

“Came for the football, stayed for the sermon”: Athletic speech, religious speech, and sport as televangelism

Stefanie Heinrich, University of Oklahoma

Abstract

This philosophical paper examines two recent sport press conferences to highlight the ways modern American professional and collegiate sport has become a new site for Evangelical televangelism. Evangelical Christianity is differentiated from other denominational umbrellas by holding a significantly larger theological emphasis on the practice of evangelism – to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all peoples. Through the influence of neoliberal ideology, American Evangelicals have “institutionalized individualism” and “borrowed the ideology of market research and consumer behavior” (Schultze, 2003, p. 62) to rationalize the creation of parachurch organizations (such as Fellowship of Christian Athletes) and the adoption of mass communication for the purpose of reaching wider and more varied audiences. By aligning itself with neoliberalism, and through harnessing popular sport, Evangelicalism has situated itself in such a way as to not only allow for greater opportunities to evangelize but to also become hegemonic in the United States. This paper argues that athletes' discussions of their Christian faith have a demonstrative impact on viewers, serves to further establish Christian hegemony in the U.S., and is a continued site of evangelism. Finally, in harnessing popular sport as a site of increased visibility, Evangelicals are able to foster their theological commitment to provide every soul with the opportunity to hear the Gospel (Larsen, 2007).

With the theological emphasis on evangelism, modern Evangelicals' adoption of mass communication to share the Word, and modern athletes' continued rise in visibility in the U.S., this study focused not only on the content of the examined press conference interviews, but also focused on viewers' reactions to the interviews. The content of the two interviews is profound and showcases the type of individual evangelism that Evangelicals believe to be part of their religious duties. However, audience members' reactions to the interviews demonstrate the impact evangelism and public testimonies can have on viewers.

This work examined the “Top Comments” left by viewers on two recent sport press conferences wherein the interviews devolved into religious testimonies. The “Top Comments,” as they were displayed at the time of this research, were gathered and then coded through first open coding followed by axial coding. The major themes which emerged were: “The Testimony,” “Courage, Bravery, and Boldness,” and “Platform for God (and Fandom).” These themes highlighted the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the athletes' athletic speech devolving into religious speech. Each athlete's religious speech in the two press conferences were textbook examples of the Christian practice of testimony (i.e., to share a story of conversion or the moment of God's influence in one's life) and the viewers felt the testimonies and the athletes' bravery, courage, and boldness in sharing their testimonies could have lasting and wide spread impacts on “believers and unbelievers alike” (partial quote from a Top Comment).

While only two examples of athletic speech turned religious speech were examined for this work, these two examples are hardly unique. And the exclusively positive nature of the “Top Comments” on the press conference videos showcase the ways Evangelical Christianity has become hegemonic in the United States. Both sport and Evangelicalism are situated within the paradox of courting lone souls within the mass audience and as Don McClanen argued when he

founded the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, "If athletes can endorse shaving cream, razor blades and cigarettes, surely they can endorse the Lord, too ("FCA Timeline," 2022). This study highlights the way sport and mass communication have been combined to further evangelize to audiences comprised of individuals that would not have purposely sought out religious content of their own volition.