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"A Biblical Philosophy of Sport and Play"
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The sardonic newspaper columnist and social critic H. L. Menken once quipped that "puritans," referring to serious-minded Christians of any sort, are "people who have a deep, foreboding fear that somebody, somewhere, might be having a good time." "God is dead" philosopher Fredrich Nietzsche, who once observed that Christian believers "have no joy," said through one of his characters Zarathustra that should he ever come to believe in God, he would only believe in a "God who danced" (40). Sadly, he was never able to locate such a God partly because the history of the church and theological discourse had so thoroughly obscured such a possibility.

These acerbic comments by two of Christianity's most notable critics suggest that the example of the Church shows that dance, play, or leisure have little if any place in the life and experience of truly committed Christians. Unfortunately, it seems as if serious saints—straight-laced, sober, and sad, many of which are cold, and a few frozen—have been infected by a kind of religious leukemia in which the white blood cells of gravity and sobriety have overtaken the red blood cells joy and celebration. As Conrad Hyers points out in his book *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy*, "One would never guess from reading endless volumes of religious compositions that humor [or play] has anything to do with God. The impression one gets is that God created *homo sapiens* but not the playful *homo ludens* or the good-humored *homo risens*. The only humanity that comes through clearly in the vast literature of religious thought is *homo gravis*"(13)¹

¹ *Homo sapiens* = man who thinks; *Homo ludens* = man who plays; *Homo risens* = man who laughs; *Homo gravis* = man as grave and serious. Hyers continues by saying that "If God created laughter, playfulness, and humor, few theologians, biblical scholars, or doctors of the church have ever heard about it. And if there is such a thing as the humor of God, it has never come through in our creeds, confessions, or catechisms" (13).

In this paper, however, I am going to argue the opposing thesis that “play,” defined here quite broadly as any legitimate and moral activity engaged in for enjoyment or recreation (including sports), is an essential part of our divinely created humanity as the image of God, and is therefore an intrinsic good. Consequently, this aspect of our God-given human nature ought to be acknowledged and cultivated as one means of becoming fully human and fully Christian.² I will argue for this thesis in three steps. First of all I will survey some commonly held attitudes of suspicion toward play in the history of the Church. Secondly, I will respond to these negative perspectives with counterpoint insights from both natural (philosophical) and biblical theology. And finally on the basis of these philosophical and biblical observations, I will make a concluding point and offer an application.

Attitudes of Suspicion Toward Play in the History of the Church

Though there are exceptions, dispositions toward play in Christian history have been quite negative, and under this influence, the role of play in Christian life has been severely undermined and devalued. This denigration of play is probably the product of the historic Christian doubt about the nature and value of the physical human body itself, and of the legitimacy of any form of leisure or pleasure in the experience of a Christian believer. Asceticism (the severe treatment of the body) and otherworldliness (exclusive devotion to heavenly and eternal matters) were the spiritual ideals of the early and medieval Church, and these notions precluded any authentic place for leisure or pleasure, sport or play in theologies or models of the Christian life. For example, the early Church Father Tertullian (A.D. 160-225) asserted that there was no greater pleasure than cultivating the distaste for pleasure itself. Thusly he argued with regard to sport that “never can you approve the foolish racing and throwing feats and the more

² In agreement with this thesis is Biola University’s athletic director and head basketball coach David Holmquist who believes that “sport reveals, and nourishes part of what it means to be a human being. It is a natural grace that we should enjoy and encourage” (33).

foolish jumping contests; . . . you will hate men bred to amuse the idleness of Greece.” This ancient Church patriarch also believed that the arts were to be condemned on the ground that the demons had designed them from the beginning “to turn man from the Lord and bind him to their glorification” (quoted in Ryken 79-80). Sometime later, Ignatius Loyola (1495-1556), the founder of the Jesuit Order, revealed his disdain for any form of frivolity when he wrote “I will not laugh or say anything that will cause laughter” (*Spiritual Exercises* 80). Given these perspectives, it is no wonder that historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), at the height of the Enlightenment, could summarize what he as a non-Christian observer understood the fundamental attitude of the early and medieval Church to be regarding the human body and its capacities. In his classic *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (chp. 15) he writes these telling words:

The acquisition of knowledge, the exercise of our reason or fancy, and the cheerful flow of unguarded conversation may employ the leisure of a liberal mind. Such amusements, however, were rejected with abhorrence, or admitted with utmost caution, by the severity of the [Church] fathers, who despised all knowledge that was not useful to salvation, and who considered all levity of discourse as a criminal abuse of the gift of speech. In our present state of existence the body is so inseparably connected with the soul, that it seems to be our interest to taste, with innocence and moderation, the enjoyments of which that faithful companion [the body] is susceptible. Very different was the reasoning of our devout [Christian] predecessors; vainly aspiring to imitate the perfection of the angels, they disdained, or they affected to disdain, every earthly and corporeal delight The unfeeling candidate for heaven was instructed not only to resist the grosser allurements of the taste or smell, but even to shut his ears against the profane harmony of sounds, and to view with indifference the most finished products of human art.

French poet and literary critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) in his brief, but classic essay “A Philosophy of Toys,” offers criticisms similar in substance to Gibbon’s when he speaks of Protestant Christians as “ultra-reasonable and anti-poetic people” some of whom refuse to give or allow their children to play with toys.

I would like to say a few words about the manners and customs of children in relation to their toys, and about the ideas of parents on this burning question. There are some parents who never wish to give them. These are solemn, excessively solemn individuals who have made no study of nature and who generally make all the people around them unhappy. I do not know why I fancy myself that they reek of Protestantism. They neither know nor allow such poetic ways and means of passing the time (202).

Happily, there was some improvement in Christian thought on such matters under the influence of Martin Luther and John Calvin during the Reformation and post-reformation eras. For example, John Milton wrote that Christians “have need of some delightful intermissions, wherein the enlarged soul . . . may keep her holidays to joy and harmless pastime.” Nevertheless, other Puritan thinkers were quite legalistic about recreation and play as manifested in their efforts at drawing up extensive lists of qualifications that governed a Christian’s choice of leisure activities, in closing down theaters, and even in banning such innocent games as shuffleboard. In Connecticut, for example, a Christian sponsored state law prohibited “the game called shuffleboard . . . whereby much precious time is spent unfruitfully.”

Outside of the Puritan and Reformed orbit there was American Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury who, according to one of his biographers, condemned all forms of laughter and play which “he considered affronts to the Lord; he hated them and often condemned both himself and others for occasional lapses into joviality.” This same spirit of severity characterized a New England Christian proprietary school which established this anti-play rule some two hundred years ago.

We prohibit play in the strongest terms. . . . The students shall rise at five o'clock in the morning, summer and winter. . . . The student shall be indulged with nothing which the world calls play. Let this rule be observed with the strictest nicety: for those who play when they are young will play when they are old.

These references to play, admittedly impressionistic and a bit sketchy, nevertheless represent what is undoubtedly a considerable portion of the story about play that has been told to countless numbers of Christian believers throughout the ages. Even today, well meaning (but mistaken) preachers and teachers across the denominations rhetorically assert that the devil never takes a vacation so why should Christians. Such historic and contemporary attitudes have shaped Christian consciousness with the deep intuition that any form of play is at best a frivolous if not an unnecessary activity, and at worst it is the very product of the devil's workshop. Christianity, so it would seem, has no place for play or for the joyous celebration of life. It's no wonder, then, that play seems out of bounds for many believers or that contemporary author Tim Hansel would pen a relatively recent Christian book on the subject of leisure provocatively titled with *When I Relax I Feel Guilty* (1979).

Insights on Play from Natural and Biblical Theology

However, these historic attitudes of suspicion and negation about play are unsupported and even contradicted by a keen observation of human nature, and certainly by significant biblical themes which establish a framework within which a robust theology or philosophy of play may be developed. In arguing for the thesis that play is an essential part of our divinely created humanity and an intrinsic good that ought to be cultivated, I will begin by searching for what we can learn about this innate aspect of our humanity by observing the play of children, the play of animals, and how human culture itself is marked by and deeply integrated with the concept of play and leisure.

Insights on Play from Natural Theology

The universal and transcultural fact is that **children are natural born players**. This well attested observation is sufficient in and of itself to establish the idea that play is an indelible characteristic of human beings which persists well beyond childhood into maturity, though in different forms. On the basis of children alone, philosophers and other thinkers have been correct to define and categorize humanity not only as *homo sapiens*—persons as thinkers, but also as *homo ludens*—persons as players.³ Gifted with an unfair portion of energy, exuberance and enthusiasm, children awake with a desire to play, spend the day at play, and go to bed at night with visions of tomorrow's play dancing in their heads. How many parents, exhausted by a day's strenuous activities, have come home only to be greeted by their son's and daughter's natural, though perhaps poorly timed and somewhat irritating question, "Mommy or Daddy, will you play with me?"

Play, therefore, is a child's life and at the center of a child's world. As Hyers points out, "For the child, life is to be played, not worked at, and certainly not toiled at. Food is to be played with—as well as eaten. . . . Feet are to be played with, not just used for transportation. Life is to be lived playfully, laughingly, wonderingly" (19). Consequently, any child who has experienced play deprivation, according to psychologists, must undergo "play therapy" in order to heal and become well adjusted adults (Burlinson and Kelly 1). For, contrary to the New England proprietary school, if children *don't* play as children, then they *won't* be able to play as adults.⁴

³ From the Latin word *ludere* which means to play.

⁴ Antonia Fraser, in her interesting and entertaining book, *A History of Toys*, demonstrates the relationship between play, toys, and human psychological development. With reference to Susan Isaac's book *The Intellectual Growth of Children* written in the 1930s, Fraser writes that "since in all their free play children are working out their fears and fantasies, the nature of the their toys must be of enormous importance. [Isaac] . . . believed that toys helped them to accept the limitations of the world, and to control their real behaviour—in short, to pass from a dream world into a real world." Hence, Fraser concludes, among other things, that toys are not just innocent companions of leisure which possess an essential charm, but they have "deep importance in the psychological development of a child and therefore presumably of the human race throughout its history" (11).

Thus, the “un-**adult**-erated” play of children tells us some thing about our God-given nature, young or old, as well as something about the God who gave us this nature. Children in their innocent play possess a secret of how to live and, original sin notwithstanding, are still in touch with the Garden of Eden and the image of God within them. The play of children not only puts us in touch with our origins, but points to the future as well, for the prophet Zechariah’s expectation is that one day in the eschaton “the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in the streets” (Zech. 8: 5). In other words, there will be play, maybe even baseball, in “heaven.”

There are lessons, then, to learn about play from the play of children. Parenthood may be a time not only to teach and train children, but also an opportunity to learn something about our common humanity from them as well. If the connection between childhood and adulthood survives the ravages of growing up, perhaps it is true, as William Wordsworth believed, that the child is the father of the man.⁵

The riotous and rowdy **play of animals**, I would also argue, teaches us something about the authenticity of play as a vital part of natural life. Consider this story told by Stuart Brown from an article titled “Animals at Play” in the December 1994 cover story of *National Geographic Magazine*.

The end seemed very near for Hudson, a Canadian Eskimo dog tethered near the shore of Hudson Bay east of Churchill, Manitoba. A thousand pound polar bear was lumbering toward the dog and about forty others, the prized possessions of Brian Ladoon, a hunter and trapper. It was mid-November 1992; the ice had not yet formed on the bay, and open water prevented bears from hunting their favorite prey, seals. So this bear had been virtually fasting for four months. Surely a dog was destined to become a meal. The bear closed in. Did Hudson [the dog] howl in terror and try to flee? On the contrary. He wagged his tail, grinned, and actually bowed to the bear, as if in invitation. The bear responded

⁵ From William Wordsworth, “My Heart Leaps Up.”

with enthusiastic body language and nonaggressive facial signals. These two normally antagonistic species were speaking the same language: "Let's play!" The romp was on. For several minutes dog and bear wrestled and cavorted. Once the bear completely wrapped himself around the dog like a friendly white cloud. Bear and dog then embraced, as if in sheer abandon. Overheated by his smaller playmate's shenanigans, the bear lay down and called for a time-out. Every evening for more than a week, the bear returned to play with one of the dogs. Finally the ice formed, and he set off for his winter habitat (7-8).

This story is just one of about fifteen case studies of animals at play in this fascinating article. The question, of course, is "why" do animals play? What if anything do they gain from play, or do they just do it because they enjoy it? No certain answers to these questions are yet available, but to naturalists who spend their lives observing and describing the behavior of animals, one thing is certain, namely, that animals of all kinds, young or old, whether mammals and birds, play. As biologist John Byers at the University of Idaho notes, a "vigorous, apparently purposeless locomotor behavior" is virtually omnipresent among animals (quoted by Flanagan 6).

Others have verified this observation about animal behavior. Jane Goodall, for example, reports that the chimps she has studied since 1960 in Tanzania's Gombe National Park are "the champions of play among nonhuman primates and that the capacity for play in youngsters seems inexhaustible" (quoted in Brown 13). Furthermore, Bob and Johanna Fagen, who together have compiled the most comprehensive and intricate studies on animal play to date, describe three general play patterns among animals. The most common form is play fighting and chasing which involves pursuing, wrestling, and hitting with no aggression involved. A second type consists of kicking, leaping and twisting in mid air. A third category is object play in which animals employ rocks, sticks, other animals, and even snow balls in their play activity (ibid.).

What is the significance to this phenomenon to our present discussion on the play of human beings? The author of the *National Geographic* article draws the relevant and well founded conclusion when he states that “new and exciting studies . . . suggest that play may be as important to life—for us and for animals—as sleeping and dreaming.” “Play,” he says, “is key to an individual’s development and to its social relationships and status” (8, emphasis added).

These observations of animals at play, when interpreted in the context of God’s book of nature, lead to the proposition that play is not only an innate dimension of human experience, but is characteristic of the natural world as well. Animals play as well as human beings, and both have theistic meaning, for God has ordained and built the activity of play into the whole of His creation. Surely if the heavens tell of the glory of God and show forth His handiwork, then so do the merry gambols of animals. The twenty-fourth through twenty-sixth verses of Psalm 104 offer biblical verification.

O \Lord,\ how many are Thy works! In wisdom Thou hast made them all. The earth is full of Thy possessions. There is the sea, great and broad, in which are swarms without number, animals both small and great. There the ships move along, And Leviathan, which Thou hast formed *to sport in it*.⁶

That God has ordained and inculcated the activity of play into the whole of creation can be seen from another vantage point as well. It is possible to argue along with Johan Huizinga and Josef Pieper that play and leisure are two of the most fundamental categories of human life and are intimately bound up in the whole enterprise of **human culture**.

In his book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950), Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga seeks to demonstrate the nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon. By that he means to show not how play fits in with all the other

⁶ See also Job 40: 19-20 which, in speaking of Behemoth, says “He is the first of the ways of God; Let his maker bring near his sword. Surely the mountains bring him food, *and all the beasts of the field play there.*”

activities of culture, but rather and more deeply, “how culture itself bears the character of play” (Foreword). For Huizinga, the social sciences had laid far too little stress on the concept of play, and on of the supreme importance of the play factor to civilization. Far from being irrelevant, play is a function of culture proper, and not just a thing within it or apart from it. Cultural development itself is a form of play which saturates the whole of cultural life.

In reading this work we learn how profound achievements in law, science, war, philosophy, and the arts are inspired and developed by the native human instinct to play. Hence, he treats topics such as “the play concept as expressed in language,” “play and contest as civilizing functions,” and the relationship between play and law, play and war, play and knowledge, and play and poetry. He also investigates what he calls “play forms” in relation to philosophy and art. Finally, he considers the whole of Western civilization, as he puts it, *Sub Specie Ludi*, that is, “under the specie of play.”

Huizinga’s essential argument is this. Elements of play underlie the very foundations of culture, especially in language (in metaphor as a play on words), in myth (a playful spirit seeking to account for the world of phenomena by grounding it in the divine) and in rituals (rites, sacrifices, consecrations guaranteeing the well being of the world undertaken in a spirit of pure play truly understood). If such rock bottom cultural enterprises are grounded in a form of play, then all other functions of culture which proceed forth from this foundation are a function of play as well. In Huizinga’s words, “Now in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primaeval soil of play” (5). The final conclusion Huizinga draws from all of this is that “play cannot be denied.” “You can deny,” he says, “. . . nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play” (3). In other words, human beings as *homo faber* (the maker and culture-builder) is grounded in and an expression of *homo ludens*, human beings as players.

Josef Pieper's argument in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, bears a family resemblance to Huizinga's. Drawing on insights from Aristotle, this German thinker asserts that one of the crucial foundations of Western culture has been leisure.⁷ For the Greeks, leisure was an attitude of mind and a condition of the soul that fostered a capacity to perceive and contemplate the reality of the world. Leisure was necessary for the philosophic or contemplative life, and was the center around which everything of value revolved. The Greeks valued leisure for this very purpose, and therefore sought to be "unleisurely in order to have leisure," that is, they "worked in order to live" rather "lived in order to work." The medieval European Christians adopted a similar attitude, believing that genuine spirituality or religion could only be born of leisure, that is, only if there was enough leisure time to allow for the contemplation and worship of God. In this sense, leisure has been and will always be the foundation of any culture, in both a philosophic and religious sense.

The problem now, according to Pieper, is that in our middle class Western world, people now "live to work" such that the demand of "total labor" (we call it "workaholism") has vanquished genuine leisure.⁸ The twentieth century cult of work and the idolatry of labor in service to economic gods, he believes, is eroding civilization since it destroys all opportunities for philosophic contemplation and religious devotion. He therefore calls for a re-evaluation of the relation of work and leisure in human life. He issues the disturbing warning that unless we substitute true leisure for our hectic and shallow amusements,⁹ unless we regain the art of silence, cultivate the ability of inactivity, and pursue the contemplative life, we will destroy ourselves and our culture. Leisure, then,

⁷ Leisure in Greek is *skolh* (*skole*), and in Latin *Scola*, from which we get our English word "school." Technically and etymologically, school *per se*, means leisure. School time is leisure time, the kind of time necessary for the cultivation of intellect, the contemplation of ideas, leading to the development of civilization.

⁸ For proof, see Juliet Schor's recent book *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, 1991.

⁹ On which see James B. Twitchell, *Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America*, 1992.

as the basis of culture, cannot afford to be neglected. These are challenging insights that are well worth pondering.

In any case, so far I have argued that the play of children along with that of animals, and the recognition of the pervasiveness of play in cultural endeavors and the concomitant need for leisure suggest that these elements of play and leisure are innate, God-given dimensions of our humanity and of the created order that ought to be recognized, celebrated, and pursued.

Insights on Play from Biblical Theology

Biblical theology supports my argument as well. The Scriptures testify to the play of animals (Psa. 104: 24-26; Job 40: 19-20) and to the play of children (Zech. 8: 3-5), but what about the play of humanity? The coalescence of the themes of the Sabbath, of feasting and festival, of dance, and the lifestyle of Jesus lay a foundation for a biblical theology of play. I will proceed to a brief discussion of each of these.

First is the **Sabbath** which grounds the notion of rest and leisure in God's very act of creation. That God established work as an ordinance of creation is well known. His intention from the beginning was for humankind as male and female to have dominion over His entire creation (Gen. 1: 26, 28; Psa. 8: 3-8). Less well known is the principle that *rest from work* was likewise ordained by God as a creation ordinance, a fact which is clearly seen in the institution of the Sabbath during the initial week of creation (Gen. 2: 1-3). This act became the basis for the fourth of the ten commandments which required Israel to "remember the Sabbath to keep it holy" (Exod. 20: 8-11).

The significance of the Sabbath for a theology of play may be spelled out two or three points. First of all, the Sabbath sets a limit to work and grants us not only the opportunity, but also the obligation to rest. The Sabbath neutralizes or relativizes work and gives us time for rest, worship, leisure and even play (Protestant reformer John Calvin, for example, spent Sunday afternoons bowling on the lawn). Furthermore, the

Sabbath commandment includes the enjoyment of and satisfaction in the works of both God and humankind. Having completed the labor of creation, God stood back, observed His workmanship, made an evaluation, and pronounced it very good (Gen. 1: 31). God's own Sabbath rest was a rest of delight and enjoyment in His work. For us, the concept of the Sabbath means that we can set our labor aside for a while and enjoy what God has made and what we have accomplished. We, too, can delight in God's works as well as our own. It means that we can alternate our mastery of the world by work with a *thankful enjoyment of the world* as we experience its beauty in rest, worship, and godly leisure. Finally, the cycle of six days of work plus one day of rest in the Old Testament, replaced by the one day of rest plus six days of work in the New Testament is to be remembered and reenacted by the people of God each week. In the original creation, God worked six days and rested on the seventh as a model for Israel. In the new creation (redemption), God recreated the world on the first day of the week through the inauguration of the kingdom of God in Christ's resurrection. On this day we rest in its honor, only to work and serve Him in the remaining six. The Sabbath principle is, thus, a memorial to God's creative and re-creative activities. It is a reenactment of what God did (creation) and what God is doing (new creation). The very rhythm of every day life, therefore, is meant to be a liturgical practice in which we are called upon to adopt a God-ordained and graciously upheld rhythm of work and rest. Insofar, then, as the Sabbath limits labor, and opens up a window for rest, this biblical theme creates space in our lives for play and leisure in which we eucharistically acknowledge and enjoy the works of God and the life He has given us.

The biblical conceptions of **food and festival** contribute to the same. Commentators agree that in providing the green plant and every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, God, in the beginning, presented the entire creation as one all-embracing banqueting table for humankind. The enjoyment of food in paradise from creation's cornucopia brought the original couple into fellowship with one another, and

with God who was the invisible provider and host at every meal. This hearty provision of and blessing upon food was meant to have aesthetic as well as nutritional value. As John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (3.10.2), “Now if we ponder to what end God created food, we shall find that He meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer. Did He not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use?” The answer to Calvin’s rhetorical inquiry is a resounding YES!

Sin unhappily eclipsed the religious meaning and significance of food. But ever since, God has worked to restore it as Israel’s numerous feasts and festivals so readily proclaim. The feasts of Israel were designed, in part, to reclaim the religious significance of the common meal which acknowledged God as the Creator as well as the Sustainer of life. The common meal was designed by God to unite table guests together in the bonds of social community as they mutually shared in and depended upon the gifts of God’s creation to sustain their earthly lives, an event which celebrated the inherent goodness of life and the world itself. These festivals were also for celebrating and remembering God’s works of redemption in which He drew men and women to Himself and to one another in covenant community (Deut. 16). These feasts were occasions for a break from life’s daily concerns, a time set aside as a holy day, a parenthesis in the regular routine of life for the purposes of celebration and remembrance. In Isaiah 25, God promised one day to gather all His people together for a lavish banquet prepared on His holy hill, and the meal words and deeds of Jesus signal the initial fulfillment of this promise (Matt. 11: 18-19, for example). And the Church has been given a weekly feast—the Lord’s Supper—to enable us to remember His redemptive work in Jesus, to restore us to His covenant, and to one another in Christian community (1 Cor. 11). One day at the Marriage supper of the Lamb, God and His people will again be bound together again by the presence of God and by the mystical

power of food to unite human beings in a holy fellowship (Rev. 19). In this context we might rightly and respectfully say: the kingdom of God is a party!

Food and festival have several traits in common with play. Both are deviations from the regular routine of life; both are characterized by joy and mirth; both are fun. This connection between the two, among other things, lead to the conclusion that food and festival, in biblical perspective, support a theology of play! Human beings, by divine design, are also *homo festivus* !¹⁰

Perhaps the clearest support for a biblical theology of play comes from the Scriptural teaching on the controversial topic of **dance** which is surely one of the purest forms of play. Interestingly enough the Hebrew word for dance is also the Hebrew word for play—QjC. The wisdom writer in Ecclesiastes could not be clearer in his affirmation of this activity when he writes in chapter three that. . .

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven--

- A time to give birth, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted.
- A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to tear down, and a time to build up.
- A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and **a time to dance** (or play).

The feasts and festivals of Israel, no doubt, were "a time to dance," and it is clear from the Old Testament, as well as the New, that dancing assumed a major role in ancient Jewish culture. There are three ways to dance according to the Scriptures. First of all there was the act of dancing unto the Lord as an act of worship or what we today might call "sacred dance"—"Let them praise His name with dancing" (Exod. 15: 20; 2 Sam. 6: 14; 1 Chron. 15: 29; 149: 3; 150: 4). Secondly, dancing was a common activity

¹⁰Celebration and feasting are at the center of play and leisure as the following quotations make clear. Feasting and festival is "man's affirmation of the universe and his experiencing the world in an aspect other than his everyday one" (J. Pieper). "Festivity is the special time when ordinary chores are set aside while man celebrates some event, affirms the sheer goodness of what is, or observes the memory of a god or hero" (Harvey Cox). "The miracle at Cana in Galilee by sanctifying an innocent, sensuous pleasure could be taken to sanctify . . . a recreational use of culture--mere entertainment" (C. S. Lewis). J. Huizinga also notes that the connection between feast and play is very close. "Both proclaim a standstill to ordinary life. In both, mirth and joy dominate.... In short, feast and play have their main characteristics in common. The two seem most intimately related in dancing" (22).

among God's people as a celebration of life and life's events—"go forth to the dances of the merrymakers!" (Judg. 11: 34; 1 Sam. 18: 6; 21: 11; 29: 5; Eccl. 3: 4; Psalm 30: 11; Jer. 31: 4, 13; Matt. 11: 17; Luke 7: 32; 15: 25). Finally, there were forms of dance that were clearly unacceptable and condemned because of its idolatrous context and sexual connotations—"when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner-guests" (Exod. 32: 6, 19; Matt. 14: 6; Mark 6: 22).

The following principles may be helpful in understanding the place of dance in a theology of play. First of all, dancing is given to human kind as a gift from God as a form of worship, and as an expression of joy in His salvation, and as a means of celebrating life and life's events under the reign of God. Secondly, dancing, like all of God's good gifts, has been affected negatively by human sin and corruption. Thus dance has and can be perverted and used for selfish and sinful purposes. However, this does not destroy dance or eliminate it from the life of the Christian any more than the corruption of sexuality has eliminated it from the context of marriage. Third, through the coming of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ, the Christian and the world has been delivered from bondage to sin, Satan and death. The cosmic scope of redemption brings the dance within its sphere of blessing. It has thus been liberated from the corruption of sin and can again be reclaimed by the Christian as his or her gift to be used to the glory of God and to proclaim the joy of redemption itself, for the gospel is the good news which makes the believer, according to William Tyndale, "*leap, dance and sing for joy!* (*Preface to the New Testament*). Finally, *only* the Christian can rightfully and truly dance, since all the dancing of non-Christians, who know neither God nor true joy, is ultimately futile and vain (common grace excepted). Only Christians who know God—the Lord of the dance—have a reason to worship and to be joyful and to celebrate life through this sacred gift. Surely, then, the biblical doctrine of dance contributes significantly to a theology of play.

But what about **Jesus**? Did He say or do anything that contributes positively or negatively to our theme? Jesus was the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Did He ever laugh or play? The answer is affirmative. There is a playfulness and humor in the sayings and deeds of Jesus as Elton Trueblood has shown in his book *The Humor of Christ* (1964). Trueblood rejects the assumption that "Christ never joked" and suggests that the sayings and parables of Jesus show continuous humor. To prove his point, Trueblood describes the universal nature of Christ's humor, details His use of irony, explains His strategy of laughter, points out the humorous aspects of His parables, and concludes with a list of thirty humorous passages in the synoptic gospels. The most characteristic form of Jesus' humor, according to Trueblood, was the hilarious exaggeration, the preposterous fantasy, the "Texas story" which no one believes literally, but which everyone remembers. The book's final conclusion is this: "If Christ laughed a great deal as the evidence shows, we cannot avoid the logical conclusion that there is laughter and gaiety in the heart of God." Though He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, He was also a man of humor, acquainted with laughter.

When we add to this evidence from Jesus' friendships ("a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners"—Luke 7: 34), His frequent celebrations and dinner parties ("the Son of Man has come eating and drinking"—Luke 7: 34), and His attendance at a festive wedding where He turned water into wine to keep the party going (John 2: 1-2), we cannot but help get a fresh impression of the festive nature and delightful personality of Jesus Christ. C. S. Lewis interprets Jesus' acts of feasting, friendship, and merry-making—all consolidated at the Cana wedding—as sanctioning a vigorous pursuit of culture and leisure. He writes, "The miracle at Cana in Galilee by sanctifying an innocent, sensuous pleasure could be taken to sanctify . . . a recreational use of culture—mere 'entertainment'" (15). The convivial lifestyle of Jesus contributes to a biblical theology of play!

Jesus' own manner of life, plus the evidence from the other biblical conceptions of dance, feasting and festival, and the Sabbath along with observations from the natural world regarding the play of children and animals, and the significance of play and leisure for culture—all these ideas generate the conclusion that there is a divinely sanctioned and ordained place for play in our lives as Christians.

A Concluding Point and Application

This study on a “biblical philosophy of sport and play” contributes to self-knowledge. I am able to recognize and rejoice in the fact that I am, as God's image, intended and made to play—*homo ludens*. This kind of self-understanding can be liberating as it delivers us from reductionistic and truncating views of human nature which may restrict playful activities. In this paper we have gone to some effort to justify this facet of our human existence from both natural and biblical theology, an effort rendered somewhat unnecessary by simple, everyday observations of human nature and of people, naturally, at play. The very interests and behavior of human beings testify to this innate desire and need for play in our lives.

But an equally important if not *more important* conclusion from this study is what it tells us, not so much about ourselves, but about God Himself and His divine nature. Namely, that God in and of Himself—the God of creation, and the God of redemption—is a God of play—*Divinitas Ludens!* The thought almost seems disrespectful if not blasphemous. How foreign to God, *we feel*, is the notion of play. God, *we think*, is straight-laced, sober, and sad. How dare we associate God with such frivolity!

But how else are we going to account for the phenomenon of play in humanity, in the animals, in culture, and in creation if it is not deeply rooted in the very nature of God, and in the very essence of the One in whose image we have been created. We play because God plays. We rest because God rests. We enjoy leisure because God is a God of leisure. This theology of play, I submit to you, engenders not only self-

knowledge, but also theological knowledge, that is, new and refreshing insights into the character of God Himself.

God is anything but humorless and playless. When we look at the earth and sea teeming with such a profusion of fascinating and, in some cases, fearful creatures, when we observe millions of galaxies, billions of stars, as well as pulsars, quasars, comets, and black holes, when we experience the beauty of human creativity and imagination in its quintessential expression, as in a Mozart sonata, a Bach fugue, a baroque novel, or a Renoir masterpiece, when we see the smile of an infant, the play of children, the humorist's jokes, and the games people play, in all of these wonders and mysteries of life, do we not see God at play? All these things reveal something of the divine playfulness of and the divine playfulness in creation. We may even be able to agree with Hyers who concludes that "on this scale, the highest order of existence, both divine and human, is play" (21). This byte of theological knowledge also possesses the power of liberation, delivering us from morose thoughts about God, and introducing us to a side of the Divine nature who is infinitely delightful and full of happy glory.

If God is a God of play, and if human play is, indeed, rooted in divine play, then we as humans ought develop our abilities at play and cultivate a spirit of playfulness. This is both our gift, and in a sense, our responsibility. St. Irenaeus once said, "The glory of God is a person fully alive," and I believe that without a passion for play, we are never fully human nor fully alive. Whatever forms of "play" you may pursue—whether it be music, reading, sports, furniture restoration, gardening, photography, or drag racing—do it heartily unto the Lord, as a reflection of a rarely recognized aspect of the divine nature. Your life will be an answer to H. L. Mencken's stereotypical puritan who worries about people having fun, and your example will testify to the Fredrich Nietzsches of the world that, indeed, there is, and that you know and truly believe in a God who dances.

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