

Why the church is a bad sport

By [David Williams](#)

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It was a silly video, really, just a little bit of feel good fluff that drifted into my social media filter-feeding:

The images, from an Australian professional tennis match, in which Leighton Hewitt and Jack Sock, two globally ranked athletes, are having at it. Leighton Hewitt serves, boom. The service is called out, and he prepares to take his second shot at it.

Only Jack Sock, having seen the ball in, shouts out to him that he really should challenge the call.

There is bafflement, and laughter, and the call is challenged. The video is reviewed and, indeed, the ball pasted the line, a clean, perfect ace. It's a great example of good sportsmanship, or so we are told. Here someone willing to lose, because winning at the expense of honesty would just be unacceptable.

Yet though it was a feel-good flit across my awareness, of no more import than a video of a puppy saying cheese, it stirred theological thinking in me. Because everything does.

What I thought was: this is why it's so hard for congregations to be moral agents. Because congregations are teams, and the morality of teams is different from the morality of individuals. Our genial tennis player, seeing the ball clearly in, is able to quickly make a choice as a moral agent. He would rather lose the point than lose his sense of integrity.

But singles tennis is a competition between two individuals. What if this were a team sport? What if this were football? If an opposing player catches a pass for a touchdown at the end of the endzone, and it's ruled out of bounds and incomplete, and you've seen his feet clearly in bounds, what do you do? The moral calculus is different. Can you make that decision for your team? Do your ethics define the ethics of the group?

The answer, more often than not, is no.

As Reinhold Niebuhr noted in the last century, it's why collectives have such trouble living up to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Individuals may be able to love enemies and turn the other cheek, but groups do so with difficulty. The morality of the collective is justice, the balance of claims within the group, not grace or mercy. The purpose of the group is self-preservation, not self-sacrifice.

Perhaps that's why churches, like corporations and political parties and armies, tend to be struggle so mightily to play the game by the rules Jesus taught.

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