

Violence in sports (David W T Brattston)

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Do Christians really disobey Christ's command to "turn the other cheek" and "resist not evil" when they participate in or watch fistfights and returning blow for blow with a consenting partner for the purposes of play or show? What come first to mind are "extreme" or "ultimate" fighting, and brawls in the course of an ice hockey game. All Christians abide by moral standards when interacting with family, co-workers, friends, and the general public. Does God permit us to suspend interpersonal ethics for sports?

The actions remain sinful, according to three Christian sources close in time, culture, and spirit to Jesus. What is a sin when done against a person's will remains a sin when done for the amusement of an audience. These ancient Christian sources are valuable to us because they record Christian thought not far removed from the apostles and preserve Christ's unwritten preaching and Bible interpretations and thus indicate how the original Christian teaching was understood by the audience in whose culture and milieu it was originally meant to

be understood. They also reveal that violence in sports is not a recent phenomenon or problem.

In the middle of the second century AD the church father Tatian denounced many facets of contemporary culture because they violated basic Christian values. Although the two authors probably did not know of each other's existence, Tertullian in the closing years of the same century voiced antipathy toward violence in sport and its effect on spectators.

Nonfatal fights for entertainment of an audience were discountenanced because of (1) the attitudes and impact on the participants, (2) the socio-economic structure that fostered such shows, and (3) the effects on the spectators. All three apply in today's world.

Even consensual fighting manifests a sinful attitude, wrote Tertullian. It betrays the Christian principles of loving one's enemy, turning the other cheek, offering no resistance when struck, and refraining from repaying blow for blow in revenge. Such fighting for show, especially bare-knuckle boxing, physically disfigures the participants, marring a human body that was created in the image of God, and thus virtually marring God's image as well. Tertullian especially referred to calloused fists, cauliflower ears, and permanent scars resulting from cuts inflicted in the course of the "show".

The bodily wounds are not really voluntary. Tatian revealed that wealthy promoters manipulated men into participating in their own physical and spiritual mutilation. Participants were economically forced to barter themselves away by entrepreneurs who treated both them and violence itself as commodities to be bought and sold.

In Canada today, players detest hitting or maiming their opponents, either out of human compassion or because they may be assaulted in retaliation. The National Hockey Players Association asks team owners to inflict heavy penalties on aggressors, but many owners believe violence attracts fans and therefore money. Some owners threaten to fire players inclined to more peaceful ways. After all, team owners are usually businessmen who promote hockey only as a way of enriching themselves, and violent games enrich them more.

Judging by the length at which both church fathers wrote, their main grievance was with the internal and external behaviour of spectators. Some sports cause crowds to grossly violate the Christian virtues of peace, tranquility, moderation in emotions, and admiration for civilized pursuits. Tatian observed that fighters are

rewarded not for acts of virtue but for acts of violence and discord, the winner being the one who excels in inflicting blows.

Tertullian described the effects on spectators at great length. Although God enjoins us to be calm, gentle, quiet and peaceful, and not to vex Him with anger, rage or ill-nature, the shows by design promote rivalry, and

where you have rivalry, you have rage, bitterness, wrath, and grief, with all bad things which flow from them—the whole entirely out of keeping with the religion of Christ. For even suppose one should enjoy the shows in a moderate way, as befits his rank, age or nature, still he is not undisturbed in mind, without some unuttered movings of the inner man. No one partakes of pleasures such as these without their strong excitements; no one comes under their excitements without their natural lapses.

It is hypocrisy, said Tertullian, for people who say they are followers of the Prince of Peace to delight in and cheer acts of violence. The same would probably apply to some video games today, where simulated violence and killing may breed an appetite for violence in spectator events.

Foreshadowing today's riots among soccer fans, Tertullian pointed to the public disorders resulting from "the hostile collisions of rival parties", which Christians even today deplore in non-athletic situations. Clement of Alexandria opined that senseless expenditure of money on such shows and the riots resulting from them are simply not "sport". Although the Olympic games were popular then, they were inexpensive by today's standards, without millions or billions of dollars thrown away for a few weeks' entertainment.

Well-travelled in the eastern Roman empire and highly educated in the classics, Clement of Alexandria held different views on Graeco-Roman culture than our other two authors, but generally agreed with them as regards violent spectator sports. Dean of the world's foremost Christian educational institution in the A.D. 190s, he sought to make Christianity acceptable and appealing to Greek intellectuals and educated pagans in general. He made it his mission to show that Christianity was compatible with and actually surpassed Graeco-Roman moral values even by their own standards.

In a detailed compendium of instructions for the Christian life, Clement would allow Christians only participant sports—and even then only with strict limits. The purpose of athletics was not to be entertainment or glory but physical exercise and building healthy bodies and souls "when this is done without dragging a man away

from better employments". To attain a golden mean and balance in life, Clement recommended walking, playing handball, reading aloud, and performing one's own housekeeping and other personal labour instead of relying on servants. He praised the ancient Greek king who turned a mill for physical exercise in the days before machinery. Clement even allowed wrestling for males (but not females), providing the motive was to exert the muscles and did not involve craftiness, showiness, or glory-seeking, in short, anything done for the sake of onlookers or out of competitiveness instead of for one's own bodily improvement.

How are we to reconcile Clement on the one hand with Tatian and Tertullian on the other so that they harmonize and provide guidance in the twenty-first century, in order to reflect in our own era the Christianity of the time when the utterances of Christ and the apostles were still fresh in Christian memories? First, we must remember that we accept the guidance of the church fathers only on the basis of a wide consensus of many authors and not on the personal opinions of one or two. Second, much of Tatian's and Tertullian's rationales relate to excesses such as rioting and violence and its effect on spectators, while Clement would allow only participant sports. In modern terms, they and other early Christian authors would be disgusted at the violent disturbances among spectators that mar many soccer matches and fights among players of ice hockey, but not road hockey among neighbourhood boys.

How should we twenty-first-century Christians regard violence at sporting matches when the Bible and most of the consensus of the apostolic tradition say nothing against peaceful games that provide harmless and innocent exercise? The answer is by heeding and putting into practice the many injunctions in Scripture and tradition to be peaceful and peaceable, e.g. Romans 12.18, 2 Corinthians 13.11, Hebrews 12.14 and James 3.17. Second Peter 3.14 even exhorts Christians to be zealous for peace. This is in addition to the many biblical and early-post-biblical exhortations to gentleness, meekness and peace generally.

The sum of the ancient wisdom is to *participate* in sports, and then only for beneficial exercise, rather than delight in violence among athletes or embroil oneself in excessive emotions while watching a game.

Fortunately, there has been a backlash among players, spectators, governments, and the general public. Both Canada and Britain have appointed commissions to investigate violence on the part of ice hockey players and soccer spectators. Rules of the game have been changed, equipment redesigned, and structural alterations to sports arenas made to lessen or prevent violence. However, there remains in full force the philosophy that fighting brings money, and winning and profits are the

sole considerations for any game. The only sure way to halt these evils is a change of heart in people, a repentance, a heeding of the tradition preserved by the early fathers to return to the ways of the Prince of Peace. Perhaps members of the Apostleship of Prayer can protest to team owners, individual players, and presidents of fan clubs with the same persistence they now pray for the Pope's intentions; and, of course, pray to God that the violence end.

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