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The Victory of the Slaughtered Lamb: A Theology of Winning (and Losing) for Christian Athletes

Brian K. Gamel

George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University, Waco, TX 76706, USA; brian_gamel@baylor.edu

Abstract: This paper explores what a notion of victory rooted in Revelation's theological grammar might look like. Although this essay might hold interest for a variety of individuals, it is written with Christian participation in sports in mind. What might a theology of victory look like that is specifically Christological? That is the question this essay attempts to address. Before offering a theology of victory, though, we will first explore why Revelation is a place to examine this question and how others have attempted to frame their own answers.

Keywords: Revelation 5; slaughtered lamb; theology of victory; victory; conquering; paradoxical identity; Christian athletes

1. Introduction

Disgraced former pastor of Mars Hill Church, Mark Driscoll, is recorded giving this commentary on the passage in Revelation 19:11ff:

He gets a snapshot, the curtain is pulled back, and, behold, a white horse—I love this!—How many of you grew up watching Westerns? The good guy always rides the white horse. It's biblical! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True. And in righteousness he judges and makes war. You know Jesus will never take a beating again. That was a one shot deal for salvation. That is not an ongoing job for Jesus, to take a beating. His eyes are like a flame of fire—I just love this! This is ultimate fighter Christ. A hip-hop buddy of mine calls it thug Jesus.¹

Driscoll's "ultimate fighter Christ" is his commentary on what it means for Jesus, and by extension his followers, to win. The Jesus who is victorious, for Driscoll, is the Jesus who "will never take a beating again". It is perhaps not by accident that Driscoll derives this insight from his reading of the book of Revelation, a text famous for its language of graphic, sometimes even lurid violence.

This paper advances a notion of victory rooted in Revelation's theological grammar. Although this essay might hold interest for a variety of individuals, it is written with Christian participation in sports in mind. What might a theology of victory look like that is specifically Christological? That is the question this essay attempts to address. Before offering a theology of victory, though, we will first explore why Revelation is a place to examine this question and how others have attempted to frame their own answers.

Victory in War and Athletics

Examining the book of Revelation may seem an odd choice for an essay devoted to understanding sports and *athletic imagery*. Unlike in other parts of the New Testament—Paul, Hebrews, or the Pastoral letters—there are no overt athletic metaphors used by John in his book. However, there is lots of language about "conquering" or "overcoming" in Revelation, more than anywhere else in the NT.² The Greek word often rendered in English as "conquering" or "overcoming" is νικάω, whose noun form (νίκη) means "victory" (and from which the transliterated term "Nike" comes).³ The notion of victory in the ancient world was readily used for military success, but also for triumph in athletics as well.⁴



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The pageantry surrounding military victories in the Greco-Roman world is well known (triumphal arches, marches, statues, etc.).⁵ The same kind of theater was used to celebrate athletic victories as well: both involved the public awarding of glory, emblems of honor (like crowns), and lasting monuments to their respective winners.⁶ Sometimes athletic victory could take on an importance and notoriety even eclipsing that of great generals.

Victors were viewed as having acquired divine status. At the Olympic games leaves of olive trees were cut with a golden sickle from the most sacred olive trees before they were handed to the victor. “The victors were placed on the same level as the gods and entered into communion with them. This bond was clearly demonstrated in the temple of Zeus in Olympia, for Phildias represented Zeus wearing a crown of wild olive. When the victors were honored they wore the same mark of distinction as the god: a wreath woven from the evergreen branches of a wild olive tree.” (Hullinger 2004, p. 353)

Thus, there is not a clear distinction between notions of military and athletic victory; observations about one arena have relevance for the other.⁷ For both, victory was understood as domination, subjugation, and entailing superlative glory. The language of victory is equally the language of war and athletics.

When John writes to the seven churches in Asia Minor he uses a similar pattern for each letter:

“To the angel of the church in X” (Rev 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14)

“These are the words of (*some description of the risen Jesus*; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14)

“I know your (*status*)” + (*some form of commendation*, usually; 2:2–3, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15)⁸

“But I have this against you” + (*some form of chastisement*; 2:4, 14–15; 20)⁹
(*some form of instruction*; 2:5–6, 10, 16, 24; 3:3–4, 18–20)¹⁰

“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)¹¹

“To the one who conquers” or “Whoever conquers” or “To everyone who conquers” or “If you conquer” + (*promise is given*; 2:7, 11, 17, 26–28; 3:5, 12, 21)

Not all of these elements are in each letter; for instance, Laodicea famously has no words of commendation. But in each letter John, writing in Jesus’ voice, at the end addresses those who “conquer” (2:7, 11, 17, 28, 3:5, 12, 21), sometimes right next to language about receiving a “crown” (2:10, 3:11). But what does John mean by this? He tells each of the churches that if they “conquer” they will be given some reward, but what is he telling them to do? Our clue comes with the very last mention, in 3:21, when John (speaking for Jesus), writes, “To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, *just as I myself conquered* and sat down with my Father on his throne” (NRSV, italics mine). John is telling the Christians to conquer, and that this conquering is the same kind of conquering that Jesus himself performed. Thus, we need to understand how it is that Jesus conquered to understand what John wants us to do.

So, how did Jesus conquer?

2. The Conquering Lamb of Revelation 5

After John finishes writing the seven letters we enter chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, which is where the visions of the book begin. Chapter 4 introduces a scene in heaven where there is a throne—a symbol of political power—and one who sits upon it (4:2).¹² Around this throne everything else is organized: the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders with their own thrones and their own crowns (4:4). Each of these elders is casting their crowns before the one on the throne and falling down before him (4:9–10); that is, they are relinquishing their claim to political power and prestige (their crown and their

position of honor on their own throne) and acknowledging that all true power flows from the one on the throne (4:11).¹³ The purpose of this chapter is to establish that God holds all political power, not the emperor. The center of the world is not Rome but the throne of God. Notably, there is no “plot” to this scene; John is describing the ordinary state of things. John is trying to say with this picture that *this* is the deepest, most truest reality, and not what his readers hear and see in their everyday lives (Bauckham 1993, pp. 31–35).

Chapter 5 of Revelation introduces a problem.¹⁴ The one on the throne holds a scroll in his hand sealed up with seven seals (5:1). The scroll almost certainly represents the will of God, the proclamation of the One on the throne.¹⁵ But no one is found who can open it (5:3). It will remain a mystery.¹⁶ But then, as John weeps over this misfortune, one of the elders informs him, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, *has conquered*, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (Rev 5:5, NRSV, italics mine).¹⁷

This verse contains a constellation of messianic imagery. The *Lion* was often identified as a messianic symbol, since lions were often understood to be regal, strong, and powerful.¹⁸ Furthermore, he is identified as being from the tribe of *Judah*, the tribe of Israel from which King David came. Judah is the tribe kings come from.¹⁹ The final modifier—*The Root of David*—seals the messianic imagery. David is the king to whom God gave a promise to always allow one of his offspring to sit on the throne of Israel (2 Sam 7:14). It is this promise that forms the foundation of messianic hope, that even after the kingdom of Judah falls and ceases to exist as a political reality there is an expectation that someone from David’s lineage will come and restore Israel to its former glory and fortunes. This coming figure, who will again reign over Israel as king, is the anticipated messiah, the one anointed by God to restore Israel.

When we put all this together, we have a good picture of what this short sentence means: the fierce, proud, noble, militaristic leader promised of old, who is expected to restore political power to Israel—*this* is the one who has conquered. This should make sense to John’s readers; this imagery is what they would expect when discussing conquering and victory. A victor claims triumph by being the strongest, quickest, wisest, and most powerful. This is what John *hears* when the elder describes the one worthy to open the scroll. But in the very next verse, John *sees* something very different.²⁰

“Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb *standing as if it had been slaughtered*, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (5:6, NRSV, italics mine).

The *Lamb* is not an evidently militaristic image; it is symbol of sacrifice.²¹ Lambs are weak. Lambs are victims. Lambs are subservient. Many nations and kingdoms have employed the sigil of a lion to represent their leader or their country; none have utilized the figure of a lamb (likewise, in athletics, lions, tigers, bears, eagles, and wolverines are all used to represent sports teams; almost none use rabbits, squirrels, or lambs).

And the Lamb looks as if it has been slaughtered. This is the language of cultic sacrifice, but it is also the language of complete and total annihilation by one’s enemies. Even in our contemporary context when we speak of losing severely we describe it as a “slaughter.” Being slaughtered means being defeated. It means being destroyed. It means losing.

3. A “Christological Redefinition of Winning”?

How are we to understand the relationship between the imagery of the Lion and the Lamb?²²

3.1. *The Lamb Becomes a Lion*

Eugene Boring has outlined four different interpretive possibilities for understanding the relationship between the images of Lion and Lamb. The first option correlates the terms temporally: Jesus is *first* a Lamb and *then* a Lion. He cites Hal Lindsey’s *The Lamb Becomes a Lion* as an example of this paradigm (Boring 1989, p. 108). In this rendering it is

the vulnerability and suffering of (the earthly) Jesus that then enables and warrants the violence and domination of the world by the risen Lord. Jesus' weakness, sacrifice, and suffering are here understood to be instrumental; being slaughtered creates the necessary conditions for conquering.

This reading of Revelation is pervasive in lay contexts. As we saw in the opening, Driscoll is fond of this interpretive framework. His fascination with the militaristic imagery of Revelation reveals his underlying assumption about what it means to be victorious. Being an "ultimate fighter," making "war," personifying a "thug," is, for Driscoll, the embodiment of conquering. And, just as clearly, "taking a beating" is for him loss. The warring, violent Jesus of Revelation 19 is, in Driscoll's opinion, the proper and inevitable end of the slaughtered Lamb of Revelation 5.

In the first of Boring's schemas, then, "conquering" sheds none of its conventional associations. The lion conquers the same way anyone else conquers—by having more power, more force, and more resources. It is not the idea of victory that is here redefined, but the proper route to it. The death of Jesus somehow "unlocks" the vast reservoir of God's infinite power that can then be deployed against the unbelievers. The Lamb becomes the Lion.

3.2. *A Lamb to Some and a Lion to Others*

The second way Boring suggests we could understand the relationship between power and weakness is to split the role of "lion" and "lamb" into two, depending on the intended recipient of Jesus' actions (Boring 1989, p. 109). To some, in this model, Jesus would act as a Lion, vanquishing and overthrowing, while to others Jesus would serve as a Lamb who sanctifies a people and prepares them to serve as priests and rulers.

This dual role is strikingly similar to the way the Messiah is portrayed in much of Second Temple Jewish literature. In the *Psalms of Solomon* 17 the "son of David" (21) is raised up by God to "destroy the unrighteous rulers" and "purge Jerusalem from gentiles who trample her to destruction" (22).²³ He will "drive out the sinners from the inheritance" and "smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter's jar" (23). Yet to his own he acts to "gather a holy people, whom he will lead in righteousness" (26). The juxtaposition is clearest in v. 35: "He will strike the earth with the word of his mouth forever. He will bless the Lord's people with wisdom and happiness." The sinful nations are treated with wrath and domination but the faithful of Israel are exalted and blessed.

Likewise, the Dead Sea Scrolls also envision a dual role for the Messiah, depending on the identity of those with whom he interacts²⁴; 4Q458 explains that "he will put him to death and his army [...] And you will consume the uncircumcised ones, and you will [...] And they will be justified." (fr. 2, col. II).²⁵ In the *Targum Neofiti Genesis* the Messiah "girds his loins and goes forth to battle against those that hate him; and he kills kings with rulers, and makes mountains red from the blood of their stain and makes the valleys white with the fat of their warriors. His garments are rolled in blood; he is like a presser of grapes" (49:10–12). Contrast this dark image with the language of 4Q521, in which "God's Messiah" is a servant to the pious, "freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind, straightening out the twis[t]ed", and who "will proclaim good news to the poor" (fr. 2, col. II).

In this schema, Lion and Lamb represent a kind of dual modalism in which Jesus deals with communities of people according to their righteousness or commitment to the people of God. Here, "conquering" also keeps all its traditional connotations; what changes is the audience with which Jesus interacts. Conquering is a part-time job for Jesus.

Matthew Street takes a position similar to the one Boring describes here. Street understands John to describe a "leonine lamb" possessing characteristics of both creatures. John depicts the Lamb of Revelation "with symbolic associations that recall both weakness and strength," emphasizing Christ's non-violent death as well as his wrath and power (Street 2012, p. 173). Street also problematizes the sharp juxtaposition between Lion and Lamb that many commentators have assumed by arguing that "whenever the horns of sheep are referred to in the Old Testament, the animal is a ram" (Ibid., p. 174). Thus,

instead of a crisp contrast between two radically different images, Street suggests that John might instead “have been comparing two aggressive animal images [i.e., lion and ram]” (Ibid.) Although Street does not overtly claim that Christ plays a dual role—Lion or Lamb, depending on the audience—he seems to suggest as much in his work. He notes that the function of the Lamb in Revelation is one of judgment and enactor of God’s wrath against the unbelieving world. It is not the horseman (19:11–16) or glorious figure (1:9–10) that people are made to be afraid of in John’s vision, but “of the most innocuous and helpless symbol in Revelation” (Ibid., p. 178). The Lamb presides over the torture of the impenitent (14:6–9), is compared to Moses who oversaw the annihilation of Israel’s enemies by flood (15:1ff), and “conquers” his enemies in violent warfare (17:14) (Ibid., pp. 182–83). The posture of the Lamb towards unbelievers is one of wrath, judgment, and total condemnation.

For Christians, in contrast, Street describes a much warmer relationship with the Lamb. The Lamb is present as protector of the 144,000 (7:4–8), as the bridegroom of the church (19:9), as a temple for God’s people (21:22–23), and the possessor of the book of life (21:27) (Ibid., pp. 181, 183–84). The Lamb acts as a shepherd for those faithful to Jesus (7:15–17), who praise him for the “salvation” that comes from him and the one who sits on the throne (7:10). For those who wash their robes in the Lamb’s blood, rest, deliverance, and comfort are given (Ibid., p. 179). For the faithful followers of Jesus, the Lamb is meek and mild.

This bifurcation of audience makes a good deal of sense of Street’s insistence that the Lamb is actually “a creature of two paradoxical aspects that operate simultaneously” (Ibid., p. 185). Although Street understands the horned Lamb as a “unified symbol of pacifist humanity and violent divinity” (Ibid.), it also appears that the relationship one has with the Lamb of Revelation for him depends greatly on which population one finds oneself in. Street asks, “In answer to the question, ‘Is it lamb or ram?’” and then answers his own question: “it is neither and both” (Ibid.). It seems, however, that one could answer that question for oneself quite confidently, depending on one’s relationship to that figure.

3.3. *The Lamb Is Really a Lion*

Boring’s third suggestion is that we might understand “Lamb” as simply another word for “Lion.” The seemingly vulnerable image of the Lamb is really just another symbol for the power and might of the lion. Paul Middleton is among the chief proponents of this position. Where others see disparity and even reinterpretation in the juxtaposition of lion and lamb, Middleton sees continuity. The defining feature of the Lamb in Revelation, he argues, is not its vulnerability nor its subversion, but rather its blatant power.

Middleton points out that the Lamb in Revelation 5 is not a typical lamb. John describes it as “standing as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth” (5:6). Each of these details, Middleton insists, argues for an understanding of John’s Lamb not as a jarring contrast to that of the Lion, but rather as consonant with it. The Lamb conquers *in the same way* that a Lion does. The images reinforce each other.

Middleton notes that the horn (nrq) is a stock image in the Hebrew Bible invoking military strength or royal power.²⁶ God is called “the horn of my salvation” (2 Sam 22:3; Ps 18:2). And the horn can have messianic associations, as well. The psalmist rejoices that God will “make to sprout a horn for David” (Ps 131:17), and in the prophet Micah God promises that Israel will have an iron horn and bronze hooves so that it can “grind down many nations” (4:13), which has a messianic connotation in 1QS 5:26.²⁷ Finally, Judas Maccabeus, the famed leader of the Maccabean Revolt, is portrayed in the Animal Apocalypse of 1 Enoch as a horned lamb who conquers his enemies with superior force (90:6–19) (Middleton 2018, p. 86). A Lamb with seven horns is, for Middleton, a Lamb with military power.

Similarly, the fact that the Lamb possesses seven eyes is a sign for Middleton that the Lamb is omniscient. The Hebrew Bible portrays the eyes of God as representing God’s all-seeing quality.²⁸ John seems dependent on Zechariah 4, where the seven eyes of God “run to and fro throughout the whole earth” (4:10). The association with Zechariah is

important, since here the prophet declares that God will accomplish God's purposes "not my might, nor by power, but by my spirit" (4:6) since John has already identified the seven eyes as the seven spirits of God. The Lamb with seven eyes is for Middleton a powerful figure invested with divine authority (Ibid., p. 87).

Finally, Middleton offers a different reading of the one quality attributed to the Lamb in Rev 5 that could be seen as subversive—the fact that John describes it as "slain." For many commentators, this one detail undermines and reinterprets the entire constellation of images we have explored so far. For some readers of the Apocalypse even though the Lion "conquers," and the Lamb has seven horns, seven eyes, and is near the center of power (the throne), the revelation that the Lamb has been slaughtered reverses and challenges an understanding of the Lamb as a traditional conqueror. Middleton points out, however, that "the slain Lamb does what slain lambs do not normally do; it is standing (ἑστεκός)" (Ibid., p. 86). Middleton argues that the status of the Lamb as slain does not preclude ancient audiences from understanding it as powerful and aggressive. Whereas modern readers might see a slain Lamb as vulnerable, Middleton argues this does not appear to be a view shared by the narrative world of the text (Ibid., p. 87). The combined effect of all this imagery might even suggest a different translation for ἀρνίον. Middleton argues that "ram" instead of "lamb" might better capture the kind of presentation John is seeking in Rev 5. Rams have horns, are symbols of power, and were used for sin offerings, marking festivals, forming covenants, and the consecration of priests, so that none of the sacrificial associations are lost in rendering ἀρνίον as ram.²⁹ Even if we reject this suggestion, Middleton concludes by arguing that we should set aside seeing the Lion/Lamb imagery as incongruous or subversive. This understanding, he insists, comes from a misreading of Rev 5, which is filled with imagery of messianic power, triumph, and overwhelming might (Ibid., pp. 94–96). Those who argue for a non-violent or vulnerable Lamb Christology, in his opinion, must reckon with the fact that, "not only does [the Lamb] conquer, in the rest of the Apocalypse he undertakes activities that might be more appropriate to the lion image. It shares the Day of Wrath with God (Rev. 6.12–17), supervises the torment of the wicked (14.10), and conquers an army in war (17.14)" (Ibid., p. 92) might describe Jesus as a Lamb, but this Lamb is not tame.

3.4. *The Lion Is Really a Lamb*

The final configuration between Lion and Lamb that Boring offers, and the one he argues is the correct reading of Revelation, is the reverse of the previous model. The Lion, he contends, is really a Lamb. He muses that perhaps John was familiar with the synagogue practice of "perpetual Kethib/Qere", in which a word or phrase that appears in the text is replaced with another, so that John might hint to his readers that "wherever the tradition says 'lion,' read 'Lamb'" (Boring 1989, p. 110). For Boring, it is the vulnerable, slain image of the Lamb that redefines and reinterprets the image of the conquering lion.

Yet it is precisely the word νικᾶω that Boring sees as the "key christological verb" in Revelation. It is what binds Jesus and his followers together, so that Christians conquer "not only by what they do but what Jesus has done (12:11)" (Ibid., p. 111). What Jesus has done to conquer, Boring notes, is the same thing that his followers are called to do. Conquering, for both Jesus and his followers, "means no more or less than dying" (Ibid.). He also points out that the language of conquering had not only a militaristic connotation but also a forensic, legal one as well. Drawing on the work of Adela Collins, he argues that to conquer could also mean being acquitted in a court of law. Collins explains that, "The acquittal of the faithful is paradoxical. It is expected that they will be found guilty in the local Roman courts and executed. But the testimony they give and their acceptance of death will win them the acquittal that counts—in the heavenly court, in the eyes of eternity" (Collins 1979, p. 14). For Boring, this paradoxical outcome of accepting death is how the Lamb conquers, so that "what it means to 'win' has been redefined by the cross of Jesus" (Boring 1989, p. 111).

Likewise, Loren Johns' work in his book *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John* also represents the last of Boring's categories. Recognizing the scene in Revelation 5 as "central" and "the rhetorical fulcrum" of the entire book, Johns emphasizes the contrast between what John sees and hears even more strongly, arguing that the image of a Lamb standing as if slaughtered "is specifically designed to communicate the shock, irony, and ethical import of his message that *the Conquering One conquers by being a slain lamb*, not a devouring lion" (Johns 2003, p. 169 n. 70, italics original). At the heart of Revelation's message, he insists, is a radical redefinition of power.

Johns writes at length to clarify what he means by this redefinition of power. The imagery of the Lamb in Rev 5 associated with power and strength—its horns and eyes and its standing posture—are indeed images of power, Johns admits, but they are to be interpreted through their juxtaposition with the image of slaughter, not in opposition to it. We are not to understand Jesus as having first suffered weakness, through his death and crucifixion, and then gained power by his resurrection and vindication. "Essential to a proper understanding of the book's rhetoric is the recognition that the lamb *has triumphed* in his death and resurrection, not that the lamb *will triumph in the future, subsequent* to his death and resurrection" (Ibid., p. 161, italics original).

Central to Johns' argument is the conviction that ἐσφαγμένον ("slaughtered, slain") does not primarily mean "expiation." He notes that in the NT the word group associated with σφάγω is only used for the murder of humans, not animal sacrifice (Ibid., p. 169). The logic of sacrifice as expiation, according to Johns, is rare in Revelation in general, and he suggests avoiding the language of "sacrifice", as it is imprecise. Instead, we should understand slaughter in the context of "political resistance and martyrdom" (Ibid., p. 161). That the Lamb is "slaughtered," then, becomes the central lens through which to understand Jesus and his victory. Jesus overcomes not (primarily)³⁰ by dying as an atoning sacrifice for sins but as a faithful witness unto death who refuses to compromise with the systems of the world. This, for Johns, is how victory is (re)defined in Revelation. "The lamb is strong, but the exhibition of its strength is unconventional: its strength lies in its consistent, nonviolent resistance to evil" (Ibid.).

For Johns, then, to engage in nonviolent resistance unto death *is* to be victorious; they are one and the same. Nonviolent resistance is not a mechanism or performance that then allows some future action to occur; it is not a prerequisite activity that unlocks some later, *actual* action of God's that we would then call victory. Nonviolent resistance itself is how God acts in history (Ibid., p. 163).³¹ The Lamb is not slaughtered and only then, later, becomes "worthy;" the Lamb is worthy because it is slaughtered. The focal point of the death of Jesus in Revelation, according to Johns, is not atonement, but witness, and it is this act—along with the other verbs used in Revelation 5 like "purchased" and "made"—that is the victory. These are not proleptic visions of what he will do, now that he is in a position of power to do something—these actions represent what Christ has already done in the present, by his faithful witness unto death (Ibid., p. 170). Thus, while Boring talks about a "Christological redefinition of victory", Johns actually outlines what that might look like. Jesus' nonviolent resistance to the point of death is synonymous with the Lamb's conquering, and that equation is, for Johns, the redefinition of victory.³²

4. Theology of Victory

What does it mean for Jesus to conquer in Revelation? Middleton argues that it is through dying that both Jesus and the saints who follow him become victorious. Middleton insists, however, that "the vindication of Jesus is not in any sense a *reversal* of his death" (Middleton 2018, p. 220, italics original). Instead, it is the death of Jesus that frees Christians from sins, makes them into a kingdom, and causes judgment. He wants to maintain that "it is through his death that that Lion/Lamb had conquered (νικάω; 5:5)" (Ibid.). Likewise, the martyrs who follow conquer and are victorious "not because they offer non-violent resistance, but because they follow the proto-martyr, the Lamb, whose death was followed

by vindication and glorification so that he shares God's throne and is the agent or arbiter of judgement" (Ibid., p. 224).

Similarly, Ragnar Leivestad sees the notion of victory in Revelation as comprising two categories: "moral-martyrological and mythical-eschatological" (Leivestad 1954, p. 237). The saints (following Jesus) conquer by refusing to accede to the demands of their culture, and die rather than deny their faith. But for Leivestad, "the victory of the martyrs is not complete until they have been justified through their own exaltation and the punishment of their persecutors" (Ibid., p. 238). In both of these cases, notions of victory are bound up in their enemies' defeat—in order for Christians to win, someone else must also lose.³³

For Street, "John's challenge is to present this crucified Messiah as a victor, not to erase the shame of his historical end since John's community accepts Jesus as Messiah with full knowledge of his execution and death, but to emphasize that Christ's execution at the hands of Roman authorities was actually victory and that Christians are in the same situation Jesus was."³⁴ The language of defeat being "actually" a victory is an attempt to express the paradox of the conquering slaughtered Lamb, but it fails to outline precisely how that would work or what that might look like.

Johns comes closest to offering a "Christological redefinition of winning" at which Boring only hints. Johns rightly sees that for John, Jesus' death/resurrection represent not only the redemption of God's people but also the key to overcoming evil in history (Johns 2003, p. 168). He notes that for Revelation the notion of conquering and the idea of victory go together as word groups (Ibid., pp. 171–78). He is careful to explain as well that, although victory is being redefined, it is not the case that white becomes black and vice versa; victory is not a "spiritual" triumph that is won through dying. Losing is not paradoxically winning. Victory is a matter of spiritual discernment (Ibid., pp. 179–80). But if Boring is right and Johns' impulse is correct, what does this look like? How can we more fully articulate the theological logic at work in this Christological redefinition?

Redefining victory as "winning by dying" can elicit both awe and befuddlement. Christians often use the language of paradox to describe aspects of their faith, even when those concepts are not always necessarily paradoxical.³⁵ But how does something like "winning by dying" work? Is this equivalent to the logic of "winning by losing"? If the saints "conquer" through their faithfulness, what does that look like in the everyday lives of Christians?

One way of understanding this notion of victory as faithfulness is to construe it as a strategy, an alternative way of achieving the same goal as everyone else. The temptation here is to construe faithfulness as a hidden *techné*, a secret skill that brings about the same desired end we share with everyone else. This turns faithfulness into tactics, and is similar to how game theory suggests kindness has worked evolutionarily to bring about genetic advantage.

In Robert Axelrod's landmark 1984 book on game theory, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, Axelrod reports and discusses the results of a series of simulated AI strategies involving the iterated prisoner's dilemma.³⁶ Several different algorithmic strategies were submitted to a tournament meant to simulate evolutionary scenarios. These algorithms provided the rules for how each program would interact with the others. Some tried to be exploitative and take advantage of "nice" strategies by defecting when cooperation had already been established. Others were robustly "selfish" from the beginning, and offered seemingly little interest at all in mutuality.³⁷ What Axelrod found was that the most successful strategy in his tournament was the one called "tit for tat", which always began with cooperation and then copied whatever the opponent before did last. After several rounds of this tournament involving different rules and algorithms, Axelrod outlined what he considered to be the necessary traits of a strategy in order to be successful: nice (not defecting before opponent does), retaliating (do not be exploited), forgiving (stop cycles of revenge), and non-envious (do not attempt to score more than your opponent) (Axelrod 1984, pp. 34–54). The results from these series of experiments have offered insight into how forgiveness and cooperation

could result evolutionarily from self-interested agents, since successful strategies lead to those outcomes.³⁸

It is tempting to think that the kind of victory modeled by the Lamb in Revelation is a clever kind of strategy, like “tit for tat”, which, while perhaps appearing disadvantaged, actually offers hidden strength. For many, this kind of non-obvious advantage would constitute what they consider to be the paradox of the cross.³⁹ Faithfulness, however, is not a strategy. It is not exploited to make winning possible. Nor is it an excuse for losing, a foil one can deploy when things do not turn out as desired and with which one can comfort oneself by saying, “Well, I failed but that’s ok because failing is what being faithful means”. Faithfulness is not a mechanism for ensuring that one wins more often nor a consolation for failure to achieve. It is a way of standing in the midst of winning and losing. It is the how of Christian existence, not the what.

What John’s dialectical image of the Lion and Lamb means for victory is much more subtle. Winning in sports as a Christian is not acceptance of the world’s task (victory defined by the world) nor rejection of it (victory redefined) nor achieving the same end by different means (victory alternatively reached). Winning as a Christian is not a separate event from winning as an unbeliever; they are not competitive with each other. Christian winning happens *in the pursuit of* winning as a participant. It is not defined by a goal or *telos*; it is not reached or achieved. It is a posture, a way of being that is inhabited.

Here, it is helpful to reflect on Rudolf Bultmann’s concept of “paradoxical identity,” which stems from his inquiry into how we can understand the meaning of God as acting in a causally-closed world. If we insist on God’s actions in an objectifying sense, Bultmann argues, we speak of God’s actions mythologically, for it imagines God’s actions as though they were another creaturely agent competing against other forces in the world. In this understanding, for God to perform some specific act would necessarily mean that some other force or creature did not do it, and vice versa. Rather, for Bultmann, God’s actions take place *within* so-called natural, secular events, and are hidden within plain sight. “Faith insists not on the direct identity of God’s action with worldly events, but, if I may be permitted to put it so, on the *paradoxical identity* which can be believed here and now against the appearance of non-identity” (Bultmann 1958, p. 62, italics mine).

What Bultmann means is that one cannot point to any specific historical event and declare that here, uniquely and specifically, is an act of God. This leaves people with three ways for trying to understand God’s action in the world: nonidentity, direct identity, and paradoxical identity. “Nonidentity” would be to insist that we have no way of knowing at all about God’s action in the world and all God talk is thus rendered meaningless.⁴⁰ Another is to insist on direct identity, that all actions in the world are synonymous with God’s actions. But Bultmann denies that every worldly event is an act of God, for this would result in pantheism (every action is a divine action, which means no action is divine); faith does not insist on the direct identity of God’s action with worldly events, but on their *paradoxical identity*, which can only be believed here and now against the appearance of non-identity.

In faith I realize that the scientific world-view does not comprehend the whole reality of the world and of human life, but faith does not offer another general world-view which corrects science in its statements on its own level. Rather, faith acknowledges that the world-view given by science is a necessary means for doing our work within the world. Indeed, I need to see the worldly events as linked by cause and effect not only as a scientific observer, but also in my daily living. In doing so there remains no room for God’s working. This is the paradox of faith, that faith “nevertheless” understands as God’s action here and now an event which is completely intelligible in the natural or historical connection of events. This “nevertheless” is inseparable from faith (Bultmann 1958, p. 65).

Paradoxical identity is not just a claim about the nature of God but, more importantly, about the way in which we live our lives before God in faith. “To illustrate what Bultmann

means by this term [paradoxical identity], it helps to think of the shift from two-dimensional to three-dimensional vision. If we look at the world through just one eye, we accurately see what is around us, but everything appears flat. We see the objects on the surface, so to speak, but we do not comprehend their *depth*. Opening our other eye affords us a new perspective by which to observe the world. Our brains reconcile these two sets of images so that we perceive the world in a three-dimensional way. We see the *same object* in *two ways*. The two perspectives are nonidentical but coterminous" (Congdon 2015a, p. 148). To see God act in the world is not to be given access to special events that others do not possess, but to see the same events as others and perceive them differently.⁴¹ Like Schrödinger's cat, which is both alive and dead at the same time, an event can be both entirely explainable as a "secular," worldly event, and, at the same time, the specific direct act of God.⁴²

Likewise, I want to argue that Christian winning/victory is paradoxically present in Christian participation in sports. It happens *in* the pursuit of winning/losing but it is not synonymous with that outcome. It is also not an alternative destination. It is a posture, a way of being. Victory is paradoxically present in winning/losing but is not coterminous with it. That is, one can win (or lose) a specific sporting event and those outcomes have no bearing on victory. Neither winning nor losing is an indicator of victory, and victory does not correlate with specific outcomes. It is the transformation of those experiences *as they are* in light of Jesus' own victory.

To further illustrate this, it is helpful here to recount a conversation between Karl Barth and Heinrich Vogel on the nature of resurrected bodies. Vogel, whose daughter was crippled, had expressed to Barth his desire for his daughter to dance around the Lamb's throne in the resurrection. "To Vogel's expression of this desire Barth responded that what needed to be changed in the eschaton was not the physical configuration of the body of Vogel's daughter but rather 'our' perception of it as somehow not quite up to the standard that God intended for his creation." We limit God's authority of choosing how continuity and discontinuity with bodies would work; "we project worldly standards of physical completeness or normalcy onto the imagination of resurrected life." (Brock and Wannenwetsch 2018, p. 216).

Vogel's expectation comports with what most would likely assume about resurrection: that those features we deem weak, abnormal, or dishonorable would be banished in the eschaton. Barth's rejoinder offers a different way of imagining this issue: that resurrection does not repudiate and eliminate weakness, but transforms it and our relationship to it. We assume, Barth suggests, that we know what a perfected body ought to look like, and we then assume that God's rightwising action is to bring about bodies that comport with that image. Barth, however, suggests that what needs to change is our perception of those bodies and the ways in which human societies accommodate them (or do not).

In a similar vein, Rowan Williams, in his magisterial book on Christology, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, affirms this same idea by suggesting that the action of God in the world is not spectacle but precisely the ordinariness of creation. Jesus' "performance of creatureliness is to be identified as the self-disclosure of the infinite, answer to the *quid sit Deus?* question. . . it shows that God, as the reality which does not ever have to defend itself against any 'other,' is not susceptible of description as any kind of determinate subject. . . . The tension [Przywara] puts at the centre of his scheme is the 'unresolved and irresolvable' reality of the humiliated and executed Christ: *this* is what God does, *this* is God's enactment of what it is to be God in the terms of finite, 'speaking' action in the world." (Williams 2018, pp. 239–40) The kind of victory that Jesus embodies is in line with the paradox of Jesus' identity as both fully God and human.

In the Gospel of Mark, the young man in the tomb tells the women who have come to anoint Jesus' body, "you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, *the one who has been and continues to be crucified*" (Mk 16:6). I have translated the verb ἐσταυρωμένον to reflect its form as a perfect passive participle—Jesus is the one who was crucified but also continues, *even in resurrection*, to be crucified.⁴³ This should not surprise us; Jesus bears the wounds of his execution even in his appearances to the disciples. The transformed body of the resurrected

Jesus, the body of glorification and the foretaste of the future life, still remains marred by death. Resurrection does not obliterate death and disfiguration, but it does transform it. We might say resurrection redefines and re-narrates what it means to die a brutal death.

Likewise, I suggest that for John, who also uses a perfect passive participle for Jesus (ἐσφαγμένον: has been and continues to be slaughtered), the reality of Jesus' vicious death and humiliation continues to have significance for understanding Jesus as victor. It is *as* the slaughtered Lamb that Jesus overcomes. Or, to put it differently, Jesus' activity as a conqueror and Jesus' status as a victim are to be seen paradoxically as the same (Bultmann). Or, yet again, we might say that being slaughtered provides the essential starting point for talking about what overcoming means (Barth, Williams). All of these expressions are aiming towards the same end: a specifically Christian (indeed, a Christological) re-characterizing of what it means to win.

Without this re-characterization I am suggesting that our definition of winning is often defined by domination, self-aggrandizement, and glorification; a definition we then apply to Jesus and his own victory. The first three ways we explored above in which interpreters have often read Revelation 5 suggest that the impulse to make Jesus' loss a victory in the non-paradoxical sense—in a sense that is immediately and readily available for all to understand and use—is strong and undeniable. That is, we have often begun our theological reflection on victory with an *a priori* understanding of what it means to win already. We assume—*of course!*—that we know what victory means, because such a notion seems so obvious. With that concept in hand, we then begin the work to understand how a humiliating execution could be molded and transformed to represent and embody this understanding of victory. A weak Jesus who dies without fanfare seems like a theological problem in need of alteration. Our “obvious” understanding of victory is thus the lens for interpreting the death of Jesus.

This is the reverse of how Paul approaches the message about the cross, where the very experience of Jesus' disempowerment and dishonor serves as the locus for understanding what strength and wisdom are (1 Cor 1:18ff). Here, the weakness and foolishness of God are contrasted with human notions of power and insight. Likewise, I suggest, John's juxtaposition of the conquering Lion with the slaughtered Lamb is meant to interpret the former by the latter. Bultmann's concept of paradoxical identity, along with Williams' assertion of the paradoxical nature of Christ's identity offers a way of understanding the slaughtered Lamb as a model for victory that does not require assimilating it to, and subsuming it under, the dominating lion. This paradox means *both* accepting, owning, and naming loss and failure *and* refusing to let those realities define our existence and hope for transformation in the midst of it. Faith observes the slaughtered, humiliated Lamb, and does not deny that reality or render it only the first stage in a sequence which will end in the Lamb's domination, but accepts it, receives, and *also* says, “nevertheless.”

5. Conclusions

What does all of this mean for those whose identities and professions are bound up with traditional, non-Christological definitions of winning? How does a Christian athlete, or coach, or sports administrator meaningfully interact with this insight? Such a discussion is outside the scope of this short reflection, and its application is not uniform and singular.⁴⁴ But I think that a good place to start is with the experience of failure and loss. I share here three very short reflections as tentative applications on how one might encounter loss differently, in light of the discussion above.

First, in an effort to sound spiritually mature and robust, many Christians (athletes or not) regularly maintain that God does not care who wins or loses in athletic contests—that God is not, for example, a Dallas Cowboys fan. But such a view actually disengages God with the world and creates a zone in which God is either apathetic or inactive. While it might be reassuring to us when we lose, this notion removes God from the sphere of human activity. Instead, it would be better to assert that God might, in fact, care about which team wins or loses a particular sporting event, but not for the reasons we would. God's action

in the world is often mysterious and indiscernible, but a robust theology would maintain God's action in the world, even with the outcome of athletic contests, while also asserting that God's purpose in those outcomes and our desired ends would likely often not line up. Accepting loss means not consoling ourselves with the notion that sports do not matter, but that our thoughts and God's thoughts are not the same.

Secondly, and relatedly, accepting loss means neither seeing it (necessarily) as a failure or judgment by God nor as a source from which to learn a lesson. Some experiences must simply be endured without final answers or complete insight, and losses in athletic contests are among those. While some revelation is offered to us there are some things that are simply "hidden from the foundation of the world" (Mt 13:35). Accepting loss can be an act of trust, a concrete example of Bultmann's "nevertheless" of faith mentioned above, which maintains God is active in the world, and in our lives, in ways we cannot yet see or comprehend, and might never understand.

Finally, accepting loss might also look like a re-examination of what we value, prioritize, and esteem. Like the discussion about Vogel's handicapped daughter, our expectations about winning and losing are often shaped by what winning and losing represent for our culture. Athletic loss can be the opportunity to rethink our notions of glory, service, sacrifice, community, and love for enemies, among a host of other things. It can also serve as the impetus for discovering whom we have overlooked or undervalued or which tenets we should question or dismiss. If, for example, we only valued crowning the fastest human to run 100 m no matter the cost, why not encourage as much drug use, doping, and cruelty in training as possible, to see what a human is actually capable of achieving? We have, of course, decided as a global community that those means do not justify the ends we would seek. How might experiencing loss reveal more of those evaluative judgments on what it is we actually seek from sports?

It must be emphasized again, however, that all of this reflection should come *at the same time* as we are also striving for victory in competition. Accepting loss does not mean not caring or trying to turn loss into victory. Being a Christian does not take those experiences away. And it does no good to close one's eyes to those realities and apply spiritual pixie dust to one's life when defeat crushes us, as it inevitably will, for us all. Instead, we can begin by embracing loss and failure *as* loss and failure, to resist the temptation to spiritualize those experiences away. Conquering like Jesus is not to swap out defeat for victory, or to find a way to turn a loss into a win. It means losing like Jesus did. It means drinking in and embracing loss, but hoping for its transformation in the same way that the crucified body of Jesus is resurrected and redefined, even though it remains a crucified body. Learning to define our failures through the lens of the slaughtered Jesus is one step towards sharing in the victory of the Lamb.

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Notes

¹ The Rise & Fall of Mars Hill Podcast: Season 1, Episode 12, 1:14:48.

² The word appears, usually in verbal form, seven times total in the rest of the NT (John 16:33; Romans 8:37; Hebrews 11:33; 1 John 2:13, 4:4, 5:4, 5:5). In Revelation alone the word appears 16 times (2:7, 11, 17, 26, 28; 3:5, 12, 21; 5:5; 6:2; 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; and 21:7). Leivestad (1954), notes that the NT does not draw on the LXX for its use of νικάω as it only appears twice in the entire corpus (21). Grabiner (2015, p. 99), observes that, "If the Lamb is the key Christological noun in Revelation, 'conquer' is the 'key Christological verb.'"

³ The original name Phil Knight chose for his shoe company was "Dimension Six", which all of his employees roundly rejected for being "unspeakably bad." He polled employees to find a better name but there were no better suggestions, until at the

last minute before submitting paperwork to the U.S. Patent Office Jeff Johnson, the company's first employee, said he had had a dream the night before in which the name "Nike" came to him, from the winged goddess of victory. See Uta (2020) (<https://brandminds.live/the-story-behind-the-brand-nike/>, accessed 18 July 2023).

The same word used for military victory (νικάω) is used repeatedly to describe athletic victory. Lucian, *Timon* 50, uses νενίκηκε to describe Timon's victory in a boxing match. P. Oxy. 14.1759 contains a brief letter of Demetrius to a certain athlete, Theon, wishing him prayers that he might νικᾶν (conquer) in all his sporting ventures. And Ignatius of Antioch tells Polycarp (*Pol.* 3.1) that it is the part of athletes to suffer blows and νικάν (be victorious). Furthermore, the foundation of the games themselves were often rooted in military battles, real or legendary. The Nemean games were connected to Heracles' battle with the Nemean lion and the Pythian games link their origin to Apollo's slaying of the python at Delphi (See Cazzadori 2016, pp. 312–21).

Statues of the winged goddess "Victory" (Νίκη) have been found in abundance in the archeological record of the Greco-Roman era. The statues depict a figure (a woman) ready to take flight, usually with wings (See Oviadiah 2000, pp. 87–92).

Perhaps the most pervasive example of this double-sided symbol was the laurel wreath symbolizing both athletic and military victory and used as the iconography of Augustus' reign. This symbol "helped convert Augustan *potestas* into *auctoritas*, dominion gained through civic violence into more fungible, evidently consensual sociopolitical currency." (Pandey 2018, p. 279).

Of special interest as well is the appearance of the term in 1 and 2 *Maccabees*. Here, the military imagery of victory in battle (2 *Macc.* 13:15) exists side-by-side with the martyrs (Eleazar and the seven brothers) who triumph over the unrighteous king by their virtuous deaths (2 *Macc.* 1:11; 6:10; 7:3f; 8:1; 9:6, 30; 11:20f).

Not every location gets a commendation; it is lacking in the letters to Sardis and Laodicea.

Several churches receive no chastisement, either because it is unwarranted (Smyrna, Philadelphia) or because there was no commendation with which to contrast a chastisement (Sardis, Laodicea).

This part of the letter is highly variable, and some parts lack clear instruction entirely (Philadelphia).

Sometimes this comes after the address to those who conquer (Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea) and sometimes before (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum).

"[Chapters 4–5's] central image is political. The throne image occurs again and again like a keynote symbol throughout the whole book. . . . The central theological question of chapters 4–5 as well as of the whole book is: Who is the true Lord of this world?" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991, p. 58).

"In the formula 'the One sitting on the throne' two concepts, God and king, are merged into a single powerful rhetorical device which highlights the 'embodiment of absolute power.'" (Gallusz 2014, p. 123).

There is debate over the origin of the imagery found in this chapter. A popular theory posits John's reliance on an ancient Egyptian enthronement scene (See, e.g., Aune 2006, pp. 233–39). My interest in Rev 5 centers on its narrative elements within the text, which remains largely unaffected by these kinds of considerations.

The meaning of the scroll is disputed. Among the most popular interpretations is that it represents "the mystery of the meaning of history" that is unknowable to humans (See, for example, Newport 1986, p. 175). Others see the scroll as the contents of what John is to preach (Johnson 2001, pp. 103–4). Finally, Ranko Stefanovic, who wrote an entire book attempting to deduce its meaning, suggests that the sealed scroll is connected to the OT idea of a covenant book and might represent "the revelation of God's will to men" and thus be related to the OT itself (Stefanovic 1996, p. 322).

Grabiner (2015, p. 98), notes that the "total silence in response to the question is conspicuous in a noisy book like Revelation."

The Greek highlights the prominence of the verb, ἐνίκησεν, by placing it at the beginning of the sentence before the subject or objects.

Slater (1999, p. 169), points out that 4 *Ezra* 11 and 12 also utilizes the symbol of a lion as a messianic symbol, attesting "independently" to "the expectation in some Jewish quarters for a conquering Messiah."

"Judah" and "Root of David" are standard messianic tropes by the time of Revelation, drawing on Gen 49:9 and Isa 11:1. See Beale (1999, pp. 349, 1146–47).

Grabiner (2015, p. 100), points out that "new songs" were connected with God's victory over enemies in the OT.

There is some contention about this claim, as we will see below.

Articulating this relationship is surprisingly uncommon in much of the literature on Rev 5. Brighton (1999), for example, is content simply to state that, "The victory is won by Christ the Lamb, in his death on the cross and his resurrection" (137) without bothering to expound on how being slaughtered should be considered a victory.

Translation by Wright (1985).

The depiction of the Messiah in the DSS is complicated and controversial. Some even claim there are two different Messiahs described in the various documents. For more discussion see Collins (2010).

Translations from Martínez and Tigchelaar (1997).

For *power in general*, cf. Deut 33:17; Lam 2:3, 17; Ezek 34:21; Dan 7:7–8, Mic 4:13; Hab 3:4. For *military might*, cf. Ps 75:4, 10; Jer 48:25; Lam 2:17; Dan 7:23–27; Zech 1:18–21. For *royal power*, cf. 1 Sam 2:10; Ps 148:14; Jer 48:25; Zech 1:18; Dan 8:20. The one that

God exalts is often associated with horn imagery (1 Sam 2:1, 10; 1 Chron 25:5; Pss 75:10; 89:17, 24; 92:10; 112:9; 148:14; Lam 2:17; Sir. 47:5) (Middleton 2018, p. 85).

27 “With your breath of your lips may you kill the wicked. . . May he make your horns of iron and your hoofs of bronze. May you gore like a bull. . . and may you trample the nation[s] like mud in the streets. For God has raised you to a sceptre for the rulers before you. . . all the nations will serve you, and he will make you strong by his holy Name, so that you will be like a lion. . .” Translation from Martínez and Tigchelaar (1997).

28 Cf. 2 Chr 16:9; Ps 34:15; 139:16; Prov 15:3; Sir. 17:15, 19; 23:19; 39:19.

29 Ibid., pp. 87–88. Middleton also notes that “ram” and “lamb” were used interchangeably in the *Aqedah* story as the object of sacrifice, making this association even stronger.

30 Johns (2003, p. 169), n. 70, does not want to argue that John the seer polemicizes against Paul’s theology of the cross with its atonement theology, only that Revelation is taking up that traditional notion and connecting it to its own understanding of the death of Jesus. Presumably, then, notions of expiation lie in the background of the imagery of slaughter even if they are not foregrounded by the author.

31 Ibid., p. 163. Johns argues that the unsealing of the scroll is akin to understanding the action of God in history and that the Lamb, therefore, offers a window into God’s nature.

32 Although there is not space for a full discussion, here it is important to highlight Steve Moyise’s work on the Lion/Lamb imagery (Moyise 2001). Moyise rightly points out the danger in simplistic readings of this imagery in Revelation, noting, “The Lion/Lamb juxtaposition is not so stable that readers are forced to reinterpret the apocalyptic violence in non-violent ways. It is imperative that they do so (for the good of humanity), but it is also imperative that they realize the precarious instability of such a position. . . It does not do justice to the book of Revelation to advocate a position where Lamb simply replaces Lion. Evil is much more complex than that” (194). My own work in this paper, in part, is an attempt to argue for a theology of victory that does justice to this complexity.

33 Similarly, Dickerson (2003, pp. 67–81), contrasts the notions of “moral victory” with “military victory” in *The Lord of the Rings*, suggesting that the former is more important than the latter. Although these concepts are not explicitly Christological, they represent a similar idea to Leivistad’s suggestion that we can rank or categorize different kinds of victories.

34 Street (2012, pp. 173). Beale (1999, p. 353), argues for a similar idea even if he does not explicitly draw out the implications. When asking “how is the paradox of ‘conquering through suffering’ to be understood more precisely?” he suggests that Christ was “physically defeated but spiritually victorious.” This idea locates victory in a “spiritual” sphere that is inaccessible to others, and allows the empirical defeat to be mitigated.

35 Quine (1976, p. 5), outlines different categories of paradoxes in his famous essay “The Ways of Paradox.” Veridical and falsidical paradoxes rest on premises that are either true but not obvious or seem true but are not (respectively). Antinomies are true paradoxes because they “produce a self-contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning.” I would argue that the redefinition of victory for which Boring argues and I attempt to delineate in this essay is an example of the antinomy class of paradoxes according to Quine. Hoffman (2005, pp. 148–49), argues that, “paradoxes play a major role for the seer [of Revelation] in his way of describing Christ. He defines and explains Christ paradoxically as unexplainable, and thus comprehensible only through paradoxes.”

36 The prisoner’s dilemma is a classic thought experiment analyzed by game theory with the following parameters: two members of a criminal gang are captured and interrogated separately. If both turn on each other (defect) then both will be given three years of prison time. If one defects and the other refuses to talk, the defector will be given only a year in prison, while the other will serve four years. If they both stay silent, however, they will serve only two years each (the values for each scenario are sometimes altered, but the important point is that mutual cooperation is a better outcome for all involved than mutual defection, and when one cooperates but the other defects it is worst and best for each, respectively). The “iterated” element of this game is important because if neither member expected to see or interact with each other again, then the best option would always be to defect on the other person. But knowing that you will face them again changes the calculus of interaction (See Axelrod 1984, pp. 7–12, for more discussion).

37 A survey of some of the more interesting and noteworthy strategies are outlined by Axelrod (1984, pp. 34–54).

38 Ibid., pp. 55–69; and especially 88–105 for an account of how “selfishly” driven Darwinian evolution can yield cooperation via the mechanisms discussed by Axelrod. Ezra Klein referenced these ideas offhandedly recently when discussing the American political landscape: “For the health of democracy it’s actually better to have two norm-eroders than only one norm-eroder because then there’s no sanction for norm-erosion on either side. . . in game theory it’s often proven. . . that the optimal strategy in a lot of hostile negotiations is tit-for-tat, that you should react however the other player reacted until they change strategy. . . having a strategy where you match what the other side is doing will get you to a better outcome than simply trying to hold to a more when-they-go-low-we-go-high approach.” The Ezra Klein Show Podcast “There’s Been a Massive Change in Where American Policy Gets Made,” 6 December 2022, 48:43.

39 This position is actually a relapse back to the third point above: that victory *looks like* losing but it is not.

- 40 “Apophatic theologies posit a *nonidentity* between God and the world, which precludes the possibility of genuine knowledge and talk of God—something Bultmann refuses to abandon. The alternative is a *paradoxical* identity, which argues that God acts in history, but in a way that is accessible only to faith.” (Congdon 2015a, p. 50).
- 41 “Bultmann thus describes the paradoxical identity of history and eschatology as the *double strangeness of Christian faith*: the strangeness of a historical event being the eschatological event of salvation is complemented by the strangeness of a historical existence being the eschatological existence of the justified. In this way faith corresponds to its object, that is to say, ‘the paradox of Christian existence corresponds to the paradox of “the word made flesh.”’ The ‘inner connection’ between these two paradoxes consists in the fact that ‘both are an offense to the human pursuit of security.’ Just as ‘the exalted Jesus is at the same time the earthly Jesus’—that is, ‘the *δοξασθεῖς* [glorified one] is always the *σὰρξ γενόμενος* [the one who became flesh]’—so, too, faith is an eschatological existence *within* human existence. Just as Jesus ‘can only be the Revealer as the one who always shatters [*der Zerbrechende*] the given, who always destroys every security, who always irrupts from the beyond and calls into the future,’ so, too, ‘faith is not flight from the world or asceticism but *deworldlizing* as the shattering [*Zerbrechung*] of all human standards and assessments.’ Faith no longer knows Christ ‘according to the flesh’ (2 Cor 5:16), and therefore it embodies a mode of existence governed not by the flesh but by the Spirit. Faith is the paradoxical identity of the new humanity of Christ and the old humanity of Adam—*simul iustus et peccator*—and as such it remains an offensive disruption to a world that demands proof of revelation and evidence of righteousness.” (Congdon 2015b, pp. 773–74).
- 42 The difference here is that with Schrödinger’s thought experiment when one finally observes the cat in the box the quantum wave function collapses and the cat is either dead or alive, not both. In precisely the opposite way, for Bultmann God’s action always remains paradoxically identical to a worldly event. “Martyn’s concept of bifocal vision is, in fact, equivalent to Bultmann’s concept of ‘paradoxical identity.’ The point for both is that the apocalypse is not an event alongside other events in history, nor does it create a new historical age that appears to all people apart from faith. On the contrary, it is an epistemological crisis in the sense that it alters our very relation to the world. The Christ-event transfigures history for the one who faithfully participates in it.” (Congdon 2012, p. 125).
- 43 “The Markan version of this confession uses the theologically weighty perfect passive participle for Jesus’ crucifixion (*εσταυρωμενον*), as does Paul in 1 Cor 1:23; 2:2; Gal 3:1 (cf. Gal 6:14); Jesus remains the Crucified One even after his resurrection.” (Marcus 2009, p. 1085).
- 44 For discussions on Christian sports and competition (see Ellis 2020, pp. 42–45); for a discussion of the spirituality of sport, including how a practitioner might engage in competition (see Hutch 2012, pp. 142–45); for an analysis of competition in sport, see Watson and White (2012, pp. 153–68); finally, for a discussion about competition and what its intersection with disability reveals about it (see Hargarden 2017, pp. 201–14).

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