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IDENTITY CONGRUENCE AMONG CHRISTIAN COACHES: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Despite the tight coupling between Christianity and American sport, empirical research has found a level of tension between the Christian identity and the moral culture of athletic competition (Bennet et al., 2005; Nite et al., 2013; Stevenson, 1991). Existing research has focused on the identity of the Christian athlete; however, there is scant empirical work on coaches who also claim a Christian faith and identity. The purpose of this grounded theory study is to better understand identity congruence as a process through which Christian coaches make sense of, and find coherence among, their Christian and professional identities. Qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 44 head coaches at Christian colleges and universities were analyzed to generate a model of identity congruence that illustrates the unique tensions and alignments between participants' Christian and professional commitments. Implications for practice and future research are discussed in light of the proposed model.

Keywords: Christian, coach, identity, intercollegiate, sport

Introduction

There is a well-documented and historical relationship between Christians and American sport. In the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, sport's institutionalization and rising popularity made it an effective tool for evangelism and discipleship (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). Coaches have been integral to these efforts, as their position has been granted significant moral authority. To the extent that sport has been used as a vehicle for character development, coaches are often charged with facilitating that process. In this way, coaching has provided Christians with a position and platform for ministry. Despite the centrality of the coach, research on Christian identity in sport has tended to focus on athlete development (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Mosley et al., 2015; Ronkainen et al., 2020; Stevenson, 1991). Far fewer studies have examined the coaching role in light of the Christian identity. The current study seeks to address this gap by turning scholarly attention to the relationship between coaches' Christian and professional identities.

This study is primarily concerned with Christian coaches' *identity* rather than a set of practices and pedagogy that are informed by coaches' Christian commitments. Although there is certainly overlap between one's identities and practices, an identity can be understood as a broader set of beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions about what it means to inhabit a particular role (Glanzer, 2013). To examine the "Christian" and "coach" identity is to understand the moral and practical implications of each role, as well as areas of convergence and divergence between the two. The purpose of this study, then, is to better understand how Christian coaches find coherence between their Christian identity and their professional identity as a coach. This purpose is expressed in the research question:

How do Christian coaches seek congruence between their Christian and professional identities?

Given the relatively unexplored terrain of Christian identity in sports coaching, I employed a grounded theory method that aims at inductive theorizing from lived experience (Charmaz, 2014). Toward this end, I relied on in-depth interviews with 44 head intercollegiate athletic coaches at institutions affiliated with the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU).

Literature Review

Christian Identity and Sport

Christians have been actively engaged in all forms of sport and recreation. There is a level of alignment between the Protestant ethic, as conceptualized by Max Weber, and the American-democratic virtues that have historically been emphasized in competitive sport (Overman, 2011). The result has been a kind of synthesis between the Christian and athletic identity, such that sport has become an appropriate—if not preferred—way for Christians in sport to express their faith. These claims find empirical support in studies of Christian athletes and coaches which suggest that faith can mediate some of the negative psychological effects of intense competitive pressure (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Egli & Hoven, 2020; Mosley et al., 2015). For coaches, in particular, faith and spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, bible study) can be a form of professional capital that can enhance their practice and pedagogy (Egli et al., 2014).

One way the Christian identity can enliven coaches' professional practice is through servant leadership. First conceptualized by Robert Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership has become popular among Christians looking to pattern their

leadership roles after the life and teachings of Christ. Coaches who embody servant leadership conceptualize their role as a calling and understand holistic student-athlete development as a hallmark of their programs (Vinson & Parker, 2020). Other scholars have suggested that this kind of servant leadership can lead to more sustainable athletic and sport organizations by diffusing struggles for power and control (Peachey & Burton, 2017).

Despite the tight coupling between Christianity and sport, Christian engagement has also been fraught with conflict and contradictions. Hoffman (2010) draws attention to the tension between the competing moral cultures of competition and Christianity, noting that the former has always been clumsily rationalized into the latter. This contradiction between the Christian faith and competitive sport is apparent in empirical studies on elite athletes and coaches. In an early series of studies on Christian college athletes, Chris Stevenson (1991, 1997; Dunn & Stevenson, 1998) discovered a central tension between athletes' Christian identity and their identity as an athlete. In Stevenson's (1991) initial study, even the athletes most committed to their faith reported difficulty with navigating the dual role of Christian-athlete.

Research has shown that coaches are not exempt from these contradictions and often struggle to find coherence between their Christian and professional identities. In one case study of a coach of a large NCAA Division I baseball program, the coach referred to himself as a "living contradiction" as he described the tensions he felt between his faith and the competitive pressures of coaching. Ultimately, this coach felt forced to disengage from some aspects of competitive sport to honor his Christian faith commitments (Bennett et al., 2005). Even in an explicitly Christian context, coaches have reported similar identity conflicts. Hoven & Egli (2019) found that coaches at a Catholic high school feel forces of "drag" that make expressing their faith through coaching more difficult. One example of a dragging force was an organizational culture in the athletic department that valued performance over deep theological reflection on development through sport.

These forces of drag are also evident in a case study of one evangelical liberal arts college pseudonymously named Pacific Christian College (PCC). Schroeder and Scribner (2006) analyzed the organizational culture of PCC's athletic department and found several characteristics that hindered or aided coaches' efforts to integrate the institution's Christian mission into their work. One of the sources of tension came from a fundamental shift in PCC's institutional culture. A strengthening of PCC's academic identity and the weakening of its religious identity made it more difficult for coaches to articulate their relevance to the college's mission. Other scholars have also noted the

conflicts between intercollegiate athletics and the religious mission of Christian colleges (Nite et al., 2013).

Given the importance of the coaching role and the observed contradictions between competitive sport and the Christian life, there is an urgent need to study how these tensions play out in the identity of Christian coaches. Specifically, the process of identity congruence among Christian coaches is an understudied phenomenon and remains an important area of expanded scholarship.

Conceptualizing Identity

The English philosopher, Arthur Holmes (2007), identified two broad philosophical traditions that frame research on identity. The first tradition lies with empiricists, like John Locke, who perceived identity as grounded in experience and sense-data, and thus contingent on individual memory. This tradition continues in modern identity theories that emphasize the cognitive dimension of human development. Burke and Stets (2009), for instance, wrote that “the self originates in the mind of persons and is that which characterizes an individual’s consciousness of his or her own being or identity” (p. 9). The implication is that a person’s identity can be worked out in isolation, within their own mind.

The second tradition that Holmes (2007) identified acknowledges the relational aspect of identity development, namely, that identity can only be fully understood in the context of community. Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) described it this way:

I am someone’s son or daughter, someone else’s cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles. As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. (p. 220)

For MacIntyre, life is a “quest” to find a unity among the narratives that inform all of one’s identities. On this view, identity is inseparable from historical narratives that define the roles a person may inhabit, and a set of norms, standards, and practices associated with those roles. To illustrate, the legacies of two highly successful college basketball coaches, John Wooden and Bobby Knight, represent very different narratives about what a good coach looks like. Each coach embodies a tradition that identifies particular virtues and vices. In a similar way,

Christianity consists of its own competing narratives (i.e., denominations), though, like any sport, they are united by a core set of norms and standards.

This quest for unity among one's identities is intrinsic to the human experience. In his theory of human flourishing, sociologist Christian Smith (2015) identifies six basic human goods that make up the foundation of personhood. Among these basic goods is *identity coherence*, which Smith defines as "continuity and positive self-regard in one's sense of personal selfhood over time and in different contexts and situations" (p. 181). Another basic good, knowledge of reality, includes:

learning about the world and one's place and potential in it; increasing awareness and understanding of material and social realities; developing or embracing believed-in truths about what exists and how it works that provide order, continuity, and practical know-how to life experience. (p. 181)

These two goods alone capture MacIntyre's (2007) understanding of life as a narrative quest for unity among a person's identities. For Christian coaches, finding identity congruence must involve a negotiation between the moral implications of their faith and professional identity. The research question articulated above is primarily concerned with mapping out this process.

Methodology

My qualitative approach to this study is couched in an interpretivist paradigm that brings individual experiences, small-scale social interactions, and meaning-making processes to the fore of the research process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). An interpretive approach also implies that knowledge is co-created between the researcher and the participant. This double hermeneutic relies on each participant's interpretation of reality and the collective sense-making of the researcher (Giddens, 1976). Consistent with this paradigmatic assumption, I employed a grounded theory method that derives new theoretical insights directly from the data of participants' lived experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Given the scant empirical research devoted to coaching and Christian identity and the need for new frameworks in this area, a grounded theory approach was appropriate.

Participants and Sampling

For this study, I began with an initial purposive sample based on the following criteria:

1. *Institutional identity*. Participants had to be head coaches at the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) affiliate schools as these institutions were likely to explicitly foster faith development through faith integration in their curricular and co-curricular offerings.
2. *Athletic affiliation*. Participants' programs were required to compete in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Division III. Athletics programs that compete in this division must adhere to a philosophy that prioritizes the student-athlete experience and the university's educational mission. Since these programs did not offer athletics scholarships, they were furthest removed from dynamics that impinge upon the standard of amateurism.
3. *Professional experience*. Participants were required to have at least one year of coaching experience across one or more CCCCU institutions. This was an important delimiter, as it excluded coaches who have not spent a substantial amount of time coaching in a Christian context and have had less time to reflect on faith integration.

As a secondary recruitment strategy, I used a snowball sampling method, in which I asked participants to recommend others who might be good candidates for this study (Patton, 1990). This snowball sampling method proved necessary due to the somewhat insular nature of athletic departments and staff; I found there to be a level of suspicion and skepticism toward an outsider interested in research. Coaching is extremely relational, so the social and professional networks that coaches maintain provided an invaluable candidate pool.

Like other qualitative methods, it can be difficult to discern an appropriate number of participants. I relied on the concept of *saturation*, which refers to the point in data collection and analysis at which no new categories or themes emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Although I reached saturation earlier than expected (around 25 participants) I continued the interview process to ensure that emerging concepts would be fully developed and sufficiently nuanced. In total, there were 44 participants representing 21 unique CCCCU institutions spanning 12 states and covering the Northeast, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, and Western regions. In terms of institutional identity, there were 13 distinct denominations represented. Other participant demographic information can be found in Appendix A.

Data Collection and Analysis

To elicit a rich account of participants' experiences I used in-depth phenomenological interviews. When conducting phenomenological interviews, Seidman (2013) recommended a three-part interview that emphasizes: (a) the participants' life history as it pertains to the topic of interest; (b) participants' detailed reconstruction of their lived experiences relevant to the topic of interest; and (c) participants' reflection on what their history and experience with the topic of interest means. However, I elected to condense this three-part interview process into one interview, which other phenomenological researchers have endorsed (Smith et al., 2012). I chose this single-interview format out of concern for participants' time, which was extremely limited due to the nature of their jobs. I also considered the number of participants and the amount of data I could reasonably analyze as the sole researcher for this project.

After transcribing the interviews, I used Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software to fragment the data into codes and themes. I used two first-cycle coding techniques to draw out the thematic elements I was interested in exploring. A values coding technique enabled me to draw out the attitudes and beliefs that represent the participants' worldviews and moral assumptions (Saldana, 2016). I paid special attention to participants' thoughts, feelings, and actions that emerged while reflecting on their Christian and professional identities. After coding each transcript for value-laden language, I used a narrative coding process to understand the storied and structured nature of participants' experiences. Narrative coding identifies various story elements and how those elements contribute to goal attainment or purpose fulfillment, which makes it ideal for exploring concepts like testimony and quest (Polkinghorne, 1995). During this phase, I coded each transcript into narrative elements (e.g., setting, character, purpose) and linked them together through a process of "restorying" (Creswell, 2007, p. 56).

Once I created the initial codes, I moved to axial coding, a second-cycle coding process that identifies additional dimensions of developed categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). During axial coding, I also examined data that did not fit neatly into categories created by my initial coding processes, which helped me add complexity and nuance to my findings. As themes began to solidify, I wrote a composite summary that included all the interviews to capture the essence of participants' collective experiences (Hycner, 1985). This process, which Saldana (2016) called "codeweaving," helped me move from coding to theorizing.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is achieved through four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A strong combination of these criteria can maximize the study's contribution to scholarship and practice. To satisfy these criteria, I engaged well-known techniques including a positionality statement (see Appendix D) and data triangulation with secondary sources and extant theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to these measures, I engaged in a rigorous peer debriefing and member-checking process in which I reviewed my findings with two focus groups. The first focus group was comprised of colleagues who evaluated my coding process, categories, and resulting theory for analytic soundness and innovation. The second focus group was comprised of participants who assessed the "practical adequacy" of my findings (Kempster & Parry, 2014). This feedback was analogous to member checks and helped to ensure the resonance and usefulness of my grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Findings

The research question guiding this study was:

How do Christian coaches seek congruence between their Christian and professional identities?

From my analysis, I identified two major themes that defined participants' experience of this process. First, participants understood the relationship between their Christian and professional identity in terms of three core commitments: 1) professional performance; 2) transformational relationships; and 3) worship. The second major theme included the primary challenges that participants faced as they sought to uphold those core commitments. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss these major themes in detail and provide further nuance within each.

The Commitments of Christian Coaching

Professional performance.

One of the most common concerns among participants was a desire to achieve excellence in their programs. In fact, most participants' athletic department mission or vision statements appealed to the pursuit of various kinds of excellence (e.g., academic, athletic, social). Although maximizing performance

was intrinsic to their professional identities, participants explained that their faith also inspired them to achieve excellence in all areas of their life, including sport. Zach brought this insight to the fore:

I know a lot of people would overlook this... but I want to be a really good soccer coach... So how do you engage faith? I can't tell you that they get segregated too often and then, with my first answer, not give you an answer about being a good coach. Like, how do you engage faith in your program? We try to be a great coach, and we try and bring along coaches that value that as well.

For Lawson, achieving athletic excellence was a part of his Christian commitment to honor his employer: “[institution] took a chance on me, so... I want to show my gratitude in the way I honor their expectations.” Chad was one of several participants who grounded this conviction in scripture, reciting the apostle Paul’s encouragement to work “enthusiastically, as something done for the Lord and not for men” (Col. 3:23). This spirituality of work that prioritized dedication was common among participants.

One important nuance is the extent to which the participants in this study defined their performance in terms of the results produced by their programs (i.e., winning and losing). Participants’ attitudes toward the relationship between performance and results existed on a spectrum. For those on one end, winning was nearly tantamount to faithfulness. Chad represented the most extreme view that “if it’s Christian, it should be better.” Chad also described winning as central to his evangelical orientation:

Hey, if our school is a ministry, if this thing is supposed to be evangelical in nature, why are we doing anything that’s average? Because nobody wants to be, like, the average guy, everybody wants to be a winner, you know? So, if you go out there, and we’re 10-0 and we’re dominating, we’re playing like [rival institution] plays, people want to know what they’re doing. You know, if we are the [institution] that I took over here four years ago that’s going 2-8 and getting smacked every week [pause] Well, nobody’s interested in that.

Chad was not alone; an additional 13 participants shared similar concerns about the relationship between excellence and Christian commitment. Jarod was one who shared Chad’s concerns: “I mean, all the stuff that we talked about is really cool. But if you’re on a team, that’s 4-20. It’s not quite as cool.” Sarah’s comment was humorous but summarized the sentiment well:

“if [Jesus] would have been, like, a crap Carpenter, his ministry might have been less effective.” For these participants, Christian witness was, at least partially, contingent upon athletic and professional success.

On the other end of the spectrum, some participants were critical of appeals to success as a Christian imperative. One such participant, Randy, was vigilant in his awareness that winning, as a measurement of excellence, can distort faithful participation in sport. When the importance of winning surfaced during his interview, Randy recited Philippians 2:3-4 without hesitation: “Do *nothing* out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility value others above yourself not looking out for your own interest, but instead for the interest of others” (emphasis original). In light of this passage, Randy frequently asks himself and his coaching staff to reflect on the extent that winning has become their measure of success. Another participant, Dave, eschewed the word “excellence” altogether: “I hate the word excellence. I never say it and I never use it in our program... Perfection is what we talk about in our program, because, again, Matthew 5:48, be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.” Dave made it clear that “perfection” had nothing to do with success, but rather a sanctification process that happens through communion with God in Christ.

Transformational Relationships

In addition to being faithful to their professional responsibilities, participants in this study identified relational elements that linked their professional and Christian identities. Most often, participants mentioned the coach-athlete relationship and a holistic approach to athlete development that made their coaching position a “ministry.” Joey gave the fullest account of this sentiment:

Even the hardest practices are the easiest time of the day. It’s the other 22 hours of the day that complicate life... It’s what the kids are dealing with on a daily basis, that’s what I want to be engaged with. I’m meeting with a girl tonight after practice. Her dad died a year ago, as a freshman. And, you know, she’s got a lot of baggage, she’s got a dad wound. And so, she said, “Hey, can we meet?” [I said] “Sure, let’s go.” So that’s being a minister. I mean, I do more counseling than I would do—quote unquote— coaching but, in my opinion, that’s *real* coaching. (emphasis original)

Randy identified this pastoral work as “transformational leadership,” though many more referred to their position as a coach as a “tool for transformation” (Zach).

An important characteristic of transformational leadership and relationships was that it involved time-intensive, intentional, and one-on-one interactions that provided support, challenge, or discipline. Participants provided social and emotional support simply by being a caring and listening presence amid their athletes’ joys and struggles. These types of interactions were rarely structured and usually took place “off the clock” (Tony). Often, participants described simply “being a caring presence” (Sarah) in these interactions, but they were also prepared to offer insight and wisdom to athletes facing a moral dilemma or undesirable situation.

Second, participants issued challenges to their athletes that would help them grow into their potential. Louis provided ample challenges to his freshman and sophomores to be “servant leaders,” so that they would be prepared to fully assume that role when they became juniors and seniors. Lawson made a concerted effort to cultivate vulnerability on his team by challenging his athletes to “get out of their comfort zone” by sharing more of their own life stories with the team. Participants also described how they challenge their athletes to take more ownership of their faith. Denise explained this to prospective athletes during the recruiting process: “you’re not just going to come play volleyball, but you’re going to be challenged to walk out your faith and to grow in your faith.” Participants commonly used scripture or their own testimony to challenge their athletes to “think a little deeper” (Lisa) about how the message applied to their own lives.

Third, participants mentioned discipline and correction as an important part of their role. When faced with their athletes’ moral failures, participants sought to extend “grace” (Stacey) while also helping the athlete to learn from their mistakes. Lindsey offered a vivid illustration of this process:

There’s this really great picture I like... if we’re on the road together, and we’re going in one direction on this road, there are times [athletes] are going to go off the road. And grace is the place where we let them come back... but when you start having somebody go the opposite direction on the road, that’s when I think, as coaches, we can’t handle it anymore. So, you can go off the road, and we have grace to let you come back on, but when you start moving in the opposite direction of us, that’s when you can’t be a part of the team anymore.

Often, participants' efforts to help their athletes back onto "the road" were not only corrective but redemptive. That is, participants helped their athletes learn from their mistakes through dialogue and reflection.

Worship

The most important commitment that participants associated with Christian coaching was the biblical command—and spiritual need—to worship. In a broad sense, participants defined worship as the prioritization of God and their Christian identity. Larry expressed the common sentiment that worship meant "putting God first." Sarah elaborated, "Our big thing is... when you put first things first, secondary things don't become less important, they actually become more valuable." For the participants in this study, worship had a vertical dimension concerned with right relationship with God, as well as a horizontal dimension that "lives out" (Richard) one's worship through right relationship with others. As Lisa said, "Coaching from a Christian identity means loving God first and others second." Worship (vertical) and ethics (horizontal) were two sides of the same coin.

Participants sought a vertical relationship with God by infusing their professional practices with spiritual disciplines. Randy described how prayer was central to the life of his coaching staff: "If we're going to coach by the power of God, then we've got to be connected with God... through prayer." Although most participants employed prayer in some way, Randy and his coaching staff were exemplary:

We might take 30 minutes to an hour every day, and pray over our roster, pray over different issues within the team. We're praying as a staff and it's a mandatory deal. The way we think about prayers is through a simple acronym we call TACOS: thanksgiving, adoration, confession, others and self. That's kind of the five ways that we try to incorporate prayer into our program.

Most participants were wary of prayer becoming a rote exercise devoid of spiritual engagement. Julie explained, "I think people sometimes feel obligated to join. And the last thing I want to do is make somebody feel obligated to make myself feel better." However, when prayer was thoughtfully woven into participants' professional practices, it enlivened the more pragmatic parts of their role as a coach.

A few participants emphasized observing a sabbath as another way to foster their relationship to God. Brent's institution prohibited any official university activities on Sunday, which he saw as a benefit to his own spiritual

development: “I think, you know, especially the Sunday thing... we've kind of lost, as a society, what that day of rest means how important that is.” Similarly, Eleanor explained that she felt a conviction to take an additional weekday away from official team activities. She described a message she received from the Spirit: “What’s the most important thing about what you’re doing? And if it’s not me [Christ], keep [the athletes] on field.” For participants like Brent and Eleanor, sabbath rest is not only a restorative practice but a redemptive one. Sacrificing athletic training was an act of self-denial that reminded the participants and their athletes where their ultimate identity comes from.

Along the horizontal dimension of worship, participants saw worship as a way of coaching that honored God with their professional and athletic abilities. Sarah explained that in addition to church, “worship is how I coach on the [soccer] field.” Leann explained that “the [softball] field was a sanctuary to worship.” Macy also described the basketball court as a “sanctuary,” adding, “our worship is giving our excellence to the sport.” It was clear that participants’ commitment to their professional responsibilities and to a relational coaching style (discussed above) was the practical outworking of a worshipful life.

One additional way that participants’ worship manifested in practice was their desire to model Christlike virtues that defined a uniquely Christian character. Participants referred to a broad range of virtues that they saw as salient to both their Christian and professional identities. The most popular source of Christlike virtues among participants was the fruit of the Spirit enumerated in the apostle Paul’s epistle to the Galatians (Gal. 5:22-23). By far, the most common Christlike virtue that participants mentioned was love. Stacey’s statement represented the centrality of love for most participants: “We don’t care how fast they [athletes] go, as long as they know they’re loved when they leave.” From the selfless nature of love, participants also derived the virtue of humility, which they described as posture that eschews boasting in one’s own ability while intentionally encouraging others. Seth articulated an especially rich definition:

Humility is really placing a higher value on what you don’t know than what you do know... So I invite my guys to really, truly, embrace a posture of openness. Like, I can learn something from the coach, from my teammate, from the other team, from the referee, from wherever.

Participants also connected acts of service to the virtues of love and humility. This was often couched in the language of “servant leadership,” which required athletes to prioritize their own goals and desires under the ends of the team.

Challenges

Separate spheres.

Most of the participants in this study described growing up in a “Christian home,” (Richard) though this experience was not monolithic. Some described being members of an “intentional church community” (Holly) and heavily involved in its youth ministry. Others talked about their childhood faith as a rote cultural practice that seemed “fake” (Robin) and “something we did out of obligation” (Wade). Regardless of their early experiences with Christianity, few coaches recalled faith and sport as being *integrated* during their time as athletes. Dave chuckled a bit as he recounted his childhood: “We tried to ditch out of church as much as possible with sports. So, sports were a part of our life, Church was a part of our life, but they also kind of contradicted or conflicted.” Louis recalled, “Growing up, through high school, faith and sport were separate. There really wasn’t an understanding that, if I would call myself a follower of Christ, then don’t be a jackass at the game, right? They were just separate.” Noah’s experience was similar:

I think there are places in the country where, just by virtue of the cultural Christianity in that region, faith and [sport] show up and they blend together. That was not my experience. Baseball time was baseball time, football time was football time. Church time was church time.

In all these examples, faith and sport existed on parallel tracks. As Zach summarized, “it was more *association with* than it was *message delivered*” (emphasis original).

It was not surprising, then, when most coaches admitted that they still feel a level of tension between their Christian identity and their identity as a coach. Dayton summarized this conflict well:

I think there can be a chasm between the two at times. If we’re in season, this is gonna be all about soccer, like, my identity is “soccer coach,” versus offseason, it’s really easy to be like, “Hey, I’m a soccer coach, but I’m coaching for the guys and making sure they become the men God has planned.” If I’m being honest with you, I think it’s easy for me to have that separation of my identities. Sometimes it’s big, sometimes it’s small.

Like Dayton, some participants described this conflict as a matter of prioritizing their Christian and professional identities appropriately. Laban explained, “It’s a struggle to find that balance. And I don’t know that in-season you really can [long pause] I don’t know. I never have. Maybe that’s where I’m missing the boat.” Other participants saw a more fundamental contradiction between their faith and the competitive spirit:

There is conflict that exists there [between faith and sport]. Because there are moments where the things that you need from your team pushes on those boundaries of, I wouldn’t say losing your faith-based component, but not framing faith in the way I think faith is intended to be framed.

Often, the separation of faith and sport during participants’ time as athletes contributed to tensions between their Christian and professional identities throughout their coaching career.

When coaches tried to pinpoint the source of this conflict, they often described the competing moral cultures of Christianity and sport. Seth framed this challenge with a series of questions: “Is the goal, efficiency and winning? Or is the goal connection? Is the goal shared experience? Is the goal the process of growing and becoming?” Although participants noted that these goals overlapped, some were aware of the tensions between the fast pace of organizational leadership and the slower contemplation and theological reflection. Laban explained how the messages he has been told growing up created this tension:

As athletes, as competitors... and as a group of coaches, all we’ve ever learned our whole lives is don’t be content. Don’t be happy with where you are. Be better. And here’s the Bible saying, be content with where you are. And we’re like, “Nah, I’m not doing that.” [laughs]

This kind of messaging was common in participants’ own experiences as athletes and continued into their coaching careers. Nash explained how the competing cultures of faith and sport manifested in his professional role as a coach:

It’s a ministry, but it’s also a business. And if you don’t do the business well, you lose the opportunity; I still have to get students in, I still have to recruit, you know, hopefully, win a few games here and there so they’ll let me keep hanging around.

Nash was one of several participants who had stories about how their commitment to faithfulness made it more difficult to move up the professional ranks in their coaching career.

Finally, despite their desire to embody Christlike virtues, many participants found those virtues difficult to reconcile with the framework of competitive sports. Renee explained, “I think the Mercy aspect is hard. I don’t know, the competitor in me is like, “show no mercy [laughs].” Through her laughter, Renee was articulating a common struggle to prioritize virtues that seemed to temper the competitive spirit. Laban identified contentment as a manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit, but was hesitant to encourage his athletes to be content:

I don’t like the concept of teaching my [athletes] to be content where they are. And how do you on one hand go, “Guys, hey, be content where you are.” And on the other hand, go, “Come on, you’re better than that!” The athletes look at me like, “Which one coach? What do you want me to do?” [Sighs] Not gonna lie, it’s a struggle.

When asked about how the fruit of the Spirit related to athlete development, Noah admitted, “Yeah, I probably haven’t thought about that enough, frankly... how does love fit? How does peace fit? How does gentleness fit? I don’t have a great answer for that.” In addition to this list, participants identified “kindness” (William), “patience” (mentioned by five participants), and gentleness (mentioned by 17 participants) as particular fruits that were difficult to graft into their team. Ultimately, participants valued these Christlike virtues but sometimes struggled to fit them into their pedagogy.

Ordering Identities

As mentioned above, participants understood that their Christian identity needed to be prioritized above all others, especially their professional identity. However, not many participants acknowledged that all of their other identities needed to be ordered as well. Those that did acknowledge their other identities pointed out that the nature of coaching made it hard to bring order and balance among them. Sarah explained:

I don’t really model that balance very well, currently... I hate when people come to me, and, I’ll say something like, “I have to work, I have to recruit, I have to do this.” And they’re like, “I understand, work comes first.” And I think to myself, is that what I’m portraying? And I think it’s true, but I hate that...

William agreed that “balancing priorities” like “loving my wife,” “spending time with the Lord,” or even “maintaining my own well-being” was one of the biggest challenges of being a Christian coach. Lindsey added, “Sometimes, we’re just trying to make people understand how hard we’re working... but nobody else can take responsibility for making sure that our lives are balanced and healthy.” These participants acknowledged that even the desire to serve others through their professional role could become disordered if they were done for the wrong reasons or hindered relationships outside of their professional lives.

The result of this disordering was a level of psychological and spiritual fatigue. Torn between their compassion for their athletes and their own sanity, participants described this constant pressure as an emotional weight that impacted other areas of their lives:

They look at the coach and make him an idol and...it can be emotionally exhausting. Right? Like, I’ve got kids that don’t understand the boundary of like It’s six o’clock at night. I’m trying to be home with my family, I don’t need you to text me about random stuff... I love them to death, but we’re not their savior.

A few other participants noticed a temptation to assume a “martyr role” (Lindsey, Sarah) or develop a “savior complex” (Stacey, Isaac) that provided an inflated sense of self-importance. One observation among participants was an increase in mental health concerns that complicated the coach-athlete relationship. Denise represented a group of participants who shared a sense of inadequacy in the face of these challenges: “I’ve never had more players come in and say they’re depressed... I’m not a psychologist and I do not have the training to, you know, handle it.” Many participants identified “psychologist” among several different hats they have to wear as a coach: “Sometimes I feel like you need six degrees to be a coach. You need a business degree, a psychology degree, you know, there are so many different roles” (Julie). Julie was one of several participants who felt a pressure to meet athletes’ every need.

Professional and Spiritual Support

Given their felt psychological and spiritual fatigue, participants identified strong support systems as central to their ability to find congruence between their Christian and professional identities. Some participants expressed gratitude for their fellow coaches or their athletic directors as friends and mentors who could help them navigate their Christian and professional identities. However, not all participants felt they had this kind of support from their colleagues. For these participants, institutional resources to develop as *Christian* coaches were rare.

Jarod explained, “I think even at [institution] it’s assumed that at all your students are Christian anyway, or that it’s an easier thing, or you’re dealing with a special population. But no, and no, and no, and no.” Tanya observed a similar attitude at her institution, adding:

I think at times [faith integration] is left to the coaching staff to figure out the degree that they want it... It is encouraged and I would even say, in the past 14-15 months, there’s probably even been an expectation of it. But is there a structure given? No.

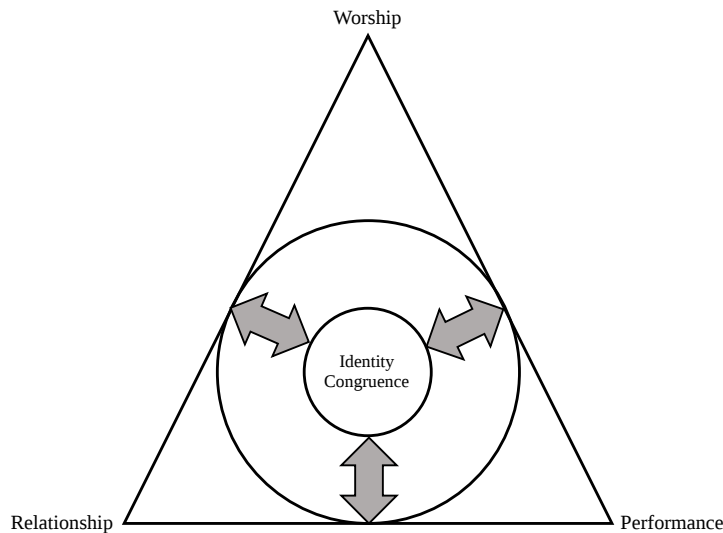
Leann made a similar comment: “I don’t think there’s been a super direct, like, ‘here’s the training,’ but the influence and the atmosphere hold you to that.” Despite expectations from their institution, these participants were left with little guidance on navigating their Christian and professional identities.

Discussion

The findings from this study contribute to several threads in the scholarly literature on athletic coaching and Christian identity. First, these findings are consistent with existing research that finds a felt tension or conflict between coaches’ professional and Christian identities (Bennett et al., 2005; Hoven & Egli, 2019). The experiences shared by participants in this study suggest that these tensions stem from a separate spheres approach to their own development as athletes. Participants also described a set of competing moral cultures to faith and sport that perpetuate these tensions and identity conflicts. Scholars have described these “competing logics” as constitutive intercollegiate athletics and the relationship between faith and sport (Macaulay et al., 2022; Nite et al., 2013). One immediate implication that can be drawn from these observations is that coaching from a Christian identity is not a simple synthesis between faith and sport. Rather, there is an ongoing negotiation between the Christian and professional identities inhabited by Christian coaches.

This study also extends existing scholarly conversations by adding some needed complexity to the understanding of the relationship between coaches’ Christian and professional identities. Primarily, the findings suggest that identity congruence among Christian coaches can be understood as the unity among their commitments to their profession, their relationships, and their worship. This unity is complicated, however, by the competing logics that push coaches away or pull them nearer, to congruence and unity.

Figure 1. Identity congruence model for Christian coaches.



As depicted in Figure 1, the resulting model portrays identity congruence, not as a universal linear path or formulaic synthesis, but a non-linear “wandering” to approximate a balance between coaches’ commitments to performance, relationships, and worship. The word *approximate* is appropriate here because there was a sense among participants that a perfect unity or balance among their identities and commitments will always be somewhat elusive and that the tensions between the competing logics are never neatly resolved.

It is important to note that not all coaches consciously sought congruence among their identities and commitments. Although many coaches were aware of tensions produced by their various identities and sought to hold those tensions in God-honoring ways, some coaches unapologetically described the lack of balance and order in their lives. In these cases, the professional identity, with its commitment to performance, superseded the others. The role of the “martyr” described by Lindsey and Sarah helped some coaches rationalize their overcommitment to their professional identity. However, even in these cases, coaches aware of a lack of congruence, even if they did not consciously seek it out.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study, and the proposed model above, lend themselves to several implications for coaching practice in Christian settings. First, the tensions between coaches’ Christian and professional identities should

spark conversations and efforts toward educational and professional development that better prepares coaches to thoughtfully bring their Christian identity to their coaching practice and pedagogy. An obvious starting point would be curricular changes in coaching education and development programs that reflect the unique challenges of being a Christian coach. Specifically, coaching education programs at Christian colleges and universities may find this research helpful as they prepare their students for coaching in Christian contexts.

Second, the findings from this study point to a need for more professional support for Christian coaches, especially those in explicitly Christian educational settings (e.g., private Christian schools and universities). Athletic administrators and directors must acknowledge their important role in coaches' professional and spiritual development. Intentional programming that brings athletic administrators and coaches together holds promise as a facilitator of identity congruence. In addition to administrative support, athletic departments, and other governing bodies, would be wise to increase the presence of chaplains as a source of spiritual and professional support for coaches. Empirical research shows that team chaplains can help mediate the tensions produced by Christian spirituality and competitive sport (Dzikus et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2020; Waller et al. 2008).

Limitations and Future Research

First, although this research has implications for faith-sport integration outside of Christian education, exploring those possibilities was beyond the scope of this project. One way this area of inquiry could be expanded is by exploring the experience of athletic coaches at public and secular private universities. One such study has been conducted as a case study of one head coach of a major NCAA Division I athletic program (Schroeder & Scribner, 2006) with some fascinating insights. Another direction for future research would be through comparative analyses of coaches in Christian and non-Christian contexts. My own research suggests that there could be some important differences (Strehlow, 2023).

Second, this study maintained an exclusive focus on the evangelical context. Future research would benefit greatly from engaging the work of more Catholic perspectives who have been entrenched in the relationship between faith and sport for some time now (Grisez et al., 2008; Hoven, 2016; Power, 2015). Catholic ministries have historically organized their youth sport programs around service and play as opposed to a more evangelical tendency to prioritize evangelism and work. There is evidence to suggest that this Catholic model is a viable way to counter the growing professionalism and privatization of youth sport and to recenter fun and play (Miller, 2022). Bringing the emphasis on “play” in Catholic theologies of sport to bear on the evangelical context could help draw

out tensions between a spirituality of work and incarnational phenomenology of play.

Finally, although my data was demographically representative, my analysis could have benefited from more voices of underrepresented groups in college coaching, namely women and coaches of color. Some participants' own experiences of discrimination in their departments were consistent with literature that shows women are drastically underrepresented in coaching and athletic leadership position at all levels. It was clear from participants' responses that theological reflections on FSI could benefit, and should welcome, critical sociologies that explore the underrepresentation of these group in athletic leadership positions.

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APPENDIX A

Summary of Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Sport	Experience (yrs)
Adam	Male	White	Basketball	4
Arthur	Male	White	Track & Field	8
Billy	Male	White	Track & Field	22
Brent	Male	White	Soccer	6
Chad	Male	White	Football	5
Chandler	Male	White	Golf	10
Cliff	Male	White	Soccer	11
Connor	Male	White	Soccer	1
Dave	Male	White	Track and Field	26
Dayton	Male	White	Soccer	5
Denise	Female	White	Volleyball	7
Eleanor	Female	White	Lacrosse	6
Grant	Male	White	Baseball	8
Holly	Female	White	Volleyball	5
Isaac	Male	White	Swimming	11
Jake	Male	Black	Soccer	8
Jarod	Male	White	Basketball	2
Jeff	Male	Asian	Basketball	2
Joey	Male	White	Track and Field	17
Julie	Female	White	Softball	5
Kendall	Female	White	Soccer	12
Laban	Male	White	Baseball	3
Larry	Male	White	Football	4
Lawson	Male	White	Baseball	17
Leann	Female	White	Basketball	5
Lindsey	Female	White	Volleyball	11
Lisa	Female	White	Basketball	2
Louis	Male	White	Scott Frey	22
Mack	Male	White	Tennis	3
Macy	Female	White	Basketball	10
Nash	Male	White	Basketball	12
Noah	Male	White	Football	3
Randy	Male	White	Football	9
Renee	Female	White	Lacrosse	4
Richard	Male	White	Golf	20
Robin	Female	White	Softball	7
Seth	Male	White	Soccer	11
Sarah	Female	White	Soccer	1

Stacey	Female	White	Rowing	4
Tanya	Female	White	Basketball	3
Tony	Male	White	Soccer	19
Wade	Male	White	Soccer	20
William	Male	Black	Soccer	1
Zach	Female	White	Soccer	10

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Warm-Up

- I would like to begin with an exercise in storytelling. Imagine that you are writing a book about your life. Can you give me a summary of this book with an emphasis on:
 - Your development as a Christian
 - The role that sports and coaching played in that development.I am interested in the most significant experiences of your story, but you may be as detailed as you like. Please feel free to take some time to write or organize your thoughts before you begin.

Early Experiences in Sport

- What sports did you grow up playing?
 - Why did you choose these sports?
 - How do you recall faith being integrated into your experiences in these sports?
 - What role did your parents/guardians play in your faith and athletic development?
 - The church?
 - Coaches?
 - Peers?
 - Others?
- When did you choose to commit to the sport you currently coach?
 - What contributed to this decision?
 - Can you elaborate on how your faith developed alongside your involvement with this sport?
- What was the highest competitive level (high school, college, professional, etc.) that you played in your current sport?
 - What was your experience like as a Christian at that level?
 - How did your coach(es) encourage or contribute to your faith development?
 - Teammates?

Early Career

- What drew you to coaching as a career?
 - What role did your faith play in this decision?
- What kind of formal training did you have for this career (e.g., certifications, education, etc.)?

- Did the curriculum for these programs encourage you to reflect on your Christian faith? If so, how?
- What kind of informal training did you have for this career (e.g., mentorship, independent reading, etc.)?
 - What resources were helpful for thinking about faith and coaching?
- How important was it to you to coach at a Christian institution?

Mid-Career

- What drew you to your current institution?
- How does the Christian mission of the institution influence your coaching?
- Can you outline your coaching philosophy for me?
 - How has this changed over time?

Looking Back and Looking Ahead

- How would you describe your relationship with God?
 - Where have you felt alignments between this relationship and athletics?
 - Where have you felt tensions?
- What do you find most rewarding about coaching?
- What do you find most challenging about coaching?
 - How do you overcome that challenge?
- Reflecting on our conversation so far, what does it mean to be a Christian coach?
- How do you find purpose in your work?
- Do you think of your career as a calling?
 - If so, what does that mean to you?
- If you had to summarize how your faith and coaching have changed over your life, what major stages or phases would you identify?
- We began this interview with your story, but there are still chapters to be written. When you think about the final chapters of your story as a Christian coach, what do you hope they will entail?

APPENDIX C

Positionality Statement

I once heard James Davison Hunter describe research as little more than thinly veiled autobiography. My own development as a researcher has led me to believe this is true, at least in part. My interest in college athletics flows from my prior experiences as a highly competitive athlete, a high school coach, and a student-athlete services professional at two high-profile NCAA Division I athletic departments. In fact, I left my role in Baylor's athletics department to enroll in its PhD program in higher education precisely because I felt a disconnect between my work and the purposes of the university (as I perceived them at the time). Throughout my time in this program, I never doubted my commitment to better understand the "peculiar institution" of athletics and its role in the university.

What took me by surprise was a burgeoning interest in moral formation and faith integration in higher education. My own faith background and tradition emphasized a personal belief in, and relationship with, Christ. Within this framework, Christian orthopraxy was reduced to an individual moral responsibility to avoid specific sins. However, as I studied the Christian moral and intellectual tradition, I began to understand Christian faithfulness in terms of a larger narrative of human teleological ends and virtues. This infused my own faith with a moral imagination that was absent in the faith of my childhood and early adult years. I started to see my life anew—as a story embedded in the story of Christ's redemptive work in the world. This ignited my interest in the implications of various moral traditions for college student development. Intercollegiate athletics, as a significant aspect of student life, and part of my own narrative, was an obvious focus for my own research.

One of the challenges with this research was a disconnect between my newfound Christian ethic and my prior experiences in the church and in sport. I suppose I was (or am) somewhat resentful that the Christian subculture I grew up in seemed more concerned with navigating cultural movements than catechizing its youth into the Christian narrative. For instance, I recall hearing more messages about avoiding sex, drugs, and swearing than the broader implications of Creation, Fall, and Redemption as themes that run through my entire life. As a result, I never thought about my faith as something that should, or could, inform the other areas of my life, including athletics.

Although my coaches always emphasized "character" as an important part of being an athlete, this concept was not necessarily tied to a Christian faith. Two examples come to mind. I spent several seasons of youth baseball being coached by my father, and I remember having many meaningful conversations with him before and after practices and games. We talked a lot about how sports can teach

responsibility and cultivate the qualities of a good man. Later, as a tennis athlete at a Christian college, I did have a coach who drew more explicitly from his faith. He led us in prayer, read scriptures, and modeled his vision of good character; and yet, the purpose of these messages seemed to be more related to athletic performance than a faithfulness for its own sake.

Both my father and my college coach were Godly men who had a great impact on me. In both examples, however, Christ seemed to be an assumed feature in the development of a set of secularized Protestant virtues. At most, faith was merely added on top of our otherwise ordinary practices but did not transform those practices. Due to these experiences, I find a lot of resonance in critical evaluations of muscular Christianity and evangelical involvement in American sport. That is, it is easier for me to see the ways in which Christians have failed to redeem sport cultures than it is for me to see how they have succeeded. I first noticed this tendency while writing the introduction and literature review of this dissertation. I am grateful to scholars who have helped me be more charitable in my own evaluations. Still, my tendency to view Christian involvement in sport with a critical eye is one that I will need to check throughout data collection and analysis. It is a bias that I will continually bring to the fore in my memos and other notes about participants and their responses.

While reflecting on my experiences as a Christian athlete, I also encountered a memory in which my identity as a male was especially salient. I remember, as a collegiate tennis athlete, a conversation I had with a female athlete on the women's tennis team. I was talking about a male tennis athlete from another team who I regarded to be one of the most talented in our conference, and I was shocked to learn that the female athlete with whom I was speaking was not familiar with this person. It wasn't until she asked me to name any of the most talented female athletes in our conference that I realized the double standard that was at play. I think my expectation that a female would, naturally, be familiar with a male athlete reflected a cultural assumption that men's sports bear more importance and prestige than women's sports.

Although I have worked to better understand the experiences of women, I recognize that there are still times when my own experiences as a man inevitably shape the way I interpret data. This was evident in a recent study I did on coaching and character development at NCAA Division III and NAIA institutions. As I was analyzing participants' responses, I realized that male and female coaches had very different cultural scripts, which made it difficult to talk about coaching independently from one's male or female identity. Prior to collecting these data, I was unaware of how stark this contrast would be, and it has sharpened my sensitivity to gender differences in the coaching process. This particular bias becomes even more complex when one considers societies increasingly fluid understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity and its

implications for sport. As the Christian concern for diversity and inclusion collides with normative claims regarding human sexuality and gender identity, the notion of gendered experience and development in sport becomes precarious. As I go through this process, I want to honor participants' theologically informed convictions regarding gender roles, while also exploring the possibility of fully human development for those who lie outside prescribed gender norms.

In addition to my experiences as a Christian athlete, and a male athlete in particular, I also have several overlapping cultural identities that undoubtedly shape the way I think about faith, character, and sport. Race is certainly one consideration, as White and Black Protestants, for instance, have historically differed on social issues that stem from White European's enslavement of Africans and the subsequent racial tensions that emerged from this reality. This may result in racial differences on important social, political, and theological issues present in American sports culture. There are also cultural differences more tied to ethnicity than race. For instance, those from certain Asian or Pacific Islander cultures might prioritize more collectivist values and virtues than the liberal individualism of Western American culture more broadly. Throughout my data analysis, I will do my best to keep my cultural identities at the fore of my memo reflections. I also want to be sure to return to literature that highlights the experiences of Christian athletes and coaches from racially marginalized communities to account for how faith-integration might manifest cross-culturally.