
Remembering What It Means

by John and Sylvia Ronsvalle
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Have you seen the movie *Seabiscuit*?

Now that's what we think movies are all about! It's the kind of film you talk about after you leave the theater. And it's all the more involving because it's based on a true story.

There was one piece of dialogue in particular that struck us both.

The boss has purchased the racehorse Seabiscuit on the recommendation of Tom Smith, the trainer. They're watching Seabiscuit run, or rather ramble. Tom Smith is disgusted, and the owner wants to know what's wrong.

Tom Smith summarizes the problem: "They've got him so beat up he's forgotten what he was born to do. He has to learn to be a horse again."

Without revealing too much if you have not seen it, the rest of the movie is about the healing of three broken men and one broken horse.

It struck us both that Tom Smith's quote could be applied to the church in the U.S.

"They've got the church so beat up it's forgotten what it was born to do. The church has to learn to be the church again."

How has the church been "beat up"? Stephen Carter points to one example, in his 1993 *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*. Citing various legal decisions, he concludes that the idea of "faith as the source of moral inspiration is trivialized" (p. 81, emphasis in original). Religion is thus seen not as a defining orientation but rather as a hobby (p. 115).

In the movie *Seabiscuit*, the horse was trained to lose. As a running partner for potential winners, all Seabiscuit was allowed to do was pace the other horse, and was always held back when it mattered at the finish line.

Today, Christianity is often seen as the "pace horse," encouraging members in their business or relationship activities. At some point, it was no longer appropriate for the church to make demands on members for its own agenda.

Maybe that's because many churches have trouble knowing precisely what that agenda should be. What authority will church members listen to, in this antiauthoritarian age? What makes one vision better than another? Who will church members follow?

Pastors find themselves in an awkward place. Every town is filled with "felt-needs" churches. So if a pastor pushes too hard, members who don't want to be pushed can shop around until they find a church that will let them coast. If too many members leave, so does the pastor.

And so what's easiest is the lowest common denominator of operations and buildings. These two activities are necessary. But they ought to be the foundation on which we stand to reach out in Jesus' name. Too often they are the finish point of the congregation's agenda.

That's probably always been true to some degree. But why, then, were church members in the past willing to deny themselves for their beliefs? In the 1800s through the early 1900s, the idea of sacrificing either to go overseas as missionaries, or to live simply to support missions, was not that unusual.

Today, many church members are sacrificing, but it is by carrying a load of debt to support an expanded consumer lifestyle.

What would it take for people to begin to discipline their spending, in order to increase their giving to support expanded missions?

What would it take for a congregation to limit its internal operations and announce that any income over a set amount would go out of the congregation for missions?

What would cause church members to be willing to deny themselves and take up the cross of their global brothers and sisters' needs?

Whatever it is, it's what separates champions from the wannabes.

And it probably has something to do with believing what we say we believe.

Our potential as the church in the U.S. is tremendous. There's a very hurting world waiting to be loved in Jesus' name. God has allowed us to accumulate great resources that could be used for great good.

We have it in us. Maybe we can remember what we as the church were born to do.