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BAKER, WILLIAM J. *If Christ Came to the Olympics*. New College Lecture Series. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2000. Pp. xii + 84. Notes, photos, index. U.S. \$14.95 pb.

In 1987, New College, an Anglican college affiliated with the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, commenced an annual public lecture series dealing with aspects of contemporary society from a Christian perspective. Some years later, with the Sydney Olympics looming large, New College decided to invite a scholar to discuss them. Hence, in 1999, William Baker delivered the New College Lectures using as his title, "If Christ Came to the Sydney Olympics." The slim volume reviewed here is an expanded version of those lectures.

Imagining the historical Christ at the Olympics begs for some context. Fortunately, Baker provides the reader with some background on imagining Christ in settings modern and contemporary. He cites several literary precedents that have appeared during the course of the past century in which authors have imagined the reaction of Christ to historical

periods not his own. While acknowledging the dangers that exist in removing the historical Christ from his time, Baker argues that it is possible to reach some conclusions about how he would react to the modern Olympic Games. He also notes in his chapter, "Gods and Games," that connections between sport and religion have existed since ancient times and provides a list of examples. Baker notes that though the modern Games would be totally alien to Christ in many ways, there would be a number of aspects that would be familiar. Pierre de Coubertin's ideas about the Games carried a significant spiritual element. Furthermore, the structure of the Games with their various ceremonies is reminiscent of religious rites. Though Christ might recognize the style of some of the activities, Baker suggests that he might wonder at their authenticity.

Baker also critiques certain aspects of the Games when he discusses what he feels would be, for Christ, the false gods present at the Games. He picks three: commercialism writ large, which undermines the Games loftier goals by substituting pecuniary gain as a goal; nationalism—understood in the sense of using the Games for nation-state goals; and, most significantly, sport itself which has become the religion of choice for many people.

In contrast to these criticisms, Baker argues that Christ would be pleased with some aspects of the Games and devotes a chapter to the positive side of the Olympics. Three focal points relate to changes that have occurred in the Games that have made them more inclusive than they were at their inception. In short, Baker suggests that Christ would approve of the disappearance of the Games' amateur requirements and the hypocrisy engendered by them. He also argues that Christ would look favorably upon both the inclusion of women and people with skin colors other than white in the Games. For all three points, Baker provides examples from the Games showing how they have slowly become more inclusive throughout their history. Finally, Baker devotes a chapter to those he calls "prime time proselytes," that is, Christians who use the Games as a stage to promote their beliefs. As in previous chapters Baker shares some of the historical background to the issue, focusing upon several athletes who have been, or were, vocal advocates for Christ. In that it deals with an aspect of the Games not often covered by historians, this chapter is arguably more valuable than some of the others. Though he writes from a Christian perspective, Baker is not impressed by the hard-sell evangelical efforts of some athletes and Christian groups at the Games. In contrast, his admiration of Eric Liddell (of *Chariots of Fire* fame) is palpable. Liddell also spoke publicly of his Christian faith but, apparently, in a manner far removed from what Baker believes to be the aggressive and simplistic approach of our current proselytes. Baker finds Liddell's type of evangelizing far more palatable. Would Christ approve or disapprove of the proselytes? Baker waffles at the end of this chapter as to the answer, going only so far as to hint that Christ should not be listed as the number one reason why an athlete attained his or her goals.

Perhaps more useful than his exposition of styles of Christian witness is Baker's brief explanation for what he calls the "cozy connection" between modern sports and "evangelical piety." In short, he argues, both are governed by clear rules, both are ritualistic, and both can be likened to products that are for sale. This is an interesting argument that needs further development.

Given the brevity of the book, none of the chapters were developed comprehensively. Of course, they stem from lectures and, as such, were not designed to be. Furthermore, the

historical information that book conveys about the Games can be found in more detail elsewhere. However, these are not the main reasons to read the book. Rather, the value of this concise little volume is found in those sections that examine explicitly the links between Christianity and the modern Olympic Games.

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