YOU CAN'T BE AN EVANGELIST IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE WORLD CUP

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Category: Mission

Let me admit straight away, that I'm not a great football fan; I'll also admit that the title to this post is just a little hyperbolic!

Football as a Conversation Starter

Now, I may not be a great football fan, but there are many, many people who love the game and who like to talk about it and this is especially the case during a big tournament such as the World Cup. "Did you see last night's game?" is just about the easiest conversation starter that there is. As I said, I'm not a great football fan, but it doesn't take a lot of effort to keep track of the matches and scores so that you can join in a sensible conversation with people who want to talk about the cup.Â When we lived in Ivory Coast, I used to keep track of the progress of the two biggest local teams; ASEC and Africa. Just a little bit of background allowed me to strike up a conversation with taxi drivers, market salesmen or just about any other man in the country.

These days, English Premier league football is incredibly popular around the world and it is fairly common to see shopkeepers in West Africa wearing Chelsea or Arsenal shirts. From remarking that they have an interest in football in my country, to mentioning that I care about their country and want people to know about Jesus is a leap that even a tongue tied evangelist like me, can make.

Football may not be your sport of choice, but provides a simple way of getting into conversation with lots of people: try it!

Football as Cultural Expression

Whether you like it or not, there are a lot of people out there who love football. It is the worlds most popular spectator sport by a long way. That being said, there are lots of other people who don't like football, which is fair enough. However, whenever the World Cup comes around there those, mainly from North America, who feel constrained to go into detail about why football is an inferior sport to the ones they like. Even the normally thoughtful Scott McKnight had a fatuous dig at football recently.

Americans like to tell the rest of the world that football is silly because of the penalty shoot outs; apparently, without realising that they are a recent imposition on the game and disliked by most football fans. Blame TV schedules; don't blame football! We are also told that football is boring because the scores are so low, and, horror of horrors, games can end in a draw. While it would be interesting to explore the cultural meaning behind these sorts of comments, that is not my point. What really interests me is what the attacks on football communicate about attitudes to other cultures.

In the final analysis, sport is a part of national culture. People generally prefer the sports that they grew up watching and playing. I love rugby, but if I'd grown up in the US, I'd probably be really keen

on American football. It isn't that one game is intrinsically better than the other, it's just that we live in a world with different cultures; which is good!

However, this means that articles which make disparaging remarks about football and imply that it is inferior to baseball or what-have-you are implying that the cultures which play football are inferior to those that play baseball. It smacks of the sort of nationalism and cultural imperialism that have been squeezed out of most areas of Christian discourse and communication. Of course, I don't think for one moment that everyone should like football. However, those who feel a need to go out of their way to attack the game need to realise that they are alienating the people for whom football is a part of their national way of life and you simply cannot be an evangelist to a nation if you start insulting the national culture big time!