

Christianity Is a Team Sport • I Corinthians 12

The 30th Super Bowl pitted the Pittsburgh Steelers against the Dallas Cowboys in one of the biggest sporting events of the year. But it could have been the Indianapolis Colts against the Dallas Cowboys because the playoff game was very close. A different call by one official or a pass caught in the end zone in the final seconds of that game would have put the Colts in that Super Bowl instead of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

In an analysis of that game, sports commentator Mark Rosen of WCCO television said that the Colts really didn't have the superstars and talent of many other NFL teams that ended with far worse season records than Indianapolis. But the Colts played together as a team and that's why they did so exceptionally well.

Which do you think is better — lots of talent with poor teamwork or less talent with great teamwork? Actually the ideal would be great talent and great teamwork. That's what God describes in the New Testament in I Corinthians 12. We can read portions of that chapter as though we're a team reading a playbook and see how much Christianity is like a team sport.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpreta-

tion of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you." (I Corinthians 12:4-21)

And then it is all summed up in verse 27: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

You notice that the Bible uses the word "body" to describe the way Christians share together instead of the word "team." That requires some explanation.

Two thousand years ago God wanted to do something truly great in our world for the human race. And so he sent his son to get the job done. His son needed a body in order to do the job and so that's what he got, being born on Christmas Day. Think of that body as "the body of

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Christ #1.”

During thirty-three years, the Son did what he was sent to do. He lived a righteous life, died on the cross for human sins and rose from the dead. Then it was time for him to go back home to heaven.

His work was done, but God had a lot more work to do. And so God decided on another body to represent him and to get everything else done that he wanted to have done — a body that would speak for God, teach like Jesus, love like Jesus, perform miracles like Jesus, be generous like Jesus. You can call it “the body of Christ #2.”

The big difference is that body #1 was one person named Jesus. Body #2 is a team composed of all of us. The team is not called the “Vikings,” the “Twins,” the “Cowboys” or the “Steelers.” God named his team “The Church.”

For that team God has a dream. In fact, you could call the church of Jesus Christ “God’s Dream Team.” The dream goes like this . . .

First of all, to be on the team a person must be a Christian. Just as a Russian or an Italian athlete cannot be on the U.S. Olympic team, a non-Christian cannot play on God’s team. There are no exceptions to that rule. Just as there are “wannabes” who go to a sports shop and buy a Vikings jersey to wear with their favorite player’s name on it, some unbelievers may try to look and act like Christians, but that does not make them part of the team that is called the church.

The only way that anyone ever gets on God’s team is to personally accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and be willing to wear his symbol, the cross, and to play by his rules. Incidentally, that is why we insist that a person must be a Christian to be a member of Wooddale Church. We play by God’s rules.

Not only does God require that only Christians be on the team, but God also expects that every Christian play on the team. To God it is wholly unacceptable for someone to claim to be a Christian and not participate in his church. Christianity is not a spectator sport. With the privilege of belonging to God comes the responsibility of doing what God says.

Now it’s true that there are some Christians who

say, “I’m a Christian and I count myself to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, but I don’t want anything to do with the church of Jesus Christ. I believe in God and all of that, but I don’t believe in organized religion.” That’s just about as absurd as someone signing a contract with the Minnesota Vikings and saying, “I won’t go to football games because I don’t believe in organized sports.”

Responsibility always comes with relationship. We know that if you have a good friend and a good relationship with that friend that there are responsibilities of friendship. If you’re married, there are responsibilities that accompany that relationship. If you are a parent, you have responsibilities. Responsibilities and relationships always go together. And so, God expects every person who is a Christian to play on his dream team.

The captain of his team is Jesus Christ himself. In the New Testament in Ephesians 4:15-16 it says that Jesus is the Head of the church and that from him the whole team, the whole body, “joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

There’s been some confusion about who is captain of the church team. There are people who have thought themselves to be the captain, the head of the church. There have been those who have been pastors or elders or religious leaders or denominations who have claimed that role. But that is absolutely contrary to everything God teaches us and that we understand from the Bible. We are players on Christ’s team. Jesus Christ is our Lord, our leader, our captain. We take our orders from him.

The coach of this team called the church is the Holy Spirit. I Corinthians 12 explains that it is the Holy Spirit who gives spiritual gifts to every Christian so that at the moment a person becomes a believer in Jesus Christ, with that belief and with that relationship also comes at least one but sometimes several spiritual gifts. Just as the coach decides who pitches, plays first base or bats last in the lineup, so the Holy Spirit assigns “positions” on the church team by giving Christians gifts such as teaching, leadership, helping or encouragement. The New Testament tells us that every single Christian has as

least one such gift.

A very good coach often knows the players better than the players know themselves. A good coach sees the potential and knows what best suits the player. The Holy Spirit is the best coach of all and he gives every single Christian a job on the team. A key element of Christian life and growth is to discover your gift, your assignment, and play where the Spirit tells you.

But knowing a position, having a great captain and a wonderful coach does not always make us into a team. In order to be a team, each player must commit to each other, to the good of the whole team. In I Corinthians 12:7 we read, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” So the position that I’m given is not for my benefit, it is for your benefit, or better stated, for our benefit. It means doing whatever it takes to make each other effective. It means that we depend upon one another. We never play in isolation.

One of the most famous trades in sport’s history was several years ago between the Dallas Cowboys and the Minnesota Vikings when Hershel Walker was traded to the Vikings. Everyone would acknowledge that Hershel Walker is probably one of the greatest athletes ever to play football and probably one of the greatest athletes of the century. No doubt about that. But the trade proved that even the greatest superstar cannot make a team win. In order to win, a team must play as a team and have interdependence. A team must know each other, support each other and play well together.

Teams have a “one-for-all-and-all-for-one” relationship. But there is a uniqueness to the church of Jesus Christ that makes it unlike any other team to which it can be compared. For the one for whom we play is God himself and the one who is for all of us is God himself who has guaranteed us the ultimate victory. We cannot lose as long as we are on God’s “dream team.”

So what does a Christian do? How do I get connected? How do I make it happen? The place to

begin is to sign up. In other words, become a Christian. It means making a personal choice to faith, to commit your life to Jesus Christ, to acknowledge him as Savior and to be a follower of him for the rest of your life. It isn’t just for a little while for he demands that we have exclusive loyalty to him. Very practically, it also means volunteering to serve.

We live at an interesting time and place in history where many within our culture, including Christians, do not want to serve but to be served. We like to watch other people play but we don’t want to get involved. That, of course, will not work when it comes to God’s team.

That is how the church can help. It is the responsibility of the local church to help you find your “position.” If, for example, the Spirit has assigned you the position of teaching then it is our corporate responsibility to help you connect with the class or the individual whom God has called you to teach. If your position is giving, we’ll help you give in a way that will make a great difference for God. If your position is serving other people, we’ll direct you to social service opportunities here in our metro area. If the Spirit has assigned you evangelism, that is telling other people about Jesus Christ so that they too can join the team, then we’ll help you lead people to Jesus Christ. If your gift is leadership, we’ll put you where leaders are needed.

It seems as though our culture today is in a period of reluctant leadership. We see in many of the

political campaigns that sometimes the people who seem most obviously called are the ones who are the most unwilling to serve. Within the life of

Wooddale Church we estimate that there are hundreds of people who would welcome an opportunity to be part of a small group but they don’t want to lead a group. I’ve often done the same thing, saying that I’m willing to help out wherever the service is needed; I just don’t want to be the person in charge. If the Spirit has given you the gift of leadership, you need – and I need – to be willing to lead!

A key element of Christian life and growth is to discover your gift, your assignment, and play where the Spirit tells you.

Once we've signed up to play on God's team we then need to try out. The process of trial and error is a fabulous way to learn what God has gifted us to do. I know people who have tried teaching, counseling, laboring, giving and a dozen other ministry positions on God's team before discovering the right fit. If you try teaching but your reaction is, "I'm gifted to be a teacher, but no one in my class seems to be gifted to be a learner," that may be an indication that you should consider another position! That's the way many things in life are done. People usually decide whom to marry after dating a number of people; we try different courses in college in order to find out what our major should be. It's a trial and error process. That's the way discovery takes place.

Let me give you a word of counsel. Don't wait to be recruited. Don't wait for someone to call and ask. I admit that's what I tend to do. I figure if I'm not asked then I don't have to do it — but that's simply not the way to play on Christ's team. Don't leave it up to someone else. And don't be discouraged if you're turned down. Never believe anyone who says there's no place for you. That is simply not true, for the Bible has assured us that the Spirit of God has a place for everyone on his team so. Just keep on trying until you are exactly where God wants you to be.

And then, when you are in God's position for you on the team, play well. If that position is to represent Jesus Christ in your place of business, then be the best employee you possibly can be and speak well for Jesus Christ. If your position is to be an usher in a church service, then be the most gracious and godly usher possible. If your position is to love people that others don't care about, then be compassionate to them and merciful, just like Jesus Christ. If you are called to teach, then be God's teacher and teach very well.

We can all begin to see how God's dream team works — how it all fits together. Each of us commits to Jesus Christ admitting that we cannot do it alone. There is nothing we can effectively do alone, but together we can be all that God wants us to be. When we each do our part, God's dream for the team is realized and the church is truly the body of

Christ.

Imagine yourself on the bench of a ball game — not the Super Bowl, but the Eternity Bowl. It's the championship game between Good and Evil. You are a member of God's Good Team. He has personally recruited you. He has paid for your contract at the price of his own son's life and you are there seated wearing his uniform with Christ's cross emblazoned on it.

The game plan has been written and the Spirit, who is the coach, has a great comeback strategy in order to win. He decides to send you in. He needs players to take up new positions to share the gospel of Jesus Christ at work, or to teach a Sunday School class, or to serve on a school board, or to be like a cheerleader with the gift of encouragement to bolster others who would otherwise be discouraged, or to give money to keep the team on the field. He needs players to pray for the supernatural power of God to flow, to exercise gifts of leadership like a quarterback, to hold the line with the gift of helps or to aid someone who is injured. The Spirit points to you and says, "The team needs you. God needs you."

What do you say? What will you do? Certainly you will not answer by saying that you never bothered to find out what position you are supposed to play. You won't answer by telling the Spirit of God you're too busy. You won't argue that you came to the Eternity Bowl only to be a spectator and never intended to actually become involved.

Of course not. As a Christian you will say, "Coach, just tell me where you want me to go. Just tell me what you want me to do. You and the team can count on me. You can count on me to be part of the team of Jesus Christ.

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