

Church-Sponsored Recreation

A look at “Sport’s Ministry”

Intro: As you might well imagine, all kinds of mail comes to our church mail box containing promotions for all sorts of things—literature, furniture for the meeting place, ideas for “ministries” of about every kind you can imagine. A few weeks ago a promotion came from a company called “Upward Unlimited”. In short, the company offers to train us in establishing a “sports ministry” through which they suggest churches such as ourselves may “reach the lost”. They desire to partner with churches to reach their communities for Christ “through Basketball, Cheerleading, and Soccer programs” conducted by local churches.

This mailing raises an interesting question that congregations ought to evaluate carefully and Scripturally. To what extent should churches be involved in providing such activities (organization and/or funding), even when wholesome and recreational? Is it valid to use such activities to create an opportunity for evangelism? Would the end justify the means?

Most of us would surely be aware that virtually all religious groups have answered these questions with a resounding “yes”. Let’s take a few moment to evaluate these questions.

First some more information about “Sports Ministries”

What is the objective?

Clearly stated the objective is to create an environment where children can enjoy sports in a non-competitive environment and through them learn lessons of moral value and supposedly be led to accept Christ. This activity then provides an opportunity to involve children and their parents in the other “ministries” of the churches providing the sports activities.

As an evidence of the possible “success” of such efforts they report how that “in the 2002-2003 season more than 200,000 boys and girls will participate in the Upward programs across the United States. A minimum of 225,000 family members will attend Upward events. And over 185,000 volunteers will come together in nearly 1,000 churches of different denominations to share the gospel with these children and their families.” Moreover they indicate that last year “more than 20,000 participants made a first-time decision to “accept Christ” in Upward ministries across the United States”.

How does it work?

I wondered how exactly the gospel would be taught to children and adults in such an environment.

The answer was that children would be taught “through scripture-based devotions” and spectators through “halftime testimonials each week”.

And why this approach?

John Garner of Life Way Christian Resources answers: “Reaching a post-modern culture takes using all the tools at our disposal. Traditional tools (asking someone to a Bible study, crusade evangelism, door to door evangelistic visits, etc.) are in many places, not effective as they once were. People pass by our churches every day and ignore us because they don’t see the relevance of the church or what the church has to offer in their lives. To them, the Christian life is one of rules, no fun, and something that does not relate to their work, family or leisure....that is why recreation and sports ministry works”.

But consider this additional reason why such efforts are necessary and desirable according to Dr. Howard Batson, author of “Common-Sense church Growth”: “More families select their church based upon the desire and wishes of their children than on any other determining factor-even more than theological concerns. While this is a poor prioritizing of the selection criteria, it is a reality churches must address. Congregations desiring to grow must recognize the power of children as decision makers and design their ministries in such a way that preschool, children, and youth programs are top priorities.”

What shall we say to these things?

I am sure that many churches will embrace this approach to “reach the unchurched” just as they have embraced every other “ministry” that has come down the pike. Already, churches throughout the land have spent millions each year financing gymnasiums, ball fields, recreation equipment, and “fun activities”, and devoted countless hours organizing such efforts. But the question of key importance is, is it right? Is it Christ’s will for the church? And to that we must give an emphatic “no!” Consider these points: There is no Biblical authority for the church to provide recreation for children or adults.

In the NT we see Christians joining together and jointly financing work to which they all had an equal obligation as disciples of the Lord. This led them to provide for these activities:

Assemblies for the purpose of worshipping God and receiving instruction in the word (1 Cor. 14), and planning its work (Ac. 14).

Proclamation of the word resulting in salvation of souls and the spiritual growth of believers (Ac. 11 & 13)

Benevolent assistance of needy saints among them and needy churches around them (Ac. 4 & 11)

Christians were never commanded to assemble to play ball nor to provide such activities for others nor is there any Biblical precedent for it as a part of the church’s work.

Instead we see that Christians were forbidden to assume responsibility for the peculiar obligations of the individual disciples (1 Tim. 5:16).

It is the responsibility of parents to meet the social and recreational needs of their children (1 Tim. 5:8). (Perhaps part of the reason why many church members are willing to support "sport's ministry" is the convenience it provides to parents to have someone else plan and provide the recreation of their children.) Since providing recreation is the work of the home, we conclude that teaching sports or providing the facilities for such is not authorized by the NT church for the local congregation.

But someone may object: But our purpose is not merely to let the church stand in the place of believing parents but instead our efforts are to be seen as a means to an end, to gather crowds for evangelism. By providing a service to non-believers, we create an opportunity for teaching.

There is no Biblical authority (or precedent) for using carnal appeals to gather crowds for spiritual instruction.

Jesus surely could have invited all of Galilee to a "fish dinner" in which he hoped to discuss some OT Scriptures as they ate. His miraculous powers could have been used in astounding ways to entertain the crowds. And then in between stunts he could have taught them some gospel principles. If he could do this, why did not do this? His inactivity suggests His will!

But again someone may object: But did Jesus not offer loaves and fish to the masses?

The two occasions of his feeding the masses were clearly acts of mercy to those who have already shown spiritual interest and who are in need of food for the journeys they must make.

But consider these points from John 6:

Jesus rebuked the crowds for seeking to fulfill natural hunger and for missing the spiritual message of his miraculous signs.

Jesus deliberately repelled the crowds with a discourse in which he taught himself to be the bread of life. The thousands following for material benefits were repelled and withdrew! Did Jesus not know that this would happen? Or was it a calculated error on His part?

The NT churches were certainly capable of providing all the recreational lures of Roman society to gather a crowd for spiritual instruction (games, circuses, etc.); but not a single evidence of it exists in Scripture or the early history of the church. If they could and didn't, doesn't this presume that they also considered it either unscriptural or unwise?

There is an inherent contradiction in this approach.

Carnal appeals by nature bring together carnal people! Yet somehow we imagine that if we can get carnal people together we can make them interested in spiritual things through a quickie testimonial or a 2-minute devotional!

The gospel is intended to reach a certain kind of mindset! (1 Cor. 2:14). Spiritual appeals by nature bring together spiritual people! Would not a spiritual appeal to the masses afford the best opportunity to find out who is seeking God and the needs of the spirit and eliminate those who do not?

The concept that the end justifies the means leads to logical absurdity. If indeed we can provide sports as a means of drawing a crowd, then we are at liberty to provide any other attraction that carnal men may attend.

One could just as well imagine a "food" ministry in which unbelievers come to a church-provided restaurants where the waiters quote Bible verses between courses. We could sponsor concerts where between numbers Bible messages could be read or Bible tracts given out at the end of the performance.

Such an approach logical leads to the concept that the church is nothing more than a provider of secular services in the hopes of influencing a few people spiritually through them!

Such efforts will always raise doubt behind the motivation of those who are "converted".

If we consciously mix the spiritual and carnal, using one as the occasion to promote the other, how will we know to what extent those who come on board are there for the great spiritual benefits to which the gospel calls us or whether they are there for the next game or the next meal?

And what implications would this have for a churches' future?

Even if such efforts were lawful they would be terribly inexpedient.

They involve a tremendous waste of time, personnel and resources

It would be hard to imagine the countless man hours and the millions of dollars invested in such projects, all of which is done in order to create minutes of "devotions" and "testimonials".

It is inexpedient to finance such things when those who would go and teach the masses cannot find the needed support to fulfill the great commission.

It might be reasonably argued that the atmosphere of sports provides the poorest environment for spiritual instruction.

Building faith requires:

An atmosphere of spiritual inquiry

Appeal to the Scripture

Time for sober reflection upon truth presented

A sports ministry can supply none of these:

The condition of the heart in competitions and light hearted activities is unsuitable to the spiritual nature of the gospel message. How is the heart focused on goals, points, and competition prepared to hear that Jesus died for our sins?

No one brings a Bible to a ball game.

The efforts to teach appear to be a minor time component in terms of the whole activity. How does a two-minute testimonial at half-time lead people to obey the Lord?

Such efforts reflect a misunderstanding of how faith itself is produced.

The scriptures clearly show us that faith is produced through the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 10:17).

No person has ever come to believe in Jesus Christ through a baseball, basketball or soccer game, no matter how much fun or excitement it generated.

If our goal is to build faith, why not simply do that to begin with!

The approach reverses the natural leadership commanded in the Scripture.

The decision as to where a family should attend church does not and should not belong to the children in a family but to the proper leaders of the home, the parents.

To make such a decision based on the whims of children would be to abrogate the very spiritual leadership fathers and mothers are to provide their family (Eph. 6:4).