

A Theology of Play

- What is “Play”
 - Heb. *sachaq*, *shaa*, and *raqad*, Gr. *paizo*
 - The words themselves are not commonly used, but we shouldn't fall into the word/concept fallacy (cf. 1 Cor. 10:7).
 - A working definition: Play is voluntary, enjoyable, non-utilitarian activity that provides rest from our normal labors.
 - Play is *purposeless*, but *meaningful*—there is no immediate goal past enjoying the play itself.
- Why haven't we heard much about the theology of play and recreation in the church?
 - Pseudo-virtue—the Protestant work ethic overdone
 - Cotton Mather: “Let your business engross most of your time. ‘Tis not now and then an hour at your business that will do. Be stirring about your business as early as ‘tis convenient. Keep close to your business, until it be convenient you should leave it off.”
 - Industrialization—a premium on output and efficiency
 - Lack of felt need—does anyone really need instruction on playing?
- Creation | God at Play
 - Like play, the adornments of creation are meaningful, but not necessary—God did not make a world of bare efficiency.
 - Ps. 19:1; Ps. 104; Matt. 6:28-30
 - Ps. 104:25-26 | “Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.”¹
- Creatures at Play
 - Creativity—as those who reflect God in virtue of bearing the divine image, we too produce meaningful but unnecessary products that reflect divine action and enrich the world.
 - E.g., music, art, poetry, dance etc.
 - Games
 - Games are imaginary realms created with fabricated goals, obstacles, rewards and rules that participants willingly submit themselves to for the purpose of pleasure.
 - God built play—particularly enjoying food and drink with friends and family—into the religious calendar of Israel (e.g., Feast of Tabernacles).
 - Often included as an element of worship, song and instrumental music are recurring examples of play in Scripture, with Jubal, descendant of Cain, being the “father of all those who play the lyre and pipe” (Gen. 4:21).
 - Ps. 137:1-4, Matt. 11:16-18

¹ Or, *which you formed to play with*

- Sex
 - While sex has important utilitarian functions (i.e., childbearing), it can also be the pinnacle of play despite its frequent misuse.
 - Prov. 5:18-19 | “Let your fountain be blessed and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.”
- Play as Re-Creation Sabbath
 - ‘Recreation’ comes from the Latin word *recreate* (*re*, “again” + *creare* “create”) meaning to restore, renew or refresh.
 - Play has universal appeal because *everyone longs for new-creation rest, even if they don't know God*.
 - Play's strong, universal appeal, therefore, is explained theologically by realizing that *to play is to experience a dim, yet meaningful, foretaste of re-created life*. The happiness and excitement of intense play is as close to Heaven as many people will ever get.
 - It is no surprise, therefore, to see play included as one of descriptors of the renewed Kingdom on Earth.
 - Zech. 8:4-5 | “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”
 - Isa. 11:8 | “The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.”
 - Ultimately, because play is joyful rest from our labors, play is robust Sabbath.
- How Does Play Go Awry?
 - Over-indulgence—like with every good thing, we must guard against gluttony
 - Distraction/diversion—we can use play to cover-up or cope with challenges instead of addressing them
 - Identity Crisis—in play, we can adopt identities and even certain kinds of respect that carry little to no weight in the real world. It can become tempting, therefore, to build our identity here, where we are successful and admired.

Strategies for Playing Well

- Calendar regular time for pure play.
 - Set goals for productivity so “more” is not always the answer to what “needs” to be done.
- Try new ways of playing—*especially with friends*.
- To the best of your ability, be “all there” when you're playing.
- Express thanks to God when you've played well to create muscle-memory for the blessing of play.
- Find ways to do regular activities *playfully*.
- Identify small graces and victories in your life and family celebrate more frequently.
- Find people who play well and imitate them.