

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus

Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska

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Christian Freedom in American Culture: Marijuana and Professional Sports

That we are free in Christ is a central teaching of genuine biblical Christianity. In the non-moral areas of life, we have the responsible freedom to choose. Christians have often not appreciated this freedom, choosing instead to universalize their convictions in certain entertainment areas of life (e.g., movies, DVDs, the theater), as well as in leisure time activities (e.g., playing cards, drinking wine or other forms of alcohol). The result has usually been some form of legalism that ignores God's grace and the freedom it brings. To set legalistic strictures on what to consume, what movie to view or what leisure time activity to engage in is a sign that our faith is weak, not strong—Paul's clear argument in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14. Some Christians, for example, choose not to have a television in their home, while others do. To universalize either option as a test of sanctification is unbiblical and contrary to our freedom in Christ. However, to see our Christian freedom as license to do anything in the non-moral areas of life is equally unwise and contrary to biblical wisdom. In 1 Corinthians 10:23-33, the Apostle Paul offers three principles that enable the Christian believer to exercise wisdom in making choices in the areas of Christian freedom: (1) Will it be profitable? (2) Will it edify? (3) Will it bring glory to God? There is tension in exercising our freedom but living in a fallen, broken world always creates tension. How we deal with the tension is a sign of our maturity in Christ.

Let's test these principles in two major areas of American culture:

- First is the growing accommodation to marijuana in our culture. What is often called the "recreational use of marijuana" is growing in the United States: It is now legal in Colorado and Washington and the Obama administration has refused to enforce the federal laws against marijuana. It seems reasonable to speculate that within a few years the "recreational" use of marijuana will be legal throughout the entire US. As with alcohol, marijuana use, where legal, is a matter of Christian freedom. But in exercising the freedom to use marijuana where legal, *Christianity Today* executive editor, Andy Crouch, offers wise counsel: "The Christian's freedom is a gift that leads to serving others, with care, attention, skill, and singleness of heart. It's a freedom that willingly sacrifices easy pleasures in order to serve. And by that standard, it's hard to imagine that pot will be helpful any time soon." Christian freedom, further, is always exercised within a cultural context where there is a community with values, practices and mores. In North America, how does marijuana function? Crouch writes correctly that "[Pot] is associated with superficially pleasant disengagement from the world. It connotes a kind of indolence and 'tuning out' that is not an option for people who want to become agents of compassion and neighbor love, not to mention its association with all kinds of immaturity." In addition, one must consider that marijuana creates a temptation "to depend on substances to numb the pain of lives robbed of dignity and meaningful work."

The marijuana plant is part of the world that our God created and He has declared it to be good. We have a stewardship responsibility before Him to be wise in how we utilize our role as creative cultivators with our God. He is the sovereign; we are His dominion stewards. As His image bearers, what we do and the choices we make must always foster a deeper relationship with Him. As Paul declared, our freedom should lead to choices that are profitable, edifying and bring Him glory. Crouch writes that “Image bearing invites us to deeper capacities and competence. . . . Is marijuana a cultivated celebration of the created world, one that enhances and sharpens image bearing in all its dimensions? Or does it merely substitute for the consolations and comforts of life lived truly and honestly before God and other people?” For Christians who are free in Christ to make this choice, that choice seems obvious. Furthermore, in a broader sense, it is time that government asks a related question when it comes to legitimizing marijuana: “Laws profoundly mold culture, so what sort of community do we want our laws to nurture? What sort of individuals and behaviors do our governments want to encourage? [David Brooks argues] that in healthy societies government wants to subtly tip the scale to favor temperate, prudent, self-governing citizenship. In those societies, government subtly encourages the highest pleasures, like enjoying the arts or being in nature, and discourages lesser pleasures, like being stoned.” Responsible freedom is not only a mark of mature Christianity; it is a mark of sensible government.

- Second—a few thoughts about professional sports. It is certainly true that Christians, as with everyone else in American culture, enjoy professional baseball, basketball and especially football. It is also true that as Christians we have the absolute freedom in Christ to enjoy these sports and delight in them as much as anyone else. But, it is probably time for Christians to ask the questions Paul asks in exercising our freedom in Christ—is it profitable, edifying and does it bring glory to God? Theologian Albert Mohler recently wrote that “In a real sense, big-time sports represent America’s new civil religion, and football is its central sacrament. The relationship between sports and religion in America has always been close, and it has often been awkward. The ‘muscular Christianity’ of a century ago has given way to a more recent phenomenon: the massive growth of involvement in sports at the expense of church activities and involvements.” For the broader American culture, the attachment to sports teams far exceeds an attachment to religious faith—any type of religious faith. Mohler cites research that demonstrates that about fifty years ago only three in ten Americans identified themselves as sports fans. In 2012, that number is greater than six in ten. Over that same period, church attendance and other types of religious activity have fallen sharply. The researchers he cites (Chris Beneke and Arthur Remillard) write: “Modern sports stadiums function much like great cathedrals once did, bringing communities together and focusing their collective energies. This summer, the Archdiocese of New York is expected to outline plans to close or merge some of its 368 parishes; 26 Catholic schools in the archdiocese have closed operation. By contrast, the city and the state of New Jersey spent hundreds of millions to build new baseball and football stadiums.” The secularization of American culture certainly explains these remarkable developments. But religious faith and practice will not disappear in the increasingly secularized culture of America. What we do know is that religious involvement and identification are diminished at the expense of big-time sports. And genuine biblical Christianity is not immune to these developments. It is time for those of us who identify ourselves as Christians to ask some hard questions. That

we have the freedom to enjoy professional sports is a given. But is our indulgence in those sports in all of its manifestations profitable, edifying and does it bring glory to God? Many evangelical Christians may not be able to accurately summarize the gospel and they may not be able to defend the doctrine of the Trinity or the deity of Jesus Christ, but they can probably name their favorite sports teams, players and recite the recent scores. This reality makes us uncomfortable, but our responsible freedom in Christ necessitates that we ask these questions. May God give us the necessary wisdom and grace to do so.

See Andy Crouch's brief essay in *Christianity Today* (March 2014), p. 22; David Brooks in the *New York Times* (2 January 2014); and www.albertmohler.com (4 February 2014).