

1991

A Christian Philosophy of Physical Education

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A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

A Paper Presented

to

The Faculty Status Committee of Northwestern College
in partial fulfillment of the tenure review procedure

by

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February 25, 1991

Can a Christian philosophy of physical education be developed? If, indeed, Christianity permeates and governs all of life, then a Christian philosophy of physical education exists. To discover a Christian philosophy of physical education, I have chosen to identify a few key secular philosophies of physical education and to discuss related biblical principles and the thinking of selected Christian scholars. Following this discussion, a Christian philosophy will be delineated.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

A few foundational biblical principles need to be identified for the development of a Christian philosophy of physical education. The first biblical principle is that we are to love God. When a lawyer asked Jesus which is the greatest commandment, Jesus responded:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the great and foremost commandment. (Matthew 23:37-38, New American Standard Bible [NASB])

To love God should be the primary goal in life.

To love God is to know God (1 John 3:2, cr. John 14:21). Therefore it can be argued that our primary goal in life is to know God. J. I. Packer (1973) powerfully elaborated on this primary principle in his book Knowing God:

What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the 'eternal life' that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. (John 17:3)....What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God. (Jer. 9:23f)....What of all the states God ever sees

man in, gives Him most pleasure? Knowledge of Himself. (Hos. 6:6)

(p.29)

Knowing God, then, provides the basis for all our goals, thoughts, and actions in life. Knowing God requires one to respond "to God's revelations in trust and obedience, faith and worship, prayer and praise, submission and service" (p. 15).

If, then, we are to know God, we need to pursue God and to seek His truth. The second biblical principle is that all truth is God's truth (Holmes, 1977 cited in Wilhoitt, 1987). Knowledge of God, or truth, can be gained through general and specific revelation (Van Dyke, Birkey, & Nickel, 1987; Wilhoit, 1987). General revelation is "that which can be known about God through nature, through history, and through human consequence" (Van Dyke, et al., 1987, p. 90). Specific revelation is "God's own personal revelation of Himself through Scripture and ultimately, through Jesus Christ" (p. 90). Science can be defined as the study of God's creation and the laws that govern His creation (Stoner & Newman, 1969). Thus, knowledge derived from science and knowledge derived from the study of the Scriptures are united in God (Henry, 1976; Van Dyke, et al., 1987; Wilhoit, 1987). Based on this unity of truth, the study of any subject matter will contribute to the pursuit of the knowledge of God.

Thus, our primary pursuits in life and in the development of a Christian perspective of physical education should reflect these primary goals of life. Our primary calling is to know (love) God and to seek God's truth in terms of both general and specific revelation.

BIBLICAL EXAMINATION OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION PHILOSOPHIES

Siedentop (1990) identified several significant physical education philosophies that are of current significance. Of these philosophies, the following have been selected for discussion: 1) education through the physical philosophy,

2) the human movement philosophy, 3) play education/sport education philosophy, and 4) the fitness/wellness philosophy.

Education Through the Physical Philosophy

The first philosophy selected for discussion is the education through the physical philosophy. This philosophy is and has been the most influential philosophy for physical education. Although this philosophy was developed during the late nineteenth century, it is the single most widely held philosophy today by physical educators. This philosophy is based on the concept of physical activity as a means to an end. Consequently, participation in physical activity and sport has been viewed as an important and effective means for intellectual, moral, physical, and social development of the participants. The actual activities of physical education are not viewed as important in and of themselves. The inclusion of physical activities and sports in a school curriculum are only justifiable on the basis of the above four-fold goals of education.

The concept of justifying participation in various life experiences as a means to an end does have some biblical justification. All of life is spiritual and all of life's activities and experiences have spiritual ramifications. Since we were created to know God, all of life experiences, including physical activity, have potential for this end.

A Christian philosophy of physical education based on the education through the physical philosophy has been developed by Martin (1983). Martin utilized the literal hermeneutical method of biblical interpretation to construct a biblical doctrine of physical education. He defined physical education as "education of the person by means of physical activity" (p. 6). Furthermore, Martin defined Christian physical education as "the use of physical activity for the purpose of developing Christ-like characteristics in the life of the believer" (p. 115). Thus, physical activity was viewed as a means for developing spiritual

attributes of the Christian. Through this study, Martin concluded that physical education is beneficial for developing spiritual qualities, due to the environment in which the activity of physical education takes place. Many physical activities are conducted in a competitive environment. Competition accentuates the true character of the participant, and thereby serves as a "testing laboratory for the confrontations of life" (p. 115).

Based on I Timothy 4:8, Martin concluded that physical education should seek to develop a healthy body during life on earth and to develop eternal spiritual qualities. I Timothy 4:8 reads "for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (NASB). On the surface, this passage seems to suggest that we not involve ourselves with "bodily discipline" or physical activity. However, according to Martin, the first portion of this verse can more accurately be translated that bodily exercise has benefit for a little time. The Amplified Bible version of this verse also recognizes the value of bodily exercise while we are on this earth:

For physical training is of some value--useful for a little; but godliness [spiritual training] is useful and of value in everything and in every way, for it holds promise for the present life and also for the life which is to come. (I Timothy 4:8, Amplified Bible)

It can be concluded from this passage that physical education should strive to promote physical fitness, but this goal should be subordinate to the goal of spiritual development.

Martin derived another biblical principle for physical education from the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). The principle is that each Christian has the responsibility to be good stewards of his or her own talents, including motor skills. These talents should be fully developed and presented to God.

Therefore, the Christian's responsibility is to pursue his or her own level of excellence in the development of the motor skill abilities given to him or her by God.

It is evident from the Scriptures that human beings are spiritual beings and that things we do here on earth have eternal (spiritual) effects. Life experiences, in and of themselves, do not have the same value as the spiritual outcomes derived from life experiences. The education through the physical philosophy parallels this spiritual concept. It maintains that the justification for physical activity is in the more highly valued derived spiritual attributes.

The primary purpose of our life experiences is related to the primary purpose of our existence -- to know and love God. Through our life experiences, we have the potential to develop Christ-like characteristics such as self-discipline, integrity, excellence, cooperation, respect for authority, and a sense of fair play. Through physical activity, we have the potential for knowing God and becoming more like Christ. There appears, then, to be adequate biblical justification for an education through the physical philosophy for physical education.

Play Education/Sport Education Philosophy

A second important philosophy of physical education is the play education philosophy. This philosophy is rooted in the concept that play is central to one's existence (Siedentop, 1980). Play is an activity which is entered into voluntarily for its own sake. Thus, play has value in and of itself. Under the play education philosophy, physical education is form of play. Physical education can then be defined as "any process that increases a person's tendencies and abilities to play competitive and expressive motor activities" (p. 253).

A parallel philosophy is sport education. The purpose of sport education is to "educate students in the skills, values, and attitudes of good sport, so that they might enjoy and participate themselves, and also so that they would be active

contributors to a healthier sport culture." (Siedentop, 1990). Physical education and sport are just one of many forms of play. Other forms of play, according to Siedentop would include art, drama, and music.

A Christian philosophy of play has been developed by Johnston (1983) who believes that play is a biblical concept. Under this concept, play is an end in itself and play should be entered into for the enjoyment of the activity, with no other justification. However, through play, other consequences may occur such as "joy and release, the personal fulfillment, the remembering of our common humanity, and the presentiment of the sacred" (p. 34). Johnston's biblical view of play is based on the Hebraic model of play. The Hebraic model is in contrast to the Protestant model of play in which play is justified by one's work and must be utilitarian in nature. The Hebraic model is based on the principle that God is "concerned with our play as well as our work, our aesthetics as well as our ethics" (p. 87). More specifically, the Hebraic model of play is based on the five following biblical principles: 1) the principle of the Sabbath, 2) advise given in the book of Ecclesiastes, 3) the sexual play of the Song of Solomon, 4) the play forms of the nation of Israel, and 5) the pattern of the friendships of Jesus.

The Sabbath was characterized by the absence of work (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). By definition, leisure time can be considered to be the absence of work and it is the time during which play takes place. The Sabbath is the time the nation of Israel "played". However, during this time of "play" there was to be a spiritual focus. The Exodus account of the commandment for the Sabbath focused on the remembrance God's creative nature. The Deuteronomy account commanded the Israelites to remember that it was God alone who saved them from the bondage in Egypt. Johnston concluded that the principle of the Sabbath has the following implications in our play: 1) "The play of the Sabbath is a reminder that we cannot find ultimate meaning" (p. 92) in our work, 2) since the

Sabbath is a period of non-work (play) it is important for the "recognition of the divine and sanctifies and refreshes ongoing life" (p. 92), and 3) the play of the Sabbath frees us up to enjoy life more fully.

According to Johnston, one of the major themes of Ecclesiastes is that life should be lived joyfully as a gift from God. Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 gives evidence to this theme:

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor--it is the gift of God. (NASB)

This concept of the enjoyment of life is further supported in the New Testament by the writing of Paul in I Timothy 5:16:

"Instruct those who are rich in this present world not be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. (NASB)

Based on these passages, then, the Christian should recognize that our work and our play, including physical activity and sport, is to be enjoyed. All of life is a gift from God and is intended to be enjoyed. However, we must be careful not to allow the play in our life to be the primary focus of living.

There is biblical evidence that various forms of play were important to the nation of Israel. Israel at play can be seen in the biblical descriptions of festivals, dance, feasting, and hospitality. Other forms of play were also highly probable, although there is little evidence (Packer, 1980). It was highly likely that Hebrew boys participated in such sports as wrestling, tug of war, and foot races as well as having practiced throwing a spear or a sling.

However, a further elaboration of dance is appropriate due to its apparent importance in the life of the Hebrew nation. Dance is a rhythmic motor activity that has had significant place in culture throughout history. Dance has been a

frequent component of physical education programs because of the motor skill and physiological benefits such as cardiovascular fitness, muscular endurance, flexibility, and coordination. The Bible has much to say about dance. Dance was used as an expression of joy and merriment (Psalm 30:11; Ecclesiastes 3:4; Jeremiah 30:19; 31:4, 8), as an expression of joy in victory (I Samuel 18:6-7; 21:11; 29:5; 30:16), as an expression of joy in the return of a significant person or a group of people (I Samuel 18:6-7; Judges 11:34; Luke 15:23-25), as an expression of joy in personal and collective worship (II Samuel 6:12-23; I Chronicles 15:25-29; Psalm 149:3; 150:4), and as an expression of joy in God's salvation (Exodus 15:19-21). Dance was performed by both men and women, by the young and the old, and corporately and individually. However, it must be noted that the Bible demonstrates that dance can be used for sinful purposes such as in worshipping a false god, (Exodus 32:19-32) and manipulating human emotions (Matthew 14:6; Mark 6:22).

Johnston also suggested that further evidence of a biblical theme of play is identified in "The Song of Solomon" from the viewpoint of the "joyful play of lovers". Play can also be seen in the life of Jesus in his friendships with people. Johnston stated that play was "central to the pattern of Jesus's friendships" (p. 88) as indicated by His hospitality and His participation in weddings and feasts.

Human Movement Philosophy

The human movement, or movement education philosophy has been considered as the most viable alternative to the education through the physical philosophy (Jewett, & Bain, 1985; Siedentop, 1990). Under this philosophy Physical education is defined as human movement (Jewett & Bain, 1985). Therefore, the purpose of physical education is to learn to move skillfully, to become aware of the meaning of movement, and to study and apply the principles which govern human movement (Jewett & Bain, 1985; Siedentop,

1990). The human movement philosophy also provides the basis for "kinesiological studies" (Jewett & Bain, 1985, p. 61). Kinesiology literally means the study of movement. Under this framework, the study of movement can be categorized into many subdisciplines such as exercise physiology, biomechanics, motor learning, etc. This philosophical view emphasizes that physical education is an interdisciplinary field. Physical education may in fact be the most interdisciplinary field in that physical education integrates the fields of art, biology, chemistry, drama, history, physics, psychology, and sociology into the study of human movement.

The study of human movement (physical education) has biblical justification in view of the earlier discussion of general and specific revelation. Because truth gained from general and specific revelation is united in God as God's truth, the study of any subject matter will contribute to the pursuit of the knowledge of God. Thus, by studying human movement and its subdisciplines, one can know more about God, the world He has created, and ourselves in relation to God and His creation.

Fitness/Wellness Philosophy

The final physical education philosophy to be discussed is what Siedentop labelled as "the fitness renaissance and the wellness movement" (p. 82). This physical education philosophy is based on the concept of wholistic health, or wellness. This philosophy of physical education goes beyond the normal definition of health, "freedom from disease", to embrace the ideal of optimal wholistic health.

The goal of physical education under the fitness and wellness philosophy is to produce a lifestyle which promotes optimal total health. The parameters of wellness typically include physical, mental/emotional, social (Brynteson & Brynteson, 1989; Corbin & Lindsey, 1990; Hoeger, 1991; McGlynn, 1990;

Prentice, 1991; Rosato, 1990; Stone, 1990), and spiritual health (Brynteson & Brynteson, 1989; Corbin & Lindsey, 1990; Hoeger, 1991; Prentice, 1991), and sensitivity to the environment (McGlynn, 1990; Rosato, 1990).

This wholistic view of life is a biblical concept. Even in the life of Christ we can see a wholistic view of his development (Luke 2:40, 52). The four parameters of wholistic development identified in these two passages are spiritual, social, physical, and intellectual development.

Even in the great commandment there is indication of this wholistic view of life in that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:7, NASB). Mark's account of this same passage substitutes the word "strength" for "mind" (Mark 12:30, NASB).

Total health is indeed a significant biblical theme. God is very concerned that we be healthy. This is evidenced in John's prayer to his reader:

Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers. (III John 2, NASB).

God's desire for us to be healthy is evident in the following ways: 1) God frequently stated that He is our healer (Exodus 15:26; Deuteronomy 32:39; Psalms 103:3; Jeremiah 30:17), 2) the causes of the loss of health are identified (I Samuel 5:6-12; Proverbs 7:22-27), 3) instructions are given throughout the Bible for obtaining health (Proverbs 3:5-8; 4:20-22; 17:22), and 4) many of the miracles of Jesus and of the Apostles were acts of healing. It is interesting to note that there is a strong relationship between our relationship with God and our health. We are told in Scripture that if we fear and trust God, turn from evil, and obey His Word we will have health (Proverbs 3:8; 4:20-22). Obviously, then, spiritual health and physical health are interrelated, and God is very concerned about the health of our total being.

Of the proponents of the fitness and wellness philosophy of physical education identified above, only Brynteson and Brynteson (1989) provided substantive biblical views of wellness. In their book, In Search of Total Health (1989), they stated that in order "to be completely healthy, we must follow both spiritual and natural laws." (p. 15) The biblical view of health is more than just freedom from disease, but includes those "important positive health attributes that allow us to live lives of quality and quantity" (p. 24). This is the abundant life that Jesus referred to in John 10:10. Based on III John 2, the Bryntesons stated that it is God's will for us to be healthy. They cited several reasons why we should be concerned about pursuing optimal health. These included: 1) God loves us (John 3:16) and wants good things for us (Isaiah 43:5), 2) our body, in which the Holy Spirit dwells, belongs to God (I Corinthians 6:19-20; Genesis 2:7), and 3) we are His temples (I Corinthians 3:16). Drawing an analogy to the Old Testament temple, the Bryntesons concluded that God wants our bodies to be in the best possible condition (I Kings 6:22). In addition, God desires to be glorified through our bodies (I Corinthians 6:20), and "God wants us healthy so we can serve Him and do his work here on earth." (p. 27). From I Thessalonians 5:23 and the previous points, the Bryntesons suggest that the Lord is very interested in having us present our bodies in a healthy state.

The Bryntesons provided several biblical patterns for establishing a lifestyle conducive to developing optimal health. The underlying principle for developing health is that we need to take action and present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). The first biblical behavior pattern is rest. Humans were created not only to work but to rest. There should be daily rest (Psalms 127:2) and a period of weekly rest (Genesis 2:2; Exodus 20:9-11; Exodus 34:21; Mark 6:31). Secondly, we should avoid the consumption of tobacco products, drugs, and alcohol (Proverbs 23:21; I Corinthians 6:10). The

third behavior pattern for optimal health is that of safety. The fourth is exercise (I Timothy 4:18). Scientific evidence has clearly demonstrated that exercise is necessary for optimal health. Body fat control is the fifth behavior pattern that should be followed by Christians (Proverbs 23:20-21). Maintaining a proper diet is the sixth (Proverbs 23:2; Leviticus 3:17), and the final biblical pattern for optimal health identified by the Bryntesons is that of emotional stability. The Bible frequently defines the human as having three interrelated components -- the mind, body, and spirit. Therefore, emotional health is important because "we cannot dissociate physical health from emotional and spiritual health" (p. 42).

Recent research has overwhelmingly demonstrated that what we do with our bodies physically affects us in terms of our health and our emotional and intellectual status. In particular, the lack of adequate physical activity is strongly linked to a wide class of illnesses labelled "hypokinetic diseases". Corbin (1991) defined hypokinetic disease as a disease or condition associated with a lack of physical activity, that is, regular exercise. Examples of hypokinetic disease are coronary heart disease, atherosclerosis, low back pain, adult-onset diabetes, and obesity. Coronary heart disease is currently the number one cause of death in industrialized nations.

According to Hoeger (1990) cardiovascular fitness is the single most significant aspect of health that can contribute to optimal health and wellness. Cardiovascular fitness has been shown to reduce coronary heart disease, atherosclerosis, stress, obesity, and adult-onset diabetes (Corbin, 1991). Cardiovascular fitness has consistently been a major emphasis in physical education programs and is one of the primary emphases of the proponents of the fitness/wellness philosophy of physical education. However, it must be remembered that, from a biblical perspective, total optimal health cannot be achieved unless the spiritual dimension is addressed as well.

PERSONAL CONCLUSION

Biblical principles were found to be related to each of the selected philosophies of physical education. A composite or an eclectic philosophy may be the most appropriate. Zeigler (1968) may have provided us with the best overall definition of physical education. He defined physical education "as the art and science of voluntary, purposeful human movement" (p. v). This definition has several implications and serves as a good framework for developing a composite view of Christian physical education. The first implication is that physical education involves a skillful act (art). The second implication is that physical education involves understanding, scientific inquiry, and application. The third implication is that physical education involves purposeful human movement.

By drawing upon the biblical correlates of each of the selected secular philosophies of physical education and by amplifying Ziegler's definition of physical education, I would like to propose the following Christian view of physical education.

The art of Christian physical education involves the following: 1) the skillful utilization of our talents, including our motor skills, and 2) the beauty of human movement as evidenced in the act of dance as an expression of love for God. The science of Christian physical education involves the following: 1) the study of God's general revelation of the field of physical education and its subdisciplines as a means by which we can increase our knowledge of God, and 2) the study of the specific health implications of regular participation in physical activity. The purposeful human movement of Christian physical education involves the following: 1) the use of physical activity to develop Christ-like characteristics, 2) the entering into physical activity as a reflective activity in which we remember the creative and redemptive works of God, 3) the entering

into physical activity for the sake of its own enjoyment, as a gift from God, 4) the participation in physical activity as a means of expressing our joy to others and to God, and 5) the participation in physical activity due to the accrued health benefits and God's desire for us to be healthy.

I believe that, by applying the above principles for physical education, I can, in part, fulfill the great commandment, as a physical educator, as a student of human movement, and as a participant in physical activity.

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