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In 1997 the Promise Keepers rally filled the mall in Washington D.C. with hundreds of thousands of men for its “Stand in the Gap” rally, led by former University of Colorado football coach, Bill McCartney. Though the Promise Keepers is less about sports than about spiritual renewal, personal commitments, and responsibilities, we now take for granted that athletics and evangelical Christianity often go hand-in-hand in America. Professional sports team have thriving chapters of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. We are not really surprised if, after an afternoon of bone-crushing tackles, an NFL lineman announces that “I just want to thank the good Lord for the opportunity to win a championship,” or if he sports a “What Would Jesus Do” tattoo. Clifford Putney’s book surveys the origins of the alliances of Christianity and sports culture. As he puts it, it “provides an overview of the muscular Christian movement in America at its historical peak, roughly from 1880 to 1920” (p. 7). The movement for muscular Christianity, Putney rightly notes, did not originate as an evangelical movement. Rather, concern for physical fitness and organized sports first grew up in the broader Victorian culture. Christian leaders, first in Great Britain, then began to adopt these activities as ways of building character and advancing civilization. By the 1880s American Protestant churches, which often had backgrounds of Puritan or Methodist aversions to sports, were routinely endorsing the culture of physical vigor.

Protestant reasons for celebrating muscular Christianity varied. Representatives of emerging liberal Protestantism saw it as a way of helping to develop “character” and “manliness,” in the sense of being “civilized.” The ideal man was both strong and responsible, dedicated to serving others. Social gospel leaders saw such strength as building the courage to go to work in the slums. More widespread was the evangelical idea that men who were strong spiritually, morally, and physically were necessary to carry on the rugged task of foreign missions. At home evangelical leaders, hoping to bring more men into the churches, began to build the alliance between sports and evangelism. The YMCA, which was designed first of all to promote Christian conversions, soon was also building gymnasiums, and was the most prominent organization in heralding this connection. Church camps and various organizations for boys that emphasized physical fitness and the outdoors arose in this era for similar purposes. The outstanding athlete-evangelist of the decades after 1900 was former major-league baseball player Billy Sunday.

As Putney’s account makes clear, the union of sports and Christianity was part of wider American cultural developments. Teddy Roosevelt’s advocacy of the rugged life, morality, civilization and military strength reminds us of this well-known trend. G. Stanley Hall provided one of the best-known scientific rationales for encouraging boys in the rough and tumble of outdoor life as a way of guiding them safely through the individual’s recapitulation of the savage stage of the race. Probably Putney’s most significant contribution in this largely familiar story is his documentation of the extent to which the ideals of muscular Christianity were applied to women as well as to men. Though the strenuous and outdoor life for women and girls were more contested than for men, still the YWCA, the Campfire Girls, and the Girl Scouts all reflected the new popularity of such outlooks.

Putney surveys the role of Protestant churches in World War I and particularly the part played by the still-
evangelical YMCA as the leading service organization used to support the troops abroad. By this time the theme of muscular Christianity as such seems not to have been so clearly articulated as the churches were more directly concerned with issues of warfare, civilization, and evangelism. In a brief “Conclusion” Putney also recounts the changes that faced the churches in the 1920s and implies that these changes had something to do with the decline of muscular Christianity. Apparently the old rhetoric had largely disappeared. Perhaps, though, the decline in the rhetoric was more a sign of success. Churches supporting sports was no longer remarkable. Church-related organizations such as summer camps, church athletic teams, youth organizations involving sports and the outdoors, or church-sponsored Boy Scout or Girl Scout troops had become taken-for-granted parts of the landscape.

Putney tells the story of this fascinating phenomenon well. Synthesizing earlier more specialized studies, Muscular Christianity provides a fuller introduction to the topic than is found elsewhere. Specialists in the field may be disappointed, however, by Putney’s reserve in critical interpretation. Although he refers to the relevant literature, he does not go far in developing his own interpretations. He touches lightly, for instance, on the implications of his subject for questions regarding gender, ideas of civilization, race, biological evolution, or even the meaning of “manliness.” Although all of these topics are there, Putney does not do enough either in developing his own thesis or in evaluating previous interpretations with regards to them. Nonetheless, his narrative provides an engaging overview for those seeking to understand the origins of a still-significant phenomenon.