

**Identity Formation in Christian Professional Footballers:  
Life Course, Faith, Career**

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A thesis submitted to The University of Gloucestershire in accordance with the requirements of  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Sport and Exercise.

**April 2022**

### **Author's Declaration**

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed: DG Daniels      Date: 30th April 2022

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the influence of the Christian faith on the identity formation of professional footballers. It proposes the theocentric (God-centred) foundation that personal identity is received as a gift from God rather than gained by athletic achievements. The thesis considers how this theological perspective aids respondents' capacity to deal with the institutional pressures of an all-consuming career, which requires players to adhere to a restrictive, performance-based athletic identity. The research design is based on practical theology, which facilitates the disciplinary combination of theology and sociology. The study adopts a qualitative methodology and presents empirical findings from semi-structured interviews with 14 UK-based Christian professional footballers.

The study's primary results are that a theocentric, received approach to identity formation provided Christian elite athletes with unprecedented existential fulfilment and security. These experiences led to an authentic integration of personal beliefs at work, resulting in behavioural and verbal witness to Christianity. The evidence also indicated that this process was encouraged by the support of other Christians through Bible studies undertaken in the context of peer groups and local churches. The main conclusion of the research is the benefit of appropriating a theocentric personal identity that is received from God rather than achieved by athletic performance. Becoming a Christian may alleviate the restrictive institutional and cultural demands of the professional game and engender the development of a more holistic personal identity which contributes to the wellbeing of professional footballers.

## Publications

### Academic Journals

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*Proc,*

*You always put the cause first. Thanks for being a team-mate, role model and, above all, friend.*

## **Introduction**

### **Introduction**

The introductory chapter begins by outlining what the study seeks to achieve. The research context describes the strategies of the inaugural North American Christian sports ministries of the 1950s and 1960s regarding the pastoral support for Christian elite athletes. When sports ministry reached the UK in the 1970s, its pioneers sought to assimilate the inherited North American paradigm into a British context. The attempted integration raises the research problem of how to provide optimal pastoral support for Christian elite athletes. This problem exposes a research gap, namely the potential to explore and clarify the theological foundations of sports ministry provisions for the pastoral support of Christian elite athletes. Further, the search for theological clarity can be complemented by qualitative evidence to understand the athletes' experiences. The research context, problem and gap lead to an outline of the research aims, objectives, and questions, focusing on a theological and qualitative exploration of identity formation in Christian elite athletes.

The significance of the study is that it is an inaugural theological study of identity formation in Christian elite athletes and may contribute to the broader academic and practical discussion regarding the wellbeing of all elite athletes. This input develops through theoretical considerations regarding identity formation in the disciplines of theology, psychology and sociology, followed by a proposal for empirical inquiry into the lives of Christian elite athletes. Meanwhile, the pioneering nature of the thesis leads to a discussion of its corresponding limitations. The study's restrictions

include the limited amount of previous theological and empirical inquiry into the lives of Christian elite athletes, which leaves little scope for reviewing established literature. Furthermore, the theoretical combination of theology with qualitative investigation entails significant methodological challenges. Finally, the chapter presents an overall layout of the study to map out how the thesis deals with the objectives, aspirations and challenges outlined above.

### **The research context: Christianity and sports ministry strategy from 1945**

Christianity is a major religion stemming from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus Christ. Its largest groups are the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant churches. The current thesis is situated within the Protestant tradition, which follows the tenets of the Protestant Reformation, a significant movement within Western Christianity that began in the 16th century, against what its followers perceived to be errors within the medieval Catholic Church. Protestantism emphasises the Bible as being the primary authority for Christian doctrine. It holds that salvation comes by divine grace as unmerited favour and emphasises justification by faith alone rather than by faith with good works.

The immediate context of the thesis is framed by Ladd and Mathisen (1999) in their monograph charting the historical relationship between Christianity and sport from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. They describe the inaugural Protestant North American sports ministry movement of the 1950s and 1960s when two of today's most prominent and globally influential sports ministries were founded. A vital aspect of the initial strategies of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 1954 and Athletes in Action in 1966 was to encourage Christian elite athletes' engagement in public evangelism.

Meanwhile, there was also an emerging focus on Christian elite athletes' personal and professional welfare, for example, in the National Football League (Fisher, 1969) and Tennis (Klaus & Yorkey, 2012).

Sports ministry reached the UK in the 1970s through North American influences and sought to assimilate the evangelistic and welfare-based strategies into a British context. Parker and Weir (2012) describe these initial developments when the Christian Sportsmen's Outreach was launched in the UK in 1975, followed by conferences to identify Christians involved in sport at Bisham Abbey in 1976 and Crystal Palace in 1977. By 1980 this group had been formalised and renamed Christians in Sport (CIS), and the next three decades saw the emergence of 35 new Christian sports ministries. The largest of these was Sports Chaplaincy Offering Resources and Encouragement (SCORE). Parker and Weir (2012) describe how, after gaining initial traction under the auspices of CIS, SCORE was established as an independent organisation with the support of the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 1991. The purpose of SCORE was to focus on developing sports chaplaincy, particularly in professional football. SCORE was renamed Sports Chaplaincy UK (SCUK) in 2011 and currently provides chaplaincy to the English Premier League, the English Football League, the Professional Footballers' Association and the Scottish Football Association.

**The research problem: how to provide optimal pastoral support for Christian elite athletes**

The research problem that emerges from this historical background is how, in a British context, to provide optimal pastoral support for Christian elite athletes. This research problem exposes a research gap. The emergence of a global sports ministry movement has led to a growth in academic

research concerning the broader impact of spirituality in sport (Parker & Watson, 2011). It has also led to studies concerned with the relationship between sport and Christianity (Ellis, 2014; Parker & Watson, 2012, 2014a, 2015; Parker et al., 2016). In turn, there has been little academic reflection regarding the theological foundations underpinning the practical provision of pastoral support for Christian elite athletes. There has also been minimal empirical inquiry into the experiences of these athletes. The current thesis seeks to act as an initial corrective to this research gap by undertaking a theological and qualitative exploration of the impact of the Christian faith upon the lives of UK-based Christian elite athletes.

### **The research question: exploring identity formation in Christian professional footballers**

In the light of the research context, problem and gap, this thesis explores the development of Christian elite athletes' identity when faith was juxtaposed with a professional football career. The study aims to build upon and extend existing theoretical work in the fields of psychology and sociology concerning identity formation and career transition in English professional football by exploring the complex interplay between elite sporting status and theological, faith-based life choices. There are three subsequent objectives, all of which are concerned with specific aspects of the impact of the Christian faith on the identity formation of professional footballers. The first considers the effect of faith in workplace environments at key career transition points, including injury, transfer, retirement, and post-retirement. Secondly, attention turns to the impact of Christianity on the formation of identity at home, which includes relationships with family, friends, and wider social networks. The third and final objective explores the impact of the Christian faith on respondents' willingness to communicate their beliefs with colleagues who were not Christians.

The research question summarises these objectives: how is identity formed in Christian professional footballers during their careers? To this end, the study presents findings from a series of semi-structured interviews with 14 former professional footballers, each of whom became Christians during their careers. Having addressed what this thesis seeks to achieve, it is also important to consider how the study might prove valuable to further academic research and practical developments in providing pastoral support for Christian elite athletes.

### **The research significance: pioneering theological and qualitative inquiry**

The primary significance of the current study is that it can make a theological and empirical contribution to the growing academic and practical interest in the welfare of elite athletes. Literature discussing the vulnerability of elite athletes has emerged in disciplines of psychology and sociology, as well as in practitioner accounts and small-scale academic studies undertaken by sports chaplains. Most of this literature has considered the culture of professional football, which is the location of this thesis. Professional football is a prestigious yet precarious career, and many try, but few succeed in attaining professional status. Moreover, for the small number who fulfil this ambition, it is a career that inevitably contains significant highs, lows, injuries and heartbreak amidst the pursuit of cultural and financial reward (Parker, 2001; McGillivray et al., 2005; Roderick, 2006a). The reality is that, for all its aspirational attractions, very few have, or will, experience first-hand the daily, demanding, and painful realities of life as a professional footballer.

Several studies have sought to understand the harsh realities of employment within the game. Increasing attention has been paid to how the institutional, cultural values of professional football



can adversely affect the identity formation of its employees (see, for example, Gearing, 1999; Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2014; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014; Hickey, 2015; Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Manley & Parker, 2017; McCready 2019; Roderick & Allen-Collinson, 2020). The main thrust of this literature is that "professional football is such an all-consuming and physically demanding career that it is inevitable that self-identity is, essentially, determined by it" (Roderick, 2006a, p. 17). In essence, the prevailing institutional norms of professional football mean that career achievements define player identities.

The body of psychological and sociological literature outlined above shows how football is a vocation that can limit the holistic development of personal identity, preventing the emergence of a healthy sense of self. Sports ministries are increasingly aware of the challenges facing those employed in the professional game. SCUK has sought to provide effective pastoral support for those engaged within UK professional football clubs, regardless of religious beliefs. At the time of writing, SCUK provides chaplaincy services to 70 of the 92 English Premier League and English Football League clubs. Fourteen are attached to Premier League clubs and 56 to English Football League clubs (M. Baker, National Director for England & Pastoral Support Director in English Football, personal communication, February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022)

The challenges facing British professional footballers have been identified in several practitioner accounts by sports chaplains (see, for example, Heskins & Baker, 2006; Parker et al., 2016). Practising sports chaplains have also produced small-scale academic studies exploring the roles played by chaplains in professional football clubs (for example, see Threlfall-Holmes & Newitt, 2011; Parker & Watson, 2015; Parker et al., 2016; Roe & Parker, 2016; Weir, 2016; Whitmore,

2018; Oliver & Parker, 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Fleming & Parker, 2022). These studies reinforce the demanding nature of professional football and show how chaplains have handled a wide range of issues, including physical injury, mental health concerns, career termination, addiction and bereavement (see, for example, Heskins & Baker, 2006; Gamble et al., 2013; Gamble et al., 2016; King et al., 2020).

Sports chaplaincy literature shows how chaplains have served alongside football club staff to alleviate the normative cultural expectations of professional football that career achievements define player identity. Meanwhile, the current thesis takes a narrower focus and seeks to initiate a study that deals specifically with the experience of professional footballers who have adopted the Christian faith. The research is a theological and qualitative exploration of identity formation within this faith-based context. The thesis introduces the foundational theological perspective that personal identity is not attained by human achievement; instead, identity is to be received from God through Christ; it is a gift from God (Horton, 2006; Null, 2008a, 2016). The study then uses this theological framework to explore the impact of the Christian faith on respondents' identity formation during their professional playing careers. The primary hope of this study is that it encourages further and extensive academic inquiry regarding the pastoral support of Christian elite athletes across a wide range of sports, age, gender, social class and ethnicity. I also propose that sports chaplains explore how to apply the theological perspective that identity is received and not achieved to the pastoral support of all elite athletes, regardless of religious beliefs.

## **The limitations of the research**

As mentioned above, there has been very little theological and empirical inquiry into the lives of Christian elite athletes. This deficiency creates challenges for the current thesis. The problems include a limited amount of theoretical literature reflecting on the theological foundations of existing sports ministry practices. This challenge is compounded by the absence of qualitative findings regarding the experiences of Christian elite athletes. Furthermore, significant methodological problems arise in seeking to combine the discipline of theology with qualitative research. Nevertheless, I consider the study worthwhile despite these issues if it encourages further and more effective analysis. This introductory chapter closes with an overview of the study's theological framework and empirical findings, which unfold over ten chapters.

## **Thesis overview and structure**

Chapter One begins by reviewing how inaugural North American sports ministry approaches to supporting Christian elite athletes were initially adapted in a British context. The chapter then considers how developing a clear theological foundation might provide a rigorous and effective underpinning for practical sports ministry support. A theocentric (God-centred) foundation is proposed, which is a paradigm that distinguishes between the athlete's identity as received from God and personal identity as achieved by the athlete (Null, 2008a, 2008b, 2016, 2021; Jones et al., 2020). The chapter proposes that the theocentric foundation of a received identity can provide the Christian elite athlete with a sense of fulfilment, security, authenticity and witness previously unattained by an identity achieved through athletic performances.

Chapter Two contrasts the theocentric perspective on identity formation with the normative achievement-based approach in professional football (see, for example, Roderick, 2006a; Hickey & Roderick, 2017). The chapter reviews psychological and sociological literature regarding identity formation in elite sports, particularly professional football. The literature indicates that the institutional norms of elite sports facilitate the development of a performance-based athletic identity amongst elite athletes. The chapter closes by suggesting that the pastoral support offered by sports chaplains already plays a role in alleviating restrictive identity formation amongst professional footballers, regardless of their religious beliefs. Meanwhile, I also propose that the distinctive aspect of the current study, namely a theocentric approach to the pastoral support of Christian elite footballers, can offer unique and practical insights into enhancing the welfare of all players, regardless of religious beliefs.

Chapter Three describes the challenging nature of designing a research project which combines theology with qualitative research in the social sciences. It proposes a methodological paradigm founded on practical theology for assessing the impact of the Christian faith on the life course experiences of Christian elite athletes. This methodology features data collection via semi-structured interviews and a process of data analysis based upon the conventions of grounded theory. The chapter concludes by reflecting on my positionality and its impact on the design and process of this research.

Chapter Four introduces the reader to the respondents in the study, providing brief insight into their professional careers and how, within that context, they became Christians. The chapter also

provides a historical overview of England's professional football league structures, in which respondent careers unfolded.

Chapter Five is the first of five chapters devoted to the research findings. It focuses on how becoming a Christian provided a previously unattainable sense of fulfilment in the professional game. The chapter suggests that this was a consequence of a received identity, shaped by an appreciation of theocentric personal significance (Null 2008a, 2008b, 2016, 2021; Jones et al., 2020). The chapter considers this tendency towards unprecedented fulfilment at crucial career junctures, namely the transition from schoolboy to professional footballer, the experience of deselection, job loss or injury and during periods of domestic turbulence.

Chapter Six considers how Christianity enabled a new degree of security for respondents as they dealt with the ongoing challenges of professional football. The chapter discusses the sense of assurance predicated on the belief that God was now in control of respondents' athletic vocation (Null, 2008a, 2008b, 2016, 2021; Jones et al., 2020). Particular attention is paid to the capacity of respondents to obtain a sense of security from the Christian faith amidst the vagaries of contractual uncertainty, workplace conflict, and career transition.

Chapter Seven explores the authenticity exhibited by the respondents as they sought to integrate their Christian beliefs with their workplace behaviours. The chapter shows how initial efforts at integrating faith and professional football careers often incurred ridicule or aggression from colleagues. However, findings indicate that if respondents sustained the required playing

performance level on the field, their faith ultimately gained the acceptance and respect of management and team-mates.

Chapter Eight considers the essential coherence between respondents' newly found experience of identity received from God and an appreciation of God's ongoing engagement in their athletic activities, resulting in respondents' increasing witness to their faith. The chapter draws on the understanding of vocation provided by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer Martin Luther (Wingren, 1957/2004), which is applied to Christian elite athletes by Null (2016). The notion of vocation shows how God uses His gift of athletic talents to fulfil the divine mission in respondents' personal and professional lives. The God-given vocation as a Christian elite athlete entails that God works through the good and bad experiences of elite sport for two purposes. First, to draw the Christian closer to Himself in appreciation of a received identity that confers personal significance regardless of athletic performance. Secondly, to enable the Christian to serve others, thus facilitating Christian witness to family, friends and athletic colleagues.

Chapter Nine demonstrates the nature of the pastoral support which facilitated and encouraged respondents' experiences of fulfilment, security, authenticity and witness. The chapter proceeds from the theological premise that God works through the Bible to draw the Christian closer to Himself and, by doing so, fulfils His mission through their vocational talents and relationships (Horton, 2002; Wingren, 1957/2004; Null, 2015). The chapter explores how respondents' experiences indicate the crucial role of the Bible, understood and applied in the context of peer groups and local churches, in facilitating peer evangelism.

Chapter Ten draws together the conclusions of this study. In addition, the chapter offers proposals for future academic research regarding identity formation in Christian elite athletes. Finally, on a practical level, I suggest that sports chaplains consider drawing on the theocentric perspective of the current study to aid all elite athletes' personal and professional welfare, regardless of their religious beliefs.

# Chapter One

## Pastoring Elite Athletes

### Introduction

This chapter contextualises the current study in the inaugural North American sports ministries of the 1950s and 1960s. They faced the challenge of balancing the use of famous Christian elite athletes for public evangelism with supporting the athletes' personal and professional welfare. The problem of providing optimal pastoral support for Christian elite athletes became pertinent in a British context when sports ministry reached the UK in the 1970s. It exposed the need to clarify the theological underpinning of sports ministry practices. This gap is addressed in the pioneering application of the theological foundation of the 16th century Protestant Reformation to contemporary sports ministry activities by Null (2008a, 2008b, 2016). He compares a 'theocentric' (God-centred) and an 'anthropocentric' (human-centred) perspective. Null (2021) elaborates on this distinction in his appraisal of the work of Hoffman (2010) and claims that a theocentric approach to the pastoral support for Christian elite athletes facilitates a novel sense of fulfilment and security, leading to enhanced authenticity and Christian witness. The chapter concludes by proposing a theocentric theological foundation for an empirical exploration of the provision of pastoral support for Christian elite athletes.



## **Sports ministry strategies**

In their monograph regarding the historical relationship between Christianity and sport from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Ladd and Mathisen (1999) consider the impact of the North American evangelist Billy Graham on the development of sports ministry. When Graham joined the staff of the para-church organisation Youth for Christ in 1945, he was determined to find ways to present the Christian message to young people through contemporary cultural approaches and practices. When planning an evangelistic event in his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1947, Graham thought that sport might attract an unchurched audience to listen to his message. On the opening night of the city-wide event, Graham invited Gil Dodds, the then US Mile Champion, to take part in a race at the host stadium before giving his Christian testimony. Reflecting on that evening, Graham summarised the aspect of Dodds' sporting appeal very simply: "we used every modern means to catch the attention of the unconverted – and then we punched them right between the eyes with the gospel" (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999, p. 113). The event was so successful that Dodds travelled globally with Youth for Christ between 1949 and 1954, routinely participating in a race before giving his testimony and preaching the Christian message. For both Graham and Youth for Christ, this strategy encapsulated the practical realisation of a vision for Christian conversion and a pragmatic approach to achieving this goal.

The use of Christian elite athletes' fame and celebrity status for public evangelism became an established model in the 1950s and was influential over the next thirty years. Ladd and Mathisen (1999) identify that this approach was promoted by the initial North American sports ministry organisations, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), founded in 1954, and Athletes in Action

(AIA), founded in 1966. Initial objections to this strategy were made by Deford (1976), who, in positing a somewhat critical (and perhaps derogatory) view of the sport-faith relationship, called it 'Sportianity'. Deford (1976) claimed that the need to gain access to athletes for public evangelism made sports ministry organisations too deferential to the institutions of elite sport. Several North American Christian scholars developed this theme by expressing unease over the failure of Christian ministries to challenge how the increasing professionalisation of sport had led to the growing and, in their opinion, the malign influence of commercial agendas (for example, Novak, 1976; Hoffman, 1992; Higgs, 1995; Krattenmaker, 2010; Hoffman, 2010).

Meanwhile, it is essential to note the simultaneous concern of sports ministries for athletes' personal and professional needs. In a paper outlining the development of sports chaplaincy, Weir (2016) shows how welfare-based practices were pioneered in the North American Football League in the mid-1960s, with the establishment of Sunday pre-match chapel services for players and staff (Fisher, 1969). By 1975, Baseball Chapel had initiated a similar venture in all the Major League Baseball teams. In 1983, Pro-Basketball Fellowship was founded to coordinate chapels and chaplaincy in the National Basketball Association. A similar initiative was launched on the professional tennis tour in 1980 (Klaus & Yorkey, 2012). The chapel programmes, alongside the one-to-one pastoral support offered by sports chaplains, illustrate that early North American sports ministries were concerned with athletes' personal and professional welfare. The eventual organisational result of these chapel services and study groups was consolidated in the formation of Pro Athletes Outreach, which held its first conference in 1970 (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999) and continues to be a significant provider of pastoral support to Christian elite athletes in North America.

The North American influence led to the global growth of sports ministries during the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this period, several informal conferences prompted the development of the International Sports Coalition, a wide-ranging and informal collection of sports ministry advocates committed to the worldwide advance of sports ministry (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). The Christian Sportsmen's Outreach was launched in the UK in 1975, followed by conferences to identify Christians involved in sport at Bisham Abbey in 1976 and Crystal Palace in 1977. In 1980 this group was renamed Christians in Sport (CIS) (Parker & Weir, 2012).

CIS used the imported evangelistic and welfare-based strategies. For example, in 1989, Olympic hurdler Kriss Akabusi gave his testimony at a Billy Graham Mission in Crystal Palace (Harrison, 1991). In the same year, Scottish professional footballer Brian Irvine testified at two of Graham's Mission Scotland meetings (Irvine, 1996). Meanwhile, CIS simultaneously invested in Christian elite athletes' personal and professional welfare, including several Christians who competed for Great Britain in the Seoul Olympics in 1988, where CIS provided two members of the pioneering Olympic sports chaplaincy team (Weir, 1993, 2016). In 1993 CIS initiated monthly gatherings to offer pastoral support for Christian professional footballers. These meetings began in the London home of the First Division player, Pete Green. Over the next three years, similar gatherings emerged across different cities (i.e., Birmingham, Sheffield, Manchester and Edinburgh), replicating the model and extending its reach: “We have a network of players' Bible study groups around the country, meeting monthly to enable players to study together and pray for each other. In addition, we support players with one-to-one meetings” (CIS, 2000, p.6).

Parker and Weir (2012) describe how 35 new Christian sports ministries emerged in the UK between 1980 and 2010. These included Sports Chaplaincy Offering Resources and Encouragement (SCORE). Parker and Weir (2012) describe how, after gaining initial traction under the auspices of CIS, SCORE was established as an independent organisation with the support of the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 1991 to focus on developing sports chaplaincy and was particularly prevalent in professional football. SCORE was renamed Sports Chaplaincy UK (SCUK) in 2011 and currently provides chaplaincy to the English Premier League, the English Football League, the Professional Footballers Association and the Scottish Football Association. SCUK's explicitly welfare-based focus is evident in its *Introduction to Chaplaincy* (2020):

In the chaplaincy role, it is all about having good relationships with players, athletes and staff, offering care and compassion with a non-judgemental attitude. In sports chaplaincy, we use the expression "pastorally proactive and spiritually reactive." This means we pastorally care for everyone whether they have a faith or not and then react spiritually where appropriate. We are not there to force our faith on anyone.

The initial work of CIS in the 1980s and the emergence of SCORE in the 1990s illustrate how two central UK sports ministries engaged in providing pastoral support for elite athletes. Pivotal to these developments was increasing evidence of elite athletes' personal and professional vulnerability. This approach reflects broader cultural models of chaplaincy – for example, in the military, prisons and hospitals – which has accentuated the provision of spiritual and pastoral support in line with an incarnational form of mission and ministry (see Threlfall-Holmes, 2011; Ryan, 2015, 2018; Waller, 2016; Whitmore & Parker, 2020). Chaplains have cared for those facing

a range of personal challenges, including physical injury, mental health concerns, career termination, addiction and bereavement (Heskins & Baker, 2006; Gamble et al., 2013; King et al., 2020). Growing recognition of these issues has led professional sports clubs and organisations to employ specialist staff to assist player welfare, with chaplains working alongside sports psychologists (Hemmings et al., 2019) and welfare, safeguarding and family liaison officers (Oliver & Parker, 2019). These collaborative examples of pastoral care advocate the complementary nature of chaplaincy to broader sports science and holistic welfare support teams. Gamble et al. (2013) note that since sports chaplains essentially comprise a cohort of unpaid volunteers, they are not burdened by the pressures faced by salaried staff, who are required to ensure that players contribute to the urgent need for short-term competitive results.

Furthermore, in line with those engaged in chaplaincy in various social contexts (Threlfall-Holmes, 2011), sports chaplains are able to invest in long-term relationships with players. There are examples of pastoral support enduring beyond a current club or sports institution (Parker et al., 2016; Roe & Parker, 2016). This specialist provision offers a unique and critical opportunity to walk alongside athletes through sporting trials and success to help the long-term holistic growth and development of everyone entrusted to their care (Waller & Cottom, 2016). In sum, the emphasis of SCUUK over the last thirty years appears to have been to advance a long-term, welfare-based approach for all athletes, regardless of religious beliefs.

The development of sports chaplaincy, with its commitment to the pastoral support of all elite athletes, has added a new dimension to the inaugural sports ministry practices of using Christian elite athletes for public evangelism and providing for Christian elite athletes welfare. This more

comprehensive development has led to debate regarding the role of evangelism in sports ministry. In 1988, the organising committee of the Seoul Olympics pioneered official chaplaincy in the Olympic Village. However, event organisers became increasingly concerned about the place of evangelism in chaplaincy, and Weir (2016, p. 17) reports how this unease led to the initiation of a new policy at the Sydney Olympics of 2000. From 2000 onwards, chaplains at the Olympic Games were required to sign an Olympic Religious Services Policy. The document included the statement: "Religious Services personnel will not be permitted to use this ministry as a vehicle for conversion or proselytising." This policy refuted the right of Olympic chaplains to advocate the adoption of the Christian faith by athletes or other religions or none. In the light of this development, David Tyndale, one of the chaplains in Sydney (Tyndale, 2004), pointed out that if evangelism was to remain an aspect of sports ministry strategy among elite athletes, steps were needed to clarify and resolve its role within sports chaplaincy.

The resolution to this tension might begin by comparing the perspectives of Krattentaker (2010) and Hoffman (2010) regarding the role of Christian sports chaplains. They agree that sports ministries have commodified Christianity by adding it to the long list of products advertised by famous athletes and that Christians should stop channelling sport for evangelistic purposes. However, Krattentaker (2010) argues that sports chaplaincy could be redeemed if it paid less attention to evangelism by appreciating the importance of religious pluralism and focusing on dealing with the endemic problems of sports. In turn, Hoffman (2010) strongly repudiates any form of sports chaplaincy as a valid expression of Christian ministry and holds that Christianity and contemporary competitive sport are mutually exclusive. Christians should reject all forms of competitive sport, irrespective of their popularity and influence. Sport is beyond redemption since

it corrodes character by appealing to selfish instincts and harming human relationships: "If one were to design a social exercise that tempts Christians toward such (selfish) sins, they couldn't do much better than competitive sports" (Hoffman, 2010, p. 148).

Regarding the place of sports chaplaincy, Hoffman (2010) argues that multi-millionaire athletes, whose greatest crisis, in his opinion, might be coming to terms with losing a game, do not need the support of chaplains. Thus, if the current study is to propose any constructive Christian approach to engaging with elite athletes, regardless of the strategies involved, the fundamental rejection of Christian involvement in competitive sport must first be addressed.

### **Theological foundations**

The most robust defence of Christians engaging with sport to support elite athletes, encapsulating both evangelistic and welfare practices, is offered by the church historian, theologian and five-time Olympic chaplain John Ashley Null (2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2016, 2021). Null proposes that any critique of specific sports ministry strategies must begin by assessing the theological foundations, particularly the notion of personal identity. A range of terms is used in discussing the concept of identity formation. For example, 'significance', 'worth', 'value', 'achievement', 'performance', and 'performance-based identity' are used interchangeably by Null (2016) in his exploration of the experience of two Christian swimmers who competed against each other at international level. The current study will employ the range of synonyms used to discuss personal identity. However, it is worth noting that the foundational distinction in play here is the pivotal theological distinction between personal identity as received and achieved.

Developing the theological distinction between a received and achieved identity requires focusing on the fundamental aspects of the relationship between Christianity and sporting culture. Null (2008a) addresses this association by drawing on the analysis of the more comprehensive relationship between Christianity and culture in the seminal work of Niebuhr (1951). For the present chapter, it is helpful to observe that while Niebuhr identifies five paradigms for analysing this relationship, he suggests that the third of these, “Christ above Culture” is the dominant model in church history (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 116). This notion holds that despite the fracture of the world that results from rejecting the creator God, culture can be redeemed by human initiatives. Null challenges this premise, arguing that this is an anthropocentric (rather than a theocentric) basis for redemption. Null applies this critique to the redemption of sport, suggesting that the anthropocentric strategy has become a significant hindrance to developing an appropriate theological infrastructure for supporting Christian elite athletes. The rationale for this rebuttal is that such assumptions lead to a pathology that may be outlined as follows: sports culture determines that when athletes fail to achieve the required performance level, they should be embarrassed at the failure and internalise deep personal dissatisfaction. They must then harness their determination and willpower to return to the appropriate standard. Only by such efforts can athletes regain a coach's affirmation and be restored to a place of self-worth.

According to Null (2008a), adopting this cultural perspective for supporting Christian elite athletes stimulates several problematic consequences. First, since all athletes will, at some time, face injury, loss of form, deselection and retirement, personal identity cannot ultimately rest on athletic achievement. Secondly, suppose this institutional logic of sport is inferred and applied to



Christianity. In this case, it can become intuitive to believe that one can only become of worth to God when attaining good spiritual performance. Hence, spiritual failure becomes a matter of embarrassment, which demands the harnessing of internal spiritual willpower to find a way to return to spiritual success and divine approval. Finally, when athletes in this convention undergo sporting failure, they may be prone to merge sport and faith. They may wonder what neglect of Christian duty led God to prevent them from athletic success.

The consequence of the 'Christ above Culture' model, when applied to sport, is a downward cycle that may consistently lead to withdrawing from God and ultimately falling away from the Christian faith. Athletes are likely to withdraw from God when facing sporting and spiritual failure, feeling that they must earn the right to attain God's favour and athletic success. This trajectory is a recipe for pastoral disaster since, at the very time an athlete most needs to turn to God for comfort, they feel obliged to withdraw and galvanise themselves before they can return.

Yet there is an alternative approach to the sporting culture's anthropocentric prioritisation of athletic achievement to obtain a sense of personal value. This perspective focuses on a theological viewpoint that wholly rejects the notion that achievements can provide self-worth. Null (2008a) advocates this way of supporting elite athletes by utilising a fourth archetype suggested by Niebuhr (1951), namely, "Christ and Culture in Paradox" (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 149). This concept accepts the insufficiency of the third model, 'Christ above Culture'. In this view Christ is above culture, and He must be placed infinitely above all human beings in a transcendent and righteous way. Christ is so distinctive that, in relation to Him, all human efforts are tainted. The predominant principle is the inability to earn, achieve or perform to gain restoration with God. Whenever a Christian elite

athlete stands before God, their acceptance is never, at any point in their lives, contingent upon their spiritual performance.

The claim that personal identity is received rather than achieved provides the theological foundation for this thesis. It is a stance affirmed by Null (2001, 2014) in his assessment of the role of 16th century English Reformer Thomas Cranmer in the theological development of the Christian doctrine of justification. Central to the theology of Cranmer was that the most glorious aspect of God was his love for the unworthy. The practical consequence for Christian ministry was the pivotal importance of highlighting and proclaiming this truth to encourage a life of ongoing repentance (turning back to God) and remembering God's consistent and continuous gracious love for fallible humanity. For Cranmer, this process alone can inspire grateful human love towards God and overflows into a similar gracious love towards fellow human beings. This emphasis reflects the theological underpinning of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, emphasising how the Bible reveals the exclusive means of human salvation. That is, by the sovereign grace of God, through faith in Christ.

To fully appreciate the theocentric emphasis of this theological approach, it may also prove helpful to consider how the theologian Horton (2002, 2006) advocates this Reformed<sup>1</sup> perspective. In his pioneering theological response to how post-modern anthropologies have addressed the formation of personal identity, Horton begins with certain convictions about the trinitarian God of the Bible. God is innately relational, and this is manifested in his relationship with his creatures, who are made "in the image of God", as conveyed in the Bible (New International Version, 2011, Genesis

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<sup>1</sup> Based on any system of belief that traces its roots back to the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

chapter one, verse 27). The relational God took the initiative to interact and establish a relationship with humanity by entering the situated narrative of human history, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ (Horton, 2006). The work of Christ, who was the perfect human manifestation of the "image of God", was to establish a new covenant (typically known as The New Testament) whereby God interacted with humanity through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. The result was that humanity was given access to an unearned relationship with God. The theological basis for personal identity is receiving (not achieving) the gift of a personal relationship with God through interacting with His Son, Jesus Christ.

The rationale for drawing on the work of Horton (2006) regarding the divine, relational foundations for personal identity is that his theological starting point is a framework that entirely resonates with that of Null (2001, 2008a, 2016). However, the unique aspect of this Reformed approach to identity formation in the work of Null is that he applies it directly to the lives of elite athletes. Thus, the significance of an elite athlete is entirely predicated on the fact that the relational God graciously and unconditionally loves a person, and that God is willing to go to great lengths to restore a divine-human relationship through faith in Christ. Personal identity is not predicated upon the human capacity to earn God's favour by achievements or performances. Personal identity is received through Christ, thereby giving those who put their faith in Christ a place of unconditional value before God.

The Reformed, theocentric approach identified by Cranmer and reinforced by Horton and Null lends itself to further critical clarification of the relationship between a received and achieved identity. The relational God is also the creator God. This dual aspect of God implies that since

humanity has been made in “the image of God”, a new relationship with God lends itself to the opportunity to reflect and represent God in everyday creative activities (Horton, 2006, p. 61). The unconditional nature of divine love, which provides personal worth, also freely endows each person with creative talents that, through their deployment, facilitate ensuing relationships with other people. The Christian’s personal value emanates from receiving a restored relationship with God, and their achievements encompass the subsequent activities undertaken in an already established and gracious relationship with God. Thus, the divine setting for human achievements is thoroughly embedded within the context of an unearned and received personal identity that provides unconditional significance. Any achievements attained through the creative development of God-given talents are always secondary to a received identity, a freely given value before God. The result of the correct alignment of a received identity and personal achievements through God-given talents is an appreciation that individuals may fulfil, through the acceptance, support and constant, intimate presence of God, the creative and relational purposes for their lives.

This sentiment is well captured in a letter written by the Christian leader Paul, to the church in Ephesus (modern Turkey), describing the nature of Christian redemption, in Ephesians chapter two, verses eight to 10 (New International Version, 2011):

<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Verses eight to nine outline the source of unearned personal significance, and verse 10 describes God's complementary provision of creative talents so that Christians may contribute to their communities in relationship with God. This analysis demonstrates that properly understood, both personal worth and athletic achievements are gratuitous, unilateral gifts from God. Personal worth is predicated on an identity received through faith in God. Personal achievement involves using divinely given talents, themselves considered an intrinsic good, which the Christian practices in relationship with God and community with others. Understood in this way, while the career of a Christian athlete may involve joy and hardship, God will equally use both to draw the athlete closer to Himself (Null, 2016). This sovereign care reflects the teaching of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer John Calvin, who considered that "in all our cares, toils, annoyances, and other burdens, it will be no small alleviation to know that all these are under the superintendence of God" (Calvin, 1536/1845, Book III, section 6).

This theological foundation provides a secure base for supporting Christian elite athletes. The theocentric approach can prevent athletes from being held hostage to the highs and lows of the competitive sporting life. It offers the experiential perspective that the key to personal worth does not lie inside the athlete, achieved by harnessing personal willpower for athletic or spiritual gain. Instead, it provides the viewpoint that having received a new identity and commensurate sense of value to God, divinely given athletic capabilities enable a vocation that God will use to draw athletes closer to Himself in victory and defeat and build loving relationships with others. This theological approach regarding the critical differentiation between a received and achieved identity offers a coherent alignment and complementarity between personal significance and athletic attainments. In a paper making preliminary suggestions on this issue to sports ministries, Null

(2008b) summarises his conclusions regarding this theocentric perspective on identity formation in Christian elite athletes. He proposes that it provides two divine gifts that may shape elite athletes' approach to themselves and their athletic vocation. First, God has given them a worth, a value, a significance that will never disappear. Secondly, He has designed them to express that worth by being fully alive through athletic performance. As a result, elite athletes may find themselves reconnecting with their childhood joy of sport, attaining fulfilment and security perhaps long forgotten due to the performance-driven pressures of their professional life.

### **Fulfilment and security**

Null's (2008a) preference for Niebuhr's (1951) fourth paradigm, 'Christ and Culture in Paradox,' instead of the third paradigm, 'Christ above Culture,' marks the stark contrast Null (2008a) draws between a received and achieved identity. Hoffman's (2010) refusal to engage with the pastoral support of elite athletes might be said to place him firmly in Niebuhr's (1951) third paradigm as a proponent of achieved identity formation.

This debate regarding the theological underpinning of competitive sport has existential ramifications concerning personal fulfilment and security. For Null (2008b), a theocentric understanding of sport, with its received identity based on Niebuhr's fourth paradigm, can result in athletes re-discovering an earlier joy in their athletic experiences. In turn, for Hoffman (2010), any restoration of sport to a more pristine and joyous condition demands that it abandons its competitive format in favour of recreational play.

The approach to sport adopted by Hoffman has previously been favoured by several scholars (see, for example, Huizinga, 1950; Rahner, 1949/1967; Moltmann, 1971/1972; Johnston, 1997; Holmes, 1983; Harvey, 2014). Foundational to the approval of recreational play is the critical distinction between competitive sport and play. Play is autotelic. That is, authentic play has no external or extrinsic purpose since this robs play of its recreative power. The whole point of play is simply to play; genuine play is, thus, an experience of spontaneous, unbounded freedom. Play can engender this kind of emotion because it reflects God himself, that God was at play in the process of creation itself. Further, He remains the playing God in His day-to-day engagement in creation. Hoffman explains the autotelic nature of play with reference to the Bible's book of Proverbs, chapter eight, verses 27 to 31 (New International Version, 2011):

<sup>27</sup> I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep <sup>28</sup> when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, <sup>29</sup> when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. <sup>30</sup> Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, <sup>31</sup> rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.

These Bible verses personify the trinitarian God at play in creation. Hence, for Hoffman, when human beings play, they may enter an intimate experience of this playful God and manifest a sense of joy, release and fulfilment. Even given the inevitable prospects of periodic defeat, participation in the adventure of playing is resolved when the play ends, and the players return to everyday life.

To play in this fashion can be a transcendent experience. It may be an act of worship that can lead to a sense of God-honouring gratitude that enriches the lives of those around the player.

Despite acknowledging the numerous benefits of play outlined here by Hoffman (2010), it is evident that this perspective on sport as playful, spiritual re-creation has little to offer Christian elite athletes. To address this limitation and in keeping with the earlier theological approach to the relationship between Christianity and sport, Null (2021) returns to a theocentric foundation. The central critique is that the perspective of recreational play, encapsulated by Hoffman (2010), takes an anthropocentric approach. It asks how humanity should approach God in play, rather than asking how God acts to transform the participants during human play. Null shares common ground with Hoffman regarding the belief that life itself is a matter of the playing God engaging playfully in creation. However, rather than perceiving competitive sport as a human construct, Null argues that God takes great delight in providing an athletic vocation. Correspondingly, through the experience of competition, God enables athletes to recover their initial, intuitive, playful imitation of the playing God.

The precise point here is that the God who plays has initiated, designed and gifted competitive sport as a divine allurements. Sport is a God-created source of joy that draws those who have athletic talents closer to Himself and the service of others in the act of competition. Hence, in the magnitude of the universe created by God, the divinely facilitated place of sport is a means of providing athletes with an insight into the ultimate reality of creation. This discernment is that God initiated and orchestrated human existence, which is God's game. This enterprise clarifies the purpose of sport. As God plays in creation, humanity joins Him in play, using divinely gifted



talents and relationships. God is entirely in control of the game of life, and God invites his creatures to play their game, using their gifts, in their own game of life. The critical aspect of taking a theocentric perspective on the notion of God at play in creation is that it may bring freedom to express an athletic vocation assured that it is a gift from God. Furthermore, while fully engaging in the athletic career, the perception that this role is subservient to a far greater game that God is playing entails that athletes cannot tie themselves too closely to the outcomes of this world. Indeed, one can now understand the fractured nature of one's efforts against the wonder of God's perfection. Now athletes can be free to enjoy their play, as they play with an assured insight into their minor but significant role in the Game of God.

Understanding the divine allurements of sport, and thereby helping elite athletes savour the sheer joy and fulfilment and security of their role in sport, is an essential aspect of the work of pastoring Christian elite athletes (Null, 2016, 2021). To be assured that one has received personal significance through a freely received relationship with God in Christ means that athletic gifts provide regular opportunities to enjoy the pleasure of doing that for which one was created. It is also a reminder to enjoy the people with whom one builds relationships in this process. In times of sporting and spiritual anxiety, it is helpful to remember that God's gift of sport has provided many joyous experiences and relationships during the athletic journey. These are joys that an athlete will never forget, regardless of today's performance, and this can provide a great sense of fulfilment in the lives of Christian elite athletes.

At the heart of Hoffman's (2010) complaint against sport is the issue of competition in pursuit of winning, and he appears to find it impossible to accept that any form of sporting comparison can

be divinely sourced. The pivotal role of competition makes sport innately malign. The demand for victory leads to unhealthy rivalry, with winners being prone to hubris and losers to personal shame, embarrassment and insecurity. Hoffman's (2010) approach is qualified by Ellis (2010), who draws attention to an essential distinction between theologies of play and sport. Ellis (2010) questions the autotelic nature of play, pointing out that play in the context of sport serves a wide range of holistic and social outcomes, including competing and winning. Critically, in his survey of largely local rather than elite competitors, Ellis notes that competition is "not just about winning tournaments or games, but also about measuring and testing oneself." (p171).

This qualification of Hoffman's (2010) approach by Ellis (2010) is expanded by Null (2021), who focuses on the flaw of Hoffman's (2010) disdain for competition/comparison as it applies to the experience of elite athletes. The problem with Hoffman's (2010) argument is that the meaning of comparison – and so competition – must always be a matter of context. Hoffman (2010) is making a 'category error' (Null, 2021). He assumes that athletes are bound to use the notion of competition to establish self-worth rather than to develop self-awareness regarding athletic ability. Thus, it is crucial to determine whether engagement in competition seeks personal significance or solely athletic comparison. Pivotal to this differentiation is the complementarity of God-gifted personal value and the vocational use of divinely provided talents. If athletes can clarify this distinction, they can then grasp the thorough integration of God's purpose for serving others through their sporting lives.

This theocentric perspective on competition/comparison provides not only an existential sense of fulfilment but also of security. It accepts that while the personal significance of an athlete is always

independent of their athletic attainment, it remains perfectly acceptable that the athlete compares their sporting performances with others to gain insight into what one is, or is not, capable of achieving. Null (2021) illustrates this by pointing out that Roger Bannister ran a sub-four-minute mile in 1954 after some considerable planning and effort. Then, just six weeks later, another athlete broke Bannister's record, and within a year, three other runners ran under four minutes in a single race. Hence, comparing one's talents with those of others can lead to positive results, including the inspiration to emulate others' performance levels. Competition may also help athletes see what gifts they lack and indicate where they are at their most effective. This observation can be an essential aspect of developing self-awareness regarding the distinctive strengths which athletes have in their God-given vocation, facilitating their capacity to enjoy their specific function in serving God in society. Competition can be a healthy concept when restricted to enhancing athletic performance since the competitor has the assurance that their worth is not contingent on sporting achievements.

A theocentric theological foundation further develops the social and communal advantages that result from appreciating that God is sovereign regarding every aspect of vocation. The 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer, Martin Luther, proposes that everyone has been gifted specific talents and commensurate relationships by divine design regardless of religious beliefs. Luther termed this a "station" in society (Wingren, 1957/2004, p. 2). He indicates that this facilitates human contribution to social cohesion since even the most selfish person is typically obliged to use their talents in the service of others if they are to earn a living (Wingren, 1957/2004). This Lutheran analysis of how God restricts human selfishness and benefits the social good is applied explicitly by Null (2008a) to God's intention for all elite athletes. For example, as salaried athletes engage in

sporting competition, their efforts facilitate several social benefits. Athletes help draw communities together, provide role models, offer fans a cathartic release from everyday pressure, and provide insight into aesthetic beauty and excellence. This theocentric, Lutheran perspective holds that, in a fractured world, there is a dignity to professional sport, which, far from being frivolous to God, plays a part in the divine mission to make a positive difference in human society.

Luther then takes this idea of "station" one step further. He indicates that since all vocations bring some degree of "trouble and toil", this God-designed framework regularly confronts humanity with the need to turn to God for help (Wingren, 1957/2004, pp. 29-31). Null (2021), once again, applies this theological principle to the experience of Christian elite athletes. Sport, with all its ups and downs, gives Christian athletes numerous opportunities to review the truths of their faith. To this end, regular experiences of defeat and victory can help clarify that an athlete is invariably loved by God, regardless of their achievements. This assurance is a mechanism that continually reinforces that God is in control of all circumstances. It provides confidence that God will use each experience for the good of those concerned. The writer Paul explains this security in his letter to the church in Rome in Romans chapter eight, verse 28 (New International Version, 2011): "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

This reflection by Paul neatly captures the theocentric starting point, which suggests that in His grand design, the relational, creative and playing God has furnished the Christian elite athlete with a received identity, a sense of unconditional personal value. It also reinforces a second and complementary claim that athletes can discern their place in God's greater game through the divine

provision of a suite of relationships and talents. With this theocentric foundation, which explains the relationships between personal worth and athletic performances, Christian elite athletes may attain a sense of fulfilment and security by experiencing a oneness between their athletic accomplishments and God's purpose for their lives. As a result, the Christian elite can find themselves with an increased capacity to serve the welfare of workplace playing colleagues and spectators.

### **Authenticity and mission**

Differentiating the place of received and achieved identity and the commensurate distinction between personal significance and sporting performance is crucial in the lives of elite athletes. With this theocentric framework in place, Christian elite athletes can appreciate that the value of the commitment, effort and investment required to achieve and sustain a career as an elite athlete does not ultimately depend on a specific result or, indeed, the ultimate career record. Instead, the value of athletic endeavour is discerned by God's faithfulness in using every aspect of sporting performance, victory and defeat, success and failure, for His more significant and eternal purposes. The clarity in comprehending that God will be faithful to his commitment to using the gifts He has granted an athlete for good allows Christian athletes to appreciate the joys and disappointments of their careers. When they face the anguish of losing some of their deepest held aspirations, their confidence in the divine goodness, love and plan for their lives is pivotal to their welfare. In the light of this clarity, athletes can have an assurance that God is committed to fulfilling his designated mission in their lives. In turn, this assurance can assist them in finding even greater joy

and security, knowing that God works all things together for good at the crucial moments of their careers (Null, 2016).

Niebuhr's (1951) fifth proposition for relating Christ and culture addresses the prospect of fulfilling a distinctively designed mission for one's life. The fourth paradigm highlights that Christ alone can redeem culture and that it cannot be a matter of human performance or achievement. This paradigm leads to the fifth model, "Christ the Transformer of Culture" that having entered the divinely granted gift of a relationship with Christ, the subsequent transformation in the life of a Christian can play a part in transforming culture (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 190). Niebuhr makes this transition by identifying that while Luther sees vocations primarily as a way for God to restrain sin in the world, another major 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer, John Calvin, expects Christians to transform their environment through God-given vocations. In short, according to Null (2008a), Calvin wants Christians to let God work through and within their vocations to aid the restoration of human beings and their communal life together, to God's intention in creation. Indeed, Calvin considered God-given vocations to be "activities in which they [humanity] may express their faith and love and may glorify God in their calling" (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 217). Calvin considered the promise of God to Christians to include "the transformation of mankind in all its nature and culture into a kingdom of God in which the laws of the kingdom have been written upon the inward parts" (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 218).

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that a growing sense of fulfilment and security can lead to a commensurate feeling of gratitude to God in the outworking of athletic vocation because of a

theocentric perspective. Further, this recognition may lead to a new desire to serve colleagues and fellow competitors. When aligned with articulating the Christian message, such authentic deeds might be the best form of evangelism (Null, 2016) since sharing Christianity with others cannot be divorced from the impact of the conferral of Christian faith by God on the Christian athlete.

The theological framework outlined above proposes that the intuitive experiences of fulfilment and security resulting from a received identity lead to a proactive exhibition of individual authenticity and Christian mission. This trajectory from existential experiences to agentic behaviours raises the question of the relationship between God's initiative and human agency. The position taken by the current thesis is that these concepts can be harmonised. Luther proposes such coordination in 1525 (2008) – not sure if I'm citing properly. He describes how the innate 'bondage of the will' is liberated by Christian regeneration. As a result of the new and divinely facilitated 'freedom of the will', the Christian can actively and responsibly pursue a virtuous life.

Furthermore, the Apostle Paul had already outlined the compatibility of the relationship between divine initiative and human responsibility in his letter to the church in Philippi [modern Greece]. In chapter one, verse six, Paul writes, "He [God] who began a good work in you will carry it through to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (New International Version, 2011). Paul acknowledges God's initiative in coming to and sustaining faith. In chapter two, verses 12b-13, Paul then indicates the Christians' responsibility to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose" (New International Version, 2011). While God is at work in providing a new "will" to "act in order to fulfil his good purpose", the divine initiative is set in the context that the Philippian

Christians are to exercise agency. They are “to continue to work out your salvation”. This simultaneous activity will be a lifelong venture for the Christian. Paul explains in chapter three, verse 14, “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (New International Version, 2011). In the fourth and final chapter, in verses 12-14, Paul points out that while the Philippian Christians will face highs and lows in this lifelong venture, personal responsibility will continue to be underpinned by God’s support, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (New International Version, 2011).

A lifestyle marked by such divine initiative and human response aligns with the *missio Dei* (the mission of God).<sup>2</sup> Bosch (1991, pp. 389-90) provides a concise definition of the *missio Dei*: "Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God." The *missio Dei* defines Christian mission as being derived from the very nature of God. This perspective echoes the importance of God's trinitarian and relational nature outlined earlier by Horton (2006). That is, Christian mission begins with the God of love. It is not a product of human programmatic initiative. In the *missio Dei*, God the Father sends the Son, and God the Father and the Son send the Spirit. The essential and innovative thinking involved is that Christian mission is not an anthropocentric sub-section of the church's work. Instead, Christian mission is theocentric and is the active outworking of the loving, relational, sending God. The missionary initiative comes from God alone, thereby, mission is a movement from God to the world, and the

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘*missio Dei*’ has been prevalent in contemporary theological discussions regarding the mission of the church. In this study the concept is used interchangeably with its English translation, ‘the mission of God’.



church is simply an instrument of that mission. To participate in mission is to join in the movement of God's love toward people since God is the source and strength of that sending love. God's mission is calling and sending the church to be missional within its social settings, within the specific sub-cultures in which Christians find themselves. The mission of God flows directly through every Christian and every community of faith that adheres to Christ.

Once again, it is possible to find in the ground-breaking work of Null (2008b) an application of mainstream theological scholarship to the specific context of integrating Christian doctrine with the culture of sport. Null argues that because of the growing fulfilment and security experienced by Christian elite athletes, God enables them to fulfil the *missio Dei*. This capacity results from a divinely given desire to serve fellow athletes, officials, and supporters as a grateful response to the Christian's God-ordained role within elite sport. It is here, amongst the team-mates of Christian elite athletes, that some can really get to know the character of their high-profile Christian peers. In this more intimate setting, colleagues may identify any radically different and attractive perspectives and behaviours of a Christian elite athlete. Several questions may follow. Does the Christian elite athlete find their sense of self-worth independently of athletic performance? Does the Christian elite athlete exhibit joy and security in good and bad times? Is there evidence of gratitude to God that overflows into the service of others? The alignment of such deeds with enunciations of Christian belief can enable Christian elite athletes to share their faith with those fellow athletes and coaches with whom they share so much of their lives. In this regard, Null's framework for supporting Christian elite athletes (2016) affirms the theocentric approach to identity formation. This God-centred perspective is the avenue by which a Christian elite athlete

will experience existential fulfilment and security, resulting in the active pursuit of public authenticity and a life of Christian witness as they live out the *missio Dei*, the mission of God.

The challenge of sharing the Christian faith in contemporary Western culture, where perceptions of Christianity, and the church itself, are changing dramatically, is highlighted by Whitmore and Parker (2020) in their consideration of the role of the *missio Dei* in developing a theology of sports chaplaincy. They fully accept claims that there has been a need for the church to re-evaluate its models of community engagement in the present day and that the Christian church should adopt the approach of *missio Dei* by engaging deeply within the social settings of contemporary culture. Whitmore and Parker (2020) propose that sports chaplaincy is one way such an obligation may be increased, as a distinctive aspect of Christian ministry intentionally focused and embedded within a community outside the traditional boundaries of the church. They pay particular attention to how the *missio Dei* emphasises the importance of integrating dialogue with practical provision for the welfare of athletes. At the heart of this dialogue is an intentional commitment to listening actively and closely to understand the specific needs of athletes. Whitmore and Parker (2020) argue that as chaplains become increasingly aware of the subtle and nuanced perspectives and conditions of the athletes they serve, they will be better equipped to develop more profound and authentic relationships. Through such incarnational and authentic dialogue, sports chaplains may find themselves in a position whereby they can appropriately articulate the redemptive Christian message to athletes deeply embedded within the sports culture. There is much here that lends itself to enhancing the pastoral support of all elite athletes.

A full appreciation of the application of the theocentric foundations recommended by Null (2008a, 2016), aligned with the employment of the *missio Dei* to the work of sports chaplains proposed by Whitmore and Parker (2020), may be an effective means of advancing elite Christian athletes' witness within secular sporting institutions. That is, sports chaplains might consider how they could optimise the *missio Dei* in their clubs. One effective strategy might be to focus on providing pastoral support to Christian elite athletes using the theocentric framework that clarifies the importance of received, rather than achieved, identity. The resulting characteristics of fulfilment, security, authenticity and witness may facilitate an optimal outworking of the mission of God. It may be Christian elite athletes themselves, rather than the sports chaplains, who become the primary witness to team-mates and staff within the confines of day-to-day life in elite sports institutions.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have considered how historical sports ministry practices have influenced the pastoral support offered to Christian elite athletes regarding public evangelism and player welfare. I also identified how the growth of sports chaplaincy had extended sports ministry provision to the pastoral support of all elite athletes, regardless of religious beliefs. In pursuit of developing theological foundations to analyse these practical approaches, I needed to address the fundamental challenge presented by Hoffman (2010) regarding the engagement of Christians in competitive sport *per se*. To address this challenge, the discussion of theological foundations sought to distinguish between a received and an achieved identity, which was expounded using literature from the 16th century Reformed tradition and applied by Null (2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2016, 2021)

to elite sport. The proposed theocentric position suggested that the resulting sense of personal significance could lead to an innate and existential degree of fulfilment and security, leading to agentic striving for public authenticity in the vocational experience of a Christian elite athlete. The final section of the chapter highlighted the emphasis placed by Whitmore and Parker (2020) on the importance of the *missio Dei* in the work of sports chaplains. I suggested it could be advantageous to tease out the implications of sports chaplains providing a theocentric, received perspective on personal identity to Christian elite athletes since this might result in the athletes themselves making a significant contribution to the advancement of God's mission within their sports clubs.

## Chapter Two

### Football Culture and the Sporting Self

#### Introduction

Chapter One proposed a theological foundation for considering identity formation in the lives of Christian elite athletes. The theocentric basis underpinning the provision of pastoral support for these athletes distinguished between personal identity as received and achieved. This perspective prioritises God's gift of personal worth and aligns this with His complimentary endowment of athletic talents. Theological clarity regarding the divine initiative to establish and invest in the vocation of athletes may enable compelling existential ramifications. These include heightened fulfilment, security and consequent public authenticity, leading to Christian witness in word and deed amongst athletic colleagues. I suggested that those supporting Christian elite athletes should facilitate the development of received identities to enhance the athletes' vocational joy and ensuing capacity to extend the mission of God through the athletes' Christian witness among peers.

The current chapter explores the antithesis of the theocentric, received approach to identity formation recommended in Chapter One. It considers how elite sport prioritises an identity founded on athletic achievement. This paradigm is assessed by probing the intersubjective institutional norms of elite sport, drawing primarily, but not exclusively, on sociological literature regarding professional football. The contribution of these norms to a restrictive athletic identity is considered before the discussion turns to the role of family, friends, and broader social networks in contesting institutional demands and promoting alternative senses of self. There follows a

consideration of the claim that despite growing academic study, there is evidence of intersectionalist, limiting concrete, practical application to supporting player welfare. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the role of sports chaplains in caring for elite athletes may have been overlooked. Sports chaplains have shown commitment to challenging the dominant performance-based norms. Adopting a theocentric approach could entail even more holistic benefits for the elite athletes they serve, regardless of religious belief.

### **Football culture and institutional norms**

I noted in the Introduction to this thesis that the concept of personal identity has specific disciplinary nuances. The current chapter focuses on the notion of personal identity within the social sciences. It is premised on the belief that identity formation is a consequence of the influence of a person or group's characteristic beliefs, traits, appearance, and expressions. Therefore, this chapter assumes a constructivist, interpretative methodological approach to forming identity in elite athletes.

Furthermore, the limitations of an athletic identity align with the notion of intersubjectivity, which originates in the social theory of Habermas (1970) and holds that instead of being individual or universal thinkers, human beings subscribe to 'thought communities'. These are communities of differing beliefs, for example, scientific beliefs, generations, nations, political movements, professions and churches. These various communities share different social experiences from those of other thought communities. A critical aspect of such thought communities is that their beliefs can become imperative standards for community members. This chapter discusses how the

cultural values of elite sport, observed primarily here concerning professional football, appear to encourage the development of a restrictive athletic identity.

In his seminal work concerning the nature of everyday life in asylums, Goffman (1961) introduces the concept of total institutions, which he defines in the following terms (p. 11):

A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like situated people, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. Prison serves as a clear example, providing we appreciate that what is prison-like about prisons is found in institutions whose members have broken no laws.

Goffman's in-depth account of observed institutional behaviours and practices in a psychiatric hospital illustrates how, upon entry, previously established social arrangements developed in the home lives of inmates are removed, creating a barrier to the outside world. He notes how 'inmate' functions and social roles facilitate predictable and regular behaviour patterns. Goffman (1961) proposes that such arrangements are not dissimilar to the processes involved in, for example, army camps, monasteries, prisons and boarding schools. In such environments, the isolation of a particular group from wider society facilitates the reconstruction of social roles and behaviours as group members are subject to the same domain and restrictions imposed by those in authority.

In his pioneering ethnographic study of youth traineeship in English professional football, Parker (1995, 1996a) argues that football clubs can be legitimately added to the list of organisations that Goffman (1961) cites because they openly exhibit several characteristics of total institutional life.

Parker notes how, within the context of his research, coaches at Colby Town constructed a stringent workplace and social environment within which they and the players co-existed. Alongside expected demands that trainees perform diligently in training and organised matches, mechanisms such as behavioural codes of conduct reinforced trainees' lowly place in the club hierarchy. For example, institutional rules around dress codes differentiated trainees from their professional colleagues. The club strictly regulated domestic life through organising and overseeing accommodation, dietary arrangements and leisure time activities. Further, Parker (2000) notes the ambivalence of club officials regarding the place of formal education in trainees' weekly schedules and their lives more generally. These constraints framed the broader principles that management directives should go unquestioned. A central way trainees could bolster their chances of achieving a place in the professional ranks was by displaying an unwavering commitment to these institutional norms. In short, any expression of individuality was strongly restricted and discouraged.

'Habitue' is another conceptual foundation used to address the experiences of professional athletes. This concept used by Bourdieu to articulate the sociological problem of agency and structure. To this end, Bourdieu deploys the concept of habitue to demonstrate the interrelationship between individual autonomy and societal restrictions on exercising that autonomy. In his work concerning the nature of social life in his native Algeria, Bourdieu (1980/1990) considers this relationship between societal conditioning and the formation of personal identity. He proposes that the development of personal identity is constrained by how society deposits within its members the unconscious dispositions for specific culturally acceptable ways of thinking and behaving. These norms then act to guide the behaviour and thinking of individuals within collective groups. Habitue



encompasses those aspects of culture anchored in the body or daily practices of individuals, groups, societies and nations. It included the totality of learned habits, physical skills, styles, tastes, and other non-discursive knowledge that might be said to "go without saying" for a specific group (Bourdieu, 1980/1990, pp. 66-67; see also, Bourdieu, 1972/1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1977)

Furthermore, Bourdieu postulates that the accumulation and application of capital plays an important role in forming a habitus (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Bourdieu expands the notion of capital beyond its economic conception. Social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital are all identified as significant determinants of social class and standing (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1977; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1987). One aspect of the degree to which social origin affects the attainment of cultural capital is the extent to which an individual appropriates formal educational opportunities. These ideas are elaborated in Bourdieu's (1979/1984) classic study of French society, *Distinction*, in which he shows how the "social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds" through "cultural products" including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life (1979/1984, p. 471). These all lead to an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies, to "a sense of one's place" and to behaviours of self-exclusion (1979/1984, p. 141). In this regard, Bourdieu considers the formation of personal identity to be a product of an individual's habitus, the constitution of which is, in turn, impacted by that individual's economic, social and cultural capital.

The theoretical perspective of Bourdieu's habitus has also been used to explore trainee professional footballers' restrictive experiences and working conditions. Several scholars have adopted this

theoretical framework to analyse the experiences of this group. For example, research carried out into players' lives at two Scottish clubs by McGillivray et al. (2005) and McGillivray and McIntosh (2006) illustrate the strict institutional requirement for trainees to demonstrate their steadfast engagement with their role to achieve professional status, with its substantial social and financial rewards. These expectations deemed that trainees manifested their levels of dedication via an ongoing commitment to developing their physical and technical abilities and their contribution to team performance. Trainees typically sought the incentives to display these necessary levels of commitment at the expense of other forms of capital that might benefit players' short and long-term welfare. Employers (managerial staff and coaches) did not encourage the augmentation of cultural capital in the form of education. As a result, players tended to conform to a habitus that disregarded more holistic educational opportunities. Similar norms have been identified in the lives of young professional boxers by Wacquant (1995), whereby a lack of education has been found to curtail post-boxing career opportunities.

Similarly, the conclusion that the primary focus of coaches was to develop first-team players at the expense of any other outcome is identified by Cushion and Jones (2014) in their study of trainees at an English Premier League club. They also use the framework of socialisation developed by Bourdieu to highlight the restrictive approach to the construction of social identity. Cushion and Jones (2014) found that the environment created by coaches significantly curtailed other aspects of personal and professional life. These limitations included strict institutional codes regarding workplace, domestic, recreational, and educational interactions. Indeed, the whole system was structured to achieve conformity since this was considered the best approach to preparing players for the rigours of professional life. The emerging culture of professional football

purports to develop the identity of a footballer by aligning everyone with the institutional norms of the profession.

The notion of 'surveillance' has also been used to assess these all-encompassing sub-cultural norms within professional football. This concept derives from the work of Foucault (1975/1977) in his study of the historical development of the modern penal system as it transitioned from public executions to more subtle forms of discipline and social control during the 18th century. Foucault seeks to analyse punishment in its social context and examines how it influences more comprehensive power relations. Reformers within this context were not motivated by a concern for the welfare of prisoners. Instead, their goal was to allow different forms of power to operate more efficiently. Foucault's conceptualisation of 'discipline' represents how a series of techniques control the (docile) body by coercing and arranging an individual's movements and experience of space and time. Devices such as timetables, military drills, and exercises facilitate this control by using the three foundational elements of disciplinary power: hierarchical observation, normalising judgment, and examination. The model of the Panopticon exemplifies these components. The Panopticon, devised by the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, is a building where individuals can be supervised and controlled ubiquitously and efficiently. Institutions modelled on the Panopticon began to spread throughout Western cultures in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the right to observe and accumulate knowledge had been extended from the prison to hospitals, schools, and later factories. For example, the modern-day prison system developed from this disciplinary paradigm, aiming to deprive individuals of the freedom to pursue reformation. Prisoners are observed within restrictive boundaries and become the subject of normalising judgments regarding institutionally acceptable and appropriate behaviour. The examination of prisoners in this way

seeks to determine their suitability for a role within society. The prison model exemplifies other networks of power that spread throughout society and seek control through observation, normalising judgement and examination. In short, controlling power thrives on surveillance.

This theoretical approach is adopted by Manley et al. (2012) in their analysis of an English Premier League Academy, highlighting how technological advances in measuring the physical aspects of sporting performance contributed to stricter institutional controls upon players. Consequently, trainee players faced significant pressure to adjust their training, competition, resting, and home life to re-align their behaviours with explicit institutional expectations. Thus, their sense of personal worth became intertwined with increasingly dominant notions of physicality and performance measures. Resistance to physical control mechanisms equalled a rejection of an elite footballers' desired character, role, or identity. The developing capacity for biological monitoring has normalised judgment and examination of players. As a result, there are further opportunities to reinforce the long-established disciplinary norms that one exhibits total devotion to the game and unwavering dedication to the manager.

The partial outworking of these disciplinary norms occurs under the subtle coercion of 'routine', by which power renders individuals docile (Foucault, 1975/1977). The demonstration of the controlling nature of routine as a disciplinary mechanism is shown by Jones and Denison (2017) in their study of 25 recently retired professional football players between the ages of 21 and 34. Jones and Denison (2017) demonstrate the all-encompassing daily restrictions of professional football and the experiences of pain and relief that arose from the removal of such a routine in retirement. Gearing (1999) also identifies the prevalence and effect of one-dimensional athletic

identities in a study of 12 former players, ranging in age from the early thirties through to early seventies, most of whom were still working in various occupations. Gearing demonstrates that professional footballers are often unprepared for retirement from the game, which is often involuntary or enforced because of injury or contract expiry/termination, because of being 'immersed' in the football club as the critical feature of the player's life. Further, Gearing (1999 p.47) notes the requirement for players to exhibit a "disciplined and collective" approach, as enforced by the football club's institutional culture and standards, which accords with the preceding analysis of the control of players' careers by coercive power.

Collectively, these studies provide a crucial body of evidence that suggests that institutional norms within professional football have created a series of behavioural restrictions in the lives of trainees (and professionals) where personal significance is assessed by strictly defined, monitored, reinforced, and examined athletic achievements. Within this scenario, the primary requirement is to attain a technical and tactical capacity that, if exhibited consistently, has the potential to lead to team selection and a career in the professional game. At the same time, such norms are tightly interweaved with the exhibition of an unwavering dedication to the game and surrender to managerial authority and control. In a retrospective analysis of two footballing academies which they initially examined (some 20 years apart), Manley and Parker (2017) note how these intrusive practices had been apparent over the two intervening decades. Indeed, Manley and Parker (2017) conclude that little has changed regarding workplace practices and institutional values despite policy changes at both clubs and governing body levels. These studies conclude that if trainees wish to become professional footballers, they must conform to these enduring cultural expectations.

The performance-based requirements faced by trainee professionals contrast markedly with the theocentric perspective on a received identity formation outlined in Chapter One. Moreover, any hope that reaching the professional ranks might mitigate such behavioural expectations is not supported by evidence from those who have successfully made this transition. Roderick (2006a) observed that the careers of adult professional footballers continued to be jeopardised by non-conformity to cultural norms. Utilising the dramaturgical framework devised by Goffman (1959) around self-identity, Roderick widely explores this transition by considering how current and ex-professionals may interpret and give meaning to their workplace encounters. Further, in-depth consideration will be paid to this paradigm in due course (see, for example, Roderick 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; 2012, 2014; Roderick & Schumacker, 2016). The critical issue to note is that Roderick's findings with adult professional players resonate strongly with the literature surrounding trainee experiences regarding expectations of conformity to club culture. For example, in a study of how two English professional footballers disidentified with team culture, Roderick (2006c) shows how these players exhibited high levels of cynicism toward managerial powers. The two players eventually overcame tensions between their internal perception of their identities and how they were expected to present in public. They did so by conforming to workplace expectations. Likewise, in considering an individual player's career and the ultimate significance of being selected to play, Roderick and Schumacker (2016) highlight the ongoing influence of the suite of institutional demands identified in players' lives. This narrative reinforces that the fundamental requirement for gaining personal significance as a professional footballer is the display of culturally defined achievements.

Roderick (2006a) found that institutional norms within the adult professional game dictated that players should exhibit a 'good professional attitude', a term not explicitly nor formally defined and yet commonly used by managers and coaches within the professional game. For Roderick (2006a), demonstrating this attitude includes the need to show absolute commitment to the professional game, follow management instructions without question, and be willing to sacrifice all for the team's good, including playing when injured. The over-arching message here is that players need to exhibit these behaviours to attain any form of personal significance as professional footballers. This evidence suggests that professional football can present a highly volatile and dynamic workplace culture for trainee and adult players, where uncertainty is ever-present (Roderick, 2006c). Roderick's findings reveal that players routinely conformed to the demand for total dedication to the game. The presentation of idealised workplace behaviours enabled them to be accepted, valued, respected and, above all, selected to play in the team (Roderick, 2006a; Roderick & Schumacker, 2016). Accordingly, the personal significance of players was contingent upon their adherence to these restrictive institutional norms. The requirement that players conform to stringent institutional limitations to be accepted raises the question of the impact of such constrictions on the development of personal identity.

### **The nature, scope and impact of athletic identity**

In psychology the term 'identity' is associated with self-image, self-esteem, and individuality. Identities often feel as if they are stable ubiquitous categories defining an individual, because of their grounding in the sense of being a continuous and persistent self. In their research into identity formation and elite sport, Brewer et al. (1993) studied American college athletes using the pioneering Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), a model developed further by Brewer and Cornelius

(2001). AIMS analyses the construction of athletic identity by seeking to understand the strength of identification with the athletic role (social identity), emotional responses to failure in the athletic role (negative affectivity), and lack of other social roles (exclusivity). The AIMS questionnaire was administered for the first time in English professional football by Mitchell et al. (2014) to assess the levels of athletic identity among 168 youth trainees aged 16-18 and spread across all four English professional leagues. The results indicated a tendency to over-invest in a one-dimensional identity and, consequently, trainees experienced psychological difficulties when their clubs did not offer them a professional contract.

Further, a study of trainees from English and Scottish Premier League and Football League football academies by Blakelock et al. (2016) compared the experiences of players who attained professional contracts with those released by their clubs at the end of the trainee period. Findings indicated that some of the players released by their club experienced psychological distress, and the authors propose that clinicians, clubs and (football) organisations (i.e., governing bodies) should clarify the development of service provision to enhance player adjustment to deselection. Concerns regarding the mental health of trainee professional footballers are also raised in an earlier study by Brown and Potrac (2009). They explore the experiences of four young, former elite footballers whose careers were terminated at the end of their three-year period as trainee professionals. The analysis considers how the trainees concerned had developed an athletic identity and the difficulties this created as they sought to adapt to life outside professional football. These problems included feelings of loss, uncertainty, failure and disorientation and impacted their social, physical and psychological wellbeing. Further, the participants highlighted that they had received little social support from the clubs they had played for since childhood. Brown and Potrac



(2009) conclude that those entering scholarship (trainee) programmes should receive support that allows them to develop the skills needed to cope with such events by anticipating future transitions and helping them identify transferable skills for use beyond sport.

While the quantitative psychological investigations above focus on early career termination among trainees, the meta-study of Ronkainen et al. (2016) aims to provide a critical synthesis of qualitative research on athletic identity in sports psychology. The authors critique the status of qualitative research on athletic identity and recommend that future research is better grounded in more complex, longer-term cultural constructions of athletic identity and the impact on psychological wellbeing. While psychological 'identity' is associated with individual self-perception, they note that individuals' identities are fluid, since they are also contextual, situationally adaptive and changing. Regarding a richer and more nuanced perspective on identity theory, in-depth investigations into the lives of experienced, established professional golfers by Carless and Douglas (2006, 2009a, 2014) and Olympic athletes by Carless and Douglas (2013) adopt narrative identity theory (see Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This approach holds that individuals form an identity by integrating their life experiences into a 'story of the self'. Individuals make sense of who they are through the narratives they construct, understand, value and express to others. In this view, identity is developed and sustained through storytelling and narratives created from previous life experiences, significant relationships and social norms that have accrued over time (McAdams, 2003). The belief that the formation of identities takes place in the larger social world within which individuals exist is foundational to this theoretical perspective (Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

In their study of professional golfers, Carless and Douglas (2014) argue that their respondents were encouraged to subscribe to a narrative where personal identity revolved around performance outcomes. They say that "performance narrative" (2014, p. 73) is a concept closely related to that of "athletic identity". In a paper drawing on evidence from Olympians across an eclectic range of sports, including rowing, rugby union, swimming, cricket, judo, canoeing, hockey, netball and track and field athletics, Carless and Douglas (2013) identify three significant outcomes of this performance narrative. First, an over-emphasis on athletic identity led to emotional tension and regret, as athletes reflected on relationships sacrificed or suppressed to pursue performance outcomes. Secondly, individuals resisted the pressure to conform, drawing on alternative narrative resources from outside of elite sports cultures, such as relational (defining oneself through meaningful relationships beyond sport) and discovery (forming identity through alternative interests) narratives (Douglas, 2009; Carless & Douglas 2006). Third, athletes often hid their stories and identities if these did not align with institutional expectations. They hid because a failure to accommodate culturally dominant narratives brought with it the risk of being excluded or ostracised - which could, in turn, lead to deselection and loss of sponsorship and earnings.

Carless and Douglas (2014) additionally found that athletes were likely to counteract the threats to their careers by emphasising their athletic identity when they perceived it necessary, consciously presenting themselves in ways aligned with the "performance narrative" (p. 73). Athletes emphasised their single-minded devotion to athletic success while simultaneously understating other aspects of their identities. They did so to align themselves with the expectations of significant others, such as team selectors, managers, and coaches. This behaviour goes some way to highlighting the tension between following dominant institutional narratives and a willingness to

use a range of alternative narratives to manage personal and professional lives. Notably, the tensions arising from this strategy led to feelings of inauthenticity, which ultimately damaged athletes' sense of wellbeing. Carless and Douglas (2014) suggest that opportunities be created for more complex identity narratives to be created, understood, voiced, and applied in practice. This recommendation would require, for example, the collaboration of coaches, performance directors and family members to support athletes in developing "counter-stories within sport" whereby stories that promote non-sporting interests are affirmed rather than mocked (2014, p. 188). This approach considers that the effective formation of personal identity requires an ability to build an authentic narrative.

An increasingly nuanced qualitative approach to the long-term formation of personal identity in elite athletes is also proposed by Roderick (2006a), using a social interactionist paradigm, placing an emphasis on the collective identity in which an individual's sense of self is strongly associated with role-behavior or the collection of group memberships that define them. This sociological approach emphasises that social actors do not innately possess any specific self; instead, the self has multiple aspects which are a product of social interactions (see Jenkins, 2008). The meanings ascribed to social encounters determine the outlook and behaviours of group members. As indicated earlier, Roderick (2006a) draws on the seminal work of Goffman (1959), which views everyday social life as a staged drama in which social actors attempt to form favourable self-impressions before different audiences. This notion of "dramatic realisation" (1959, p. 30) suggests that while in the presence of others, i.e., when "front stage", individuals strive to behave so that the "audience" can grasp what might, without a good "performance", remain unapparent or obscure (1959, pp. 15-16, 128). The suggestion is that the "presentation of self" is a carefully (stage)

managed process. Individuals interact by displaying themselves through many differing "fronts" to conform to various social and institutional roles and norms (1959, p. 225). Within any given culture, identity management promotes the appearance that individuals adhere to normative group practices and values. Central to the possibility of developing alternative personal identities is that whilst presenting the requisite front stage behaviours, individuals simultaneously possess the capacity to engage in conduct contrary to the dominant norms in play. For Goffman (1959, p. 112), these "back stage" behaviours thus represent how individuals engage in practices unseen by and resistant to the expectations of host organisations as "back regions are typically out of bounds to members of the audience" (1959, p. 128).

Roderick (2006a) uses this dramaturgical framework to analyse how the footballers in his research developed their personal and professional identities. Specifically, he shows how players attempted to distance their back stage selves from the workplace, front stage performances, finding discrete ways to dissociate from a total commitment to the external expectations of the workplace. In a further study of two footballers who resisted the performance-driven values of the professional game, Roderick (2014) again adopts Goffman's framework to demonstrate how the individuals concerned sought to remove themselves from the pressures of front stage performances where work colleagues and the wider public scrutinised their behaviour.

These findings are consistent with the experiences of the professional footballer James Schumacker, who is the subject (and co-author) of a later study by Roderick (Roderick & Schumacker, 2016), which provides an example of the tension between private and public workplace self-presentation. This conflict lays bare the uncertainties and instabilities of

professional footballing life, especially the anxieties around securing longer-term employment and being selected for first-team games. In particular, the discussion pays attention to the context in which footballers exist, noting the fundamental requirement to exhibit the achievement-orientated cultural norms which exemplify a 'good professional attitude' (Roderick, 2006a). This institutional pre-requisite draws out the complexity of the lived experiences of players and how the respondent concerned interpreted these social realities, both front and back stage, in the process of identity formation. Further, Schumacker's career was developed, supported and adjusted via an intricate web of individual factors, occupational demands and familiar relationships, which shaped how he presented various aspects of self in personal and workplace situations (see Allen-Collinson & Roderick, 2020). One consequence of this – which often plays out in the environment of a professional football club where there is intense rivalry between players seeking matchday selection – is the reluctance of professional footballers to explore workplace anxieties with teammates (Roderick, 2006a, Roderick, 2006c, Roderick, 2014; Roderick & Schumacker, 2016).

The literature considered above indicates that personal identities are complex, multifaceted, and subject to different influences in various ways. These studies also show that alternative sources and understandings of identity do not disappear when players are at work. Instead, these back stage selves are not given a primary role and therefore receive little exposure. The capacity to decide when to reveal or hide non-athletic identities at work raises questions of agency. What determines the willingness of athletes to present themselves in ways that do not align with institutional demands?

### **Contesting institutional demands**

Subscription to intersubjective thought communities can lead to common beliefs becoming normative requirements. We have seen how this can apply to elite sports culture through the development of a restrictive athletic or performance-based identity. A further aspect of intersubjectivity is that it can entail shared (or partially shared) divergencies of meaning. That is, there is scope for different individual interpretations and applications of the community norms, and these disparities are observable through various forms and degrees of self-presentation.

While there is evidence of divergencies of meaning within the restrictions of professional football, there are significant limitations to the willingness to resist the exhibition of an athletic identity at work. This chapter has argued that the cultural values of elite sport, observed primarily here concerning professional football, appear to encourage the development of a restrictive athletic identity. Further, there are limitations to the willingness to resist the exhibition of an athletic identity at work. For example, Roderick (2006a, 2014) and Roderick and Schumacker (2016) hold that while subtle forms of subversion can undermine the organisational power of management, there is often no intent on the part of the athletes concerned to overturn existing conditions entirely. Roderick (2006a) explains that external adherence to the cultural expectations enforced by clubs was necessarily in the players' best interests if they wished to remain in employment. Players were ultimately constrained to demonstrate alignment to the institutional norms and values and normative in play if they were to secure favour and ensure longevity within the professional game. In sum, the pressure to exhibit an athletic identity appeared to restrict the presentation of existing alternative deviant identities at work.

To further an understanding of the factors which might determine the integration of back stage and front stage identities, Hickey and Roderick (2017) combine Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework with Markus and Nurius's (1986) concept of 'possible selves'. They analyse the formation and workplace exhibition of alternative personal identities amongst ten male professional footballers aged 18 and 26 who had experienced career transition from the English Premier League to other clubs, higher education or alternative employment outside the professional game. The notion of 'possible selves' encompasses representations of a prospective role or state of being, which "represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). This combination of conceptual ideas reflects the social interactionist perspective, which stipulates those identities are fluid. Hickey and Roderick (2017) argue that in the case of their respondents, the flexibility of identity formation and the public presentation of self was continually in the process of being adjusted and negotiated by a vision of whom they wished to become. Several factors contributed to attaining such a future ideal. Initially, the respondents needed access to ideas for whom they might become, determined by social experiences. Having gained a degree of foresight into whom one might become, respondents required a blueprint to achieve the desired outcome. Progressing towards such an untested aspiration requires both practical guidance and emotional affirmation. Thus, legitimisation and support by work colleagues, family, and friends can profoundly impact an individual's willingness to realise the public presentation of a possible future self. This approval is critical when the vision is uncoordinated with the dominant set of social and cultural norms in which the individual is currently situated (Oyserman et al., 1995). Nevertheless, when consistently aligned with ongoing, affirmative practical and emotional feedback, the process outlined above can have a significant pragmatic impact, according to Oyserman and Markus (1990). This beneficial effect is because

growing confidence in an alternative self may increase willingness to exhibit previously hidden aspects of oneself in current, public environments.

This combination of the dramaturgical analogy of Goffman (1959) and the emphasis on audience idealisation of a prospective self by Markus and Nurius (1986) provides a theoretical foundation from which to consider how alternative identities might become increasingly integrated with current, authentic presentations of self in the workplaces of professional football. This engagement is because an alternative and established perception about where an athletes' life might lead may become a vital component of current behaviours. As a result, practical, everyday decision making can result in a more holistic and authentic representation of personal identity. This conceptual shift may address the problem noted earlier by Carless and Douglas (2014) that the inability of athletes to integrate a more rounded version of themselves at work led to feelings of inauthenticity, which ultimately damaged their wellbeing. Hickey and Roderick (2017) explore how more complex identity narratives, in this case with an eye on future selves, can be created, understood, articulated and publicly exhibited.

Critical to this pragmatic proposal is that influential audiences affirm and support the vision of a future self. The role of significant others in this process is pivotal. In their study of Finnish student-athletes, Ronkainen et al. (2019) noted that participants chose athletic role models who had other identities alongside their sporting careers. This process allowed the athletes to build more multifaceted senses of identity without compromising their chances of athletic success. The importance of gaining opportunities to emulate athletes who had more comprehensive perspectives on their sense of self aligns with the study of Jones and Denison (2017) regarding career transition



from professional football. They point out that there is an assumption that elite sport automatically builds character and helps develop essential life skills through disciplinary strategies. However, they challenge this understanding and emphasise the importance of coaches developing an appreciation of the many unseen effects of disciplinary power on footballers' bodies both during and after their careers. In the light of their analysis, Jones and Denison (2017) challenge coaches to adapt their approach to facilitating the development of a broader range of personal identities that bring benefits when athletes face retirement.

In a similar vein, Hickey and Roderick (2017) assess the influence of football players' families and friends. They demonstrate that career transitions were more difficult when audiences would not accept performances of non-footballing identities. For example, they argue that negative attitudes towards higher education amongst players' social group, manifesting in derogatory comments, may render it less likely that a player returns to education following retirement. Perhaps not surprisingly, moving on from professional football was much easier when significant others legitimised participant performance of non-footballing identities. The specific context of the participants observed by Hickey and Roderick (2017) provides a valuable platform upon which the current thesis seeks to build. Respondent experiences suggest that the affirmation of family and friends enabled participants to adopt alternative senses of identity, both during and after their footballing careers. Yet, participants who did not receive such affirmation struggled to realise alternative identities. In such cases, the desire of participants to sustain a career in professional football inhibited the expression of a non-footballing identity. If they were to remain within the profession, participants were aware of the need to focus on the normative and expected presentation of workplace athletic identity.

### **Football culture, theology and the sporting self**

The intersubjective cultural norms of elite sport appear to display stringent limitations upon divergent meaning for elite athletes regarding personal identity. The significant restrictions on presenting anything other than an achievement, performance-based orientation raises the question of the oppression faced by elite athletes, in particular professional footballers. The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by Crenshaw (1989). It is the notion that all discrimination and oppression is linked through the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, gender and class, and other factors include sexual orientation, physical ability/disability, and religion.

Intersectionality acknowledges that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people. It is in this context that the earlier focus on trainee footballers illustrated the restrictive and discriminatory nature of educational and developmental pathways in the professional game (Parker, 2000, 2001; McGillivray et al., 2005; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). Furthermore, the subsequent over-investment in athletic identity has been identified as a cause of mental health concerns when trainees fail to attain professional status (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014). In terms of adult players, evidence from professional football (for example, Roderick 2006a), golf (Carless & Douglas, 2014), and a range of other sports (Carless & Douglas, 2013) has shown how athletes may feel obliged to conceal aspects of their identity at work. Hiding parts of

self can lead to inauthenticity, which can be problematic for wellbeing (Carless & Douglas, 2013, 2014).

Considering the institutional culture of professional football has led to requests for integrating more holistic aspects of personal identity in day-to-day work to support player wellbeing. Concerns regarding the welfare of trainee and adult professional footballers have reached the highest levels of the English game and led to the launch of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in 2012 (Premier League, 2012). The EPPP is a long-term strategy initiated through consultation between the English Premier League and its clubs, representatives of the English Football League, Football Association and other key football stakeholders. It aims to develop better 'homegrown' (UK-based) players and develop young players' welfare and broader interests. The welfare agenda of the EPPP is grounded in the desire to achieve performance gains by creating "educationally rounded people through a holistic approach" (2012, p. 12). The terms "rounded" and "holistic" are not explicitly defined, though they indicate a desire to aid the trainees' development through broader perspectives that encompass skills and interests other than football. Perhaps more importantly, the EPPP provides no apparent criteria for assessing progress in developing "educationally rounded" players. While it has devised established means of improving the standard and quality of homegrown players, there appears to be less clarity about how the system evidences its claims for the holistic development of trainees.

Concerns over the EPPP have led commentators to call for a more rigorous approach that provides potentially substantial evidence regarding its efficacy. Manley and Parker (2017) note the failure of the EPPP to reverse the dominant cultural norms that trainees routinely face. In assessing the

impact of the EPPP on the 'personal development' of trainee professionals, McCready (2019) acknowledges the importance of scholarly research in identifying the problems facing young players. Nevertheless, he is critical of the failure of the initiative to lead to practical change in the conditions these young players face. Moreover, while McCready (2019) credits Hickey and Roderick (2017) with making a significant addition to the evidence base concerning the identities of young professional footballers, he remains critical of the absence of ensuing practical application.

McCready (2019) proposes the concept of 'personal development' to create a holistic and practical approach to enhancing the welfare of trainee professionals in English football. This notion is adapted from pioneering work by Danish et al. (1993) among elite American student-athletes, which pays attention to the continued growth of the whole person throughout athletic careers. They devised the 'Life Development Intervention' programme to ensure a common and consistent method of teaching participant athletes comprehensive life skills through the existential experiences of elite sport. Danish et al. (1993) propose that engaging in the long-term development of transferrable skills and talents is pivotal to career transition when a playing career ends. Critical to this process is that the individual athlete accepts that they will, at some point, need to make this transition and that it is wise to plan for this scenario. A pivotal aspect of this discussion is the need for developmental interventions to be made long before the athlete's career is on the verge of termination through injury, deselection or retirement. The term 'personal development' is also used by Stambulova et al. (2015) in their study of Swedish student-athletes dual career experiences during their first year at national elite sports schools. They noted that despite increasing theoretical discussion about mindfulness-based interventions in sport, no context-specific instrument existed

to measure this phenomenon. Thus, they devised 'The Mindfulness Inventory for Sport' (MIS). This MIS is used to assess athletes' use of mindfulness as a self-regulatory skill when facing disruptive stimuli in their sport. The common ground shared by Danish et al. (1993), Stambulova et al. (2015) and McCready (2019) is that these authors have sought to consider the pursuit of holistic development by athletes as they incorporate learnings from sport into broader life. The goal of these interventions has been to contribute to fostering non-athletic and athletic interests and identities throughout sporting careers.

These examples represent the kind of initiatives that target the development of the whole person rather than focusing solely on the athlete role (see also Strachan et al., 2011; Nesti & Sulley, 2014). McCready (2019) develops and applies this thoroughly practical approach to English football through his proposal for creating, delivering, and evaluating workshops for trainee players. This intervention, he argues, assists the personal development of young players from the earliest stages of their careers, rather than the point at which they face deselection from the professional game. The advocacy and development of programmes to engage with athletes long before they transition from elite sport is a significant, practical advance towards the goals envisaged by the EPPP.

As part of the ongoing challenge to redress the restrictive cultural norms in professional football clubs and academies, the current thesis recognises the importance of making practical advances in the personal development of trainee and professional footballers. This study seeks to demonstrate how sports ministries may be at the vanguard of this pragmatic provision. Sports chaplaincy has become an embedded aspect of professional football in the UK in recent years. For example, as previously noted, 70 of the 92 clubs in the Premier League and English Football League currently

have chaplains. Chapter One considered how chaplains have an established track record of investing in holistic and long-term relationships, regardless of the religious beliefs of those to whom they offer practical pastoral support. Sports chaplains have also demonstrated how this care is regularly achieved in conjunction with other sports specialists committed to player welfare (see Heskins & Baker, 2006; Gamble et al., 2013; Hemmings et al., 2019; Oliver & Parker, 2019; King et al., 2020). Engagement between sports chaplains and the stated outcomes of the EPPP is made explicit by Roe and Parker (2016) in their small-scale qualitative study of a Premier League club which shows how the club used chaplaincy to contribute to its long-term strategy involving the EPPP. They argue that within this context, the chaplain was ideally placed to provide safeguarding and welfare support to young players because of their independence from team management structures and the prioritisation of holistic care above performance-related issues.

McCready (2019) does not identify the practical support sports chaplains offer within professional football in the UK. However, the literature surrounding sports chaplaincy indicates the established presence of an existing strategy that has provided consistent investment in player welfare and development. Therefore, the embedded infrastructure of sports chaplaincy suggests that they have an essential role in delivering the practical welfare support necessitated by the preceding analysis. Further consideration of the role of sports chaplains resonates with the call for more qualitative work to provide suitable alternatives for the welfare of trainees (Mitchell et al., 2014) and adult professional athletes (Carless & Douglas, 2014). This thesis seeks to respond to the request. It is a study that responds to the challenge of engaging in qualitative inquiry to contribute to effective practical strategies for developing, supporting and integrating private and public personal identities. Later recommendations will suggest how the findings of this study into the lives of

professional footballers in the years before the development of the EPPP offers established, concrete and practical proposals to challenge some of the contemporary limiting mores of professional football. The thesis advocates employing a theocentric approach to enhance the day-to-day investment in athlete welfare in ways that apply to Christians and those of other faiths or none.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed psychological and sociological literature regarding the nature of identity formation and its implications for athlete welfare. The review has highlighted how the intersubjective institutional culture of professional football compels players to exhibit an unbounded passion for the game and total subservience to management and authority. The resulting development of an intense athletic identity was initially a psychological concept which began to be explored from a sociological and qualitative approach. The chapter progressed by introducing the theoretical perspective of social interactionism to provide an analytical framework with more nuanced and subtle indicators regarding the formation of personal identity in the lives of elite athletes. The social interactionist approach pays attention to the role of significant others, including, for example, family members, friends and acquaintances, in affirming prospective senses of oneself, which might manifest themselves in current behaviours at home and work within the professional game. The importance of the role of other people in providing opportunities for alternative versions of self for professional footballers culminated in a discussion about the intersectional influence regarding the lack of practical options for players' personal development. However, I pointed out that sports chaplains have, for some time, been committed to practices that

seek to reinforce a developmental approach to identity formation amongst athletes. They have done so by collaborating with other specialists to challenge the dominant performance-based norms and offer holistic and long-term relationships that last beyond the tenure of a single club. I proposed that if chaplains adopt a theocentric approach to pastoral support, it could entail even more holistic benefits for the elite athletes they serve, regardless of religious belief.

The consideration of identity construction in professional sport that has been reviewed in this chapter is a complicated and multifaceted issue that demands ongoing academic inquiry. For this reason, Mitchell et al. (2014) have called for the continued growth of qualitative methodologies to increase understanding in this area of research within professional football. This study seeks to address the challenge by engaging in empirical research into the lives of Christian professional footballers. It does so by contrasting the achievement-orientated culture of professional footballer outlined in this chapter with the theocentric perspective of a received identity expounded in Chapter One. The appropriation of Christian faith while sustaining a professional career offers an opportunity to explore the formation, support, and establishment of Christian identity and assess the resulting integration and practical impact on everyday workplace life. Such a task entails the methodological integration of theology and social science, which will now be addressed.



## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Design**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter One I proposed that optimal pastoral support for Christian elite athletes requires the development of robust theological foundations regarding the Christian perspective on personal identity and that such foundations should underpin the practices of sports chaplaincy. To this end, I identified the need to adopt a theocentric approach to identity formation, an approach which advocates that personal identity is received from God. Chapter Two explored the antithesis of this theocentric, received perspective by reviewing psychological and sociological literature focused on identity formation in elite athletes. I suggested that the social processes by which identities have traditionally been formed within the cultural confines of English professional football represent an anthropocentric, achievement-orientated approach to identity formation in elite athletes.

The present chapter brings together these theological and theoretical foundations to provide a conceptual lens through which the research findings can be viewed and interpreted. It begins by addressing the significant methodological challenges of integrating theological and social science literature in search of empirical authenticity. These challenges arise because the Christian belief that there is a God who reveals Himself to humanity assumes ontological and epistemological positions which run contrary to the foundations of the social sciences. In addressing this methodological tension, the chapter proposes a research design founded on practical theology and

appropriately aligned methods of data collection. This methodology features data collection via semi-structured interviews and a process of data analysis based upon the conventions of grounded theory. The chapter concludes by reflecting on my positionality and its impact on the design and process of this research.

## **Methodology**

Those engaged in the study of Christianity and sport have routinely acknowledged that, paradigmatically, theology and the social sciences have traditionally belonged to opposite ends of the research spectrum (see, for example, Parker & Watson, 2014b). They suggest that despite an increasing body of academic literature in this field, and regardless of the clear understanding that belief systems impact social relationships, theologians have "been somewhat reluctant to recognize the value of empirical research" and work in the interpretive traditions (Parker & Watson, 2014b, p. 193). It would seem inevitable that the consequent limitation in qualitative work has inhibited the assessment of the relationship between Christianity and sport in day-to-day athletic contexts. In undertaking qualitative work in the life course, faith, and career of Christian professional footballers, this thesis aims to take up the challenge to facilitate further theological reflection and resulting practical proposals for the pastoral support of Christian elite athletes.

The philosophical challenge of combining theology with empirical research arises because belief in God, and His revelation to humanity, assumes a realist ontology and a positivist epistemology. That is, the Christian faith assumes that God determines objective truth and that such truth is found in God's revelation to humanity. This combination is at odds with the constructivist ontology and

interpretive epistemology common to the social sciences, whereby the presumption favours the notions of reality and meaning as social constructs. This philosophical proposal must be aligned to an appropriate methodological design to develop a robust research paradigm, which the sub-discipline of theology, called 'practical theology', can provide. Practical theology holds that the study of Christian belief requires not only the intellectual and deductive knowledge of the Bible's teaching but an additional exploration of the application of its teachings in everyday life situations, as Cameron et al., (2010, pp. 20-21) explain:

Practical theology is a discipline committed to making whole and dynamic the truthfulness of Christian thought and action through the bringing together of aspects of faith which, in truth, can never be separated from one another. Practical theology seeks in explicit and varied ways to enable the Christian practitioner to articulate faith - to speak of God - in practice.

Practical theological research is rooted in embodied situations in the contemporary world, considering Christian beliefs in the daily lived experience of people who profess such beliefs. In their seminal work in this area, Swinton and Mowat (2006, p. 6) articulate this position:

Practical theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.

In their seminal work on the use of the seemingly disparate entities of theology and qualitative research, Swinton and Mowat (2006) insist that such work must retain theological integrity. That is, belief in the reality of God and his revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ must retain a primary position in the design of practical theological research. In everyday experiences, the Christian faith must be embodied, interpreted, and acted out. Practical theology is a theological discipline that seeks to faithfully participate in and study how the life of faith is communicated and practised. It is a (sub) discipline based on the wish of theologians to explicitly consider how everyday behaviours relate to the Bible and its teaching.

In the interests of maintaining a relationship between theology and the social sciences, Swinton and Mowat (2006) initially propose a design for qualitative research that provides accurate data for theological reflection whilst retaining the integrity of both theology and the social sciences. They do so by putting forward a conceptual framework that enables theologians to approach qualitative research from a theological perspective, rather than a context already defined by qualitative methods in the social sciences, which they do not consider to be neutral. A crucial factor here is that the Christian perceives reality as shaped by a belief in God and His revelation to humanity. Therefore, reality cannot be shaped by an alternative assumption that such a being does not exist and cannot reveal Himself. Critically, human experience will be viewed from one or other of these exclusive ontological and epistemological perspectives. Therefore, contrasting assumptions regarding ontology and epistemology underpin both theological and sociological inquiry. Swinton and Mowat (2006) propose a model of integration that seeks to bring together these theological and sociological dimensions in a manner that offers equal voice to each, exploring the complexities of the human condition for those whose lives are based upon the

Christian faith. Swinton and Mowat (2006, p. 74) call this initial model of integration "mutual critical correlation" and propose this as a contribution to developing a theoretical framework for qualitative theological research. Essentially, this involves a theological framework and evidence-based findings from life situations leading to a dialogue considering the teaching of the Bible against perspectives and insights from other sources of knowledge, primarily from the social sciences.

In her reflections on the practices of a Christian Zionist congregation in their adopted settlement in the West Bank, Phillips (2012) develops a more robust approach than that suggested by Swinton and Mowat (2006). Phillips offers a rigorous defence of qualitative theological approaches insofar as the social sciences have moved away from modern, structuralist and positivist understandings of their social scientific objectivity. According to Phillips (2012), the social sciences have moved towards post-structuralist, constructivist, and interpretive understandings of how the social sciences themselves and the individuals who conduct social scientific research are situated. For Phillips, practical theology represents more than an attempt to make Christian doctrine intelligible or to highlight the recognition that Christian belief is inherently contextual. Her position is that the situation of the theological researcher matters. It is a matter of 'knowing', and it is an epistemological perspective which 'knows' God and his revelation (Phillips, 2012). This approach considers both objective truths, as emanating from God's revelation in the Bible, and the subjective experiences of Christian people seeking to live day-to-day lives in response to this truth. This process aligns biblical concepts with a tacit understanding of practice, facilitating integrated theological findings in qualitative research.

In his edited collection of papers devoted to the relationship between the church's doctrines and social inquiry, Ward (2012a) also addresses the importance of attaining theological integrity as a starting point for qualitative research. He points out that in the interplay between beliefs (theology) and practices (the tools of the humanities/social sciences), the role of fieldwork is to root the biblical ideas of the image and mission of God as found in the lives of actual people, places and practice. Ward argues that theology is replete with assertions about the social and communal nature of the church and the challenge is to assess how aligned such assertions are to the actual lived experience of Christians. Ward (2012a) claims that a theological understanding of the nature of the Christian community should lead naturally into the empirical study of its forms and practices as a necessary and positive means of enabling it to achieve its proper goals and live out its true identity. For him, qualitative research (or in his wider interpretation 'ethnography') "refers to a way of seeing or a way of approaching social research", which encompasses values such as reflection, reflexivity and immersion (Ward, 2012a, p. 6).

Having defined ethnography in this way, Ward argues that qualitative research (which he terms the "ethnographic turn" in theological research) represents a strategic intervention in Christian theology (Ward, 2012a, p. 6). He reinforces the claim that research methods are never neutral, situating the researcher in relation to the area of study. He points out that the researcher's perspective is crucial to how they see, what they see, and what they eventually come to write. Qualitative methods constitute a particular perspective or voice within different disciplinary conversations. Whatever the disciplinary field and whatever the point at issue, qualitative research focuses attention on the lived and the local. Christians will inevitably "see" things in a Christian manner, which subtly influences what they observe and assess (Ward, 2012b, p. 38). Christians

reflect theologically whether consciously or subconsciously. In many ways, the central issue is how to bring such implicit theological assumptions from the background to the foreground so that they may be identified, interrogated, and critically applied. Ward draws on the work of Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) to explain this by using the term "foreshadowing" (Ward, 2012b, p. 37). Under this analysis, the normative approach of qualitative research is to follow a research question to conduct theoretical debates and research. In this view, research is "foreshadowed" by conversations that direct attention and interest (Ward, 2012b). Throughout a research project, these conversations continue and are refined and changed. Moreover, theological interest "is not simply one among many interests for those who self-identity as theologians", but the one in which theologians will seek to engage when constructing research (Ward, 2012b, p. 49). Of course, in one sense, this is nothing new given that scholars within the social sciences have long since debated the nature, function and value of qualitative research and particularly the role of the researcher in this process. What Ward (2012a) does is to shine a theological light on such debates.

In due course, Swinton moves away from his original proposal of 'mutual critical correlation' (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p. 74) regarding the relationship between theology and the social sciences, pointing out that unless the status of theological research is seen as equivalent to that of research in the social sciences, theology runs the risk of being viewed as a 'second-order activity', which may, in turn, compromise Christian theology, with its disciplinary nuances and subtleties, as a valid mode of knowledge (Swinton, 2012). That is, he refutes the idea that theology is an activity that occurs only after rigorous qualitative work. As Phillips (2012) and Ward (2012a, 2012b) have observed, all qualitative research is value laden. The methods one chooses to

investigate evidence will determine what one can and cannot see. Qualitative research is more than a method of data collection. It impacts the construction of the research, how data is collected, analysed, interpreted and presented, and the audience to whom the findings will be attractive. Swinton (2012) argues that meaning and interpretation should emerge from scrutinising particular contexts by observation leading to data collection. The primary research tool is, of course, the researcher. Therefore, taking one's methods as a Christian into a particular context or community is critical to gaining meaning-generating processes within that community. Bias is necessary.

For Swinton, at the heart of qualitative research is the hermeneutical enterprise; it is first and foremost an interpretive venture, and the "act of interpretation is necessarily value-laden" (Swinton, 2012, p. 81). This is a double hermeneutical process where: (i) social actors interpret their life circumstances and experiences in and through the data collection process, and (ii) we, as qualitative researchers, subsequently interpret these interpretations via data analysis and narrative construction. Swinton (2012) suggests a difference for the researcher between observing the behaviour of Christians — "looking at"— and having a tacit understanding of experience because of the researcher's personal Christian faith — "living in" (p. 91). Christians engaging in qualitative research cannot but engage in both, and such reflexive knowledge of "living in" makes a difference (p. 91). Those who 'live in' Christianity inevitably work within a different methodology, which means they will look and see differently. Such modes of 'looking' and 'seeing' may complement each other, but they are not the same, nor are they necessarily equivalent.

The simple philosophical requirement, it would appear, is to acknowledge the exercise of theological reflexivity within theological dimensions and to assume this as a standard and primary



aspect of empirical theological research. The methodological positions adopted by Swinton (2012), Phillips (2012) and Ward (2012a, 2012b) affirm this approach, indicating how disciplines that naturally lie at opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum may transcend traditional research boundaries. An empirical study is the most effective way to explore lived experience. Moreover, subsequent reflection on qualitative findings fed back to the theologian to recalibrate the interpretation and the application of the concepts deployed for analysis are central to practical theology and the methodological approach of this thesis. Therefore, the consideration of identity formation in Christian professional footballers which this thesis undertakes 'looks' and reflects upon the research findings from the theocentric perspective that a Christian athlete has a 'received' identity and that their personal significance due to the initiative of the relational God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Retaining academic integrity was pivotal to this research design. The same standards must apply to the consideration of research methods since the approaches chosen to access data matter as much as the philosophical and methodological requirements. Hence, it is to this issue that we now turn.

### **Methods of data collection**

From the outset, this study situated its central research question regarding the identity formation of Christian elite footballers within the theoretical framework of practical theology. Based on the above discussion, a constructivist, interpretative methodological position was then adopted, but clearly framed within the robust theological perspective of a 'received' identity. For this reason, it was necessary that the methods of data collection were appropriately aligned since contextualising the implementation of methods is intimately linked with research design and methodology. This

process includes consideration of the choice of participants, the nuances of the data collection process.

The choice of participants was of initial importance. Primary data collection required access to, and interviews with, people who had become Christians while sustaining a career in professional football. Gaining access to potential participants was viable since I had an extensive network of relationships, having been involved in men's professional and semi-professional football from 1978-1999 as a player, coach, and manager and from 2013 as a director of a professional football club. As such, in my role as a researcher, I had ascertained "tacit knowledge", namely a contextual understanding of the culture in which research occurs, that is critical to providing in-depth qualitative data (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). Further, I became a Christian while playing professionally in 1984 and have worked alongside Christian professional players for Christians in Sport since 1989. These factors enabled me to invite a cohort of individuals to engage with the study. It is important to state at this point that I had long-term relationships with all the respondents, and in all cases, had been involved in the pastoral support of most respondents since they had become Christians.

The choice of respondents was determined by the research question, namely, to identify the impact of Christian faith on identity formation within the workplace of professional football in the UK. In the absence of any previous qualitative research in this area, one of the aims of the study was to initiate further inquiry into this field by providing a baseline for future research. To assess the process of identity formation, I determined that the respondents needed to have sustained a playing career long enough after becoming Christians to observe how faith and football had impacted their

sense of self and any resulting social relationships. In pursuit of this end, all but one of the respondents worked as professional footballers having appropriated Christian faith. One respondent became a Christian whilst transitioning out of a professional playing career but continued to work in professional football in a coaching capacity.

At this stage, my choice of such a homogenous cohort of participants may be worth noting. I wished to form a snapshot of a particular group of people who came to faith as closely as possible to the inaugural development of sports ministry amongst elite athletes in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, as observed in Chapter One, the inaugural use of Christian elite athletes for public evangelism was simultaneously modified by a focus on pastoral support (Parker & Watson, 2011; Parker & Weir, 2012). I hoped to benchmark the impact of pastoral support on the identity formation of these Christian elite athletes. Another reason for the respondent selection was that all became Christian during their playing careers and had little previous lived experience of a Christian community. This unique trait provided the opportunity to track their experience from inaugural faith, throughout their playing career and beyond their retirement from the profession.

Thus, at the time of the interviews, all my respondents had retired from playing football and ranged from 42 to 66 years of age. Following their playing careers, six respondents continued to work full-time within the professional game in various management roles, one made a living by managing several semi-professional teams, one combined management in professional football with a charitable role, one directed a charity and five became Christian pastors. The length of time between retirement and this study arguably increases the risk of recall bias (Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008). However, this age range meant that I also had the benefit of exploring the process of identity

formation both during and beyond respondents' playing careers since the transition from the game is typically disruptive of a balanced sense of self (Gearing, 1999; Jones & Denison, 2017). The specific criterion for selecting the respondents means that, rather than being a representative group of former players, the overall cohort of respondents "more closely resembles a panel of expert informants" (Roderick, 2006c, p. 250).

Once I had settled on participant selection, the next step was to consider how many would be invited to join the research project, since this would have a bearing on the research methods for accessing data (Patton, 1990). The qualitative nature of the study, aligned with the depth of my relationships with the participants, lent itself to using interviews. Bryman (2016) points out the rule of thumb that the broader the scope of a qualitative study and the more comparisons between groups required the greater the number of interviews needed. Conversely, he argues that if one has a specific research focus, then an interview can be directed at that focus and its associated research questions, and relatively fewer interviews are necessary. He suggests that for the publication of a study based on qualitative interviews, the minimum number of interviews required seems to be between 20 and 30. Adler and Adler (2012) advise a range between 12 and 60 and a mean of 30 interviews. However, the closed nature of elite sports typically indicates the likelihood of a smaller sample size, according to Adler and Adler (2012, p. 8), who contend that:

[A] small number of cases, or subjects, may be extremely valuable and represent adequate numbers for a research project. This reduction in the number of participants is especially true for studying hidden or hard to access populations.

Indeed, given the notoriously 'closed' nature of professional football and the traditional difficulties that researchers have experienced in gaining access to players or former players for research purposes mean that smaller sample sizes are normative for qualitative research within the professional football context (see Parker, 1996; Roderick, 2006c). Indeed, this context legitimises the qualitative study of the experiences of only two or one former professional footballer(s) (Roderick, 2014; Roderick & Schumacker, 2016). The specific focus of this thesis on identity formation, coupled with the challenge of accessing elite athletes, appears to legitimate the choice of a smaller sample size. My supervisor advised that the collection of about forty hours of recorded data was optimal for a study of this magnitude. To this end, I chose 14 Christian players to interview since this enabled me to diarise three one-hour interviews with each respondent. An overview of the career of each of these respondents is available in Chapter Four.<sup>3</sup>

Consideration was given to three types of interviews: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. Structured interviews were quickly dismissed due to the personal relationships I had with the respondents. I was confident that accessing appropriate data could be achieved informally. Further, I did not believe that structured interviews were the best option to obtain nuanced responses on the participants' experiences, as there "is generally little room for variation in response except where the infrequent open-ended question may be used" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 363). However, unstructured interviews did not seem to be the best approach either. An entirely informal, free-flowing conversation might have facilitated the emergence of an extensive range of topics with potential concepts, ideas and historical anecdotes. However, it was clear that

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis to protect the identity of the respondents. Any identifying information has been removed to protect the respondents further.

maintaining a specific focus was required to elucidate the nuanced experiences of appropriating Christian faith whilst sustaining a career in professional football. Accordingly, I decided to use semi-structured interviews described by Burgess (1984, p. 102) as "conversations with a purpose." This implies "purpose" on the part of the interviewer and simultaneously the opportunity for the respondent to feel that they are in a "conversation" and not an interview. As indicated by the research question, I had a clear purpose, and I wanted to frame the conversation around the goal of identity formation as Christian elite athletes. Semi-structured interviews seemed to be the best-equipped option to balance purposeful outcomes with free-flowing conversations. Bryman (2016) advises that flexibility is crucial in qualitative interviewing; that allowing respondents the freedom to answer open-ended, conversational questions that the researcher can follow up on maintains the standard of a semi-structured as opposed to a structured interview.

Furthermore, Bryman (2016) states that a benefit of semi-structured interviews is that they provide the interviewee with an opportunity to offer a wide range of responses. This approach allows the researcher to ask questions with a purpose but simultaneously to honour the opinions and viewpoints of the participants (Fontana & Frey, 1998). A capacity to listen carefully to the responses allows the interviewer to pick up on various emergent topics and ask for elaboration or clarification from the interviewee. A semi-structured interview involves exploring broad questions and topics, giving the interviewee a great deal of scope in their responses. Indeed, the capacity of the researcher to take cues from, and further probe, the respondents' discussion enables the researcher to "follow up the specific responses along lines which are peculiarly relevant to them and their context, and which you could not have anticipated in advance, in a highly organic way"

(Mason, 2002, p. 64). Whilst the process should retain flexibility regarding the choice and order of questions, the researcher typically addresses questions to the respondents.

I adopted a semi-structured approach because I believed that there was a pertinent yet wide range of questions and topics of interest emanating from the central research question which would engage the respondents in conversation. This approach meant that I could devise a broad framework or interview schedule within which there was space for following the conversation in the direction dictated by the responses. Thus, there was a need to structure the conversations to ensure the monitoring of data collection covering the critical areas for later analysis.

The interview process began by reviewing the interview questions with my supervisors to ensure appropriate rigour. Prior to the onset of the research, the University of Gloucestershire Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval. Respondents were contacted informally in the first instance regarding their willingness to participate in the research and then, in the same manner, to arrange interviews once they had given consent. Interviews took place between December 2017 and June 2019 and comprised three separate conversations with each respondent, no less than six months apart. The first round of interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and took place at participants' homes or hotels local to them. The second and third round of interviews took place by Skype or Zoom. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full.

The data collection method outlined above shows that the first interviews were in person and the next two rounds virtually. This approach can be advantageous when respondents are spread across a large geographic area (Bryman, 2016). Twelve of those interviewed lived in the UK and two

overseas (in the USA and Canada). Further, twelve were still in full-time employment and faced time restrictions in terms of their everyday work. The use of Skype and Zoom meant that I could organise interviews at very short notice at times to suit their specific needs. Bryman (2016) also notes the drawbacks of remote interviews, including less spontaneity and the decreasing likelihood to probe and ask follow-up questions. I reflected on these potentially problematic aspects but decided that since I had well established, long-term relationships with the respondents and a history of meeting with them online and in person, the positives outweighed the negatives. For these reasons, on balance, AlKhateeb (2018) and Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown (2016) highlight the benefits of using Skype as a medium for completing qualitative research. There are, of course, risks of technical failure of audio or video quality when using Skype or Zoom (King & Horrocks, 2010). However, technological improvements have primarily addressed this worry, and there were no technical glitches experienced during the interviews. Of course, in the COVID era, qualitative researchers have come to rely far more heavily on virtual data collection methods and what was once seen as an innovative way of carrying out research has now become the norm (Rania, Coppola and Pinna, 2021).

During the interviews, the semi-structured approach allowed the questioning style to be open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify responses. In this regard, Fielding and Thomas (1993, p. 140) note that "probing is a key interview skill. It is all about encouraging the respondent to give an answer and as full a response as the format allows." Within the context of the semi-structured interview, I sought to probe the interview responses to garner more detailed and nuanced narratives from respondents. The initial round of discussions enquired about respondents' career histories and how they became Christians. This broad approach made the initial



interview straightforward since recalling the details of their careers and their Christian testimony were familiar and comfortable topics of conversation, which placated any fears that committing to an engagement in academic research might be awkward. The creation of a six-month gap before the second interview proved helpful in transcribing and undertaking initial analysis that played a part in honing the questions for the second phase interviews. Therefore, the function of the first interview, in addition to enabling general discussion on the respondents' faith and careers, was to identify key issues and patterns that arose in the responses and framed the remainder of the study (Arber, 1993). The second round focused more closely on how Christianity had impacted their everyday work and workplace relations and domestic experiences. These themes had started to emerge during the first round of interviews when respondents described how they became Christians and, in the second round, led quickly into more in-depth explorations of the challenges and advantages of everyday integration of Christianity and sport.

The second phase interviews provided rich data for analysing respondents' identity formation throughout, and indeed beyond, their playing careers. The six-month gap before the final round of interviews also proved pivotal. The original plan was to ask a series of questions regarding the integration of faith with wider public interactions since all respondents had, to varying degrees and at one time or another, been publicly recognisable figures. However, the first two interviews uncovered numerous and unexpected examples of how studying the Bible had impacted respondents' experiences. Further, there was a similarly surprising number of indications of the influence of significant other Christians in affirming participants' identity as Christians and aiding the integration of faith and professional sport. By this stage, I had read the work of Hickey and Roderick (2017) regarding the role of 'significant others' in affirming or denying alternative

identities in the lives of professional footballers. This conceptual breakthrough demanded further exploration and the role of the Bible and significant other Christians in supporting the integration of Christianity and sport became the focus of the third round of interviews. The unexpected data gleaned in this final round of inquiry ultimately provided a sense of completion and closure to the respondents' journeys into, through and beyond professional playing careers (see Chapter Nine). Very sadly, one of the respondents passed away between the first and second stages of the interview process. In his case, I used data from the audio recording of an interview I had previously conducted with that respondent regarding his Christian faith and professional football career.

All in all, I found the interview process to be a significant learning experience. By the end of the three rounds of interviews, the world of Christianity and professional football, one which I had previously thought of as very familiar, had now, somehow, become strange (Burgess, 1984). Substantial analysis was required to help me understand what had been going on in the lives of these fourteen respondents.

### **Data analysis**

After completing each separate round of interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed to provide an overview of participant responses. The six-month gap between interviews allowed adequate time for reflection on the findings. Indeed, as noted above, after completing and reviewing the first two rounds of interviews, it became apparent that new concepts were emerging that I had not previously considered, regarding the role of the Bible, and the influence of significant others, in respondents' integration of faith and sport. As indicated, this initial analysis led to a

significant change of strategy regarding the third-round of interview questions. The importance of coordinating data collection with analysis throughout the research process, in contrast to undertaking this process after completing data collection, is emphasised by Delamont (2012). Charmaz (2014) also considers the cyclical nature of such processes and the importance of initial and ongoing analysis and argues that researchers often need to return to participants with new inquiries based on previous analysis.

Thus, analysis was utilised both during and after the data collection process. Indeed, my findings in the first round of interviews shaped the data collection in the second and third rounds of interviews (Arber, 1993). This ongoing analytical process is reminiscent of a grounded theory approach to qualitative inquiry which via a highly inductive process de-prioritises the use of previous theories or concepts to analyse data (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz argues that grounded theory allows for the data obtained in a study to determine and drive the theory produced. Preconceived theories should not be forced upon nor control the data analysis. Instead, the findings themselves should provide the desired definitions and insights. Indeed, the overriding objective of grounded theory is to provide a plausible theory that emanates directly from the data itself (McLeod, 2001).

The adoption of a grounded theory mindset certainly sat comfortably with my analytic approach since I did not collect data with preconceived ideas of what I would find. However, it is recognised that, in its purest form, grounded theory is a highly nuanced perspective, suffice to say that my own approach to data analysis would be better described as broadly 'thematic' (see Charmaz, 2014). Whilst I was deeply embedded in the cultures of professional football and Christian

organisations, my engagement had been as a practitioner rather than an academic. I had no previous insight into academic considerations of identity formation within the professional game nor any prior knowledge of studies investigating the institutional cultures of elite sport. Hence, my background in the arena of Christianity and professional football led me to what I later recognised as (broadly speaking) a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Further, and crucially, I could not find any previous qualitative inquiry into identity formation amongst Christian elite footballers. Thus, the attempt to engage a theology and social science perspective in pursuit of an examination of the identity formation of Christian elite athletes appeared to be a novel venture. Following Charmaz (2014), I undertook a systematic analysis of data through a process of open, axial and selective coding and the formation of a conceptual framework that facilitates the presentation of participant experiences from their own perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2000, 2014). Throughout this process the role of coding to synthesise the data from the interview transcripts into clear categories was crucial to identifying the key themes and issues which had structured respondent lives. From a grounded theory perspective, the coding of data is a fundamental mechanism via which the researcher can uncover emergent patterns and themes (Mills, Bonner and Francis, 2006). The benefits of this are similar to those of content analysis identified by Biddle et al., (2001, p. 795), whereby researchers can "distil information from large amounts of qualitative data ... to identify core or common themes." Thus, I undertook data analysis in the post-interview periods in search of concepts and categories that might best explain the findings. This was done by relistening to audio recordings and rereading interview transcripts, which proved crucial for the eventual approach to framing the findings.

In adopting a thematic approach, the practical discipline was to comb through the data by continually listening to the audio recordings of the interviews. Once patterns appeared to emerge, I would place the edited segments of the rough transcripts into groups, using tables on Apple's Numbers software. Then, if this process appeared to provide sufficient evidence, I used it to devise the categories and concepts which form the basis of the data findings chapters. The process did not involve coding software. In sum, data were treated and analysed in five stages. Firstly, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. Second, transcripts were read in full, alongside listening to the audio, to gain a comprehensive overview of the data. Third, each transcript was individually coded and indexed. Fourth, these experiences were categorised into several overarching topics, such as the details of the respondents' footballing careers and the process of coming to Christian faith. Fifth, these topics were formally organised into generic themes, such as the influence of significant others and the occurrence of workplace evangelism, which form the basis of the subsequent data chapters.

Since this thesis seeks to develop a research design that integrates theology and the social sciences, it is helpful to turn to the analytic approach of practical theology proposed by Swinton and Mowat (2006). They highlight the importance to practical theology of engaging in analysis from the earliest stages of collecting data. This process is akin to a "pastoral cycle", suggesting that it provides the opportunity for theological reflection throughout the interview process (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 97). It is worth capturing the whole process of their research design here since it offers a helpful insight into the overall approach of this thesis. The research design begins by proposing the importance of the research question in the context of Christian living. There follows the choice of the qualitative method employed to pose questions of observation, interpretation, and

application, as the researcher interacts with respondents to search for meaning through subsequent analysis. Crucially for the methodological approach of this thesis, the process engages in theological reflection on the findings. This reflection includes the church's practices and teaching in the light of Scripture. The final aspect of the pastoral cycle suggested by Swinton and Mowat (2006) is that the conclusions are then explored and probed in a focus group setting to facilitate the possibility of further reflection on the findings, with this degree of reflexivity on the researcher's part designed to ensure a degree of critical faithfulness. The goal of this process is the proposition of revised, and subsequently applied, practices that are faithful to the Bible.

Though my research did not deploy formal focus groups as outlined by Swinton and Mowat (2006), much of the process they advocate in the pastoral cycle is a pertinent description of the analytic approach adopted here. As the interviews progressed, it became apparent that some significant concepts and practices, such as the importance of the Bible, the critical role of the Christian community and God's missional nature, were robust features of the findings. This development, alongside theological reflection between interviews, led to the different approach in the final round of interviews outlined previously. In pursuit of integrity, having concluded the third interview, and in line with conventional practice concerning processes of respondent validation (or member checking), all participants were given the opportunity to review their transcribed accounts for accuracy (Bryman, 2016). It is worth noting that while no one did ask to see the transcripts, after the second interview, several respondents asked to talk through what I was beginning to 'see' in the discussion, which, as we have seen, played a vital part in my strategy regarding the third round of questions.

## **Positionality and ethical guidelines**

Academic rigour is critical to any research, and the veracity of the findings in this thesis are valuable only insofar as the inquiry was academically rigorous. This requirement for rigour applies to qualitative as it does to quantitative research, indeed, "rigour is the means by which we show integrity and competence" within qualitative research (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 390). In establishing such rigour, Tracy (2010) provides eight criteria for high quality quantitative research. These are having a worthy topic, rich rigour (that is, having both accuracy and depth), sincerity, credibility, resonance, making a significant contribution, being ethically sound, and being meaningfully coherent. Tracy's criterion builds on the seminal contribution of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who provide four foundational criteria for trustworthiness, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. It is instructive to consider, in turn, each of these criteria, as applied to the present study. I have already outlined how credibility was pursued by a thorough approach to research design, beginning by using a practical theology framework to address the challenge of integrating theology and the social sciences. The study also sought to ensure a degree of dependability in the rigour deployed in selecting appropriate data collection methods and by following a rigorous process of data analysis to discover the themes, concepts, and categories devised to address the research question.

Regarding the notion of transferability, this is "achieved when readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action" (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). The incorporation of generalisations beyond the scope of a particular study is something that qualitative research is often challenged by. Bryman (2016) notes that total

replication of a qualitative study is nearly impossible since one cannot revert to a specific time with the exact circumstances and actors available to a previous researcher. Rather, it is widely accepted within the orbits of qualitative research that the researcher's responsibility is to provide sufficient depth through "thick description" that enable the research to be externally validated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). Moreover, the findings proposed in this thesis can be further tested and assessed. For example, several the main empirical themes have close ties with wider sociological studies concerning identity formation and several established theological discussions regarding Christian mission, in the guise of *missio Dei*. In both scenarios, the study makes transferable generalisations for comparison to those areas of study.

The final criterion for trustworthiness provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is confirmability. Since complete objectivity is impossible for a researcher, the idea of confirmability is essential. The key issue here is to seek affirmation that the researcher has acted in good faith and not allowed personal agendas or biases to dictate the work. Personal interests and identification within the field of research must be acknowledged, observed and reflected upon in the process of inquiry since it is not feasible to keep the researcher's perspective neutral (Denzin, 1997; Bryman, 2016). It is important to exhibit reflexivity regarding the researcher's perspective since the concessions about personal biases matter, requiring a significant degree of reflexivity in fieldwork and data analysis. The research question requires a degree of reflexivity focused on awareness of the researcher's previous knowledge and experience in the field.

Regarding the researcher's participation, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) present a spectrum between two extremes, from full immersion in the field to those who are complete outside



observers, with most research occurring in between the two. My role was certainly one of observer, but an observer deeply embedded as a practising football incumbent and Christian leader. Thus, previous knowledge of the field and the researcher's own experience is, in some form, used to engage with and interpret the data. Patton (2015, p. 33) states that the individual conducting a research study "is the instrument of the inquiry". In this, the researcher is a part of the study, even if they try to remove themselves. Therefore, being mindful of one's positionality within society is beneficial to understanding one's work and approach to the research. Within the context of this study, and as described earlier, I was well-versed in the cultural norms and assumptions of both professional football and Christianity, having been involved in professional and semi-professional game as a player, coach, and manager and as a director of a professional football club. Further, having become a Christian whilst playing professionally, I have then worked alongside Christian professional players for CIS since 1989. Indeed, I had long-term relationships with all the respondents, having been involved in their pastoral support since, in most cases, they had become Christians. If we are the product of our social construction, then I must consider that this applies to me as well as the person being interviewed.

The role as a participant and observer raises the importance of hearing the call that the researcher should be aware of their previous engagement and research in the field of study since, as we have seen, no research position is entirely neutral (Swinton & Mowat, 2006; Patton, 2015; Charmaz, 2008, 2012; Bryman, 2016). This gives rise to a third order requirement to consider the relationship between myself and the interviewees and the construction of meaning gleaned in this interaction. These previous experiences and vocational decisions allowed me a familiarity and comfort within the research that may not have been present otherwise. In turn, and crucial regarding the issue of

good faith in the light of the potential for personal agendas and biases, I made every effort to ensure that all respondents knew that I was collecting data without hidden motives and would strive to respect their positions and opinions.

Despite the challenges to objectivity resulting from my engagement in Christianity and professional football, my history as a practitioner did lend itself to a degree of academic objectivity. I had never previously engaged in academic research and was without any experience or insight prior to beginning work on the study. My subsequent contribution to academia is restricted to one publication (Jones et al, 2020) undertaken in the context of the current research. It was partly due to this academic naivety that the process of data analysis proved to be thoroughly exhilarating. Experiences that I had previously thought to be familiar became, in a sense, increasingly stranger. The analysis and categorisation of data chapters provided novel and welcome insight into the nature of identity formation in Christian elite athletes, far surpassing my previous understanding. For these reasons, I suggest that, within the confines of the challenges facing every form of qualitative research, the current thesis may claim that it fulfils the criterion of confirmability, and so trustworthiness.

The search for rigour by using the four criteria for trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is a constant challenge for those undertaking qualitative research. A further critical aspect of the research approach is adherence to ethical standards (Janesick, 2003). The Faculty of Applied Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Gloucestershire granted ethical clearance for this research. Further, I carried out the design and execution of the research in accordance with the Statement of Ethical Practice set out by the British Sociological Association (BSA) (2019). As

required by these guidelines, respondents were informed prior to the interviews of pertinent information, including the research's nature and their right to withdraw from participation. Confidentiality was crucial given the public nature and prominence of respondents' professional settings. I obtained informed, voluntary consent from all the research participants considering the scope and purpose of the study. The research was overt, as covert research was not needed because this did not compromise the participants or my safety as the researcher. All data was kept on password-protected computers that were securely stored in locked premises.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began by considering the philosophically challenging nature of the research question, which focuses on the impact of Christian faith on the identity formation of professional footballers. I sought to demonstrate how disciplines that naturally lie at opposite ends of the methodological spectrum may transcend traditional boundaries in designing a research paradigm for this inquiry. I indicated the importance of themes at the heart of the sub-discipline of practical theology, most specifically that lived experience is most effectively explored empirically. Reflection on qualitative findings fed back to the theologian to recalibrate the interpretation and the application of the concepts deployed for analysis can be utilised whilst retaining the integrity of a theological perspective.

This research methodology is vital to the research question under consideration here since there is little existing empirical work surrounding the process of conversion and maturation in Christian faith in the context of elite sports culture. Therefore, there are limited opportunities from which to

analyse the impact and efficacy of efforts to develop an optimal approach to pastoral support. The findings of this study seek to initiate such conversations so that those committed to offering such support can begin from an evidence base. For this reason, the research methods which flowed from this effort to retain academic integrity are important both theoretically and practically. Access to data matters as much as methodological requirements. Therefore, I proposed that the optimum way of collecting data for this study was to engage a small number of former professional footballers in semi-structured interviews over three separate sessions to use the process to provide opportunities for reflexivity on the researcher's own perspectives.

The question of positionality has also been addressed. This section considered the requirements for credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as benchmark criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research. I addressed these issues with the acknowledgement that I had and retained a passionate interest and involvement in research. As Bryman (2016) points out, this personal investment on my part must be acknowledged, observed, and reflected upon in clarifying the process since it is not feasible to keep the researcher's perspective neutral. It was essential to exhibit reflexivity concerning my viewpoint. It was also vital that I considered the relationship between myself, and the interviewees and the construction of meaning gleaned from our interactions. Indeed, personal relationships with the interviewees demanded regular pauses for reflection, to ask myself questions such as, "How did I prevent them from saying what I wanted to hear?" Upon completing the thesis, I asked the participants to read my analysis of their responses. While no one wanted to read the study in draft form, the majority wanted to hear my perspective on their experience and largely offered approval.

While I have acknowledged my interest and involvement in the field of professional football and pre-existing relationships with the respondents, I believe the preceding analysis demonstrates that academic rigour was at the centre of this study. That I followed a rigorous process of research design and implementation, meant that my eventual findings were a product of the data and not of my academic assumptions or expectations. With all of this in mind, and before embarking on the empirical findings, our attention now moves to the respondents themselves via an overview of their career and faith journeys.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Meet the Players**

#### **Introduction**

As acknowledged in the discussion of research design in Chapter Three, I had known and worked with the respondents over many years and had witnessed, first hand, their appropriation of the Christian faith whilst sustaining a career in professional football. Before considering the empirical data findings arising from this study, I turn to the respondents themselves. All had professional football careers, predominantly in England, between 1970 and 2009. The structure of English football has developed throughout this period. Up to and including the 1991-92 season, the four tiers of English professional football were the First, Second, Third and Fourth Divisions. The introduction of the Premier League in 1992 brought with it a change to the football 'pyramid'. From the 1992-93 season, the Premier League was distinct from the Football League, with the latter overseeing the second to fourth tiers of English professional football, now called the First, Second and Third Divisions. In 2004, the Football League changed its name to the English Football League (EFL) and the three divisions were called the EFL Championship, EFL League One and EFL League Two. The Premier League remained unchanged.

## **The respondents**

### **Colin Adams**

Born in Hampshire in 1964, Colin Adams played over 200 games as a winger in a five-year period in the 1980s. Colin began as an apprentice at a First Division club in 1980 but never played for the first-team. Colin joined an East Anglian Third Division side, initially on loan and then permanently on a free transfer in 1984. He became a Christian there aged 19 and immediately faced opposition to his faith from team-mates and management. After two seasons in East Anglia, he moved on a free transfer to a Fourth Division club in London. He spent just under four successful seasons there, scoring 46 goals in 150 first-team appearances and playing a pivotal role in the team's promotion to the Third Division in 1989. As a result, Colin moved for a substantial fee (at that time) to a club chasing promotion from the Second to the First Division in the North East of England. However, after 15 first-team appearances, Colin sustained a career-ending knee injury when playing in a local derby aged 25. He then retrained (and has since been employed) as a clergyman.

### **Will Andrews**

Born in Lancashire in 1951, Will Andrews, played over 350 games as a midfielder in a 15-year career during the 1970s and 80s. Starting as an apprentice at a First Division Lancashire club in 1967, he signed a professional contract in 1968, making his first-team debut in 1970. In 1971, the team suffered relegation, and the following season Will became a regular starter. Will's outstanding

form led to his selection for the England Under 23 team in 1972. However, a dispute with his club manager over salaries meant that Will was marginalised and had significantly reduced playing opportunities. At the beginning of the 1973-74 season, Will moved to a Second Division team in the south of England for a then substantial transfer fee. There he gained promotion to the First Division, and over the subsequent eight seasons played almost 300 games and became club captain. He also played in the inaugural North American Soccer League during the summer breaks between 1976 and 1979. During his time in America in the summer of 1976, he became a Christian. Will finished his professional career with a London club in the Third Division between 1981 and 1983, aged 32, before moving into non-league football as a player-manager until 1988. Will spent over 30 years as a church pastor in the Bedfordshire town where he lived during most of his football career.

### **Roddy Cowan**

Roddy was born in the Caribbean in 1958 and moved to London as a child. He played over 600 games in a 19-year career as a striker from the 1970s to 1990s, scoring more than 150 goals. Roddy began his working life as an apprentice electrician, playing football at non-league level. He became a professional footballer at the age of 19, in 1977, when he signed for a First Division club in the Midlands, where over seven years he played just under 250 games, scoring more than 80 goals. In 1984 he moved to another First Division club, where his tenure until 1991 included winning the FA Cup, playing over 200 games and scoring more than 50 goals. During the 1980s, Roddy also won a small number of full international caps for England. Aged 33, he moved to another First Division club for two seasons, playing over 50 games. It was at this point, in 1991, in the middle



of difficult divorce proceedings, that Roddy became a Christian. With the advent of the Premier League in 1992, Roddy dropped down to the new First Division in 1993, before spending two seasons playing in the Second Division. He retired from playing in 1996, at the age of 38. He went on to work in a variety of coaching roles at one of his previous clubs and spent many years as an accredited football agent. Sadly, Roddy died suddenly during this research.

### **Pete Green**

Pete Green was born in Kent in 1967. Starting as an apprentice at a London First Division club in 1983, he turned professional the following year, aged 17 and he became a Christian at the age of 18. He played as an attacking midfielder in a career that spanned over 500 games across 18 years in the 1980s and 1990s, scoring more than 100 goals. After failing to establish himself in the first-team, Pete moved to a Third Division club in 1987 to ensure first-team football. After two seasons, Pete moved to a Second Division team on the South Coast. After experiencing relegation in his first season, Pete transferred to a Second Division club in the North East in 1990 for a then significant transfer fee. There he enjoyed a successful three-year spell, playing over 100 games and scoring over 30 goals as the team won promotion to the newly formed Premier League. As a result of the birth of his first child, Pete sought a move closer to family, leading to a transfer to a Premier League club in London in 1993 for another substantial fee. He spent three seasons there and made an FA Cup final appearance. From 1996, he spent six years at another London club in the First Division, playing almost 200 games and scoring over 30 goals. He retired from football in 2002, at the age of 35, and engaged in a successful media career for over six years before training as a church pastor, a role which he continues to fulfil.

**Mick Jones**

Born in America in 1975, Mick Jones, a striker, grew up in East Anglia. He played almost 150 games over a seven-year period in the 1990s, scored just under 30 goals. Mick spent part of his childhood in foster care. However, football proved to be a valuable outlet and as a schoolboy player attached to a professional club, he was selected to attend the prestigious Football Association School of Excellence at Lilleshall, Shropshire at the age of 15. Mick returned to his First Division club as an apprentice in 1991 and signed his first professional contract in the second season of the new Premier League in 1993. It was at this stage that Mick became a Christian. He transferred to a First Division South Coast club in 1994 and played almost 100 games, scoring over 20 goals in just under three seasons. In 1996 he moved to a Second Division club in Yorkshire, playing 20 times as the team succumbed to relegation. Mick spent the 1997-98 season overseas and returned to the UK for the 1998-99 season at a Third Division club in London, playing 10 games. At this point, aged 25, he developed a back problem that ended his professional career. Mick continued to play part-time, spending eight seasons at the top level of non-league football, during which he played for England's non-league international team. In the mid-2000s, he worked as an actor but ultimately pursued his primary goal of establishing a charity to use sport to help disadvantaged and terminally ill children.

**Phil Lee**

Born in London in 1973, defender Phil Lee played enjoyed a 17-year career in the 1990s and 2000s, playing over 400 games. Starting as an apprentice at a London First Division club in 1990,

he signed his first professional contract in the inaugural year of the Premier League in 1992. He made his first-team debut that season and played a handful of games before moving to a Third Division London club, where he spent three seasons and played over 100 games. In 1997, Phil moved to a First Division club on the outskirts of London for whom he played just under 100 games, over the course of three seasons. In 2000 he moved to a First Division club on the South Coast and shortly after the move, at the age of 27, he became a Christian. Phil played at the club for nine seasons and made almost 200 appearances, with five of those campaigns being in the Premier League. While at the club, he started a Christian charity, using football to aid disadvantaged communities both locally and internationally. He retired from football after failing to recover from a persistent knee injury in 2009, at the age of 36. At the time of this study, Phil was working in a Christian organisation supporting professional sportspeople.

### **Jake Martin**

Born in London in 1972, Jake Martin, played as a defender in over 400 games across a 14-year professional career in the 1990s and 2000s. Aged 14, Jake was selected to spend two years in a cohort of England's best players of his age group at The Football Association's School of Excellence at Lilleshall. He returned to his London First Division club as an apprentice, signing a professional contract aged 17. However, the club released Jake at the age of 19, and he struggled to find permanent employment in the professional game for 21 months, undertaking 22 trials during that period. He finally signed a permanent contract for an East Anglian Second Division club in 1993 and went on to play over 150 games over five years. In 1998 he moved to a Third Division club in London, where he played for another six seasons, making 250 appearances. Jake

played 16 times for England at youth level and earned a small number of senior international caps for a Caribbean country. In 2004, at the age of 32, Jake left the professional game but continued to play for two more seasons at a non-league level. He became a Christian shortly after leaving the game. Since retirement, he has worked as a coach, including in a senior coaching role for the Football Association.

### **Ben Morris**

Born in London in 1969, Ben Morris played as a winger, scoring 10 goals in just under 200 games across a 12-year period during the late 1980s and 1990s. Ben did not play at schoolboy level at a professional club. However, Ben signed a professional contract and made his debut aged 17 in 1987, after a short apprenticeship at a First Division London club. In 1988, as top First Division teams sought to sign him, Ben was side-lined with a cruciate knee ligament injury. In 1989, having made an initial recovery from the injury, Ben moved to another London First Division club. He became a Christian during his second season at the club, at the age of 22, but continued to struggle with injuries. In 1992 he left for a team in the First Division, playing just under 50 games over two seasons. In 1994 he returned to his first club, by then in the First Division (with the Premier League's introduction in 1992) for one season. In the four seasons from 1995-99, Ben played for a London First Division club, a Welsh Third Division club, a London Third Division club and a Third Division club on the South Coast. He played for England at youth and Under 20 levels. On retiring from professional football, aged 30, Ben trained as a counsellor whilst continuing to play non-league football. At the time of this study, he held a senior role overseeing player welfare in professional football.

**Steve Philips**

Born in the East Midlands in 1968, Steve Philips played as a striker in a career that involved nearly 250 league games and 43 goals across a 12-year period in the 1980s and 1990. After an apprenticeship with his First Division hometown club, he signed a professional contract in 1986 and played there for five years, making just under 40 appearances after his debut, aged 18. At this early stage in his career, and after the death of his grandfather, Steve became a Christian at the age of 20. He played on loan for three other clubs during that period. In 1991, Steve moved to a Yorkshire-based Second Division club, playing over 130 games and scoring over 35 goals in three years. In 1994, Steve transferred to a First Division club, where he spent another three seasons but only played 30 games after a change of management reduced his opportunities. He spent time on loan, firstly in England and later in Europe. In 1997, Steve moved to a Second Division club in Lancashire but only played 10 games after rupturing his Achilles tendon. He joined a Second Division club in the South West in 1998, but at the end of that season, aged 31, injury forced his retirement from professional football. Steve played non-league football before becoming a player-manager, and then a manager, at several non-league teams between 2001 and 2009. Steve trained as a church pastor and continues to work in that role.

**Brian Price**

Born in London in 1958, Brian Price played as a defender in over 250 games in a 13-year career in the 1970s and 1980s. Starting as an apprentice at his local London First Division club, Brian

made his debut in 1977 and spent the first eight years of his career there, playing over 150 games. The death of his wife from cancer after the birth of their first child in 1985 was influential in Brian coming to faith. Later that year, he moved to a London club in the Second Division, spending the next three seasons there. In 1987, Brian moved down to a Third Division club, where he stayed for three years until retirement aged 32 in 1990. After his playing career, Brian continued to work in professional football, first as a youth team coach at a Second Division club from 1994-2001, and then as first-team manager for a further two years. He became the assistant manager of a Third Division team in 2003, and the team won promotion from the fourth to second tiers in successive seasons. When he lost his job in 2010, Brian moved with his colleague to a League Two club, where they stayed for a year. Since 2012 Brian has worked at Academy and Under 23 level for a London Premier League club.

### **Harry Richards**

Born in the East Midlands in 1969, Harry Richards played as a defender in over 200 games in a seven-year period in the 1990s. After an apprenticeship with his local Fourth Division club, he declined the offer of a six-month professional contract and played non-league football from 1987-92. He then joined a Third Division club in London, where he was a regular starter as the team won the league. During this period, Harry, who had attended church growing up, became a Christian. In 1993, Harry moved to a First Division London club, where he played in 32 games over two seasons as the club reached the play-offs. He spent two periods on loan during that time and joined one of these teams, a Second Division club in Yorkshire, in 1995. In his two seasons there, the team won consecutive promotions from the Second Division to the Premier League. In

1997 he joined a Second Division club in Lancashire and played 10 games there. In 1998, Harry went on loan to a Scottish Premier Division club, a move which he made permanent. Harry suffered cruciate knee ligament damage in his second full season at the club. In 2000, at the age of 30, he moved into semi-professional football whilst studying for a degree in sports science at the University of Edinburgh. On graduating, he was appointed as a sports scientist with a senior Scottish sporting institute, after which he moved to the USA to work as a football coach.

### **Paul Roberts**

Born in London in 1956, Paul Roberts, who could play as both a defender and midfielder, played just under 60 games in a seven-year period in the 1970s. Starting as an apprentice at a First Division London club, he signed a professional contract aged 17 in 1973, when he made his first-team debut. In 1974 he made a further eight appearances in the team before, in the 1975/76 season, he established himself as a regular, making 29 appearances. A new manager for the next season meant fewer starts when he made 12 appearances. In 1977-78, Paul was moved from defence into midfield and became a regular starter again, until a knee injury curtailed his season, after which he became a Christian. The longer-term effects of the injury proved insurmountable, for although he stayed at the club until the end of the 1979-80 season, he never fully recovered. He effectively missed the next three seasons, and though the club retained him in the hope that he would regain fitness, the injury forced Paul's retirement from football at the age of 24. Paul captained England in all international age groups, up to the Under 21s. Paul managed several non-league teams while working in sales for 40 years.

**Simon Stevens**

Born in London in 1961, Simon Stevens played over 400 games as a midfielder in a 17-year period between the late 1970s and 90s. When he was 15 years old, his mother died unexpectedly. Shortly afterwards, Simon failed to get an apprenticeship at the London club where he was a schoolboy player. He left home and headed to the East Midlands, where he became an apprentice with a First Division club. He signed a professional contract there, making his First Division debut aged 17. He went on to play for seven more clubs (one of them twice) over the next 14 years, primarily based in the third and fourth tiers of English football. Six clubs were based in the north of England, and two in the Midlands. In 1993, aged 32, an attraction to the Christian faith, which he had first experienced as a teenager, led to Simon becoming a Christian. He retired in 1995, aged 34. After a period in non-league football, in 1997 Simon became a coach in the professional game. Simon has since worked at a club that has had spells in both the Premier League and the Championship, leading both the Academy and the Under 23s.

**James Walters**

Born in Sheffield in 1969, James Walters played over 500 games as a defender in a 19-year career, from the 1980s to the 2000s. After an apprenticeship at his hometown First Division Yorkshire club, James made his first-team debut as an 18-year-old in 1987, shortly after the death of his mother from cancer. After one season, he left to join a Second Division club on Humberside, where he played over 130 games in four years. His career was threatened by a cruciate knee ligament injury in 1991, leading to temporary unemployment the following year. In this period, at the age of 24, he became a Christian. He joined a Third Division Yorkshire club in 1993, before moving



to another Yorkshire club in the First Division, where he spent over a decade and played over 300 games, winning two promotions and playing in the Premier League. He ended his playing career in 2005, at the age of 36, when he joined a non-league club in Yorkshire as a player-coach. After retiring as a player, James worked as a coach, assistant manager, and caretaker manager at the club where he spent over a decade as a player. Since then, his primary focus has been the CEO of a children's educational charity, which he founded, in the city where he played and managed. He has recently returned to a part-time role as an assistant manager at a League One club.

Each of these respondents experienced the highs and lows of a career in professional football. Alongside that, each respondent sustained such a career whilst appropriating Christian faith. Attention now turns to the findings regarding the respondents' experiences on this journey.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Football, Faith and Fulfilment**

#### **Introduction**

This thesis investigates how becoming a Christian influenced identity formation in professional footballers. Chapter One reviewed historical evangelistic and welfare-based approaches toward engaging with Christian elite athletes and proposed a foundational theological framework for providing pastoral support. This theocentric perspective distinguished between a received and achieved identity, emphasising the precedence of God's initiative in conferring a sense of self-worth in athletes. Complimentary to this primary notion is that God also provides and sustains athletic talents to facilitate sporting attainments. This alignment of personal worth and athletic performances may enable the Christian athlete to integrate faith and sport, leading to an authentic workplace witness to Christianity. Chapter One suggested that sports chaplains might facilitate the theocentric and received perspective in the lives of Christian elite athletes since this could aid the advancement of God's mission within sports clubs through the athletes' witness.

Chapter Two dealt with literature reviewing the institutional values of elite sport and unearthed several restrictive cultural norms. It also considered how these limitations might be contested and identified the importance of significant others in developing, maintaining and ultimately aiding the presentation of alternative versions of oneself at work (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). The chapter suggested that sports chaplains already play a part in challenging these restrictions as they collaborate with other specialists within sports clubs in pursuit of a more holistic approach to

player identity formation. I proposed that if chaplains adopted a theocentric approach to providing pastoral support this could entail even more holistic benefits for the elite athletes they serve, regardless of religious belief.

The current chapter focuses on one of the limiting norms raised in Chapter Two, namely the expectation that players exhibit an all-consuming passion for the game to gain the respect of management and fellow players (Parker, 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Roderick, 2006a). The current chapter uses theocentric lenses to analyse the influence of Christian faith and the role of significant others in counteracting the institutional demand of professional football that the game should be the central source of life fulfilment. Several transition points identified by Roderick (2006a) are explored: the move from schoolboy to professional player, during periods of deselection and job loss, dealing with injury, and finally, when facing marital problems.

### **From schoolboy to professional footballer**

One of the stringent cultural expectations in youth football is that young players position the game at the core of their identity. They are to eat, breathe, and sleep football. This requirement appears less pernicious when players are still schoolboys, experiencing the feel-good factor of being courted by clubs competing to sign them as trainee professionals (Parker, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). Mick Jones exhibits the initial fulfilment achieved as a much sought-after schoolboy. Between 1984 and 1999, a select number of the best 14-year-olds from the top English clubs were singled out and educated together residentially for two years at the Football Association School of Excellence in Lilleshall, Shropshire, after which they began a formal traineeship with their host

clubs (Parker, 1996b). In the late 1980s, Mick's selection to attend the school provided great satisfaction:

It was the pinnacle for all boys in our age group. It was one of the best feelings of my life, getting selected, getting that letter to be told that you'd been selected [to go to Lilleshall]. To go up there and see the place, and the [pictures of the] players who had played for England who had gone before you, I wanted it more than anything. I very much loved the idea of being away from home as well. It had so many benefits ... The players and the bonds that you built [made it] two of the best years of my life.

Sustaining zeal for the game becomes more challenging once schoolboys become trainee professionals (Hickey, 2015). As noted in Chapter Two, the transition represents a rite of passage, whereby trainees learn to express themselves in ways considered synonymous with being a professional (Parker, 1995, 2001). The reproduction of stereotypical gender identity and values means that access to the adult game is to enter a hegemonic masculine culture driven by the norms of power, authority and competitive aggression (Parker, 2006). This initiation involves imbibing the explicit, official cultural norms of discipline and conscientiousness, alongside the implicit, unofficial values of conspicuous consumption, excessive socialising and heterosexual endeavours. To survive and flourish, players must adopt behaviours that are supposed to develop a trainee into a man capable of gaining a professional contract and thereby accessing social status, fame and wealth (Parker, 2001, 2006). The expectation is that trainees who can deal with the temporary restrictions of subordination will benefit from 'making it' in the professional game (Parker, 2001; McGillivray et al., 2005; Roderick, 2006a).

The aspiration to wider social benefits illustrates how the significance of trainees is contingent on their achievement in attaining and conforming to the cultural norm of finding fulfilment through the rewards offered by becoming a professional. The assumption is that if they can learn to fulfil the stringencies of club officialdom while increasingly adhering to the social habits of professional players, they will become real footballers worthy of respect. The challenge of making this transition was evident to Pete Green. Like Mick, Pete had starred for England at the Under 15 level. The stark realities of the move from schoolboy star to the rigorous requirements of being a trainee professional became apparent to Pete when he started work at a London First Division club in 1983:

I thought, like many other young schoolboys, that I had achieved the schoolboy dream. That is what it's all about. Like a lot of people in culture today, you know, money, fame, career. It's what makes you happy. So, football really was my god. And then I signed [a first professional contract] ... the reality of it was tough. And then I play well, and then not so good. You get bawled out [shouted at] in training. Now, this is your job. And I am not as happy as I thought I would be. Football is not quite as satisfying as I thought it would be.

The day-to-day reality of the job involved verbal chastisement, competitive pressure and institutional seriousness. Professional football was not about having fun; it was a matter of instruction, obedience and routine since it was ultimately a means of making a living (Parker, 1995, 2001). The trainee had to achieve the requisite standard dictated by institutional norms to obtain personal significance. Pete was embedded in this culture when he went to church for the

first time. His mother started attending when Pete was a second-year trainee, and, out of curiosity, he went along with her. On his first visit, Pete participated in the youth group, which met after the church service. He was surprised that, despite the social advantages afforded by his profession, the other attendees patently had something even more desirable:

I turned up at that youth meeting in my XR3i [a 1980s sports car]. I've got money in the pocket, I've got the career, I'm in the 'in crowd' [culturally respected], and they're not in the 'in crowd', this half a dozen young people. They have not got the money, not got the career, not got the car, not got the fame. And yet when they started talking about Jesus, when they started praying, there was a joy and a reality to what they had, which I didn't have.

Pete's awareness that there may be more to life than appropriating the rewards of being a footballer was also experienced by Paul Roberts when he went to church. Like Pete, his family had no history of churchgoing. Paul had grown curious about matters of faith shortly before becoming a trainee at the age of 16 and started to attend church intermittently. Paul made a stellar start in professional football, making his first-team debut in 1973, just after his seventeenth birthday. Paul continued to attend church periodically, but by his own admission, it had no impact on his life. That changed in 1978 when Paul received an invitation to speak about his football career at the church youth group. He agreed to do so, and it surprised him:

The guy who was running it [the youth club] impressed me so much. He didn't look up to me at all, which was like, so refreshing, and he seemed to be so much at peace. And it really hit me. I was thinking, "I've got so much more going for my life than he has. I've got

so much more money. I was then due to marry a beautiful girl and all this sort of stuff." But I said, "Blimey, he has got something I haven't got." So, I stayed. I said, "Can I stay and listen to the rest after I spoke?" And he said, "Yeah."

The intention of initial trainee exposure to conspicuous wealth and opportunities for heterosexual exploits is a prelude to complete socialisation into the full-time occupational role (Parker, 2001, 2006). Nevertheless, Pete and Paul discovered that the Christian faith could contest their profession's ostensible social advantages and satisfactions. Mick Jones reached similar conclusions shortly after signing his first professional contract as a 17-year-old in 1993. Despite his delight in the social opportunities afforded by his status, Mick found it increasingly difficult to attain the promised fulfilment:

I had everything I wanted materialistically; the career looked good. But there was still something missing, and I can only explain it as like a void. I remember my aunty and uncle saying, "Look, it's only Jesus that can fill this void"... and I remember getting to that stage where I was just saying, "If you [God] can make a difference in my life like you have in theirs, then I wanna know." It was a radical transformation.

Mick knew that adopting the Christian faith would be counter-cultural, a "radical transformation". Nevertheless, he took that step to search for an alternative source of fulfilment. Mick offered an insight into a theocentric perspective when he described the foundation of his beliefs, namely that his aunt and uncle had "taught [him] about grace from a young age." The testimonies of all three respondents resonate with the theocentric framework of Chapter One, which suggests that

fulfilment cannot be discovered merely through athletic achievements (Null, 2008a, Null, 2008b; Jones et al., 2020).

Further, the previously noted role of significant others, particularly family, friends and other acquaintances outside of work, in accessing and appropriating alternative visions of oneself (Hickey & Roderick, 2017) was evident in the Christian experience of Mick, Pete and Paul. Mick was impressed by the faith of his aunt and uncle. Pete and Paul were delighted to meet peers who were not in awe of their status as professional footballers. It seems evident that the Christians Pete, Paul and Mick encountered inspirational and attractive prospects of an alternative identity as a Christian. The basis of this witness was the exhibition by significant others of authenticity in word and deed, suggestive of personal fulfilment.

The testimony of Christians to these three young footballers provides an example of the *missio Dei*. The notion of the mission of God was outlined in Chapter One, representing authentic behaviour aligned with an articulation of the Christian message. Mick became a Christian through conversations with his aunt and uncle in 1993. Pete became a Christian during weekly attendance at the youth group shortly after his initial visit in 1984. In 1978 Paul became a Christian in a more public setting. Shortly after attending the youth group, he and his fiancée attended a church service. At the close, the preacher invited people to acknowledge that they wanted to become Christians by going to the front of the church for prayer. Paul did so and had an exhilarating experience:

The preacher and others went to lay [place] hands on my head and just said something like, "Lord, break down the barriers." And I just collapsed on the floor and crumbled on the



floor before they touched me. The peace was just surreal, like nothing I'd ever experienced before. I was crying my eyes out, and then I walked back to [his fiancée]. She said, "What's happened?" I said, "I have not a clue, but it feels fantastic." And then I gradually, not smoothly, but gradually, I learnt what the Lord had done in my life.

Paul's experience summarises the central tenet of this first section. He, Pete and Mick found a sense of personal fulfilment in Christianity, which transcended their football achievements. As they transitioned from schoolboys to trainees, initial exposure to the Christian lifestyle and message, through influential Christians, challenged and then usurped football as the primary source of personal identity in their lives. Meanwhile, Mick, Paul and Pete were at the earliest stage of their professional lives and yet to face the challenge of dealing with deselection and potential job loss. Attention now turns to the impact of the Christian faith in this scenario.

### **Deselection and job loss**

Transitioning from a schoolboy into a full-time professional career requires that trainees earn professional acceptance by exhibiting a passion for football, exemplified by a will to win, aggression, competitiveness and physical and mental toughness. Critical though this attitude is, it avails little if players cannot get into the team (Roderick, 2006a). The failure to be selected risks potential job loss and can lead to a growing estrangement from the dominant ideological rhetoric, which depicts football as a thoroughly fulfilling vocation (Roderick, 2014). Once again, personal performance, in this instance through team selection, is the normative path to personal value in the institutional culture of professional football.

The inability to ensure first-team places played a part in how Harry Richards, Colin Adams and Phil Lee became Christians and provides an opportunity to consider how their experiences align with the existential ramifications of the theocentric approach to identity formation outlined in Chapter One. Harry Richards became a trainee footballer at a Midlands Third Division team in 1985. He went on to play semi-professionally in the Football Conference for four years before he joined a London Fourth Division club at the age of 22 in 1992. In his first season, he faced the prospect of being dropped from the team and released by the club:

[During a game] I had not played well and came in at half time, and the manager was particularly harsh... [He said], "Make the most of the second half because this will be the last time you'll play professional soccer."... I went home and thought ... "This is what I've put everything into. My life has been pretty much driven to do this, and I'm at [the club], playing in front of 3,000 people, getting hammered by the coach or whatever." And I thought, "Is this what it's all about? Do I really want to go on to do this?"

The manager's approach aligns entirely with the earlier discussed cultural norms of verbal aggression regarding the pressure to perform (Parker, 1995, 2001). Colin Adams and Phil Lee had less combative starts to their careers than Harry. When Colin began as a trainee at a First Division London club in 1980, he was already guaranteed a three-year professional contract upon reaching 18. Phil Lee completed a successful period as a trainee at a First Division club in London and made his first-team debut at the age of 19, in the inaugural year of the Premier League in 1992. Despite such promising beginnings in their professional careers, neither consolidated a first-team place by

the end of their first seasons. Colin joined an East Anglian Third Division club on loan, and Phil did not earn a new contract.

An examination of the impact of transfers on players' self-worth by Roderick (2006a, 2014) indicates that desirable transfers facilitating a move higher up the football rankings represent distinct benchmarks of career progress and thus positive experiences. The result is an enhanced sense of personal significance. In turn, undesirable transfers typically result from being unwanted by a current club, leading to heightened uncertainty about the future and a loss of self-esteem and status. In such situations, players seek to regain workplace approval. Critical to this social presentation is the exhibition of a determination to re-establish oneself by finding a new club and, in so doing, to prove their old club wrong. This procedure is a product of the cultural conflation between players' significance and achievements. Phil and Colin exemplify this process, with Phil expressing initial determination to regain his role as a footballer elsewhere:

It [being released] was like from hero to zero, a real shocking experience. It hurt because, I think, the only way I can describe it now, looking back, was that it was my first real rejection from [the manager] saying, "Look, you're not good enough." So that hurt. It took me a number of years to get over that, without me knowing it, because my thought process after that was, "Prove them wrong."

Colin did not have to leave his host club but chose to make his loan into a permanent move to ensure regular first-team football. However, rather than enhancing his sense of self-worth, the move proved to be a harrowing experience with the Third Division team he joined:

It was a nightmare, really. Surviving in a team losing all the time as a wide player [playing in a forward position] is just impossible. I feel for anybody who goes through that. Because you're not the player who's going to change that. And therefore, you get battered by something that you haven't got the armoury to stop it. Because nobody can bring the best out of you ... So, you're just the wrong player in the wrong place at that time. So, I do remember that as being my hardest period in football.

Failing to make the first-team at their original clubs was a painful experience for Phil and Colin and led to declining contentment with their profession. The passing of time exacerbated Phil's disenchantment, even though he had established a successful career. After leaving his original club, Phil signed a three-year contract for a Third Division club in London. Then he then spent another three years at a First Division club in the south of England, where, in the final year, he was offered a new deal, but at a salary below that offered to less experienced playing colleagues. This situation made Phil feel he was no longer valued or wanted:

Football, at that point, wasn't the most important thing anymore. There was too much around it that made me think, "Actually, even though you're doing it, do you really enjoy it?" I was 25. Am I really enjoying it [a career in professional football]? Is it all it's set out to be? I've now proven to myself that I can play professional football. Now what? What is it about? I thought it was about the money, in all honesty ... but it wasn't, and it still didn't satisfy me.

In the context of growing disappointment resulting from deselection and job loss, Harry, Colin and Phil became Christians. Chapter Two noted that the stress of dealing with the institutional requirement to show great enthusiasm for football when privately unhappy with the profession can be alleviated by access to, and affirmation of, alternative senses of self (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). In providing access to this alternative source of identity, other Christians impacted how Harry, Colin and Phil came to faith. Specifically, influential Christians exhibited the mission of God through a combination of authentic actions and articulating the Christian message. When Harry faced the grim prospect of further rejection and potential job loss, he found inspiration in the Christian faith of other professional footballers who he knew, who displayed a "peace" whilst also making the Christian faith seem "relevant":

I'd seen people in my life who had got that sort of peace and that faith and the understanding as to what life is all about. And then obviously from there and, you know, God put people in my life ... I had a perception; you have a picture of what Christian people are like. My picture was very much from my background. I had a village upbringing. So, village church, old fashioned. But now, there are other Christian professional footballers I can relate to ... That made Christian faith relevant to me.

Colin also described the influence of the player he was replacing at his new club. Colin was surprised that this person, whose job was now under threat, could respond positively to the situation. Rather than showing signs of despair, his competitor exuded "hope" and it offered Colin a vision that he might attain such optimism:

The first 19 years of my life, my football seemed to be essential to who I was. So, my identity was strained for me because I wanted to be more than that. And so, faith was not an escape from that ... But faith answered some of the more imbalanced stuff of my upbringing.

When he rejected the unpalatable contract offer discussed earlier, Phil moved to another First Division club on the South Coast for the 2000-2001 season. Phil met the club chaplain, Martin Morgan:

I got introduced to Martin Morgan. And he helped me with questions, with situations ... He'd always keep saying to me, "The Bible's alive today, you know, it's relevant for today." And I'm thinking, "Oh man, I think you've got it wrong. But I don't quite know if you're right. You know, you're the real deal [I respect you]. I don't know."

All three respondents became Christians due to growing disappointment with the game due to the transition process around deselection and job loss. They experienced increasing unhappiness with the cultural norm that being a footballer could provide absolute satisfaction. This awareness led to a foundational change when the respondents observed alternative routes to personal fulfilment which were divorced from footballing achievements. Colin became a Christian when his teammate invited him to church for the first time:

The church made it so clear for me that this is what being a Christian is. And then I knew, as I listened and as I sat there, could I leave that church without making a decision? And if

I did leave the church making that decision, it would have an impact ... It was an isolating period ... [but] there was great joy in my life, and the tangible presence of God in my heart and in my life was so overwhelming that all of those things were worth giving up, which is, you know, when I look back on it, is almost mad.

In the dawning awareness of what he began to see as the delusion that sport alone could enable the fulfilment of childhood dreams, Colin found a more profound fulfilment in Christianity. Phil had a similar experience when he started attending church with his wife, and this led to him appropriating Christianity:

I thought, "They have peace, and I want that peace." I couldn't have described it as that at the time, but that's what I wanted. And in the end, I just said, "Tell me, tell me what it is that you've got." They [church leaders] explained that Jesus died for me to restore God's relationship with me ... When they said you don't have to do anything and showed me the verses in the Bible, I thought, "Okay, I'm in."

The pressure on professional players, propagated by institutional culture, correlates achieving workplace goals with acquiring personal value. Chapter One identifies this as an anthropocentric approach to identity formation. Harry, Colin and Phil became Christians within this cultural environment when facing deselection and job loss. Christianity appeared to provide a sense of fulfilment unattained through football, and other Christians influenced the faith journey by pointing to an alternative vision of oneself. In that sense, deselection was a trigger to demonstrate the inadequacy of a performance-based approach to personal significance. The fulfilment

experienced by Harry, Colin and Phil through becoming Christians accords fully with Chapter One's analysis of the theocentric and received approach to identity formation. The pathway has been observed in the transition from schoolboy to trainee and during deselection and job loss. The same trajectory appeared to be present in the lives of respondents who became Christians during times of injury.

## **Injury**

The importance of exhibiting the drive to restore a place in the team when deselected is also prevalent when players are injured. The failure to be active participants and make meaningful contributions to the team involves an expectation of rejection because players are letting down their manager and team-mates (Roderick, 2006a). The need to return to action as quickly as possible is explored in a study considering the uncertainty that is a central feature of workplace life in professional football by Roderick (2006c), who pays particular attention to the issues of ageing and injury. Roderick (2006c) highlights the normalisation of pain and injury, showing how players tend to be aware of the broad timelines for returning to action, especially from soft-tissue injuries. Thus, if recovery from injury is slower than anticipated, players realise the need to deal with the risk of being categorised as a malingerer or "injury-prone" (Roderick, 2006a, p. 67). The pressure of not performing is ostensibly easier to manage when the injury is physically external or visible, for example, a broken bone or dislocation. However, it is more complex when the damage is internal or psychological. Typically, players will hurry back to action before they are ready to avoid stigmatisation. They may conceal pain from medical staff and coaches, behaviour that can lead to health-compromising situations (Roderick et al., 2000). This cultural norm highlights the



pressure placed upon players to play when not fully fit, whatever the risk to their future wellbeing, since the failure to perform due to injury can be a direct challenge to the correlated personal worth of players (Roderick, 2006a).

James Walters and Ben Morris became Christians in the process of dealing with severe injuries when their experiences led to growing disenchantment with the job. James Walters made his league debut for a First Division club in the north of England in 1987, at the age of 18. Shortly afterwards, James moved to a Second Division team and played 130 games before picking up a career-threatening injury in the 1991-92 season, aged 22. It was a devastating experience:

Just before my 23rd birthday, I did my cruciate [ligament]. It was a difficult time ... I had nothing to fall back on ... I was just finding life a struggle, even before the injury ... I was in a bad place even though on the pitch everything was great. People were watching. It was rumoured that [a major First Division club] were watching [considering signing James]. Clubs were watching me. But it was a tough period ... I saw a specialist, and he said, "You may never play again." That was a real shock.

James faced immediate difficulties since his contract was due to expire two months after the injury, and the club pressured him into playing without undergoing an operation. In hindsight, he reflected that they hoped to mask the seriousness of his injury so that the club might release him without needing to fulfil an obligation to pay for an operation, as well as an extra six months' salary to cover the period of recuperation. However, since players need to demonstrate the right attitude (Roderick et al., 2000), James agreed to play on, anxious to show his commitment to the cause,

though it was a considerable risk to his long-term health. The attempt failed, and the club released him at the end of the season without mentioning their responsibility to pay for post-contractual care. Whilst James' discovery that he had a right to this support forced the club to act appropriately, the club's exploitative behaviour contributed to his growing cynicism toward the professional game:

They tried to get me back playing without doing the operation [to limit the club's financial liability]. They said, "Oh, your leg's got a lot of stability." But every time I got to a certain stage in my rehab [rehabilitation], and I tried to check or twist, it just collapsed under me and literally made me feel sick ... They released me at Christmas, halfway through my rehab [rehabilitation] ... I was living at my cousin's house at the time. Back then, I had lost the house and all that sort of thing [due to financial constraints].

The process that saw Ben Morris become a Christian also resulted from a cruciate ligament injury. He made his debut for a London First Division club in 1987, at the age of 17. His up-and-coming career faced termination in 1988:

I had torn my ACL [anterior cruciate ligament] and posterior cruciate [ligament]. Now in 1991, those were career-threatening injuries ... I went to the specialist, who said, "Look, we're going to give you an injection, but if that doesn't work, your career is over." So, I remember being in that room with the specialist and him saying, "If this doesn't work, your career is over." And after he said, "Your career is over", it was like his mouth was moving, but I couldn't hear anything. All I could think of was, "What am I going to do now?"

Ben was terrified about what his future held. Like James, his story exemplifies the challenge of working in the fragile, uncertain and sometimes exploitative world of professional football (Roderick, 2006c). Nevertheless, in painful transitions due to injury, James and Ben found new hope. James was attracted to Christianity through the influence of a Christian colleague with whom he commuted to training. James respected the willingness of his team-mate to resist what Parker (1995, 2001, 2006) identifies as the pressure to conform to the notions of masculinity exhibited by the social habits of professional players, particularly those of conspicuous consumption and excessive socialising. It was this colleague who stood out by his practical concern when James faced the trauma of severe injury and had to leave the club:

Drinking was a big culture in football, and whenever the lads were going out for these [drinking] sessions that they used to have after training on a Tuesday all day ... We had a couple of senior players who would almost bully younger players, and all players, to come ... But he would say, "Nah, I'm going home to my wife and my young baby. I want to see them." He used to get hammered [receive abuse] for it ... It was him one day who [when James got injured] took me to see [the man who prayed for his knee].

The practical support offered by James's colleague was in stark contrast to the lack of positive interaction and affirmation offered to injured players identified by Roderick (2006a). James started attending a Christian meeting with his previous team-mate after leaving the club, at a time when James was training alone and before he re-entered the professional game by signing for his local

Third Division club. It was during this period of recovery and re-establishment of his career that James describes the emergence of a new fulfilment in his life:

Somewhere deep inside me, I just knew that I would play again, which was amazing ... That period of playing for [a Third Division club] was a transition period and being prayed for. I was trusting the Lord that I'd be alright in that first game with the reserves, and I was wanting to know more about Christianity, and I was travelling to see that gentleman who had prayed for me over that 12-month period ... And then I'm signing for [a Second Division club], that's when I looked and gave my life to the Lord.

The witness of a team-mate, when James had been cast aside by his club, led to Christian faith. This development reflects the expression of the mission of God outlined in Chapter One, as the authentic deeds and words of a Christian proved attractive to a colleague. This theocentric foundation also applies to Ben's testimony. Ben had a year remaining on his contract when he was injured, but the threat to his career shook him. Indeed, this injury contributed to Ben's growing sense that he could not attain fulfilment through his football career:

Football changed from enjoyment to a business. And it was more a case of, "We need these three points."... I tried to hold on to the enjoyment aspect of it, but it is very hard because it's a points game and people wanted their bonus money, goalscoring money, appearance money. It was all kind of based on that. And that was hard to get my head round.

During Ben's long recovery from injury, a trusted senior professional at his club supported him. The care was unexpected since Ben could not contribute to the team during this period (Roderick, 2006a). The sensitive approach of his Christian colleague continued when Ben regained full fitness. Shortly after getting back to action, Ben was purchased for a substantial fee by a rival London club. At this point, his colleague offered practical advice regarding insurance against any future career-threatening injury and introduced Ben to a financial advisor who was a Christian. However, the matter of faith only became apparent when the insurer asked Ben an unexpected question:

Before we even spoke about financial stuff, [the financial advisor] said to me, "Do you believe in God?" And I thought, "What on earth has that got to do with you looking after my finances?" And I said, "Yeah." And then we cracked on with the conversation, with the financial stuff, and it was just weird. And then he said to me, "We have this group meeting at [a London church], a sports fellowship. Come down."

Ben did not initially respond to the offer, but when he did start attending the Christian meeting for elite athletes in 1991, at the age of 22. Ben explained how time spent with Christian athletes allowed him to reflect on the realities of professional football, and at this stage, he became a Christian. This process occurred during a period when the disappointment with the capacity of football to offer fulfilment, instigated by his experience of injury, was growing more profound:

I asked those questions [about the Christian faith] for about a year because I couldn't get my head around it. My [initial] perception was that to become a Christian [meant] you can't

do this; you can't do that ... [However] I committed myself to Christ on the 5th of November 1991 at the Christian sports fellowship.

Once again, role models who helped identify and re-affirm an alternative, prospective personal identity were pivotal (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). Both players became Christians when facing career-threatening injuries. James and Ben learnt how dispensable they were and how quickly they could find themselves out of work. The fragile nature of a football career and the commodification of players can lead to increasing dissatisfaction with the game (Roderick, 2006a). Nevertheless, because of the counter-cultural influence of other Christians, James and Ben found an alternative source of self-worth beyond that of being a footballer. In contrast to the precarious nature of an identity premised on a professional career, both players found a more definitive fulfilment in the Christian faith. Other respondents discovered satisfaction through Christian faith rather than the limiting expectations for an all-consuming fulfilment through football achievements when they faced marital problems.

### **Marital problems**

Part of the trainee's journey to becoming a professional footballer is learning to appropriate what Parker (2001, p. 77, 2006, p. 696) terms the "occupational inheritance" of maleness, which includes increased opportunities for heterosexual relationships. The sexual achievements of the trainee footballer provide an avenue by which the player is expected to obtain personal significance through alignment with the cultural norms of the profession. Two respondents discussed how

access to the sexual opportunities meant to provide this fulfilment ultimately led to marital problems.

Will Andrews was in the England Under 23 team in 1971, at the age of 20, after becoming a regular starter in his First Division team in the north of England. In 1973, Will moved to a club in the south of England and over the next three seasons, he played regularly in the top league of English football. During this period, Will, like other British players, played overseas during the English off-season break. As a result, he and his wife Coleen could spend time near to her parents, who had recently emigrated to restore their broken marriage. Will's in-laws had started attending church, where they became Christians and had restored a fractured marriage. When Will saw them for the first time in their new environment, he and Coleen were astonished by the transformation in her parents' relationship. This change had a significant impact on Will since he knew that his lifestyle was putting his own marriage at risk:

Coleen said, "I could see a miracle in my mum and dad. Their lives were totally different."

So that made us start to think, start to talk ... We were having a lot of problems; I have to be honest about that with you. It was all my fault, I was living a double life, and all of that football life, which I'm ashamed of but at the time was normal to me ... We were already on a very downward path.

Roddy Cowan was a famous professional footballer who had a career that lasted almost 20 years, with 14 of those years being at the top tier of the game. Towards the end of his career, in 1991, at

the age of 33, his marriage was beyond repair because of his extra-marital relationships over several years:

I'm one of the boys. And of course, when you're out there, drinking, it comes with all sorts of things, such as women, particularly for me anyway. And so, you get caught, don't you? Lipstick on the collar, wife hears about you with this girl, and it starts to destroy your marriage ... The building blocks of my marriage: trust, confidence, communication, putting time into your marriage were being smashed ... It might look good from the outside, but inside the four walls of the home, it was very cold. And it was all my fault.

Rather than bringing a sense of fulfilment, the sexual promiscuity facilitated by Roddy's professional career brought disastrous consequences to his domestic life. Then, a car accident that claimed the life of his longest-standing and best friend in football exacerbated Roddy's awareness that a lifestyle may "look good" yet be devoid of fulfilment. The death of such a close friend, alongside the ongoing breakdown of his marriage, caused Roddy to be deeply troubled:

It broke my heart. Here was my best mate, we had been through all these things together ... There were questions in my heart about "Where's he now?" "Is there life after death?" And, "If I'd have died, where would I be?" ... And one of the biggest things that really sank into my thinking was: Here was me and [the deceased friend], fame, money, influence, power, cars, adulation. And [the deceased friend] took nothing with him. I'm here thinking, "So what's life all about?" It hit me like a brick, like a sledgehammer. I just needed answers.



The excessive wealth and access to sexual opportunities offered by professional football are considered impressive and satisfying consequences of building a career at the highest level (Parker, 2001). However, for Will and Roddy, the results were less than inspiring. Will referred to many relational problems caused by his conduct whilst Roddy had "smashed" the foundation of his marriage. For both players, the cultural norms of maleness inherent to professional football had failed to provide fulfilment and, as Roddy phrased it, had provided questions rather than answers. Against this backdrop, the witness of Christians caused both players to consider alternative avenues to fulfilment. Will desired his marriage to work and knew that their changed attitudes and behaviours caused the restoration of his in-laws' marriage after becoming Christians. Alongside an evident lifestyle change, they had explained the Christian message to Will and Coleen during their stay. Accordingly, after their first visit to her parents and hearing about who Jesus was, both Will and Coleen wanted to become Christians:

Coleen says, "I've just got to have this Jesus in my life." And I'm thinking, "What have you done now?" And her mum came to me 40 years ago, and she said, "Will, what about you?" ... And then and there, in that lounge, on the other side of the world, we both prayed a very simple prayer of faith and repentance.

The final steps to appropriating Christian faith came for Roddy when he was anguishing over his marriage breakdown and grieving his best friend's death. Roddy contacted a respected acquaintance who was a professional cricketer and whom he knew to be a Christian. They discussed Christianity and his friend suggested Roddy should take the conversation further with someone he could depend upon to enter a discreet discussion about this question since Roddy was

a very public figure. The subsequent meeting established trust, and resulted in Roddy meeting a third person, the pastor of his local church. In conversation with the pastor, Roddy resolved to become a Christian. Nevertheless, within three days of this profession, having scored two goals and played a pivotal role in his team's weekend victory, Roddy went clubbing with his team-mates and woke up in bed with a person he had met at the nightclub. It led to great despair and a definitive step of faith:

My mind is saying, "Here you are, asking God to come into your life, [but] two days later, you're committing adultery. How do you square that up?" Come Wednesday [and] I'm in tears. [The pastor] gave me a little book ... I started to read this book, and as I'm reading this book, the penny drops. It really sinks in that Christ loves me, died for me, and he rose again from the dead. And this awesome sense of peace comes over me.

The impact of the cultural norm of sexual promiscuity (Parker, 2001, 2006) had been to cause marital failure and sadness rather than fulfilment. Roddy found greater satisfaction in the alternative sense of self offered by Christianity. Meanwhile, becoming a Christian stabilised Will's marriage. When Coleen stayed on with her parents for another week after Will returned to the club, he did not revert to seeking fulfilment through extra-marital relationships:

When I got back to [his home city], I just knew something inside me was different. When I get off the plane, one of my mates comes to pick me up, and normally, now I have a week on my own with the boys – "Here we go, party time, disco night, a few beers!" I'm 24. But I wasn't interested. And actually, I'm thinking, "What's wrong with me?" And that was a

Wednesday, and I remember on the Saturday night, I'm sat in my apartment, on my own, looking through the telephone directory for a church I could go to tomorrow morning.

Will and Roddy embodied the theocentric approach outlined in Chapter One. Both players found fulfilment through God's unconditional love for them rather than the 'rewards' of their cultural kudos as professional footballers. They discovered that their self-worth hinged on a gift from God rather than being achieved through the sexual endeavours encouraged by the institutional culture of professional football. This assurance proved liberating for both Roddy and Will, as evidenced by the sense of peace and alleviation from the social pressure that they embraced. Furthermore, the role of significant others was paramount in affirming alternative senses of self (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). Both players had the opportunity to observe and learn from Christians who supported them in a manner that embodied the mission of God. To that end, these Christians offered authentic support both in the way they cared for Will and Roddy and how they paid patient and careful attention to explaining the Christian message. As a result, both Will and Roddy found a fulfilment in Christianity that transcended the sexual promiscuity encouraged by their profession.

## **Conclusion**

As highlighted in Chapter Two, the requirement that professionals maintain a paramount love for football is problematic since the daily pressures of the job make it difficult to sustain such enthusiasm. Indeed, the disenchantment and uncertainty arising from the stress of professional football demonstrate why a player cannot obtain fulfilment from an identity solely predicated on their career (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). The respondents considered in this chapter found

fulfilment by adopting the Christian faith during their football careers. At the start of this chapter, trainees found fulfilment in Christianity when dealing with the transition from schoolboy to professional footballer. The second and third sections offered evidence of respondents who faced key challenges of deselection, job loss and injury. The final part of the chapter considered respondents facing marital problems. All these career transition points created a growing disappointment and subsequent dissatisfaction with the promised rewards of a professional football career. These experiences contributed to tarnishing the possibility of maintaining an all-consuming passion for football (Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006a). Respondents identified an alternative vision for their own lives when they met Christians. This process led to respondents' engagement with and affirmation of alternative prospects for personal identity (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). By becoming Christians, respondents moved from finding fulfilment through football to fulfilment through the Christian faith. Football achievements were no longer the source of personal significance. Instead, their relationship with God was the foundational source of self-worth. A later chapter will explore the consequences of this change in respondents' daily interactions at their football clubs. Meanwhile, the next chapter will consider the impact of becoming a Christian on another institutional value of professional football, namely that of seeking security by footballing success (Roderick, 2006a).

## **Chapter Six**

### **Football, Faith and Security**

#### **Introduction**

The theocentric analysis of participants' experiences in Chapter Five indicated that inaugural Christian faith, encouraged by the witness of influential Christians, provided a source of fulfilment previously unattained through professional football. Another aspect of this theological perspective is that Christianity may offer an unprecedented assurance of divine control over an athletic vocation (Null, 2008a, 2008b, 2016; Jones et al., 2020). This chapter examines how becoming Christians impacted respondents' sense of security regarding their playing careers. As outlined in Chapter Two, the institutional expectation is that players should seek career security through playing achievements. The impact of Christian faith on this cultural norm is explored in the experiences of contractual uncertainty (Roderick, 2006c), changing room conflicts, early-career termination through injury (Roderick, 2006b) and late-career foreclosures through injury and ageing (Gearing, 1999). The respondents' experiences suggest a sense of security emanating from their Christian faith, founded upon a theocentric understanding of identity formation.

#### **Surviving contractual uncertainty**

The sub-cultural expectation of an unrelenting passion for the game, when unchecked, can lead to professional football colonising players' lives to the extent that this becomes their only source of making a living (McGillivray et al., 2005; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). Moreover, the

institutional demands of professional football tend to engender one-dimensional athletic identities amongst footballers (Mitchell et al., 2014). This demand may prove problematic for gaining a sense of personal and career security in a career marked by a competitive labour market, short-term contracts, and vulnerability to the uncertainties of deselection, injury and ageing. Nevertheless, there is an expectation that players present stable workplace identities by offering an attitude of total and unwavering commitment to the team's success, regardless of personal uncertainty and insecurity (Roderick, 2006c). Accordingly, the normative culture of professional football dictates that players find security through exhibiting this 'good professional attitude' (Roderick, 2006a) in contrast to the actual private, stressful reality of contractual uncertainty experienced by the players.

Against the uncertain background of professional football, the respondents' Christian faith provided security derived from neither their contractual circumstances nor their presentation of workplace identity. After becoming Christians, Mick Jones, Ben Morris, Pete Green, and James Walters faced contractual uncertainties. Chapter Five explained how Mick became a Christian in his first season as a professional footballer through the influence of his aunt and uncle. Mick was not offered a new deal at the end of his initial season, yet he expressed confidence that God was in control of the situation. Signing for a First Division club in the south of England reinforced this assurance:

And I remember having a time where I was like, "Lord, I know you're real, okay? I don't know how to pray, but I need some help here because I have no idea where I'm going next. This is all I know." And then I discovered just how God pulls the pieces together [because

of the sequence of events that led to a contract offer] ... I just knew that it wasn't a coincidence, that it was a God-instance. It was one of my first memories of going, "Wow, He really answers prayers. He really cares about me. He really can provide for me."

Over the next three years, Mick played 95 games and scored 22 goals for his new club. During this period, he grew in confidence that God was in control of his career:

So that then had a massive impact on my life and how I love football, and how I looked at my football career. I realised that it wasn't actually about my football career. It was about who has blessed me with the career. And it made me look at my identity, that it wasn't about my performance, which, again, as a footballer, I know I struggled with.

Mick exhibits the belief that his significance existed independently of his career achievements and that this provided a degree of assurance that God was in control of his career. This theocentric perspective on identity formation is antithetical to the normative presumption that athletic achievement is foundational to personal worth and a sense of security (Null, 2008a, 2008b, 2016; Jones et al., 2020). Ben Morris displayed a similar mindset to Mick in less favourable circumstances. Ben became a Christian through engaging with a network of London-based Christian professional footballers, following an invitation to the meeting from his financial advisor. During this period, a new manager dropped Ben from the team. Ben knew that the cultural norm was to behave in ways that were preferable to the changing room, regardless of personal convictions (Roderick, 2014; Roderick & Schumacker, 2016). Ben dispelled the need to find his assurance by adhering to this expectation:

You become a bit of a people pleaser, and footballers will say that is a big issue for them. But I think my faith enabled me to remove myself from that people-pleasing mindset and just be me. In the back of my mind, my thoughts were, "If you do play the game [fit in with the culture], maybe you will play in the first-team, maybe you will get an extended contract, [since] you've got a family to look after." But the faith side of it was that there was peace there, so that I know I was comfortable being myself.

Ben's Christian faith allowed him to challenge the cultural norm of attaining security through being a "people pleaser". Instead, his faith ensured that he experienced "peace" despite refusing to act as if all was well when he was not selected to play. The same trend was evident for Pete Green, who came to faith at a church youth group before his First Division debut in 1984. Becoming a Christian helped Pete discover an alternative way of dealing with day-to-day professional insecurities:

Coming into the professional world, I found it hard. It's tough, the criticism and the stick. So maybe because I was taking my identity from football, I felt it a bit. Once I became a Christian, it was like Christ was with me in training, on the matchday. So, one thing was that this abiding sense of Christ with me at all places at all times ... And so, I had this real confidence, not in football or what people said, and so I could receive criticism because all of a sudden, I am not relying on football for my identity or my worth.

Like Ben, Pete believed that God had provided his athletic talent, and this perspective provided confidence in divine control over his football career. This assurance was noticeable in Pete's certainty that he could trust God when transferring between clubs. The process of moving because



players are unwanted by their current club is demoralising, whereas transferring because players are in demand from other clubs enhances self-confidence; it is the difference between being the "exploited" and the "exploiter" (Roderick, 2006a, p. 113). The certainty of divine control assisted Pete in both scenarios. Early in his career, he failed to break into the first-team at his original First Division club and dropped down the divisions to join a Third Division team in the south of England in 1987. Eighteen months later, he moved to a Second Division club, before being signed, in 1990, for a substantial fee by a club in the North East. The club went on to gain promotion to the First Division. Pete described how his faith and the correlated sense of personal significance provided increased resilience in both negative and positive transfer experiences in the uncertain world of professional football:

I developed the ability to ride the lows, which are more regular than the highs. It just allows you to be content whether you have plenty or little ... People could actually then see a stability there when everything else was wobbling. You know what it's like, injuries, bad form. Team-mates were wobbling because their hope is set on something that's just temporary.

Pete was appointed captain as his team celebrated promotion to the newly formed Premier League in 1992. Two years later, Pete was purchased for another substantial fee by a major Premier League club in London and captained the team in the FA Cup final. Pete continued to align his fundamental identity as a Christian with his professional role through appropriating the theocentric perspective outlined in Chapter One. Accordingly, Pete based his assurance and security on God's authority, and this led to a Christian witness to playing colleagues:

How I witness to my team-mates, and number one, how I take care of my own soul and my own family is more important than if I win the FA Cup. And if I'm to be honest, this grew as I got older. But really, the witness that I present to the other players around me is more important than how I actually play on a Saturday. Now I'm not saying that was always at the forefront of my mind in those early days, I wanted to play well, but that became an increasing reality in my life.

James Walters experienced a similar growing understanding of the relationship between the security attained by his faith in God and assurance regarding his football career. He had become a Christian after dealing with the exploitation of his club during a career-threatening knee injury in 1991. James played professionally until 2005, a decade of which was spent with a team in the north of England, as they climbed from the Second Division to the Premier League, before later dropping back to the third tier. The professional challenges were often unnerving when progressing to the Premier League because of the competition for first-team places. This instability led to uncertainty due to regular and public speculation about possible competitors for James's position. Nevertheless, James retained confidence that God was in control:

All of those things [the results of becoming a Christian] just give you that solid platform to play again amongst all the challenges of being dropped and fighting for your place. You know, getting up to the Premier League, the club signed a left-back to take my place ... And people were like, "Just be a problem in the club. Tell him [the manager] you want away [a transfer]." There's that battle ... and I was reading my Bible, and the Lord said,

"Work as if you're working for me." ... I go, "I want to do it your way, Lord. I'm not going to be difficult."

Appropriating a theocentric approach to personal significance and achievements (Null, 2008a, 2008b, 2016; Jones et al., 2020) impacted the sense of security perceived by Mick, Ben, Pete and James. They believed that God's authority transcended the importance of cultural affirmation when they faced selection and contractual uncertainties. The Christian faith appeared to entail a similar sense of assurance when respondents faced workplace conflict with team-mates and management.

### **Conflict with players and managers**

Chapter Two considered the expectation that professional football players should exhibit a good professional attitude, which includes prioritising the good of the team (Roderick, 2006). Further, subservience to management authority was a crucial and enduring institutional norm in the professional game (Manley & Parker, 2017). Thus, players should exhibit the requisite dedication to the team and management to sustain a career. Coercive authoritarianism may facilitate this collective dedication to exercise control (Parker, 2006; Manley et al., 2012; Cushion & Jones, 2014; Mills & Denison, 2013, 2018). This aggressive domination emanates from senior players (Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006a) and management (Roderick, 2006a; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Manley & Parker, 2017). Colin Adams and Steve Philips faced circumstances where their Christian faith proved to be the source of conflict when team-mates or management perceived their behaviours to be a mark of insubordination in rejection of the requirement for total collective commitment. In each case, the sense of security arising from a theocentric understanding of

personal significance enabled Colin and Steve to resist pressure from players and management when conflict arose.

Colin Adams faced tension with a senior player shortly after becoming a Christian. As noted previously, Colin became a Christian in 1984 at an East Anglian Second Division club through the influence of a colleague he had replaced at the club. The following season, when his team-mate had left and the team faced relegation, the situation became decidedly fraught:

I don't think I have ever come across, in my career or even in football, somebody who was so intent, so desperate, to destroy what you had. When I drove in, I would see him sitting in his car, and he'd be reading the papers. And he'd search the papers for something [negative] about a vicar or a priest or something. And he would find things, and then when he'd find them, he'd be really nasty about it, [saying] "That's what you lot are like." So, it wasn't even a question ... It set a tone in the dressing room.

A senior player perceived Colin's Christian faith to be undermining changing room conformity and contributing to collective team failure. In such cases, verbal chastisement is one of the tools used to preserve occupational conformity and success (Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006a; Cushion & Jones, 2014). The censure became increasingly evident when the manager discussed Colin's faith and asked how Colin had become a Christian. The manager asked to continue the conversation the following day, and the situation became much more confrontational:

He said, "Every player in this dressing room that I have, I know 100% they would do what I tell them." He said, "But I don't have that with you." And I said, "What do you want me to do?" And he said, "I know that they'll come in and train on a Sunday." And I said, "I'll come and train on a Sunday if that's what you want." And he said, "You go to college every Wednesday." And I said, "Well, that's a good thing, isn't it? You're not telling me that's a bad thing?"

Despite Colin affirming his commitment to the team, the manager provided a stark ultimatum:

And he said to me, "You can hear what I'm saying. The rest of the players, seven days a week, I can ring them any time I want, and they'll do what I tell them. But you won't." And I said to him, "I really don't know what you're asking of me." And he said to me, "Well, let me make this clear for you: who's more important to you, me or God?" That's what he said.

The manager questioned Colin's loyalty to himself and the team and challenged any attempts made by Colin to refute these accusations and defuse the conflict. He probed the commitment to education, suggesting that college attendance was an aspect of Colin's lack of fidelity. Chapter Two considered the ambivalence of club officials towards the formal education of players (Parker, 2000), and the manager's attitude resonates with the claim that club staff may view education as restricting total and exclusive commitment to the game. The meeting ended with a blatant demand that Colin chose between loyalty to God or the manager. Colin was aware that he faced a crisis but felt that he could not compromise his position:

I looked at him, and I knew I was finished; I knew it was that moment. And I thought, if I try to survive, I'd never be able to live with myself; and if I don't [try to survive], then I'm finished. And so, I said to him, "I tell you what, you have absolutely no chance." That's what I said to him. And he looked at me back, and he said to me, "See that door, once you go through that door, don't ever come back." As I was walking through the door, he said, "There's one other thing for you ... I will make sure you never play football ever again."

Colin refused to deny his primary adherence to the Christian faith when conflict arose. Such refusal was likely to prove problematic since control over player appearances, contracts, and longer-term employment are mainly within the manager's control (Sennett, 1998; Roderick, 2006c, 2014). Despite the power held by his manager, Colin's response demonstrates a sense of personal and professional security that transcended the fear of management authority and authoritarianism. Instead, his security originated from the personal significance conferred by God through the Christian faith. The security emanating from this theocentric understanding of identity formation liberated Colin to uphold the primacy of his Christian faith when conflict arose.

Steve Philips exhibited a similar refusal to regulate Christian beliefs and practices in the face of conflict with management. Steve became a Christian while playing at an East Midlands First Division club in 1988, at the age of 20, after the death of his grandfather led to conversations with the local vicar. Steve left his original club in 1991 and joined a Second Division club, where he had three successful seasons, scoring 35 goals in 130 games, before a change of manager in 1994. Shortly afterwards, the new manager took Steve aside just before they boarded the team bus for an away game and told Steve that he was not to bring his Bible. Steve pushed back:

He says, "You're not coming on the bus with the Bible under your arm." I said, "Well, I'm not getting on the bus then." He said, "No, no – get on the bus, but put the Bible back in your car." I'm like, "Listen to me, let me put it back to you. You've got a choice. I either come on the bus with my Bible, or I get back in my car, and I'm going home." He says, "You're not coming on this bus with that Bible." I say, "Right, I'm off. Because I am not coming on that bus without my Bible ... So, all the best at the weekend, I'm going [home]."

Steve refused to comply with the manager's demands, and was eventually permitted to bring his Bible on the team bus:

He said, "You can come on the bus with your Bible, but you're not allowed to get it out." I said, "If I come in this bus, I will get my Bible out, and I'll flippin' read it, or I'm not getting on." He went, "Okay, well, get on then. But keep it to yourself." I went, "Wow, mate, what is wrong with you? I will not keep it to myself. I will get it out, and I will flippin' shout it from the rooftops. If you want me on the bus, my bag was coming on, and I'm going to shout it from the rooftops." He went, "Okay then, get on then."

After a very short tenure, the sacking of the manager alleviated the tension, and Steve developed a harmonious relationship with his replacement. A year later, Steve moved to another First Division club in the north of England, and, once again, Steve ran into conflict with the manager. The problem arose because Steve did not "go down" [fall to the ground] during an attacking move

when tripped by the opposing goalkeeper. The manager was furious that Steve had missed the opportunity to gain a penalty, blaming this reluctance on his faith:

He said, "You're not cheating if you go down, and it might be against Christian beliefs and things, but it's not cheating. It's okay. It's about winning. We win at all costs. It's about winning football matches, and that's how you win." ... I challenged the manager in front of the players, and he went mad at me. And I said, "Listen, I don't care what you say; you put me in that place again, I would not have gone down." And after that, I wasn't his favourite ... So, I wasn't really playing in the first-team towards the end of my time there.

When conflict arose, Steve resisted managerial authority by refusing to consent to what he considered cheating. Like Colin, Steve embraced organisational conflict and rejection. This preparedness suggests that both exhibited a theocentric perspective to their assurance, an implicit understanding that their God-given worth conferred greater security than that offered by subservience to managerial authority. Roderick (2006a, 2014) documents that players might offer subtle and understated forms of verbal and physical resistance to undermine organisational power relationships without intending to overturn existing conditions. He suggests that this is because external adherence to the cultural expectations enforced by the club was in participants' best interests if they wished to remain in employment. Thus, to curry favour and ensure longevity within the professional game, individual players may be compelled to demonstrate alignment to the overall cultural values and behaviours, regardless of their personal beliefs. The evidence presented here indicates that both players refused to conform to collective demands and rejected subsequent player and management pressure to acquiesce, regardless of the cost to their careers.



Instead, the respondents' sense of security, predicated on the work and character of God rather than their football career, provided confidence in God's sovereign control over their lives in times of conflict. Attention now turns to the impact of this assurance in situations where injury caused the premature retirement of respondents.

### **Early career termination through injury**

Elite sport is one of the few vocations which accepts that professional status is so inextricably dependent on the body's athleticism that injury and the threat of injury are inevitable and regular features of working lives (Hawkins & Fuller, 1998; Roderick et al., 2000; Roderick 2006b). Chapter Five showed how this pressure entailed social disapproval from workplace colleagues if players were perceived as too slow to return from injury. Further, since management careers can depend on players' availability for selection when required, a willingness to play through injury is considered one of the foundations of a 'good professional attitude' since it can secure management approval (Roderick, 2006a). As a result of this pressure, managers may coerce players to return to training before they are ready, leading to health-compromising situations (Roderick et al., 2000; Roderick, 2006b). In turn, players may exhibit desperation to return to playing after injury to maintain security according to cultural norms and managerial expectations (Roderick et al., 2000; Roderick 2006a, 2006b).

Moreover, players find it problematic to sustain one-dimensional athletic identities formed by the institutional pressures of professional football when they must leave the game due to injury. Gearing (1999) notes that the transition away from professional football is significantly more

challenging for players whose careers have been curtailed by injury than those who retire of their own volition. He adds that when injury forces players to retire, they may be unwilling or unable to relinquish their footballing identity and adapt to new, alternative lifestyles. Nevertheless, Paul Roberts, Mick Jones and Colin Adams indicated the importance of the security attained through their faith in God rather than management or peer affirmation when they faced career-ending injuries in their early to mid-20s.

Paul Roberts had come to faith in 1978, shortly after a cruciate ligament injury caused him to miss an FA Cup-winning appearance at Wembley. The club was determined to restore Paul to fitness, but the injury proved troublesome and materialised each time Paul appeared ready to recommence playing:

The bottom line was, as soon as I started to try and really push it, I'd break down again. They [the club medical team] still didn't know why. They sent me to hypnotists, things like that. Someone said, "It might be in his head", which really aggravated me. But, you know, I gladly said, "Yeah, I'll do anything, I'll go, yeah." But it was a nonsense.

Paul's injury continued to inhibit his capacity to play football despite these efforts. Nevertheless, since he was an asset to the club, they retained his services for another three seasons, making multiple efforts to restore his fitness. By 1980, when Paul was 24 years old, it was evident that his days as a professional footballer were over:

I had a meeting with the management, and the physio [physiotherapist], when it had come to the actual end, and they said, "Well, we've done this for a number of years ... and we can't go on. We're now going to buy [they named a player who would replace Paul]." ... There's a bit of relief. I remember because it's hard, battling against a brick wall, but of course, scary, thinking, "What else can I do? Where does this take me?" That was pretty tough.

Due to managerial pressure, professional players may seek security by return to training too quickly following injury (Roderick et al., 2000; Roderick 2006a, 2006b). Paul's experience appears to demonstrate a desire to exhibit a 'good professional attitude' (Roderick, 2006a) through his willingness to do "anything" to return from the injury. However, conformity to management pressure in this regard was not the foundation of Paul's sense of security. Instead, one could argue that Paul's theocentric understanding of personal significance provided the sole source of security at this crucial juncture in his life. Chapter Two considered how early career termination in professional football could lead to mental health concerns due to the abrupt identity foreclosure (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Paul's description of the process of dealing with his injury points to the importance of his Christian identity:

I think of myself as being a tough guy. I come from quite a rough background, and I'm quite tough mentally, but I can't see me being able to survive that [enforced retirement] if I hadn't had this experience [becoming a Christian] which changed everything. Because although it was the next few years that were really hard and hurtful, I knew I had something

more precious than football. Football is really important to me ... But I experienced something and am continuing to experience something that is far more important.

Paul described himself as being a "tough guy", which aligns with the dominant hegemonic cultural norms described in Chapter Two. Nevertheless, he expressed that adherence to this institutional expectation was insufficient for dealing with a career-terminating injury. Paul depended on his Christian faith to cope with such stress and alluded to the confidence that God had his best interests at heart. Paul's experience resonates with the analysis in Chapter One, which advocated a theocentric approach to identity formation. Paul's identity, and resulting security, were not a product of his football career but his relationship with God.

Mick Jones's three-year stint at a First Division club in the south of England between 1993 and 1996 was a period in which he consolidated the perspective that his acceptance by God transcended the security to be gained by affirmation from the public, his manager or team-mates:

It's not about the scores in the paper, how well I'd done, or what the crowd thought of me, or the manager's approval, or wanting to be respected and loved amongst your team-mates. It was a defining moment for me. Because in them years, it was then about identity. I realised that I was accepted by Jesus just as I was, and it didn't matter whether I performed on the pitch or not. I was loved. So, although with the football at times I struggled ... something amazing was going on, and my whole outlook was changing really.

The arrival of a new manager tested this confidence since he did not want Mick in his team. Mick moved to a Second Division club in the north of England, but he managed only 20 appearances in his first season due to back problems. The club released Mick, and he spent a season overseas, again playing only a handful of games because of his back injury. Mick returned to a north of England club in the Third Division, where the injury flared up after 10 games, and he did not play again that season. In 1999, aged 24, the ongoing problem with his back was identified as a prolapsed disc and led to his full-time professional career termination. However, he continued to earn a part-time salary for several years in the Football Conference [the top tier of semi-professional football]. Mick's Christian faith had an essential impact on the approach to the situation:

So, to know that God has been guiding my journey means that I know that I'm not bitter [about injury] ... Honestly, faith, and what God has given me, is so much more than just a football career ... So even though I was injured every season, I still look back and look on the positive ... I know that God is in control and that there is a bigger picture. And I look at things, I suppose, in light of eternity, as a believer, knowing that there is a bigger picture and that He opened the doors, and He gave me the opportunity to play football.

Cynicism towards the game because of injury, leading to a sense of rejection and a loss of self-worth, is a recognised feature of professional football (Roderick, 2006a). Mick's assurance of God's design led to a much more positive perspective, as Mick utilised a theocentric understanding of his athletic vocation. Through the lens of understanding this "bigger picture", Mick recognised that his significance was independent of his athletic achievements.

Colin Adams echoes these sentiments of assurance when facing a career-ending injury. After two difficult years of conflict with senior colleagues and management at his club in East Anglia, Colin moved to a London Fourth Division club in 1986. There followed three and a half very successful seasons, which led to a transfer, for a substantial fee, to a club in the North East. His new club was at the pinnacle of the Second Division and heading towards promotion to the top tier. However, Colin came to the end of his burgeoning career when, during a local derby, without being tackled, his knee gave way, and he collapsed to the ground. The problem proved to be a degenerative disease of the knee-lining. Nevertheless, Colin's manager sought to rush a return from injury, insinuating that Colin's delay in returning from injury resulted from his poor attitude (Roderick et al., 2000; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b). The manager's behaviour further aggravated Colin's injury:

After the November operation [until he left the club the following June], I never trained with the team again ... They were still hoping to get me fit, and [the manager] would take me out to train on my own. He ruined me. He literally took me on the hills and shouted at me. In the modern world, it would have been a huge [safeguarding and legal] claim. When my career finished, the reports always showed that the original injury probably didn't finish my career, but it was the after treatment and rehab [rehabilitation].

Colin's injury was so severe that in 1990, after just 15 games for his new club, he had to retire from professional football at 25. Despite this, Colin felt an assurance that God was in control of the whole situation, and he even expressed gratitude for the circumstances in which his career concluded:

My time at the club was really exciting ... I did enjoy it, and the training was fun, and playing was great, and the life was different, and everybody knew you. And you kind of thought, "This is what I thought it would always be like." And obviously, it was over very quickly then [due to the injury]. But even though my career ended very quickly there with the injury, I always know that looking back, the one thing I had, and I always thank God for this, was that I played at a level at which I was very comfortable.

Colin had previously worried about what he would do for a living if he had to stop playing football. Nevertheless, he did not lose his sense of security despite failing to conform to the managerial pressure to continue playing. Colin's Christian faith enabled him to retain a sense of personal significance along with an indication that he might exercise different, non-athletic, God-given talents for future personal achievement:

Previous to coming to faith, I'd always been a little bit paranoid [about], "What else will I do [after retirement]?" ... When I became a Christian, all of those things seemed to not matter anymore. I knew that God had a plan for my life. God knew where it was going; you could trust Him. I started to worry less. And when injury forced my retirement, I, therefore, had no other thought than, "God knows what He is doing." ... I would immediately say, "OK, God, what are you going to do with me? What's my life going to be?"

The assurance that "God knows what He is doing" enabled Colin to have a sense of security in dealing with transitioning from the game. As with Mick and Paul, Colin clearly distinguished his significance from his athletic achievements. Colin, Mick and Paul had appropriated a theocentric understanding of personal significance, whereby their security arose from the character of and work of God rather than their footballing careers. In contrast to the difficulties when players have their careers curtailed by injury (Gearing, 1999), premature closure did not diminish Colin, Mick or Paul's sense of self-worth or future purpose.

### **Later career termination because of injury and ageing**

Chapter Two noted that the institutional demands of the professional game necessitate a total commitment to football, thereby facilitating the development of one-dimensional athletic identities (Roderick 2006a; Mitchell et al., 2014). As a result, professional football players are often ill-equipped for retirement from the game (Gearing, 1999; Jones & Denison, 2017). Indeed, Chapter Two noted the analysis of Jones and Denison (2017), who concluded that the loss of routine could be a source of both relief and profound challenge amongst retired professional footballers. Former professionals found difficulty due to lacking stability, purpose and identity upon retirement. Once again, a more holistic, theocentric perspective on personal identity provided the respondents with a sense of security that assisted with career termination.

The effect of this security when coping with a career-ending injury was evident in the experience of Steve Philips. On the very day that Steve, aged 29, signed for a First Division club in the north of England, he ruptured his Achilles tendon in training. Shortly after Steve returned to full training,



the tendon re-ruptured. Steve was out of action for 14 months, and the club did not renew his contract. After such a long period of injury, Steve was aware that he might struggle to find employment at another club at 30. Nevertheless, he remained unperturbed, confident that God would provide a new career opportunity:

What's really interesting is that at that time, when it re-ruptured, that was when I heard, at a leadership event, God speak to me for the first time, the only time audibly. He said that He ordained that day and that He commissioned me that day to tell people about His Son Jesus. So, what was the worst day of my life, actually turned out to be one of the best. You think I'm in a terrible place, but actually knowing that God got [was with] me was a massive comfort to get through that difficult time.

A vision for the future enthused Steve, despite facing the end of his professional career. Though the double-rupture of his Achilles tendon led to the end of Steve's full-time playing days, he continued to play semi-professional football:

And I got a phone call from [a friend who was managing a non-league club] who said, "I'd love you to come and sign for us. Why don't you come and have a look at what we're doing?" ... I went and signed, and had three and a half, four years there. It was great. I absolutely loved it.

At the same time, Steve felt he was in the process of developing a new, God-given career as a Christian minister:

God knows the beginning and the end, and everything in between, thankfully. I don't know what's going to happen, but I know the One who does. See, God was good to me, and He spoke to me [ to provide assurance for the future]. That was a life-changer. Because all of a sudden, I wasn't bothered about my football career coming to an end because I knew that God had a plan ... there must be a pathway.

As he ended his playing career, Steve's response was a vitality that he could continue playing part-time football while transitioning to a new vocation. Steve expressed an ongoing pleasure in being able to combine both his passions. Rather than dismay, Steve had confidence that "God had a plan" during the transition period. Phil Lee reflected a similar confidence in God. Phil became a Christian shortly after becoming disenchanted with his profession during contract negotiations at his club, leading to his joining a different First Division club in the south of England in 2000, at the age of 27. Phil was in a hospital preparing for knee surgery after damaging his cruciate ligament a year later. When his career was under threat, he was amazed to discover an unexpected sense of security:

I had an hour of total peace, peace that I had chased, peace that I had been looking for in so many other areas. That peace which I had been looking for was always temporary because the fear would come back in, the doubt would return. But at this point, for this hour, nothing! Nothing at all. No fear about the future, nothing about the past, nothing about now! Just peace! And I knew at that point that it was as if I could tangibly have touched Jesus ... I prayed, "Lord, whatever you want me to do, I'll do."

The injury did not end his career. Instead, Phil went on to play for the club for another decade. However, it was a foretaste of future assurance when Phil finally decided to retire after an 18-year career that became increasingly difficult to sustain because of knee problems. He expressed a clear distinction between personal significance and athletic achievement:

The start point of preparation was knowing that God had a plan for my life ... All the other things I was doing away from football showed me that football is part of who you are, not all of who you are. So, when retirement came, I thought, "Okay, the last seven years playing as a Christian footballer were brilliant, absolutely brilliant. Ups and downs. Lots going on, lots of ups and downs on and off the pitch. But what a brilliant time. As good as that was, wow, what's next?" That was my thought process, "What's next?"

A key aspect of Phil's approach was that professional football was "part of who you are, not all of who you are" and that it was now a question of "what's next?" in his life. The distinction between Phil's career and his identity allowed a transition away from professional football that did not impugn his sense of personal significance. Phil's theocentric understanding of identity formation gave rise to this sense of security. Pete Green exhibited similar confidence when he decided to end his high profile playing career at 35. Pete's captaincy at most of his previous clubs had led to several people encouraging him to become a manager, but he decided that, initially, he would work in the media:

Finishing for me wasn't the big dilemma that it could be for many because my identity wasn't tied up in football. I went with the media, not with the coaching because that's 24/7. It's a vocation, management, and I don't think that's for me ... But I didn't know if [the media job] would be forever, but I worked hard at it, just the way I did with football ... And I had this deep trust in the Father's providence, and I had no idea that it would go as well as it would, but I trusted that the Lord would provide for me, for us.

Foundational to Pete Green's perspective was the distinction between his significance, insofar as his "identity wasn't tied up in football", and the confidence that in "the Father's providence", he would discover future avenues by which to express his abilities. Pete understood that his achievements were not constitutive of his personal value. Instead, any attainments resulted from his exercise of God-given talents and relationships. Pete's sense of security was married to his personal significance rather than his athletic achievements and therefore was not subverted by retirement. The initial experience of dealing with the end of his playing days was much more difficult for Roddy Cowan. Roddy had avoided career-threatening injuries during a very high profile, 19-year career. Nevertheless, at the age of 37, having been a Christian for four years, he could not attain another playing contract. Roddy found it hard to cope:

I think those moments were probably the lowest of my life. I was still a young Christian, [having been a Christian for] one or two or three years ... The thing about that time [was that] there was no routine. For 19 years [as a player], there was routine: get up, breakfast, whatever you do, get to the training ground, train, bit of banter, bit of beer, come home –

routine. Now, I'm in bed, eleven o'clock [in the morning] ... There's nothing to do. All your mates are footballers and are all training.

Roddy was not ready to stop playing, and he wanted to retain his sense of "routine". The concept of 'routine' can be an aspect of disciplinary techniques, which are the primary way that power, through subtle coercion, makes individuals docile (Foucault, 1975/1977). Daily training routines and disciplinary lifestyles are normative in professional football, so losing access to such familiarity can be painful. Losing such a routine can be a "disorientating" experience (Jones & Denison, 2017, p. 931). Without the regular prescription of activities, or the regular reinforcement of expected behaviours, retired professional players are often at a loss in establishing direction as they seek new roles within society, especially at the outset of their retirement (Jones & Denison, 2017). From a Foucauldian perspective, the disciplinary impact on Roddy had made him a "docile footballing body" incapable of coping with career termination (Jones & Denison, 2017, p. 298). However, a theocentric perspective suggests that despite the trauma of leaving the game, Roddy's Christian faith enabled him to sustain an ongoing sense of personal worth, and a resulting sense of security, which led to an exploration of alternative avenues for achievements that were unrelated to football:

[They were] stressful times when you're on your own, and in all that you're praying every day, you're growing [in faith], "Lord, what's this?" You're crying – the stresses. And you're blagging it because you're a man as well, to the outside world. You're going through all this stuff. But with all that, you're seeing God's hand on you all the time ... in little pockets of stress, you are seeing God's hand on you all the time.

In this adversity, Roddy recognised that his sense of security originated from his Christian faith:

But I love God ... God's in my life, [so] it's going to be okay. When I became a Christian, that moment in that room, I just sensed God saying, "Everything's going to be okay." I don't know how, but everything was going to be okay. And in that room, there was a peace that everything's going to be okay. It's a peace that surpasses understanding.

Moreover, as Chapter Nine will explore further, involvement in the local church played a key part in this process:

I was growing in God, always, all the time. I was going to church, learning, being part of the church, growing, paying my tithes [giving money to the church], developing and being part of the church by helping out in different areas in the church, and that kind of stuff.

Roddy's reflection implies his significance to God, that "God's hand [is] on you all the time", and that Roddy had a "peace that surpasses understanding". Roddy exhibited alternative sources of personal achievement to professional football since he could contribute to the broader community by "helping out in different areas" through his church network. He indicated a tacit understanding that life remained both significant and purposeful despite the demise of his football career. Unlike Phil and Pete, Roddy could not control the timing of the termination of his playing career and therefore found retirement to be a more traumatic experience (Gearing, 1999). However, unlike the participants studied by Gearing (1999), Roddy could integrate the reality of retirement into the

broader narrative of his life. Therefore, like Phil and Pete, Roddy appeared to find equilibrium by separating personal significance to God from previous personal football achievements and exploring alternative vocational avenues.

## **Conclusion**

The current chapter has explored the relationship between Christianity and the institutional norm in professional football that career security is optimised by conforming to the values of unfaltering commitment to the collective cause of team and management (Roderick, 2006a). Chapter One suggests that a theocentric perspective in elite athletes makes possible a new sense of assurance in God's ultimate control over the athletic vocation (Null, 2008a, 2008b, 2016; Jones et al., 2020). Considering the achievement-led approach of institutional sporting culture outlined in Chapter Two, the current chapter indicates that respondents found ultimate security through their confidence in divine control over their sporting careers. This sense of personal assurance demonstrates the critical role of an alternative source of personal identity during contractual uncertainty, workplace conflict and retirement.

Requests for the earlier integration of alternative personal identities into the process of career transition are increasingly common in elite sporting circles (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2009a, 2009b; Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Jones & Denison, 2017; McCready, 2019; Stamp et al., 2021). The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the process was already well established in participants' lives, with the Christian faith making a positive impact from the earliest career transitions right through to retirement. This healthier transition appeared due to the increasing

security gained through a theocentric perspective on their personal significance, an assurance of divine control over their vocation. Up to this point, the thesis has explored respondents' private thoughts and feelings and identified the existential fulfilment and security gained from becoming Christians. Their experiences also indicated a reduction in cynicism towards the difficulties resulting from their professional career. In this respect, the next chapter considers how the respondents exhibited a novel degree of authenticity through integrating Christian faith into public workplace behaviours and interactions.



## Chapter Seven

### Football, Faith and Authenticity

#### Introduction

Chapter Five suggested that when respondents became Christians, a received identity enabled a degree of fulfilment previously unattained in the achievement-driven world of professional football. It also indicated the critical role played by other Christians in helping respondents appropriate and sustain their inaugural faith. Chapter Six proposed that Christianity provided a new sense of security. However, it also identified changing room conflict when Colin Adams and Steve Philips resisted pressure to segregate Christianity from the workplace. The current chapter further examines how respondents' exercised agency in integrating faith at their clubs and how this was initially received, before exploring the consequences of the authentic combination of private belief with public, workplace behaviours.

The factors that determine the coordination of back stage and front stage identities amongst professional footballers are explored by Hickey and Roderick (2017). Chapter Two discussed their analysis combines the theatrical metaphor of Goffman (1959) with the concept of 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and highlights the vital role of work colleagues, among others, in accepting or rejecting the presentation of possible selves. This legitimisation is particularly crucial when the vision does not align with the dominant social and cultural norms in which the individual is currently situated (Oyserman et al., 1995). Such authenticity, or integrity, is often elusive in elite sports (Carless & Douglas, 2014). Thus, any rejection by significant others within

the football club might curtail efforts to integrate Christian beliefs with workplace behaviours. In turn, the theological perspective outlined in Chapter One posits that a theocentric understanding of personal significance can enable relational authenticity in Christian athletes (Null, 2008a, 2008b, 2016; Jones et al., 2020).

This chapter considers the normative pattern of respondents' experiences within football clubs as they sought to harmonise faith and football. It explores whether the successful alignment of respondents' personal beliefs and workplace behaviour was contingent on colleagues' affirming their Christian faith or whether it occurred notwithstanding a lack of affirmation. The first two sections discuss initial ridicule and then overt aggression faced by respondents when they identified as Christians and therefore intuitively posed a threat to the cultural conformity expected to facilitate optimum team performances. The third and fourth sections of the chapter identify a change of mood, as managers and players began to respect respondents' integrity in seeking to combine their faith and sport. This authenticity led to growing respect for respondents' credibility, trustworthiness and reliability on and off the field.

### **Initial ridicule**

Some respondents reported that the initial reaction in the changing room to their new faith was informal ridicule, known as 'banter'. The culture of banter characterises men's interactions in general and is particularly noticeable in sport (see Segrave et al., 2006; Hein & O'Donohoe, 2014; Lawless & Magrath, 2020). This kind of mockery is a form of interaction that can facilitate and disrupt inclusion and, accordingly, banter fosters a hegemonic community and isolates individuals

or demographics based on a particular characteristic (Lawless & Magrath, 2020). Banter also plays an essential role in socialisation and building relationships within a hegemonic masculine culture (Easthope, 1990; Eubank, Nesti and Cruickshank, 2014; Nichols, 2018). For example, Nichols (2018) draws on the dramaturgical metaphor of Goffman (1959) to suggest that the use of banter is a conscious aspect of a competitive rugby players' front stage presentation to conform to changing room requirements. However, whilst enabling the formation of relationships without requiring mutual vulnerability, the result is that players may publicly engage in changing room banter whilst privately feeling insecure and anxious (Brownrigg et al., 2018).

Banter is also explicitly identified as shop-floor humour, used as a means workers seek to control those perceived not to be "pulling their weight" (Collinson, 1988, p. 435). Against this background, banter is a prevalent aspect of professional football culture (Gearing, 1999; Parker, 2006; Roderick, 2006a; Manley & Parker, 2017; Newman et al., 2021). According to Parker (2001, 2006), this is part of the informal learning process used to direct football trainees towards constructing masculinity that reflects the development of traditional working-class identity. It is an aspect of the toughening up player development that lasts throughout a career and is critical to peer and management acceptance in professional football, requiring individuals to cope with the insults of others and offer similar jibes in return. The general expectation is for players to laugh along when they are on the receiving end of banter, even when privately experiencing uncertainty, anxiety or personal hurt (Parker 2001, 2006; Brownrigg et al., 2018). They must manage their feelings so that colleagues continue to receive the signal that a player is resilient enough to cope with the pressure of performing under pressure in big match situations (Roderick, 2006a). Newman et al. (2021, p. 7) note that this banter, a form of bullying, is legitimised in the professional football

context to "test the mental toughness of its players". On the one hand, the ability to withstand and engage in changing room banter can therefore be considered a prerequisite to acceptance by professional colleagues. On the other hand, failure to adequately manage the social interactions of banter is equated with an inability to benefit the team and therefore poses a threat to results.

When others within clubs became aware of respondents' Christian faith, the deployment of banter provided a mechanism to examine the impact of Christianity on the capacity to perform under pressure. Such was the experience of Mick Jones, who, as previously observed, became a Christian at the age of 18, in 1994, shortly before leaving a London First Division club to play in the English Second Division. Since becoming a Christian at the age of 19, Mick had stopped swearing, and the manager immediately picked up the absence of expletives:

I remember [the manager], in front of all the boys, would always pull up on my language by just sort of saying, "Come on, don't you just want to go and swear? Let it out, let it out." And I've become this 'flippin' 'ecker' [a mild form of exclamation which is a euphemism for the word 'f\*\*\*ing']. From management down to players, and I vividly remember [the manager] doing it in front of all the players, like almost trying to get me to swear as if I needed to swear ... That's the norm. That's what you do.

Expletives are an embedded aspect of the social pressure to conform to working-class masculinity. Workers must display a willingness, for example, to swear and "give and take a joke" (Collinson, 1988, pp. 424, 435). Mick appropriated this nickname in a light-hearted manner and went on to play 95 times for the club, scoring 22 goals. The ability to receive and reciprocate banter was an

aspect of Simon Stevens's testing when he became a Christian. Simon had been a professional footballer for 15 years before becoming a Christian in 1993 at 32. Shortly afterwards, he transferred to an English Fourth Division club. The banter began as soon as his new team-mates found out about his faith. It happened on the team bus when Simon was sitting next to a senior player who had been a colleague at a previous club. Simon was leafing through a tabloid newspaper when his colleague made a crude remark about a picture of a semi-naked woman. Simon hesitated in offering a response, whereas, in the past, he would have retorted immediately with a lewd comment:

So, I said words along the lines of, "That's very nice." So [due to Simon's unexpectedly reserved response] he is obviously fishing for more detail than I would have normally given. And he said, and it was so strange, he said, "You're not one of them born again Christians, are you?" I said, "I am." So, honestly, he stood up at the back of the coach and moved into the aisle and shouted it down the coach [that Simon was a Christian]. I'll never forget it. So, the barriers were broken very early on.

This incident resulted in further teasing at work, with players posting similar pictures on his changing room locker and car window. Simon made sure he played along and sought to give as good as he got:

I wasn't po-faced [unhappy with his team-mates] about it. I had a joke that I nearly had a crash on the way in [to work] because I daren't look in my wing mirror because of the pictures ... I think it is better to show that you are real when you still identify with people,

but you have a clearer line [idea] of where to draw the line. And sometimes, if I'm honest, I get that wrong. But I'm conscious of people seeing that I'm a regular guy rather than someone who's removed. So that was a real clear, definitive example of what it was like early on.

The nature of workplace culture in working-class, shop-floor life contains sexist humour based on practical jokes (Collinson, 1988). Simon's response was a degree of conformity with this cultural changing room requirement while simultaneously questioning how to create boundaries that aligned with his faith. The rejoinder mattered because normative banter's jovial give and take are considered evidence of the ongoing capacity to perform under pressure (Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006a). Simon navigated the institutional norms of professional football by demonstrating the requisite ability to perform under pressure through engagement with banter whilst maintaining integrity by staying on the right side of "the line" in his faith.

Steve Phillips' had to manage a similar testing routine through banter when he became a Christian much earlier in his career. Chapter Six considered how, after the death of his grandfather, Steve became a Christian while playing at an East Midlands First Division club in 1988. When the captain found out, he announced it to the whole squad as they sat in the changing room before a training session. Steve, who was 20 years old, found the experience difficult:

I got battered that first day. Imagine the first-team dressing room, all the older pros [professionals], [the team captain] comes walking in, then all of a sudden, it's out. I was a bit embarrassed at first, and [I] got ripped to shreds. They called me "Reverend". They

called me "Maxi Priest" [the name of a rock band]. And so the players were quite standoffish and taking the mickey. I remember [a senior player] saying to me, "It's just a phase you're going through. It won't last long."

Chapter Six showed how senior players played a role in sustaining changing room conformity to collaborative team success. The chapter also illustrated how managers had ultimate control over contractual, employment and playing opportunities (Sennett, 1998; Roderick, 2006c, 2014). Steve quickly decided it would be in his best interests to tell the manager immediately:

I actually went see the gaffer [manager]. I banged on his door, and my knees were trembling. I banged on the door, and he was like, "Who is it?" I opened slowly and said, "Gaffer, it's me, Steve." [He asked] "What do you want?" [I said] "Gaffer, I was just thinking, you know I go to church now. I was just thinking if there's any chance we can have a club chaplain." He went, "F\*\*\* off, stick your f\*\*\*\*\* chaplain. Now get out of my office."

Despite this abrupt and aggressive response, the interaction between Steve and the manager continued:

So, I closed the door really slowly and stood there for three or four seconds. Then, I tapped on the door again. He went, "Who is it?" So, I opened the door, and he went, "What do you want now?" I said, "Gaffer, is that a 'No!' then?" He started laughing and said, "Go on, get out, you beggar."

Steve's ability to respond to an expletive-laden verbal chastisement by using humour indicates his capacity to offer a culturally appropriate response to workplace interactions. All three respondents had to engage with, and navigate, workplace banter following initial attempts to integrate faith and work. Mick, Steve and the more experienced Simon were all required to show that becoming a Christian had not diminished the ability to hold their own under the stress of private anxiety or hurt.

Further, Mick, Steve and Simon continued to integrate their personal beliefs and behaviours at work despite colleagues' non-affirmation of their Christian faith. The inability to attain changing room support may have rendered a successful integration of an alternative self with their careers less likely (Oyserman et al., 1995; Hickey & Roderick, 2017). However, the experiences of all three respondents suggest that they were able to act authentically, aligning personal beliefs and workplace behaviour, despite the lack of attestation. This consistency accords with the analysis in Chapter One, whereby a theocentric understanding of personal worth enables Christian athletes to act authentically, regardless of social opposition.

The need to prove that professional performance was undiminished by Christian faith was also crucial for Will Andrews, who, as previously indicated, became a Christian through the influence of his in-laws while playing overseas in the off-season of 1976. As captain of his First Division club, Will was apprehensive about whether the players would now accept his leadership since he had no experience of Christianity in professional football. When he returned to England to start the new season, he did not have to wait long to discover how the team would respond to his new



faith. At the end of the first training session, a group of senior players started questioning him about an evident change in his behaviour since, as documented earlier in Mick's case, Will had stopped swearing:

After training one day, we were all in the shower or the bath or whatever ... and then two or three [team-mates], just out of the blue, are like, "What is going on? You're a completely different person." I thought, "Oh my goodness me" – you know, I'd been praying about this. How am I going to tell my team-mates that I've become a Christian? And here we are, 12 blokes naked in the shower, and they're asking me what's happened.

Will responded to these questions by explaining that he had become a Christian:

And so, I told them I'd become a Christian, and my life had changed. And the only reaction was this stunned silence, they stare at me, and they all went, "Oh, you mean you've become all religious?" That was their understanding. And I said, "No. I don't think I've become all religious at all. I just have a faith; I believe in God." And that was the start. And that news spread like wildfire.

The cultural expectation of professional football is that when the banter flies, players can show that they are tough enough to laugh along with the insults (Parker, 2001, 2006). They also need to reciprocate, proving that they are resilient enough to handle pressurised situations (Roderick, 2006a). Mick, Steve and Simon exhibited this capacity. When Will declared his faith, there was a more serious tone to the interaction. Shop-floor humour tests and seeks to control those considered

not to be "pulling their weight" (Collinson, 1988, p. 435). Will, as team captain, was determined to show that his faith would not diminish his leadership. However, the tension indicated in Will's interactions lends itself to further analysis since his experience demonstrates that light-hearted banter is not the only response of professional footballers when Christian faith is perceived to threaten team unity and results.

### **Initial aggression**

While banter is often light-hearted, occasional and reciprocal, it is noted by Grey-Thompson (2017), in a review of duty of care and safeguarding procedures in sport, that it can also lead to bullying. This aggression can be one-sided, intentional and persistent unless clear boundaries are established and maintained. Newman et al. (2021) make the same point, showing that insecurity, competitiveness, and job pressures can fuel less friendly banter between players, becoming abusive and amounting to bullying.

Chapter Six identified that the cultural requirement for an unswerving commitment to team solidarity and cohesion is an essential value within professional football, with the prevalent belief that lack of conformity off the pitch leads to team failure on it (Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006a; Cushion & Jones, 2014). As a result, player management may use coercive, verbal and physical authoritarianism (Roderick, 2006a; Parker, 2006; Manley & Parker, 2017). Academics have widely used the concepts of control and authority as mechanisms to supposedly maximise team performance in professional sport (Manley et al., 2012; Cushion & Jones, 2014; Mills & Denison, 2013, 2018). The effects of authoritarianism, control and verbal aggression go beyond

management boundaries, with an expectation of unquestioning compliance with official instruction from senior players and management (Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006a). Chapter Six indicated that conflict arose in cases where the Christian faith of the respondents was perceived to threaten the cultural norm of conformity and submission to authority. This imperiousness impacted Colin Adams, whose early attempts to integrate his private beliefs and workplace behaviours led to confrontations with workplace colleagues, who responded with aggression rather than deploying banter when the matter of faith arose. On one occasion, very shortly after Colin had become a Christian and his Christian colleague was still at the club, they found themselves in a very uncomfortable meeting:

I remember [the manager] calling two of us in and telling us what he had been told [by another manager], "You should get rid of those Christians, because Christians are like cancer, they spread." [I felt] utter shock, really. I suppose I understood that becoming a Christian at that point was the willingness to lose everything.

Paul Roberts was an established first-team player when he became a Christian at a top London club. Before the knee injury which prematurely ended his playing career, he was aware of some preconceptions amongst management that Christian faith may cause a player to be less competitive. Paul was aware of this more subtle form of animosity:

People felt if you became a Christian, you lost your toughness, and you became weaker. I think I would have thought that as well. I'd have been exactly the same before I came to

faith. So, I think people were a little bit wary, [thinking] "Let's see how this changes things."

There is a fear that a lack of conformity and cultural compatibility off the pitch may lead to collective team failure (Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006a; Cushion & Jones, 2014). As a result, management and players may view non-conformity to cultural norms as a threat to matchday performances, negatively affecting the team and the manager's career. As will become clear later in this chapter, Paul felt that his combative approach as a defensive midfield player refuted this management claim. However, Paul's attempt to integrate his personal beliefs and workplace behaviours were initially considered to threaten his capacity, and therefore the ability of the team, to perform. Paul, as with Colin, did not receive the workplace affirmation that would be considered pivotal to the successful integration of his faith and footballing career (Hickey & Roderick, 2017).

The institutional requirement that players exhibit a total commitment to the team by manifesting subservience to the authority of both management and senior players is one aspect of a 'good professional attitude' (Roderick, 2006a). Harry Richards fell short of this requirement, and he was dropped, then transferred to another club. Harry had become a Christian after being intimidated by a manager at his Third Division London club in 1992, when he was told in no uncertain terms during a half-time break that his sub-standard performance was likely to cause the termination of his contract. Harry determined that he would leave as soon as possible, regardless of the manager's decision, and signed for a higher level, First Division London club, in 1993. Shortly after arriving at his new club, Harry realised that the manager was bullying a young player. Harry was infuriated that the rest of the players distanced themselves from the victim, perceiving that they were doing

so to protect themselves from getting on the wrong side of the manager. This compliance resonates with the primacy of subservience to managerial authority in professional football (Manley & Parker, 2017). Harry was determined to counteract this norm and protect his young colleague, regardless of the cost:

I was the opposite [to the other players]. I became his friend, and I didn't care if [the manager] left me out of the team because I was friendly with this guy ... It was more about [that] I respected the player, and I didn't like what was going on, and so it was building that relationship. He came to church with me a few times, you know, when we were at [the club]. We became really good friends.

Harry paid the price for an overt refusal to conform to management control, and the club released him at the end of the season. In 1994, Harry signed for a Scottish Premier Division club. It was observed earlier that the institutional culture of banter in professional sport might manifest itself aggressively, which amounts to bullying (Grey-Thompson, 2017; Newman et al., 2021). This norm reflects the experience of Colin and Paul, who, respectively, faced overt, spoken aggression and more subtle, silent aggression. The requisite managerial authority (Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006a) was undermined by Harry and led to his transfer. All three respondents faced hostility as they sought to integrate their private beliefs and workplace behaviour due to their Christian faith's threat to on-field success.

There is also evidence of initial and aggressive opposition to the Christian faith emanating from within the playing group in the case of Pete Green. In 1991, Pete was the captain of his newly

promoted First Division club in the North East. To bolster the squad for the new campaign in the top-flight of football, the club signed two experienced international players. Shortly after their arrival, they accosted Pete because of a newspaper interview in which he had discussed his Christian faith:

An article came out in the paper [based on an interview with Pete and entitled], "Why I could never be one of the lads." ... I didn't go out to say that, but in some way, it had come out that there is so far you can be in with the team, but as a Christian, you're going to have a different mindset ... [A senior player] had been sniping, and there was always a bit of stick, and then one day he put a note under my door [in a hotel]. It was blasphemous. I mean, talking about Jesus and Mary having sex ... It was really hurtful.

To be "one of the lads" alludes to expected conformity to a collective masculine culture of excessive socialising, alcohol consumption and heterosexual endeavours (Parker, 2001, 2006). The attacks on Pete seemed to result from the perception that his non-conformity to these norms could undermine group loyalty and ultimately endanger success on the field. This perception also caused Phil Lee some initial workplace conflict. After signing for a First Division club on the South Coast, Phil became a Christian before the 2000-2001 season. Phil discussed his faith with the local newspaper, and some players objected to this:

So, the reaction in the dressing room was negative ... [Team-mates] challenged my credibility and integrity because everything up until that point fitted into what the dressing room liked ... but [the newspaper article] was very different. That was the first point of

being challenged about what I believed and why I believed it ... [A senior professional] came into the room and said, "What does this mean? How can you be a Christian? Do you think you're better than us?" And that was a big challenge.

Conflict arose because Phil spoke openly about his faith. However, Phil continued to do so, and he also started meeting regularly with the club chaplain, Martin Morgan. In due course, Phil found that the mood began to change:

After about 18 months or so, the guys had gone from challenging me to actually asking me questions ... "What is this about? When you meet with Martin, what do you do?" ... So, in that space of time, 18 months, this was happening to the point that guys were asking me to pray for their personal situations.

Phil's experience comprised two distinct stages. First, he faced initial scepticism and hostility from the playing group regarding his Christian faith. This animosity accords with the cultural norm that questioned anything which might negatively impact team conformity and on-pitch performance (Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006a; Cushion & Jones, 2014). Moreover, Phil's account reflects the experiences of Colin Adams, Paul Roberts, Harry Richards and Pete Green. In each case, players or management at the respondents' football clubs perceived the Christian faith to threaten performances and therefore pose a risk to collective career development (Roderick, 2006c). As a result, management and team-mates responded with aggression, rather than affirmation, to the Christian faith. Secondly, however, the consistency of Phil's playing performances, which earned him the fans' player of the year award, alongside his off-field behaviour, sustained the respect of

his playing colleagues. This capacity to perform on the pitch mirrors the experiences of Colin, Paul, Harry and Pete, who continued to integrate their personal beliefs and workplace behaviours despite initial aggression. There appears to be a trajectory from initial hostility towards the respect and acceptance of colleagues once the evidence demonstrated the existential effects of the Christian faith did not unduly negate athletic performance and changing room camaraderie.

### **Growing respect from managers**

Banter or more overtly aggressive attempts to enforce conformity to collective unity seemed familiar when respondents made initial attempts to achieve institutional acceptance for the Christian faith. Nevertheless, the respondents sustained employment within the professional game following these embryonic rejections. This section explores how relationships between respondents and managers developed beyond initial conflicts regarding Christian faith. Managers are in a position of power since they have control over playing opportunities (Sennett 1998; Roderick, 2014). However, the careers of managers and the players in their squads are closely linked. The job security of football managers rests almost exclusively on results, and commensurately, results depend significantly on the players selected. Meanwhile, players' careers depend less on results than their performances (Roderick, 2006c). This scenario can strengthen players' situations since managers may need them to get results. Respondents needed to gain managerial approval as they continued integrating their personal beliefs and workplace behaviour.

The alleviation of concerns regarding the impact of Christianity on Will Andrews was achieved entirely because of the consistency of his matchday performances:



I had many conversations [about Christianity] with [the manager] – he just kind of accepted it. As long as I did the stuff on the field, he couldn't care less, really ... I was in my prime. I was 24, 25 ... I was a key player for the team. And he knew that. And we had a very good working relationship. So, he was more than happy that I was still producing at a high level [on the pitch] ... I was really a key player that he wanted to keep signing every year.

Mick Jones also demonstrated his continued efficacy through his footballing performances. This chapter has noted that Mick was mocked at his Second Division club because he didn't swear. This type of reciprocal banter provides a platform to assess whether professional players can manage the pressure associated with professional football (Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006a). Mick navigated this banter in a light-hearted manner, and his subsequent performances confirmed to management that he could perform to the right level:

What he [the manager] got from me was that there would be no one in training that would, you know, work as hard as me ... He knew he got 100% from me, and I think he respected that, as there were players coming to the end of their career who were maybe just trying to pick up their money. But for me, I was hungry. I wanted to succeed ... It was a really good relationship, really honest, and I think he'd look back and say I was hard-working, and so I got his respect from what I did on the training ground and the pitch.

The pivotal importance of on-field performance to the acceptance of Christian faith is also evident in the case of Colin Adams, who had been bullied and forced out of his East Anglian club.

Nevertheless, within two months of that painful rejection, Colin had an opposite experience when another manager telephoned and asked Colin to consider signing for a Fourth Division club in London. Considering his previous experience, Colin assumed that the enquiring manager must be unaware of his Christian faith and feared that the offer would be withdrawn once he knew Colin was determined to integrate his private beliefs and workplace behaviour. Colin decided to resolve the issue upfront at the beginning of the meeting. It proved to be an unexpectedly humorous exchange as the [not-Christian] manager assured Colin that he aware of Colin's faith and still wanted to sign him:

I was so conscious of what had happened before [that] I said [to the manager], "You do know that I'm a Christian, don't you?" And he said to me, "I do. Have you got a problem with that?" And I said, "No, I haven't got a problem", and he said, "Well, I don't have a problem either." And so began a completely different journey to the one that I'd had before ... Suddenly my football career came back to me.

Chapter Five outlined that transferring from a club is a precise career juncture, which can impact identity formation and self-conception; being sought after by a club is a positive experience, which leads to an enhancement of personal worth. Conversely, when a club releases a player, the negative experience can lead to heightened uncertainty about the future and a loss of status and self-esteem (Roderick, 2006a). Colin had gone from being unwanted by his previous club to meeting with a manager eager to sign him. Colin's confidence flourished as he became a pivotal member of a successful, winning team. While his new manager knew of Colin's faith, it was not problematic because the manager rated his playing ability very highly.

The integration of Christianity in Colin's relationship went a step further than respect for playing ability when the manager extended Colin's contract by two years. The manager presented Colin with a small suitcase containing an illegal cash incentive to sign the new deal at the meeting. Colin was not prepared to break the law by receiving the payment and refused to comply with the manager's request:

He said, "That's yours. We won't talk about that, will we?" I said, "Can you put it through my wages, please?" And he said to me, "No. That's yours to take out of here." And I said, "I'll only have it through my wages. I don't want that money. So, I won't sign the contract, thank you." ... I knew that it wasn't right. But I think that strengthened my relationship with him because I signed a new contract a little bit later and probably got less money out of it, but at least I did the right thing.

The capacity to combine Christianity with acceptable matchday performances, leading to management confidence, was evident in Colin's case. It seems equally clear that this mutually beneficial relationship did not prevent Colin from confronting the manager over what he considered an issue that was contrary to his Christian beliefs. Colin was determined to sustain an alignment between his faith and football career and was confident in demonstrating this through his actions. The degree of authenticity here is conspicuous and indicates a depth to the quality and nature of the relationship between the manager and Colin, whereby Colin could take a moral lead with his superior. In this example, Colin felt that his resistance to the manager strengthened rather than diminished their relationship. In professional sport, players may try and maintain a sense of

personal integrity through resistance to managerial authority in cynicism (Roderick, 2006a; Wacquant, 2001). This rebuttal necessarily breeds feelings of resentment towards the manager from the player (Roderick, 2014). In contrast, it appears that Colin maintained his integrity whilst continuing, and strengthening, his relationship with his manager. This alignment demonstrates authenticity through the calibration between Colin's public behaviour and the subjective understanding of his actions. Indeed, this indicates a striking integration between front stage presentation and back stage reality (Goffman, 1959).

James Walters also built trust with his manager through requisite playing performances. As previously outlined, James had recovered from a career-threatening cruciate knee ligament injury when he became a Christian in 1993, just before starting his tenure with a Third Division club in the north of England. After six months at the club, James was invited to be interviewed about his Christian faith at a church near the manager's home, and James invited the manager to attend. In the event, someone directed a question to the manager [who was present as a member of the audience], asking what he thought of James's Christian faith. The manager responded that he had no concerns about Christianity since it had not diminished James's match performances:

He stood up at the end and said, "I've watched James. As long as it doesn't affect him, and it doesn't seem to, then it's alright." He was thinking on the negative side of it ... The bottom line was as a manager, he obviously looked at me and thought my Christian faith might affect me negatively. His whole thing was, "It doesn't have a negative effect. So, it's fine. Let's get on with it." He didn't actually see the stability faith was giving me off the park was actually helping me to be far better on the park.

The manager was primarily, if not wholly concerned, with James's capacity to contribute acceptable matchday performances (Roderick, 2006c). Chapters Four and Five have previously pointed out the impact of unprecedented fulfilment and security resulting from the Christian faith. James was disappointed that the manager did not appreciate that a new off-field "stability" underpinned his playing performances and that his football career had been augmented by the existential consequences of becoming a Christian.

Phil Lee also appropriated this theocentric understanding and desire to integrate faith and career. Phil played for several managers in his decade at a South Coast club but fondly recalled his time under a very well-known and experienced manager when the team was in the First Division. At that stage, nine first-team players and two backroom staff identified as Christians, and a group met to pray at the chaplain's home on Wednesday. Phil asked the manager for permission to set aside a room at the stadium where people might meet to pray for a few minutes before matches:

I was thinking, "This ain't gonna work. I'm going to ask the question of him [the manager], but I'm not too sure how he's going to take it." But [there was] respect [between us]. Now we had Christian players at the club who were game changers [the best players in the team]. He [the manager] would always look for his main men to help them the best he could. So, an opportunity for his main men to pray, or to do something a bit different that is going to help the team, he was going to go with ... So, when I asked the question, he said, "Yes".

The result of this development was that there were often 15 or 16 players in the matchday Christian meetings. This situation subsequently became well-known amongst other Premier League players and clubs. On one occasion, Phil was interviewed in a live, televised pre-match interview about the gathering:

[The interviewer] couldn't believe that we would stand and pray in the kit room – the tumble dryers and washing machines going ... He says, "What's the purpose?" And again, talk about favour, to openly say that as Christians, we believe that speaking to God at any time is acceptable, but that to gather a group of players together to have a bit of time, a bit of peace, an opportunity just to be thankful for what we've got. Because the interview was live, nothing could be taken out. And we spoke openly about Jesus.

The ability to attract managerial respect whilst integrating his faith and career was also apparent in Steve Phillips' experience. When Steve's manager received an invitation to a Christmas event at the city cathedral, he requested that Steve accompany him to speak because "I don't want to do this on my own. It's a bit uncomfortable." Steve responded willingly to this opportunity:

I said, "Yeah, course." I went with him, we did what we were doing and in the car on the way back to the ground, about a 15-minute drive, I thought, "Here we are. I can't believe the manager took me to a church event ... I might not ever be in this place ever again." And I said, "So do you believe in God then or what?" And we had a conversation about God, and he said he did [believe]. And I told him what I thought the gospel was.

Following an initial announcement of their Christian faith, Will, Mick, Colin, James, Phil and Steve eventually retained management confidence. Managers continued to give them playing opportunities because they could make appropriate contributions to what most mattered in sustaining a career in football management, namely successful results (Roderick, 2014). Meanwhile, the respondents exhibited a theocentric perspective, contrasting with the need to attain management affirmation of an alternative identity as a prerequisite to workplace behaviour. Fulfilled and secure in the personal significance gained from their Christian faith, the respondents resisted cultural norms by integrating their faith and career whilst eventually earning the respect of management because their newfound authenticity was coupled with appropriate matchday performances.

### **Growing respect from players**

Chapter One indicated that the existential effects of a theocentric perspective on personal significance may include increasing degrees of fulfilment, security, authenticity and witness. The preceding discussion has explored how authenticity aligned with respondents' workplace presentation of personal beliefs. Such coordination is a significant marker since, while Hickey and Roderick (2017) noted the importance of workplace colleagues in legitimating workplace behaviours, respondents initially received very little changing room affirmation. Nevertheless, this novel authenticity did increasingly impact respondents' workplace relationships. Paul Roberts embodied this capacity to integrate his faith and career through sustaining appropriate match performances whilst adopting a very different perspective on competitors and team-mates. Paul, as noted previously, became a Christian in 1978, just as he was beginning to establish himself as

a regular first-team player at his London First Division club. Paul had a specific role in the team, which remained externally unchanged and unaffected after he became a Christian, though his motives were now entirely different:

I was quite a physical player, so I was a defender, a 'destroyer' [the role of disrupting the performance of the most skilful opponent]. So, I tackle and things like that. And you're sort of brought up really to hate the opposition because they're the ones who are stopping you getting three points, getting your win bonus, stopping you getting a better club or whatever ... And I found it immensely easy not to hate the opposition. I don't think anyone would have noticed that at all because I don't think it changed the way I played at all.

Paul's new perspective did not compromise his capacity to compete as a professional footballer. At the same time, Paul's attitude towards team-mates had also changed:

My whole life changed. It's a life-changing thing. There was something more important than football, although football remained very important ... I would think of my team-mates more as people and less as just a good footballer. So, I'd be more interested in that side. I'd want to be a good ambassador for God. I was aware of that all the time.

Paul was clear that, while sustaining a high level of playing performance, his attitude towards playing colleagues was changing. Paul started to view team-mates more holistically, "More as people and less as footballers." This changed perspective enabled deeper relationships within the workplace as Paul continued to retain a career in professional football. Paul's performances were



unaffected, and his renewed outlook reflects a more measured and caring approach consistent with the *missio Dei* outlined in Chapter One, which will be explored further in Chapter Eight.

Having gained the manager's trust both for his professional ability and subsequently for the moral implications of the Christian faith, Colin Adams found himself yearning to engage in discussions regarding the broader dimension of the lives of playing colleagues:

I started at [the club] really well. I think football is quite an important part of it. I was the manager's choice. The manager had signed me. He wanted me. The team were good, and I added [value] to the team. As long as I played well – football's a funny world – I think if you play well and want to fit in, but you're different in some way, it copes with your difference as long as you can be relied on within the team.

Colin's sustained integration of his personal beliefs with workplace behaviours, combined with a consistently high level of performance in matches, led managers and playing colleagues to become more accepting of his Christian faith. The same pattern was apparent in Will Andrews' experience. During pre-season training, Will's team-mates had asked him why he was not swearing anymore, and he told them he had become a Christian. There was an awkward silence. Within weeks, Will had wholly reversed the initial doubts regarding the fear that his Christianity would harm team unity. Will was playing well and retained the captaincy of the team. He continued to lead team bonding occasions, retaining the responsibility for organising the players' 'night out' on Wednesdays [typically a day-off in professional football]. The team would spend the late afternoon and evening together in a pub. After becoming a Christian, Will continued to facilitate the

occasion, though he cut back on his alcohol consumption. His relationship with the team remained strong and is illustrated by the light-hearted banter:

Wednesday night was the boys' night out ... Then Thursday morning, everyone comes in and has a good sweat session ... I still went out with the lads every Wednesday. But I remember, players used to come up to me, this is true, and they'd come up to me, and I might have a pint glass in my hand, and some of them would literally stick their fingers in the pint glass to see what I was drinking. So, they'd say to me, "That's your fourth drink", and I'd say, "But it's a shandy."

Finding an authentic consistency regarding team social occasions was also crucial for Pete Green. He, as discussed earlier, had experienced a powerful and aggressive attack from two senior international players when they signed for the newly promoted Premier League club at which he was captain. In due course, Pete found a way to engage in the players' 'night out':

Going on trips with the guys and, you know, they maybe go off and do certain things ... I wouldn't be with them. And they give me a bit of banter or a bit of stick for it ... Or, if we were out and the guys were having a drink ... I'd be the guy that maybe, you know, got the lads home and drove them home or whatever it might be ... It was a difficult thing to know how to navigate being one of the lads, but you're not one of the lads.

Mick Jones also took on the role of driver on these social occasions:

Because I wasn't drinking and didn't want to, I was the taxi driver. So, any night out, I'd be the one who was sober and driving, and I just found myself trying to look out for everybody ... And I realised that God made me a peacemaker.

Paul, Colin, Harry, Will and Pete not only integrated their personal beliefs and workplace behaviours despite the lack of initial affirmation from colleagues. They also sustained workplace relationships due to their performances on the pitch and commitment to the team off the pitch. They recounted how their Christian faith facilitated the building of more profound relationships with team-mates. Chapter Two explained how players are unlikely to examine their workplace anxieties with other squad members (Roderick, 2006a, 2006c, 2014; Roderick & Schumacker, 2016). Nevertheless, Mick Jones learnt the value of being the "taxi driver" on players' nights out since it was during such occasions that players sometimes confided in him:

But at the same time, [a team-mate] and others come to mind where they're in tears sharing their stories with me before I'm dropping them off. And then I'm able to share Jesus at two or three o'clock in the morning. So, those moments were gold, really. I look back, and I'm just so thankful that I was there, and that God put me there for them, for players ... You get a chance to share and show God's love, you know, by being there and serving people. So, there are moments like that where I really know that wow, what an amazing God we serve.

Growing respect for respondents, when they could hold their own on and off the pitch and so remain in the manager's plans and the team unit, was also evident in the case of Phil Lee. He had

been a Christian for eighteen months. He was an established first-team player at his Premier League club when he found a way in which he could attend players' social occasions without being present for every aspect of the event:

Our Christmas Party involved a meal, strippers, nightclub ... And I knew I couldn't be there; I just knew it. But the reality of that is that I would definitely have separated myself from my team-mates ... by saying to them that I don't want to [go] ... I said, "I won't stay for when the strippers are there, but I'll come for the meal. Then I'll leave, and I'll meet you all at the [night] club afterwards." ... A couple of senior pros [professionals] said, "Yep, that's alright. That's fine. He can do that. We're happy with that."

The experience of navigating social interactions to exhibit a commitment to the team whilst not comprising on matters of faith was also familiar to Brian Price. Brian made his debut for his hometown First Division club in 1977, playing 151 times for the club. He became a Christian after his wife's death from cancer shortly after the birth of their first child in 1985. Brian sought to integrate his Christian faith with nights out:

Sometimes a social group [of team-mates] would say, "You want to go out?" And so I'd say, "I'm staying until 10", or a couple of times they'd go straight after training, so I'd say, "Well, I'm driving [to avoid getting drunk]." ... There here were a few instances like that ... But there was a line in the sand, I suppose, something that you couldn't see, that made [me] at times know you're part of them [the group of team-mates] ... but there was a bigger picture.

For Paul, Colin, Will, Pete, Mick and Phil, the response to integrating personal, Christian values with changing room culture, though initially problematic, became a positive experience over time. This chapter has noted that conformity to a collective masculine culture of excessive socialising, alcohol consumption and heterosexual endeavours (Parker, 2001, 2006) was part of the preparation for the lifestyle of a professional footballer. This approach aligned with the expectation that players would not discuss workplace concerns and anxieties with each other (Roderick, 2006a, 2006c, 2014; Roderick & Schumacker, 2016). Nevertheless, growing management acceptance due to matchday performances, aligned with counter-cultural efforts to align faith with the established culture of social occasions, led to a new degree of integration. Indeed, this began to result in discussions about the Christian message. The authenticity displayed in the respondents' life was an essential component of their witness to the Christian faith. Mick recounted his experience of one playing colleague who persistently gave him "stick" for his faith before noting the player's discreet interest in Christianity:

So [the player] would always give me stick on a weekly basis ... but he'd come and sit next to me and started asking me questions about my faith and about Jesus and stuff, and about suffering, which he couldn't get his head around. And it happened with a few of the players. Within a crowd, they'd be the ones giving me banter and stick, but at the same time, when it was one-on-one, they would ask questions about my faith. That was a real training ground [for Mick's faith].

The relational transition from changing room tension to acceptance seems evident here, with a trajectory through fulfilment and security to authenticity in workplace relationships, leading to verbal Christian witness. Respondents garnered the respect of team-mates following the integration of private beliefs and workplace behaviours. This integration was neither contingent on the affirmation of workplace colleagues nor hindered the social or footballing performances of the respondent. Accordingly, the respondents engendered respect from team-mates whilst exhibiting personal authenticity, which contributed to developing more profound and authentic workplace relationships and the opportunity to respond to peer requests to engage in discussions about the Christian faith.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the experiences of respondents who retained employment within the game after becoming Christians by considering the consequences of their efforts to integrate a new, alternative identity within their football clubs. Respondents faced initial workplace banter as colleagues challenged them about the impact of Christianity on their adherence to the game's values. These norms were based on working-class, shop floor, masculine values, including swearing and explicit sexual innuendo, jokes and behaviours (Collinson, 1988; Parker, 2001, 2006). There was also evidence of more aggressive and confrontational enforcement of conformity (Roderick, 2006a; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Manley & Parker, 2017). Typically, to try and sustain an alternative sense of identity and self-worth that conflicts with the values of institutional culture, professional footballers are required to engage in a degree of presentation management (Roderick, 2006b, 2006c, 2014). There appeared to be little initial prospect of respondents sustaining a longer-

term career within the game, given their determination to align Christianity with professional life, since the registered attempts at integration led to rejection by senior players and management. Nevertheless, the evidence demonstrates that the respondents could successfully integrate their faith and workplace behaviour whilst continuing a career in professional football, provided they could maintain an acceptable level of matchday performance. The result was a growing depth of relationships with team-mates, resulting in colleagues' willingness to initiate discussion about Christian faith. The next chapter will explore this process by considering how respondents' authenticity and subsequent verbal witness to Christianity aligned with the *missio Dei* outlined in Chapter One.

## Chapter Eight

### Football, Faith and Witness

#### Introduction

The critical theological differentiation between a received and achieved identity proposes that it is inappropriate to consider athletic performance as the source of self-worth. Personal significance is an unearned product of God's divine initiative in bringing the Christian athlete to faith. Subsequently, sport is an arena where God uses Christian athletes' talents to draw them to a more profound understanding of God's commitment to their life-long personal development. The current chapter explores the suggestion that God uses His gift of sport to draw the Christian athlete closer to Himself through the "school of discipleship" (Null, 2016, p. 128) of an athletic vocation. This concept explores how God uses His gift of sport to facilitate, through the highs and the lows of an athletic career, the development of a novel and authentic degree of commitment to the service of others and a consequent witness to the Christian faith.

Chapter One identified how the theocentric framework for understanding the Christian experience, outlined above, is developed by Null (2008a). Null draws on Niebuhr (1951) regarding the paradigms of relating Christ to culture. Of particular interest to this thesis is Niebuhr's fourth paradigm, "Christ and Culture in Paradox" (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 149), which expounds on the view of Martin Luther, a leader of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, that God has granted every individual a "station" (Wingren, 1957/2004, p. 2). God has given all people talents and proportional relationships that contribute to social cohesion since even the most self-centred individual is



typically obliged to use their abilities in the service of others to earn a living (Wingren, 1957/2004). Moreover, Luther takes the notion of 'station' a step further, indicating that since all vocations bring some degree of "trouble and toil", these God-designed difficulties regularly confront humanity with the need to turn to God for help (Wingren, 1957/2004, p. 29). John Calvin, another 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer, considers that "in all our cares, toils, annoyances, and other burdens, it will be no small alleviation to know that all these are under the superintendence of God" (Calvin, 1536/1845, Book III, section 6).

Calvin developed the work of Luther by perceiving "Christ as the Transformer of Culture", the fifth paradigm proposed by Niebuhr (1951, p. 190). God equips Christians to play a positive role in transforming culture through God-given vocations, as they learn to appreciate His support in dealing with the "trouble and toil" arising from daily work. Thus, while Luther sees vocations primarily as a way for God to restrain sin in the world, Calvin expects Christians to use individual vocations to aid the restoration of human beings and their communal life together, to God's intention in creation.

Null specifically applies the fourth and fifth paradigms of Niebuhr (1951) regarding Christian vocation to the work of elite athletes (Null, 2008a, 2016, 2021). In this analysis, sport gives Christian athletes numerous opportunities to assess the truths of their faith. The regular experience of defeat and victory can help athletes clarify their worth in God's love for them rather than athletic attainments. Thus, athletic achievements have intrinsic value as an activity undertaken in relationship with God. This theocentric foundation enables Christian athletes to experience a sense of fulfilment, security and authenticity as they recognise and internalise the coherence between

their athletic accomplishments and God's purpose for their lives as an expression of their personal significance. Further, it provides a foundation for a divinely enabled capacity to care for the needs of and share their faith with fellow athletes who face the same vocational challenges but without an assurance that personal value is independent of fluctuating athletic performances and achievements.

Athletes who can reflect the altruistic lifestyle outlined above exhibit the mission of God. Chapter One considered that the mission of God, manifested in workplace evangelism, is encapsulated by the concept of 'mission Dei'. Bosch (1991) defines the *missio Dei* as an innate characteristic of God. Mission is, therefore, theocentric; it is not the product of human initiative. Instead, Christians fulfil God's mission by reflecting the loving, relational and sending God within their social settings. The *missio Dei* is an aspect of divine liberation to exhibit authentic altruism, which Null (2016, p. 16) suggests might be the "very best form of evangelism."

The current chapter uses the theological framework outlined above to consider the evidence of the fulfilment of God's mission in respondents' lives. Three theocentric questions frame this chapter. They are questions that Null (2016) devised in proposing a framework to support elite athletes in pursuit of this transformational outcome. The first question considers the experiences of joy that result from a vocation as a Christian athlete. There follows a discussion of the second question, namely, how the difficulties attending an athlete's work drew respondents closer to God. The third and four sections of the chapter address Null's third question, which asks how the vocational experiences of joy and disappointment develop into genuine concern for others, both during

respondents' playing careers and after they had retired from the game. Such care for colleagues is a matter of actions and words, and it is the mission of God in elite sport.

### **Vocational joy**

Null's first question asks how God's gift of sport enables the Christian athlete to experience joy (Null, 2004, 2016). Chapter Five showed how becoming Christians had provided respondents with a new sense of fulfilment, a satisfaction previously unattained through their football careers. The evidence in this chapter demonstrates that further joy followed. This joy arose as God's gift of sport revealed the loving character of God and his design of sport as a vocation through which the Christian athlete could serve God as they grew in an understanding of God's unconditional love. This joy is evident in the case of Roddy Cowan. Chapter Six noted how a theocentric understanding of his God-given personal significance curtailed Roddy's trauma when his failure to gain another contract forced his retirement after 19 years in the professional game. While reflecting on this scenario, Roddy highlighted how, after becoming a Christian and before his enforced retirement, he had experienced joy through his playing achievements, which he considered to be the product of exercising his God-given abilities:

It's a weird thing. And so, football wasn't so important. I could play better, [there was] no pressure ... And [my faith gave me] the perspective [that] it's not me ... So, I'm going out and enjoying myself ... It was brilliant ... God has given me a talent; I'm going to give it back to him and do my best, and if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. It's not the end of the world. And [I had] the perspective that "When I die, I will go to heaven."

Roddy expressed delight that God had designed an athletic vocation to enter a profound experience of God's goodness in day-by-day sporting performances. Pete Green echoes the same sentiments regarding God's engagement with his athletic talents. He describes how the Christian faith enabled him to appreciate that football was a divine gift that was integral to his daily life:

I understand what life is about. I understand what football is about. I can see football as the gift of God, even as a necessary overflow of being created in the image of God ... So, then I would see going out there on a Saturday as a display of the wisdom of God in the beauty of sport. So, then that responsibility to steward those gifts for the glory of God. Now, people in the crowd aren't necessarily thinking in that way, but I did.

The examples provided by Roddy and Pete demonstrate how a received identity enabled them to find joy in their football careers. More specifically, the Christian faith offered an insight that football, grounded in the gracious provision of full and unconditional personal worth, was a gift that intimately engaged God Himself in their day-to-day professional life. Mick Jones expressed an appreciation that God was in control over his football career, and his joy arose from the gratitude he felt when reflecting upon the belief that his footballing career was a gift from God:

But it's unbelievable how again, God just points out little things, you know, or reminds you, and that feeling of nostalgia, like, even now, I just think, "Wow, I loved it." You know, what a blessing being paid for something you enjoy doing. One of the best jobs in the world, without doubt, for me. And you know, I know there's millions of kids and grown-

ups that would have loved to have done it. So, I'm extremely grateful. And it's amazing even now how He is sort of still teaching me about my career.

The sentiments that Mick's career was a gift from God accords with the theocentric perspective regarding vocation, which had a profound influence on his attitude and behaviour towards others. Roddy, Pete and Mick attained increasing pleasure during their football careers as it became more apparent that God had provided two distinctive and aligned gifts. First, God had conferred upon them personal significance by bringing them into a relationship with Himself through Christian faith. Second, God had determined to establish and deepen the divine-human relationship through the activities of being a professional footballer. Colin Adams also recognised both gifts from God. He experienced the joy that came from the interconnected nature of these two gifts in his vocation as a professional footballer. Colin's experience of joy was rooted in an understanding that God was thoroughly engaged in his profession:

From the moment I became a Christian, my football and my faith were never separate. I never ever thought of it separately. And so, I prayed about every training session. I prayed during every match ... In my career, from that moment when I made a decision when I was 19 to follow Jesus, I never ever had a separate football career and a faith. I never thought in those terms. So, when I went to training, I would always be praying that I would be faithful to God and honest and that people would want to know Jesus.

Chapter Five used the notion of fulfilment to describe a primary consequence when respondents became Christians. This chapter has noted the further sense of joy and gratitude that began to

emerge as respondents developed an understanding that their football career was a matter of divine design and an ongoing, moment-by-moment engagement in God's plan for their lives. Like Colin, Brian Price expressed gratitude for his football career. Brian clarified that, as his professional career ended, football had provided a source of joy that, critically, had remained intact irrespective of on-pitch success:

Once I became a Christian, it became less about, "Can I win?" As a kid, when I used to say my prayers every night, it was all about me. As a [Christian] player, I was just a bit more grateful and realised how lucky I was. And even if you're not winning every week and you're playing at [the club], you are still doing what you wanted to do. You've been given a dream, and you've been helped along the way, and you're still doing it. I didn't fall out of love with football, and I think God helped me to do that.

Brian's joy in his football career emanated from a theocentric understanding that football was his God-given vocation. As a result, Brian experienced joy from an intrinsic love for the beautiful game rather than the attainment of joy contingent on his athletic achievements. To that end, Brian returned to the "childhood joy of sport" (Null, 2008b, p. 59), which transcended the pressures of a football career. Brian's attitude to playing non-league football after retiring from the professional game encapsulated this sentiment:

After I stopped [playing full-time professional football], I came back again to play [part-time at a non-league club] until I was 37. It was because I wanted to play. I just felt that it

was a grass pitch and a ball and 11 players. It wasn't necessarily about the size of the stands and the win bonus. It was, "You've been given the chance to play by God."

Brian's reflections align with the other respondents discussed in this section. Like Roddy, Pete, Mick and Colin, his experience of career joy and aligned gratitude contrasts with the evidence of Chapter Two, which showed how cynicism toward the profession became increasingly embedded as careers progressed over time (Roderick, 2006a). Indeed, Pete explained how this positive perspective enabled him to cope with the "successes and failures" of a professional football career:

Now I'm appropriating my whole football career under God, and so then, I was able to handle successes and failures, not perfectly, but with the rooting that this is not eternal. Christ is eternal. The result on a Saturday is meaningful, but it doesn't mean everything.

Pete's perspective aligns entirely with the theocentric view outlined in Chapter One and with the experiences of the other respondents considered in this section. The capacity to separate personal significance from athletic achievement while perceiving the alignment between God's gracious love and his ongoing involvement in their vocational gifts brought them great joy in their football careers. The pleasure afforded Christians as they reflect on their God-given sporting talents is summed up by Null (2016), from the film *Chariots of Fire*, in which the Christian athlete Eric Liddell is presented as saying: "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure." In the current chapter, the concept of "joy", alongside its accompanying synonyms of "happiness", "pleasure", "gratitude", and, as Chapter Five considered, "fulfilment," is used to analyse how Roddy, Pete, Mick, Colin and Brian understood a professional

playing career as a gift from God. Their reflections provide examples of a growing understanding that their football careers were a God-given gift that presented an opportunity to experience the joy that comes from doing something God designed for their lives. However, as Pete identified, a professional football career can also be a source of disappointment and adversity. Attention now turns to respondents who faced career adversity and recognised that it drew them closer to the God who had granted them their careers.

### **Vocational adversity**

Null's second question to apply the theocentric perspective to the lives of Christian elite athletes concerns how the divine gift of sport draws them closer to God in times of adversity. Null (2016) poses this question in the context of framing elite sport as God's 'school of discipleship', whereby the sporting talents God has gifted elite athletes enable, in times of career difficulty, a deeper understanding of God's unconditional love. One of the critical times when players face hardships is during the process of retirement. Chapter Six indicated that many professional footballers are ill-equipped and poorly prepared for retirement and that leaving the game can be particularly problematic when it is an involuntary decision following injury or contract expiry (Gearing, 1999). Retirement may, then, provide a challenge as players lose a crucial facet of their identity yet also feel a sense of relief and liberation from the cultural constraints (Jones & Dennison, 2017).

When James Walters left the professional game after being released by the club where he had played for over a decade, he became a player-coach at a local semi-professional club. James appeared to have navigated the change comfortably. When, two years later, James returned to his



previous professional club as the assistant manager, he was anticipating a revival of the excitement and energy associated with his playing days. However, he was surprised by his inability to cope with the new role:

So, you're not joining in training anymore. You're just taking it. [After training] you go back to the club and eat with the players to be around them, but then you're in the office looking at X, Y and Z and not doing any training. It was a real strange one. I started waking up in the morning and couldn't explain how I felt ... Was it depression? Was it fear? Was it anxiety? I'd wake up with this feeling every single morning. Every morning I had to get in the shower and pray to get out the door, to literally get out the door.

James' account suggests that there can be delayed adverse effects in transitioning out of the professional game. The unexpected stress that followed his management appointment may have been triggered by returning to the restrictive, institutional culture of the professional game (Jones & Denison, 2017), albeit James was returning in a management capacity. Though he continued in the management role for four years, this problematic experience set a train of thought that ultimately led James in an alternative direction. In 2011, increasingly convinced that his talents lent themselves to a future vocation which was partly outside the professional game, James formed a charity for disadvantaged young people in the city where he had played and managed for 15 years. James recalled that this was the culmination of a possibility conceived over a decade earlier, when, as a Christian player in his mid-20s, he had been involved in an inner-city project using sport to engage young people:

[It was because of] going with Christians in Sport as a young Christian to America. They were amazing times for me as a young Christian. Really good times. And I guess the Lord, as He does, using everything for a purpose. The year we went, we went down to the inner-city in Atlanta. We took the kids on the field with no shoes [the children didn't have shoes], and you look now [today], and I'm working with disadvantaged young people. So, you look back and go, "Okay, Lord." It was pieces that were being put together [by God].

James specifically highlighted how his life comprised of "pieces that were being put together [by God]." James exemplified how, during his career transition, the unexpected challenges he faced in moving from player to manager drew him closer to God. Crucial to this was an understanding that God was intimately engaged in the daily aspects of his career, and this enabled James to serve others, both in his managerial and charitable vocations. James indicated the role of Christians in Sport in that process, and attention will return to the influence of significant other Christians in Chapter Nine. James' perspective highlights the appreciation of his established personal significance to God, an assurance that aligned with the confidence that God, having enabled and engaged in James's career in football, would continue to facilitate and invest in vocational achievements, both within and beyond the professional game. The experience of Mick Jones also reflects the capacity to retain this theocentric perspective whilst experiencing career adversity. Before injury necessitated an early retirement from the game at 25, Mick had begun to understand the implications of football being a gift from God that benefited the recipient regardless of whether things were going well or poorly on the field:

My faith had a massive impact in my identity, how I was both on and off the football pitch. I didn't have to impress. Although I wanted to work hard and do my best, it wasn't for the manager or the fans or my team-mates. It was for God. I was playing for that audience of one. It was about Him ... I was okay whether I played badly or well, injured or not. Whatever the circumstance, I'd be okay ... I'd say, "I believe that the God I know will give me an opportunity, that it is Him who opens doors."

This chapter suggests that elite sport can be perceived as part of God's school of discipleship whereby God provides athletes with sporting talents and uses these to draw the athletes closer to Himself during inevitable sporting adversity (Null, 2016). Mick made explicit that the immediate circumstances did not have a deterministic effect on his state of mind. Instead, the understanding that God was entirely committed to Mick's welfare framed his thoughts, alongside the reflection that the expression of divine investment might manifest itself in both painful and joyous professional experiences. The narratives of James and Mick reflect this growing understanding of God's unconditional love and sovereign control for the benefit of the Christian during times of hardship.

The effects of this theocentric understanding are clarified further when considered in the experience of Jake Martin. Jake became a Christian after the conclusion of his professional career, during which he played more than 500 games. However, Jake's career got off to a difficult start when he was not offered a professional contract at the First Division club, where he had been a youth player. Jake went on to have 22 trials in the subsequent 21 months before signing for a Second Division club in 1993. Jake spoke of the devastation he felt when he was released:

At the time when I got released ... it's probably the closest I've got to hating someone because he has literally just torn your whole life apart, ripped your dreams up ... It's really hard to love a club that has shattered your dreams. It's really hard ... I find that's hard, but my faith helps me to deal with that and has helped me to deal with it.

Jake's trauma resonates with the evidence that trainee footballers suffer from psychological distress and mental health concerns because of being released (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Blakelock et al., 2016). However, Jake also referenced his faith as providing a new perspective from which he could reflect on his career. Since becoming a Christian and moving into a coaching career, Jake's view on football had changed:

There is a God who loves you, and you can love Him. That's your choice ... It gives me so much more clarity over what I do, so much more. And so much more understanding of why I do what I do ... Sometimes I do look back, and I wish I had faith when I played football. I really do.

Jake explicitly recognised that Christian faith enabled him to understand the God-given purpose of a footballing career, even when it involved profound challenges. Colin Adams did become a Christian whilst playing professionally and accordingly applied a theocentric understanding of God's control over his career in times of adversity. Colin initially faced bullying when he became a Christian, but over time, and at a new club, he had been able to build his career while he continued to integrate his faith and football. When Colin's career ended prematurely because of a knee injury

at the age of 25, he was very conscious of the adversities faced in the professional game. Colin emphasised how much he had gained because of the hardship:

I grew massively in that period. I remember praying because I didn't really know my faith at all. I used to say to God, "Can we do some shortcuts so that I can know you better? I don't mind suffering." ... I realised that it was a completely wrong prayer to pray... but I knew that my faith was not going to grow unless I was pushed and put myself out there. I prayed that I would go and share my faith wherever I was.

Colin had a strong appreciation that God was favourable towards him as he faced bullying and career-terminating injury challenges. Indeed, he jokes about the importance of "suffering" for a deepening faith relationship with God, asking if there might be "some shortcuts" in the process. God had initiated a new relationship with Colin, and he was confident that he could trust God through the ups and downs of his football career.

The capacity to appropriate and apply this theocentric perspective displayed by Colin during career adversity is also apparent in Phil Lee. Within a year of Phil's arrival at a club, a new manager was appointed and informed Phil that he was surplus to requirements. Phil had been a Christian for just two years at this point, and the advice which he received from Martin Morgan, the club chaplain, proved critical to Phil's subsequent understanding and application of God's role during the adversities of a professional career:

[The manager] said to me, "You can leave the club." Martin Morgan gave me this verse [from the Bible], "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do for God." I asked, "How do you do that?" He said, "Play for the one who gave you the gifts." [I said] "How?" He said, "Phil, you've played for everybody else, now play for Him." And in those training sessions, I'd be saying, "This is for you, God, this is for you. I don't care what the manager said. This [performance] is for you." Two weeks later, he [the manager] says, "You can stay."

Phil was explicit in his desire to play "for God". Thus, Phil exhibited a clear theocentric understanding that his football career was an outworking of his Christian faith as a God-given vocation. Phil was not seeking to attain God's favour through his playing achievements. Instead, Phil recognised that he could enjoy his career as a God-given gift, from a place of security. This assurance was irrespective of managerial opposition, following the analysis in Chapter Seven. This analysis aligns with the unconditional acceptance from the divine giver of the gift and the vocational, day-by-day privilege of using God-given abilities, regardless of the manager's opinions. Through adversity, God used the gift of sport to draw Phil closer to Himself. It was in this school of discipleship that James, Mick, Jake, Colin and Phil realised that God uses the sporting talents He has gifted elite athletes, in times of career difficulty, to provide a deeper understanding of God's unearned love.

Moreover, the respondents recognised that their divine, vocational gifts enabled them to experience the ongoing reality of that love. Having dealt with how God uses both the career joys and adversities to draw the Christian athlete to Himself, attention now turns to the Null's third question, which asks how God's gift of sport has drawn the Christian athlete closer to others in His

service. The analysis suggests that the Christian elite athlete's positive and negative vocational experiences, conferred and guided by God through His gift of sport, are used to advance the Christian elite athletes' capacity to enhance the mission of God in elite sport.

### **The mission of God during a professional football career**

Chapter Seven considered the integration of private beliefs and workplace behaviours when respondents became Christians. The initial result of the alignment was the disruption of changing room norms, leading to opposition by banter or more overt aggression. Nevertheless, when management observed that playing performances were not diminished because of Christian faith, playing colleagues shifted to a position of greater acceptance concerning respondents' faith. This consent proved to be the foundation for more intimate workplace interactions, with playing colleagues engaging Christians in conversations about sensitive and personal issues. It is not common in the institutional culture of professional football to voluntarily engage in vulnerable discussions within the workplace, which may expose weaknesses (Roderick, 2006a). The third question posed by Null (2016) asks how vocational experiences of joy and disappointment develop into genuine concern for others. The evidence presented in this section suggests that the answer to the question is that these experiences resulted in fulfilling the *missio Dei* as authentic and transformational lifestyles led to Christian witness through the service of others and consequent articulation of Christian beliefs.

Having faced bullying when he first became a Christian, Colin Adams enjoyed a wholly different experience at his next club. The manager highly rated his playing ability, and subsequently, the

changing room endorsed his faith. With his position at the club becoming more established, Colin sought to share his Christian faith with team-mates whenever the opportunity arose:

I prayed that somebody would notice my faith or talk to me about it. And for the first few weeks, nobody noticed. I used to say, "God, I must be hopeless. Nobody knows. Nobody notices." And I was quite depressed about it at the time. Then suddenly, somebody, I can't remember who it was, suddenly asked a question, and I said, "Well, I was at church" or something. And suddenly, off it went [having conversations about Christian faith]. The environment was completely different to the previous club.

Colin was sensitive to colleagues insofar as he did not seek to take the initiative in introducing discussions about his faith. Instead, he "prayed that somebody would notice my faith or talk to me about it." When Colin transferred to a Second Division club in 1989, he continued to pray and seek opportunities to share his faith, and there was a repeat of this pattern:

I used to share a hotel room with [a team-mate], and I used to have to look after him because he got drunk all the time ... It was a very open faith time, but also one that was positive in the dressing room, as it was [at the previous club] ... I wasn't intense about it [sharing faith], in the sense that I didn't need other people to like me or agree with me, but I was happy to talk about it. I wouldn't push. I definitely wasn't a salesman, even though I wanted people to become Christians.



Colin exhibited a practical desire to care for his team-mates alongside a desire to communicate the Christian message. Mick Jones exhibited the same underlying but sensitive care for the spiritual needs of others. When Mick found out that a new player was joining the club, he displayed concern that the player would feel welcomed. Mick's motive for doing so was his Christian faith:

When new players come into a club, the first thing everyone wants to do is to find out the positions they play and give a sigh of relief when you find out they're a defender, or whatever it is. But I would try and befriend them because I knew this is what I was learning about who this Jesus was and what He did, and how He would love people regardless. So, it had a massive impact.

Mick wanted to go beyond what might be considered superficial and transactional interactions with playing colleagues. He viewed colleagues holistically, as people, not just as competitors, due to his understanding of God's love. Steve Phillips felt the same way and explained how his Christian faith had changed how he thought about playing colleagues. Steve had experienced banter from team-mates and his manager when he first became a Christian in the East Midlands, and he had engaged in severe conflict with managers at two other clubs. Nevertheless, he found that his attitude towards others began to change:

I was quite a selfish lad, I think. I think in my younger years that I was arrogant and opinionated. So, I look back at that, and I cringe. I thank God that He got hold of me, and that changed and swung around. I guess Christ's example of loving me first helped me to love others, so I became very caring and wanted to help people.

The attitudes of Colin, Mick and Steve towards their team-mates changed when they became Christians. All three respondents correlated their Christian faith with a desire to care for those around them as part of their vocation in professional football. This tendency is also visible in Will Andrews. Will's team-mates had initially reacted to their captain's pre-season declaration of Christianity with a "stunned silence" before management and player confidence in Will's on-field performances ensured that any concerns about the impact of faith on his capacity to lead the team disappeared. Will noted the profound change in his attitude and the resulting change in relationships with his playing colleague:

The players at first were a bit stand-offish, but after a while, I found the players coming to me, asking me questions. Players would come to me saying, "I'm thinking about asking for a move. What do you think?" [And I'd ask] "Well, have you thought it through?" I was giving counsel and advice to other players and junior players particularly. And I always noted when [the manager] bought a new player, they would always room them with me, and say, "Will, can you look after him?"

Colin, Mick, Steve and Will all experience a transformed attitude towards team-mates because of their Christian faith. This holistic concern for workplace colleagues caused the respondents to care for their team-mates, reflecting the mission of God. Chapter One discussed how the *missio Dei* combines authentic deeds and dialogue (Whitmore & Parker, 2020). The evidence suggests that respondents exhibited attitudes and acts of genuine care aligned with an appropriate and responsive articulation of the Christian message. God used the highs and lows in the careers of Colin, Mick,

Steve and Will to draw the respondents closer to himself and to the service others through practical care and Christian witness. The mission of God can be fulfilled through an athletic vocation (Null, 2016).

The desire to communicate the Christian message was also apparent in the life of Roddy Cowan. Roddy experienced a highly successful football career, in which he achieved significant on-field success. Earlier in this chapter, it was clear that his sense of joy, and resulting realignment of priorities, came from knowing that God had given him the talent to play football. However, the marital difficulties and trauma of retirement also caused Roddy difficulties and sadness. Through these variable experiences, Roddy developed a desire to share his Christian faith publicly and acted on this instinct:

The Holy Spirit says, "Tell the world." ... I was fearful. Not everybody knows I'm a Christian. I'm still a name [famous], but not everyone knows I'm a Christian ... I'm going to have to talk [to the media] about the birds and the drink and the booze ... [The headlines were] "Roddy Cowan, [after a] life of women ... becomes a Christian." Out! Everyone knows who I am. Yes, they'd gone on about the drinks and the birds and all that kind of stuff ... But everyone knows I'm a Christian. No mask. It was brilliant.

As observed earlier, the *missio Dei* is correctly understood as God's act of mission through His people as they serve others by deed and word. Alongside building authentic relationships by acts of service, Colin, Mick, Steve, Will and Roddy described increasing desires and opportunities to

share the Christian message. In the case of Phil Lee, within two years of his becoming a Christian, the influence of Christianity at his club was very strong indeed:

A couple of members of the backroom staff had been asking me a couple more questions quietly about the Christian faith and talking about their own personal lives. So, I invited them to an Alpha Course [an introduction to the Christian faith]. And in the end, they said "Yes", and they come for a period of time ... we keep it under the radar... I know that one or two other lads said they're Christians, but I don't know where they're at on their journey. So, I invite them as well.

Many of Phil's colleagues became Christians, and it made a significant impact:

We've got nine players at the club who are Christians. I had such confidence now within the dressing room to talk openly about my faith. So, what I was able to do, [was that] when new signings came in, because there was something regular happening once a week with the chaplain, when new signings came, I would introduce myself and I would say, "I am a Christian, as some of you may know, and one of the things I do with the chaplain is meet him once a week, and we do a Bible study and pray. You are more than welcome to come."

This increasing desire to share the Christian faith with playing colleagues was also evident in the career of Pete Green. He had experienced increasing joy throughout his football career as he appropriated a theocentric understanding of a received identity and its relationship with his athletic

talents. Pete spoke explicitly of his growing desire to communicate the Christian message to team-mates:

When I got saved [became a Christian], I was 18 and maybe 18 months into being a pro [professional player]. And it was a very real conversion experience in terms of my mindset changed straight away. I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, I wanted to read the Word of God and pray, and I had this joy inside and wanted to tell the guys at work ... I was open with them from the start and prepared to get a little bit of stick for it. But because Christ was central, and Christ is God, not football anymore, it gave me confidence.

The desires of Colin, Mick, Steve, Will, Roddy, Phil and Pete to communicate the Christian message to team-mates reflected the work of God through their careers (Null, 2016). In this sense, God used the joys and hardships of their sporting careers to draw them closer to Himself, providing a personal assurance which overflowed into the service of others. Mick explicitly articulated this theocentric understanding of Christian witness, whereby his desire to share Christian faith with colleagues reflected his own experience of joy and difficulties:

Because of the transformation, I wanted to share it [the Christian message], but I didn't always know how to. As it went on, I always looked for opportunities when I could, whether it's talking about the happiness or the joys you had. Different ways, really. But it was hard because being real ... the Christian faith is difficult; it is a journey.

A theocentric understanding of a received identity, with resulting clarity regarding the nature and role of God-given athletic achievements, coupled with the existential effects of Christian faith during times of both joy and adversity, led these Christian athletes to fulfil the mission of God at their clubs, as well as more widely in the public arena. However, given the challenges facing elite athletes when they retire from playing (Gearing, 1999; Jones & Dennison, 2017), the question arises as to whether the tendency toward authentic concern and witness extended beyond the confines of respondents' football careers.

### **The mission of God after a professional football career**

The preceding analysis suggests that God provides joy to the Christian athlete through sporting successes alongside hardship through sporting failures. God uses his gift of sport in the life of a Christian athlete as a school of discipleship to increase the athlete's understanding of God's unconditional love (Null, 2016). Accordingly, God can use every aspect of the Christian athlete's career to fulfil His mission in their lives. This chapter has indicated Christian witness in respondents' lives, regardless of career joy or adversity. This tendency to fulfil the mission of God appears to be a life-long process, lasting beyond a career as a professional footballer.

Being forced to retire early from a football career allowed Mick Jones to pursue a passion for charitable work with young people. Mick felt this could be his post-playing vocation because of his complex, domestic background and the growing realisation that his status as an ex-professional footballer could be beneficial:

I've always had a passion for helping children. During my upbringing, when I was still at school, my mum went to prison. I was fostered out at times and had a difficult childhood ... As an adult, and especially playing professional football, I realised how many more children out there like me who are disadvantaged and vulnerable ... I had a real heart that I wanted to help and support some of those children ... I always recognised that you know, by playing professional football, I was a positive role model.

Mick had considered this possibility shortly after becoming a Christian. When he had to leave the game because of a back injury, he set up a children's charity to work with disadvantaged, vulnerable children in the UK, alongside supporting an orphanage in Africa. Mick's attitude and actions demonstrate an implicit internalisation of the theocentric approach. Despite the curtailment of his playing career, God used his life experiences to separate his self-worth from the capacity to attain personal achievement. It enthused Mick that he could envision the next stage of God's vocation for his life as he ended his playing career, and he noted that this deepened his relationship with God. Mick pointed out that his appreciation of his "calling" had developed during his football career and that this helped him to understand how God would work in his subsequent charitable career:

It has not felt like a job. It felt like a calling ... All I ever wanted to do was play football, [and] then knowing it was cut short through injury, to then go, "Right, what else do I know? What am I passionate about?" And that's why I started working with children and just seeing where that would lead, really.

Simon Stevens also exhibited a theocentric understanding to convey that God's work in his football career had facilitated his desire to serve others. Chapter Seven noted that Simon had become a Christian at the age of 32, towards the end of his professional career. Four years later, he became an Academy and Under 23s coach. Simon drew upon his historical appreciation of the highs and lows of the God-given gifts of sport in his new role. Through his reflection and the resulting confidence in God's unconditional love and divine oversight of his career, Simon developed a greater capacity for serving trainees and fledgling professional footballers:

He [God] has made me more of a rounded person and a rounded coach. I think I can have more empathy with people ... He [God] has given me more compassion and mercy ... A 16-year-old teenager can be quite hard to handle. So, I try to look beyond the surface and see what kind of person they are and focus more on relationship-building. As I said previously, it used to be more about me.

Jake Martin, like Simon, became a professional coach after his playing career. Jake also drew on his sports experience as a school of discipleship. He saw this as foundational to his desire as a coach to use God-given gifts in the service of others. When he stopped playing, Jake joined a Premier League club's community programme staff before being offered a coaching role in their Academy. In 2010, Jake began work for the Football Association as a Coach Educator, responsible for mentoring coaches employed by professional clubs. This chapter has already highlighted that Jake experienced significant challenges in his playing career. After becoming a Christian and making the transition into a non-playing career, Jake was able to be specific about the impact of his Christianity upon his motives as a coach:



My faith definitely impacts a lot on how I coach and how I educate people ... My job, first and foremost and fundamentally, is about relationships. It's building relationships, it's maintaining relationships, and it's understanding relationships ... and that's what your faith is. Because if you can build your relationship with God, understand it and make sense of it, surely it helps you build and maintain and understand your relationships with other people.

Jake's attitude towards a manager who had declined to offer Jake a new contract during his playing career exhibits his growing capacity for altruism:

I didn't agree with [the manager's] decision to let me go. And then, a couple of years later, he had some really poor health. And my thing is to ring him up and go, "Are you okay?" Because that is the way I understand my faith.

Based on the analysis of these findings, the desire to serve others in football appeared to develop over time for respondents who remained within the professional game at the end of their playing careers. For example, after three separate one-year contracts at three different clubs, Ben Morris grew weary of earning a living as a professional player and voluntarily transitioned from the game at 30. He started playing part-time for a semi-professional team in the fifth tier and discovered that several younger team members began turning to him for personal and professional advice. These unexpected requests led Ben to consider that his future vocation might involve these relational skills, and he began formal training to advance this prospect:

I played five years [at a non-league level]. That gave me an opportunity to get my love back for football [and] it gave me an opportunity to think about what I was going to do after football. At 35, I completed my counselling course. I became a qualified counsellor. I was 35 and decided to retire from the game, and I went into counselling.

Ben trained as a counsellor for three years and then began working with school children in a London borough. In 2003, Ben was offered a role at the Professional Footballers Association, focussing on player welfare. Ben reflected on God's part in the integration of his experience as a professional footballer – in particular, the significant cruciate ligament injury which significantly restricted his career opportunities in his late teens – with the talents which had provided the platform for his new career:

When I first got the [counselling] job ... the Lord showed me that I was never meant to have a football career. All I was meant to do was find out what football was like and then use that to help others ... [And I thought] "I've gone through all that I've gone through just so that in the work I'm doing now with these players I can share my experience." And so, I was like, "Oh wow, [that is] clear. Yep, that's fine. [It] makes total sense now."

The capacity to use the God-gifted vocation in sport to draw closer to others in God's service was, for Ben, the consequence of the difficulties he had faced in his playing career. As he grew in an understanding that God had used his football career as a school of discipleship, he could see that this "makes total sense now." Reflection on the distinction between his received personal

significance to God and the achievements resulting from his God-given playing gifts enabled Ben to transition to a new career using alternative talents God had provided. Ben continues to perform a significant role in offering counselling for professional footballers, overseeing numerous staff employed for this purpose. His service-orientated vocational perspective is palpable:

Whenever I go into a room with a new client, I always say, "Lord, this isn't about me. I'm just your vessel sitting in front of this person ... I'm just grateful to be part of this." ... The skills that I've undertaken, the experiences that I've gone through, I share my experiences with them because that brings the boundaries down ... That empowers them to feel more comfortable, to share even more things on a deeper level.

Ben's experience reflected a conviction that God had used the highs and lows of his football career to enable him to serve others in his present career with greater effectiveness and sensitivity. This awareness mirrors the experience of Brian Price, who recognised that God's sovereign control over his post-playing vocation had enabled him better to serve others in his subsequent career:

When I first finished playing ... I got a little part-time job at a school teaching PE [physical education]. I thought, "What am I doing here?" But I realised within a few weeks that it was the right place to be. The hours had trebled, and it was an enjoyable time ... and so, when God is there prompting and is around ... you know that if something doesn't work out, then something [else] will work out, even though I don't know what it is ... You've been given a gift, and He is guiding you in how to use it.

Brian's theocentric understanding that God was in control of, and would use, Brian's talents applied equally to his playing and non-playing careers. The findings in this section indicate that God's work through respondents' footballing careers enabled them to fulfil the mission of God in their service to others. This freedom was evident in the zeal of Steve Philips, who became a church leader after his playing days had ended. Steve expressed great enthusiasm that the range of gifts God had given him allowed him to serve others:

God's given me that amazing ability to do that [to talk to people about God]. And then all of a sudden, I see an opportunity ... I've got to tell this person about Christ, and I share with them ... then you meet them again ... and they become a Christian, and you pray this prayer with them. And they're actually giving their life to Jesus, for the first time, and you've been a part of that amazing miracle and that little journey. And the whole of heaven is rejoicing, and it's another person that's going to be at my side one day when I stand before the Father [God].

Steve's enthusiasm firmly captures the sentiments represented in this final section since he showed a desire to spend his post-playing working life in the service of other people, which included telling others about Christianity. Mick, Simon, Jake, Ben and Steve believed that God had enabled them to enjoy his good gift of sport in their careers. Furthermore, God sharpened their awareness that the adversities of professional football had provided them with a school of discipleship. These theocentric components nurtured a service-orientated approach that transcended their playing careers and led to a profound desire to witness the Christian faith by gracious deeds and verbal proclamation, and so fulfilling the mission of God.

## **Conclusion**

The theoretical and theological framework used to analyse this chapter has been the critical differentiation between a received and achieved identity and the consequent clarity between personal significance and career achievements. This chapter has explored the distinction by using three questions posed by Null to provide a pastoral framework for supporting Christian elite athletes. The first two questions probed how the God-given athletic talents had brought Christian athletes closer to God both through times of joy and by sport operating as a school of discipleship through periods of adversity (Null, 2016). This divine education is one whereby God uses every sporting experience to draw Christians closer to Him, as they achieve a growing appreciation of God's love for them regardless of sporting success or failure. Null's third question elucidates how God worked through respondents' service-orientated behaviours and verbalisation of the Christian message to fulfil the mission of God. The witness of respondents was apparent during and after their professional football careers. This chapter has also highlighted two facets of the theocentric perspective that are crucial in this regard. First, respondents had an assurance of their undeserved, yet unconditional, personal significance conferred by God through the Christian faith. Secondly, they were confident that God had used their athletic vocation to serve others and increase their understanding of God's unconditional love for them. In facing good and bad times through their career, the inner assurance of these truths appeared to liberate respondents to develop a novel and authentic degree of commitment to the service of others through practical care and verbally sharing the Christian faith.

## Chapter Nine

### Pastoring Christian Elite Athletes

#### Introduction

Chapter Eight highlighted respondents' Christian witness through authentic deeds and dialogue. This witness represented the *missio Dei*, the notion that Christian mission is an attribute and activity of God expressed through the Christian church (Bosch, 1991). This study proposes that the divine provision of fulfilment, security and authenticity led to Christian witness in respondents' lives. These findings align with the theocentric foundations of Null (2008a, 2016) that an appreciation of God's gift of unconditional acceptance, and the continuous divine engagement in the joys and disappointments of an athletic vocation, can lead Christian elite athletes to fulfil the *missio Dei* within the institutions of elite sport. The current chapter considers what factors facilitated the development and sustenance of respondents' contribution to the mission of God.

The capacity to maintain a long-term contribution to the *missio Dei* is discussed by Whitmore (2018) regarding sports chaplains. While the current thesis is concerned with the lives of Christian elite athletes, rather than sports chaplains, the perspective he adopts can prove helpful to this study. Whitmore emphasises the centrality of "personal discipleship" (2018, p. 473-474), whereby the Christian life is characterised by following Jesus. According to the Christian gospels, foundational to the notion of discipleship is the call from Jesus to "follow me" in Matthew chapter four verse 19; Mark chapter one verse 17, chapter two verse 14; Luke chapter five verse 27; and John chapter

21 verses 19 and 22 (New International Version, 2011). The call to be a disciple of Jesus is a matter of obedience to him; the disciple does not dictate the terms of the relationship. Therefore, discipleship can be understood as "the individual believer's reaction" to Jesus' call to "follow me" (Whitmore, 2018, p. 476). The current chapter takes the notion of personal discipleship and applies it to Christian elite athletes instead of sports chaplains. It does so to discern how respondents' personal discipleship enabled them to maintain an ongoing engagement with the mission of God.

Fundamental to Christian discipleship is obedience to the directives of God rather than the preferences of the disciple. It is a crucial tenet of the Christian faith that the Bible, as a "God-breathed" revelation in Second Timothy chapter three, verse 16 (New International Version, 2011), is the definitive means by which God communicates with humanity. God speaks to the Christian through the Bible, drawing them closer to Himself and into Christian service (Null, 2015). The process is the work of the Holy Spirit, who enters and transforms human hearts as the Bible is read (Null, 2015). Indeed, "the Spirit works through the Word, and not outside of it" (Horton, 2002, p. 218). God works through the Scriptures to confer faith and enable the Christian to do good works to fulfil His will (Wingren, 1957/2004). The current chapter highlights the role of the Bible in respondents' ongoing discipleship. It shows that discipleship cannot be divorced from understanding, obeying, and applying the Bible in everyday life.

Alongside exploring the way God works through the Bible in aiding Christian discipleship, this chapter also explores the role of supportive Christians in affirming respondents' faith. Chapter Two outlined how Hickey and Roderick (2017) highlighted the role of significant others in confirming (or resisting) alternative identities in elite athletes. Chapter Five, and to a lesser extent, the

subsequent data chapters of this thesis, have referred to those who played essential roles in affirming respondents' alternative identities as Christians. The current chapter further focuses on the influence of significant others by considering the part of Christian peer group meetings and local churches. Accordingly, the second and third sections indicate how respondents' developing Christian maturity resulted from understanding the Bible through peer groups and local churches engagement. The final section of the chapter considers how Bible study, peer groups and local churches established a long-term commitment to evangelism in respondents' lives.

### **Bible study**

The obedience of the individual Christian to Jesus Christ, through personal discipleship, is vital in establishing the capacity to sustain a long-term contribution to the *missio Dei* (Whitmore, 2018). Personal discipleship requires the Christian to understand, obey and apply the Bible as God's revelation to humanity in everyday life. Crucially, this process results from God drawing the Christian closer to Himself through the Bible, rather than the Christian seeking to draw themselves closer to God. This point is made explicitly by Null (2015) in considering the perspective of 16<sup>th</sup> century English Reformer Thomas Cranmer regarding the relationship between doctrinal truth and God's work to transform the desires of Christians (Null, 2015, p. 205):

Scripture was God's chosen medium to tell human beings the truth about the world around them and the struggles within them ... Equally important, however, the Bible was also the means through which God worked supernaturally to turn people's hearts to himself and the doing of his will.



Cranmer embraces a theocentric view that God worked through the Bible "to turn people's hearts to himself and the doing of his will" and this perspective has two stages. First, God works through the Scriptures to draw the Christian closer to Himself. Second, because of this attraction, God works through the Scriptures to fulfil His will through the lives of Christians. This process accords with the view of Horton (2002) that God works through the Bible to generate both faith and obedience. In this regard, Horton highlights the pivotal role of the Spirit (Horton, 2002, p. 209):

Without the Spirit's activity, the meaning or sense of a biblical text may be grasped but not generate the genuine understanding that comes with faith. At the same time, the Spirit is not a secondary source for divine revelation in addition to Scripture, but the latter's author as well as illuminator.

This intrinsic link between the Bible and the Holy Spirit accords with the theocentric understanding of God's divine initiative and ongoing work through a Christian's vocation. Through the Scriptures, God fulfils His will as He grants faith to the Christian and draws them closer to Himself and into growing obedience. Martin Luther adopted this perspective that God worked through the Bible (His "Word") to fulfil "His will" in the lives of Christians (Wingren, 1957/2004, p. 224):

As gospel, the Word of God impels man to faith, rather than to pious searching into God's plans; and as law, the Word of God impels man to the work of his vocation. In the course of man's work in his vocation, God fulfils His will fulfilled, step by step.

Building on the work of the Reformers Luther and Cranmer, later scholarship by Horton and Null elaborates on the understanding that God works through the Bible to instigate and mature faith in the Christian. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the role of the "Word of God" in fulfilling God's will for a Christian's vocation (Null, 2006, Null, 2015). Null applies this theocentric framework to an athletic context to show that the Christian athlete can have an assurance that God "has promised to show you who He is when you read the Bible" (Null, 2004, p. 124). Thus, God worked through the Bible to draw respondents closer to Himself in their God-given vocation. The result was the maturation of faith and fulfilment of the mission of God.

Chapter Seven showed how Simon Stevens, 32, when he became a Christian, made his faith public when he refused to make a lewd comment about a semi-naked photograph on the team bus on the way to a game. He had become a Christian shortly before this incident, and a growing understanding of the Bible played a pivotal role in developing his faith:

I think because I spent, you know, time in the Word, and, you know, it gave me the basis of the way to live my life. And I think I became acutely aware that I was almost an ambassador, that I wore that title of being a child of God, probably not in the other people's eyes but in my eyes. I was very conscious of living in a correct way in obedience.

Simon's desire to live "in obedience" because of his faith exemplifies what it means to be a disciple of Jesus (Whitmore, 2018). Crucially, Simon correlates his desire to live obediently with "time in the Word". This emphasis on the Bible accords with the theocentric perspective outlined above,

whereby God works through the Bible to draw the Christian athlete closer to Himself (Horton, 2002; Wingren, 1957/2004; Null, 2015). Indeed, Simon considered that appropriating the Bible's teaching preceded specific changes in his life:

You look at life different. You look at people different. I'm more tolerant, more forgiving. It's just the reading of the Word that you try and let it get in you, and you see its outworking. It works across all spectrums of life.

Gaining a greater understanding of the Bible was also pivotal to Brian Price when he became a Christian. Brian was aware of the pivotal role that understanding and applying the Bible played in the ongoing alignment of his faith and career:

My Christian journey hasn't been so perfect that it has meant [that I can say], "That's all fine, I can do that." Because I need reminders that now come from ... the daily Word that I read ... that says, "Don't forget God sees you in everything" and "God works for good." I need reminders that every day at work, I'm there to please God. Those sorts of things when I'm a bit down ... I still believe that there is a purpose for me, and I'm there [at work] for a purpose.

Simon and Brian described their initial engagements in studying the Bible and the impact on their lives. The experience of both respondents indicates a change in perspective as they spent time reading the Bible and accords with the theological view that "through rumination on the words of Scripture, the Holy Spirit supernaturally entered and transformed human hearts" (Null, 2015, p.

206). In other words, God worked through the Bible to draw the respondents closer to Himself (Horton, 2002; Wingren, 2004; Null, 2015).

Harry Richards and Steve Philips provided specific examples of how studying sections of the Bible had helped them understand and apply their faith in particular situations. It is instructive to observe the mechanics of how Bible study achieved this end. Chapter Seven observed that Harry had left his London club to play in Scotland after he and the manager had conflicted over how the latter had bullied a younger player. Within two years of arriving in Scotland, injury forced Harry to leave the full-time game, and he went on to play part-time whilst studying sports science at university. Professional players are often ill-equipped to cope with a premature injury-forced retirement (Gearing, 1999). However, Harry identified the role of a particular Bible passage in helping him re-frame his life course:

[I faced] a lot of adversity, going from earning good money, to all of a sudden where you've got to manage having pretty much no money, you know, while studying [and] injured. Going non-league is pretty much pocket money. That was tough ... but reading the Bible verses, [such as] being "content in all circumstances" and realising that it's not the things you think make you happy that actually make you happy.

Harry found happiness when leaving the game as he studied the proper meaning of a section of the Bible and appreciated the application of the text to his own experience. He alludes to being content "in all circumstances". This quote comes from the New Testament letter written by the apostle Paul to a church he had founded in Philippi [modern Greece]. It comes from a section of the letter

where Paul discusses how Christianity can provide stability in good and bad times. Below is the Biblical context of the quotation from Philippians chapter four, verses 10 to 13 (New International Version, 2011):

<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last, you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content *whatever the circumstances* [italics my own]. <sup>12</sup> I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup> I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

The Bible's teaching that difficult circumstances need not shake the sense of fulfilment and security of the Christian helped Harry recalibrate his understanding of and improve his capacity to deal with career transition through retirement. Steve Philips also exemplified how the appropriation of biblical teaching developed a theocentric perspective. It was observed in Chapter Seven how, as a young professional, Steve had been asked by his team captain if he was a Christian and then how, immediately afterwards, Steve had spoken to the manager about the appointment of a club chaplain. Steve felt that the capacity to respond appropriately to these changing room pressures was the result of his church pastor helping him understand what the Bible said about articulating personal faith in public:

The pastor gave me a Scripture that got me right in the heart. It said, "If you are ashamed of Christ in front of man, he will be ashamed of you one day when he comes down, in his

glory, with all His angels." That was like a knife in the heart. I'm like [praying], "Oh Lord, I've got to do something here." So actually, when [the team captain] came in [and asked Steve in front of the team about his faith], that was the moment when I thought, "Lord, this is it then." I'm so glad [I spoke of my faith] and it was a weight off my shoulders.

Steve is referring here to the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Mark, in the eighth chapter (verses 34 to 35, and 38), where Jesus describes the life of a Christian disciple (New International Version, 2011):

<sup>34</sup> Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it... <sup>38</sup> *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.*" [italics my own]

Steve considered verse 38 of this passage from the Bible in its broader context and was able to apply the meaning to his specific circumstances. In doing so, Steve felt that he had been obedient to Christ. Obedience is a central component of the concept of personal discipleship, whereby the Christian life is characterised by following Jesus (Whitmore, 2018). Steve's example aptly demonstrates how the understanding and application of biblical teaching enabled the fulfilment of the mission of God within his vocation as a professional footballer.

The way God works through the Bible to draw the respondents closer to Himself and into an obedient faith (Horton, 2002; Wingren, 1957/2004; Null, 2015) is exemplified by respondents within their athletic vocation (Null, 2004). In the experience of Simon, Brian, Steve and Harry, the Bible, taught and discussed in peer groups and churches, was the primary source for Christian discipleship, in showing how to be obedient in striving to follow Jesus in fulfilment of the mission of God.

### **Peer groups**

The primary source for developing Christian discipleship among respondents was the Bible, "the means through which God worked supernaturally to turn people's hearts to himself and the doing of his will" (Null, 2015, p. 205). According to Whitmore (2018), the personal discipleship which is necessary for fulfilling the *missio Dei* is a matter of both collective and individual obedience. Thus, focus now turns to the support of other Christians in establishing respondents' discipleship through the study of the Bible. Chapter Two outlined how Hickey and Roderick (2017) highlighted the role of significant others in affirming or resisting alternative non-athletic identities in elite athletes. The preceding findings chapters of this thesis have referred to the role of other Christians in affirming respondents' alternative identities as Christians. The current section explores the influence of peer support on the growing maturity of these Christian elite athletes.

The transactional nature of relational dynamics among professional footballers results from the potential conflict between a cultural emphasis on team solidarity and the individual need to maintain employment (Roderick, 2006a). Chapter Two noted how the result of this tension was a

pragmatic approach towards relationships with current colleagues, with peer support limited to former, trusted work colleagues connected with other clubs, who, when necessary, may aid in securing employment (Roderick, 2006b, 2014). In contrast to this cautious approach, respondents appeared to be willing to explore workplace fears regarding, for example, injury and deselection with other professional players. This vulnerability resonates with the authenticity emanating from a theocentric understanding of a received identity outlined in Chapter Seven as outworked in a profoundly relational manner within Christian peer groups. Indeed, the strength of peer support among respondents can be highlighted by contrasting the experiences of two distinct groups of respondents. Paul Roberts, Will Andrews and Colin Adams had become Christians between 1976 and 1984 before establishing accessible peer support groups for Christian professional footballers. As a result, these respondents were relatively isolated and unable to receive significant relational support from other Christian professional footballers. In turn, Steve Philips, Mick Jones and Jake Martin became Christians after 1988 and benefitted from peer groups established in 1993 by CIS. These peer groups provided an opportunity for individuals within the world of professional football to provide mutual support, whereby they could be vulnerable and open in understanding and applying the Bible within their vocational context.

Paul became a Christian in 1978. In 1980, aged 24, injury forced Paul to leave the game prematurely. During this period, Paul felt he had to face the crisis alone, at a time when those who understood both his Christian faith and professional sport could have been a real help to him:

No one who was a Christian from sport got alongside me ... and having people from sport [to provide support] would have made a difference. It does make a difference because,



obviously, they have some understanding of what you're going through. The empathy part is a lot easier as opposed to a lovely guy in the back pew [at church], who tells you, "Everything will be great, don't worry about it." There were some lovely people who did that. But there's a limit to how that can help you.

When Paul was facing premature retirement, Will was building his career as the captain of a First Division club, having become a Christian through the influence of his in-laws while playing overseas in the off-season of 1976. Though he was acquainted with Paul, Will continued to feel isolated in his faith journey:

I felt a little bit alone. There were the likes of Paul Roberts ... and Walter Edwards [a North American who helped introduce sports ministry to the UK] who [occasionally] pulled us all together, all the way from the States. And so, there was a half a dozen of us ... I longed for there to be more [players] who think the same way, had the same pressures, the same struggles in sport because you're an athlete and you're trying to live this life; and as you try to be this [Christian] witness and yet keep your game level up.

Will did not benefit from peer support through Bible studies with other Christians who understood professional football. Will and Paul had both retired from the game by the time Colin Adams became a Christian in 1984, and the only Christian player he knew was the team-mate through whom he had become a Christian just a year earlier. When injury terminated Colin's career five years later, a volunteer leader from the CIS network contacted him. The caller had no personal experience of professional football, and it was an abrupt and unhelpful intervention:

[The person] phoned me up and said, "Now your career is over, God's going to heal you, to show his power." I said, "It's too late if God wanted to heal me." He just prayed and put the phone down. It really upset me at that time. Because I had nothing at that point. I needed someone to say, "How are you doing?" With Christians in Sport, it was not a brilliant moment. But it's not an easy moment anyway. I understand that ... I don't remember it as being a brilliant period, and I don't remember feeling particularly well supported.

Among American collegiate athletes, Fuller (2014) identifies the absence of support from peers who have a tacit understanding of what athletes face when leaving elite sport. One of the six detrimental themes identified in the transition experience was the loss of camaraderie and support systems. This isolation is evident in the experiences of Paul, Will and Colin. Meanwhile, the absence of peer support for Paul, Will and Colin, who, in the 1970s and 1980s, were the first respondents to become Christians, emphasises the contrasting, positive experiences reported by respondents who became Christians in the 1990s when peer group meetings developed. Steve Philips, Mick Jones and Jake Martin all benefited from the Bible teaching and mutual support that helped them apply their faith in the context of professional football. Steve expressed the nuanced importance of the Christian peer support he received:

That support from someone that had been in the same culture that understood and empathised [was necessary]. They know what the craic is, and they know the feelings. They know the emotional side of the game, the hurts, the ups, and the downs. There need to be people there for them to do that, to support them.

This emerging network became a source of support for Mick Jones when, having been a Christian for a year, he transferred to a new club and met another Christian player. As a result, Mick met a cohort of Christian players who regularly met at the London home of Pete Green. The meetings at Pete's house had a positive impact on Mick's personal life:

It just changed everything because it just opened me up to think, "Wow, there are other Christians [in professional football]", and I was introduced to other Christian footballers. We'd have meetings at Pete Green's and other players' houses. It went from meeting up [one-to-one] with [a person from CIS] after training [to meeting with a group of Christians], and it was just freedom; knowing that I could talk about my faith, I can share my problems, I can be real because I certainly didn't have it all together.

The role of significant others in facilitating Mick to be authentic – to "be real" – is apparent. This support accords with the analysis of Hickey and Roderick (2017) regarding the crucial role of peers in affirming non-athletic senses of identity amongst professional footballers. Alongside the general encouragement of being able to speak transparently about a range of personal issues, Mick also described how more senior Christian players taught him how to integrate Christian faith with his on-field performances:

I remember conversations with people that have trailblazed that have been there and done that. People like Roddy Cowan and [another Christian player in the meeting], listening to conversations between them ... They [had] absolutely battered each other [when playing

against one other]. Yet, they were the best of mates. And in doing that, they were giving God their best. And so, it was players that were sharing biblical principles, but their own experiences of how they grew and dealt with things as well.

Mick's experience in the peer group reflects the principle identified earlier in this chapter, namely that understanding and applying the Bible is how God draws Christians closer to Himself as they live in obedience to Him within their vocation (Horton, 2002; Wingren, 1957/2004; Null, 2015). Chapter Seven discussed how respondents could integrate private faith at work and the pivotal importance of retaining management and peer respect through playing performances. The peer group support described here by Mick was a significant aid in the process, with senior players helping him reflect on how he could be fully physically competitive without compromising his Christian faith. The peer group enabled Mick to refine a theocentric perspective regarding his career, whereby God would work through the rigour of a competitive professional environment to develop Mick in his Christian faith (Null, 2016). The opportunity to engage in conversations about intimate, personal vulnerabilities and practical questions about competitive performance as Christian athletes appeared to be a significant aspect of these peer group meetings.

Jake Martin also gained personal and professional insight from fellow Christians through these peer group meetings. Jake played over 400 games in a 14-year career in the 1990s and 2000s before beginning his coaching career shortly afterwards. During this transition, in 2004, when aged 32, Jake became a Christian. Jake joined a Christians in Sport players' group and found it encouraging: "The group of people had little chats together, meeting in various places. Because those things are great opportunities to talk to other people and be yourself, be your true self."

Jake summarises the pivotal importance of these peer groups insofar as they facilitated the opportunity for being "your true self". It contrasts with the institutional norms of professional football discussed in Chapter Two, whereby players are unlikely to move beyond pragmatic and transactional interactions with other players at their clubs and are hesitant to be open and share workplace anxieties with colleagues (Roderick, 2006a, 2006c, 2014; Roderick and Schumacker, 2016). However, it accords with the observed effects of the Christian faith considered in this thesis. Chapter Seven elaborated on the public integration of the Christian faith and a professional football career. Steve, Mick and Jake were able to be vulnerable and express their sentiments in the presence of other players. This integration of back stage and front stage selves enabled the growing authenticity amongst workplace colleagues identified in Chapter Seven (Hickey and Roderick, 2017). Therefore, the mission of God in respondents' lives appears to have been significantly assisted by these peer groups. Building on the initial analysis regarding Bible study, the experiences of Steve, Mick and Jake demonstrate the utility of peer groups, bringing together those who understand both Christian faith and professional football to understand and apply biblical teaching within the vocation of professional football. Meanwhile, alongside reporting their positive experiences of peer groups, Steve, Mick and Jake and other respondents also articulated how they were affirmed and encouraged in their Christian faith by local churches.

## **Church**

Christian discipleship is critical to the fulfilment of the *missio Dei* in a Christian's life (Whitmore, 2018). This chapter has sought to demonstrate the pivotal role of the Bible in

Christian discipleship, as God works through the Bible to draw the Christian closer to Himself and into obedience within their vocation (Horton, 2002; Wingren, 1957/2004; Null, 2015). In this regard, the relationship between the church and the Bible is paramount. Cranmer advocated the view that "the church's chief responsibility [is] promoting Scripture's message and protecting its authority for salvation" (Null, 2006, p. 516). Moreover, Null (2004) considers the pastoral and supportive role of relationships within a local church, as the Bible is applied to the lives of church members, to be a pivotal aspect of Christian discipleship.

Chapter One noted how the emergence of practical accounts and small-scale academic literature regarding the role of sports chaplaincy in providing pastoral support for elite athletes, regardless of the athletes' religious beliefs (Threlfall-Holmes & Newitt, 2011; Parker et al., 2016; Waller & Cottom, 2016). In contrast, the role of local church communities in supporting the discipleship of Christian elite athletes has received little attention. Yet, several respondents discussed the biblical insight and pastoral support they received from local churches. For example, despite the absence of peer support available to Will when he became a Christian in 1976, he was greatly encouraged by his local church members. When Will and his wife Coleen began attending church, their initial acquaintance with two other couples led to meaningful friendships:

So now, what was really brilliant for Coleen and I, two or three couples just took us under their wing and treated us just as totally normal people. And that was so refreshing ... and so brilliant, because, I have to be honest, I was a typical footballer, very sceptical about everybody and everything. I'd been taught that people always wanted something out of me

... I was locked into that thinking ... But bit by bit, these people just treated us like Will and Coleen.

The limited support available from "lovely people" at church, compared to the encouragement of Christian peers within the professional game, was described earlier by Paul Roberts. Nevertheless, Will's experience indicates that local church members provided a strong support network, despite their lack of awareness of the professional football context. Phil Lee, like Will, was initially cautious when he started attending church with his wife and children, but in due course, he, too, was pleasantly surprised:

We were suspicious because of trust issues that we had when we'd let people into our lives before, but these [people from church] were showing that they were authentic in terms of who they were as people, so we built trust, and we built good friendships ... That allowed us to recognise that there is a life outside of football. It helped us in terms of raising our children, you know, being able to place them in another circle of friends ... It allowed us to feel safe so that if things were not going well, we had a safe place to speak.

In their paper considering the difficulties professional footballers face in finding places of personal sanctuary, Roderick and Allen-Collinson (2020, pp. 109-110) show that even daily attendance at the training ground demands a "performance". Added to this, the challenge of relentless and unremitting public pressure due to their fame can lead to real problems in developing authentic friendships (Cashmore, 2014). As with Christian peer groups, going to church may have played a part in alleviating this problem by providing access, for Will, Phil and their families, to a place of

genuine friendship, seemingly unparalleled in their previous experience. Phil felt that church friendship offered him and his wife access to a more holistic view on life beyond their previously narrow, athletic perspectives:

It wasn't about what you wore, what you drove, but it was actually, again, the central figure of Christ that drew them together. We gained an understanding that the world of football and the skills and gifts we've got as individuals, as [Phil, his wife and children] could be used for God. But we didn't see that before. I suppose it opened up our minds that we weren't just on a narrow path to be successful in football and float off into no life afterwards ... So, it gave us a hope of a life of something beyond football.

Chapter Two proposed that the development and affirmation of alternative 'possible selves' are critical to developing a rounded sense of identity and the integration of an elite athlete's front stage presentation and back stage reality (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). Involvement in a local church was pivotal for developing Phil's sense of identity. Moreover, Phil identified "the central figure of Christ" as the source of value rather than any form of material wealth. To that end, Phil's experience resonates with the theocentric perspective that predicates personal significance on the work of Jesus, not on the performance of the Christian. Phil's involvement in a local church was crucial to his appreciation of this perspective. Alongside giving him an alternative approach to his future beyond the professional game, Phil also reflected on the fact that the support he and his family received from the church enabled him to integrate his faith at work more effectively:



That first 18 months, having the support of the Christians within the football club and my church family outside the club really allowed me to recognise that if you are challenged about your faith in the workplace, there's a reason for it, and that reason for it gave me strength to go in and face what those challenges were. And I always say that if I didn't have that outside support, I don't know where I'd be today.

Will and Phil were both established first-team players in their mid-20s and were married with children when they attended church. On the other hand, Mick was a single man aged 18 when he became a Christian, and this chapter has observed that Mick joined a Christian peer group when he moved to play in a new city. Mick also began attending church, and he found it to be instrumental in grounding his faith:

The Bible came to life, and I was actually clinging to Scriptures that actually helped me in those circumstances. So, the Bible was making a massive difference to me. This was all new to me as well ... I previously had my auntie and uncle, who had led me to the Lord, and God provided an amazing youth group and a church that I could grow and get rooted in, and that made a massive difference, or else I'd have massively struggled.

The grounding of Mick's faith occurred as he spent time understanding and applying the Bible within the context of relationships in a local church. In that regard, the relationships Mick developed in the church, and the Bible teaching he received, were pivotal in maturing his faith (Null, 2004, 2006). Indeed, Mick was explicit about how spending time at church both brought

stability to his faith and expanded his social horizons, with an increasing desire to spend time with other Christians:

I couldn't believe that I was looking forward to going to church on a Sunday or meeting up with some other young believers during the week, as opposed to going on a night out. I couldn't believe that the simple things of getting [together] with other Christians to open the Bible was more exciting to me than a night out with the lads, when for so many years, from a young age, that's all I was interested in.

In the early stages of his career, Mick drew on his church support to find a sense of balance between his Christian faith and his social and professional life. Colin Adams drew heavily on his church when injury prematurely ended his playing career. It has been observed that Colin did not have adequate peer group support in this crisis period. In turn, he found significant assistance from his church, especially the support of his vicar:

It was my own church that helped, which is, in the end, perhaps why I do what I do [Colin became a vicar]. Because it was my church that didn't change, and I just needed something to not change, and the church didn't change. And one of the people who really amazingly looked after me was the vicar of that church, who didn't even understand football. He couldn't work it out! But he was amazing ... That was the transition at the end of the football. He was the one who helped me [to move on to a new career].

Chapter Two emphasised the impact on an athlete's identity formation where role models demonstrated non-athletic facets of identity (Ronkainen et al., 2019). Chapter One noted that such holistic and long-term perspectives is a key strategy of sports chaplaincy (Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt, 2011; Parker et al., 2016; Waller and Cottom, 2016). Colin received such support from his local church pastor. Pete Green also highlighted the vital role of his pastor after he and his future wife became Christians at a local Methodist church:

Having a few peers there, young Christians, there [at the church] and being mentored by the minister, a godly man, a lovely man, and his wife ... He was the one who had invited me back to his house, where he had a youth meeting every Sunday ... I had a 'spiritual father' appear.

This chapter has proposed that God's work through the Bible was the pivotal means of discipleship as Christian elite athletes matured in their Christian faith. Church leaders played an essential role in facilitating the ongoing discipleship of Colin and Pete. As with Will, Phil and Mick, this process occurred through Bible teaching in the context of a local church community. The fellowship provided by peer groups and local churches were critical social groups whereby respondents developed their understand and application of the Bible to their personal and professional lives. While sports ministries may play a beneficial role in engaging and supporting Christian elite athletes, it is also noteworthy that the local church community can also provide crucial assistance in the holistic development of elite athletes' lives.

The current chapter contends that understanding and applying the Bible is a prerequisite to fulfilling the mission of God in the lives of Christians (Horton, 2002; Wingren, 1957/2004; Null, 2015). Further, according to Cranmer, the "church's mission was to proclaim the unchanging message of the Gospel" (Null, 2015, p. 197). The final section of this chapter explores the impact of Bible teaching, through peer groups and churches, on respondents' evangelistic propensities.

### **Evangelism**

The theocentric perspective posits that an athlete's received identity is a product of God's unconditional love through faith in Jesus Christ. In turn, God works through the athlete's vocation to draw them closer to Himself and into the service of others, in fulfilment of the *missio Dei*, as the athlete experiences fulfilment, security and authenticity flowing from their God-given identity. The current chapter has sought to demonstrate the pivotal role of the Bible in this process, as God works through the Bible to confer faith and draw the Christian closer to Himself and into obedience within their vocation (Horton, 2002; Wingren, 1957/2004; Null, 2015). If God works through the Bible to mature athletes' faith in their personal and professional lives and thereby to fulfil the *missio Dei*, then a crucial link between the Bible and the fulfilment of the mission of God emerges.

Chapter One began by discussing the historical developments from evangelistic to welfare-based approaches regarding the pastoral support of Christian elite athletes (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). The opening chapter also drew attention to concerns regarding the evangelistic aspects of chaplaincy, the result of which was the Olympic Religious Services Policy which was introduced in Sydney,

2000. This policy includes the statement: "Religious Services personnel will not be permitted to use this ministry as a vehicle for conversion or proselytising" (Weir, 2016, p. 17). Chapter One noted that Tyndale, one of the Sydney chaplains, indicated that action was needed to clarify and resolve the role and place of evangelism within sports chaplaincy (Tyndale, 2004). The current thesis proposes a resolution to this challenge, namely that evangelism amongst elite athletes can be well served by the natural Christian witness of one competitor to another. Thus, sports chaplains may find that the most intuitive way to encourage evangelism is to help Christian elite athletes fully appreciate their theocentric and received identity.

The respondents' experiences demonstrated a growing tendency toward workplace conversations about Christian faith in the light of their growing fulfilment, security and authenticity. Chapter Seven considered how Pete Green had been open about his faith from his earliest days as a young professional at his first club. His approach became more intentional as he grew in experience as a Christian footballer and as his "sense of mission" gained momentum:

As I went on, I was open about my faith. I would speak if players asked me. I would go to do stuff evangelistically outside the club, but I think I had more conversations one-to-one with players more pointedly as I got older. I developed that sense of mission in the workplace more, I guess. I would do the [media] articles and be more open about it.

There was a correlation between Pete's growing desire to share his faith and his appreciation of the Bible's teaching. Pete felt his biblical comprehension was pivotal to the personal integration of his faith and career and the way he shared his faith at work:

And I just remember I couldn't wait to read my Bible on an evening ... This is a supernatural, powerful, joy-filled life that we can have ... there is a power in the Christian life. Like, even early on, I'm excited about these things. And now football is not God. Jesus is God, as He is. And yet, I knew I was a Christian and a footballer. And so, I was open with the lads straight away.

Pete noted that the excitement arising from his Christian faith, rooted in his appreciation understanding and application of biblical teaching, created a desire to be "open" in sharing his faith with team-mates. This willingness accords with the suggestion that God worked through the Bible to fulfil the mission of God within the respondents' vocation. Moreover, as Pete's understanding of the Bible facilitated an integration between his career and football, Pete's sense of excitement resonates with what Null (2016, p. 126) describes as the "evangelism of joy".

The Bible's crucial role in enhancing evangelism within the workplace is also apparent in Phil Lee's experience. Chapter Eight considered how several of Phil's team-mates became Christians at his South Coast Premier League club. This positive experience was preceded by a negative period in which colleagues challenged Phil's faith. During this challenging period, Phil found that understanding and applying biblical teaching sustained his perseverance at the club. Phil emphasised the role of the club chaplain in providing this support:

But Martin Morgan, once again, with advice and a couple of Bible verses, just helped me understand that being a Christian wasn't going to be easy, that being a Christian was

actually going to be offensive to some people. I didn't understand all of that, but Martin helped me realise that what I was going through, millions of people have gone through before, and millions will go through in the future and that I would be fine. I'll get through this.

Phil's understanding of the biblical teaching that personal and professional challenges are characteristic of the Christian life helped him endure a period of difficulty before subsequent evangelistic opportunities. Moreover, Chapter Eight noted how a vital facet of these opportunities were Bible studies, to which Phil invited team-mates and other employees of the club. This strategy resonates with the central proposition that God works through the Bible to mature the Christian and as the primary means of conferring Christian faith (Horton, 2002; Wingren, 1957/2004; Null, 2015).

This chapter has observed that Mick Jones was part of a Christians in Sport peer group, in which he "began to apply biblical principles to my life and experience" and attended a local church where the "Bible came to life". In his first year as a young professional at his Premier League club, while receiving treatment from the physiotherapist, Mick Jones found himself responding to questions about Christianity from some of his most senior professional colleagues:

I remember when I was on the treatment table, which was often, just having a conversation with [esteemed international team-mates]. I'm answering questions and blatantly sharing my testimony, my faith ... It was almost like there was silence as I'm sharing with all these senior players and the physio. I just couldn't believe it that I was given this audience ...

That was a real moment where I just came away like, "Wow, I've just got to share the Gospel with some of the biggest names in football."

Mick continued to engage in evangelistic conversations when he moved to his second club and established himself as a first-team player. He did so by reading his Bible on the team bus:

On our coach days, so away games, I'd sit down the front, and I'd actually get the Bible open, knowing that as players came down [the bus], they'd see me reading the Bible. That was like a big, "What are you doing?" Because a lot of them had never seen any player reading the Bible. It's not like now you can be on your phone ... So other players would have to hear about it. So, of course, you get comments.

Though others initiated the conversations described by Mick, he was keen to engage in dialogue about Christianity. Steve Phillips exhibits this correlation between understanding and applying the Bible and workplace evangelism. As Steve's knowledge of the Bible grew, so did his capacity to engage in nuanced dialogue about discrete aspects of Christianity. It was his team captain who opened up the discussion:

We were talking about who you would help, who you would go the extra mile for. So, [an England international player] said to me, "Why would you help somebody you don't know?" So, I explained to him the parable of the good Samaritan, and I also explained to him that we should help our neighbour, and our neighbour is anyone that might need



helping, whatever creed, colour, culture, anything, even your enemy. And he's like, "What? Why would you help your flippin' enemy? I would never help anyone I don't know."

When engaging in workplace conversations, Steve drew on his understanding of a specific section of the Bible to explain his faith to a team-mate. The "parable of the good Samaritan" refers to a section of Jesus' teaching recorded in Luke chapter 10, verses 25 to 37 (New International Version, 2011). Steve spoke about how becoming a Christian had changed his perspective on life due to awareness that he had been the undeserved recipient of God's help:

I said, "Well, I would have had that same thought as you and that same reasoning in my mind and heart before I met Christ. But you need to remember that Christ died for me even while I was still a sinner." ... [I said], "It's something I don't deserve, mate. However, Jesus did it for me. Even while I was an enemy of Him, against Him, abusing Him verbally and in my mind when someone spoke to me about it, He still died for me. So that love that He showed for me is the love that I now show for people ... [by] trying to be like Christ."

According to Whitmore and Parker (2020), dialogue and pastoral support emerge from the intentional building of relationships around everyday interaction through active and appropriate listening. The day-to-day nature of the examples above represents a combination of authentic concern for colleagues, leading to intimate conversations with team-mates about appropriating Christian faith. Steve engaged in such conversations, but the critical insight provided in this analysis is the crucial role of the Bible in this process. The experiences of Mick and Steve suggest

that the Bible simultaneously encouraged them in their faith and played a pivotal role in workplace evangelism.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has drawn on the work of Whitmore (2018), who emphasised the importance of personal discipleship in facilitating the *missio Dei* in the lives of sports chaplains. The notion of discipleship in pursuit of the mission of God was applied to the respondents rather than sports chaplains. The chapter considered how Christian elite athletes were able to sustain a long-term and maturing contribution to the mission of God.

The evidence identified three key factors in helping respondents' ongoing Christian discipleship, beginning with the importance of the Bible. Null (2015) expounds how the Bible draws Christians closer to Himself and into the service of others. Understanding and applying the Bible proved significant to the long-term development of respondents' Christian growth. The importance of the Bible in personal discipleship was facilitated by two social groups. The importance of significant others in helping professional footballers to develop alternative identities has been identified by Hickey and Roderick (2017). The current chapter affirmed this by identifying the crucial role played by Christian peer group meetings and local churches. The final section of the chapter considered how Bible study, coupled with relationships through peer groups and local churches led to ongoing personal discipleship and intuitive evangelism as respondents shared their faith with workplace colleagues.

The findings reported in Chapters Five to Nine have considered how identity was formed in Christian professional footballers. The final aspect of this study is to draw conclusions from this empirical evidence and to make recommendations for future enquiries.

## Chapter Ten

### Conclusions and Recommendations

#### Introduction

This chapter draws the study together and makes some recommendations for future research and practice. It begins by summarising the findings in response to the stated research question and objectives regarding identity formation in Christian elite footballers. Against the complex background of professional football, the Christian faith provided respondents with a degree of fulfilment, security and authenticity not previously experienced during their playing careers. These experiences led to a Christian witness at work, at home and, in some cases, to the wider public.

Attention then turns to the significance of the study, indicating its innovative combination of theology and qualitative insights into the identify formation of Christian elite athletes. Yet, the pioneering nature of this thesis aligns closely with its corresponding limitations. These restrictions concern the difficulty of benchmarking the study's findings with previously established theological and empirical studies in this area. The methodological challenges of combining theology with qualitative research are also discussed. Despite these limitations, I make several recommendations for future research. These proposals include the need to further distinguish between the theological concepts of a received and achieved identity in providing pastoral support for Christian elite athletes. This venture into the previously uncharted empirical territory also offers a considerable opportunity for future qualitative inquiry regarding the experience of Christian elite athletes across a broad range of sports, ages, ethnicity, and gender. Finally, I offer the practical proposal that

sports chaplains seek to apply the theocentric foundations of this study to the care of all athletes, regardless of religious belief.

### **Main findings of the study**

This study has explored the development of Christian elite athletic identities when faith is juxtaposed with a professional football career. To this end, the thesis builds upon and extends existing theoretical work concerning identity formation and career transition in English professional football. It has explored the complex interplay between elite sporting status and faith-based life choices. The research featured three subsequent objectives, all of which were concerned with specific aspects of the impact of the Christian faith on the identity formation of professional footballers. The first considered the implications of faith in workplace environments at key career transition points, including injury, transfer, retirement, and post-retirement. Secondly, attention turned to the impact of Christianity on the formation of identity in domestic situations among family, friends, and broader social networks. The third and final objective surrounded the exploration of the impact of the Christian faith on respondents' willingness to articulate their beliefs at work, at home and in wider social settings. The research question summarised these objectives: How is identity formed in Christian professional footballers during their careers? The study presented findings from semi-structured interviews with 14 former professional footballers who became Christians during their careers.

Chapter One proposed that Christian faith should be predicated on the theocentric perspective that personal identity was received from God rather than by athletic achievements (Null, 2008a, 2008b,

2016, 2021). Chapter Two showed how, conversely, the cultural norms of the professional game expect players to find significance through playing performances (for example, Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006a). Chapters Five and Six indicated that when respondents became Christians, the theocentric foundation of a received identity led to two unprecedented existential experiences. Chapter Five showed how the Christian faith led to a sense of fulfilment previously unattained by career achievements. Chapter Six indicated that the Christian faith led to a degree of security hitherto unparalleled in respondents' playing careers. The evidence suggested that foundational belief in a received identity from God, rather than an achieved identity through professional football, provided novel aspects of fulfilment and security in respondents' personal and professional lives.

The intimate, existential experiences of fulfilment and security led to public behavioural changes at respondents' football clubs. The findings of Chapter Seven pointed to an authentic integration between private lives and public workplace behaviours. The evidence suggests that Christian beliefs were not kept confidential but exposed to colleagues at work. As a result, respondents faced banter and bullying from team-mates and managers. However, the tipping point in retaining changing room approval hinged on one critical factor: matchday performances. Once the manager and team-mates identified that a respondent could contribute effectively to team success, their Christian faith was acknowledged and accepted. Consequently, it led to ongoing conversations about Christianity with work colleagues whose respect had been garnered.

Thus, the study's initial findings were that becoming a Christian provided a new degree of fulfilment and security, which resulted in the integration of private faith with workplace

behaviours. When combined with acceptable on-field performances, the resulting authenticity ultimately led to witness regarding the Christian faith with both team-mates, managers and sometimes in the wider public arena. Chapter Eight explored the link between this growing Christian witness and respondents' appreciation that God was fully engaged in their athletic vocation. One aspect of the theocentric foundations outlined in Chapter One is that God uses His gift of sport to draw the Christian athlete closer to himself. God does this through the school of discipleship, leading to the *missio Dei* (Null, 2016). Chapter Eight showed how God used every aspect of the inevitable combination of highs and lows of an athletic career to give insights into His unconditional love. The reinforcement of the gracious nature of a received identity, gained through this vocational insight, facilitated respondents' growing gratitude to God. The experience of grace and gratitude emanating from discipleship led respondents to fulfil the mission of God. Respondents reflected the loving, relational and sending God within their social settings by showing commitment to the service of others, witnessing by deeds and words to the Christian faith. Null (2016, p. 16) suggests that this might be the "very best form of evangelism."

Chapter Nine paid attention to the factors which contributed to sustaining respondents' long-term Christian development and maturity. It drew on the importance of personal discipleship in pursuit of the *missio Dei*, which was originally applied to sports chaplains by Whitmore (2018). The place of personal discipleship in relation to the mission of God was, instead, applied to respondents' experiences. The chapter highlighted the pivotal importance of the Bible in furnishing an understanding of Christian living. The Bible was taught and applied by respondents in two major communities, namely peer groups and local churches. These affirmatory influences resulted in

respondents' ongoing, life-long Christian discipleship and witness, noting the important respondents placed on peer evangelism.

This section has outlined the key findings of the study and it is hoped that these findings may contribute to future research in this area.

### **Contributions of the study**

The current study has addressed the research question of identity formation in Christian elite athletes. I posed this question to contribute to the broader research problem: the need to recommend an optimal approach to provide pastoral support for Christian elite athletes. To this end, the study sought to address specific research gaps. First, the research aimed to contribute to the theological foundations underpinning the practical sports ministry practices for providing pastoral support to Christian elite athletes. Secondly, the study sought to pioneer qualitative inquiry into the lived experiences of Christian elite athletes.

Chapter One discussed the need to assess the theological foundations underpinning sports ministry approaches to providing pastoral support to Christian elite athletes. This requirement led to consideration of how the theocentric approach of the 16th Century Reformers Luther, Calvin and Cranmer was applied to the lives of Christian elite athletes by Null (2008a, 2008b, 2016, 2021). This pioneering work by Null advocates a Reformed, theocentric perspective that sport is a divine gift, facilitating a God-given vocation for the Christian elite athletes. This approach contrasts with what Null calls the anthropocentric approach to identity formation in Christian elite athletes. The



contrast is between the theocentric view of sport as a divine initiative and the anthropocentric perspective that sport is a human construct.

The stark contrast between the theocentric and anthropocentric foundations to sports ministry became clear when considering the challenges made by Null (2021) to Hoffman's (2010) notion of 'play'. Hoffman (2010) argues that one of the reasons sports is ungodly is that it is innately competitive: sport is founded on comparison. Sporting competition is inherently malign since it leads to hubris in the victor and despair in the vanquished. The resulting conflict leaves no room for authentic Christian fellowship founded on love for one another. Null (2021) seeks to refute this by showing how Hoffman (2010) makes a 'category error' insofar as he fails to clarify the theological distinction between a received and an achieved identity. This theocentric foundation explains the critical differentiation between the received, unconditional gift of self-worth and the vocational importance of gaining self-awareness regarding the comparative strengths and weaknesses of one's divinely gifted athletic talents. Thus, for Null (2021), any competition/comparison regarding the Christian elite athlete's significance to God is inappropriate and should be rejected. However, it can be positively advantageous for Christian athletes to compare the quality of athletic performances. Comparison can be helpful since competition facilitates self-awareness in determining how to optimise the contribution to the service of others through an athletic vocation.

The current study adopted a Reformed, theocentric foundation for identity formation in Christian elite athletes. It sought to contribute to the theological discussion regarding the place of competitive and elite sport in the divine purpose. The study also sought to contribute to the research

gap in a second way. This input regarded the provision of optimal pastoral support to Christian elite athletes by pioneering empirical research regarding the identity formation of Christian elite athletes. The existence of established psychological and sociological academic literature regarding identity formation in elite athletes, regardless of religious beliefs, was outlined in Chapter Two (for example, Cushion & Jones, 2014; Manley & Parker, 2017; Jones & Denison, 2017). This literature assisted in providing some theoretical and empirical frameworks for the study. The thesis was also aided through small-scale academic studies by sports chaplains regarding their roles in providing pastoral support for coaches and players in professional football clubs, regardless of religious beliefs (for example, Gamble et al., 2013, Oliver & Parker, 2019). Nevertheless, a PhD level study combining theological theory with qualitative research into the lives of Christian elite athletes may be unprecedented.

### **Limitations of the study**

Those engaged in the study of Christianity and sport have acknowledged that, paradigmatically, theology and the social sciences have traditionally belonged to opposite ends of the research spectrum (see, for example, Parker & Watson, 2014b). They suggest that despite an increasing body of academic literature in this field, and regardless of the clear understanding that belief systems impact social relationships, theologians have been reluctant to engage with empirical research in the interpretive tradition (Parker & Watson, 2014b). It would seem inevitable that the consequent limitation in qualitative work has inhibited the assessment of the relationship between Christianity and sport in day-to-day athletic contexts. In undertaking qualitative work on the formation of personal identity in Christian professional footballers, this thesis has sought to take

up the challenge of dealing with such limitations to facilitate further theological reflection and resulting practical proposals for the pastoral support of Christian elite athletes.

Thus, the study has entailed the significant methodological challenge of integrating theological and social science literature in search of empirical authenticity. The Christian belief that there is a God who reveals Himself to humanity assumes ontological and epistemological positions which run contrary to the foundations of the social sciences. I have addressed this conflict in Chapter Three, where I have articulated a research design based on practical theology and appropriately aligned data collection methods. The goal of utilising practical theology as an investigative framework was to search for accurate data to form theological reflection whilst retaining the integrity of theology and the social sciences (Cameron et al., 2010; Swinton, 2012). A defence of the importance of recognising practical theology described how the social sciences had moved away from modern, structuralist and positivist understandings of their social scientific objectivity towards post-structuralist, constructivist, and interpretive understandings of how the social sciences themselves and the individuals who conduct social scientific research are situated. Practical theology represents more than an attempt to make Christian doctrine intelligible or to highlight the recognition that Christian belief is inherently contextual. The situation of the theological researcher matters (Philips, 2012).

Further, Ward (2012a) indicates that in the interplay between beliefs (theology) and practices (the tools of the humanities/social sciences), the role of fieldwork is to root the biblical ideas of the image and mission of God as found in the lives of actual people, places and practices. Theology is replete with assertions about the social and communal nature of the church, and the challenge is to

assess how aligned such assertions are to the actual lived experience of Christians. The central issue of this study was how to bring such implicit theological assumptions from the background to the foreground so that they may be identified, interrogated, and critically applied. In short, the simple philosophical requirement was to acknowledge the exercise of theological reflexivity within theological dimensions and to assume this as a standard and primary aspect of empirical theological research (see Swinton, 2012; Phillips, 2012; Ward, 2012a, 2012b).

The second major limitation of the study was the lack of previous qualitative research into identity formation in Christian elite athletes. There are a limited number of small-scale academic studies and practitioner accounts of the pastoral support provided by sports chaplains within professional football clubs, regardless of the religious beliefs of recipients. Whilst useful, such literature offers little assistance to a study concerned with the identity formation of Christian professional footballers. This absence of substantial, documented empirical research into the lives of Christian elite athletes is understandable since, as was noted in Chapter Three, gaining access to the lives of professional footballers is notoriously difficult. Since this restriction left no scope for reviewing previous findings in this field, I adopted the conventions of grounded theory to undertake a systematic analysis of data through a process of open, axial and selective coding and the formation of a conceptual framework that facilitated the presentation of participant experiences from their own perspective (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2000, 2014). In my data analysis, the role of coding to synthesise data from interview transcripts into clear categories was crucial to identifying the key findings (see Mills et al., 2006). The benefits of this are similar to those of content analysis identified by Biddle et al. (2001), whereby researchers seek to distil information from large amounts of qualitative data to identify foundational themes. Thus, following Bryman

(2016), the data analysis process was driven by my search for concepts and categories that best explained participant interpretations of their life course experiences.

### **Recommendations for future research**

The primary recommendations of this study are focused on further academic research rather than leading with suggestions for sports ministry practices. This prioritisation is a consequence of the fact that this study is an initial attempt to consider identity formation in Christian elite athletes, specifically professional footballers. Further qualitative inquiry is required before substantial proposals for practical and programmatic change are put forward.

My assertion here is that the theological discussion developed in Chapter One can contribute to ongoing studies. The theocentric foundation proposed is that personal identity is received as a gift from God and is unachievable by individual performance. Further, it holds that when a person has become a Christian, God engages with that person through a divinely gifted vocation to draw Christians closer to Himself and into the service of others (Wingren, 1957/2004; Horton, 2008). Null (2008a, 2008b, 2016, 2021) pioneers the application of this Reformed perspective to the lives of Christian elite athletes. The proposed importance of a theocentric foundation to underpin the findings of this thesis pinpoints the critical difference between a received and an achieved identity in the lives of Christian elite athletes. This discussion leaves much scope for further inquiry into the theological foundations of practical sports ministry. Such research would enhance the process of identity formation and consequent provision of pastoral support for Christian elite athletes.

The empirical findings presented in Chapters Five through Eight indicate that on becoming Christians, respondents discovered a new sense of fulfilment, security and authenticity that led to Christian witness. This evidence may prove beneficial to those engaged in professional football culture, where, as Chapter Two indicates, identity can be stringently restricted causing significant existential problems. As intimated previously, these findings provide an inaugural paradigm for further academic studies concerning identity formation in Christian elite athletes across numerous social categories and variables (i.e., sport, age, gender, social class, ethnicity). Such inquiry lends itself to more comprehensive, practical proposals to enhance the pastoral support of Christian elite athletes.

Chapter Three noted and explained the rationale for the homogeneity of participants, who formed a snapshot of a particular group of people who came to faith and received pastoral support from their earliest experiences of faith through to post-retirement, during the inaugural years of sports ministry amongst elite athletes in the UK. Since that period, the number of Christian professional footballers and the breadth of their Christian traditions has significantly expanded. As this thesis has documented, many sports chaplains now provide pastoral support in professional football (Parker & Weir, 2012; Weir, 2016; Sports Chaplaincy UK, 2020). In Chapters Five to Eight, the current study has identified the profoundly positive influence of one such chaplain, Martin Morgan, on the Christian development of Phil Lee. Numerous chaplains currently support Christian professional footballers and coaches within their clubs. The current thesis could be a benchmark for further academic study regarding the role of sports chaplains in enhancing identity formation in pursuit of optimal pastoral support for Christian elite footballers from a much greater breadth of Christian traditions.

Chapter Nine of the thesis has focussed on three aspects of pastoral support that appeared to have the most significant impact on the Christian maturity of respondents, namely the Bible, peer groups and local churches. The teaching and application of the Bible in meetings with peers and at churches played a pivotal role in the maturation of Christian athletes and it notes the resulting evangelistic instincts of respondents. Once again, this is uncharted territory concerning empirical research on the identity formation of Christian elite athletes. This research gap leaves scope for further consideration of the role of peer groups and local churches in providing the pastoral support. In keeping with the earlier recommendation, sports chaplains already engaged within football clubs may be well placed to undertake these research opportunities.

The inaugural nature of this theological and empirical venture does not preclude a closing practical suggestion. Chapter Two elaborated on the cultural requirement in professional football for identity formation predicated on the commitment to a one-dimensional athletic ability. This normative expectation is called a 'good professional attitude' by Roderick (2006a). There are malign consequences, including psychological difficulties among trainees (for example, Brown & Potrac, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014; Blakelock et al., 2016) and anxiety among professional players (for example, Roderick, 2006a, 2006c, 2014; Roderick & Schumacker, 2016). Meanwhile, evidence from golf (Carless & Douglas, 2014) and a range of other sports (Carless & Douglas, 2013) have shown how athletes feel obliged to conceal aspects of their identity at work. This need to cover up certain life or lifestyle choices can lead to a sense of inauthenticity that is problematic to wellbeing (Carless & Douglas, 2013, 2014).

One of the Premier League's Elite Player Performance Plan (2011) goals was to achieve greater holistic player welfare and development. This effort has faced criticism (for example, Manley & Parker, 2017; McCready, 2019). McCready has called on those researching and engaging with professional footballers to be more front footed in providing practical solutions for player welfare. Chapter One illustrated how sports chaplains can, and do, engage in contesting one-dimensional athletic identities fostered within professional football clubs. This thesis may provide a novel opportunity to respond to McCready's request. The study has explored and documented the impact of a theocentric foundation on the identity formation of *Christian* elite athletes. The findings have shown how this led to an unprecedented degree of fulfilment, security, authenticity and Christian witness. These characteristics represent a positive and hopeful framework. It is a paradigm that sports chaplains may wish to explore within their clubs in two ways. First, a deliberate, theocentric approach to pastoring Christian players may lead to natural, instinctive peer evangelism, thereby reducing any tensions about the evangelistic role of sports chaplains. Secondly, it would be fascinating to observe the consequences of a rigorously applied theocentric and received framework on the pastoral support of *all* elite athletes, regardless of religious beliefs.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began by summarising the findings of the study regarding the identity formation of Christian elite footballers. It has highlighted that in the demanding context of professional football, the Christian faith facilitated a newfound sense of fulfilment, security and authenticity at work and home. These characteristics led to an enhanced witness to the Christian faith in domestic, professional and wider public settings. I suggested that these findings facilitated opportunities for



dealing with the research problem, namely pursuing the optimal provision of pastoral support for Christian elite athletes. The chapter progressed by proposing ways in which the study might add value to current research. I have suggested that unpacking the work of Null (2008a, 2008b, 2016, 2021) to provide a Reformed, theocentric foundation for pastoral support to Christian elite athletes was important. This process offered a rigorous response to the concerns raised by Hoffman (2010) that the innately malign nature of sport precludes Christian engagement. This reply clears the path for constructive discussions regarding the place of competitive and elite sport in the divine purpose. The second valuable aspect of the study was its pioneering contribution to empirical research regarding identity formation in Christian elite athletes. Though inaugural, the thesis can still provide a basis for further qualitative inquiry.

Attention then turned to the study's limitations. The thesis could not draw on any previous theological reflection combined with empirical research into the lives of Christian elite athletes. There were also methodological challenges in a study that sought to integrate theology and empirical research. The study's limitations were followed by a discussion regarding the potential avenues for further research. The primary focus was on further academic investigation to follow this inaugural attempt at understanding identity formation in Christian professional footballers and identified two aspects. There is scope for additional theoretical, theological work regarding the notion of a received, as opposed to an achieved identity and the complementary perspective that God uses the vocational talents and relationship he has gifted for Christian discipleship (Wingren, 1957/2004; Horton, 2008). I recommended further study to build on this paradigm's pioneering application regarding Christian elite athletes developed by Null (2008a, 2008b, 2016, 2021). This theocentric claim provides much scope for further academic discussion.

Moreover, there are recommendations for further empirical study in the lives of Christian elite athletes. There is an opportunity to assess the initial claims that the Christian faith furnished respondents with a new sense of fulfilment, security and authenticity that led to Christian witness. These findings provide an inaugural paradigm for further academic studies concerning identity formation in Christian elite athletes across numerous sports, ages, genders and ethnicities. Meanwhile, I suggested that this provides an immediate opportunity for sports chaplains, who are currently providing pastoral support to Christian elite athletes within professional football, to advance academic study in this regard. A final avenue for potential research emerged from the findings in Chapter Nine. This chapter proposed three characteristics of pastoral support that strengthened the faith of respondents, namely Bible study, peer groups and local churches and how this combination of pastoral support led respondents to engage in peer evangelism. These findings offer the prospect of further inquiry. In line with the earlier recommendation, I suggested that sports chaplains already engaged within football clubs may be able to address these research questions.

Finally, I have proposed two practical recommendations. First, that sports chaplains review the prospect of the focussed investment of a theocentric, received identity in the lives of Christian elite athletes at their clubs. Secondly, it would be interesting to see what happened if sports chaplains were to pay attention to a rigorous application of a theocentric perspective of a received rather than achieved identity in their day-to-day engagements at their clubs. This approach could provide sports chaplains with a robust, practical and innovative framework via which to facilitate pastoral support to all athletes, regardless of religious beliefs.

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