



# Editorial



## Matthew van Duyvenbode

Matthew van Duyvenbode is Head of Advocacy at Bible Society. Over the past year or so, he has been responsible for preparing a range of biblical resources and initiatives to help mark the 2012 Games. For more information about how Bible Society is responding to the Olympic and Paralympic Games, visit [www.biblesociety.org.uk/2012](http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/2012)

Get on your marks for this no-punches-pulled sports edition of *The Bible in Transmission*. As Britain prepares for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, you're invited to take a timeout to focus our attention on the parallels between sport and the Bible.

If you've ever tried to examine this relationship before, you'll recognise that the biblical material directly alluding to sport is scarce. In selecting the articles that make up this edition, we've tried to build a team of contributors who reflect a wide breadth of Christian involvement with sport, and who think creatively about the parallels between sport and the Bible. These contributors have demonstrated skill in drawing on the limited amount of directly applicable biblical material, and show a maturity of approach that recognises the need for a considered hermeneutic when handling a paucity of scriptural texts.

In our work advocating for the vital place of the Scriptures in the public square, Bible Society have highlighted four key 'drivers' of culture: arts, media, education and politics. Whilst not identifying sport as a key driver of culture per se, we recognise that it has immense significance for a large proportion of our wider culture, and has an ability to gather, inspire and motivate – a conclusion celebrated in the following essays.

In our opening piece on sport and the Protestant work ethic, Dominic Erdozain gives a helpful overview of the complicated relationship between sport and Christianity. Using examples from the development of muscular Christianity as well as notable contemporary sportsmen, Erdozain argues that sport has become valorised by the intensity of seriousness with which the player approaches

their participation. This phenomenon extends beyond the scope of professional sports, where, 'culture is a badge of identity and sophistication, and sports are pursued with an intensity that mirrors rather than balances the demands of the workplace'. This results in the ironic situation where the player hardly plays at all.

What, then, should be an appropriate response of the Christian when sport is experienced as a gruelling struggle to define one's identity? Erdozain draws on the work of Robert Johnston to suggest that rather than rejecting sport outright as spurious or unimportant, one should draw on the 'final attitude' of the preacher in Ecclesiastes. 'A Christian approach to sport', he suggests, 'might be one that relativises its importance, without trivialising it – perhaps even rattling the cage to show that it is just a cage ... whilst honouring its virtues.'

In his brief historical overview of the Church's relationship with sport, David Oakley identifies the inherent challenge which arises when 'morality has become confused with money values and "winning at all costs" seems to have replaced "sporting spirit"'. Identifying the early twentieth century as a period of disconnection between the Church and the sporting world, Oakley presents a mandate for re-engagement.

Oakley paints a sweeping vision of the potential that sport can offer the Church, demonstrating that sport is an international social phenomenon, providing a universal 'language of movement' recognised by governments and world organisations. Sport – Oakley argues – can be seen as both a microcosm of life, and as a method of experiential learning. He points to Paul's use of sporting metaphors to

illustrate principles for his audience as a prototype of how the Christian community can also effectively use sport as a tool for communication. Noting that sport is a growing phenomenon, Oakley identifies the 'sense of enjoyment that is experienced in playing or in watching others play that is part of the appeal of sport for many people'.

Looking behind sport to the fundamental question of the place of the human body in Christian thought, Synthia Sydnor explores the issue of femininity, sport, mission and dignity in her expansive essay, 'Sport, Women and the Mystical Body of Christ'. Sydnor begins by identifying sport and the body as 'emblems of society: they mirror shifting societal practices, beliefs, fears, ideals and norms relative to historical and cultural contexts'.

Sydnor critiques a secular cultural studies agenda which, in her view, would seek to mimic a predefined masculine agenda in sport, and re-examines the issue of women in sport in the light of Pope John Paul II's 'Theology of the Body'. Embracing a theological standpoint which celebrates the unique contribution of femininity allows Sydnor both to point to 'the genius of woman', and to expound John Paul II's understanding of all humanity being symbolised as somewhat feminine in respect to the Bridegroom, Christ. For Sydnor, then, a reconceptualisation of sport is possible where sportswomen don't seek simply to emulate sportsmen, but to re-imagine sport in terms of beauty, asceticism, efficiency and folk tradition.

Nick Watson offers a different lens through which to re-imagine the relationship of the body, sport and theology in his compelling essay on the prophetic contribution of the Special Olympics. Whilst praising the achievements of the Paralympic movement, from which have emerged many role models for non-disabled and disabled persons alike, Watson points to the lack of equivalent recognition for those participating in the world's largest organisation for persons with intellectual disabilities.

Watson highlights the motif of power through weakness found particularly in the Pauline letters. In identifying existing power structures within sport as corruptions of the neutral concepts of success, status and winning, Watson states: 'I fiercely champion the *potential* good of sport but also argue the case that the *institution* of professional commercialised sport is one edifice in the modern tower of Babel.'

Drawing on the work of Wolf Wolensberger, Watson proceeds to identify three prophetic signs of the contribution that those with intellectual disability can make to the wider sporting culture, namely that the visibility of the Special Olympic community is growing; that non-disabled and disabled persons share their lives together; and that disabled people are 'gentling' others. Watson concludes by reflecting on the notion of solidarity within our largest sporting events, agreeing with Jean Vanier that 'we have to look at the poorest and the weakest. They have a message to give us.'

Andrew Parker and J Stuart Weir's essay explores in greater detail a concept which is referred to in many of

the other essays in this edition of *Transmission* – muscular Christianity. Tracing its routes back to the English Public School system, and identifying it with the birth of modern sport in the nineteenth century, the authors describe muscular Christianity as 'a term encapsulating notions of spiritual, moral and physical purity', whilst suggesting that 'in reality muscular Christianity had at its root a range of ethical concerns'.

Parker and Weir follow the impact of muscular Christianity on sport, and the Protestant church's relationship both with sport and social issues over the course of the next 150 years. Recognising the twentieth-century institutional disconnection with sport which has been referred to elsewhere, the writers identify the 1980's as a pivotal period, both as a crisis point in ministry without 'involvement in what was the most popular leisure choice for young people', and yet also a time of flourishing beginnings with the growth of Christians in Sport and other such ministries here in the UK.

The historical analysis leaves room for both encouragement and questions, with the authors pointing to the challenging 'moral dissonance' which secular sporting provision often promotes – a far cry from the muscular Christianity which the authors see as fundamental in the development of contemporary understandings of sport.

Our final contribution to this edition is an account of Chris Rose's founding involvement with the Street Child World Cup (SCWC). Developed in 2010 in response to the harsh treatment of street children in Durban at the time of the football World Cup, SCWC has become a symbol of social justice challenging the kind of immorality described by our other contributors.

Rose describes the perception change that an initiative such as SCWC can effect: 'The inaugural SCWC's aim was to challenge the negative perceptions and treatment of street children and also allow the participants to recognise their potential and see themselves as agents of change. To see the children walk out in their national strips, to laugh and sing together yet having no shared languages, was so powerful.'

As Rose concludes his account by sharing the ongoing challenges and potential for growth that the SCWC have in advance of Rio 2014, it's a salutary opportunity to reflect on this summer's sporting events as an equally significant moment to engage with our culture in whatever way we can. Perhaps it might be through social justice, or through provision of recreational space. Maybe it could be in association with a sports mission organisation. Or it could be a chance to think about creating more opportunities for individuals to flourish no matter what their gender or ability.

However you might choose to respond, our hope is that this edition of *Transmission* will help you to consider the scriptural and wider theological implications of sport alongside the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.