

Laying one down: Baseball and sacrifice

by [John Bowlin](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue



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We are well into Lent and its disciplines. Holy Week is fast upon us. And the baseball season is beginning. I've always considered this convergence of calendars fitting. Baseball is a gospel game, or so it seems to me. At the very least, it bears a portion of the gospel's image.

The humble sacrifice bunt, for example, can help us see how sacrifice works. It can help us see how a sacrificial offering might save and what authority it might assume. Above all, it helps identify the intended ends of the one who deliberately suffers loss for the sake of another.

A runner is stranded on base, in a far country, unable to get home on his own. The batter, sent by another, lays down a bunt. His aim, his desire, is to obey the manager and get the runner home.

He does not want to be thrown out. He doesn't want to sacrifice himself so that the other can return home. He has no such false heroics or suicidal fantasies in mind. Rather, he wants to rescue the runner and move him toward home, nothing more. Laying down a bunt is the best means at his disposal.

Yet he will do what he can to reach first base safely. He dashes down the baseline full tilt, knowing full well that his own safety is unlikely. The loss will come as a consequence of the bunt. In obedience to the manager and for the sake of the runner, he is willing to choose this means, risk this loss, and make this sacrifice. In

this qualified sense, we can say that he laid down his bunt for another.

At the same time, we must also say that his sacrifice, although in one sense voluntary, was also contrary to his settled will. In Thomas Aquinas's useful idiom, the subjunctive state of his will (in Latin, his *velleity*) is negative toward the loss he is likely to incur. He would avoid it if he could, but he can't. Given the intentions he actually has and the means at his disposal, given the authority of the one who sent him and their shared desire to save the stranded runner, and given the circumstances that he finds himself in, he can do no other. He must offer himself. This he must do, and this he willingly does, although not without negative velleity toward the loss that he knows will come and toward his impending descent into the dark and dreary dugout.

One might ask: Aren't there other ways to advance the runner and bring him home? Surely there are, and others may tempt the batter to try them. Swinging for the fences brings rewards that bunting cannot. But the batter wants neither glory for himself nor to be honored by others. Rather, he wants to act in obedience to the manager and rescue the stranded runner, and he hopes to be united with each back home. For the sake of this end and in light of this hope, a bunt is best.

So goes my parable. It brings certain aspects of Christ's sacrifice into focus, most prominently the moral psychology of his self-offering and the work it accomplishes. If we say that Jesus wanted to die, either as an end in itself or as a means of saving humanity, then in effect we count his death a suicide. Many Christians speak in these terms, but this talk is best avoided. In its place, we need to find a way to speak of Christ's death without reducing it to self-slaughter. The moral psychology of a sacrifice bunt provides the terms we need.

Christ intended to obey the one who sent him and rescue his friends, his lost beloveds. He neither intended his own death as an end nor willed it as a means to some other. Rather, he acted in obedience and love, knowing full well that this would subject him to our sin, to our imperial ambitions, and our lust to dominate. He knew that loss would come as love is extended to sinners like us and as powers are opposed for the sake of that love, and yet there is no reason to think that he welcomed this grief. Rather, we should say that he was willing to suffer it for the sake of this love, although not without a negative velleity toward the loss. In this qualified sense, we can say that he laid down his life for his friends.

And notice: love that is willing to suffer loss for the sake of another is the medium of this rescue. Only love that is so willing can bring the lost beloved home. In general, this is what sacrificial offerings do, or so the anthropologists tell us. They unite what blood or eternity has divided. They reconcile those separated by sin. They draw together the once alienated and forge social bonds where there once were none. They create family lineages among strangers and enemies. They generate at-onement.

Thus the apostle Paul's familiar words: "while we still were sinners Christ died for us. . . . While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:8, 10). It's this sacrifice that creates a social bond between the God of Israel and the gentiles who knew him not (Rom. 9:25-26). It gathers them into his household and enables them to cry "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15). It redeems them from their lawless and faithless ways, from their alienation from God and neighbor, and then engrafts them—"a wild olive shoot"—into a "cultivated olive tree," whose natural branches will one day be "grafted back into their own" (Rom. 11:17, 24).

Paul says that while Christ's sacrifice reconciles, it's his resurrection that gives life (Rom. 5:10-11). Or, more precisely, it's an indwelling of "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead" that gives us life even now, even as the ages overlap and good intermingles with evil (Rom. 8:11-12).

So it is in baseball. The one who lays down a bunt for another, who is thrown out and then descends to the dugout, may nevertheless be regarded with favor by the manager, who may give him a chance to swing the bat during Sunday's game. Batter up!