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THE GREAT GAME OF LIFE

There’s only one thing on everyone’s mind at the moment, so I might as well talk about it today.

Rugby! The big final is on tomorrow night, after six weeks of rugby mania called by some: “rugby heaven!” And “heaven” might be a good word for it, because it has often been remarked that rugby is the unofficial state **religion** of New Zealand. Indeed rugby is like religion in many ways.

Expensive grandstands soar into the air like cathedrals. Crowds of “disciples” fill the “pews”, rising in unison to the Mexican waves and exulting at the thrilling plays. The punters who come from all over the world to view the matches are like pilgrims visiting holy sites, the “hallowed turf” of famous grounds like Eden Park (the modern day “Garden of Eden”?). National anthems are sung with stirring devotion like hymns of praise. The battle is intense; the fields are “sprinkled with the sacrificial blood of the martyrs”. Top players and heroes of the past are adored like saints. The Webb-Ellis trophy is sought as diligently as the Holy Grail.

A church in Wellington apparently sports a stained-glass window of Jesus as an All Black. Religious historian Professor Peter Lineham, speaking to Kim Hill on national radio summed it up: “Rugby is not just a game. It’s a religion.”

New Zealand is by no means alone in this regard. A quick Google search shows that South Africa, England and France have been known to use the phrase “unofficial state religion” to describe the game with the oval ball.

One remarkable example of the religious overtones associated with Rugby, is found at a chapel in France called “Notre Dame Du Rugby.” The church is decorated with hundreds of rugby shirts in glass cabinets. Four stained-glass windows feature images of the Virgin Mary in various rugby poses, including a line-out, a scrum, and a cradling of the infant Jesus with a rugby ball in his hands. A framed prayer at the altar translates into English:

“Virgin Mary, who taught your child Jesus to play at your knee,

Keep a maternal watch over the game of these grown-up children.

Be with us also in the great scrum of existence,

So that we may come out as winners in the great game of life,

Giving an example – as on the field – of courage, zest and team spirit,

In the word of an ideal in your name. Amen.”

Reference to the “the great scrum of existence” and “the great game of life” begin to move our focus from the limited arena of the game of rugby to the important business of life in the real world.

And actually we can learn some great spiritual lessons from the game of rugby. The Apostle Paul compared our Christian life to the running races and wrestling/boxing bouts of the Olympic Games.

1 Cor. 9:24 “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.”

Similarly, only one team can get the prize of the Rugby World Cup. So should we run in our Christian lives in the eager, enthusiastic way the rugby players want to win.

1 Cor. 9:25a “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.”

Rugby players have strict training – so should we.

1 Cor. 9:25b “They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”

The Rugby World Cup won’t last – in 4 years’ time it will be up for grabs again. But our crown of eternal life will last forever. Are we prepared to fight as hard for an imperishable crown as the All Blacks are for a perishable one?

1 Cor. 9:26 “Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.”

A comparison with wrestling and boxing as well as running. We know that we don’t earn salvation – God gives it to us as a free gift – but on the other hand there is discipline in the Christian life.

A lesson we learn from rugby that you don’t see in other sports like running and boxing, is that of teamwork. A rugby team has 15 players, each of which plays in a certain position. There is just one fullback, one hooker, a couple of wings, a halfback etc. A fullback is a good kicker and runner. The fast runners are on the wings. The forwards are not as fast as the backs, but their strength and talents are in their weight and ability to push and grind their way forward, overpowering the opposition. They’re all different, have different strengths and weaknesses, but work together as a team.

Paul compared God’s Church to a team.

1 Cor. 12:12-15

Verse 12“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.” Many members, but one team.

Verse13“For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” Different types of people, but one Church.

Verse 14-15 “Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.15Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.”

A fullback could think he doesn’t get the ball very often, so isn’t on a team, and goes off the field for a rest – but when the ball comes to that end of the field, suddenly he is needed. You might think we’re only a small group, God doesn’t really need us in His Church: what difference do we make? But we all have our strengths and ways in which we are needed in God’s team.

How do I know that? Because God has called us into His team.

Verse 13 That’s how we enter the team. God is the Selector or coach who chooses the team.

Verse 18 “But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be.” God has decided this.

John 15:16 “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.”

Jesus Christ appointed us, to bear fruit on His team.

An important person in a rugby team is the Captain. In Hebrews 2:10, Jesus is called the Captain of our Salvation. It’s very important for the team to obey the Captain – so we need to obey Jesus Christ our Captain.

Hebrews 2:10 “In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what He suffered.”

Jesus Christ became our Captain by being made perfect through suffering. He came to earth and played the rugby game of life Himself, and suffered in it.

Rugby players do suffer. Many are hurt in the violent, fiercely fought rucks, mauls and scrums. The Christian life isn’t always easy. Satan is always there trying to trip us up. To live by God’s standards of honesty, truthfulness, ethics, righteousness, gentleness, love and peace can sometimes be very difficult. We have rucks and mauls in the Church, and Christians get hurt while on the team. Some people end up leaving the team and the game.

2 Timothy 2:5 “Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor’s crown except by competing according to the rules.”

Rugby players have to obey the rules. Imagine what it would be like if there were no rules! Imagine what the Kingdom of God would be like if everyone did what they wanted. The Bible contains the rules in the spiritual field.

In rugby, players often try to cheat, by kicking people while they are down, tackling them at head height, even biting their ears! It’s hard to get away with these things these days, because a lot of it can be caught on video. And so in everything we do, God is watching us (so to speak) on His heavenly video, and we don’t get away with it.

When people are caught doing this sort of infringement in rugby, they are sent to the “SIN bin.” There’s another “bin” in rugby too. When someone is hurt enough that they start bleeding, they have to go off the field for a while, and go to the “BLOOD bin.”

Jesus went to the “blood bin” for us! We all need to go to the blood bin too – accepting Jesus Christ’s blood to cover our sins. He was thrown in the sin bin too! (Was made sin for us.)

Hebrews 12:1-2 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Verse 1 People in the stands are watching the game. Run with endurance. Life is a continual test match.

Verse 2 Fixing eyes on Jesus, as if He is a runner on the track, or kicking a goal in rugby!

Quote from *Richie McCaw – Follow the Leader* (Air NZ In-Flight magazine 2007)

“*The sacred piece of cloth known as an All Black’s jersey is something Richie McCaw has pulled over his ample shoulders more than 100 times now – and he hopes he’ll never get used to it. “Once I put the jersey on, I get a real sense of people having put their trust in me,” McCaw explains. “The black jersey brings out the best in you, that’s why it’s special and that’s why you always stop and have a look at it before you put it on”…he puts his safety on the line every single match, driving his body through tackles and breakdowns, collisions and rucks where the sprigs fly and blood runs. Remember that match last year when he had to have staples put in his face, mid-match. “Didn’t hurt,” he says…”too much adrenalin.” In fact a scientist once figured out that All Blacks put themselves through as much physical trauma in their high-speed, bruising games, as someone in a car crash – and they do it every week…It’s in the mind where test rugby is won and lost… “You put everything into every single test you play.”*

Ritchie McCaw’s commitment, compared with Romans 12:1: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”

The “sacred piece of cloth” can be compared to “the white linen which is the righteousness of the saints.”

Isaiah 61:10 I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of His righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns His head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”

Revelation 19:8 “Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.)

Colossians 3:12-14 12“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

This shows how we are to be clothed, with the spiritual “strip” of God’s “All Blacks!” In fact I guess the term “All Whites” applies better on a spiritual level!

One aspect of our Christian lives is being “instant in prayer.” There’s an example of this in the Rugby World Cup too. Notice what this *New Zealand Herald* article, September 5, 2007, revealed about the importance of instant communication in the All Blacks’ camp.

*“It’s late in the Rugby World Cup semi-final and the All Blacks are going badly. The coaches, watching from their box in the stands, desperately need to change the game plan. Coach Graham Henry mutters a few words into his radio, which are picked up by coaching staff on the sideline, who relay the message to the players on the field. The team responds, turn things around and march to victory. All Blacks communications will be via portable radios supplied by Christchurch company, Tait Electronics…The TP9100 radios will be a vital link between coaching staff – including coaches, the manager and the team doctor… “On any given match day, secure, instant and clear communications could make the difference between winning and losing.”*

Another comparison between rugby and Christianity is that of conversions. In rugby, tries are converted; in Christianity, people are converted!

And we can talk about the “scrum of salvation”, for which the rules are:

CROUCH! Kneel in prayer

TOUCH! Reach out for God

PAUSE! Meditate

ENGAGE! Live a Christian life.

So we are God’s team, playing the spiritual game of rugby, not for the World Cup, but for something greater than that.

2 Timothy 4:7-8 “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing.”

Let’s all strive to be able to say that!

Only one team can win the Rugby World Cup, but we can all be winners in the spiritual rugby game of life. Our faithful play in the great game of spiritual life will be well worth it, when we receive our wonderful reward, the glorious crown of Eternal Life in the Kingdom of God!

