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## **CHRIST AND SPORT: REAPPROPRIATING H. RICHARD NIEBUHR'S CHRIST AND CULTURE TYPOLOGY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

What is the relationship between Christ and sport? In this article I unpack five types of responses that Christians have offered to this question and examine how they correspond to the five approaches described in H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work *Christ and Culture*. The primary goal is to offer a helpful heuristic to make sense of how Christians can think about sport. The article begins by clarifying two framing problems—one theological, one philosophical—that underlie the discussion. It then proceeds to describe the five types and the ways they are reflected in theological literature on sport.

*Keywords: Niebuhr, typology, interpretivism, sport*

### **Introduction**

Sport is one of the most loved—and loathed—dimensions of modern culture. Indeed, modern sport is a complex and multifaceted reality that invites a number of diverging responses. This raises several questions. How does one begin to relate sport and faith? What might a theological assessment look like? In particular, what is the relationship between Christ and the values embedded in the complex phenomena of contemporary sport?

In this article I unpack five types of responses that Christians have offered to these questions, and examine how they correspond to the five approaches described in H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work *Christ and Culture* (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951).<sup>1</sup> The primary goal is to offer a helpful heuristic for beginning to make sense of how Christians can think about sport. While doing justice to the complexity of the issues and the nuances of the authors I discuss would require more than a brief article, I trust that these rough sketches and preliminary conclusions will be helpful to readers who are new to these questions, and perhaps provide some clarification for those who are already familiar.

### **Enduring Problems**

H. Richard Niebuhr observed that Christians throughout history have responded to culture in different ways, and he outlined five distinct approaches or *types* of responses to culture. Before we examine these types and seek to provide some context to their relationship

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<sup>1</sup>A previous article (Wittmer, 2008) worked to translate *Christ and Culture* to sport. Smith, Johnson, and Hiller (2012) also briefly outline four of Niebuhr's types in relation to sport competition. However, the papers do not include the "enduring problem" or the actual expression of these types within the literature.

with sport, we first need to clarify two framing problems—one theological, one philosophical—that underlie the current discussion.

The theological problem is often referred to as “the enduring problem” (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951). Niebuhr saw that a fundamental question for Christians is how faithfulness to Christ relates to its engagement with the world. While Niebuhr construed the problem primarily in terms of Christology (addressing the relationship between “Christ” and “culture”), he also identified five underlying questions or “polarities” that frame the problem (Yeager, 2009). The questions address the following issues.

1. Epistemology: What is the relationship between reason and revelation, or natural and revealed law?
2. God’s relationship to the world: How are nature and grace, or creation and redemption, related?
3. Relationship of sin to goodness: How, and to what extent, does sin affect creation?
4. Relationship between law and gospel: How do morality and grace fit together?
5. The church’s relationship to the world: How should Christians engage with society and culture?

These questions are deeply interconnected, and Niebuhr presents his five types as common patterns of responses to these five questions.

The second, and related, problem belongs to the field of sport philosophy. Here, the problem of epistemology—of how we can identify sporting norms and values—has caused significant scholarly debate (Kretchmar, 2007, 2015; Morgan, 2004, 2012, 2020; Russell, 1999, 2004; Simon, 2000, 2004). On one end of a spectrum, we find the internalists, who interpret the values and norms of sport as autonomous from those of culture, and internal to sport. They often appeal to the rules of sport (i.e., formalism) or a shared human nature as the source of these values. On the other end of the spectrum, externalists or conventionalists see the values and norms of sport as merely reflecting and reinforcing the values of the society of which it is a part. As an example, consider the pursuit of competitive excellence. Is this intrinsic to sport, or is this an expression of the preferences and desires of particular societies?

This internalism/externalism debate is in many ways a question of nature versus nurture. Internalist approaches may fail to appreciate the historically conditioned dimensions of sport, interpreting as “natural” (and therefore inevitable and justifiable) what are the products of the people and culture that created the sport (and could therefore be different from what they are). On the other hand, externalist approaches—which are often more critical and frequently employ postmodern deconstruction—may fail to make sense of the relative durability or consistency of sport across times and cultures. They may also lack normative resources, resembling a form of ethical relativism (at least insofar as they do not appeal to nature). In response to these weaknesses, scholars of sport philosophy have tended to locate themselves between the two poles, an area described as *interpretivism* or *broad internalism*. This approach seeks to identify and analyze both internal and external factors at play in the world of sport.

In both the theological and philosophical problems related to sport, then, we find responses existing along a spectrum, with opposing answers at the two ends and a range of other perspectives (median responses) somewhere between them. This is not a coincidence, but points to the interconnectedness of these two problems. Indeed, epistemology—the question of how we know—often operates as the defining polarity within Niebuhr’s typology, being framed between a “new law” (*Christ against*) type similar to externalism, and a “natural law” (*Christ of*) type similar to internalism (H. R. Niebuhr, pp. xliii-xlviii).

## **Niebuhr's Five Types in Relation to Sport**

### **Two Extreme Types**

These first two types mark the outer poles of Niebuhr's typology and offer mirror opposite responses to the problem of Christ and culture. Placing them next to each other can help us better understand the tensions at play, as well as their relation to the median responses of the subsequent three types.

### **Christ against Sport**

This first type is defined by the fundamental antithesis it posits between Christ and culture. It tells the story of Jesus in terms of a clash of kingdoms: Jesus's kingdom in opposition and resistance to the kingdoms of the world. Followers of Christ are given a new and peculiar identity within a world that is subject to the powers of darkness. They are members of a new order, faithful to a new king who achieved the victory of his upside-down kingdom through an act of self-giving love. As such, they live according to a new law, appealing to the Sermon on the Mount—particularly its non-violence—and Christ's command to carry a cross. They reject the value structures and practices of culture and pronounce a prophetic indictment against its numerous idols and corruptions.

In this type, Christians are confronted with an either-or choice between obedience to Christ or to the false powers of culture. The Christian may participate in culture where such obedience is possible, but the perversions of culture often complicate such faithfulness and require withdrawal from culture. Separate from culture, the church exists as counter-cultural alternative: a prophetic community in which believers live as exiles and sojourners in faithful witness to Jesus's kingdom.

In its evaluation of sport, this type tends in the externalist direction. It challenges sport where it expresses and embodies values antithetical to Christ and reflects the wider culture's particular ideals and values. It rarely involves a wholesale rejection of sport. Instead, it anticipates that sport played within Christian wisdom and under Jesus's lordship will look radically different.

Many observers have pointed to tensions between the values common in sport and those of Christianity. Tom Krattenmaker's (2010) *Onward Christian Athletes*, for instance, explores this in a chapter titled "A Match Made in Heaven—or Hell: The Dissonance between the Values of Jesus and the Values of Big-Time Sports." Krattenmaker observes a number of conflicts: Jesus teaches morality; sport teaches egregious behaviour through its win-at-costs ethic. Jesus teaches love and non-violence; sports involve significant violence. Jesus teaches inner purity; the sport spectacle is "awash in beer and babes" (p. 177).

Watson (2014) observes a similar opposition between Christian values and those of sport, which he sees as a "microcosm" of modern society (2014, p. 37). In particular, he directs his indictment toward commercialized sport and its emphasis on the pursuit of wealth and fame and its "being the best, win-at-all costs" ethic rooted in pride (pp. 27, 35). He describes the professional sports industry as a modern Babel, a "cultural idol" based on Enlightenment principles such as utilitarianism, capitalism, and ableism (pp. 24, 29). Watson also agrees with William Stringfellow that sports "represent a prominent and aggressive Principality . . . markedly similar to that of circuses and athletic spectacles in Imperial Rome" (p. 90). In response, Watson looks to the Special Olympics and its cultivation of love, transparency, solidarity, and play as a

prophetic alternative to commercialized sport. Here we see the embrace of “humility, weakness, and vulnerability”—all “anathema” to modern sport—as a sign pointing to the cross and kingdom of Jesus (p. 28).

The identification of sport idolatry goes back at least to the early third century. Tertullian’s polemical *De Spectaculis* eschews Christian participation in the Roman games, contrasting its many gods with the singular God of the Bible and warning of its de-formative character. Today, such concern has indeed led many modern Christians to withdraw from sport. Christopher Stevenson’s (1997) study on Christian athletes in elite sport categorizes three types of responses to sport. His third type, “Rejection of Elite Sport,” find themselves unable to “reconcil[e] the imperatives of their Christian faith with the demands and expectations of contemporary, elite sport” (pp. 254-255). In light of the required compromises, they eventually withdraw from elite sport.

Among the various expressions of this type, perhaps the most thorough and complete is found in Shirl Hoffman’s (2010) *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sport*. Hoffman describes sport culture as “narcissistic, materialistic, self-interested, violent, sensational, coarse, racist, sexist, brazen, raunchy, hedonistic, body-destroying, militaristic” (p. 146). His book offers a piercing critique of sport culture that centers around the outworking of competition. Hoffman rejects the idea that sport competition is traceable to human nature. Instead, he frames his discussion of sport with reference to Candace Clark’s *Misery and Company*, which tells the story of a Ugandan mountain people, the Ik, who saw the moral descent of their community when they were removed from their fertile land to a region that was barren of resources and afflicted by famine. What followed was the rise of an ethic “based exclusively on self-interest,” including an absence of sympathy and even joy in others’ misfortune (p. 146). Hoffman argues that this moral depravity is characteristic of sport in light of the competitive ethic that frames it.

In describing several “Ikish” fruits of sport, Hoffman gives particular attention to the psychological violence of the so-called “killer instinct,” a competitive mindset that suspends sympathy in order to create “social distancing” (p. 149). He provides several examples of the killer instinct in action, from an American football player becoming “mean and nasty” in competition to a swimmer described as a “steely-eyed assassin” to an amateur bowler who seeks to “mangle her opponent” (pp. 149-150). Hoffman also interprets the physical violence of many sports (i.e., collision and combat sports), as well as an anti-sacral view of body that enables such violence, in terms of the outworking of this competitive ethic (pp. 132, 156, 282). He describes American football, for instance, as teaching participants to “run down the weak, hammer your enemy, gouge him where it hurts and the referee can’t see,” making “viciousness” a requirement for victory (pp. 133-134). Hoffman also challenges the popular adage that sport builds character, arguing that sport’s “competitive reward structures” diminish expectations for moral behaviour, to the point that indecent behaviour is often heralded as “brilliant gamesmanship” (pp. 201-207, 211).

Placing the Sermon on the Mount and the fruits of the Spirit in contrast to the outworkings of zero-sum competition, Hoffman concludes there is an “inherent friction” between the culture of sport and Christianity (p. 156). This tension is perhaps best expressed in his rhetorical question, “Can the mind of Christ co-exist with the killer instinct?” (Hoffman, 1986). While the true Christ is “meek and gentle,” engaged in a mission that “exemplified servanthood, peace, and reconciliation,” the Christ of sports is a “more severe, no-nonsense, bare-knuckled Jesus” (2010, p. 162).

Despite this critical posture, Hoffman does not call for the removal of competition from sport. Instead, he sees the redemption of sport competition through its mitigation and in reclaiming the spirit of play. More specifically, Hoffman calls the Church to work toward redesigning and reimagining sport, offering prophetic, counter-cultural alternatives to the excesses of sport culture. In this way, sport might truly realize its spiritual potential as an expression of embodied worship (2010, pp. 262-292).

### ***“Christ against” in Question***

The *Christ against* type is obviously attentive to tensions or conflicts between Christ and culture, and thereby highlights the need for discernment. It can also offer profound insights into counter-cultural alternatives that are more reflective of Christian values. Here, however, I will address two common criticisms of this type.

First, in its judgment of the world against the ideals of Christ’s kingdom, those who expound the *Christ against* type can tend to have difficulty conceding the value of anything less than these ideal practices and values.<sup>2</sup> In this way, they may fail to observe the limitations of culture and the relative goodness present within it. They may also overlook the role of temporal standards during this time of hopeful expectation of Jesus’s kingdom (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951, pp. 73-76). Hoffman’s evaluation of sport seems unfairly pessimistic at times, overshadowing the goods many participants experience in sport.

A second—and often the most significant—critique of the *Christ against* type is that its tendency toward isolationism is irresponsible. In its movement to be set apart and no longer “of” the world, it often establishes a mentality of withdrawing from the world.<sup>3</sup> For example, Hoffman states that he does not advocate for Christian withdrawal from competitive sport, but at no point does he delineate how Christians can participate in competitive sport without engaging in a mental transformation (e.g., embracing the killer instinct) that he describes as “necessary” (2010, p. 155). In its uncompromising insistence on ideal practices, this type lacks the resources to resolve such a dilemma (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951, pp. 65-76).

Despite these limitations, are there not expressions of sport in which a *Christ against* posture is most fitting? I doubt many contemporary Christians would question Tertullian’s condemnation of the Roman games and the need for Christian withdrawal in this situation. But are there not similar spectacles of violence in modern sport? I think in particular of today’s commercialized forms of mixed martial arts (MMA). That some Christians have not only embraced this spectacle but even defended it as an expression of Christian discipleship (Junge, 2014), leads us to consider the next type in Niebuhr’s typology.

### **Christ of Sport**

This second type offered by Niebuhr is characterized by the essential unity it sees between Christ and culture, and is at the other end of the spectrum from the *Christ against* type. While the “Christ of culture” type can manifest itself in various ways, the fundamental pattern is

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, see Novak’s overview of idealism and realism (1976, pp. 323-326).

<sup>3</sup> See Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s discussion of radicalism (*Christ against*), compromise (*Christ of*), and responsibility (1995, pp. 125-132).

the same: members of this type perceive little or no tension between the values and practices of culture and those of Christ, even expressing radical enthusiasm toward culture. Christ arrives as the champion of culture who brings its ambitions to fruition. In its interpretation of sport, this type inclines toward internalism, suggesting that to relativize the values celebrated in sport would be to relativize values associated with Christ. This type tends to see the values in sport as shared values, rooted in human nature, with Christians being able to participate alongside those outside their faith.

While all expressions of this type see a connection between sport values and Christian theology, they may sharply disagree on the actual values considered internal to sport. Scott Kretchmar (2015) argues for a number of positive values in sport, tracing them to human nature. These include such goods as excellence, achievement, play, spirituality, self-discovery, self-expression, aesthetics, and community. These values appear consistent with Christian values. However, Kretchmar also notes that one could just as easily construct a list of values highlighting sport's "egoistic and Machiavellian" tendencies (p. 96). These values, of course, would fit well within the critique of sport offered by the *Christ against* type.

In light of these contrasting values, it is essential to distinguish between discerning expressions of this type, which preserve Christian character, and accommodating expressions of this type, which celebrate anti-Christian values in sport. Regarding the former, Pope John Paul II's sports theology represents a discerning use of the *Christ of* motif, identifying Christ as "God's true athlete" in his victory over the powers of darkness (2016, p. 59). Robert Ellis has also made careful use of the *Christ of* motif, focusing on Jesus's competition and victory in his description of God as *Deus Victor* (2014, pp. 219-227). While Ellis sees in Christ a model of self-sacrifice for athletes, he balances his use of "Christ-the-athlete" images by pointing to the irony of the cross, in which victory was achieved through defeat. Certain segments of the muscular Christian movement (a promotion of manliness, physical strength, and character development through sport with roots in Victorian England) have also made more cautious use of the *Christ of* motif. Within many present-day organizations in the intersection of Christianity and sport (most are influenced by muscular Christianity), it is commonplace to hear the gospel communicated using the language and symbols of sport, particularly the sport metaphors used in Paul's letters. Christ's Passion is also commonly upheld as a model of endurance through suffering, and also as an event that one might participate in through sport, albeit in an incomplete and shadowy way. Though some of the tensions between sport culture and Christianity may be overlooked, such appropriations of the *Christ of* motif avoided the excesses described below, and more typical of muscular Christianity.

In contrast to the above examples, there is consistent tendency for expressions of the *Christ of* type to modify the true nature and character of Jesus and recreate a Christ in line with cultural beliefs and values. Hence this type is often simply described as the "accommodationist" type (H. R. Niebuhr, p. 83). In this case, Christ is conflated into sport, to be 'of' it.

Such accommodation to sport takes a variety of expressions. Jesus has been presented as everything from the greatest quarterback, goalkeeper, or bodybuilder to the greatest linebacker or fighter. Despite the bizarre nature of such depictions, this type is remarkably popular. In Stevenson's study of Christians among elite athletes, about a third of those interviewed fell into a group defined by "Commitment to Elite Sport" (1997, pp. 251-252). Members of this group reported a "sacred responsibility" to their sport, marked by an increased intensity and commitment to developing their sporting talent and competing for God (pp. 251-252). Notably, however, if one's talents involve "hitting people, hurting people, intimidating or fouling people,"

these actions too were understood as being done “for Christ” (p. 252). As an example of this attitude, Stevenson cites NFL all-star Reggie White’s claim that “every time I hit a quarterback, I want to make sure he sees Jesus Christ” (p. 252).<sup>4</sup>

### ***“Christ of” in Question***

It is clear that one must be very cautious in the use of this type, lest it be abused. Indeed, the accommodating tendencies within the broader muscular Christian tradition are well documented. Ladd and Mathisen (1999, pp. 213-230) describe a “folk theology” within muscular Christianity that owes more to the values of sport culture—such as competitive virtue, heroic models of performance, and therapeutic self-control—than to those of Christianity. John White (2011, pp. 223-240) also challenges muscular Christianity, noting that it wrongly interprets sport as a neutral realm and thereby fails to see the ways in which it may be opposed to Christ. Similarly, Dominic Erdozain (2010, p. 39) observes the development of a secular soteriology or “philosophy of redemption-by-recreation” within muscular Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

The temptations of this type are quite obvious. It tends to distort and dilute the true nature of Christianity and become of the world. It fails to see the upside-down nature of Jesus’s kingdom and the ironic victory of the cross. With Christ replaced with “an idol called by his name,” worldliness is sanctified as the kingdom of God (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951, p. 110).<sup>6</sup>

### **Three Median Types**

While the *Christ against* and *Christ of* types mark the outer edges of Niebuhr’s typology, most theological assessments of sport have found neither of the above types satisfactory. We now move to consider three median positions between the two options of withdrawal and accommodation, all of which offer a middle way toward addressing the question of Christ and sport.

#### **Christ above Sport**

The central idea in the *Christ above* type is hierarchy. It works to connect, but still draw distinctions between, Christ and culture through a hierarchical nature-grace synthesis. In this view, the natural life (culture/sport) plays a preparatory role for the gospel and supernatural life, with nature completed, or perfected, by grace. God’s gifts in creation are good and can provide happiness, but perfect happiness is found only in a higher good—namely, the beatific vision of God. In this way, Christ arrives as the fulfillment of a good but incomplete culture.

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<sup>4</sup> The recent movement to combine Christianity with MMA, popularly known as cage-fighting, also reveals such accommodation. Notably, as of 2011, “roughly 700 churches in the United States have begun incorporating MMA into their ministry in some capacity” (Borer & Schafer, 2011, p. 167). Justin Greve’s (2014) “Jesus Didn’t Tap” provides a helpful survey of the literature within this movement. Junge and Storkel’s *Fight Church* documentary (2014) also provides insight into the phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> Erdozain argues that Muscular Christianity’s depiction of salvation in terms of physical health and ‘manliness’ played a role in the secularization of Britain. This soteriology is consistent with the “this worldly” orientation of this type (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951, p. 85). On the accommodation of Muscular Christianity, see also Hoffman (2010, pp. 14-15) and Krattenmaker (2010, pp. 64-66).

<sup>6</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 110.

This type's key representative is Thomas Aquinas. Using this nature-grace distinction, Aquinas "combined without confusing philosophy and theology, State and church, Civic and Christian virtues, natural and divine laws, Christ and culture" (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951, p. 130). For Aquinas, the cardinal virtues of Aristotle (justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude) belong to the realm of nature and lead to a natural happiness. At the same time, these natural virtues are perfected by the higher theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, which belong to the realm of grace and lead to supernatural happiness. In like manner, as culture expresses the outworking of natural reason, the realm of culture is governed by natural law, where we see overlap with internalism. In contrast, the new law, as found in the Sermon on the Mount, arrives by grace and is above all the gift of the Holy Spirit (*Summa*, IIa-IIae, q. 108, art. 1).

Core aspects of John Paul II's sports theology express this nature-grace paradigm. His view of sport as an embodied cultural activity is consistently positive, insofar as it exists in its "true nature" (2016, p. 59). Particularly, he praises sport as a "training ground" for certain natural values, such as the cardinal virtues, as well as other moral virtues, including teamwork, sacrifice, solidarity, loyalty, and developing the body (pp. 14, 15, 20, 27). These values, he argues, are universal and essential to the well-being of society. At the same time, these natural values are subordinated to higher values. The "true athlete" is the one who trains not only physically but also spiritually, in order to attain a "harmonious and cohesive unity of body and soul" (pp. 36, 60). Moreover, within this hierarchy, the natural prepares for the spiritual. John Paul II draws on Pius XII's observation that physical exercise can be "almost an *ascesis* of human and Christian virtues" that enables opportunities for transcendence (p. 14). Indeed, sport can serve as an "introduction to more true and lasting conquests" (p. 14). John Paul II's sport homilies are filled with invitations to become "athletes of the spirit," following Jesus in the ultimate race and victory to receive the crown of eternal life (p. 60).

A number of other scholars have made use of this type in recognizing certain positive virtues in sport while not identifying them with Christ. Martin E. Marty, for instance, notes that "part of the charm of sports is that they offer a compelling image of virtue—the spectacle of human talents channeled toward a goal" (2005, p. 5). Shirl Hoffman, while disagreeing with this assessment, points out that the line of thinking reflects C. S. Lewis's idea of "sub-Christian values" (2010, p. 197).<sup>7</sup> Lewis describes these values as the "highest level of merely natural value lying immediately below the lowest level of spiritual value" (1967, p. 22). This, of course, is an expression of the nature-grace synthesis.

Michael Novak's *The Joy of Sports* also makes use of this nature-grace synthesis, albeit in a unique way. Novak, like the authors discussed above, locates sport in the realm of nature and sees the four moral or cardinal virtues as the primary virtues expressed in sport (1976, pp. 351-360). He also, however, extends this motif further in describing sport as a natural religion. With sports "in second place, within a scheme of greater ultimacy," the religion of sport stands alongside, rather than against, his Catholic convictions (p. 20). Indeed, one might even say the former offers an incomplete version of the latter. For Novak, sport, like the Eucharist, is built around themes of death and life (pp. 40-49). Its rituals and dramas center around "dimly perceived" aspects of life and offer "an experience of at least a pagan sense of godliness . . .

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<sup>7</sup> Hoffman argues that sport often leads to deformation rather than formation into sub-Christian values (2010, pp. 193-218).

driv[ing] one in some dark and generic sense ‘godward’” (p. 20).<sup>8</sup> A sacredness is present in sport, whereby “tokens of eternal life” are understood to be realized in its moments of near-perfection and beauty (pp. 138-139). For Novak, all this works to complement, rather than overshadow, his Christian convictions. As he puts it, “grace exceeds, but does not cancel, nature” (p. 126).

### **“Christ above” in Question**

The *Christ above* type offers a compelling resource to Christians. In particular, it offers a means of affirming certain positive aspects and virtues of sport without conflating them with Christian virtues or character. By prioritizing grace, this type also counters the secularizing tendency of the *Christ of* type. We should, however, consider two common criticisms of the *Christ above* type.

First, expressions of this type may tend to separate nature and grace, giving nature autonomy from grace.<sup>9</sup> While John Paul II appears more intentional about maintaining the nature-grace relationship, aspects of Novak’s argument are susceptible to this criticism. While Novak offers an account of sport governed by internal values that are rooted in a universal human nature, the relation of these values to Christ is often obscure, and he has little to say about how a uniquely Christian identity might inform sport participation.

Second, a “natural” grounding of sport can reveal problems in one’s account of sin. Novak, for instance, at times offers a natural grounding to sport violence, defending the place of “bodily aggression, violence, rage, hatred, and the ecstasy of danger” in American football as consonant with the natural man (1976, p. 210). Though Novak does ultimately observe a tension between nature and grace (as seen in his use of the *paradox* type), his account often fails to work out the relation between *is* and *ought*. He at times seems to not only accommodate but even to celebrate aspects of sport that may be antithetical to grace. Indeed, “the major objection to the synthesists’ [i.e. *Christ above*] answers which all but the cultural Christians [i.e. *Christ of*] raise is...[that] they do not in fact face up to the radical evil present in all human work” (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951, p. 148). The remaining two types offer unique answers on the relation between sin and goodness.

### **Christ Transforms Sport**

The next type we consider is the *Christ transforms culture* type, reflecting a conversionist type of relationship with sport (I am departing from the order in which Niebuhr discusses the types in order to discuss the *paradox* type with greater clarity in my next section). In this type, Christ is the great rescuer and healer of culture, where God’s kingdom acts to transform culture, to “penetrate the feelings, habits, thoughts, words, acts” and “at last . . . our whole social existence” (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951, p. 228).

This type is typically expressed through an inaugurated or realized eschatology: Christ is already king, and His kingdom is a present possibility. Just as humanity’s works are subject to

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<sup>8</sup> cf. 1 Cor. 13:12.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, see the criticisms of scholastic Thomism offered by *Nouvelle Theologie* and more recently by Radical Orthodoxy (Rowland, 2005; J. K. A. Smith, 2005, pp. 31-61).

the power of sin and death, they are also subject to the great redemption in light of the victory already attained. The church is summoned to participate in Christ's victory through the regeneration of culture, realizing anew the inherent goodness, beauty, and *shalom* of God's good creation as foretastes of the coming age (H. R. Niebuhr, pp. 190-229).

Expressions of this type often interpret culture in terms of creation, fall, and redemption, held alongside an Augustinian view of sin (Walsh & Middleton, 1984; Wolters, 1985). In this paradigm, God gives the world order in creation so that it might realize its potential beauty and aspirational goodness. Human sinfulness degenerates God's good ordering and design, misdirecting and disordering all of humanity's endeavors. The presence of sin does not mean that a good world has gone bad, however. Stemming from an Augustinian perspective, evil is the perversion of the good, and redemption means that culture can be converted—that is, it can be redirected and brought in line with Christ's lordship, and so realize its true form anew. Grace thus restores, rather than completes, nature.

Both internal and external factors are of interest in interpretations of sport from this perspective. On the one hand, this type upholds an essential order for sport, rooted in creation (similar to the internalist perspective). At the same time, it recognizes various external factors, many of which are corrupting, at work in sport (reflecting a more externalist perspective). It then seeks to differentiate sport's true order from these perversions.

This type is commonly expressed in the Christianity and sport literature (Deardorff & White, 2008; Hamilton, 2013, 2021; Heintzman, Van Andel, & Visker, 2006; Y. S. Smith et al., 2012). While a number of different figures and publications could be considered, the *Christ transforms* type is most thoroughly explored by John B. White. White traces sport to God's act of creation, which reveals not only the goodness of sport, but also its "moral design" (2011, pp. 53, 65). Drawing on John Paul II, White frames his interpretation of God's design for sport competition in terms of gift and love (pp. 123-204). Played rightly, in accordance with ordered loves, sport can become an activity directed toward God as an "embodied form of worship" (p. 69).

Despite this possibility, White also acknowledges that sport reveals a number of idolatries rooted in "inordinate loves" (p. 25), such as violence and using performance-enhancing drugs, or even trash-talking and intimidation of opponents (p. 58). It also includes disordered attitudes and perspectives, such as use-value conceptions that dehumanize contestants, turning them into enemies to be "overcome at all costs" in a zero-sum game (p. 183). Competition is degraded into a striving for "military-style victory" rather than a mutual quest rooted in love (p. 58). White also observes how companies and political institutions misdirect sport in the service of their own goals of money, power, and glory (pp. 322, 130). In all these ways, sin corrupts sport's true design.

White's analysis is driven by a desire to identify avenues for the redemption of sport, for "a Christian ethic cannot allow sport to remain as it is" (p. 313). His vision for sport is located in "the gospel itself and the new order which Christ-reality inaugurates and interpenetrates" (pp. 14, 350, 354). With the gospel redirecting our disordered loves and giving Christians a new and secure identity, the athlete is freed to compete in accordance with God's design, in a spirit of friendship, self-donation, and love. When sport competition is played out in this way—as a cooperative and mutual-striving activity—it is even an eschatological sign: "a prelude to that new age in which nation shall not lift up sword against nation" (p. 197).

John Paul II also makes significant use of the *Christ transforms* motif. He regularly challenged his audiences to confront sports' various distortions and idolatries (2016, pp. 14, 15, 59, 74). He also offered a transformed vision of sport that might offer a true service to humanity and even contribute to the transformation of society, describing it as

sport that protects the weak and excludes no one, that frees young people from the snares of apathy and indifference, and arouses a healthy sense of competition in them; sport that is a factor of emancipation for poorer countries and helps to eradicate intolerance and build a more fraternal and united world; sport which contributes to the love of life, teaches sacrifice, respect and responsibility, leading to the full development of every human person (p. 59).

This inspiring and revolutionary vision for sport arises directly out of his proclamation of Christ's present lordship.

### ***"Christ Transforms" in Question***

For many, this is an extraordinarily attractive and significant type. The *Christ transforms* type reveals a genuine hope for culture that is rooted deeply in the gospel and offers a refreshing alternative to truncated going-to-heaven gospels that neglect culture and view salvation as an escape from God's world. In this type, the gospel is directly relevant to sport, making sense of its deviations and inviting followers of Christ to live into his kingdom's transformative vision.

Nevertheless, a criticism may still be in order, as expressions of this type can lose sight of transcendence and eschatology—the "not yet" of Jesus's kingdom. Indeed, this type can become a new form of radicalism, expressing a Christian triumphalism that seeks to enact the wholesale transformation of society by imposing Christian norms through social and political power. Expressed in this way, it neglects the cross as a key indicator of the type of social revolution that Jesus's kingdom truly brings. It also neglects the role of temporal standards for a world not ready to live by Jesus's ethic. While neither John B. White or John Paul II are triumphalistic, the question of how one might live when total transformation is neither possible nor prudent is not a prominent feature of their treatments of sport. This leads us to consider the final type that Niebuhr offers.

### **Christ in Paradox with Sport**

The *paradox* type is arguably the most complex of Niebuhr's types, and it is often misunderstood (Graves, 2018; D. Novak, 2012; Stackhouse, 2011, pp. 26-28, 82). Though it has been expressed in various ways, it remains somewhat controversial. While H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* uses Martin Luther's "Two Kingdoms" approach as his main representative of this type, I will focus instead on the Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr (H. Richard Niebuhr's brother). This will clarify the following discussion because Michael Novak—who has intentionally related the *paradox* type to sport—draws specifically from Reinhold Niebuhr.

In Reinhold Niebuhr's assessment, Jesus's kingdom is not a mere possibility, but rather a paradoxical "impossible possibility" (1956, p. 97). The image of an insuperable mountain might assist us here. At the peak of this mountain are the ideal norms and practices of the kingdom of God—the "law of love"—that transcend, judge, and relativize all other principles or values (R. Niebuhr, 1986b, pp. 113-118). In relation to this peak, all cultural achievement inevitably falls short, reminding an imperfect humanity to be realistic. At the same time, this "impossibility"

does not undo the possibility (of the mountain nor our ability to climb it). Niebuhr continues to affirm real and present possibilities of Christ's kingdom, though he asserts that in history it can only ever be approximated.

This may seem like an incontrovertible point, but I want to highlight two foundational implications that Niebuhr draws from this reality. First, Niebuhr departs from any cultural analysis based solely on final norms or principles, whether the law of Christ found in the Sermon on the Mount, or God's original intention in nature or creation (R. Niebuhr, 1964, p. 197; 1986a, p. 132). A "chasm" exists between our moral ideals and many of the requirements of history, leading to unintended consequences when we aim too high (R. Niebuhr, 1957, p. 156). Niebuhr, for instance, understands the restraint of evil through coercive violence to be essential to maintaining a just and orderly society, while also believing such coercion lies beneath the Christian ideal of self-giving love (1986b, p. 104). Niebuhr's cultural method is pragmatic, seeking to fit the various systems, practices, and norms of culture to the moral possibilities and limitations of humanity. Through the exercise of practical wisdom, Niebuhr seeks temporal standards rather than ideal ones.

This approach leads to a unique, perhaps even paradoxical, response to the externalism/internalism question. On the one hand, it tends to join the *Christ against* type in emphasizing the pervasiveness of sin in culture, appealing to an external and transcendent standard—the law of Christ—against which to judge the sports world. It thereby rejects the ostensibly rational arguments that try to fully justify sport: "whatever the present model . . . it will not measure up to the height and depth of the Kingdom of God" (M. Novak, 2001, p. 318). On the other hand, it joins the internalist perspective in affirming the presence of a shared human nature, and works to fit sport norms and practices to human nature in ways that will best allow participants to realize sport's moral potential. The key difference here is that it sees many norms and values of sport as temporal rather than ideal standards. These are "orders for corruption," not merely "corrupted orders" (H. R. Niebuhr, 1951, p. 194).

A second implication of the metaphorical mountain is revealed in the way Niebuhr weaves together the realities of responsibility, guilt, and grace. Participation in culture leads to another paradox: on the one hand, following Jesus means bearing responsibility in the world and rejecting the temptation of withdrawal. On the other hand, one cannot bear responsibility in culture without engaging in activity that falls short of the standards of Christ's kingdom. Thus, to enter into culture is to enter into its guilt—yet to renege responsibility and withdraw from culture is to involve even greater guilt. While this paradox of responsibility and guilt leads many people to inaction, it can ultimately be resolved in the reality of grace. All stand guilty before the perfect law and example of Christ, but the gospel is also active, with grace itself enabling action to proceed within history's ambiguities (R. Niebuhr, 1964, p. 213; 1986b, p. 118).

The *paradox* type is expressed in relation to sport by Lutheran pastor and former professional baseball pitcher Charlie Ruud in his discussion of brushbacks (a controversial type of pitch that risks harming the batter). In responding to the question of his own practice on the mound, Ruud writes, "What about the sinfulness within the game? Did I ever throw inside on purpose to hitters? Of course! It's a part of commanding the strike zone and disrupting the comfort of the batter. If I avoided the inside part of the plate, I'd have never thrown a single professional pitch" (2015, pp. 331-332). Ruud also clarifies he does not believe this to be in contradiction to faithful discipleship. In classic Lutheran fashion, Ruud argues that Christian discipleship must be informed by grace, and sees the Christian life less in terms of remaining

“clean and without blemish” and more in terms of faithful presence and witness within the world (p. 329).

Michael Novak expresses the *paradox* type throughout *The Joy of Sports* (1976), particularly in his analysis of sport violence, competition, and engagement in foul play. In seeking to fit sport to humanity’s moral possibilities and limitations, he is attentive to how sport might extract positive good from questionable realities. Novak describes American football as “an attempt to harness violence, to formalize it, to confine it . . . and then to release it in order to wrest from it a measure of wit, beauty, and redemption” (1976, p. 94). Novak accepts that the moral ideal—namely, the elimination of violence from society—is impossible, and he admires the way football is able to exploit violence for positive ends. In a similar way, he sees sport competition as directing the so-called killer instinct toward excellence (p. 321).

For Novak, many sports harness less-than-ideal realities that are far from unique to sport. In this way, sport offers a mirror to the world.

The true practice of sport goes on, beneath the moralistic mythology of virtue and clean-living. Basketball without deception could not survive. Football without aggression, holding, slugging, and other violations—only a few of which the referees actually will censure—could not be played. Baseball without cunning, trickery, and pressing for advantage would scarcely be a contest. . . . Sports, then, are no escape from evil and immorality. They are designed to teach us how to live in a world that is less than moral (pp. 319-320).

This interpretation of sport may be unsettling for many. Indeed, Novak does not want his readers to be naive about humanity’s propensity for irrationality, self-justification, and violence. While this may seem pessimistic, Novak’s overall appraisal of sport is in fact overwhelmingly positive, praising it for the good it achieves.

### ***“Christ in Paradox” in Question***

I consider mainly two potential abuses of the *paradox* type. Firstly, this type can be used to rationalize evils and injustices (H. R. Niebuhr, pp. 187-189). The relativizing of culture’s laws by a higher, “impossibly possible” law can lead to an easy self-justification: if one sins even in obedience, what reason is there to refrain from disobedience? It can thus lead to antinomianism. Similarly, this type can also lead to rationalizations of the status quo that stifle real opportunities for transformation.

Second, like the *Christ above* type, the *paradox* type may involve a temptation to separate what ought to be held together. Certain expressions of Luther’s “Two Kingdoms” model, for instance, made Jesus’s ethical teaching irrelevant to the political and social realm, thereby giving culture complete autonomy (Bonhoeffer, 1995, pp. 193-204). In the realm of sport, this takes the form of a compartmentalization or “dual ethic” that ultimately brackets out Christ from sport (Hoffman, 2010, p. 204; Watson & Parker, 2014, p. 73).

These potential abuses point to the need for practical wisdom in employing this type. However, many Christians continue to find the resources offered by this type to be essential for discerning faithful discipleship amid the tensions and paradoxes that bearing responsibility in the earthly city inevitably involves.

## Concluding Remarks

Christian reflection on sport is evidently both complex and diverse. Yet, we have also seen that H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* typology can be useful in clarifying its underlying issues and illuminating its dominant frameworks. For those encountering this typology for the first time, it is not unusual to discover an attraction or identification with some of these types, and perhaps also an aversion to one or more types. Here, the typology can lead to greater self-understanding and an enriched understanding of other possibilities and approaches.

It is important not to mistake this typology for a taxonomy—a mistake even H. Richard Niebuhr at times succumbed to (Stackhouse, 2011, p. 34; Yeager, 2003). A taxonomy presents mutually exclusive options with which to classify objects, while a typology is a mental framework designed to illuminate common patterns. In many ways, the types we considered can be understood as motifs, dominant ideas, or themes (Marsden, 1999). A typology does not expect any particular individual or idea to conform exactly to any one type. It also allows an observer to appeal to different types—and perhaps even all of the types—in response to different sporting phenomena.

It is also important to recognize that there are ways of relating Christ and sport that are not captured in this typology. For instance, the practice of athletes using their platform in sport for evangelism does not appear to express any of the five types we considered.<sup>10</sup> In dealing with exceptions to these five types, some have argued for adding additional types (Burgess, 2011; Neuhaus, 2007), or for reshuffling the typology itself (Carter, 2007). Still others have constructed sub-types (McConnell, 1992). While these endeavors may create more problems than they solve, such possibilities highlight the limitations of any typology—even very good and instructive ones. Historical reality is often far more complex than a simple typology can capture.

Nevertheless, many find in *Christ and Culture* an introductory framework that remains unsurpassed. These types give us a way to recognize and identify reoccurring patterns or ways of understanding and responding to sport, all of which remain open to differences-by-degree and cannot be confined to simple either-or conceptions. Christians can draw on a wide variety of resources as they attempt to make sense of sport, and we can only speculate as to how these types might be developed further as sport theology continues to grow. We can be confident, however, that the question of Christ and sport is likely to remain as relevant as ever.

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<sup>10</sup> Because the practice does not itself supply any particular theological or moral evaluation of sport, it is difficult to interpret it using the typology.

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