



COVENANT
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Electronic Thesis & Dissertation Collection

J. Oliver Buswell Jr. Library
12330 Conway Road
Saint Louis, MO 63141

www.covenantseminary.edu/library

This document is distributed by Covenant Theological Seminary under agreement with the author, who retains the copyright. Permission to further reproduce or distribute this document is not provided, except as permitted under fair use or other statutory exception.

The views presented in this document are solely the author's.

Evangelism to College Football Players

By
Benjamin Weber

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2020

Evangelism to College Football Players

By
Benjamin Weber

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Graduation Date May 15, 2020

Dr. Mike Higgins
Faculty Advisor

Dr. Joel Hathaway
Second Reader

Dr. Joel Hathaway
Director of DMin Program

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how college football chaplains communicate the gospel to college football players. Football chaplains face a number of challenges in winning players to Christ. College football is a distinct subculture. Big time programs are increasingly popular, providing teenage athletes with national notoriety. The rosters are large, and the schedules are busy. The game is violent, and the culture is competitive. This segment of the population is unique and requires a contextualized evangelistic approach. Evangelism is at the heart of the church's mission to make disciples. Therefore, this issue is crucial for fruitful chaplaincy.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with ten chaplains who served their programs for ten years or longer. These men are either employees of their university, work for parachurch organizations, or serve as local pastors. The literature review and analysis of the ten interviews focused on three key areas to understand in impactful chaplaincy: a biblical understanding of contextualization, sports as religion, and locker room culture.

This study concluded that three components combine in evangelizing college football players: intentional trust building, simple and sensible ways to present the gospel of grace, and a structured ministry funnel. Related to these three components, this study found that veteran chaplains face three major challenges to evangelism: a distorted view of manhood, the performance mindset, and scheduling constraints. To address these challenges, this study identified the motivations and practices which contribute to developing a fruitful evangelistic movement.

“If somebody comes into my territory, my zone, I want to hit him hard. I don’t ever want to take a cheap shot, but I’ll hit him with all the love of Jesus I can muster.”

— Gill Byrd, San Jose State
Football Player

“God is not going to provide any leadership on this basketball team... He is not going to parachute though the roof... and score when we need points... God does not give a damn what goes on in athletics. Nor should he.”

— Bob Knight, Indiana University
Basketball Coach

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Abbreviations	viii
Chapter One Introduction	1
Football Distinctives	1
Purpose Statement.....	10
Research Questions.....	10
Significance of the Study	10
Definition of Terms.....	13
Chapter Two Literature Review.....	17
A Biblical Understanding of Contextualization.....	17
Sport as Religion.....	36
Locker Room Culture	56
Summary of Literature Review.....	82
Chapter Three Methodology.....	83
Design of the Study.....	83
Participant Sample Selection	85
Data Collection	86
Data Analysis	87
Researcher Position.....	89
Study Limitations.....	89
Chapter Four Findings.....	91
Introductions to Participants and Context.....	91

Gospel Contextualization.....	94
Challenges to the Gospel	106
Gospel Communication	115
Chapter Five Discussion and Recommendations	128
Summary of the Study and Findings.....	128
Discussion of Findings.....	129
Recommendations for Practice	140
Recommendations for Further Research.....	146
Appendix.....	148
Bibliography	151

Acknowledgements

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Abbreviations

NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
FBS	Football Bowl Series
FCS	Football Championship Series
SEC	Southeastern Conference
NFL	National Football League
AD	Athletic Director
QB	Quarterback
RB	Running back
FB	Fullback
TE	Tight end
OL	Offensive linemen
WR	Wide Receiver
DL	Defensive linemen
LB	Linebacker
DB	Defensive back

Chapter One

Introduction

If a church commissioned some members to serve as missionaries to a foreign land, those Christians would immediately set themselves to learning the culture of that land. They would work to assimilate into the indigenous culture. This process would require learning the dialect, traditions, and values, all fairly obvious steps in the process, so as to provide answers from the Bible to questions “that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel.”¹

Unfortunately, many athletic chaplains fail to apply a missionary perspective to their work with college football players. They minister with a generic approach and thus never try to learn the language, values, and customs of the football culture. For that reason, their message falls on deaf ears. In order to reach the ball field with the gospel, chaplains need to engage players with missiological intent. This distinct people group within the college athletic culture requires successful chaplains to adapt their approach to the football culture.

Football Distinctives

The game of football is the consummate “American” sport. Author and longtime sports analyst, Sal Palantonio opines, “Football Explains America.”² Successful programs

¹ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 89.

² Sal Palantonio, *How Football Explains America* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2008), 2.

rely on teamwork and precision, incorporating over twenty specialized positions in the game. Upon the snap of a ball, eleven men try to execute a complex, memorized play in unison. Each position demands a particular ability, whether it is speed, strength, or size. Men are asked to strictly run, throw, kick, tackle, or catch. The game is decidedly tough. Injuries and pain are unavoidable features of the game. One critic of the game observes the players' bodies are "routinely turned into a weapon to be used against other bodies, resulting in pain, serious injury, and even death."³

Players are lauded for their grit. One author summarizes, "Violent masculinity is at the heart of American identity... as well as the game of football."⁴ In previous generations, grit was publicly demonstrated on the battlefield, but now it is displayed on athletic field. Since the rest of the world does not embrace football, the sport is uniquely American. An *Atlantic* columnist describes the game as a "conflation of nationalism, nostalgia, piety, and performative masculinity."⁵ The physical struggles of the game are often reinterpreted as moral lessons. Each practice and game is designed to develop rough and tough men. These values are both "championed by the sport's culture and intrinsic to American-ness."⁶

³ Michael Messner, "When Bodies are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, no. 25 (1990), 203.

⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop* (Philadelphia: Civitas Books, 2007), 93-95.

⁵ Tara Isabella Burton, "Football Really is America's Religion. That's What Made the NFL Protests so Powerful. The Macho Christianity Behind American Sports Culture, Explained," *VOX* (Sept. 27, 2017), <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/9/27/16308792/football-america-religion-nfl-protests-powerful>.

⁶ John Michael McCluskey, "'Rough! Tough! Real Stuff!' Music, Militarism, and Masculinity in American College Football," *American Music* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2019), 34.

Finally, football is unrivaled in popularity in the U.S. Historically, the Super Bowl is the most watched television event in the country each year. In 2018, the game drew over 103 million viewers.⁷ When compared to other major sports like basketball, soccer, and baseball, “37% of Americans say football is their favorite sport to watch, by far the most for any sport.”⁸ It is America’s chosen sport to watch.

Roster Size

The game of football differs other collegiate sports. First, the rosters are massive. The NCAA allows Division I teams to offer eighty-five academic scholarships. With the addition of non-scholarship players, most rosters hover around 120 players. Basketball teams generally have a roster of 15 players and baseball teams 35. At most universities, football players make up half of the student athlete population.⁹

Ethnic Diversity

College football teams are also ethnically diverse. In fact, the majority of college football players are African American. Described as the “racial conscience of sports,” professor Richard Lapchick has devoted a significant amount of research to racial issues in sports. His recent findings indicate that blacks account for “44.2% in the Football

⁷ Jeremy Bowman, “Which U.S. Sport Had the Highest Viewership in 2018?” *Yahoo News* (Dec 30, 2018), <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/u-sport-had-highest-viewership-141700953.html>.

⁸ Jim Norman, “Football Still Americans' Favorite Sport to Watch,” *Gallup* (Jan. 4, 2018), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/224864/football-americans-favorite-sport-watch.aspx>.

⁹ NCAA “College Athletic Scholarship Limits,” <http://www.reachhighscholars.org/Articles/College%20Athletic%20Scholarship%20Limits.pdf>.

Championship Subdivision (FCS) and 55.9% in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS).”¹⁰ Another of his studies reveals, “Black males in football in 90 D1 Schools in 2016 was 68%.”¹¹ Most football players compete with majority blacks on the ball field but are minorities in the classroom. On average, African Americans make up only 14% of the college student population.¹²

This diversity applies to the players but not the coaches. According to Lapchick, at the start of the 2018 season, “85.4 percent of head coaches were white men... There were 19 (14.5 percent) coaches of color in 2018.”¹³ The lack of minority representation applies to all power positions in the NCAA. Lapchick reported, “Presidents are 90% white, conference commissioners are 100% white, head coaches are 84% white, faculty athletic representatives 94.4% white, and athletic directors are 87.5% white.”¹⁴ The contrast is clear. Blacks comprise an overwhelming majority of the roster but are absent from key administrative and leadership positions. If someone attended a college football game on a Saturday in the fall that person would observe a majority black team, playing for a majority white coaching staff, and entertaining a majority white fan base.

¹⁰ Richard E. Lapchick, “The 2018 Racial and Gender Report Card: D1 FBS Leadership,” *The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports* (October 3, 2018), https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/media/2017%20College%20Sport%20Racial%20and%20Gender%20Report%20Card.pdf.

¹¹ Lapchick, “Racial Report.”

¹² National Center for Education Statistics, “Fast Facts: Enrollment,” <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>.

¹³ Lapchick, “Racial Report.”

¹⁴ Lapchick, “Racial Report.”

Busy Schedules

The daily experience of a college football player sets him apart as well. The NCAA defines these players as “Student Athletes.” The title suggests that they should devote equal amounts of time and energy to their academics and sport. In fact, NCAA bylaws state that academics should be the priority: “Student athletes should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental, and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises.”¹⁵ In reality, equal balance between school and ball is not the case.

Along with practice, a typical athlete is required to lift weights, attend film sessions, undergo treatment, and participate in walkthroughs throughout the week. One study reveals college football players give “an average of 30 hours a week to their sport but spend less than 12 hours a week preparing for class. Even during the off-season, they spend more time on their sport.”¹⁶ Most football players devote more time to studying their playbook than their textbooks. The NCAA may declare football to be an avocation, but it is a fulltime vocation for the player. The creeping professionalism of football leaves little time for students to study and develop outside interests. Joe Ehrman, a long-time football chaplain and author of *Inside Out Coaching*, attributes this imbalance to the frenzied schedules of coaches. When he served as a coach, his “hectic lifestyle ramped up to warp speed with almost no time left for self-care, rest, renewal, or recovery... I see too

¹⁵ NCAA Constitution, Article 2.9. <http://ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/D1116.pdf>.

¹⁶ Douglas Lederman, “Players Spend More Time on Sports than on Studies, an NCAA Survey of Major-College Athletes Finds,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (December, 7, 1988), 33.

many coaches who violate almost everything they know about rest, recovery, and performance.”¹⁷ The busy schedule is a problem for players and coaches alike. If the coach fails to make time for mental, emotional, and spiritual health, he will expect his players to follow suit. This time-consuming schedule creates conflict between athletes’ identities. “Do they sacrifice athletic performance or academic performance?”¹⁸ Few football players are willing to sacrifice athletic prowess.

Profitable

As college football grows in popularity, game days have become extremely lucrative. Especially in the Southeast, college football games are better attended than their NFL counterparts. Several SEC schools regularly sell out stadiums that hold close to 100,000 fans.¹⁹ According to data obtained from the Department of Education, football generates the most total revenue among all NCAA Sports. An article in *Business Insider* reports, “While the average school generates \$31.9 million in football revenue each year, the next 35 sports on average generate \$31.7 million combined each year.”²⁰ For example, the University of Texas produced \$182 million in profit in 2017. Seventy

¹⁷ Ehrmann, *Inside Out*, 175.

¹⁸ Landy Di Lu, Kathryn L. Heinze, and Sara Soderstrom, “Playing Multiple Positions: Student-Athlete Identity Salience and Conflict,” *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport* (2018), 214.

¹⁹ NCAA, “2018 FOOTBALL ATTENDANCE,”
http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/stats/football_records/Attendance/2018.pdf.

²⁰ Cork Gaines and Mike O. Nudelman, “The Average College Football Team Makes More Money Than the Next 35 College Sports Combined,” *Business Insider* (Oct 5, 2017),
<https://www.businessinsider.com/college-sports-football-revenue-2017-10>.

percent of its total revenue came from football.²¹ The gap between football and other sports is most jarring.

Unlike the NFL, college players are not rewarded monetarily. Compensation for a student athlete is limited to an academic scholarship. While NFL players make millions of dollars each year, college football players receive a scholarship that covers their tuition and room and board. In an article entitled, “The \$6 Billion Heist: Robbing College Athletes Under the Guise of Amateurism,” Drexel University professors Ramogi Huma and Ellen J. Staurowsky indict the NCAA’s claim of amateurism. Their research suggests that the student athletes generate revenue that is distributed among administrators, executives, and corporate entities. If properly compensated, “the market value for big-time football players is \$137,357.”²² As anyone can guess, college football players create an enormous financial windfall for universities.

Gameday revenues create new facilities and sustain entire departments at universities. Indiana University professors Kevin Brown and Antonio Williams add that football profits cover the expenses “for all sports teams, luxury boxes at football and basketball stadiums for alumni, donors, and dignitaries, and subsidize university budgets.”²³ Furthermore, because players are not paid, coaches receive extravagant compensation. In a *Newsday* article, Patrick McLaughlin noted that in thirty-nine states,

²¹ Gaines, “Average College Football Team.”

²² Ramogi Huma and Ellen J. Staurowsky, “The \$6 Billion Heist: Robbing College Athletes Under the Guise of Amateurism,” *National College Players Association and Drexel University Sport Management* (2012), http://assets.usw.org/ncpa/pdfs/-Billion-Heist-Study_Full.pdf.

²³ Kevin Brown and Antonio Williams, “Out of Bounds: A Critical Race Theory Perspective on ‘Pay for Play,’” *Journal of Legal Aspects of Sport*, 33.

the highest paid public official is a head football coach.²⁴ Power 5 programs operate as corporations, managing millions of dollars. Author of “The Shame of College Sports,” Taylor Branch concludes that commercialism is the driving force. From an economic standpoint, football players are no longer amateur athletes. They are the labor force behind a billion-dollar enterprise.²⁵

Some economists view the NCAA as a functional cartel. Economist Daniel Sutter refers to the NCAA as the “best monopoly in the US.”²⁶ Branch describes the relationship between the NCAA and student athletes as exploitative. The NCAA enables “universities and corporations to make money, from the unpaid labor of young athletes.”²⁷ Other academics use racial language to describe the system. In *The New Plantation*, Billy Hawkins likens the NCAA to a plantation model and uses the phrase “Internal Colonialism.” He explains that in college football, “a minority, indigenous or transplanted, is subjugated and exploited by the dominant majority colonizer.”²⁸ Former

²⁴ Patrick McLaughlin, “College Football Players, Not Coaches Deserve to Be Paid,” *Newsday* (January 7, 2016), <https://www.newsday.com/opinion/oped/college-football-players-not-coaches-deserve-to-be-paid-1.11301251>.

²⁵ Taylor Branch, “The Shame of College Sports,” *The Atlantic* (October 2011), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/10/the-shame-of-collegesports/308643/>.

²⁶ Daniel Sutter and Stephen Winkler, “NCAA Scholarship Limits and Competitive Balances in College Football,” *J. Sports and Economy* 3, no. 5 (2003), 4.

²⁷ Branch, “The Shame.”

²⁸ Billy Hawkins, *The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 44.

NCAA athlete, Victoria Jackson states, “Let’s call this system what it is: 21st century Jim Crow.”²⁹

Violent

Finally, football is distinctively violent. In most sports contact is incidental. In football, contact is the object of the game. Players are praised for weaponizing their bodies.³⁰ Coaches reward players who produce “big hits,” “pancakes,” or “lay someone out.” The play as well as the communication is decidedly violent. Coaches regularly motivate players with military analogies. Professor Ken McLeod observes that the rhetoric of “football is rife with terms such as going on ‘the attack,’ ‘blitzing,’ and ‘the long bomb.’”³¹ Altogether, such strategies lead to an excessive amount of injuries. Collisions can cause concussions and brain damage. A 2015 report from the Center for Disease Control states, “Men's football accounts for the most college sport injuries each year, as well as the largest proportions of injuries requiring greater than 7 days before return to full participation or requiring surgery or emergency transport.”³² Even with hi-tech pads and helmets, the game remains dangerous.

²⁹ Victoria Jackson, “Take it From a Former Division I Athlete: College Sports are Like Jim Crow,” *Los Angeles Times* (January 11, 2018), <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-jackson-college-sports-20180111-story.html>.

³⁰ Messner, “When Bodies are Weapons,” 203.

³¹ Ken McLeod, “The Construction of Masculinity in African American Music and Sports,” *American Music* 27, no. 2 (2009), 219–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25602271?origin=JSTOR-pdf>, 208.

³² Thomas P. Dompier, “College Sports-Related Injuries - United States, 2009-10 Through 2013-14 Academic Years.” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention* 48 (December 2015): 1330-1336. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6448a2.htm?%22>.

Football is unlike any other sport in America. The rosters are made up largely of young black men. The schedule demands a full-time commitment that hinders academic success. It is also the most visible, lucrative, and physically demanding collegiate sport in the nation. These distinctives inform the chaplain's approach to gospel ministry, stepping over into this foreign context.

Purpose Statement

Chaplains are missionaries to college football teams, and their purpose is to evangelize and disciple players. Chaplains must adjust their lives and language to the culture of the team. Given that the college football team is a distinct culture, this study will explore how college football chaplains communicate the gospel to this culture. Like any cross-cultural endeavor, this task requires contextualization—adapting evangelistic strategy to the culture of the football team.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do chaplains contextualize the gospel to college football players?
2. What challenges do chaplains face when they communicate the gospel to college football players?
3. How do chaplains communicate the gospel with college football players?

Significance of the Study

College football players in the Southeast compose a strategic people group for evangelization. First, they are college educated. College students make up 1 percent of

the world population. The college students of today may be the leaders for the region in the next twenty years. These men are not only educated and well connected but also popular. NCAA statistics reveal college football players compete in the most well attended sporting events on their campus and often in their state.³³ They have notoriety that can be leveraged for the spread of the gospel. Third, the ethnic composition of a college football team requires cross-cultural relationships. As previously noted, football teams are predominately black. In a cultural moment when it seems like blacks and whites are becoming increasingly polarized and separated, football teams maintain a high level of diversity. More than ever, the Southeast needs leaders who are able to build trust and cooperate with different ethnicities. Football players are uniquely prepared for that assignment. Winning games is contingent on players with different skin tones uniting around a common goal.

Finally, these players are self-disciplined and prepared to suffer. The game of football demands focus, perseverance, and commitment. Players walk onto the field expecting to experience some level of pain and discomfort. Success requires early mornings, motivation when fatigued, and courage. A veteran pastor explains, “To my mind, the character-building qualities of football are unmatched among sports.”³⁴

The church needs more football players. A diverse group of former college football players could dramatically impact the region for Christ. In the past, college football coaches and players have used their influence to promote social and spiritual

³³ NCAA, “2018 FOOTBALL ATTENDANCE.”
http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/stats/football_records/Attendance/2018.pdf

³⁴ Bill Kynes, “3 Reasons I’d (Still) Let My Sons Play Tackle Football,” *The Gospel Coalition* (March 19, 2018), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-reasons-let-sons-play-tackle-football/>.

renewal. For example, University of Colorado head football coach Bill McCartney founded an organization called Promise Keepers. He hosted a rally in 1996 in Atlanta, Georgia, by 39,000 men. The theme of the conference was “Breaking Down the Walls.” At the event, coach McCartney preached, “Racism is an insidious monster... You can’t say you love God and not your brother.”³⁵ In response to the message, men of color were recognized and praised by local clergy. The point being, football players and coaches participate in a distinctly visible and diverse game. They possess the potential to promote spiritual and racial reconciliation in the surrounding culture.

The findings of this study will primarily benefit chaplains to college football teams, since it will examine, explain, and recommend best practices for evangelism. Furthermore, any parent, church leader, or individual who is serious about ministering to football players will also gain valuable insights for successful evangelism. Readers will learn questions, metaphors, and methods that promote effective disciple making. Even those who have never participated in organized football will gain key insight into the culture and values of a football program. Although this study focuses on college football players, its findings can be applied to any level of football. Youth and high school programs possess many cultural similarities. Sports are a significant thread in the fabric of Southern culture. In order to reach the region with the gospel, chaplains should develop and execute a strategic method to evangelize college football players.

³⁵ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 65-66.

Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, the terms are defined as follows:

College football chaplain- An individual committed to building a gospel movement on the football team. Often this individual is an employee of a church or parachurch organization such as Campus Outreach, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, or Athletes in Action. Usually this individual is a former player, but; this is not always the case. Occasionally a coach on the staff will assume this role. Some smaller programs do not have an official chaplain. In this case, the task of evangelism falls upon current players.

Whereas a coach focuses on developing the athletic ability of the players, the chaplain's influence is spiritual. He functions as a member of the coaching staff, although the university does usually not employ him. He oversees all ministry activities, such as pregame devotionals, discipleship, team Bible studies, personal appointments, and coaches' Bible studies. He also consistently attends practice, conditioning, weights, and home and away games. For the study, each chaplain held to an evangelical understanding of the gospel.

Evangelical- This study will utilize the Bebbington quadrilateral. Historian David W. Bebbington identifies four distinguishing features of evangelicals. "Biblicism: a high regard for the Bible... Crucicentrism: a focus on Jesus's crucifixion and its saving effects... Conversionism: a belief that humans need to be converted... Activism: the belief that faith should influence one's public life."³⁶

³⁶ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1-19.

Pregame Devotional- A chapel service for the team. It usually occurs on Friday night or Saturday morning prior to the game and is optional.

Evangelism- The proclamation of the gospel to players who are not Christ followers, often through a team Bible study or a personal appointment. Evangelism is defined as a series of conversations rather than a one-time interaction.

Gospel- The message of the New Testament writers. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, human beings can have eternal peace with God. The scope is cosmic. It includes the restoration of all things in the new heavens and new earth. This paper will focus specifically on the renewed spiritual life of those reconciled forever to God.

Gospel Presentation- A visual tool that illustrates the gospel message. This explanation is sensible and incorporates scripture.

Discipleship- The intentional process of training followers of Christ in spiritual maturity so that they too become disciple-makers.

Team Bible Study- An interactive discussion among football players over scripture. The chaplain or a spiritually mature player often leads these.

One-on-one- Individual conversations with college football players. The aim of the personal appointment could be evangelistic, discipleship, counseling, or mentoring.

Coaches' Bible Study- An interactive discussion among football coaches over scripture. An experienced chaplain or a coach often leads these.

College football player- A student athlete who participates on a college football team.

College football coach – A full-time employee of the university tasked with leading the team.

Power 5 – The five major conferences in NCAA sports. These include the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference (SEC).

Revenue Producing Sport – NCAA-sanctioned sports that yield profit for the academic institution. For most universities, football and basketball are the only profitable programs. For the purpose of this study, research will focus on football.

Fall Camp- Generally a two-week period in which the football team practices and prepares for the upcoming season for eight to ten hours a day. Classes have not started.

In Season- College football teams generally play at least twelve games during the regular season. These games are mostly on Saturdays. During this time, players attend classes and have schoolwork. They generally have a consistent schedule that includes class, study hall, practice, treatment, weights, meals, team meetings, and film study.

Spring Camp- During the spring semester, the NCAA allows the team four weeks of practice. This culminates in an annual intrasquad competition called the Spring Game.

Summer Conditioning- Football training is a year-round endeavor. Over the summer, players are not allowed to participate in mandatory practices with a coach on the field. Therefore, players primarily lift weights and run. This time period allows the most availability for players to partake in Bible studies.

Influencer- a player with leadership potential, emotional maturity, and broad network of relationships on the team.

Interested- Most of the roster is comprised of interested players. They are curious about spiritual matters but lack the confidence or training to influence their teammates.

Isolated- These players lack the friendships and emotional quotient to influence positively others on the team. They are often passive, irresponsible, or uninterested in spiritual topics.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to understand how sports chaplains communicate the gospel to college football players. The literature review begins with a focused study on passages from the Bible that address contextualization. The chaplain must contextualize his life, language, and evangelistic strategy within the culture of the football team. The study will focus on contextualization found in Paul's evangelistic interactions with ancient Athenians in Acts 17.

The researcher also has identified two areas of study central to a chaplain's contextualization: sport as religion and locker room culture. While fans and parents may exclaim, "It's just a game," many athletes and fans approach the game with religious intensity. Football games share several key characteristics with worship services. Second, the college-age years are key in a student athlete's transition from adolescence to manhood. It is a time of identity formation. The student athlete often looks to external factors and relationships to determine his self-worth. For a football player, the formation process occurs within the locker room. This section, therefore, will carefully analyze the locker room culture. These two topics are critical in understanding and engaging the worldview of college football players.

A Biblical Understanding of Contextualization

Sports such as track and field and wrestling are referenced throughout scripture, and scripture has much to say about how players should play, fans should spectate, coaches should coach, and chaplains evangelize. Scripture commands believers to

contextualize their words and deeds to their surrounding culture. The classic text on contextualization is 1 Corinthians 9:19-22. It reads:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

In this passage, Paul demonstrates a willingness to change his entire lifestyle in order to better present the gospel. Jesus' entire existence was contextualized to humanity.

Although he was God, Christ was "born in the likeness of men. Being found in human form."³⁷ Christ put on humanity to reach humanity. In the same way, it is imperative for the chaplain to adjust his words and deeds to the culture of the team. Timothy Keller, a noted pastor and author in New York City, explains, "Contextualization is the idea that we need to be translating gospel truth into language understood by our culture. Cross-cultural missionaries and Bible translators have been doing this for centuries. They take the unchanging truth of the gospel and put it into language that fits the context they are trying to reach."³⁸ Contextualization involves translating the gospel message so that it is understandable to the audience.

The aim of contextualization is salvation. I Corinthians 9 makes it clear that Paul's ambition was not merely to educate, improve, or inform his church. He labored towards their spiritual salvation. Because of his consuming passion, he became a willing

³⁷ Philippians 2:8.

³⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 94.

servant to all. Commenting on this passage, Charles Spurgeon shares, “He laid aside his preferences to prevent prejudice; he submitted his will in things indifferent, and if men would but receive the gospel, he raised no questions about forms or ceremonies: the gospel was the one all-important business with him. If he might save some, he would be content. This was the crown for which he strove, the sole and sufficient reward of all his labours and self-denials.”³⁹ Therefore, contextualization is born out of a heart for others to know Jesus, a “whatever it takes” heart that desires salvation for all people.

Several authors point out that contextualization is unavoidable for all people, not just those in full-time ministry. When modern readers open their Bibles, they study contextualized scriptures. Pastor and author Tullian Tchividjian explains, “English Bible translation is an effort to contextualize the Scriptures (originally written in Hebrew and Greek for ancient peoples) for an English-speaking audience of today.”⁴⁰ Every spoken or written word is contextualized to a particular culture.

Instead of contextualization, missiologist David Bosch uses the term “inculturation.” He goes so far as to say, “The Christian faith never exists except as ‘translated’ into a culture.”⁴¹ Keller points out, “As soon as you choose a language to speak in and particular words to use within that language, the culture-laden nature of words comes into play.”⁴² Leslie Newbigin was a British bishop who spent much of his

³⁹ Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 2006), 703.

⁴⁰ Tullian Tchividjian, *Unfashionable: Making a Difference in the World by Being Different* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2009), 80.

⁴¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 447.

⁴² Keller, *Center*, 94.

ministry in India. At the end of his life, he returned to Great Britain. Then and there he realized a culture's influence on the gospel. He realized that there will "never be a culture free gospel... We should understand culture by the Gospel and not vice versa."⁴³

Preacher and professor Zack Eswine has called for all ministers to have a missionary perspective. In his book *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, he observes, "Most preachers already expect the missionaries they support to learn the culture... What makes our task different from theirs? If a preacher stops and thinks about this for a moment, he will remember that Jesus used this same means to bring many of us to himself."⁴⁴ In fact, Newbigin considered this omission to be a fatal flaw among Western ministers. He admonished them to approach home and abroad with missional intent. He writes in *Foolishness to the Greeks*, "The most urgent task is to recover missionary encounter to the West."⁴⁵ Eswine and Newbigin both suggest that all evangelism is an ethnic endeavor. Even for those who minister in their native tongue, they must adapt to the hearer. In the same way, a chaplain ought to approach football players as a distinct people group.

The inevitability of contextualization presents a challenge. Tchividjian explains, "If you don't contextualize enough, no one's life will be transformed because they won't understand you. But if you contextualize too much, no one's life will be transformed because you won't be challenging their deepest assumptions and calling them to

⁴³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 9.

⁴⁴ Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 161.

⁴⁵ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 164.

change.”⁴⁶ Chaplains should not over- or under-contextualize the gospel message. Over-contextualization makes an idol of the foreign culture. The gospel message is changed to remove any offense or scandal. Under-contextualization makes an idol of one’s home culture, and the gospel message is shared in a way that is unpersuasive or incomprehensible. Once again, Newbigin identified the same two dangers. In his words, over-contextualization means the “gospel is accepted too easily... absorbed into the worldview.”⁴⁷ Conversely, under-contextualization is a “failure to communicate... you will sound like a foreigner.”⁴⁸ According to the bishop, one extreme leads to syncretism, and the other to irrelevance. This is consistent with noted theologian, D.A. Carson’s perspective on communication. The pastor should be to preach in a way “that the Gospel will not be made to appear unnecessarily alien at the merely cultural level.”⁴⁹

One’s Own Culture

In *Leading Across Cultures*, James Plueddemann explains that the process of contextualization begins with personal awareness that “all people are a product of their shared culture.”⁵⁰ This understanding is challenging for ministers in a majority culture. Several authors criticize white American pastors for their failure to recognize their own culture. Following their research on cross-cultural preaching, James Nieman and Thomas

⁴⁶ Tchividjian, *Unfashionable*, 93.

⁴⁷ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 21.

⁴⁸ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 21.

⁴⁹ D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 122.

⁵⁰ James E Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: 2009), 65.

Rogers concluded, “Many of interviewees said that one of their biggest mistakes came in ignoring their own culture... Rarely did they consciously consider the assumptions on which their daily activities and interactions rested.”⁵¹ Another researcher, Michael Angrosino, counsels ministers not to “assume that your own way of thinking or doing is somehow ‘normal,’ ‘universal,’ or ‘natural.’ You have a culture just like everyone else – culture that was learned, and which can therefore be modified. Engage yourself in an honest appraisal of your own culture.”⁵² One fellow pastor, Michael Quicke, states, “Myopic preachers are naïve about culture. They fail to give it much thought or prayer.”⁵³ In order to contextualize to another culture, the pastor must be aware of his own culture first. Plueddemann outlines a method for cross-cultural ministry. It begins, “Uncover your own unconscious cultural values... then discover the cultural values of others.”⁵⁴ Often times, this comes with age. Newbigin recounts, “As I grow older, I learn to see that they were shaped more than I realize by own culture.”⁵⁵

Majority Culture

Several white ministry leaders confessed that they rarely consider their own culture. Pastor and author George Yancey reflects, “It is possible for white Americans to

⁵¹ James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 140.

⁵² Michael V. Angrosino, *Talking about Cultural Diversity in Your Church: Gifts and Challenges* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2001), 51-52.

⁵³ Michael J. Quicke, *Preaching as Worship: An Integrative Approach to Formation in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 53.

⁵⁴ James E Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: 2009), 65.

⁵⁵ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 21.

go through life never having to deal with racial prejudice or discrimination in any meaningful way. They don't have to deal with these issues unless they choose to do so."⁵⁶ Nieman and Rogers' research indicates that preachers of the ethnic majority seldom ask questions such as, "Why am I doing this as a white, North American, middle-aged preacher?"⁵⁷

In fact, several seminary-trained pastors leveled criticism against their own formal education. In hindsight, they attended Bible schools that trained them to reach a previous generation. One pastor, Raymond Bakke concludes, "Most of us went to Bible schools or seminaries where we learned to design ministry in our own image... Unfortunately for us, the challenge is now to retool and design ministry strategies in the image of the unreached who may be very different from us culturally."⁵⁸ Seminary professors train students in proper exposition or study of scriptures. They lecture at length on the necessity to understand the original language, speaker, and audience of the passage. In the same way, author Lenora Tisdale calls for ministers to exegete the text and the culture. She believes that pastors need "Explicit skills and training in 'exegeting congregations' and their subcultures – just as they need skills and training in exegeting the Scriptures."⁵⁹ Eswine again calls preachers to become aware or "account for our

⁵⁶ George A. Yancey, *Beyond Black and White: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 121.

⁵⁷ Nieman, *Preaching to Every Pew*, 140.

⁵⁸ Raymond J. Bakke, "The Challenge of World Urbanization to Mission Thinking and Strategy: Perspectives on Demographic Realities," *Urban Missions* 4, no. 1 (September 1986), 15.

⁵⁹ Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 18.

expository ethnicity.”⁶⁰ An effective preacher of the gospel is an expert on both the original and modern hearer. Bible scholar, John Stott refers to this skill as “double listening.”⁶¹ He knows how to study the ancient word and communicate it to a modern world.

Word of Caution

Several pastors note that contextualization does not require chaplains to deny their native culture or heritage. Ministers need not reject their ethnicity, nationality, or gender. However, the desire to proclaim the gospel should supersede all cultural attachments. Carson shares that chaplains need to be unselfish and sacrificial. They should love people more than their personal preference or privilege. He concludes that the heart of a minister should be to remove “any unnecessary barrier to the effective proclamation of the gospel.”⁶²

Historical Examples

Carson cites the example of Hudson Taylor, the founder of China Inland Mission. As a missionary in China, Taylor wore his hair in a long braid and ate the local cuisine. At the time, other Western missionaries derided him. Taylor contextualized his

⁶⁰ Eswine, *Post-Everything World*, 161.

⁶¹ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1982), 192.

⁶² Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 122.

appearance, dress, and diet for the gospel. He became “Chinese,” in order to save the Chinese. Taylor entered the Chinese culture and adapted his life.⁶³

Another classic historic example of successful contextualization was Saint Patrick and the Celtic Christians. In *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, professor of church growth and evangelism, George G. Hunter III, describes the prevailing Roman view on missions prior to Saint Patrick. The Roman church expected indigenous people “to read and speak Latin, to adopt other Roman customs, to do church the Roman way, and in other ways to become culturally Roman people.”⁶⁴ Patrick was a born Brit and at the age of sixteen, a band of barbarous Celts captured and enslaved him. While a slave, he was converted and came to identify culturally with his captors. Upon receiving his freedom, he left Ireland for a time of intense biblical study and returned intent to translate scripture into the people’s cultural and historical context, a significant departure from the missionary practice of the day. He broke with Rome and sought to develop a Celtic rather than Roman church. His followers “did not impose one establishment – certified, institutionalized expression of Christianity everywhere; they implemented the principle of ‘indigenous’ Christianity before we knew what to call it.”⁶⁵

In *Preaching to Multiethnic Congregations*, Calvin Choi explains, the “Preacher is comfortable to be in the world of in-betweenness, to be among multiple cultures and yet recognize the uniqueness and value of different cultures by promoting a spirit of

⁶³ Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 122.

⁶⁴ George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity can Reach the West... Again* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2010), 5.

⁶⁵ Hunter, *The Celtic Way*, 105.

inclusion without losing one's own identity."⁶⁶ The examples of Hudson Taylor and Saint Patrick demonstrate that contextualization is sacrificial, often uncomfortable, and requires deliberate work. Instead of imposing his native culture, the pastor adapts to a new culture. He lives and ministers in the in-between.

"All things to all people" does not mean embracing the sinful patterns of a particular culture. Ministers must reject accommodation. To some degree, certain aspects of the gospel will always remain unpopular to the broader culture. If the preacher's life is indistinguishable from the surrounding culture, he has moved from contextualization to compromise.

Observation

The process of contextualization then moves from introspection to observation, and this shift takes intentional listening and learning. Ultimately, chaplains should endeavor to develop their cultural quotient or CQ. Christopher Early and Soon Ang, authors of *Cultural Intelligence*, define CQ as "the capability to deal effectively with other people with whom the person does not share common cultural background and understanding."⁶⁷ CQ requires asking questions that help one understand the heart and worldview of every individual they meet.

Observation should be informal and formal. Eswine encourages pastors to get deeply involved in the "lives, questions, and concerns of the people, then when we study

⁶⁶ Woosung Calvin Choi, *Preaching to Multiethnic Congregations: Positive Marginality as a Homiletical Paradigm* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 106.

⁶⁷ Christopher P. Earley and Soon Ang, *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions across Cultures* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 12.

the Bible in order to preach it to them, we will see God's answers to their questions."⁶⁸ Stott views this as an essential part of sermon preparation. In *Between Two Worlds*, he writes, "Humble listening is indispensable to relevant preaching."⁶⁹ In *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, author and professor Jerram Barrs reveals the importance of asking questions. He points to Christ as a model. "We need to learn to ask questions that will help us to understand what is in a person's heart and mind. This is what Jesus does."⁷⁰ In the same section, Barrs tabulated the number of questions that Jesus asked in the gospels. He found Jesus asking ninety-four questions in Mathew, fifty-nine in Mark, eighty-two in Luke, and forty-nine in John.⁷¹ He makes the case that quality questions rather than answers are the mark of a thoughtful evangelist.

Questions also demonstrate genuine concern for the speaker. Culling data from leading psycholinguists, seminary president Dan Allender, states that "it is rare for a person to ask more than two meaningful questions of another person, especially if that other person is in distress."⁷² A succession of queries are scarce in modern conversation. Question-asking usually occurs naturally and organically. It can also take a more rigorous approach through the study of scholarly articles, demographic research, and outside experts.

⁶⁸ Eswine, *Post-Everything World*, 161.

⁶⁹ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 192.

⁷⁰ Jerram Barrs, Jerram. *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 61.

⁷¹ Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, 61.

⁷² Dan B. Allender, *Leading with a Limp. Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2006), 113.

The goal of observation is understanding, which can be a tedious exercise. Often ministers rush past this step to expedite the process and begin gospel proclamation. Understanding by observing should not be set aside. Drawing from Saint Patrick's example, Hunter shares, "When you understand the people, you often know what to say and do and how. When the people know that the Christians understand them, they infer that maybe Christianity's High God understands them too."⁷³ Only by listening and learning can chaplains hope to persuade others to accept God's unchanging Word in a constantly changing world.

Paul's Observations in Athens

In Acts 17 Paul traveled to Athens and preached at the Areopagus. The passage serves as a textbook example of fruitful contextualization. Upon arrival to the city, Paul "saw that the city was full of idols."⁷⁴ The word "saw" denotes observation and deep inspection. One dictionary defines Paul's observation as a "look, gaze, or beholding."⁷⁵ Stott writes, "The Greek verb used three times is either *theoreo* or *anatheoreo* and means... to 'consider.'"⁷⁶ This was not a quick look or cursory glance. Paul looked deeply at the numerous gods of Athens.

In fact, at the Areopagus he remarked, "As I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: To the unknown

⁷³ Hunter, *The Celtic Way*, 8.

⁷⁴ Acts 17:16.

⁷⁵ Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries* (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications Inc, 1998).

⁷⁶ John Stott, *The Message of Acts. Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1994), 290.

god.”⁷⁷ Paul used his observations to transition to an explanation of the uniqueness of the God of the Bible when given the chance. Later in his speech, Paul referenced two Athenian thinkers. In verse 28, he quoted Epiminedes of Crete and the poem “Phainomena” by Aratus.⁷⁸ In other words, Paul read and listened to pagan philosophers and artists. He was well-versed in popular culture and identified the commonness between the gospel and Athenian worldview.

Again, John Stott comments, “We do not speak like Paul because we do not feel like Paul because we do not see like Paul... It all began with his eyes. When Paul walked around Athens, he did not just ‘notice’ the idols... He looked and looked and thought and thought until the fires were kindled within.”⁷⁹ According to Stott, contextualization incorporates the whole body: the eyes, mind, and heart. Leadership expert Stephen Covey refers to this concept as empathetic listening. This type of listening involves the ears and the heart, both hearing and feeling.⁸⁰

Compassion

As they witness the idolatry and rebellion of the football team, chaplains may be tempted to experience frustration, ambivalence, or disgust. When Christ visited the cities and villages and saw the people, however, he felt compassion.⁸¹ In *Audience Adaptations*

⁷⁷ Acts 17:23.

⁷⁸ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁷⁹ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 290.

⁸⁰ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 252.

⁸¹ Matthew 9:35.

in the *Sermons and Speeches of Paul*, Jay Adams observes that Paul always adapts to audience, which includes his emotions as well as his reasoning, vocabulary, speech, and illustrations.⁸²

Paul's Compassion in Athens

When Paul gazed at a city full of pagan idols, he was “provoked” or “greatly distressed.”⁸³ The Greek word is *paroxymo*.⁸⁴ The word describes a deep mixture of both anger and sorrow. Keller explains this complex emotion. On one hand, Paul felt anger. He saw the Athenian idolatry as rebellion against a holy God. On the other hand, he experienced sorrow. Against the backdrop of God’s love, he realized their idolatry was spiritual slavery.⁸⁵ Paul is able to speak with force and affection. He neither withdrew nor protested in anger. When he does speak, he remains civil and gentle. He reasons with them rather than declaring a message of condemnation and judgment.⁸⁶

Communication

Equipped with cultural observations and a tender heart, the chaplain finally speaks. In *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, David Hesselgrave writes, “The word

⁸² Jay E. Adams, *Audience Adaptations in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House Publishing, 1975), 61-64.

⁸³ Acts 17:16.

⁸⁴ Thomas, *Greek Dictionaries*.

⁸⁵ Timothy Keller, “Gospel Preaching that Radically Changes Lives: How to Discern, Expose, and Challenge Idols,” *Preaching Today* (August 17, 2009). <https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/themes/preachingwithauthority/gospelpreachingthatradically.html>.

⁸⁶ Keller, *Center Church*, 161.

‘communication’ comes from the Latin word *communis* (common). It’s important to establish a ‘commonness’ with someone to have communication.”⁸⁷ In other words, he translates. Bible translators Eugene Nida and Charles Taber define this as dynamic equivalence. It is the “quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors.”⁸⁸ If the goal is developing “commonness,” authors Nieman and Rogers encourage communicators to “employ widely available forms like conversation, stories, and sayings. Language helps people to bond together, interpret a common setting, express shared values, and plan for their mutual efforts.”⁸⁹ Stott equates preaching to “bridge building.”⁹⁰ The pastor’s task is to build a bridge between the culture of the hearer and the message of the gospel.

A cursory reading of the book of Acts reveals that Paul habitually declared the same gospel message in a variety of ways. The cultural commentator Denis Haack notices that in church contexts, Paul often begins his sermons with God as Redeemer and “quotes explicitly from the Bible and assumes congregational familiarity with redemptive history.”⁹¹ However in unchurched settings (like Athens), Paul started with God as Creator rather than Redeemer. He was “not concerned to quote a Bible verse for

⁸⁷ David J Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1991), 46.

⁸⁸ Eugene A Nida. and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation, with Special Reference to Bible Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 200.

⁸⁹ James R. Nieman, *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008), 12.

⁹⁰ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 4.

⁹¹ Denis Haack, “On Being Offended in a Pagan World,” *Critique*, <http://www.ransomfellowship.org/article/detail.asp?AID=23>

his sermon; he assumes no familiarity with redemptive history... He highlights the biblical resonance found in the literature of the people.”⁹² Thus, no sermon is perfectly portable, because no audience is identical.

Despite the different audiences, one theme unites all of Paul’s messages. Stott notices that the “Kingship of Jesus and its implications remains the core of the message to pagan audiences, though the terminology and approach are very different from the preaching to Jews or Gentiles.”⁹³ Regardless of the location, every sermon contained in the book of Acts points to the supremacy of Jesus.

Communication to Unchurched

Preachers fall into unclear communication when they assume that non-Christians don’t attend their services. Ministers are often well educated and interact primarily with friends, family members, and coworkers who are knowledgeable about scripture. As a result, their language can drift towards religious jargon or “Christianese.” Matthew Kim writes, “Oftentimes preachers use theological language without clear explanations.”⁹⁴

Regardless of the spiritual condition of their congregation, Eswine encourages preachers to speak as if non-Christian people are present. For no other reason, “Christians need to hear how a follower of Jesus speaks to non-Christians. Non-Christian people need to feel what it’s like for a follower of Jesus to speak to them in Jesus’s name.”⁹⁵ If one

⁹² Haack, “On Being Offended.”

⁹³ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 235.

⁹⁴ Matthew Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear our Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 2017), 88.

⁹⁵ Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, 84.

does not explain doctrinal concepts, he will alienate visitors. Author John Stackhouse observes, “Visitors feel left behind and may wonder if this church is really for them.”⁹⁶ He believes pastors should not assume biblical literacy among their hearers. He expects his followers to be unfamiliar with rudimentary concepts such as the incarnation, atonement, or the Trinity.

Non-Verbal Communication

Communication expert, Annette Simmons shares, “When you speak, words are less than 15 percent of what listeners ‘hear.’”⁹⁷ Communication involves words as well as tone, posture, and gestures. Doctoral candidate Patricia Batten explains, “Listeners judge us by far more than the words we say. They receive information from our facial expressions, our posture, our gestures, our clothes, our eye movement, our tone, and a variety of other non-verbal forms of communication.”⁹⁸ Even secular business sources affirm this tenet. In his best-selling leadership book, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey implores leaders to seek first to understand, then to be understood. He explains, “10% of our communication is represented by words we say. Another 30% is represented by sounds, and 60% by our body language.”⁹⁹ For this reason, Kim concludes that the

⁹⁶ John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 187.

⁹⁷ Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2002), 86.

⁹⁸ Patricia Batten, *Expository Story Sermon*. DMin Thesis (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2008), 108.

⁹⁹ Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 252.

“Tone of the text should match the tone of the sermon, and the tone of the sermon should be contextualized for the listeners in the pews.”¹⁰⁰

Paul’s Communication in Athens

Paul opens with his speech with a compliment. He declares, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.”¹⁰¹ His first remark is civil and courteous. He aims at building a bridge with his listener. Later, he recites pagan philosophers and songs. Bible scholar David Peterson remarks that Paul goes “out of his way to find common ground with philosophers and poets, but his presuppositions are not drawn from Platonism or Stoicism but unambiguously from the Old Testament.”¹⁰² He was well versed in the prevailing culture of his day. He didn’t immediately critique or condemn Athenian thinking. He affirmed aspects of their philosophies and proceeded to share the preeminence of Christ.¹⁰³

Accept & Reject

Effective contextualization requires diligent work. It accepts and rejects certain aspects of culture. Plueddemann notes that “God is at work in every culture, but Satan is too... The image of God can be found in every culture, but the effects of our depravity

¹⁰⁰ Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, 145.

¹⁰¹ Acts 17:22.

¹⁰² David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 496

¹⁰³ Acts 17.

are also evident.”¹⁰⁴ Keller clarifies that gospel communication should be “marked by clarity, attractiveness, and yet it still challenges sinners’ self-sufficiency and calls them to repentance. It adapts and connects to the culture, yet at the same time challenges and confronts it.”¹⁰⁵

Paul was dedicated to removing unnecessary stumbling blocks or *scandalon* to the gospel message. However, he recognizes that he cannot eliminate all offense. At the end of his sermon, he shares, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world.”¹⁰⁶ A contextual messenger desires to cause the right scandal and remove the unnecessary one. Keller summarizes that gospel preachers remove any and all unnecessary stumbling blocks. At the same time, they recognize that they cannot eliminate all offense.¹⁰⁷

In *The Heart of Evangelism*, Jerram Barrs contends that evangelism presents not only a challenge to the culture and but also the individual. He notes:

The Gospel will always be experienced as a challenge. It will challenge the mind, for it confronts false belief with the truth. It will challenge the will, for it cuts to the core of our insistence on turning away from God and going our own way. It will challenge the heart, for our hearts are devoted to many masters in place of the one true Lord. Any faithful communication of the Gospel must come with this challenge. In fact, it is appropriate to assert that if there is no challenge, there is no genuine presentation of the Gospel.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, 65.

¹⁰⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 94.

¹⁰⁶ Acts 17:30.

¹⁰⁷ Keller, *Center Church*, 94.

¹⁰⁸ Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 267.

Love

The contextual task seems daunting, and since no preacher has a sufficient CQ for this task, it is important to remember the primacy of love. Reflecting on his own pulpit ministry, Pastor Ed Rowell says, “Love does cover a multitude of pastoral sins. If my flock recognizes my voice as that of a loving under-shepherd, they will listen with ears of trust and faith. They’ll know instinctively I have their best interests at heart.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, author Paul Metzger shares, “No matter how good the argument or how contextual, winsome, and striking the message, nothing replaces sacrificial love for others; this is how trust is built.”¹¹⁰ In fact, in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul attests, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”¹¹¹ In other words a perfectly contextualized delivery without love is unintelligible.

Sport as Religion

The previous section examined scholarly research around Paul’s example of contextualization. Just as Paul “passed along and observed the objects of your worship,”

¹⁰⁹ Ed Rowell, *Before You Preach*,” *Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 580.

¹¹⁰ Paul Louis Metzger, *Connecting Christ: How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), xvii.

¹¹¹ 1 Corinthians 13:1.

football chaplains examine the dominant idols of the locker room.¹¹² Paul used the “unknown god” to describe the God of the Bible. In the same way, chaplains can reveal an unknown god, sports. Americans may not bow down to an actual altar of sport, but they watch, coach, and compete with religious fervor. This next section will explore the American deification of sport. Both secular scholars and Christian ministers agree that many in the US relate to sports have done so along religious contours.

Sports in the Bible

Paul’s letters to various churches were replete with athletic metaphors. He consistently references boxing and track and field to illustrate the need for spiritual discipline. For example, he instructed Timothy to “Fight the good fight.”¹¹³ He observed that the church in Galatia was “running well.”¹¹⁴ To the Corinthian church, he reminded them, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.”¹¹⁵ Paul believed that the athletic and Christian life could be lived in congruence. Baylor professor Michael Kerrigan agrees, stating “Through the metaphors the apostle Paul used in both exhortations and autobiographical references, he drew attention to an affinity between athletics and the Christian life.”¹¹⁶ In his book, *Don’t Waste Your Sport*, pastor and former athlete C.J.

¹¹² Acts 17:23.

¹¹³ 1 Timothy 6:12.

¹¹⁴ Galatians 5:7.

¹¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:25.

¹¹⁶ Michael P. Kerrigan, “Sports in the Christian Life,” Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University (2008), 20.

Mahaney explains that all sports are a gift from a gracious God. Each, when played and enjoyed properly, can glorify God.¹¹⁷

In reality, sports often distract athletes from their worship of God.

Paul wandered the temples in order to observe the objects of worship in Athenian culture.¹¹⁸ The chaplain recognizes that sport can either be a means of worshipping God or a replacement for God. Religion professor Nathan Jones notices that societies often “turn some of God’s greatest gifts—sex, food, and sports—into idols because those things are capable of convincing us that they’re all that really matters in life.”¹¹⁹

Just like other world religions, football has its own times and place of worship, community of believers, and regular sacrifice. Many coaches require their players to approach the game with religious zeal. Sports reporter Michael Oriard writes that the normal expectation of the players is “to live football during the entire fall season.”¹²⁰ One theologian Randall Ballmer observes, “The sports stadium has replaced the church sanctuary as the dominant arena of piety at the turn of the 21st century, especially for American men.”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ C.J. Mahaney, *Don’t Waste Your Sports* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 2011.

¹¹⁸ Acts 17.

¹¹⁹ Nathan Jones, “Feeling God’s Pleasure: Christian Faith in the World of Sports.” *Word & World* 35, no 4 (Fall 2015), 338.

¹²⁰ Michael Oriard, *Bowled Over: Big-Time College Football from the Sixties to the BCS Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 275.

¹²¹ Randall Balmer, “Is God a Rams Fan?” *Sojourner Magazine* (January - February 2001), <https://sojo.net/magazine/january-february-2001/god-rams-fan>.

Puritan Roots

The next section will provide a brief overview of the theological development of sport in Western civilization. Early in United States history, Puritans maintained a generally unenthusiastic posture towards sport. Historian Dennis Brailsford summarizes the Protestant opposition in three points. “Sport was not the best use of time; sport often took place on Sunday; sport was often associated with drinking, gambling and bad company.”¹²² Reverend Sam Ashe, a pastor in the eighteenth century, exemplifies the Puritan animosity toward sport. According to research of Richard Holt, Ashe “would bide his time till the football came near him when he would catch the ball and pierce it with a pin. He could then go home rejoicing that he had stopped his parishioners from sinning.”¹²³ Recently, historian Allen Guttman wrote that he was unaware of “a single document in which a Puritan minister or magistrate demonstrates any enthusiasm for sports per se.”¹²⁴

Catholic Correction

Whereas the Puritans maintained a negative approach to sports, Catholics provided a more thoughtful theology. In the early 1900s, Pope Pius X declared, “Young people should perform physical exercises. Performed in moderation they will not only

¹²² Dennis Brailsford, *Sport, Time, and Society* (London: Routledge, 1991), 325-329.

¹²³ Richard Holt, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989), 39.

¹²⁴ Allen Guttman, *A Whole New Ballgame: An Interpretation of American Sports* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1988), 33.

promote the health of the body, but also the salvation of the soul.”¹²⁵ More recently, Pope John Paul II mentioned sport over 120 times. In an address to young athletes he declared, “Athletic activity can help every man and woman to recall that moment when God the Creator gave origin to the human person, the masterpiece of his creative work.”¹²⁶ Likewise, Pope Benedict the XVI expressed, “Sport is one of the human activities which is also waiting to be enlightened by God through Christ, so that the values it expresses may be purified and elevated at both the individual and the collective levels.”¹²⁷ Catholic historical George Soell summarizes that historic Catholic perspective on sport as “acceptance in principle, warning against an overvaluation of sport and against exaggeration... with emphasis on the spiritual and moral effects of sport.”¹²⁸

The Catholics spoke about sport regularly. Several Popes “addressed the role of sports in society and observed how the Christian life and sporting activity complement one another.”¹²⁹ In 1990, papal authorities convened a seminar entitled “The World of Sport Today: A Field of Christian Mission.” Kerrigan actually likens this event to a modern version of Paul’s speech at the Areopagus. The conference was designed to

¹²⁵ George Soell, “Sport in Catholic Theology in the 20th Century,” *The Scientific View of Sport: Perspectives, Aspects, Issues* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1972), 63.

¹²⁶ Pope John Paul II, “Address to Participants of Athletic Championship: Be Examples of Human Virtues,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (September, 7 1987), 5.

¹²⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for the 20th Winter Olympic Games in Turin, Italy: A Light for Sports,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 6 (February 8, 2006), 2.

¹²⁸ Soell, “Catholic Theology,” 63.

¹²⁹ Kerrigan, “Sports in the Christian Life,” 20.

“encourage twenty-first century Christians to envision athletic competition and the sports playing fields as new opportunities for Christian evangelization.”¹³⁰

Dualism

A latent sacred and secular divide existed among Protestants. Sports were categorized as secular therefore inferior or frivolous. Theologian Michael Goheen concludes, “The body and soul dichotomy sees sports and athletics as belonging to the body—the inferior part of man.”¹³¹ Hoffman reiterates “Games are things of the body, and thus of a lower order than things of the spirit.”¹³² This dualism is the result of a corrupted understanding of creation. It fails to recognize athletics as a God-given good. Once again, Goheen comments, that this ascetic spirituality “while cloaked as zealous commitment, was in fact simply ingratitude for one of God’s good gifts.”¹³³

The dualistic legacy still influences the American perspective today. Goheen concludes that the sacred and secular and body and soul dichotomies of the past actually promote the idolatry of sport in the present.¹³⁴ In *Christianity and the Culture of Sport*,

¹³⁰ Kerrigan, “Sports in the Christian Life,” 21.

¹³¹ Michael Goheen, “Delighting in God’s Good Gift of Sports and Competition.” Keynote address, Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies Annual Conference. Redeemer University College (Ancaster, Ontario, 5 June 2003), 5. <http://missionworldview.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Gods-Good-Gift-of-Athletics.pdf>.

¹³² John Wilson, “Dilemmas of the Christian College Athlete,” *Imprimis* 16, no. 5 (1986). <https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/dilemmas-of-the-christian-college-athlete/>.

¹³³ Goheen, “Delighting,” 2.

¹³⁴ Michael Goheen, “The Creational Goodness of Sports and Competition,” *Comment Magazine* (March 1, 2009), 4. <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-creational-goodness-of-sports-and-competition>.

Shirl Hoffman describes this phenomenon as a “degraded view of sports.”¹³⁵ He observes that many Christians and chaplains are quick to offer superficial “prayers before free throws and praises after touchdowns but offer little, if any, alternative vision from the secular sports culture.”¹³⁶ He challenges the church to think Christianly about sport.

Today, many chaplains minister without a clearly articulated theology of sport. Theologian James Smith notes that chaplains also often lack well-developed devotional material. The prevalence of low-quality gospel curriculum points to the fact many chaplains proceed “without an underlying theology or redemptive critique of sport.”¹³⁷ Christian athletes often recognize that sports provide opportunities to glorify God verbally during press conferences or interviews. However, they fail to embrace how practice and competition in themselves can honor God. Smith laments, “Where can we find sustained theological reflection on sport? I don't mean ‘religious’ reflections by athletes—which are usually testimonials that simply instrumentalize sport as a means for sharing a message about a wholly other-worldly, disembodied ‘gospel.’”¹³⁸ In the absence of a well-developed doctrine, sports have become an object of worship, or an idol. Goheen compares sports to sex. They are both powerful impulses that can be

¹³⁵ Shirl Hoffman, *Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 6.

¹³⁶ Hoffman, *Culture of Sports*, 6.

¹³⁷ James K.A. Smith, “Introduction,” *The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), iii.

¹³⁸ Smith, “Introduction,” iii.

“twisted by sin and can easily turn ugly.”¹³⁹ In the end, Smith unequivocally states, “We lack a robust theology of sport.”¹⁴⁰

Idolatry of Sport

Many professional football players describe their relationship to the sport not as a player to a game but a worshipper to a god. For example, former free safety for the Indianapolis Colts and current pastor, Derwin Gray recounts, “Football functioned as my savior. It gave me love: If I played well, I was loved by fans. It gave me an identity: I was Derwin, the football player. It gave me significance: I was somebody because I was a great player. And football gave me a mission.”¹⁴¹ Gray’s story is not an isolated account. Religion professor Charles Prebish identifies sports “as the fastest growing religion in America, far outdistancing whatever is in second place.”¹⁴² In his seminal work, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor places sporting events among the category of the festive. He writes that sports offer “moments of fusion in a common action and feeling, which both wrench us out of the every day, and seem to put us in touch with something exceptional, beyond ourselves. Which is why some have seen these moments as among the new forms of religion in our worlds.”¹⁴³

¹³⁹Goheen, “The Creational Goodness of Sports,” 4.

¹⁴⁰ Smith, “Introduction,” iii.

¹⁴¹ Derwin Grey, “Pro Football Was My God: Until a Half-Naked Man Showed Up at My Locker,” *Christianity Today* (March 2014), 80.

¹⁴² Charles S. Prebish, “Heavenly Father, Divine Goalie: Sport and Religion,” *The Antioch Review* 42, no. 3 (Summer, 1984) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4611365>, 318.

¹⁴³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2007), 482-483.

To summarize, Puritan generations in early American history failed to embrace the creational good of sports. In this cultural moment, however, most Americans deify sport. Sports are no longer to be rejected but are instead received wholesale. In *God in the Stadium*, R.J. Higgs comments, “Sports on Sunday were generally unthinkable, especially among clergy. Today sport and religion have been sanctified in a holy union that would have stunned not only the Puritans.”¹⁴⁴

Cultural Accommodation

Several authors agreed that the idolatry of sport was merely another form of the American church being held captive to the surrounding culture. Higgs suggests that Americans don’t necessarily worship sport but rather the success, conquest, and wealth obtained through victory. For this reason, he writes, “Sports and religion are in many ways incompatible. I would even argue that the ways in which modern sports have become entangled with religious practice constitute a heresy.”¹⁴⁵ Higgs believes that victory on the field is mismatched with a Savior defeated on the cross. Like a coach motivating his players, many pastors reduce the gospel message to a spiritual pregame speech. They preach, “If you accept Christ, you can be a winner too,”¹⁴⁶ all the while forgetting that “Christianity is about a man who died on a cross. He was a loser. He

¹⁴⁴ RJ Higgs, *God in the Stadium* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁴⁵ Higgs, *God in the Stadium*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Higgs, *God in the Stadium*, 14.

appealed to the losers in society.”¹⁴⁷ Higgs draws out the counterproductive, triumphalist nature of the American church and its desire to attach itself to winners.

Hoffman adds that the church’s “invasion of Christian athletes and coaches into big-time sports (especially football)” is a quest for cultural relevance.¹⁴⁸ Balmer taps into the collective Western desire for strength and power. He sees the obsession with sport as an attempt “to reclaim a powerful, triumphant God of an earlier era... who has no trouble distinguishing right from wrong, good from evil. God the avenger. The Almighty as Arnold Schwarzenegger or Reggie White.”¹⁴⁹ Hoffman goes so far as to say, “The evangelical rush to the sports stadium may be a singular phenomenon in defining evangelical’s accommodation to modern society.”¹⁵⁰ In conclusion, several authors credit the American obsession with victory, triumph, and success as reasons why the church embraces sport wholesale.

Worship

Community worship requires a consistent location. College football fans gather on Saturdays and professional fans on Sundays. The stadium serves as their holy place. Columnist Nathan Jones observes, “We build expensive new ‘cathedrals’ to house our worship of athletic prowess. We sacrifice time, energy, attention, and tons of money to the altar of our favorite teams and players. We sometimes even deify players and

¹⁴⁷ Higgs, *God in the Stadium*, 14.

¹⁴⁸ Hoffman, *Culture of Sports*, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Balmer, “Is God a Rams Fan?”

¹⁵⁰ Hoffman, *Culture of Sports*, 6.

coaches... And make no mistake: it is more than happy to help you ‘play’ without ceasing.”¹⁵¹ After attending an NFL game, author Eric Miller wonders, “What kind of organization provides us with everything we want, from extraordinary spectacles to godlike athletes to dancing girls? And what kind of people accept such offerings?”¹⁵² Both columnists cannot attend a sporting event without experiencing a sense of liturgy.

Parishioners preach and encourage the development of a community outside of formal worship. In the same way, sports provide opportunity for fellowship. Columnist for *The Atlantic*, Michael Serazio points out that games provide “licenses to congregate together. As social creatures, there is something universal—and still enduring—in that tribal yearning... In short, if you look hard at sports, you can’t help but see contours of religion.”¹⁵³ There’s a liturgical dynamic to fandom. During a service, church attenders kneel and rise, pray and sing, talk and listen in unison. Fans also rise and cheer as one. Charles Taylor again points out that over the course of an event, fan bases “Undoubtedly become a common agent; and we may try to prolong this when we leave the stadium by marching and chanting, or even wreaking various forms of mayhem together.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Jones, “Feeling God’s Pleasure,” 337.

¹⁵² Eric Miller, “Why We Love Football: Grace and Idolatry Run Crossing Patterns in the New American Pastime,” *Christianity Today* (September 2007), 28.

¹⁵³ Michael Serazio, “Just How Much Is Sports Fandom Like Religion?” *The Atlantic* (Jan. 29, 2013), 2. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/just-how-much-is-sports-fandom-like-religion/272631/>.

¹⁵⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 482.

Unity and Diversity

From its inception, the early church promoted unity and diversity. Individuals from different social, ethnic, and economic strata joined in their adoration of Christ.¹⁵⁵ Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, Rice University sociologists, define a multiracial congregation “as one where no one racial group is more than 80% of the congregation. Using that standard, he has found that only 8% of all Christian congregations in the U.S. are racially mixed to a significant degree.”¹⁵⁶ The modern American church is generally ethnically homogenous. Dr. Martin Luther King’s observation still holds true. In a speech to college students, he exclaimed, “We must face the fact that in America, the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11:00 on Sunday morning, when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation. This is tragic.”¹⁵⁷

While churches remain segregated, sports are uniting members of various ethnic groups. Author of *Sports and Race*, Eric Barreto, notes, “Despite shrinking numbers of worshipers on Sundays in churches around the country, our communities still find ways to gather, to celebrate, to rejoice, to mourn... and sports often provide a cultural meeting space far more ethnically diverse than most of our churches.”¹⁵⁸ Marketers and advertisers invest heavily in sporting events because they assure a “wide, diverse, engaged audience

¹⁵⁵ Acts 2:42-46.

¹⁵⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., “1963 Western Michigan University Speech.” Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections and University Libraries. <https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/MLK.pdf>.

¹⁵⁸ Eric D. Barreto, “Sports and Race: A Cauldron of Theological Deliberation and Discernment,” *Word & World* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2015), 370.

watching all at the same time and without skipping the commercials... drawing unlikely neighbors into unlikely conversations.”¹⁵⁹ Sports move observers towards unity and diversity beyond the field of competition. Serazio writes, “Sports can bring diverse individuals into a common cause that extends beyond the final whistle. Sports can shift national assumptions about race when pivotal athletes transform us as we awe over their talents and charisma.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, the transcendent nature of athletics brings different people together. Kerrigan sums up, “Sports can overcome social classes, cultural differences, linguistic barriers, and geographical boundaries among peoples.”¹⁶¹

Redeeming Sport

The first move in redeeming sport is to recover the creational good of sports. Miller affirms, “In football there remains considerable good to be savored and preserved. Football, to put it differently, may lead not to the forfeiture of grace but to a richer experience of it.”¹⁶² Following creation, God called the world good. Since Adam’s original sin, everything in creation contains elements both good and fallen.¹⁶³ Thus Christian athletes and fans need not reject or receive sport wholesale. Instead, they can embrace a third option and redeem sport, integrating it into their biblical worldview.

¹⁵⁹ Barreto, “Sports and Race,” 369.

¹⁶⁰ Serazio, “Fandom,” 3.

¹⁶¹ Kerrigan, “Sports in the Christian Life,” 19.

¹⁶² Miller, “Why We Love Football,” 29.

¹⁶³ Romans 5:12-21, 6:23.

The Proper Place

Goheen attests, “The world of games, sports, and athletics is one way we construct an imaginary world with goals, rules, and obstacles. Entering into this created world for a time can enrich our lives in various ways.”¹⁶⁴ God’s original task for mankind was to “fill the earth and subdue it.”¹⁶⁵ This mandate calls for men and women to rule in a way that enhances, beautifies, and develops God’s original creation. With this in mind, Goheen concludes, “It is out of this foundational task that sports and athletics has arisen as one cultural product.”¹⁶⁶

No doubt, sports provide a variety of spiritual benefits. Author Murray Hall sees the physical benefits, noting that these activities “should not be ends in themselves. They are means to another end—desiring God and others.”¹⁶⁷ Miller similarly states, “Sport may lead us more fully into an experience of health, an experience of community, play, joy—all good gifts of the Creator. But this happens only if it is enfolded within a grander, richer participation in life... sourced in the Creator and centered on the Cross.”¹⁶⁸ The entire Christian life is devoted to the supremacy of God. Paul instructs believers “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”¹⁶⁹ Watching or playing sports are not a reprieve or break from our task of glorifying God. Instead, they are an

¹⁶⁴ Goheen, “Delighting,” 3.

¹⁶⁵ Genesis 1:28.

¹⁶⁶ Goheen. “Delighting,” 3.

¹⁶⁷ Murray W. Hall, “A Christian Perspective on Physical Education, Health, and Sport,” *Christian Worldview and the Academic Disciplines: Crossing the Academy*, edited by Deane E.D. Downey and Stanley E. Porter (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 370.

¹⁶⁸ Miller, “Why We Love Football,” 30.

¹⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:31.

opportunity to worship God. Researcher James Sire adds, “We cannot marginalize/compartmentalize God or push him to the edge of our minds when we are involved in sports. He must be the hidden premise of all our work” and play.¹⁷⁰

Competition

Before listing out the benefits of participating in sports, honest research must first confront the issue of competition. Some would question, “Does not competition promote sinful attitudes such as pride, bitterness, and envy?” NFL Hall of Fame coach Vince Lombardi exemplifies the perversity of competition. He famously quipped, “Winning isn’t everything; it is the only thing. To play this game you must have fire in you, and there is nothing that stokes fire like hate.”¹⁷¹ Lombardi demanded total commitment from his players because, “Excellence and victory is what life is all about.”¹⁷² Another NFL Hall of Fame coach, George Allen, used religious language to describe winning. He says “Every time you win, you’re reborn; when you lose, you die a little... The winner is the only individual who is truly alive.”¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ James W. Sire, *Discipleship of the Mind: Learning to Love God in the Ways We Think* (Downers Grove, IL: 1990), 80-81.

¹⁷¹ James A. Michener, *Sports in America* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1976), 481.

¹⁷² Michener, *Sports in America*, 481.

¹⁷³ Michener, *Sports in America*, 481.

Win at All Costs

Kerrigan sees the “win at all costs” mentality as dominant in the athletic landscape. He perceives it among players, coaches, and owners. He lists current athletic scandals as evidence. These include:

Fixing results for gambling purposes, using steroids and other performance enhancing substances, and stealing team signals on the field to gain an advantage. Another temptation is to commercialize sports so that athletes and spectators are reduced to commodities, exploited for financial gain (by team owners, corporate sponsors, and so on), and not respected for their human dignity.¹⁷⁴

This mindset values results and success more than the dignity of the players. In his memoir, former professional athlete and U.S. Senator Bill Bradley identifies that when sports are played improperly, there’s an internal destruction even in victory. He reminisces, “The winning team, like the conquering army, claims everything in its path and seems to say that only winning is important. Yet victory has very narrow meaning and can become a destructive force.”¹⁷⁵ Ehrman notices that the ball field equates success as synonymous with winning. If only one team a year wins it all, “in the vast majority of situations, we are left to feel that we didn’t measure up.”¹⁷⁶

In response to the idolatry of success, some theologians regard competition as inherently immoral. In *Athletics from a Christian Perspective*, Marvin Zuidema explains, “Competition is morally wrong because it pits one player or team against another in

¹⁷⁴ Kerrigan, “Sports in the Christian Life,” 24.

¹⁷⁵ Bill Bradley, *Life on the Run* (New York: Rosetta Books, 1976), 144.

¹⁷⁶ Ehrmann, *Inside Out*, 124.

rivalry which often results in hate.”¹⁷⁷ Higgs makes a distinction between sport and play. He clarifies, writing that in “sports we compete with nature and others; in play we commune with nature and others.”¹⁷⁸ Play fosters communion with God and others. Sports are the converse. They breed division with God and others. This is why he treats sport as “heresy.”¹⁷⁹

On the other side, some scholars have responded that opposition and obstacles actually lead to joy rather than hate. Goheen writes, “An opponent is not first of all a rival but one who provides the opportunity for a more delightful experience of sport. Competition is an enriching part of God’s gift. One loves one’s neighbor in sport by providing stiff competition to enhance the athletic experience.”¹⁸⁰ Ehrmann defends the sacredness of competition by pointing out the etymology of the actual word. He writes:

The root word for competition is the Latin word “petere,” meaning to search and strive for. Most often is used in the context of striving or searching for something of value or excellence. The preposition “com” means together. So, literally, competition can be defined as a “mutual quest or striving for excellence.” It is more process-oriented than outcome-oriented, whereby competitors strive together or with each other to bring out the best by presenting a worthy challenge.¹⁸¹

For this reason, Ehrmann advocates a definition of competition not dictated by the scoreboard. He teaches players and coaches that true competition allows participants to

¹⁷⁷ Marvin Zuidema, “Athletics from a Christian Perspective,” *Christianity and Leisure: Issues in a Pluralistic Society*, edited by Paul Heintzman, Glen Van Andel, and Thomas Visker (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1994), 185.

¹⁷⁸ Higgs, *God in the Stadium*, 3.

¹⁷⁹ Higgs, *God in the Stadium*, 3.

¹⁸⁰ Goheen, “Delighting,” 4.

¹⁸¹ Ehrmann, *Inside Out*, 213.

realize their full potential on the field. Winning and losing does not define success. Every player who competes with integrity is a winner. This radical redefinition “leads to respect for others, personal and team integrity, and justice and fairness” for both teams.¹⁸²

Personal experience suggests that humanity’s most satisfying moments are often the result of striving and perseverance. No doubt, sports at their worst promote rivalry and division. However, successfully overcoming opposition is the heart of competition, whether it is a game of cards or football. Author Bradshaw Frey concludes, “The joy in the game is in creating tactics to overcome the obstacles and accomplish the goal.”¹⁸³

The Good of Sports

Sports therefore are no different than any other cultural product. They are games that involve skill, decision, and strategy, simultaneously good and yet tainted by sin. Sports at their best contain manifold physical and spiritual benefits that promote thanksgiving to God. In *What the Book Says About Sport*, Stuart Weir outlines that competition is a “a gift from God; part of God’s creation; an opportunity for worship; an opportunity to love one’s neighbor; a testing ground; an opportunity for witness; important but not all-important.”¹⁸⁴ Goheen generalizes that sport leads to “Aesthetic enjoyment... Religious deepening... Social bonding... Physical satisfaction.”¹⁸⁵ Even

¹⁸² Ehrmann, *Inside Out*, 213.

¹⁸³ Bradshaw Frey, William Ingram, Thomas McWhertor, and William Romanowski, “Sports and Athletics: Playing to the Glory of God,” *At Work and Play: Biblical Insight to Daily Obedience* (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 1986), 46.

¹⁸⁴ Stuart Weir, *What the Book Says About Sport* (Oxford: BRF, 2000), 72.

¹⁸⁵ Goheen, “Delighting,” 4.

Zuidema notes that healthy recreation does not divide, rather it “can bring out co-operation, celebration, respect, and even love.”¹⁸⁶ Each author treats sport as a gift from God to be received with thanksgiving. Along with the Apostle James, they agree, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.”¹⁸⁷

Many other authors and theologians point out that sports offer physical and emotional benefits. A key factor in the transition from boyhood to manhood is the ability to regulate one’s emotions. Sports provide a structured environment for young athletes to experience and express their emotions. As Johan Huizinga puts it, sports are “not serious and at the same time absorb the player intensely and utterly.”¹⁸⁸ Zuidema observes that athletes who compete regularly come to know “the beauty of intensity of effort, the motivation of pursuit of goals, the feeling and being of fitness, the expressiveness of movement, the creativity of play, the excitement of total involvement, and the joy of sport.”¹⁸⁹ Johnston observes, regardless of the outcome of the game, “Play relativizes our ‘over-seriousness’ toward life, filling us with a spirit of joy and delight that carries over into all aspects of our existence.”¹⁹⁰ In summary, these researchers conclude that sports provide immense physical and emotional benefits to the athlete, and the game field is an opportune environment for adolescents to develop the ability to regulate their emotions.

¹⁸⁶ Zuidema, “Athletics from a Christian Perspective,” 185.

¹⁸⁷ James 1:17.

¹⁸⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (New York: Angelico Press, 2016), 13.

¹⁸⁹ Zuidema, “Athletics from a Christian Perspective,” 184.

¹⁹⁰ Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 48.

Furthermore, there are physiological factors at play. Frey again shares that during the game, the player is “absorbed in serious pursuit of a non-serious activity.”¹⁹¹ This activity floods the body with opiates that induce deep focus and satisfaction. In *Sacred Rhythms*, author Ruth Haley Burton writes, “Exercise brings mental and physiological changes... This physiological dynamic can create a change in consciousness, a kind of expansiveness in which the runner feels more integrated with his or her surroundings and the Creator himself.”¹⁹² In popular culture, this phenomenon is referred to as the “runner’s high.” William C. Bushell, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist, writes “A biological mechanism is at work... Whatever creator made the body had this in mind. It comes out in physiological science like a clear blueprint.”¹⁹³ Bushell’s data reveals that exercise produces mental change that can lead to a spiritual experience. An active body enhances the health of one’s heart and mind.

Misdirected Priorities

For this reason, sport, along with any cultural product, can be worshipped or used in the worship of God. Mahaney provides a helpful diagnostic for competitors. His signs of misdirected priorities include “We have no higher purpose than winning. We are more concerned about improving athletic skill than growing in godliness. We use sports to glorify ourselves, rather than glorifying God through godly actions.” He wraps up the

¹⁹¹ Frey, “Playing to the Glory of God,” 43.

¹⁹² Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 84-85.

¹⁹³ Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 84-85.

section by saying, “Athletic ability and achievements must be secondary; playing sports to the glory of God must be primary.”¹⁹⁴

No doubt, many athletes play the game with misdirected motives. Yet, for those who play the game for God’s glory, the potential for missionary impact is immense. As a doctoral student, Nathan Jones served as the equipment manager for the Duke University football team. He witnessed the gospel spread as players trusted in Christ. Looking back, he writes, “Without any doubt, the most remarkable cultural shift that occurred was the formation of a new kind of community. They called it ‘Duke Gang,’ but instead of their gang unifying around drugs and violence, they unified around their faith, their families, their futures, and, of course, their football.”¹⁹⁵ Jones elaborates on the theological power of sport. “What happens to a team when its players subordinate the sport itself to their faith, their families, and their futures? The whole culture changes.”¹⁹⁶

Locker Room Culture

As stated earlier, in accordance with Paul’s example in Athens, chaplains must study American football culture to remove unnecessary barriers and rightly contextualize the gospel for the hearer. In this case, football chaplains best serve the gospel by observing and understanding the characteristics of locker room culture. In addition, locker room culture is instrumental in player’s personal identity formation and worldview. According to Hunter, “a person’s view of reality is largely shaped, and

¹⁹⁴ Mahaney, *Don’t Waste Your Sports*.

¹⁹⁵ Jones, “Feeling God’s Pleasure,” 335.

¹⁹⁶ Jones, “Feeling God’s Pleasure,” 335.

maintained, within the community into which one has been socialized.”¹⁹⁷ The following section reveals the norms propagated in the locker room.

Masculinity

In the Southeast, football has become one sign for the transition from boyhood to manhood. This is largely due to the physicality of the game. In order to compete, players wear a complete set of armor. Helmets and pads for their shoulders, thighs, and knees are needed to protect players from contact. Even with constantly updated protections, injuries are unavoidable.

Football culture thus assumes that one must be strong, powerful, and tough in order to be a “real man.” Emory religion professor Eugene Bianchi notes, “Big-time football also manifests and strengthens the ideal of masculine identity in the United States. The true male is aggressively competitive and dominant in all situations.”¹⁹⁸ Expert on gender in athletics, Michael Messner adds, “His masculinity will be called into question, when he refused to further give up his body for the good of the team.”¹⁹⁹ In another article, Bianchi adds, “To be thought of as a sissy is tragic for a male child... he is schooled to muscular and psychic aggressiveness. He understands from the start that both his own and society’s acceptance of him as a man depends on his being dominant toward and protective of females and successfully competitive toward males.”²⁰⁰ The

¹⁹⁷ Hunter, *The Celtic Way*, 108.

¹⁹⁸ Eugene Bianchi, “Pigskin Piety” *Christianity and Crisis* (Feb 21, 1972), 32.

¹⁹⁹ Messner, “Bodies are Weapons,” 7.

²⁰⁰ Eugene Bianchi, “The Superbowl Culture of Male Violence,” *Christian Century* (September 18, 1974), 842.

music, practices, and speeches associated with football reinforce a conception of manhood that is dominant and aggressive. In an article entitled “Man Up!”, psychologists Joey Ramaecker and Trent A. Petrie conclude that football “reinforces traditional masculine norms, including denial of pain and using one’s body as an instrument of violence.”²⁰¹

Muscular

Athletes spend several hours each week in the weight room, enhancing their strength for practice and games. Scripture also emphasizes the value of the body, as Paul instructs the church in Corinth, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”²⁰² Later on, he informs his disciple Timothy, “bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”²⁰³ Author of *Muscular Christianity*, Clifford Putney, defines this concept “as a Christian commitment to health and manliness. Its origins can be traced back to the New Testament, which sanctions manly exertion and physical health.”²⁰⁴

College football also idealizes the muscular, masculine identity. In “Body Talk, Athletic Identity, and Eating Disorder Symptoms in Men,” Erica Ahlich, Emily M.

²⁰¹ Joey Ramaecker and Trent A. Petrie, “‘Man Up!’: Exploring Intersections of Sport Participation, Masculinity, Psychological Distress, and Help-Seeking Attitudes and Intentions,” *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 20, no. 4 (2019), 517.

²⁰² I Corinthians 6:19.

²⁰³ I Timothy 4:8.

²⁰⁴ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Harvard, Harvard University Press), 11.

Choquette, and Diana Rancourt present research showing how the muscular archetype pressures the player. In the locker room, the authors observe, the “ideal male figure is both highly muscular and also very lean.”²⁰⁵ Many players feel bound to achieve and maintain a chiseled and perfect body. The authors suggest that the locker room is actually a breeding ground for “muscle dysmorphia, a disorder involving a preoccupation with the notion that one’s body is too small and not muscular enough.”²⁰⁶

On campus, athletes are set apart by their body types and the clothes they wear. As part of their scholarship, coaches provide matching team apparel. Often athletes dress in team colors, shirts, and jackets exclusive to the roster. Sociologist Landy Lu notes, “Team apparel and physical fitness served as visible markers of athletics and athleticism.”²⁰⁷ Citing several social psychologists, author Daniel Pink remarks that clothing operates “as a marker of affiliation and identification, enables coordination.”²⁰⁸ Uniform colors and attire communicates a sense of team loyalty, inclusion, pride.

According to the author Billy Hawkins, the correlation between muscles and masculinity is especially strong among African Americans. For the black community, “Football and basketball are a rite of passage into manhood.”²⁰⁹ Bianchi compares the entrance rites for black athletes to that of a criminal gang. Gangs and football teams

²⁰⁵ Erica Ahlich, Emily M. Choquette, and Diana Rancourt, “Body Talk, Athletic Identity, and Eating Disorder Symptoms in Men,” *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 20, no. 4 (2019), 347.

²⁰⁶ Ahlich, “Body Talk,” 348.

²⁰⁷ Landy Di Lu, “Multiple Positions,” 226.

²⁰⁸ Daniel H. Pink, *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 93.

²⁰⁹ Hawkins, *The New Plantation*, 70.

require young men to act aggressively to earn acceptance and validation. In both groups, “A tough stance and acts of violence bring him material rewards, a reputation for bravery, and the adulation of females.”²¹⁰

Many black athletes describe a special pressure to dominate white opponents. Former professional athlete, Dennis Rodman, describes this sentiment. In his autobiography, he opines, “The whole thing is simple: a black player knows he can go out on the court and kick a white player’s ass. He can beat him, and he knows it. It’s that simple, and it shouldn’t surprise anyone. The black player feels it every time. He knows it from the inside.”²¹¹ Athletes feel a particular burden to project an image of brute strength and power. Blacks are especially cross-pressured. They must demonstrate force and physicality in order to be regarded as true African American men.

Anti-Academic

For student athletes, the desire for physical prowess often comes at the expense of academic success. The research of Gary Sailes states, “Many athletes feel that academics are simply an avenue to ‘big-time’ college and professional sports and should not be taken seriously. Their belief is that academics are a necessary headache to achieve superstardom in the sports arena.”²¹² In contrast, the NCAA considers football players “student-athletes.” The designation indicates their amateur status and that they should devote equal amounts of time and energy to study and compete.

²¹⁰ Bianchi, “The Superbowl Culture,” 843.

²¹¹ Dennis Rodman, *Bad As I Wanna Be* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1996), 129.

²¹² Gary A. Sailes, “The Exploitation of the Black Athlete: Some Alternative Solutions,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 55, no. 4 (Autumn, 1986), 440. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2294828>.

Stephen Waller’s research points out that the student athlete lives in constant tension, pulled in two directions. Usually, “the role of ‘student’ in the term ‘student-athlete’ becomes subservient to the role of high performing athlete.”²¹³ Over the course of the semester, the time and energy demands of the sport take over the athlete’s mind and schedule. Waller concludes that such demands lead to disintegration. Many college athletes live on a “thin and narrow spiritual pathway. They focus only on material and worldly things.”²¹⁴

Not only do football players have less time to devote to their studies; most enter college with substandard grades. In an article on admission standards in major college football programs, Lee Sigelman reveals, “There is not a single Division I-A school where the average entrance exam score of football recruits exceeds that of all new students. Indeed, at the great majority of schools, new scholarship football players’ scores do not even approach those of all new students.”²¹⁵ College football players enter college with substantially lower test scores than their classmates. Once they arrive on campus, many find themselves unable to balance the demanding roles of athlete and student.²¹⁶

Following their acceptance, the NCAA mandates that student athletes must maintain a 2.0 GPA to remain eligible. Lydia Bell’s study found that the player’s “focus

²¹³ Steven, Waller, Landon T. Huffman, and Robin L. Hardin, “The Sport Chaplain’s Role in Holistic Care for Collegiate Athletes in the United States.” *Practical Theology* 9, no. 3 (2016), 230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2016.1221642>.

²¹⁴ Waller, “The Sport Chaplain’s Role,” 231.

²¹⁵ Lee Sigelman, “It’s Academic—or Is It? Admissions Standards and Big-Time College Football.” *Social Science Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (June, 1995), 253, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44072618?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

²¹⁶ Sigelman, “It’s Academic,” 258.

is often on achieving that 2.0, not exceeding it... Such an anti-academic stance has been shown to persist throughout the college experience.”²¹⁷ The NCAA mandates all institutions “make general academic counseling and tutoring services available to all student-athletes.”²¹⁸ Many campuses respond by instituting mandatory study halls and assigning academic advisors specifically to the athletic department. Even these advisors emphasize scholastic mediocrity rather than excellence.²¹⁹

For many athletes, their academic ambition is simply to stay eligible. Lederman’s research indicates that the “ball first” mindset is especially prevalent among football players. He writes “of all the varsity athletes, football players and members of the men’s basketball team almost always have the most trouble in the classroom.”²²⁰

Another NCAA rule stipulates that coaches must excuse players from practice for academic reasons. Bell’s data reveals that “Players are far more likely to skip academic events that conflict with practice schedules, electing to do make-up work rather than miss a practice or team meeting.”²²¹ While the university may be academically elite, athletes form an inner subculture. Lu observes that most athletic departments “value athletics over academics, poor academic performance, and a lack of reinforcement around academic accomplishments.”²²² In reality, athletes study just enough to stay eligible and compete.

²¹⁷ Lydia F. Bell, “Examining Academic Role-Set Influence on the Student-Athlete Experience,” *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* (2009), 20-21.

²¹⁸ NCAA, “NCAA Division I Manual: Constitutional Operating Bylaws, Administrative Bylaws, effective August 1, 2008,” (Indianapolis, IN), 244

²¹⁹ Bell, “Examining Academic Role-Set,” 20.

²²⁰ Lederman, “More Time on Sports,” 33.

²²¹ Bell, “Examining Academic Role-Set,” 20.

²²² Lu, “Playing Multiple Positions,” 216.

Again, research indicates an ethnic component to the anti-academic stance. In his research, Alvin Logan identified that minority athletes experience a “higher level of athletic identity than their white counterparts that is also associated with stronger desire to play professionally. Consequently, the only perceived path to the athlete’s professional dreams runs through the NCAA.”²²³ From a young age, African Americans are taught the “innate black athletic superiority” myth.²²⁴ They receive the message that all blacks are natural athletes and academically inferior. If they are born into a low-income environment, football rather than academics is the way out. Sailes laments that many college athletes reach a point in their collegiate career when they are “unable to graduate after his athletic eligibility has ended... In any case, the individual has no marketable skills beyond his athletic talent.”²²⁵ Hawkins’s research indicates that African American communities not only overemphasize physical talent, but they also demonize studious types. Classroom achievers are stigmatized as fake and “Intellectuals are punks and sissies.”²²⁶ Altogether, the football culture’s obsession with success comes at a high cost; especially to the athletes’ own mental development. If a black athlete is a high achiever, administrators treat him as a “freak of nature.”²²⁷

²²³ Alvin D. Logan, Jr., Louis Harrison, Jr., and Alex Logan, “4 Years a Football Player: The Social Reproduction of Restricted Agency.” *Race, Gender & Class* 22, no. 1-2, (2015), 38. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26505322>.

²²⁴ Martin P. Smith, Langston D. Clark, Louis Harrison and Jr., “The Historical Hypocrisy of the Black Student-Athlete.” *Race, Gender & Class* 21, no. 1-2, (2014), 222. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4349697>.

²²⁵ Sailes, “The Exploitation,” 440.

²²⁶ Hawkins, *The New Plantation*, 70.

²²⁷ Hawkins, *The New Plantation*, 70.

Inevitably, graduation rates suffer. The NCAA reports, “78% of all Division I athletes graduate from college within six years.”²²⁸ More specifically, college football players graduate at a 62% rate and African American football players at 58%.²²⁹

Violent

Unlike other mainstream sports like basketball, soccer, or baseball, contact in football is not incidental. It is the object of the game. Every play begins with explosive hit between the offensive and defensive line. The play ends with a tackle, another collision between two opposing players moving at full speed. Prior to a game, Lombardi told his players, “Football isn’t a contact sport, it’s a collision sport. Dancing is a contact sport... This is a violent sport. That’s why crowds love it.”²³⁰

Players utilize force in order to score or to stop their opponent from scoring. In an article entitled “Athletic Aggression,” B.J. Bredemeier reveals another form of contact in football. He notes its “attempt to inflict pain or injury for some goal other than that of injury itself... the utilization of instrumentally aggressive tactics to provoke, intimidate, or ‘take out’ opposing players.”²³¹ This mindset is so prevalent among participants that Bredemeier calls it the “nature of the game.”²³² The locker room environment

²²⁸ NCAA, “NCAA Student-Athletes Graduating at Highest Rates Ever.” <http://www.ncaa.org/wps/ncaa?ContentID=39116>.

²²⁹ NCAA, “Student-Athletes.”

²³⁰ Michener, *Sports in America*, 420.

²³¹ B.J. Bredemeier, “Athletic Aggression: A Moral Concern,” *Sports Violence*, Springer Series in Social Psychology (New York: 1983), 48.

²³² Bredemeier, “Athletic Aggression,” 48.

indoctrinates young men to not only be muscular but also inflict pain on others. These ideas can be detrimental to a player's health and well-being.²³³

Currently, an intense debate exists about player safety in football. Despite the comprehensive padding and modern helmets, brain injuries and concussion occur regularly. In 2007, Dr. Jesse Mez and several colleagues at Boston University examined the brains of 202 former football players. The data revealed high levels of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) among professional football players. CTE is a brain disease caused by significant head injuries and concussions.²³⁴ Mez writes, "In a convenience sample of deceased football players who donated their brains for research, a high proportion had neuropathological evidence of CTE, suggesting that CTE may be related to prior participation in football."²³⁵ Among 202 deceased former football players, "CTE was neuropathologically diagnosed in 177 players... and 110 of 111 National Football League (99%) players."²³⁶ Mez acknowledges the potential for ascertainment bias, in that families of players with signs of brain injuries may have been more likely to participate in the study. However, the numbers are startling in that they demonstrate an undeniable link between football and head trauma.

The publication of this study prompted two veteran pastors, Bill Kynes and Dan Doriani to debate the merits of the game of football. Kynes did not deny the physicality

²³³ Ramaeker, "Man Up!" 517.

²³⁴ J Mez Daneshvar, D.H. and P.T. Kiernan, "Clinicopathological Evaluation of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy in Players of American Football," *JAMA* (2017), 318.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2017.8334>.

²³⁵ Daneshvar, "Clinicopathological Evaluation," 318.

²³⁶ Daneshvar, "Clinicopathological Evaluation," 318.

of the game. Instead, he mused that the ferocity leads to character building. He declares, “Some say the game increases violent tendencies; in my experience, football teaches self-control. Since the game’s rules must be obeyed, aggression must be harnessed.”²³⁷ On the other side, Doriani makes the case that the game is inherently hazardous. He says, “Football damages the body and the mind of almost everyone who plays for long... It is uniquely, irreformably dangerous.”²³⁸ He reasons that it may form character, but at what cost? Neither man debates the violence of the game; they disagree on whether such violence is best avoided altogether.

Greg Bishop, a columnist for *Sports Illustrated*, affirms the pastors’ assessments. He interviewed fifteen high level executives in the helmet manufacturing industry. The helmets makers advertise their equipment as consumer products rather than medical devices. They often sell “safer” models “without acknowledging that in fact they’re dealing in shades of un-safeness, that football will always be violent. The more passionate experts in that group compare the helmet industry to the sport of football itself, where safety has been and forever will be secondary to what matters most. Profit.”²³⁹ These companies may advertise helmets that lead to a safer game. Privately to Bishop, the execs confess their inability to prevent head injuries.²⁴⁰

²³⁷ Kynes, “3 Reasons.”

²³⁸ Dan Doriani, “Time to Push Tackle Football into Retirement,” *The Gospel Coalition* (March 19, 2018), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/time-push-tackle-football-retirement/>.

²³⁹ Greg Bishop, “When Helmet Safety Meets Capitalism,” *Sports Illustrated* (November 20, 2019), <https://www.si.com/nfl/2019/11/20/nfl-concussions-helmet-safety>.

²⁴⁰ Bishop, “Helmet Safety.”

The 2018 version of the “Annual Survey of Football Injury Research” indicates that injuries are part of the game. Kristen L. Kucera’s research shows that injuries to the head, neck, upper limbs, lower limbs, and torso were commonplace. During summer months, teams reported instances of heat stroke and even death.²⁴¹ In “When Bodies are Weapons,” Messner explores the consequences of a violent game. In order to develop a masculine identity, the players must “view their own bodies as machines and weapons with which to annihilate an objectified... the body-as-weapon ultimately results in violence against one’s own body.”²⁴²

The physicality often cuts two ways. The athlete fights to prove his manhood but such proof comes at a heavy price. This identity “unravel(ed) quickly when he injured his knee just before the state championship game.”²⁴³ The cruel irony of football is that the violence required to achieve and maintain a masculine identity also produces regular injuries that can jeopardize this tenuous identity in a moment.

Militaristic

Many researchers have categorized football not only as a contact sport but also as a modern version of war. In a day and age of unpredictable violence, football programs have become increasingly militaristic. Bianchi notes, the “game’s terminology mirrors the language of war. It is basically a battle in which astute field generals maneuver their

²⁴¹ Kristen L. Kucera, David Klossner, Bob Colgate, and Robert Cantu, “Annual Survey of Football Injury Research 1931-2018,” National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, February 15, 2019), 11-12.

²⁴² Messner, “Bodies are Weapons,” 215.

²⁴³ Messner, “Bodies are Weapons,” 7.

forces for victory.”²⁴⁴ Television commentators perpetuate this association. On air, they describe players as “fighting and dying” or being “on the front lines.”²⁴⁵ In “Football is More than a Game,” Sue Curry Jansen points out that college coaches spend the entire offseason recruiting high schoolers to attend their university and join their ranks.

Analogous to the armed forces, they are “old men seeking to enlist young.”²⁴⁶ In fact, the violence of the game is often justified with wartime rhetoric. McCluskey examines the martial components of football. He reveals, “Discourses associated with war are one of the primary means by which football’s violence is valorized as a crucial ‘man-building’ activity.”²⁴⁷ Both the military and football cultures promote the “enculturation and preservation of similar constructions of masculinity.”²⁴⁸

Independent

Football is a sport steeped in adversity. Although coaches promote team camaraderie, players often deal with physical or emotional pain in isolation. Lombardi once instructed his players, “Don’t talk about injuries to anyone. Don’t even tell your wife. Keep your mouth shut.”²⁴⁹ Lombardi’s instruction is in line with messages that young men receive at an early age. Ramaeker describes such culture as having an

²⁴⁴ Bianchi, “Pigskin Piety,” 32.

²⁴⁵ Bianchi, “Pigskin Piety,” 34.

²⁴⁶ Sue Curry Jansen, “Football is More Than a Game: Masculinity, Sport, and War,” *Communication Theory* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 186.

²⁴⁷ McCluskey, “Rough, Tough!” 30.

²⁴⁸ McCluskey, “Rough, Tough!” 33.

²⁴⁹ Michener, *Sports in America*.

“aversion to seeking help.”²⁵⁰ If players seek help, they are “acknowledging their difficulties and the inability to manage these difficulties independently, characteristics that are commonly associated with weakness and femininity.”²⁵¹ Thus, most football players are confronted with an ideological dilemma. They can refrain from seeking help and preserve their masculine identity, or they can reach out for assistance. Aid comes at a social cost. The player in need “could reduce their distress but also result in social or personal devaluation.”²⁵² On the field, players compete as a team. Off the field, they deal with adversity alone. Whatever isolation or emotional pain they experience, they often respond with indifference.²⁵³ The daily competition at practice can inhibit players from relying on their teammates. Thus, many football players develop an identity of self-sufficiency and avoid seeking help in any case.

Coaches

The coach’s influence is no longer limited to playing time or on the field matters but now also plays a prominent role in shaping a student-athlete’s academic success, schedule, diet, and values. In fact, the coach reinforces each of the previously mentioned characteristics of the locker room as its primary culture setter. For example, many coaches contribute to the anti-academic posture. They possess the power to decide who starts and who remains on the sideline. Researcher Herbert Simons writes, many athletes

²⁵⁰ Ramaecker, “Man Up!” 522.

²⁵¹ Ramaecker, “Man Up!” 523.

²⁵² Ramaecker, “Man Up!” 523.

²⁵³ Ahlich, “Body Talk,” 348.

“believe, correctly or incorrectly, that they will be penalized by their coaches for choosing academic commitments over athletic ones.”²⁵⁴ The brutality and militarism of the game requires a coach who functions as field general, leading troops to battle every Saturday. Coaches punish rule breaking and enforce strict discipline. Players who lack accountability are branded as disloyal. This influence even extends to the diets of the players. Sarah Hatteberg notes “Men who were expected to lose weight were subjected to cardio plans whereas those expected to gain weight were subjected to mandatory meals.”²⁵⁵ The coach exerts control over the player’s behavior, values, and even body. Hatteberg summarizes the experience as being “under surveillance.” The coach maintains the closely watched system. If a player refuses to conform, he will inevitably face negative repercussions on game day.²⁵⁶

Bianchi contends that the coach has supreme power. “His word is absolute law; the youthful player’s self-identity depends in large part on his ability to please.”²⁵⁷ In fact, the NCAA has actually ceded more control of scholarship money to the coach than ever. Most athletic scholarships are no longer guaranteed for four years. Athletes usually only receive the promise of financial assistance for a year at a time. Oriard comments that influence over scholarships has “stripped freedom from athletes and (given) coaches

²⁵⁴ Herbert Simons, Mark Van Rhee, and Martin V. Covington, “Academic Motivation and the Student Athlete,” *Journal of College Student Development* 40, no. 2 (March - April 1999), 158.

²⁵⁵ Sarah J. Hatteberg, “Under Surveillance: Collegiate Athletics as a Total Institution,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* (2018), 156.

²⁵⁶ Hatteberg, “Under Surveillance,” 158.

²⁵⁷ Bianchi, “Pigskin Piety,” 31.

greater authority.”²⁵⁸ Long-time sports analyst Tim Keown summarized, “I sometimes think the last stand of dictatorship in this world is the college football coach. His word is law, his rule is absolute, and his power is unlimited.” He is the final external piece.²⁵⁹

Coaches also possess the power to reinforce a culture of hyper-masculinity or to promote ideals such as empathy, integrity, and responsibility. Ehrmann observes two types of coaches: transactional or transformational. Transactional coaches “use players as tools to meet their personal needs for validation, status, and identity. They hold their power over us to elicit the response they wanted.”²⁶⁰ In response, players obey these coaches out of fear and necessity. Transformational coaches are committed to “self-understanding and empathy, viewing sports as a virtuous and virtue-giving discipline... they believe young people can grow and flourish in sports in a way that is more liberating and instructive than can be achieved through almost any other activity.”²⁶¹ Unfortunately, Ehrmann believes that most college coaches maintain a transactional relationship, using rather than building up their players. They leverage their influence in a detrimental way.

A former player and coach himself, Ehrmann now devotes his influence to developing coaches of integrity. He insists, “One of the big myths in our culture is that sports builds character. Unless a coach teaches and models character and encourages its development in his athletes, it is more likely that organized sports and contemporary

²⁵⁸ Oriard, “Bowled Over,” 125.

²⁵⁹ Tim Keown, “The Confession of Arian Foster,” *ESPN The Magazine* (August 6, 2015), http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/13369076/houston-texans-arian-foster-goes-public-not-believing-god.

²⁶⁰ Joe Ehrmann, *Inside Out Coaching: How Sports Can Transform Lives* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 6.

²⁶¹ Ehrmann, *Inside Out*, 6.

culture will spoil play and undermine the development of the very character and virtue they claim to build.”²⁶²

Loyalty

Athletes are also geographically cloistered from the rest of the student body. Other than class, they generally eat, study, and practice in separate facilities. Hatteberg’s research indicates that athletes “spend an average of 20 to 30 hours per week with their teammates, and in many cases live with one another. Their primary peers, and closest friends, are fellow members of the team.”²⁶³ The characteristics outlined above are not only present in the locker room and field. Because players live together, locker room culture is transported to the dormitory.

Two sociology professors, Adler and Adler, have written on the “organizational loyalty” that exists in college athletics. They surmise that football programs develop intense bonds between teammates. This loyalty involves “the readiness to contribute part of one’s self; it incorporates trust, the voluntary alignment of self with the group, and a willingness to follow faithfully the leadership or guidelines of the organization.”²⁶⁴ The Adlers’ research indicates that football teams, same as “combat units and religious cults, are groups with highly interdependent members that function at a high performance level.”²⁶⁵ Participation on a football team develops deep social bond between teammates.

²⁶² Ehrmann, *Inside Out*, 92.

²⁶³ Hatteberg, “Under Surveillance,” 35.

²⁶⁴ Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler, “Intense loyalty in organizations: A case study of college athletics,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1988), 401.

²⁶⁵ Adler, “Intense Loyalty,” 414.

Exploited

Locker room culture also exists within the broader social and economic context of the NCAA. College athletes are not slaves. However, many scholars and economists have criticized the prosperity of the NCAA and liken it to a modern-day plantation model. In college football, universities and companies enrich themselves through the bodies of young, unpaid men. A majority are African American. For this reason, Logan notices an “uncanny similarity to the plantation model that existed during the years of American slavery.”²⁶⁶ Branch prefers to use the metaphor, colonialism. He writes that the NCAA “is a system imposed by well-meaning paternalists and rationalized with hoary sentiments about caring for the well-being of the colonized.”²⁶⁷ Scholars from a variety of fields describe the system as exploitation, a plantation model, and a colonized system.

In “Pay for Play,” Richard Borghesi attempts to answer the question, “How much are college football players worth?” He studied the revenue models of the NCAA and NFL and determined an amount commensurate with the profit that the players generate. His findings follow. “Five-star players would be entitled to an additional \$799,000 per year, four-star players an additional \$361,000, three-star players an additional \$29,000, and two-star players an additional \$21,000.”²⁶⁸ Oriard studied the same economic inequalities. He refers to college players as “pros without pro compensation.”²⁶⁹ After surveying the salaries of coaches and administrators as well as profits created by

²⁶⁶ Logan, “4 Years,” 36.

²⁶⁷ Branch, “The Shame of College Sports,” 8.

²⁶⁸ Richard, Borghesi, “Pay for Play: The Financial Value of NCAA Football Players,” *Applied Economics* (August 17, 2016), 19, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2825281> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2825281>.

²⁶⁹ Oriard, “Bowled Over,” 233.

merchandise, advertisements, sponsorships, and television deals, professors Martin P. Smith, Langston D. Clark, and Louis Harrison, Jr., conclude, “The only amateur aspect of NCAA revenue producing sports is that the players are not paid.”²⁷⁰

Researcher Krystal Beaman conducted interviews with a sample of twenty former D1 athletes. Upon graduation, these men felt like “used goods.” Given that they received an academic scholarship, this assessment seems counterintuitive. Beaman explains, “Although participation in athletics is often considered a golden opportunity for African Americans, compelling evidence to the contrary has been presented for decades. In fact, serious involvement in athletics has hampered the development of African American males in several areas, including academic and occupational achievement.”²⁷¹ For decades, Harry Edwards has investigated how the overemphasis of sport has affected the African American family and community. According to Edwards, African American success in athletics comes at the cost of the social and scholastic achievement. He labels this as a triple tragedy:

One, the tragedy of thousands upon thousands of black youths in the obsessive pursuit of sports goals that the overwhelming majority of them will never attain. Two, the tragedy of the personal and cultural underdevelopment that afflicts so many successful and unsuccessful black sports aspirants. Three, the tragedy of cultural and institutional underdevelopment throughout black society as a consequence of the drain in talent potential toward sports and away from other vital areas of occupational and career emphasis such as medicine, law, economics, politics, education, and technical field.²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Smith, “Historical Hypocrisy,” 222.

²⁷¹ Krystal K. Beaman, “Used Goods: Former African American College Student-Athletes’ Perception of Exploitation by Division I Universities,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 77, no. 4 (Fall 2008), 352. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25608704>.

²⁷² Harry Edwards, “The Black ‘Dumb Jock:’ An American Sports Tragedy,” *College Board Review*, no. 131 (Spring 1984), 36.

The exploitation goes beyond the field. It hinders the social, emotional, and institutional progress of minorities as whole in America.

Huma's research focuses on the financial exploitation of the NCAA. His article details a system built on economic inequity. The list of grievances to the NCAA include:

Denying revenue producing athletes the opportunity to negotiate on their own behalf; limiting their ability to transfer; restricting the compensation they receive and failing to compensate them for the use of their names, images, and likenesses; failing to provide adequate protections in the form of health benefits; placing extreme demands on their time, energies, and psyches; barring athletes from pursuing sponsorship deals.²⁷³

Hawkins points out a final irony that exists in most Power 5 athletic departments. These universities "depend on Black athletic talent to generate revenue for their multimillion-dollar athletic budget."²⁷⁴ He then questions, "How ironic this is today, when we have many predominately White universities known nationally and internationally because of Black athletic excellence?"²⁷⁵

Stereotyped

With these factors in play, football players feel pressure to assume the stereotype of "dumb jock." Edwards states that dumb jocks "are not born, they are being systematically created... Black student athletes suffer from the outset from disadvantages: the myth of innate Black athletic superiority, the stereotype of the dumb Black, and social forces determining a vulnerability to exploitation."²⁷⁶ These stereotypes

²⁷³ Huma, "\$6 Billion Heist," 3.

²⁷⁴ Hawkins, *The New Plantation*, 45.

²⁷⁵ Hawkins, *The New Plantation*, 10.

²⁷⁶ Edwards, "The Black Dumb Jock," 9.

encourage the belief that blacks are physically superior and intellectually inferior to other ethnicities and reduces the worth of minority football players to their physicality.²⁷⁷

Dana E. Mastro, Erin Blecha, and Anita Atweel Seate researched the news media's role in perpetuating this label. Sports and crime stories are some of the most widely read segments in the news. They sampled national newspaper headlines and concluded:

Black athletes in sports ranging from the NBA to the NFL to MLB are addressed in reference to what are perceived to be innate talents such as physical ability, athleticism, and brute strength; identified as superior to the natural abilities of White athletes... Conversely, White athletes are described in terms of features such as superior intelligence, leadership, hard work, and ability to read plays.²⁷⁸

Furthermore, they note that black athletes are significantly overrepresented as criminals in proportion to whites. In particular, stories that focused on minority athletes were often more explicit in detail and less sympathetic than white culprits.²⁷⁹ Segments concerning white athletes focused more on situational explanations for the juvenile behavior. Reports on blacks emphasized personal blame. These stories further promote a social identity that is harmful to African Americans.²⁸⁰

In an article entitled "Fear of a Black Athlete," Ben Carrington details another way that the media further perpetuates this destructive stereotype. His data shows that sports announcers play a "central roles in biologizing black performance via their

²⁷⁷ Hawkins, *The New Plantation*, 65.

²⁷⁸ Dana E. Mastro, Erin Blecha, and Anita Atwell Seate, "Characterizations of Criminal Athletes: A Systematic Examination of Sports News Depictions of Race and Crime," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 55, no. 4 (2011), 527.

²⁷⁹ Mastro, "Characterizations of Criminal Athletes," 531-532.

²⁸⁰ Mastro, "Characterizations of Criminal Athletes," 540.

constant use of animalistic similes to describe black athletes.”²⁸¹ Researchers Jake Evans and James Cullens examined the prevalence of violent images and African American athletes in news segments. They concluded, “This image has been fashioned through the media’s racialized reporting of athlete crime, and the media’s portrayal of African American athletes as bestial, intellectually inferior, beings.”²⁸² They observed a consistent merging of the black athlete and criminal.

Edwards and Beamon separately examined the effects of stereotyping upon African American athletes as they sought employment after graduation. Edwards’ data revealed that employers often perceive football players as “physically gifted but lack the necessary mental skills and intelligence needed for elite occupations.”²⁸³ Beamon’s interviews demonstrated that mass media “reinforces the stereotype of African American males as exclusively athletically talented.”²⁸⁴ This reality frustrates former players as they search for employment.

These stereotypes not only affect minority players but also coaches. NCAA expert Lapchick notes, “At the start of the 2018 season, 85.4 percent of head coaches were white men, which was a 1.6 percentage point decrease from the 2017 Report. There were 19 (14.5 percent) coaches of color in 2018.”²⁸⁵ Evans suggests that the lack of minority

²⁸¹ Ben Carrington, “Fear of a Black Athlete: Masculinity, Politics and the Body,” *New Formation* 45 (2002), 91.

²⁸² Jake Evans and James Cullens, “A Criminal Justice System Without Justice: The News Media, Sports, Media & Rap’s Influence on Racial Crime Disparities,” *University of Miami Race & Social Justice Law Review*, no. 5 (2015), 128. <http://repository.law.miami.edu/umrsjlr/vol5/iss1/6>.

²⁸³ Edwards, “The Black ‘Dumb Jock,’” 13.

²⁸⁴ Beamon, “Used Goods,” 352.

²⁸⁵ Lapchick, “Racial Report,” 10.

coaches “reinforces the notion that blacks are not smart.”²⁸⁶ Often head coaches are white as well as quarterbacks. This dichotomy communicates to young black boys, “White coaches and QBs are the brain of the team, and African Americans as the body of the team.”²⁸⁷ Gregory Kaliss attests to the symbolic power of positions. He shares that in the past quarterbacks and middle linebackers were “protected and labeled as white only.”²⁸⁸

Identity Conflict

Taken altogether, student athletes experience serious identity conflict. The article “Playing Multiple Positions” demonstrates that student athletes regularly experience more stress, conflict between identities, and less salience than the rest of the student body. The football player feels pressure in several different ways. First, as student athletes, “The demands of one or more roles make it difficult for an individual to meet the responsibilities of another role.”²⁸⁹ Most over-identify with the athlete role.²⁹⁰ Conflict between roles is almost inevitable. “Student-athletes face increasing demands and pressures due to more rigid scheduling, greater academic expectations, and exhausting training and competitions.”²⁹¹ Lu describes this as a constant Catch 22. Every day, student athletes ask, “Do they sacrifice athletic performance or academic

²⁸⁶ Evans, “Criminal Justice System,” 131.

²⁸⁷ Evans, “Criminal Justice System,” 132.

²⁸⁸ Gregory J. Kaliss, *Men’s College Athletics and the Politics of Racial Equality: Five Pioneer Stories of Black Manliness, White Citizenship, and American Democracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 6.

²⁸⁹ Lu, “Playing Multiple Positions,” 216.

²⁹⁰ Lu, “Playing Multiple Positions,” 216.

²⁹¹ Lu, “Playing Multiple Positions,” 218.

performance? Correspondingly, participants reference tiredness and exhaustion around this dynamic. This finding speaks to the more prominent sleep deprivation problem in the student-athlete population.”²⁹²

Furthermore, Hatteberg’s research indicates that the coach’s control and constant state of surveillance are particularly stressful.²⁹³ The player’s sense of identity is contingent on his ability to succeed on the field. If this is true, each practice presents the opportunity to gain or forfeit social acceptance among his peers. Bianchi notes that for this reason, the player “can hardly afford to lose. Winning is all, even if it means trampling on his fellows. Hostility and violence are tools for removing obstacles on the way to the top.”²⁹⁴ As previously indicated, the player possesses a deep loyalty to his teammates. The daily practice forces him to defeat a beloved teammate each day to maintain a sense of masculinity.

As a result, the identity of the student athlete is constantly in flux. They operate in an environment that promotes self-definition from external sources rather than within. These sources include on field performance, classroom GPA, social expectations, and the coach’s perspective. Many build their identity upon their athletic ability. Murray Hall writes this is short-sighted at best. “Self-definition comes from external sources, not from within... While their physical skill lasts, professional athletes are celebrities—fondled and

²⁹² Lu, “Playing Multiple Positions,” 235.

²⁹³ Hatteberg, “Under Surveillance,” 158.

²⁹⁴ Bianchi, “The Superbowl Culture,” 845.

excused, praised and believed. Only toward the end of their careers do the stars realize that their sense of identity is insufficient.”²⁹⁵

Self-Definition

Football coaches often quip, “The film never lies.” In college football, every game repetition is filmed, watched, and charted. Grades are posted following every practice. Height, weight, and strength are measured throughout the year. The scoreboard reveals whether a team wins or loses. Against this backdrop, players approach the gospel with a performance mindset. They naturally liken the God of the Bible to a cosmic, spiritual coach. It is their responsibility to perform in order to achieve spiritual success and merit their god’s favor. Upon reflecting on his career in the NFL, Ehrmann summarizes, “I viewed my athletic prowess, and the plaudits it produced, as a way to receive acceptance—a false acceptance because it was based on my performance and not on my character.”²⁹⁶

The athletic world is inherently competitive. Players want to perform their best and win. As a result, “Being immersed in sport may lead athletes to adopt values that equate success with winning, which serves to validate their masculinity”²⁹⁷ For these reasons, the biblical idea of salvation through grace is an alien concept for athletes. In Ephesians 2:8-9, the Apostle Paul instructs, “For by grace you have been saved through

²⁹⁵ Hall, “A Christian Perspective on Physical Education,” 370.

²⁹⁶ Ehrman, *Inside Out*, 92.

²⁹⁷ Ramaeker, “Man Up!” 522.

faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”²⁹⁸ This logic runs counter to the ethos of the locker room.

Nearing the end of a successful professional football career, Derwin Gray came to realize, “I had achieved the American dream, only to realize it could not empower me to love my wife or forgive my father. My fame and money could not erase my sin, shame, guilt, fear, and insecurity... when an athlete’s body starts to fail, he knows his career is coming to an end. I was letting my god–football–down down. I was unable to serve it.”²⁹⁹ In that moment, Gray came to grips with football’s inability to provide a lasting identity. He finally recognized, “God loved me. Not because I could run fast or jump high or because I was good, or even for what I could give him. I realized that as Jesus hung on the cross, I was forever loved and accepted by God. I realized my sin had been erased by Jesus’ blood. It was as if I could see for the first time. That day I got infected with a virus called grace.”³⁰⁰

Danny Wuerffel was another athlete who came to trust in the grace of God. Wuerffel was a Heisman Trophy winning quarterback at University of Florida. Following his conversion, he no longer experienced the cross-pressure of identity formation. He was no longer torn between academic and athletic success. He summarized, “I’m not a football player who happens to do Christianity. I’m a Christian who happens to play

²⁹⁸ Ephesians 2:8-9.

²⁹⁹ Gray, “Pro Football,” 83.

³⁰⁰ Gray, “Pro Football,” 83.

football.”³⁰¹ The testimonies of Gray and Wuerffel attest that only salvation in Christ possesses the potential to redefine a football player’s self-definition.

Summary of Literature Review

In light of the literature examined, two significant cultural realities. First, football players and the surrounding culture worship the game of football. Gamedays function as worship services. Fans and players approach each Saturday with religious devotion. Second, this review also indicates that the locker room culture promotes hyper masculinity. The environment socializes football players to be aggressive, competitive, independent, and performance based. Many student athletes find their sense of identity in their sport. For many, the game of football serves as a functional god. It provides a sense of meaning, worth, and purpose in life. This purpose is elusive at best. Whether it be through injury, a lack of playing time, or graduation, most football players eventually are forced to accept that football will let them down. The chaplain will need to learn to study and speak to these cultural elements.

³⁰¹ Jeff. M. Sellers, “The Glory of the Ordinary: A Career Slump Gave Quarterback Trent Dilfer Insight into his own Faith - and the Faith-Hype Within the NFL,” *Christianity Today* (January 8, 2001), 62.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore how college football chaplains communicate the gospel to college football players. Over the years, many books and articles have outlined best evangelistic practices among athletes, college students, and minorities. However, a concise treatment on ministry to college football players is missing. The assumption has been that many long-time football chaplains in the Southeast are effective disciple-makers. In order to examine this assumption more closely, the following research questions focused the qualitative research:

1. How do chaplains build trust with college football players?
2. What challenges do chaplains face when they communicate the gospel with college football players?
3. How do chaplains effectively communicate the gospel with college football players?

Design of the Study

In broad terms, everyone is a researcher. English professors Wayne Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams conclude that people engage in research every day when they “gather information to answer a question that solves a problem.”³⁰² According to their definition, research is a regular activity. Sharan B. Merriam, in her

³⁰² Wayne Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 10.

book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, defines academic research as the “systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging the process.”³⁰³ Researchers must decide how to ascertain new information; they may take a quantitative or qualitative approach. According to Merriam, quantitative research “uses numbers as data and analyzes them using statistical techniques.”³⁰⁴ Whereas quantitative research is precise, statistical, and numerical, qualitative is holistic and descriptive. Qualitative researchers are most “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”³⁰⁵ Merriam eschews a formal definition because the concept is too complex. Instead, she identifies four characteristics of qualitative research: focus on meaning and understanding, researcher as primary instrument, an inductive process, and rich description.³⁰⁶

This study employed a qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. The qualitative method provided for the most comprehensive data from participant perspectives in the narrow phenomena of college football chaplaincy, while the research questions offered an approach that was inductive, comparative, and inclusive. The purpose of this study could not have been achieved through random sampling, statistics, or empirical data. Therefore, a deliberate and small sample size provided the clearest data. The goal of the study was not to merely

³⁰³ Sharan B Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 5.

³⁰⁴ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 5.

³⁰⁵ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

³⁰⁶ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 15-17.

record raw facts but to interpret and organize the data into a research tool for other chaplains. In addition, this qualitative approach enabled the researcher to create a richly descriptive project, full of words, pictures, and examples.³⁰⁷

Participant Sample Selection

The research questions required participants to communicate in depth about evangelism to college football players. Therefore, the study sample consisted of a selection of veteran college football chaplains.³⁰⁸ The researcher currently serves as an athletic chaplain at a public university in the state of Georgia. He has ministered to athletes for over ten years and has extensive experience and a network of contacts in this field. Participants were chosen for a non-probability and purposeful type of sample in order to provide the most helpful data.³⁰⁹

The goal was to select experts in the field of college football ministry. Each participant possessed at least fifteen years of experience in chaplaincy. These men are highly regarded in their profession. They also held to an evangelical understanding of the gospel in line with Bebbington's Quadrilateral.³¹⁰ Finally, they viewed their primary job description in terms of evangelism and discipleship rather than as a life coach, motivational speaker, or spiritual guide. They maintain a regular presence at team functions such as practice, meetings, meals, and weights. The researcher avoided

³⁰⁷ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 16.

³⁰⁸ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 16.

³⁰⁹ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 99.

³¹⁰ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 1-19.

chaplains whose only interaction with the players was on game day or formal ministry events like a pregame prayer or devotional. Football rosters are comprised completely of men, so all the participants were male. Each of them worked at universities in the Southeast, which provides for minimum variation of data from the broader culture. These men were also chosen to provide variation in age, ethnicity, and NCAA division level. The final study was conducted through personal interviews with ten chaplains who serve either FBS or FCS football teams. They were invited to participate by a personal phone call. All expressed interest and gave verbal informed consent to participate.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering and relied on the constant comparative method to synthesize all interview data. The researcher crafted specific, open-ended questions, so the participant could dialogue complex issues in a thorough manner. The first goal was to learn the chaplain's thoughts, intentions, feelings, and actions in regard to evangelism. The ultimate goal was "insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis" to draw out common themes, patterns, concerns, and at times contrasting methods.³¹¹

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview questions with a coworker to evaluate efficacy in gathering data. The initial protocol questions were formed largely from the literature and the researcher's own experience. As the process progressed, new questions formed and were added. The researcher consistently compared and contrasted

³¹¹ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 42.

the participant's explanations in real time, which required regular interviewing, coding, and categorizing, allowing for the emergence of new sources of data.³¹²

The researcher interviewed ten chaplains for one hour each. Prior to the meeting, the researcher submitted all general questions to the chaplain through email. This step ensured thoughtful preparation from the participant. In order to accommodate participants' schedules, the researcher conducted all interviews upon the completion of the college football season. The researcher interviewed all participants from December 2019 to January 2020, either through a phone call or video chat application. The participant's busy schedules and travel distances prevented face to face interviews. The researcher taped the interviews with a digital recorder and was able to accumulate all of the information over the course of eight weeks. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview.³¹³

Data Analysis

Following each interview, the researcher transcribed each conversation from the voice recorder. Once transcribed, the researcher read the script several times over. He underlined and noted responses that directly contributed to the research questions. This study utilized the constant comparison method, routinely analyzing the data throughout the entire process, thus allowing for ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation.³¹⁴

³¹² Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 105.

³¹³ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 105.

³¹⁴ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 105.

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed onto computer files, they were coded and analyzed. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying common agreements and discrepancies between the participants.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. How do you describe the players' initial perception of you?
2. How do you build trust with the players?
3. How long does it take to build a friendship with a player?
4. How do you know when you have reached a desired level of trust with a player?
5. How would you describe a typical player's worldview?
6. What social and cultural influences shape the players' worldview?
7. How do you contextualize the gospel to players?
8. What challenges do you face in communicating the gospel with players?
9. What are the biggest barriers that prevent players from trusting in Christ?
10. How do you overcome these challenges to communicate the gospel with players?
11. What are some of the ways you communicate the gospel to players?
12. How do group size dynamics affect how you communicate the gospel?
Individual, small group, team, or entire athletic department?
13. How do you use formal settings to communicate the gospel?
14. How do you use informal settings to communicate the gospel?
15. What role do pregame devotionals play in your ministry strategy?
16. How does working for a state institution affect your ministry strategy?

17. How do you maintain healthy relationships with coaches?

Researcher Position

The researcher has spent over ten years in chaplain ministry. One potential bias, therefore, is his own expertise. He has an established approach to chaplaincy and an effective strategy. Second, the author emphasizes doctrinal depth. He subscribes to the Reformed understanding of the gospel, holds a Master of Divinity, and places high value on sound biblical exposition. Third, the researcher believes that chaplaincy requires the leader to impart wisdom, knowledge, and daily life modeling to the players. Fortunately, he works for an organization that enables him to make chaplaincy his career. Therefore, he prioritizes time with players outside of official ministry events. Players frequently interact with his family in his home. He also spends regular relational time with the players. He is not bivocational; chaplaincy is his full-time vocation.

Study Limitations

As stated in the previous section, the researcher interviewed only chaplains who ministered to college football teams. Although high school football boasts the highest number of players and the NFL claims the highest level of prominence, no data was collected for youth, high school, or professional rosters. There was also no attention given to other sports. Although football maintains the largest roster in the NCAA, other sports like baseball, track and field, and swimming also involve thousands of college athletes across the country. Each sport has its own distinct culture.

Some of the findings may be applicable to other athletic ministry contexts or to college students in general. At the same time, the reader must test the findings. The

reader is advised to be flexible and creative in applying the research to a new sport, demographic, or region. As with all qualitative studies, the reader bears the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to his or her ministry context.³¹⁵

Finally, the research focused exclusively on chaplains employed at universities in the Southeast, a region known for its majority Christian culture. Yet, not all players originate from the Deep South. Players from all over the country join the rosters of SEC teams. Yet, the programs and coaches maintain a decidedly “Southern” feel, and for this reason, Christian ministry practices can be more overt. In the South, players expect regular team prayers and devotionals and assume a chaplain will be present on the sidelines. They also generally assume that the default worldview of the chaplain and coach to be Christian. Such assumptions are obviously not true for other parts of the country. Once again, readers living in less culturally uniform contexts are advised to carefully apply these findings.

³¹⁵ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 179.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how football chaplains evangelize college football players. To that end, this chapter utilizes the findings of the ten interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions for this study. In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions served as the intended focus of the qualitative research.

1. How do chaplains contextualize the gospel to college football players?
2. What challenges do chaplains face when they communicate the gospel to college football players?
3. How do chaplains communicate the gospel with college football players?

Introductions to Participants and Context

The researcher selected ten chaplains to participate in this study. All names and identifiable information of participants have been changed to protect their identity. The following section will briefly introduce each participant. All but one participant are full time football chaplains. In other words, they are not bi-vocational; they do not engage chaplaincy in their off time. For that reason, these men maintain a daily presence at the team facility. One participant also serves as local church pastor. His congregation allows him to devote a significant amount of time to chaplaincy. Each participant has at least ten to twenty years of experience as a football chaplain. Each of them has various employers. Seven are employed by a parachurch organization such as Campus Outreach or the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Three men serve as official employees of their

university and hold titles such as “character coach” or “director of player development.” All of these men possess an orthodox understanding of the gospel message. Furthermore, they hold a conviction for the Great Commission, namely that their chief ambition as chaplains is to “make disciples” on the football team. They do not view themselves primarily as mentors, life coaches, or guidance counselors. They endeavor each day to win players and coaches to Christ.

It should be noted that the vocation of full-time chaplain is a relatively new position. According to one participant, “Prior to 2004, there were less than thirty full-time chaplains for FBS college football programs.” In 2004, Auburn University won the Southeastern Conference championship. A former player named Chette Williams served as chaplain for the team. One Auburn beat writer surmises, “There are a significant number of people within the Auburn program who insist the Tigers would never have finished 13-0 and won the SEC without Chette Williams.”³¹⁶ Head Coach Tommy Tuberville was effusive in William’s impact on team cohesion. Following the conference championship, he praised William’s work with the team in front of the media. Big time programs across the country took notice. Power 5 teams immediately began to enlist full-time spiritual ministers for their rosters.

At the time, their motivation was largely pragmatic. Coaches and school administrators wanted to emulate Auburn’s undefeated season. The chaplain role was seen as an aid to win more ball games. At the same time, many prominent head football coaches like Tuberville follow Christ and use their platform to influence their players for

³¹⁶ Richard Scott, *Tales From the Auburn 2004 Championship Season: An Inside Look at a Perfect Season* (New York: Sky Horse Publishing, 2005), 16.

Christ. Over the years, this list has included prominent and successful coaches such as Dabo Swinney at Clemson University, Bobby Bowden at Florida State, and Mark Richt at University of Georgia, among many others. Today, in less than twenty years, nearly every FBS school in the country has hired a full-time chaplain. For this reason, the interview participants are not only veterans; they are also pioneers. The interviewees follow:

Bill serves as director of player development for a Power 5 FBS program. He was previously a position coach for twenty years. He has authored three devotionals for football players and coaches.

Larry serves as chaplain for an FCS program. He has written three books on football chaplaincy.

George serves as chaplain for a Power 5 FBS program. He is employed by a parachurch organization. He was previously a pastor for ten years.

Bob serves as chaplain for a Power 5 FBS program. He is employed by a parachurch organization. He serves at a highly academic private school.

Will serves as chaplain for an FCS program. He is also a pastor at a local church that is well attended by the players and coaches he serves.

Gary serves as director of player development for an FBS program. Unlike the other chaplains who serve at state schools, he ministers at a private Christian university. He recently published a manual on disciple-making among football players.

Henry serves as chaplain for a Power 5 FBS program. He is employed by a parachurch organization and also oversees an afterschool tutoring program at local public

schools. He often enlists college players to volunteer and interact with the middle school youth.

Mike serves as chaplain for a Power 5 FBS program. He is employed by a parachurch organization. He is a former NFL player and serves at a prestigious engineering university.

Bruce serves as director of player development for an FCS program. He is working with a relatively new football program. School administrators formed the team in 2016.

David previously served as chaplain for a Power 5 FBS program for over a decade. He was employed by a parachurch organization. He is currently employed as a traveling public speaker.

Gospel Contextualization

The first research question sought to determine “How do chaplains contextualize the gospel to college football players?” Instead of contextualization, Larry used the word, “enculturation,” and believes it to be the chaplain’s most critical task. He says, “I enculturate the gospel to the players. I am incarnational in the locker room. That’s what it means to be a chaplain—I take the presence of Christ into a sports team.”

The following section will present a functional timeline of how the chaplain can enculturate himself to the team. The process starts on report day and progresses to game weeks. This section places heavy emphasis on the chaplain’s behavior during the preseason and provides a coherent narrative for the reader.

Coaches routinely add thirty to forty new players to their team rosters every summer. Every year, therefore, the chaplain meets and befriends a new population,

adding these players to an already well-developed ministry process. Since the roster changes every year and the athletes' emotional and spiritual status remains dynamic, the chaplain is thus constantly relearning the locker room dynamics.

Fall Camp

For the chaplain, the work of contextualization begins with his first interaction with the team. Every fall, twenty to thirty new recruits arrive to join the program. All of the chaplains mentioned are present at the team facility on report day. As returning and new players report, the chaplains welcome the returners and introduce themselves to the new players and their families.

Usually the head coach introduces them along with the rest of the coaching staff. Several of the interviewees emphasized that they do not expect their title or positional authority to grant them influence. Gary points out, "Just because you have the position of chaplain, it does not necessarily mean that you have earned the right to speak into the lives of the young men. Early on, that's your ministry, to earn that platform." The NCAA prohibits padded practices for the first three days of fall camp. For that reason, Larry spends a significant amount of time in the locker room and dining hall. Camp is a special time for relationship building since classes haven't resumed for the rest of the student body. Generally, football players are the only students on campus. Larry's goal for camp is to "live in their world... Preseason is all about winning relationships."

Player Perception

Three of the chaplains mentioned that new players often possess preconceived misconceptions of a chaplain's role. Bob observed that usually, "I'm lumped into

whatever mindset they have of a pastor or a priest. I'm all of a sudden put in that category as the religious dude." There was significant variance in how each chaplain referred to themselves. Some used the designation pastor, coach, brother, or chap. Others went by a nickname or their first name.

George went out of his way to avoid any religious designation. When he introduces himself to a new player, he simply states, "I'm George, and I serve the team. I'd love to get to know you." In his context, George felt like the title of chaplain created unnecessary barriers in first impressions. He reasoned, "I won't necessarily say that I'm the chaplain. They'll find out that I'm the chaplain at some point. I want them to see me as someone they could talk to. I want them to know that I will love them right where they are. You don't have to be your best around me." The participants suggest that the title of chaplain can both enhance and diminish one's relational authority in the locker room.

Spiritual Background

Several chaplains stressed the importance of understanding the spiritual and cultural dynamics of the locker room. George emphasized the collective "locker room culture." At the same time, each player is a unique individual. Football players share common characteristics but are not monolithic. Gary takes a systematic approach, he converses with players, makes observations, and then breaks the entire roster into three spiritual categories. "The first group is high interest. These guys are intentional about their relationship with Christ and want to make an impact on their football team. The second group has some interest. These guys have a testimony of salvation, but they're not intentional about their relationship with God. The third group has no interest. These guys have no testimony of salvation." The others relied on personal interactions to make

general reflections. On his team, Henry said, most players have a “grandma or mama that has instilled in them a fear of the Lord. They may not be believers, but they have spiritual interest and a lot of doctrinal error.” Bob described his roster as believing in “a higher being, a God who’s far off, nice, and generous like Santa Claus.” Will sensed a latent health, wealth, and prosperity gospel influence in the locker room. He shared that most guys treat God superstitiously. They believe, “If we do our Bible studies and show up to team devotions, then God will bless us with a win.” The chaplains all described players’ worldviews as consistent with their surrounding culture and family.

Regional and Cultural Background

Several of the ministers who worked at national powerhouses described the need to take into account their ethnic and regional background. These programs recruit nationwide. Will noted that not all white and black players are alike. He said, “There’s also a country and city divide. This is not one homogenous group of people that you’re meeting with.” Henry mentioned that in his locker room, “A lot of our kids come from California. They’ve got a different mindset from the Southerners. We get kids from all over the country, Canada, and even Australia.” Although these chaplains serve at universities in the South, SEC football in particular attracts players from around the country.

Building Trust

Across the board, the chaplains emphasized the necessary task of building trust among the team members. This critical step can’t be skipped in the process of evangelism. George referred to trust building as “foundational.” He explained, “Once

players trust, then they can open up, and we can speak into their lives. They've got to open up to tell us where they are spiritually and mentally... Without trust they won't hear us. If we're trying to share anything about the love of Jesus, then they need to trust us for who we are." The benefits of building trust are twofold. The chaplain can gather information on the player's background, and the player will be more apt to listen to what the chaplain has to say. Will encouraged chaplains to be deliberate in evangelism and not to rush into explicit evangelistic exchanges. He said, "First, you need to invest relationally. You can't get too pushy right off the bat. The guys will get nervous."

Larry and Gary outlined several practical ways to enhance one's credibility in the locker room. Every year, Larry "memorizes every player's name, uniform number, and hometown on the whole roster...When I know a little bit about where he's from that lets me enter conversation quickly." Gary provided an extensive list of service ideas. He makes it a practice to regularly "visit a guy in his dormitory, pick up papers on the practice field, clean up the locker room, ask questions, make phone calls to parents, be on campus when students arrive, go out for a meal, invite players over to your home, and write them notes." The chaplains agreed that players need to know that they care for them. Many of the players will be slow to trust and skeptical of men in authority.

Evangelism often necessitates push-back or challenge to the prevailing world view of the player. Consequently, Henry remarked, "I need to have a relationship that is strong enough to bear the weight of that conversation. Especially with the African American men, focus on the relationship. Not 'I'm trying to fix you.'" Whether through service, meals, or conversations, all the chaplains ultimately desired for the players to

know they care. Henry brought up, “once trust exists, the players believe that my chaplain cares about me and he wants me to experience what he cares about most, which is God.”

Asking Questions

All ten interviewees agreed that building trust is a necessary step in the process of evangelism. The rest of the section will feature different ways for the chaplain to develop a base of credibility in the locker room. First, the chaplain should learn to ask thoughtful questions. Questions enable chaplains to get to know the players and also direct the conversation in a respectful manner. George works at a high-profile program; the new players receive extensive regional media coverage. He revealed, “I already know all their information, but I like to hear them talk about it. I want to know where they’re from and who they are outside of football. I’m a former football player, so I can relate to them in their language.” Mike asks questions in order to meet players where they are at, adding that later in the relationship, “we will veer off the exit to where I want to go. But you’ve got to go where they are in order to take them where you want them to go.”

Informally Asking Questions

Every chaplain harnesses the power of questions to connect with players. Larry informally asks questions to discern the spiritual condition of the player. He shared, “I peel away a layer by asking questions and get to the inside. What do you value most? What’s most important to you? Who do you want to be after football?” These questions often reveal that the athlete has not given any serious thought to anything outside of football and the here and now. Larry says these inquiries often expose that the athlete is

adrift. He will also ask questions as a spiritual assessment. He wants to know, “Can he spell Jesus or is Jesus just a curse word to him? Or maybe he is already a believer?”

Before I can develop someone, I have to know where he’s at.”

Gary uses the scripture Luke 2:52 as a paradigm for his ministry. The verse states “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” Gary sees Christ developing in four distinct areas, mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially. His questions often fall in one those four categories. For example, he will often ask, “Where do you see yourself in five years? Tell me about your relationship with your coach. What are some of your athletic goals? How are things going with your classes? What dreams do you have? Do you have a girlfriend? Do you have a religious background? Is there someone on the football team that you respect spiritually?”

Formally Asking Questions

Whereas most of the chaplains adopt an informal approach to asking questions, Mike and Gary have formalized this process. Upon arrival, new players in Mike’s program meet with him one-on-one. During fall camp, Mike conducts nearly thirty interviews with entering freshmen. He spends “a good hour with them. I want to know them and introduce myself, so they’ll know who I am and why I’m here.” While Mike conducts verbal interviews, Gary relies on a written method. All new players fill out a brief spiritual survey with seven questions. These questions include, “Do you know God personally? Do you go to church? Do you read your Bible? Are you interested in growing in your relationship God? Do you have any questions you want to talk about?” Gary works at a private Christian university and thus has more latitude to inquire from the beginning. The method varies from team to team, but the unifying principle holds true for

all chaplains. Each asks questions to understand the players before proclaiming the good news.

Ministry of Presence

All of the men also agreed being with the team on a daily basis is vital. Several repeated the phrase “ministry of presence.” This term describes the chaplain’s responsibility to be around the players regularly. Most of the time, the chaplain is unable to discuss anything of substance as the players participate in practice, games, or weight sessions. He stands on the sideline as an observer. In fact, one of David’s cardinal rules of chaplaincy is “Don’t get in the way!” He clarifies, “If the coach is talking, you’re not talking. Always look straight ahead. The players should never take their eyes off practice.”

In most cases, being present is enough. Bob explained, “I spend time in the dining hall, the training room if they’re injured, and the weight room. I find little pockets to build relationship.” Rarely in these environments do chaplains engage in lengthy evangelistic conversations. Then, as Bob reflected, “There will come a moment or crisis when they’re going to need to turn to somebody. They can’t call coach or mom and dad, and they’re counting on you. That’s when God opens up door.” Henry also expounded on the ministry of presence. He advised, “Be at most of the practices. Be in the weight room. It does something, I can’t explain it. God will maximize the time that we have together. I have great conversations in the training room. As guys do rehab, I will sit next to them on the training table and spend one-on-one time right there.” Three of the men referenced the ministry proverb, “More is caught than taught,” meaning that a minister teaches more

through his life than his words. His presence on the sidelines and in the cafeteria demonstrates a love and commitment to the team.

The Chaplain's Home

The chaplains touched on one other important location in the process of trust building, their own home. The chaplain not only spends time in the athlete's world. He invites the athlete into his own world. George recognized that most of his players lacked an example of a godly man in their own home. He and his wife host regular home-cooked meals for the players. This evening together allows the players to "sit at our dinner table and see my family interact—when I hug my son, tell my daughter I love her, or engage with my wife." Similarly, Will made the case that that the relationship may start in the locker room, but it should not stay in the locker room. He advised, "Welcome them into your home. Allow them to be around your wife and kids. They're hungry for a father figure. The culture views them as dangerous. It's huge when you stop meeting at Waffle House and let them come into your loving home."

Veteran Players

Several of the chaplains suggested that trust is built not only through their own personal presence but also through the affirmation of key veteran players. In all his years of ministry, Bill disclosed, "Evangelism really is best when our Christian players are making disciples." Despite their age, experience, and wisdom, the chaplains recognized the limits to their influence. Bob noted, when "the older guys tell the younger guys who I am and what I do, it's like word of mouth endorsement." Gary declared that older players, not the chaplain, possess the most relational authority in the locker room. His

strategy is to “influence the football team through leaders. I try to work through a spiritual leader at every position group.” Bill calls this “platform ministry.” Each year he tries to find a “few guys with notoriety who can make a big impact because people respect him. I train the team leaders to share the gospel.” Once trained, these players invite their teammates to chapel services and Bible studies as they go throughout their day.

Three of the chaplains pointed out that the influential players are not always the All-Americans or QBs. Three of the men shared how they’ve witnessed starters, backups, walk-ons, and even injured players influence a locker room. Because the entire roster is broken up into units of ten to twelve players at the position level, Bill concludes, “Even if you’re a backup, you can have an impact on your team.” Injured players who cannot play on Saturdays are not precluded from influence. Gary has seen “God use injured players, because of the way they live during the adversity.”

George formalizes this process. Each season he assigns four or five upperclassmen to serve as junior chaplains. George continues to do most of the Bible teaching and team-wide instruction. He reasoned that freshmen need to hear teaching from him and “see someone who’s actually made a transition and is living a life that is full of biblical content.” He instructs the junior chaplains to initiate spiritual conversations with their teammates. This group immediately connects with new players because they can testify, “I was in your shoes just two or three years ago.” According to Bill, mature disciples on the team and not the individual chaplains are the best soul winners. Only the player “can run on that field, put their arm around a teammate, and lead them to Christ.”

The Role of Love

Finally, a majority of the chaplains spoke on the importance of kindness and service. Gary suggested that through service, “We earn the right to speak into the lives of coaches and players.” In fact, he is famous for keeping a shoeshine box in the corner of his office. At any time of the day, a player or coach may walk in for a complimentary shine. Gary cited this as one of this many “acts of kindness that I’m going to use to build a relationship.”

Along with acts of service, physical touch communicates love. In fact, University of California-Berkeley researchers Michael W. Kraus, Cassy Huang, and Danny Keltner studied the body language among high performing team. They observed “Fist bumps, high fives, chest bumps, leaping shoulder bumps, chest punches, head slaps, head grabs, low fives, high tens, full hugs, and team huddles”³¹⁷ during a game. They concluded that these seemingly small cues predicted performance and increased cooperation. These forms of touch synch teammate and contribute to success. They concluded that the language of “Touch is the most highly developed sense at birth, and preceded language... high fives and fist bumps, seemingly small dramatic demonstrations during the group interactions have a lot to say about the cooperative working of a team.”³¹⁸ Several of the chaplains greet players with liberal hugs, grips, and celebratory pats on the back. When chaplains use appropriate touch with players and coaches, they strengthen social bonds.

³¹⁷ Michael W. Kraus, Cassy Huang, and Danny Keltner, “Tactile Communication, Cooperation, and Performance: An Ethological Study of the NBA,” *Emotion* 10, no. 5 (2010), 745.

³¹⁸ Kraus, “Tactile Communication,” 745.

As Will surveys the growing field of young sports chaplains, he notices that they overly focus on their wardrobe, music, and language to contextualize. He said this is shortsighted. He confessed, “I don’t listen to the same music they listen to. I’m not going to wear the coolest shirt. I’m out-of-date to the players. But I am who I am, and I love them.” Bruce agreed. Instead of staying up to date with the latest trend, he reminds young chaplains, “Love is always relevant. When you listen and pay attention, you’re showing genuine interest.” These men all agreed that genuine interest and care transcends all generational and cultural bounds.

Summary of Gospel Contextualization

Before a chaplain declares the gospel, he must know the members of the team. The interviews revealed that the chaplain’s first task is to build trust amongst the players he hopes to reach. He can develop credibility in a variety of ways, some formal and other informal. Simple tasks like asking questions, acts of service, and remembering names communicate value and worth to the player. Questions also enable the chaplain to learn more about the player’s background, worldview, and spiritual condition. Although conversation is limited, chaplains must not underestimate the ministry of presence. Daily visits to the cafeteria, practice field, and weight room create deep bonds. Chaplains should also invite players into their own homes. This act declares to the athlete that he is not a project but a part of the family. The chaplain’s reach will also be greatly enhanced if influential upperclassmen affirm his presence. Several chaplains attest that they reach the locker room through these players. Finally, the chaplain should always look for ways to serve and demonstrate kindness to the players.

Challenges to the Gospel

The second research question sought to determine the challenges chaplains faced when they communicate the gospel to college football players. The participants touched on cultural, spiritual, and practical challenges as they go about the task of evangelism.

Father Wounds

Four of the men immediately responded that the dearth of fathers creates significant challenges. They suggested that most of the players have a distorted perspective on what it means to be a man. Will remarked, “I estimate that seven out of the ten guys that I talk to in the locker room don’t have a father in their life. They may know who he is, but he’s not actively involved and never has been.” Bruce confirmed that observation. On his team, he observed, “Most of the players don’t have a dad and have some level of trust issues.” Bob had the most to say on the topic of fatherlessness. He expounded, “In every man there’s some father wound. The size can be different—it can be a little paper cut or the wound from a .357 Magnum.” Later he shared that fathers inflict these wounds through physical and emotional absence. He explained, “Some players don’t even know who their dad is. We’ve also got affluent kids whose dads are highly successful. They see their dad every day, but he’s too busy to engage in their life in a meaningful way... That causes a bigger wound, because the dad has chosen not to love his son. He chose to work instead.”

Unfortunately, this issue is often compounded by self-serving high school coaches. In the absence of a biological father, many players hope for their coach to display unconditional love to them. However, Will observed, “Because they’re really good at sports, most of the players have been used by the males in their life. Coaches use

force and manipulation. Over time, the athletes learn not to trust. They don't trust men in power." Coaches often maintain transactional relationships with their star players. As long as the player produces on the field and wins games, he maintains the affection of his coach.

Bob shared an anecdote that illustrates the dearth of positive male role models. In a Bible study, he asked a small group of players, "Who in your life has modeled manhood for you?" One player shot up his hand and immediately responded, "My grandmother!" Bob's story is not isolated. Several of the other chaplains shared that many athletes arrive on campus without ever experiencing an example of a godly man in their daily life.

Hip-Hop Culture

Similarly, Larry talked extensively about the influence of hip-hop culture. In his opinion, rap has done extensive damage to the masculine figure, particularly in the African American culture. Larry described how hip hop has flipped the traditional values of African American life. He shared, "In the past, there was a strong respect for the church and a real reliance on family. Today, there's no respect for the church or family. Hip hop says we can divide family however we want to. For a lot of the players, gang life may be more family than their own blood family." Larry revealed that many players possess an intense loyalty to their hometown. Before kickoff, players "rep their hometown" by writing their area code or names of deceased from their neighborhood on their wrist tape. He concluded that players feel greater loyalty to their hometown hood rather than their current teammates. He brought up that players have "ear buds in all day listening to rap. Those messages are being hammered into his head, and then I only get my five minutes of talk a week." As a result, many players lack inherent respect for the

things of God. Furthermore, to break fellowship with friends in the “hood” to follow Christ feels like betrayal. According to Larry, hip hop magnifies a violent masculinity. Lyrics in this genre often brazenly reject the biblical conception of manhood.

Performance Mindset

The words that were repeated most often by the participants were “identity,” “self-worth,” and “performance.” The chaplains all brought up the player’s tendency to determine their sense of self through their athletic performance. Bob said most players define their worth by the “things they can do. Like how much they can bench press, what the scoreboard says at the end of the game, a forty-yard dash timer, or scoring touchdowns.” Larry expounded that a misplaced sense of self often continues beyond the college age years. Following their athletic career, former players maintain the belief, “What you’ve done or what you have is what defines you.” Since they no longer play ball, they look to “the size of your bank account, the chain around your neck, the brand of clothes or sneakers that you wear, or your capacity to get women.”

Henry serves a program that competes regularly for the FBS national championship. The team’s entire roster is comprised of highly touted recruits with legitimate NFL aspirations. These are the best players in the country. Until this point, they’ve been the best player on their team for their entire athletic career. When they join the team, they suddenly realize that “there’s only twenty-two starters and there’s eighty-five full scholarships. That means sixty-three highly successful players are not starting. They’re constantly asking, ‘Why am I not playing? Why don’t I get in?’ This leads to wondering ‘What makes me significant? What really makes me special?’” Henry pushed back on the assumption that five-star recruits at a perennial powerhouse don’t feel

pressure. He senses the opposite. He said that the media and the public “assume that these guys are on top of the world and don’t have any worries. Remember, these guys are dealing with extremely high expectations from their friends, families, and communities. They don’t want to let anyone down. It’s so much pressure.”

This pressure to perform is often exacerbated by the fathers. Each year, Bob interacts with dads who live vicariously through their sons. These fathers base their affection for their son on Saturday’s game day performance. Several times, he’s seen “players lose their starting position and their dad will say ‘I won’t come back to see a game until you win your starting job back.’” Instead of demonstrating absolute love, many fathers deepen the player’s anxiety to perform.

In order to counter the performance mindset in the locker room, George suggested that a chaplain first probe inside his own heart. He astutely encourages chaplains to “Look in the mirror and make sure that we are not performance-driven first. Most of us are former players and perform in ministry activities. In order for us to help players understand that their identity is not in what they do, we have to demonstrate that level of freedom.”

Communicating Grace

Once he is growing secure in his own identity, the chaplain should demonstrate and communicate unchanging love towards the players. Five chaplains specifically pointed out that, on the field, mistakes and struggles present incredible opportunities to reinforce God’s grace. For example, Henry shared, “Players crave acceptance. They wonder, ‘If I mess up, will you still like me?’ After they mess up is usually when I have my best time with them.” Larry and Will make a practice of specifically affirming men

who committed game day blunders. Will shared, “When they fumble the football and lost the game or miss a big tackle at a crucial moment, treat them the same. The position coach is going to cuss him out. I come alongside and say, ‘I know how bad you feel about it. Here’s the reality, I’m with you. Whether you made the play or missed the tackle, you know that I’m committed to you no matter what.’” Several of the chaplains viewed miscues and losses as openings to not only encourage but demonstrate unconditional love towards players. These exchanges deconstruct the performance mindset.

Three of the participants called for chaplains to exercise care in who they show attention to at practice. Will advised, “Your time and your attitude towards guys matters. It’s symbolic. If you gravitate towards the stars and performers and don’t spend time with that freshmen or second teamer, you can unknowingly reinforce the message that players are invaluable because of what they can do.”

Finally, two of the chaplains regarded the pressure to perform as a barrier and benefit to evangelism. Previously, Henry shared about the incredible pressure players in his program experience. At some point, the player will reach a point of exhaustion with the pressure to perform. This is inevitable. He knows he cannot measure up to the expectations placed on him. Therefore, Henry will reveal to the anxious player, “I have something special for you. I know achievement is the way it’s been. Jesus is different, you don’t have to earn His love.” Mike views the culture of performance as a glaring backdrop to the communicate the gospel of grace. He noted, “We play a violent, competitive, performance-based sport that is all about bottom lines and results. The gospel is so counteractive to that. The message is a super contrast.”

Vulnerability

According to Bruce, a distorted sense of masculinity and pressure to perform combine to create an inability to be vulnerable. Many players simply don't know how to open up and ask for help. They have been conditioned to believe, "Vulnerability is weakness. In sports we leverage our strengths against the weakness of our opponent. On the field, I gain social status by being better than other people." As a result, athletes struggle to admit pain and weakness. This struggle even occurs with on-the-field injuries and pain. Bruce observed, "Even if a player breaks his leg, he's torn. He needs help, but he doesn't want to ask for help." Each of the chaplains attempts to create group environments where players feel the freedom to open up about their lives. They also labor to show that vulnerability is not weakness but strength.

Make it to the League

Nearly all of the chaplains describe the prevailing ambition among the student athletes was to "make it to the league." In the mind of a college football player, playing in the NFL is the pinnacle of success. Gary concludes, "Players are so focused on going to the NFL. It's a temporal value system... there's no thought of an eternal value system." Players feel tremendous pressure from coaches, hometowns, and families to be successful. Although the odds are extremely unlikely, they define athletic success as playing on Sundays.

Bill noticed this trend. He estimates that 90 percent of his roster thinks they will play professionally, even backups and non-scholarship players. In response, Bill redefines success. He tells his players, "Football is not the greatest thing in the world. Being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ is. Your personal goals will come up

short... Focus on maximizing your talent!” In order to maximize one’s ability, players need to be “in relationship with Jesus Christ. Success comes through being in complete fellowship with the One who made you.” Bill champions the players’ deep desire for athletic transcendence. He also counters that if a player lives only for wins on the field, his view of success is too small. One cannot be truly successful apart from Christ.

Coaches and Administrators

Each of the chaplains also mentioned coaches and school administrators as potential hindrances or advocates for broad witness. After over two decades of chaplaincy at the same school, Mike has worked alongside several different head coaches and athletic directors. He detailed, “Your coaches and athletic directors make a big difference. If you’re at a public institution, you operate within the confines of their rules... The coaching staff holds their playing time and scholarships. They are in control of everything.” Therefore, the chaplains ensure that their ministry strategy aligns with policies of the athletic department.

Regrettably, David shared that a new head coach disapproved of his presence and removed his role with the team immediately. He alluded to this decision in order to demonstrate the unchecked power that most head coaches hold. Several chaplains described the head coach as the gatekeeper. David expounded, “He can keep the gate wide open or shut it completely.” Across the board, the chaplains agreed that all spiritual services should be optional. Gary works at a private Christian school and thus had a different experience. Coaches play an integral role in his ministry strategy. Alluding to Luke 2:52 again, he reminds the coaches, “God wants to use them as evangelists. Sometimes you get too caught up with the athletic, academic, and a little bit of a social so

you don't pay attention to what's going on spiritually." For those who express interest, Gary trains coaches how to discern spiritual interest and present the gospel clearly.

Time

The final challenge that every chaplain faced was significant time constraints. The coaches control their schedules. In season, players have little free time to devote to Bible study or gospel conversations. Bob and Mike work at highly academic institutions. Bob declared, "My biggest challenge is finding windows to do Bible studies." Mike shared, "It's hard for athletes to balance expectations from coaches on top of lifting, running, getting up early, and going to bed late." Henry serves a notoriously regimented head coach. On a typical day, the player's schedule is: "7 AM study hall, class at 8 then, weights at 12, and then meetings at 2. Next is practice, and then they go straight to another study hall or class. They have something on their schedule from 8 AM to 10 PM." This schedule is more relaxed for programs that are not in the Power 5. Either way, nearly all players feel locked into the daily grind. Larry says, "This makes weekly small groups hard to do because the athletes' minds and schedules are consumed with their sport."

In response, each of the chaplains described creative ways to overcome the stringent schedule. Several rely heavily on weekly thirty-minute appointments. They identify pockets of time throughout the day to engage players in spiritual dialogue. All of them make a habit to eat meals with the team. Scholarships generally cover meal plans and many Power 5 schools operate exclusive cafeterias for athletes. The players often eat 2-4 meals a day in the cafeteria in order to fuel their training regime and maintain optimum weight. All of the chaplains shared approaches similar to Henry. "I do a lot of

Bible studies at lunch. We have a cafeteria that is only for football players. You can't even come in unless you're an athlete or a coach. I bought a meal plan to spend there. If you're a football player, you've got to eat."

Summary of Challenges to the Gospel

In summary, the chaplain will face serious obstacles in seeking to evangelize the locker room. Some of the challenges relate to the player's definition of manhood, success, and sense of self. Growing up, most of the players lack a close example of biblical masculinity. Often the only spiritual guidance they encountered was from a grandmother or mother. For this reason, they may subconsciously believe that following Christ is not a masculine pursuit. All players to some degree are consumed with achieving on field success. For over a decade, the game of football provided them with a sense of identity in their community. On top of that, chaplains must take into account two external factors: the coaching staff and the rigorous schedule. Chaplains should make every effort to not violate trust with the head coach. He must also adapt his strategy to align with a sport that occupies the player's entire day.

These challenges are not impossible to overcome. In fact, many of the obstacles have unintended benefits. For example, the lack of positive male figures ensures that the chaplain will especially stand out. The pressure to perform creates a craving for grace and unconditional love. The desire for athletic success can be reoriented towards God's glory. And, coaches can leverage their on-field influence to encourage spiritual growth.

Gospel Communication

The third research question addressed, “How do chaplains communicate the gospel with college football players?” Before the chaplain speaks, he should remind himself who he is not. David declares to young chaplains, “You are not a coach and never be a fan!” They leave the coaching to the coaches. Similarly, they never criticize referees and coaches, yell at the opposing team, or blast a player who makes a mistake, as many fans do. Instead of operating as a coach or fan, Larry calls chaplains to remember the essence of their calling. He explained it as dual role. “We are both the priest and prophet to this football community. We represent them before God in prayer. We also speak for God to them. We fill both roles in the locker room.” Several chaplains emphasized the importance of prayer in evangelism. Before talking to players about God, they talk to God about players. Several of the men use the roster as a daily prayer plan. With a list of names in hand, they pray for every member of the team.

Transitioning Conversations

All the men described a process in which they use questions to funnel conversations toward spiritual topics. Gary instructed, “Start with football. Then open up the conversation through questions. Once they see the genuineness of your heart, you can point people to Jesus.” Thoughtful questions play a critical part in each chaplain’s strategy. Will uses questions to determine a player’s purpose or life ambition. He probes to “find out what they’re living for.” Bruce often asks, “Is faith a part of your life? Have you ever considered faith?” Bob is simply looking to initiate an exchange that goes beneath the surface. Larry has a similar goal. He’s not searching for players who agree with his beliefs. He’s attempting to identify those who want to engage in honest dialogue. He

remarked, “If they ignore me, there’s nothing I can do. I’ll ask about something they watched on TV or read and now we’re going deeper. Even if they push back or disagree, I just want them engaged.” Mike follows a three-step process. Early on he will sit down with new players to discuss, “Their story, my story, and Jesus’s story.”

The chaplains all shared a variety of spiritually implicating topics. Booming hip hop beats are a constant in the football culture. Soundtracks blare at practice, in the weight room, locker room, and in the player’s personal headphones. Similar to Paul’s recitation of Aretus and Epimenedes in Athens, George quotes rap lyrics and asks the players what they think of them. He explained, “I remember the context of the words in the song, that gives me some street cred. I recite back lyrics and now we’re in conversation. I’ll also turn on BET or MTV to learn the subculture and hear the actual words. I’m not the language police, I’m getting to their world view.”

Rap lyrics are not the only profanities that athletes hear. Coaches and teammates are infamous for vulgar dialogue. Cursing is part of the common nomenclature. Any chaplain who spends regular time in the locker room or on the practice field will hear constant cursing. In response, Will shared, “I don’t correct their language or comment on their music. They’re just living their life. That’s the wrong task. If you start pointing these things out, you’re just putting up barriers.” Similar to George, Bill uses themes from rap lyrics to invite players to study Scripture. The themes of pride, money, women, purpose, racism, violence, drugs, alcohol, and parties are replete in both modern hip hop and the Word of God. For example, Bill will ask “How would you describe this rapper’s view of women?” After listening to his response, he will ask, “Would you want to see

what scripture says about women?” These interactions encourage the player to think critically about what they listen to and also consider an alternative worldview.

Evangelism as a Process

With regard to the timing of evangelism, a majority of the chaplains used synonyms such as “slow,” “process,” and “deliberate.” Bob shared, “I don’t want to cram the Bible down their throat. I just want to gauge where they’re at spiritually when we first start meeting.” Will described himself as a naturally opportunistic evangelist in his community. However, with football players he “spends a lot of time laying the groundwork so that they can trust me.” In fact, in Bruce’s experience, being outspoken too early will thwart long-term impact. Hypothetically, “If you bust into the locker room and said, ‘Hey guys, we’re going a Bible study.’ That will turn guys off, because they’re not ready for it.” George reflected that if they are on scholarship, “We got them for three or four years anyway. So, they’re not going anywhere unless they transfer.” Larry grounds his deliberate pace in scripture. He noted that “spiritual development is more like farming than factory work. We’re not going to kick out a bunch of widgets today. We’re going to nurture, grow, develop, and then eventually harvest... These things take a long time to grow and develop.”

Encouragement

Encouragement was another consistent theme emphasized. The encouragement described by the chaplains was more than an “Atta boy,” “good game,” “great play,” or butt slap. The ministers touched on verbally championing the moments of character and integrity they see among players. This encouragement aims at the heart. These ministers

did not describe this as an evangelism “tactic.” Verbal affirmation serves as a means to the strength of character on team. The players compete in a highly performance-oriented world. Many have only received adulation for their competitive performance or athletic ability. Larry summarized, “Words of affirmation, from an older guy are something they’re dying for. Most have never received them. There’s rarely somebody in their life saying, ‘I’m proud of you.’ I’ll use family words like ‘son.’ I speak in relational terms and communicate in a way that I don’t think anybody else is.”

For example, Gary regularly ask players, “Has anybody told you they loved you today?” He always looks “to catch somebody doing something right.” Gary also uses Luke 2:52 to direct his verbal praise. He appreciates “any growth academically, athletically, or socially.” Bruce praises men who take responsibility. He tells underclassmen, “You are really stepping up as a leader! I can see that you’re really challenging yourself.”

Larry affirms players especially when they make mistakes at practice or in games. Following a game day miscue, he says, “I’m wrapping an arm around guys. I’m whispering in ear holes, ‘You’re loved, cared for, and valued on your absolute worst day. You fumbled the ball, and I still love you. Performance has nothing to do with that.’” Even after successful plays, he will target the underappreciated players. For example, “If the stud running back makes a big play and scores, I’ll find the receiver who held his block for six seconds or the unseen right guard who pulled and made a booming block. That’s the guy I seek out.” Gary points out, “Sometimes the coaches are so locked in that they don’t pay attention to a walk-on or anyone who’s not getting a lot of playing time.” Against this backdrop, the chaplain speaks to the very heart of each team member.

How to Communicate

When it comes to how to communicate the gospel, several chaplains favored a simple, direct, and brief style. They avoid doctrinal debates and theological terms. Will shared that religious jargon and “theological language is not very effective in front of the whole team. I use a lot of the parables and stories of the Bible.” The athletes are largely unchurched and lack biblical knowledge. When speaking, chaplains should not assume any familiarity with Christian concepts such as grace, repentance, or faith. Furthermore, several of the chaplains avoided words such as “saved,” “convicted,” “born again,” and even “believe.” These may be doctrinally correct terms, but they either hold little meaning or are often misunderstood by the typical player. Instead, these terms should be replaced with phrases such as being “changed by God,” “trusting in God,” and “rebellious against God.” The men made every effort to speak the gospel in a common language.

Bill and Larry stressed that direct speech is necessary. Whether it is on the practice field or in the film room, coaches generally communicate with their players through short, curt commands. Larry revealed, “You don’t have time to hint at things or to be nuanced. Sit down and tell them what you want to say. All my language with football players is very direct. I’m not hinting or alluding.” Bill takes into account that the rest of campus treats these players as celebrities. Especially during recruitment, they have been coddled and praised by their classmates and community for their athletic exploits. Bill stated, “Everybody kisses their tails. I tell the truth.” Regardless of the player’s stature, chaplains cannot be starstruck by the athlete. He will actually win the player’s respect by being straightforward and not stroking his ego.

Chaplains should also aim for brevity. Very often they have two to four minutes to initiate a spiritual conversation. Many influential interactions happen informally. Whether walking to the field, icing in the training room, or resting during a water break, the chaplain should master the art of brief, intentional dialogue. One participant quipped, “Five-minute conversations can change the world.” Again, Larry observed, “Practice is broken down into five-minute increments, it’s bam, bam, bam, bam. Very staccato. I have to fit into that world and figure out how to communicate effectively in it.”

Use Examples

A majority of the chaplains use examples of famous athletes and football analogies to connect deeply with their audience. Bill shared that there are numerous examples of “guys who had great careers who’ve blown it all.” He uses them as cautionary tales, evidence that success on the ball field cannot provide lasting satisfaction. Larry makes the same point. He regularly reminds players, that “75 percent of the guys who leave the NFL are either bankrupt or divorced within five years.”

The same two participants also possessed a vault of everyday football experiences to explain certain elements of the gospel message. In order to describe the perfection of God and imperfection of man. Larry asks, “Do you always meet the expectations of your coach? How do you relate to them after that? There’s tension. None of us have met God’s expectations. We couldn’t do it on our best day, so we need help.” Bill draws on the duplicity of the recruitment process to explain the trustworthiness of God. He asks players to “think about all the promises made to you by coaches. Teachers and people kissed your butt and told you what you wanted to hear. In reality very little of it came true.” He then shows that only the God of the Bible makes and keeps his promises.

Bill also used extensive football analogies. He compared handling the football to the message of the gospel. He expounds, “Ball security needs all the points of pressure, locked in the proper arm or you’re a casualty for our team. That’s true about the way we carry the gospel. If you’ve got poor theology, you won’t make it to the end zones of life.” Bill’s interview was replete with other ball field examples. Later, he compared false teaching to a play action fake and bold evangelism to a QB throwing a post route before taking a big hit. In his prior profession, Bill was a college position coach. His communication combines deep knowledge of scripture and X’s and O’s.

Group Size Dynamics

The following section will focus on the proper setting for gospel communication. The interviewees all brought up different-sized meetings that they lead. One chaplain described the overall process as a “funnel.” He offers a large broad meeting for the entire team, an intermediate group, and finally one-on-one appointments. Bob explains, “(I offer) two main places. You can come to team chapel, come to our weekly huddle, and then I’ll meet with a handful of guys one-on-one every week.” Each of the chaplains used different terms to describe the various meetings. All of them employed a weekly pregame devotional that was opened up to the whole team. They each offered an intermediate group for players who wanted to receive discipleship or study the Bible in depth. Finally, every chaplain spent significant time meeting individually with players to dialogue the gospel, counsel, or disciple. There are a few observations to note. Larger meetings were more structured and less interactive. Often the chaplain would preach from a prepared outline, and the players would listen. The discussion groups were highly interactive. The

chaplain's role was to facilitate discussion. Finally, during one-on-ones, the chaplains would often respond to the queries or issues of the player.

Bill cites Christ's ministry as the precedent for his tiered approach. He brought up that "Jesus had the seventy-two, the twelve, and then Peter, James, and John. I have team chapels and then meet with a few faithful guys. Two or three at a time. These players hold each other accountable and grow together." The goal of the different-sized groups is to move players towards maturity. Chapel services encourage players to join a small group. Repeated small group attendance leads to one-on-ones. George described his process this way. "At chapel, I invite players to check out the discussion group. Junior chaplains will lead the discussion and I will try and follow up with the most interested players one-on-one." Larry referred to a similar strategy. For this reason, the chaplain must be highly observant when he speaks to the team. At the team devotional, Larry "looks for people who show interest or ask questions. I watch for players to respond. Immediately after I'm done, I ask 'Hey, you want to get coffee this week? Let's get together and talk.' I want to talk about the gospel individually, face to face, eyeball to eyeball." Will called this "fishing for people." Just like Larry, he explained, "I'm watching the room. If there's a guy that I'm connecting with, I'll try to grab something to eat or spend some time with him outside chapel." Each specific group encourages the player to go deeper into the Word.

Team Devotional

During the season, most teams conduct a team devotional or chapel service prior to kickoff. The head coach usually determines the length and location of the time. Some chapel services occur on Friday night following practice. Other teams host them the

morning of the game. Generally, chapels on Fridays last longer and game day services are briefer. Devotionals often occur in the team rooms during home games and a hotel meeting spaces during road trips. One interviewee shared that he worked for a coach who decided that he wanted the chapel service to last “no more than seven minutes and occur on Friday morning at the end of 6 AM practice.”

For most teams, the devotional attracts the largest number of participants. Once again, these sessions not mandatory. In some programs, attendance is tradition or a team event. Therefore, the entire roster will be present. During each interview, the chaplains remarked on their goal for the service. Will shared, “I want to establish myself as source of wisdom and truth teller and a straight shooter. I hope those guys walk out of there right. Making better choices as individually.” Bob’s hope is that he can “scatter seeds... Some players won’t come to anything else, but they’ll show up just because the chapel is their lucky horseshoe.” Will and Bob use the chapel to demonstrate the relevance of God’s Word for the players in attendance. Larry desire for players to take away that “scripture applies to their life situation.” He elucidated, “I use simple talk. I’m informing their lives in sport from scripture. I want the most secularized kid to go, ‘Wow! The Bible has something to say for my life.’”

Gary and Bill are both highly evangelistic in their chapel services. At Bill’s devotional, “Players come in and get the gospel. It’s the main reason I have the chapel service.” Their head coaches grant both men thirty to forty-five minutes to speak each Friday night. Bruce approaches devotionals in a way similar to an expository pastor prepares for Sunday morning. This season, “Every message was cut from the book of Nehemiah. Then I would tie back to Christ.” On the other side, George shared that his

messages on average last ten minutes. The head coach communicates a theme to the players each week of the season. George then crafts a message that aligns with the theme of the week. His aim is to show how the Bible often redefines worldly concepts. For example, one week the theme was power. He explained to the team, “All week long you’ve been training and equipping yourself to exude physical power on the field. Let’s look at how Christ’s power and is different from athletic power.”

At all schools, the chaplain works within the bounds set by the coaching staff. This season, at the behest of the coach, George delivered brief, sport-oriented messages on game day. Recently, Bill stopped delivering the message and instead began to enlist guest speakers. He rotates through a group of “pastors in the community and a lot of former players who love the Lord.” Each week Larry writes and delivers a personal message to the team. He confessed, that every Friday, “I throw a bunch of pieces of paper away. There are some guys will keep those letters and collect them throughout their whole career.”

Discussion Groups

Next the interviewees alluded to midsized groups. They had a variety of names. Some called them “huddles,” “small groups,” “discussion groups,” or “Bible studies.” Regardless of the title, they essentially broke down into two types. Some were high commitment and focused on discipling mature Christians. Others were low commitment and focused on evangelizing non-Christians.

Bob referred to his group as the “Dirty Dozen.” At the beginning of each year, he drops a “special sealed envelope into the locker of twelve specific guys.” These players are chosen for their life maturity and influence. Bob expects the players to attend the

group each week during the season. He feeds them and then they read and discuss scripture for an hour. Over the years, Gary created 105 different meditations on scripture and sports. He meets weekly in small groups with players who want to “build a legacy.”

George offers two groups. In one, they start “in Genesis, at the beginning, and then go through the entire Bible. During each session, they discuss the history of God intervening in our lives.” He also provides a lower commitment group called “share time.” This discussion occurs immediately after chapel service. The only commitment is to show up. Each week, he asks the team to “text me a few topics and I’ll pick one to talk about.” Over the past month, they’ve dialogued sex, money, drugs, and pre-nuptial agreements.

Will and Bruce also provide similar low commitment options. Bruce teaches from a curriculum that focus on character building and is not explicitly evangelistic. Each fall, he gathers the freshmen together for a weekly session. Bruce leads the discussion himself. He hopes that during this time he can “help them build trust with each other, explain servant leadership, model vulnerability, consider their life values, and have fun.” Will takes a different approach. Every year he mentors a group of high-character upperclassmen. He refers to these men as huddle leaders. He expects each leader to “facilitate a thirty-minute discussion over the team chapel that week. Most of these guys do it at night after they meet with tutors.” Instead of facilitating every training, Will equips upperclassmen to lead groups throughout the week.

One-on-One

As previously mentioned, the chapel services and intermediate groups are designed to funnel players towards one-on-one gospel conversations with the chaplain.

Although Bruce's freshmen group is not highly evangelistic, it "creates great opportunities for me to sit in the cafeteria and share about my relationship with God, how I met Christ, or is where my sense of identity comes from." Every chaplain referenced the power of one-on-one appointments. Those who worked at more academically rigorous or higher profile universities used one-on-ones more. Gary estimated that "This past semester, I met with probably I'd say between fifty-six and fifty-eight guys in thirty-minute segments." Mike concluded that "95 percent of the ministry I do is one-on-one. That is primarily because of the time constraints of school."

One-on-one appointments are not strictly a response to hectic schedules. They also serve an evangelistic purpose. Larry brought up, "Most of my best evangelistic conversations happen one-on-one." George eschews large groups for individual touches. He reasoned, "I'd rather meet one-on-one for about thirty minutes a week than have someone just attend a big event." These men prefer personal nature of individual conversations. Mike explained that "I can go places with them by myself that they will never go in a group. I can get through some walls and talk very personally about life in the individual sessions."

How to Play

Several men pointed out that along with the good news of the gospel, chaplains should instruct athletes in how to play the game of football in a God-honoring manner. They point out that the gospel is not separate and distinct from sports. Once it is received, it transforms how the athlete plays the game. In other words, the gospel changes the player's spiritual condition and approach to competition. A former athlete himself, Mike recounted, "We're taught to be aggressive, to attack, to throw guys on the ground. The

gospel bridles that aggression. We develop a passion to play the sport with class, within the context of the rules. God wants us to honor him by how we play.” Bill notes that often players separate their behavior and language on and off the field. He counters, “I don’t compartmentalize the world. There’s not a separate spiritual world and then an athletic world. It’s all one deal and either Christ is at the center or he’s not.” In the same way the chaplain’s life validates his message. The conduct of Christian players on and off the field has the potential to be a powerful witness, regardless of each’s status on the depth chart. Bill briefly shared a piece of his own testimony. As a college player, he noticed “one Christian guy on our team. He was a backup wide receiver. I played safety. He poured his guts into every single play. He was the most tenacious guy on the field. He was a great indicator of what Christ’s life could have looked like in football.”

Summary of Gospel Communication

Once the chaplain has sufficiently learned the locker room culture, he starts the work of gospel proclamation. Often this begins with non-threatening dialogue about faith, purpose, and spirituality. Each chaplain viewed evangelism as a long-term process of conversations rather than a one-time exchange. Persuasive communication in the locker room is usually simple, direct, and brief. Citing the example of famous football players both positively and negatively is also effective. Chaplains may also draw on athletic metaphors in an effort to speak the language of the locker room. Finally, chaplains should devise an effective process that includes team wide chapel services, discussion-based Bible studies, and one to one conversation.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how college football chaplains communicate the gospel to college football players. In chapter two, the literature review shed light on the role of sport in American culture. Football is often played and viewed with a religious fanaticism. The data also revealed that the locker room culture is nearly militaristic. The violent play, strict coaches, busy schedule, hyper masculinity, and competitive atmosphere reinforce a shallow spirituality.

The following research questions guided the research.

1. How do chaplains contextualize the gospel to college football players?
2. What challenges do chaplains face when they communicate the gospel to college football players?
3. How do chaplains communicate the gospel with college football players?

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and analyzed interview data from ten college football chaplains. The literature review revealed that successful football chaplains maintain a missionary mindset. Prior to proclaiming the gospel, chaplains learn the culture of the locker room. Using Paul's interaction with ancient Athenians as an example, chaplains contextualize their words and deeds to their surroundings. They are well aware of the deification of sport in the American culture and the values, norms, and language of the locker room. Both the literature and the interviews revealed that a majority of college football players lack positive male role models and thus possess

distorted definitions of manhood. The players also operate within a performance obsessed context. They tend to develop their sense of self from on field performance. For this reason, the chaplain affirms the players for their integrity and offers a Gospel of grace.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, the literature and interview research will be examined together to identify practical findings for college football chaplains in evangelism. Each of the participants advocated a deliberate pace in developing trust with the players, and so, early on, the chaplain should focus on building a friendship rather than aggressive proclamation with new players.

First Impression

Football players report to campus for fall camp a month before the rest of the student body. This is a major opportunity for the chaplain. During the interviews, each of the chaplains are present at the athletic facility, meeting new players the first moment they arrive on campus. As players moved through the registration process, the chaplain should introduce himself, meet family members, ask questions, and assist in unpacking. The goal is to establish oneself as a servant leader and trusted confidante.

Usually the head coach will conduct a team meeting later on that day. The chaplain should request the opportunity to introduce himself with the rest of the coaching staff. If the head coach allows, he should brand himself as a spiritual guide. The interviewees all used a variety of titles. Some preferred to be called by their position and others by their first name. Regardless of the appellation, the chaplain should be able to explain his role in under thirty seconds. One of the chaplains referred to this as an

“elevator speech.” In a few sentences or less, the chaplain must succinctly disclose his relationship to the team. I encourage chaplains not to go undercover. For example, “My name is Ben, I’m the chaplain of the team, I’m here to help you take the next step in your spiritual journey.” Or, “As the chaplain, I want to assist you in reaching your full potential as a spiritual leader.” These brief explanations set proper expectations for the players and generate relational and spiritual influence among the team.

The literature recounted examples of historical missionaries who adapted their dress and diet to the surrounding culture. If possible, the chaplain should wear team-issued clothing. Shirts and jackets in team colors and embroidered with team insignias communicate to the team, “I’m one of you.” Dressing in attire similar to the rest of the coaching staff reinforces the perception that the chaplain is the spiritual coach of the program.

Especially during camp, eating meals with the team maximizes time spent with the players. Because of the intensity of the preseason practice schedule, coaches mandate players to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner together in the dining hall. Meals are often the only time in the day when players are free to take their minds off their assignments or impending practice. By the end of fall camp, the chaplain should introduce himself to every player on the roster. He should pay special attention to developing trust with new freshmen and locker room leaders. Before classes starts, the chaplain thus knows the name, hometown, and number of every member of the program.

Funneling Conversations

While they ate together in the cafeteria, the chaplains disclosed that they often used well-crafted questions to probe into the religious background and worldview of the

players. Using basic conversation skills, they asked open-ended rather than “yes” or “no” questions. These questions produce rather than kill conversation. After the basics—hometown, major, family, and football—the conversation can then shift to an active interest in the player’s life outside the game, perhaps as the only time an adult pursues that aspect of the players’ lives.

Many players argue and debate ball as they eat. The chaplain should use conversation to connect rather than compete. He should follow this paradigm: external, internal, eternal. Conversations usually begin with the exchange of basic information or external facts. The chaplain shifts towards internal topics such as family, purpose, or background. Finally, the chaplain moves towards spiritual subjects. Questions are powerful; their benefits are threefold. They enable the chaplain to direct the conversation, gather information on the player, and communicate genuine concern.

It is the chaplain’s responsibility to initiate the spiritual conversation. He does not wait for players to reach out to him. This should be done in a respectful and tactful manner. Effective questions that funnel towards spiritual matters include: “Tell me about your spiritual background.” “What has been your experience with church?” “What do you think it means to be a Christian?” “What role does the Bible play in your life?” These questions are non-threatening and invite the player into a meaningful interaction. That being said, some players will not want to discuss these issues. If that is the case, the chaplain should respect his wishes and return to an external topic. To summarize, the chaplain initiates a spiritual conversation through an intentional question. At that point, the player can step towards or away from the topic. The chaplain reacts to the player’s next verbal response. If the player shows interest and steps forward, the conversation

goes deeper. If the player demonstrates ambivalence and steps back, the interaction returns to the surface.

Acts of Service

The research indicated that the players and coaches possess both physical and spiritual needs. Therefore, the chaplain should identify and respond to any problems he observes. This could include driving players without cars to their dorm, picking up trash in the locker room, hosting social events that facilitate team bonding, and watering down players during breaks in practice. The findings in chapter four offered several other practical ways to serve. The phrase “Players don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care,” drives my behavior. I often leave handwritten affirming notes in the player’s locker. Many of the players come from low-income families, so I help them buy food or school supplies at the beginning of the year. Once again, these actions demonstrate to the program “I am here to serve you.” These actions also reinforce commitment to the team to the coaching staff.

Prayer is a critical piece in ministry. The first thing I do each day is intercede for the men in prayer. The statement, “Before you talk to players about God, talk to God about the players,” guides my morning routine. I offer to pray with men in a variety of settings. Following an injury, before a game, or after a player discloses a personal issue, I often ask “Can I pray for you right now?” I not only pray in public with players; I also pray in private for players to know Christ. I use the media guide as my prayer plan. Every morning, I open it, read the names, gaze at the faces, and beg God to save each member of the team.

The chaplain should position himself as a confidante to the coach. Each week, coaches are under an extreme amount of scrutiny to produce immediate results. When conflict or adversity emerges, they rarely have anyone to talk to. For this reason, the chaplain should make a regular habit of knocking on the coach's door and asking "Coach, how are you doing? Is there anything I can help you with?" This inquiry applies to the head and assistant coaches as well. Over time, the chaplain will develop a reputation for being the "first person to call." Thus, when hardship affects a player, the coach can respond by calling the chaplain immediately. For example, when a player experiences a season-ending injury, unplanned pregnancy, family tragedy, or becomes academically ineligible, the chaplain can respond with prompt pastoral support.

Responding to Challenges to the Gospel

As he initiates spiritual conversations, the chaplain must be aware and ready to respond to typical obstructions to the gospel. It would serve the chaplain well to identify specific Bible passages and analogies to combat these mental challenges. In Hebrews 4:12, the author describes the Word as "living and active sharper than a double-edged sword." God's Word is active whether it is read or spoken, in personal study or evangelism. In conversation, the effective evangelist relies primarily on God's Word rather than his own opinion. Visual diagrams are also helpful in conversation. Word pictures should be graphic and interactive pictures of the gospel. I often draw these analogies on a piece of paper or napkin. Thus, the chaplain should always enter a one-on-one with a pen and paper. Diagrams engage the player's senses and provide him with a visual picture of the Christian faith. For example, the "Bridge Diagram" explains what it means to repent and believe. This tool uses Romans 6:23 to present the gospel message.

Memorizing one verse enables the chaplain to explain concepts such as sin, grace, Christ Jesus, repentance, and belief.³¹⁹

In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul exhorts believers to “Destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.” To borrow a sports analogy, successful chaplains know how to play offense and defense. They not only defend the uniqueness of the Gospel message; they also go on the attack. They tactfully dismantle the defector beliefs that oppose the faith. The next section will outline several values of the several locker room that run counter to the gospel. The chaplain should use scripture and interactive analogies to address these ways of thinking.

Ball is Life

The research indicated that many athletes and fans relate to sports with religious devotion. They function as if “sports are life.” For most athletes, their entire sense of self is built on being a successful contributor on game day. Although the numbers say otherwise, most players, regardless of their level, hope to “make it to the league.” Their sport has become their entire purpose. Therefore, to not achieve professional status feels like a loss of life. The chaplain must remind players of 1 Timothy 4:8. It reads, “While bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” I help players grasp the instability of a life built on football. In this violent game, season and career-ending injuries are common. Less than 2 percent of all college players make it to the next level. Even then, the average career of an NFL player is less than four years. The point being,

³¹⁹ Appendix 1.

football is a transitory game. The best-case scenario for most players would be to remain in the league until he's 30 years old. Few pros play into their forties. I constantly ask guys in the locker room, "What will you do when your ball goes flat?" The "Well Diagram" uses Jeremiah 2:13 to explain futility of idolatry. This analogy reveals ball as a "broken cistern" and a relationship with Christ as a "fountain of living water."³²⁰ Football may provide momentary fulfillment, but only Christ can truly satisfy.

Never Give Up

In nearly every pregame and halftime speech, head coaches implore their players to never give up before they take the field. They call for intensity, effort, and teamwork to achieve success. They assume that with the right game plan, proper effort, and execution, success is guaranteed. The student athlete's athletic prowess is often the result of diligent work in the weight room and practice field. Players often apply this same mindset in order to enter into a relationship with God. If hard work generated on-field success, they reason that diligent prayer, Bible reading, and chapel attendance will merit spiritual success. In other words, they try to earn the free gift of grace.

Against this backdrop, the chaplain calls the players to abandon trying to earn God's favor. I often explain that no athlete can achieve moral perfection. In order to know God, the player must do the exact opposite of every pregame speech he's ever heard; he must surrender or give up. In Matthew 16:25, Christ shared with his disciples, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." This step seems counterintuitive to the football player. It requires physically dominant

³²⁰ Appendix 2.

athletes to embrace their spiritual weakness. The “Throne Diagram” uses three circles to demonstrate the lordship of Christ.³²¹ It calls players to evaluate who is on the throne of their heart. They will consider if they are attempting to lord over their life or if they’ve surrendered to Christ as Lord.

Earn One’s Spot

It takes hard work to earn a scholarship and make the team. Even with a scholarship secured, the player now performs each day to maintain his position on the depth chart. The interviewees all mentioned the performance mindset among the players. Far too often, the player’s relationship to his coach is contingent on performance. If he makes a big play, he receives adulation and praise. If he fails or experiences an injury, that closeness often evaporates. For this reason, many players subconsciously relate to the God of the Bible as a cosmic coach. They feel the need to achieve in order to preserve a spiritual connection. The interviews revealed that one of the ways to overcome this obstacle is by showing grace. The chaplain should express regular kindness to all players regardless of their position, spot on the depth chart, and statistics.

The chaplain must also be able to persuasively explain the gift of grace. He should highlight that in the New Testament, the God of the Bible generally reveals himself as a perfect Father not a coach. In many ways the bond between a father and son is the exact opposite of the relationship between a selfish coach and a player. God as Father treats believers as his children. He shows believers unconditional love regardless of their performance. Chaplains should memorize and explain 1 John 3:1. It states,

³²¹ Appendix 3.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” The “Performance Grace Diagram” contrasts the difference in approaching God via performance versus grace. It reveals Christianity as a “done” rather than “do” religion. Unlike Islam, Buddhism, or Judaism, I explain, “My standing before God is not based on what I do but what Christ has done for me.”³²² The diagram demonstrates the uniqueness of Christianity when compared to other world religions.

Communication Style

The chaplain should focus on the content and delivery of his message. Communication in the football culture is intense, direct, and borderline martial. Coaches speak in a confident tone and often issue short, pointed commands. For this reason, chaplains should be direct. A meandering, circular presentation of the gospel suggests that Jesus is trivial. A straightforward, brief explanation conveys urgency and importance. Chaplains should aim for brevity and speak with boldness.

Influencers

The chaplain’s goal is to evangelize the entire team. This task cannot be accomplished alone. The chaplain will remain ineffective apart from the work of the Holy Spirit and collaboration with key leaders on the team. From a social standpoint, the team can be broken down into three groups: influencers, interested, and isolated. Influencers possess social and emotional maturity.³²³ They are highly respected among their

³²² Appendix 4.

³²³ Steve Shadrach, *The Fuel and the Flame: Ten Keys to Ignite Your College Campus for Jesus Christ* (Atlanta, GA: Authentic Publishing, 2003), 261-267.

teammates. Often, but not always, these players are team captains. It should be noted that the best players are not always influencers. I've personally seen All-American performers lack influence because of they were arrogant and self-centered.

From a leadership standpoint, the influencers are usually the top 10% of the team. The majority of the roster falls into the categories of interested or isolated. Interested players want to get involved and make friends but lack confidence or maturity. This group is spiritually curious and represents the largest segment of the team. Isolated athletes are often lonely and lack a desire to socialize with the rest of the team.

Influencers are easy to spot. They often occupy leadership roles on the team. They are vocal encouragers in practice and conditioning. Their body language is positive and confident in the huddle. They are driven in the classroom and trustworthy with their many responsibilities as a student athlete. When in doubt, chaplains can ask the head coach, "Who do you think are the leaders or most influential players on your team?" Once he identifies the leaders, he can direct his prayer and evangelistic effort towards them. When he wins the chief, he will win the tribe.

The chaplain should focus a majority of his ministry on reaching the influencers with the gospel. Here are a few reasons why. Relationships with influencers will validate the chaplain's presence in the locker room. This is especially true when the chaplain is not African American. When young players see a white chaplain in close relationship with the leaders of the team, it signals to the locker room, "He is trustworthy." Second, the goal of the Great Commission is to raise up disciple-makers. Discipleship requires players to multiply their influence. In 2 Timothy, Paul instruct his faithful follower

Timothy to “entrust (the gospel) to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”³²⁴ Key men are both faithful and able to. Once they embrace the gospel, influencers will be more likely to pass it on because they are able to relate to a broader spectrum of their teammates. Finally, these men are often the most unreached segment on the roster. In my experience, most chaplains focus on the interested. Often, they avoid influencers because these men are intimidating and seem to have it all together. Chaplains move on to the less daunting relationships.³²⁵

It should be clarified that all players are equal in worth, each is made in the image of God. This strategy does not endorse favoritism or exclusivity. I am not advocating a ministry geared strictly to the star players but rather am recognizing that some players are more strategic than others. In the context of Acts 17, Paul began his ministry among Athenian thought leaders to reach the entire city. In the same way, a focus on influencers will actually lead to more interested and isolated players hearing the gospel. Jesus Christ prayed for more “laborers,” when he saw the spiritual condition of the city centers.³²⁶ A ministry built on influencers will be more likely to multiply. All players are equally valuable, but not all players are equally strategic. The most effective way for the chaplain to reach all 125 players on the team is to target key leaders.

³²⁴ 2 Timothy 2:2.

³²⁵ Shadrach, *Fuel and the Flame*, 261-267.

³²⁶ Matthew 9:35-37.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the findings described above, the chaplain is well advised to develop a ministry funnel. A funnel contains a broad opening and narrow spout. In the same way, the chaplain should create groups that are broad at the top for the spiritual seekers as well narrow at the bottom for the mature disciples. From large to small, the chaplain should structure devotionals for the entire team, small group Bible studies for the spiritually interested, and discipleship opportunities for committed believers. There is an implied movement in the funnel, that the goal of each group is to push players towards a greater level of commitment to Jesus. Generally, the larger the attendance of the group, the lower the commitment. Players need to only show up to team devotionals. Bible studies and discipleship groups require weekly attendance and consistent reading. The chaplain also meets individually with attendees outside of the group to challenge them to take the next step in their spiritual development. Chaplains should create a three-tiered system that meets student athletes where they are at. The goal is for non-, young, and mature believers to find a group that meets and moves them forward in spiritual maturity.

Pregame Devotional

The pregame devotional or team chapel is usually the most attended weekly event. The interviews offered a variety of approaches to the devotional. Often times, the head coach rather than the chaplain dictates the topic, location, and length of the chapel service. If the chaplain maintains autonomy over the devotional, he should structure it the following way. First, it should occur on Friday night rather than on game day. Immediately before the game, players are mentally consumed with their assignment or game plan rather than scripture. Second, it should be players only. The presence of a

coach, even a well-respected one, inhibits the vulnerability and participation of the players. Third, the devotional should be optional to attend so that only interested players are present. Fourth, the message should be brief (fifteen to twenty minutes), interactive, and centered on God's Word. Finally, it is beneficial to provide players with a one-page outline for the main passage and idea of the message. Many players collect these worksheets and revisit the theme the following week.

The chaplain should choose one main passage and explain its significance, making sure to speak to its application in football and in life and being careful to not reduce every passage to a motivational pep talk. It is the coach's not the chaplain's responsibility to deliver an inspiring speech. I aim for two goals during a devotional. I want to demonstrate the ageless nature of scripture, so players see that the Bible possesses relevance for their everyday lives. Second, I want to establish myself as truth-teller. I desire for players to see that they can reach out to me as they navigate the complexities of life, whether it be school, relationships, or their future. These are modest goals; I simply want to whet their spiritual appetite and leave them hungry for more. The messages are simple and highly evangelistic.

The environment is relaxed, and I encourage dialogue. I start each devotional with a simple, open-ended question that boosts interaction. This question is deliberately nonspiritual. It is carefully worded so that any player, regardless of his spiritual background, can answer. The question will always align with the night's topic. For a message on suffering, I might ask, "What's something hard you've been through that later on you realized made you a better man?" For a message centered on satisfaction, I ask, "If you won lottery, what is the first thing you'd buy?" These ice breakers invite the

entire audience into a conversation. Next, I ask a player to read the main passage; then I interpret the meaning in a few minutes or less. As a group, we collectively discuss how to apply the truth to our lives on and off the field. I make a point to speak to issues beyond the ball field. I want the players to know God's Word applies to ball. At the same time, it is bigger than ball because it speaks to all of life. I conclude each week with quick story and explanation of how this passage points to Christ. The messages are always brief, relatable, and Christocentric.

As I speak, I pay attention to the body language and responses of the attendees. My goal is to set up follow-up appointments with the players who seem most invested. As I go, I make mental notes of the questions and answers that players elicit. I use these observations to guide my follow up one-on-ones. In the following moments and days, I invite players to meet or eat together. I will mention, "I can tell you were locked into the message; would you want meet up and talk about it more?" Or, "You asked a great question during the devotional, would you be interested in discussing that over lunch next week?" A quality devotional creates a platform for follow up one-on-one discussions.

Small Group Bible Study

The next size group is an evangelistic Bible study. By the time I've met every player, observed behavior on the field, and spoken at several chapel services, I have good handle on which players are most influential and spiritually interested. I avoid open ended, low commitment groups. Often, these become revolving doors. As the semester gets busy, attendance become inconsistent. Instead, I recommend chaplains personally invite influencers to commit to a weekly small group study. I recruit specific players to

attend a one hour-long Bible study that lasts eight weeks. I would rather have four players show up every week than forty players attend irregularly.

In recruitment conversations, I encourage them and lay out the entire commitment. I often state, “I’m impressed by your character. I can tell that you want to be a leader on the team and in life after you graduate. Attending this Bible study could help you become the spiritual leader that you desire to be. Would you be interested in committing to an eight-week study? We’ll meet in the cafeteria for the next eight Mondays for lunch to discuss scripture.” The ideal size for a Bible study is four to six. If spiritual interest is high on the team, the chaplain should expect to lead multiple small groups. One large group usually proves to be counterproductive. The recruitment pitch should be brief and clearly outline the expectations for the time. The goal is to create a group of key influencers committed to a weekly dialogue over God’s Word.

The same principles that guide the devotional should also dictate the small group. Small groups do allow a greater level of interaction and transparency. Over the course of eight weeks, the group should deliberately read and process the tenets of the faith. I find it helpful to follow this order: introduce the gospel, God’s holiness, man’s sinfulness, Christ’s sacrifice, grace, dating and sex, man’s response, and God as Father.

A few points of clarification: during the first meeting, the group looks back and then forward. I ask them to describe their spiritual background and then share what they hope to experience in the group during the upcoming semester. I then preview the content of the gospel and the emphasize value of knowing God. The pitch is a moderated version of Pascal’s wager. I conclude the first session by saying, “I’m asking you to sacrifice eight hours of your life to study the gospel, but this could change your eternal life!” Next,

the content follows the significant points of the biblical narrative: God, Man, Christ, Grace, Response (GMCGR).

I also incorporate a session on sex and the Fatherhood of God. As noted by the research and interviews, most football players lack godly male role models and are heavily influenced by hip hop and performance culture. Most of the players are sexually active and believe that sex is for personal satisfaction. It is imperative to help them develop a biblical understanding of sex. During this week, I want to make the point that “Married sex is the best sex.” I labor to explain that God’s commands are not designed to restrict their sexual pleasure. Instead, sex experienced in a marriage covenant is most enjoyable. Finally, I conclude the study with a conversation of God’s role as Father. At this point in the study, the men have grown close and will openly discuss the wounds of their fathers. We wrap up the entire process with a discussion of the perfect and unfailing Father, God himself. This process does not guarantee conversions in eight weeks. Instead it is an attempt to create ongoing gospel conversations. At the end of eight weeks, if the men want to continue to meet, the group will recommit for the rest of the fall.

Discipleship Groups

The small group Bible study is highly evangelistic and geared towards non-believers. Discipleship groups are structured for young believers. Although this research project focuses primarily on evangelism, evangelism should not be completely separated from discipleship. The goal of the Great Commission is to make disciples rather than converts.³²⁷ The work of the chaplain does not stop upon conversion. Once a player

³²⁷ Matthew 28:18-20.

professes faith, the chaplains guide them towards spiritual maturity. The next step is called establishing. The chaplain establishes the new convert in the basics of the Christian faith. This includes knowing why and how to read the Bible, pray, live in community, and share their faith. The “Wheel Diagram” is a helpful establishing tool.³²⁸ An athlete is properly established once they can lead themselves consistently in these areas.

As previously mentioned in the interviews, players not chaplains are the most influential figures in the locker room. For this reason, the chaplain should train the established believers to not only know God but also make him known. This phase is called equipping and involves training the young believer in evangelism. During the interview, several of the chaplains mentioned that “more is caught than taught.” Chaplains should model evangelism for their disciples. This skill is rarely learned through didactic reading or explanation. Thus, the chaplain incorporates the disciple into his daily evangelistic appointments. They witness together in the cafeteria and dorms. Eventually, the chaplain will also train his disciples to lead their own evangelistic Bible study. When a chaplain trains a group of mature believers in this manner, gospel influence will multiply throughout the entire team.

One-on-Ones

One-on-one appointments help transition players through the funnel. At each level, I rely on individual appointments to move players towards maturity. The literature and chaplains agreed that college football players have little free time. One-on-ones provide a great deal of scheduling flexibility. I can sit down with an athlete for twenty or

³²⁸ Appendix 5.

thirty minutes in between position meetings, treatment in the training room, or before class. Football players often initially resist opening up. They view vulnerability as weakness. I've found that players are most transparent when behind closed doors.

I use one-on-ones in both evangelism and discipleship. If a player attends chapel services with any regularity, I will mention, "Let's eat lunch together. I want to hear what you're learning in the devotionals!" Once again, the devotional is a stage to present the gospel to a group and to initiate personal gospel conversations. If the corresponding conversation is fruitful, I will often invite the player to join an existing small group study or form a new one. Inevitably, at some point in the eight-week evangelistic study, the player will have a decision to make: "Will I submit my life to the Lordship of Christ?" In my experience, lordship conversations are best received one to one. A true gospel presentation demands a loving confrontation. During these verbal challenges, I will explain that "Jesus cannot be your Savior, if he's not your Lord." I will ask them directly, "What in your life are you unwilling to surrender in order to follow Jesus Christ?" This question forces the player to name his functional god. Most often the specific lordship issue is football, success, friends, sex, or partying. At this point in the relationship, the player understands the content of the gospel. I will use one-on-ones, to help him consider the cost of following Christ.

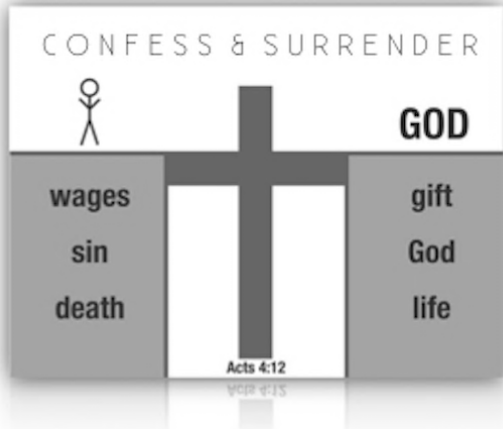
Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused specifically on evangelism to college football players. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the focus can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be highly valuable for the church at large. Evangelism among other sports would be beneficial. Men's sports such as baseball and basketball

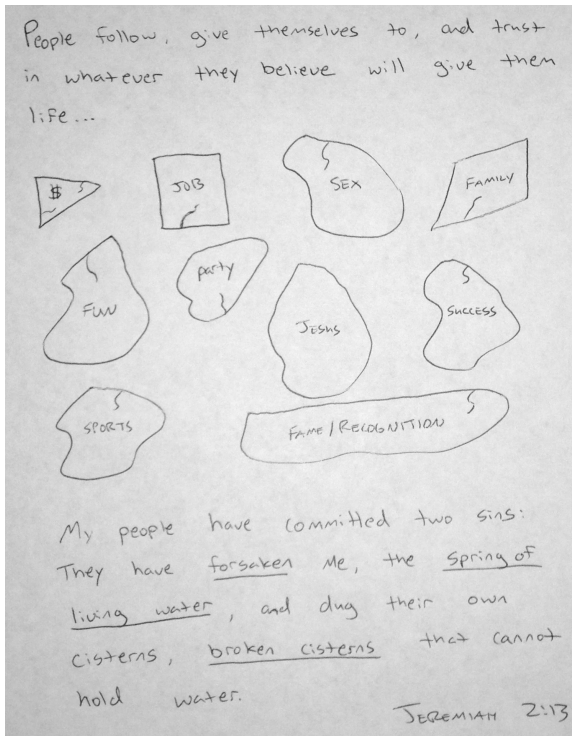
have unique cultures, as well as women's sports. Furthermore, this paper concentrated on evangelism to nonbelievers. It would be helpful to examine how chaplains effectively disciple believers in the midst of the locker room culture. Research could also be geared towards evangelizing football players among the high school and professional ranks. High school football participation is much greater than college, and NFL players are more visible than college players. Adapting this research to both high school and professional contexts would lead to greater impact.

Appendix

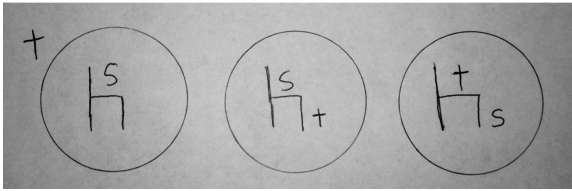
1. Bridge Diagram



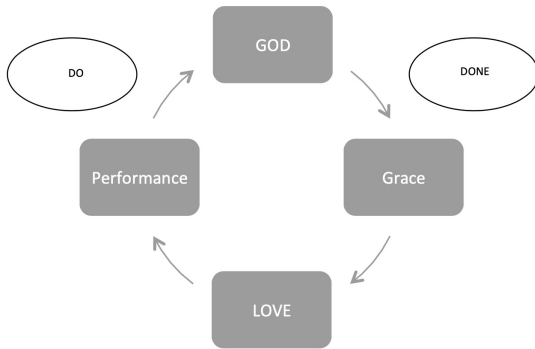
2. Well Diagram



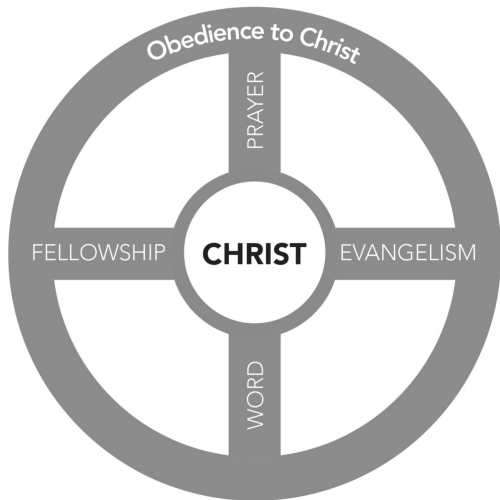
3. The Throne Diagram



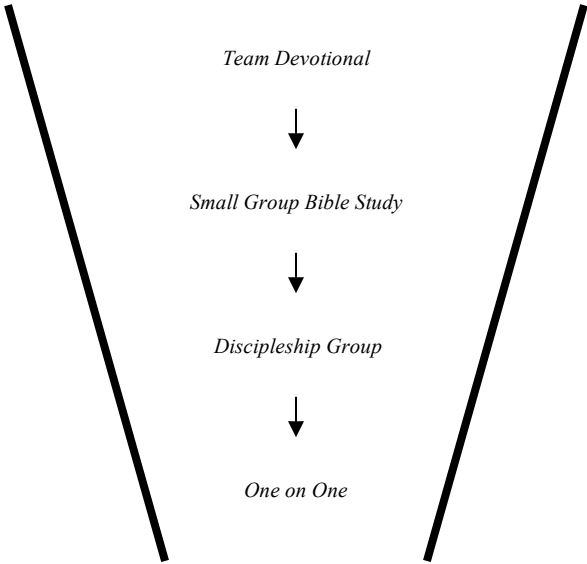
4. The Performance Grace Diagram



5. The Wheel Diagram



6. The Ministry Funnel



Bibliography

- Adams, Jay E. *Audience Adaptations in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul*. Grand Rapids, Baker House, 1975.
- Adler, Patricia A., & Peter Adler. "Intense Loyalty in Organizations: A Case Study of College Athletics." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 33, no. 3, (1988): 401-417.
- Adler, Peter & Patricia Adler "Role Conflict and Identity Salience: College Athletics and the Academic Role." *The Social Science Journal* 24, no. 4 (1987): 443-455.
- Ahlich, Erica, Emily M. Choquette, and Diana Rancourt. "Body Talk, Athletic Identity, and Eating Disorder Symptoms in Men." *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 2019. Vol. 20, No. 3., 357-355.
- Allender, Dan B. *Leading with a Limp. Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2006.
- Angrosino, Michael V. *Talking about Cultural Diversity in Your Church: Gifts and Challenges*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2001.
- Babb, Kent. "Where College Football is a Religion, and Religion Shapes College Football." *The Washington Post*. Aug 29, 2014.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/colleges/where-college-football-is-a-religion-and-religion-shapes-college-football/2014/08/29/8d03de32-2dfa-11e4-bb9b-997ae96fad33_story.html.
- Bakke, Raymond J. "The Challenge of World Urbanization to Mission Thinking and Strategy: Perspectives on Demographic Realities." *Urban Missions* 4, no. 1 (September 1986), 15.
- Balmer, Randall. "Is God a Rams Fan?" *Sojourner Magazine*. (January - February 2001) <https://sojo.net/magazine/january-february-2001/god-rams-fan>.
- Barreto, Eric D. "Sports and Race: A Cauldron of Theological Deliberation and Discernment." *Word & World* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 368-375.
- Barrs, Jerram. *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009.
- Barrs, Jerram. *The Heart of Evangelism*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001.
- Barton, Ruth Haley. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006.
- Batten, Patricia Morrison. *Expository Story Sermons*. DMin Thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2008.

- Beamon, Krystal K. "Used Goods": Former African American College Student-Athletes' Perception of Exploitation by Division I Universities." *The Journal of Negro Education* 77, no. 4 (Fall, 2008): 352-364. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25608704>.
- Bebbington, David W. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Bell, Lydia F. "Examining Academic Role-Set Influence on the Student-Athlete Experience." *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* (2009): 19-41.
- Benedict XVI, Pope. "Message for the 20th Winter Olympic Games in Turin, Italy: A Light for Sports." *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6, February 8, 2006.
- Bianchi, Eugene. "Pigskin Piety." *Christianity and Crisis* (Feb 21, 1972): 31-34.
- Bianchi, Eugene. "The Superbowl Culture of Male Violence." *Christian Century* (September 18, 1974): 842-845.
- Bishop, Greg. "When Helmet Safety Meets Capitalism." *Sports Illustrated* (November 20, 2019). <https://www.si.com/nfl/2019/11/20/nfl-concussions-helmet-safety>.
- Booth, Wayne, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*, 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Borghesi, Richard. "Pay for Play: The Financial Value of NCAA Football Player." *Applied Economics* (August 17, 2016). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2825281> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2825281>.
- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Bowman, Jeremy. "Which U.S. Sport Had the Highest Viewership in 2018?" *Yahoo* (Dec 30, 2018). <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/u-sport-had-highest-viewership-141700953.html>.
- Bradley, Bill. *Life on the Run*. New York: Rosetta Books, 1976.
- Brailsford, Dennis. *Sport, Time and Society: The British at Play*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Branch, Taylor. "The Shame of College Sports." *The Atlantic* (October 2011). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/10/the-shame-of-college-sports/308643>.
- Bredemeier, B.J. "Athletic Aggression: A Moral Concern." *Sports Violence*. Springer Series in Social Psychology (1983).

- Brown, Kevin and Antonio Williams, "Out of Bounds: A Critical Race Theory Perspective on 'Pay for Play.'" *Journal of Legal Aspects of Sport* (Forthcoming): 31-86.
- Burton, Tara Isabella. "Football really is America's religion. That's what made the NFL Protests so Powerful: The macho Christianity Behind American Sports Culture, Explained." *VOX* (Sep 27, 2017). <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/9/27/16308792/football-america-religion-nfl-protests-powerful>.
- Byl, John. "Coming to Terms with Play, Game, Sport and Athletics." *Christianity and Leisure: Issues in a Pluralistic Society*. Edited by Paul Heintzman, Glen Van Andel, and Thomas Visker, 155-163. Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1994.
- Calvin Choi, Woosung. *Preaching to Multiethnic Congregations: Positive Marginality as a Homiletical Paradigm*. New York: Peter Lang, 2015.
- Carrington, Ben. "Fear of a Black Athlete: Masculinity, Politics and the Body." *New Formations* 45 (2002): 91-110.
- Carson, D.A. *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004.
- Chan Rah, Soong. *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church*. Chicago: Moody, 2010.
- Clifford, N.K. "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis" *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion* (March 1, 1973). <https://doi.org/10.1177/000842987300200404>.
- Coakley, Jay. *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*. 11th Ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009.
- Colby, Sandra L. Jennifer M. Ortman, "Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060: Current Population Reports, P25-1143," US Census Bureau, 2014. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf>
- Coleman, Robert E. *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005.
- Covey, Stephen R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. New York: Free Press, 2004.
- Daneshvar, J Mez DH, Kiernan PT, et al. "Clinicopathological Evaluation of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy in Players of American Football." *JAMA*, 4 (2017): 360-370. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2017.8334>

- Davis, Timothy. "Racism in Athletics: Subtle Yet Persistent." *University of Arkansas at Little Rock Law Review*. 21, no. 4 (1999). <https://lawrepository.ualr.edu/lawreview/vol21/iss4/10>.
- Davis, Timothy. "Intercollegiate Athletics: Competing Models and Conflicting Realities." *Rutgers Law Journal* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 269-376.
- Deardoff, Donald II and John White ed. *The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports*. Lewistown, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008.
- 2015 reier, Thomas P. "College Sports-Related Injuries - United States, 2009-10 Through 2013-14 Academic Years." *Center for Disease Control and Prevention* 48 (December 2015): 1330-1336. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6448a2.htm?%22>.
- Doriani, Dan. "Time to Push Tackle Football into Retirement." *The Gospel Coalition*. March 19, 2018. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/time-push-tackle-football-retirement/>.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. Philadelphia: Civitas Books, 2007.
- Earley, P. Christopher and Soon Ang. *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions across Cultures*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Edwards, Harry. "The Black 'Dumb Jock:' An American Sports Tragedy." *College Board Review* 131 (Spring 1984): 8-13.
- Ehrmann, Joe. *Inside Out Coaching: How Sports Can Transform Lives*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2011.
- Elmer, Duane. *Cross Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006.
- Emerson, Michael O. and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Eswine, Zack. *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008.
- Evans, Jake and James Cullens. "A Criminal Justice System Without Justice: The News Media, Sports, Media & Rap's Influence on Racial Crime Disparities." *University of Miami Race & Social Justice Law Review* 5 (2015). <http://repository.law.miami.edu/umrsjlr/vol5/iss1/6>
- Feinstein, John. *A Season on the Brink: A Year with Bob Knight and the Indiana Hoosiers*. New York, Macmillan, 1989.

- Freeman, Alan. "Legitimization Racial Discrimination through Antidiscrimination Law: A Critical Review of Supreme Court Doctrine." *Minnesota Law Review* 62, no.1049 (1978).
<http://www.dariarothmayr.com/pdfs/assignments/Freeman,%20Legitimizing%20Racial%20Discrimination.pdf>.
- Frey, Bradshaw, William Ingram, Thomas McWhertor, William Romanowski. "Sports and Athletics: Playing to the Glory of God." *At Work and Play: Biblical Insight to Daily Obedience*. Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 1986.
- Gaines, Cork and Mike Nudelman O. "The Average College Football Team Makes More Money than the Next 35 College Sports Combined." *Business Insider*. Oct 5, 2017. <https://www.businessinsider.com/college-sports-football-revenue-2017-10>.
- Garner, John ed. *Recreation and Sports Ministry: Impacting Postmodern Culture*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2003.
- Goheen, Michael W. "Delighting in God's Good Gift of Sports and Competition." Keynote address, Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies Annual Conference. Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, June 5, 2003.
<http://missionworldview.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Gods-Good-Gift-of-Athletics.pdf>.
- . *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018.
- . "The Creational Goodness of Sports and Competition." *Comment Magazine*. March 1, 2009, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-creational-goodness-of-sports-and-competition>.
- Grey, Derwin. "Pro Football Was My God: Until a Half-Naked Man Showed Up at My Locker." *Christianity Today* (March 2014): 80-83.
- Guttman, Allen. *A Whole New Ballgame: An Interpretation of American Sports*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1988.
- Haack, Denis. "On Being Offended in a Pagan World." *Critique*.
<http://www.ransomfellowship.org/articledetail.asp?AID=23>.
- Hall, Murray W. "A Christian Perspective on Physical Education, Health, and Sport." *Christian Worldview and the Academic Disciplines: Crossing the Academy*. Edited by Deane E.D. Downey and Stanley E. Porter. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009.
- Hatteberg, Sarah J. "Under Surveillance: Collegiate Athletics as a Total Institution," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 35 (2018): 149-158.

- Hawkins, Billy. *The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Higgs, RJ. *God in the Stadium*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1995.
- Hesselgrave, David J. *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991.
- Hoffman, Shirl. *Christianity and the Culture of Sports*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010.
- Holmes, Arthur. "Toward a Christian Play Ethic." *Christian Scholar's Review* 11, no. 1 (1981): 41-48.
- Holt, Richard. *Sport and the British: A Modern History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. New York: Angelico Press, 2016
- Huma, Ramogi and Ellen J. Staurowsky. "The \$6 Billion Heist: Robbing College Athletes Under the Guise of Amateurism." National College Players Association and Drexel University Sport Management.
http://assets.usw.org/ncpa/pdfs/6Billion-Heist-Study_Full.pdf.
- Hunter III, George G. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity can Reach the West... Again*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2010.
- Jackson, Victoria. "Take it From a Former Division I athlete: College Sports are Like Jim Crow." *Los Angeles Times* (January 11, 2018) <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-jackson-college-sports-20180111-story.html>.
- Jansen, Sue Curry. "Football is More Than a Game: Masculinity, Sport, and War." *Communication Theory*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.
- Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
- The JBHE Foundation, "Recalling the Death of Racial Segregation in Southern College Football." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 21 (Autumn, 1998): 64-65. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2998993>.
- The JBHE Foundation, "Black Teams, White Coaches: African Americans Are Making Almost No Progress in College Coaching Positions." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 49 (Autumn, 2005): 32-33.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25073296>.

- John Paul II, Pope. "Address to Participants of Athletic World Championships: Be Examples of Human Virtues." *L'Osservatore Romano*, 36, September 7, 1987.
- Johnston, Robert K. *The Christian at Play*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997.
- Jones, Nathan. "Feeling God's Pleasure: Christian Faith in the World of Sports." *Word & World* 35, no 4 (Fall 2015).
- Kaliss, Gregory J. *Men's College Athletics and the Politics of Racial Equality: Five Pioneer Stories of Black Manliness, White Citizenship, and American Democracy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012.
- Keller, Timothy. *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.
- . "Gospel Preaching that Radically Changes Lives: How to Discern, Expose, and Challenge Idols," *Preaching Today* (August 17, 2009).
<https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/themes/preachingwithauthority/gospelpreachingthatradically.html>
- . *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Penguin Books, 2016.
- Keown, Tim. "The Confession of Arian Foster." *ESPN The Magazine* (August 6, 2015).
http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/13369076/houston-texans-arian-foster-goes-public-not-believing-god.
- Kerrigan, Michael P. "Sports in the Christian Life," Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. 2008.
- Kim, Matthew. *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear our Sermons*. Grand Rapids: Baker 2017.
- King Jr., Martin Luther. "1963 Western Michigan University Speech." Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections and University Libraries.
<https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/MLK.pdf>.
- Knott, Stephen. "The Impact of Dual Identities of College Student Athletes on Academic Performance." Master's thesis, Old Dominion University, 2016.
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b617/d2ef2e8b5e2db9fef679e90c142e7c04e94f.pdf>.
- Krattenmaker, Tom. *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks in to Pulpits and Players into Preachers*. Ithaca, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.
- Kraus, Michael W., Cassy Huang, and Danny Keltner, "Tactile Communication, Cooperation, and Performance: An Ethological Study of the NBA," *Emotion* 10, no. 5 (2010).

- Kucera, Kristen L., David Klossner, Bob Colgate, and Robert Cantu. "Annual Survey of Football Injury Research 1931-2018." National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, February 15, 2019.
- Kynes, Bill. "3 Reasons I'd (Still) Let My Sons Play Tackle Football." *The Gospel Coalition*. March 19, 2018. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-reasons-let-sons-play-tackle-football/>.
- Ladd, Tony and James Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 1999.
- Lapchick, Richard E. "The 2018 Racial and Gender Report Card: D1 FBS Leadership." *The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports*. October 3, 2018. https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/media/2017%20College%20Sport%20Racial%20and%20Gender%20Report%20Card.pdf
- Law, Eric H.F. *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*. Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 1993.
- Lederman, Douglas. "Players Spend More Time on Sports Than on Studies, an NCAA Survey of Major-College Athletes Finds." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December, 7, 1988.
- Leonard, David. "A World of Criminals or a Media? Race, Gender, Celebrity, and the Athlete/Criminal Discourse." *Handbook of Sports and Media* (2006). https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.4324/9780203873670_chapter_31.
- Livermore, David A. *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage our Multicultural World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2009.
- Livermore, David A. *Leading with Cultural Intelligence: The New Secret to Success*. New York: AMACOM, 2009.
- Logan, Alvin D. Jr., Louis Harrison Jr., and Alex Logan. "4 Years a Football Player: The Social Reproduction of Restricted Agency." *Race, Gender & Class* 22, no. 1-2, (2015): 36-53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26505322>.
- Lu, Landy Di, Kathryn L. Heinze, and Sara Soderstrom. "Playing Multiple Positions: Student-Athlete Identity Salience and Conflict." *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport* 11 (2018): 214-241.
- Mahaney, C.J. *Don't Waste Your Sports*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011.
- Martin, Charles H. "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow in Southern College Sports: The Case of the Atlantic Coast Conference." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 76, no. 3 (July 1999): 253-284. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23522657>.

- Mastro, Dana E., Erin Blecha, and Anita Atwell Seate. "Characterizations of Criminal Athletes: A Systematic Examination of Sports News Depictions of Race and Crime." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 55, no 4 (2011): 526-542.
- McCluskey, John Michael. "Rough! Tough! Real Stuff!": Music, Militarism, and Masculinity in American College Football." *American Music* 37, no 1 (Spring 2019): 29-57.
- McLeod, Ken, "The Construction of Masculinity in African American Music and Sports." *American Music* 27, no. 2 (2009): 219–20.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25602271?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.
- McLaughlin, Patrick. "College Football Players, Not Coaches Deserve to Be Paid." *Newsday* (January 7, 2016). <https://www.newsday.com/opinion/oped/college-football-players-not-coaches-deserve-to-be-paid-1.11301251>.
- Merriam, Sharan B. and Elizabeth J. Tisdell. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016.
- Messner, Michael. "When Bodies are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* no. 25 (1990): 213-220.
- Metzger, Paul Louis. *Connecting Christ: How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012.
- Michener, James A. *Sports in America*. New York: Penguin Random House, 1976.
- Miller, Eric. "Will We Football: Grace and Idolatry Run Crossing Patterns in the New American Pastime." *Christianity Today* (September 2007): 26-30.
- NCAA, "2018 FOOTBALL ATTENDANCE."
http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/stats/football_records/Attendance/2018.pdf
- . "College Athletic Scholarship Limits." <http://www.reachhighscholars.org/Articles/College%20Athletic%20Scholarship%20Limits.pdf>
- . Article 2.9. <http://ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/D116.pdf>
- . 2008-09 NCAA Division I Manual: Constitutional Operating Bylaws, Administrative Bylaws, Effective August 1, 2008. Indianapolis, IN: NCAA.
- . "NCAA Finances 2016-17: Top School Revenue." *USA Today*.
<http://sports.usatoday.com/ncaa/finance>
- . "NCAA Reference Center." Quick Reference Guide.
http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/elgibility_center/Quick_Reference_Sheet.pdf

- . “NCAA student-athletes graduating at highest rates ever.”
<http://www.ncaa.org/wps/ncaa?ContentID=39116>.
- National Center for Education Statistics. “Fast Facts: Enrollment.”
<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>
- Neal, Wes. *Handbook on Athletic Perfection: A Training Manual for Christian Athletes*. Grand Island, NY: Cross Training, 1981.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986.
- Nida, Eugene A. and Charles R. Taber. *The Theory and Practice of Translation, with Special Reference to Bible Translating*. Leiden: Brill, 1969.
- Nieman, James R. *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008.
- Nieman, James R. and Thomas G. Rogers. *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress: 2001.
- Norman, Jim. “Football Still Americans' Favorite Sport to Watch.” *Gallup*. Jan 4, 2018.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/224864/football-americans-favorite-sport-watch.aspx>.
- O’Gorman, Kevin. *Saving Sport: Sport, Society and Spirituality*. Dublin: The Columba Press, 2009.
- Oriard, Michael. *Bowled Over: Big-Time College Football from the Sixties to the BCS Era*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Palantonio, Sal. *How Football Explains America*. Chicago: Triumph Books, 2008.
- Peterson, David. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009.
- Pink, Daniel H. *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2018.
- Plueddemann, James E. *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church*. Downers Grove, IL: 2009.
- Prebish, Charles S. “Heavenly Father, Divine Goalie: Sport and Religion.” *The Antioch Review*, 42, no. 3 (Summer, 1984): 306-318.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4611365>
- Prince, David E. *In the Arena: The Promise of Sports for Christian Discipleship*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2016.

- Putney, Clifford. *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Quicke, Michael J. *Preaching As Worship: An Integrative Approach to Formation in Your Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.
- Ramaeker, Joey and Trent A. Petrie. "Man Up!': Exploring Intersections of Sport Participation, Masculinity, Psychological Distress, and Help-Seeking Attitudes and Intentions." *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 20, no. 4 (2019): 515-527.
- Rodman, Dennis. *Bad As I Wanna Be*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1996.
- Rowell, Ed. "Before You Preach." *Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.
- Sailes, Gary A. "The Exploitation of the Black Athlete: Some Alternative Solutions." *The Journal of Negro Education* 55, no. 4 (Autumn, 1986): 439-442.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2294828>.
- Schaefer, Richard T. *Racial and Ethnic Groups*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.
- Sellers, Jeff. M. "The Glory of the Ordinary: A Career Slump Gave Quarterback Trent Dilfer Insight Into His Own Faith – and the Faith-Hype Within the NFL." *Christianity Today* (January 8, 2001): 60-64.
- Serazio, Michael. "Just How Much Is Sports Fandom Like Religion?" *The Atlantic*. Jan 29, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/just-how-much-is-sports-fandom-like-religion/272631/>.
- Shadrach, Steve. *The Fuel and the Flame: Ten Keys to Ignite Your College Campus for Jesus Christ*. Atlanta, GA: Authentic Publishing, 2003.
- Shropshire, Kenneth L. *Black and White: Race and Sports in America*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- Sigelman, Lee. "It's Academic—or Is It? Admissions Standards and Big-Time College Football." *Social Science Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (June 1995): 247-261.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/44072618?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.
- Simmons, Annette. *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling*. Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2002.
- Simons, Herbert, Mark Van Rheenen, and Martin V. Covington. "Academic Motivation and the Student Athlete." *Journal of College Student Development* 40, no 2. (March-April 1999): 151-161.

- Sire, James W. *Discipleship of the Mind: Learning to Love God in the Ways we Think*. Downers Grove, IL: 1990.
- Smith, Brian. *The Assist: A Gospel-Centered Guide to Glorifying God through Sports*. Houston, TX: Lucid Books, 2017.
- Smith, James K.A. "Introduction," *The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008.
- Soell, George. "Sport in Catholic Theology in the 20th Century." *The Scientific View of Sport: Perspectives, Aspects, Issues*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1972.
- Smith, Martin P., Langston D. Clark, and Louis Harrison Jr. "The Historical Hypocrisy of the Black Student-Athlete." *Race, Gender & Class* 21, no. 1-2. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43496971>.
- Spurgeon, Charles. *Morning and Evening*. Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 2006.
- Stackhouse, John G. Jr. *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002.
- Scott, Richard. *Tales From the Auburn 2004 Championship Season: An Inside Look at a Perfect Season*. New York: Sky Horse Publishing, 2005.
- Stott, John R.W. *Between Two Worlds. The Challenge of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982.
- Stott, John R.W. *The Message of Acts. Bible Speaks Today*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994.
- Sutter, Daniel and Stephen Winkler. "NCAA Scholarship Limits and Competitive Balances in College Football." *J. Sports and Economy* 3, no. 5. (2003).
- Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 2017.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007.
- Tchividjian, Tullian. *Unfashionable: Making a Difference in the World by Being Different*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2009.
- Thomas, Robert L. *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries*. Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1998.
- Tisdale, Lenora Tubbs. *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011.

Waller, Steven N., Landon T. Huffman, and Robin L. Hardin. "The Sport Chaplains Role in Holistic Care for Collegiate Athletes in the United States." *Practical Theology* 9 no. 3 (2016): 226-241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2016.1221642>.

Weir, Stuart. *What the Book Says About Sport*. Oxford: BRF, 2000.

Wilson, John. "Dilemmas of the Christian College Athlete." *Imprimis* 16, no. 5 (1986). <https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/dilemmas-of-the-christian-college-athlete/>.

Yancey, George A. *Beyond Black and White: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996.

Zuidema, Marvin. "Athletics from a Christian Perspective," *Christianity and Leisure: Issues in a Pluralistic Society*, Edited by Paul Heintzman, Glen Van Anandel, Thomas Visker. Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1994.