.ilovetowatchyouplay.com)
- [www.aspenprojectplay.org](http://www.aspenprojectplay.org)
- [www.activeforlife.com](http://www.activeforlife.com)
- <https://philvischer.com/blog/the-death-of-play/>

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