



# In the Hands of God: Theology and the Benefits of American Football

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**In the Hands of God: Theology and the Benefits of American Football**

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*Preface*

I have a personal investment in the way American football is studied and understood; I played for 8 years at the high school and collegiate level. The remnants of my playing days still mark my psychological, spiritual, and physical well-being. For so many years football structured the way in which I related to my body, alongside my upbringing as a Jew. All year I would condition myself to perform acts of violence every Shabbat in the Fall, whether Friday night in high school or Saturday afternoon in college. The performance of the game was the liturgical high point of my week, not quite Jewish but still set aside to give me purpose as a man and as a creature on this Earth.

Two related events towards the end of my career caused me to reevaluate my relationship to the sport as a Jew. First, in recognition of my community service, I received a nomination to the 2018 American Football Coaches Association (AFCA) Allstate Good Works Team. I was flown to New Orleans for that year's Sugar Bowl weekend festivities to participate in an award ceremony and to be paraded around town as one of the "good guys" of college football. At the opening event of the weekend, I was unsurprised to find that most of my Good Works teammates were in some way involved with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), whose vision statement reads: "to see the world transformed by Jesus Christ through the influence of coaches and athletes." FCA is one of the AFCA's official partners. Tim Tebow, the football poster child of the sort of the evangelical mission of the FCA, was also the face of the Good Works team.

The overwhelming majority of my teammates throughout the years have had strong faith rooted in the Christian tradition. The "religiousness" of modern American sports culture and its normative Christian dominance is well established in scholarly literature. That those college football players who were nationally recognized for "doing good" in their community mostly

rooted their work in Christian values did not surprise me. I proudly wore my yarmulke the whole weekend, recognizing the novelty of being a practicing Jew at such a high-profile football event. Besides a multitude of hurried looks, no one commented on my head covering that weekend. The only exception was when the corporate representative from Allstate Insurance pulled me aside at the opening banquet of the weekend. Privately, he thanked me for my “brave” public display of my Jewishness. He confessed that he often was the only Jew in these types of spaces.

Tebow and I first met at the charity event, which consisted of the hammering of a few nails and a couple hours of photo shoots at a public school somewhere in New Orleans with Tebow and the country band Florida-Georgia Line. When I had my chance to introduce myself to Tebow, I said to him, “Where I come from, they call me the Jewish Tim Tebow.” He laughed, and replied, “You know where I just was? Israel. Have you ever been? [I shook my head] It’s amazing, I felt so connected with my Judeo-Christian roots. You have to go!” I chuckled nervously and was shepherded along to the next performance on the schedule.

My second break with football came in the Summer of 2021, about two years retired from the sport. A 16-year-old blew a stop sign and totaled the car I was driving in with my partner. Both airbags went off, and the car appeared as if it were a parabola. We went immediately to the hospital. No serious injuries were sustained, except for some bruising on my partner’s sternum and ribs. To this day we consider ourselves lucky to be alive. The doctor warned that the following morning would be the worst of the physical aftermath. Our necks would be stiff, our backs sore, and our psyches shaken.

When I awoke the next morning, I was quite familiar with what I was experiencing. It felt like I had played a football game the day before. I was comfortable in the discomfort; I had been conditioned to receive this sensation as a reward. This was the first time I really understood the

punishment I had willingly received. For 8 years, fourteen weeks every Fall, I put myself through a car crash every weekend. Familiar questions resurfaced in the past tense: Why did I go back to practice day after day? Why did I take that abuse? What was I searching for? For years I had put up with the explicit and implicit Christianness of the sport, but now I failed to see why. My faith was shaken. I no longer understood that version of myself who decided to keep going back to practice.

A quick note: I use gendered language intentionally throughout this paper, not to exclude those football players that don't identify as men, but rather to capture the highly gendered nature of my experience. The labor of women is essential to the performance of football, and women are often left with handling the emotional and physical repercussions of the sport that are ignored by men. Part of my inspiration for writing this essay came from my sexual violence prevention work with college and high school football players. I found that the work was so intricately tied up with the entire way of being a football player that any adequate solution to the pervasiveness of sexual violence needed a much more systematic analysis of how abuse is performed and sustained within the sport. To that end, this paper is just the beginning of the analysis. It is an intellectual struggle with the ways of being that lead me to the violence of football.

## *Introduction*

The research clearly shows that playing American football is ultimately detrimental to your health.<sup>1</sup> “At this point, the canary is dead in the coal mine,” said Dr. Hans Breiter, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, speaking on the long-term negative health effects of football, regardless of a history of concussion.<sup>2</sup> Despite repeated warnings from the medical community, over 1 million men played football in 2021.<sup>3</sup> Young boys and men involved in football subject their bodies to repeated traumatic collisions at least once a week every Fall season. From personal experience, I know that the effects of these collisions can be equivalent to the aftermath of a car crash. And yet this practice is allowed to continue because of what medical research calls the “positive benefits” of playing and watching football.<sup>4</sup> For many Americans, the health risks are beside the point. “I think for a long time we thought awareness was the challenge, and now I’m not sure that’s the case,” summarizes Dr. Christine Baugh, professor of internal medicine at the University of Colorado Medical School.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my faculty advisor Professor Ann Braude as well as my Teaching Fellow Mac Loftin for their help with my project. I must also thank the other professors at Harvard Divinity School who have impacted my work, as well as my peers AG, RF, MG, and TG for inspiring me and critiquing my thought. Thank you lastly to my teammates, coaches and family. This essay is a profound struggle with our shared experiences and is dedicated to the connection we share.

<sup>2</sup> Marla Paul, “College football players have abnormalities in coordination and inflammation,” Northwestern University News, 16 December 2021, <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2021/12/football-repetitive-head-impacts/#:~:text=A%20new%20study%20between%20Northwestern,are%20apparent%20before%20the%20football>.

<sup>3</sup> On average over the last 5 years there are 1,000,000 high school football players, 75,000 college players, and under 2,000 NFL players. See: “Football: Competing beyond high school.” NCAA.com. <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2015/2/27/football-probability-of-competing-beyond-high-school.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Sauer, “Research Works to Understand the Risks and Rewards of Football for Its Players and Fans,” Colorado University Anschutz School of Medicine, 9 February 2022. <https://news.cuanschutz.edu/medicine/risks-and-rewards-of-football-for-players-fans>.

<sup>5</sup> From Dr. Baugh’s interview with Rachel Sauer: “Research Works to Understand the Risks and Rewards of Football for Its Players and Fans.”

If science has proven that football is bad for your health, then what do players, coaches, and fans believe are the positive benefits of football? This is not only an ethical question, but should also be considered a theological one. A significant majority of football players in America identify as Christian, and a significant majority of those Christians identify as evangelical.<sup>6</sup> The fan base as well is predominantly Christian, with a quarter of Americans believing that God directly determines the outcomes of games, and over half of Americans thinking that God rewards athletes of faith for their successes.<sup>7</sup> Even those players who do not identify as Christian must rely on a Western liberal and neoliberal logic that Max Weber would describe as a “diffusion, not an elimination, of religion.”<sup>8</sup> It is my contention that American football is, somehow, Christian.<sup>9</sup> Football is a space in which an American form of Christianity is the dominant religion. It follows that a Western Christian paradigm shapes popular understandings of the benefits of football.

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Krattenmaker, *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks into Pulpits and Players into Preachers* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 13. Robert Klemko, “NFL Team Survey of Player Upbringings,” *Sports Illustrated*, 15 July 2017. <https://www.si.com/mmqb/2017/06/15/nfl-team-survey-playerupbringings-race-class-2016-election>.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, “One-Quarter Say God Will Determine the Super Bowl’s Winner—But Nearly Half Say God Rewards Devout Athletes.” *PPRI*. 2017 January 30. <https://www.ppri.org/research/poll-super-bowl-women-sports-god-athletes-marijuana/>. As encountered in Jeffrey Scholes, “Pray the White Way: Religious Expression in the NFL in Black and White.” *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 10:8 (2019): 470.

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Mineola, N.Y.: Courier Dover, 2003), 36. Another could framework for describing this phenomenon is the “naturalization” of religious power among secular Americans. See Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> To play on the phrase of Michael Novak: “Sports is, somehow, a religion. You either see or don’t see what the excitement is.” Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), xi. This book is credited by expert Eric Bain-Selbo as the founding text of the field of Religion and Sport: Eric Bain-Selbo and D. Gregory Sapp, eds. *Understanding Sport as a Religious Phenomenon* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 1. The “religious” element of football resembles what Megan Goodwin calls “small-c” christian. See Megan Goodwin, *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 9. I reached this understanding definitively while reading these concluding remarks from Noreen Khawaja: “The more we learn from historians of religion about where our ‘secular’ and ‘modern’ world came from, the more we come to accept that ‘we seculars’ are always in some sense Christian...” from Noreen Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 241.

It is easy to speak at length about the value of football. Coaches, players, politicians, and preachers advocate in the public arena for the “positive benefits” of the sport for the young men of America. Football secured its foothold on the national stage when the 19 casualties from the 1905 collegiate football season prompted the intervention of Teddy Roosevelt and the invention of the forward pass. Today, the sport is as prominent as ever, despite the mounting ethical and scientific evidence against America’s most popular ritual.<sup>10</sup> In this essay, I will interrogate two theological constructions of the positive benefits of football as they developed in two distinct periods in the history of the sport. First, I name and describe the “formative” theology in the founding period of football in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This theology understands football as a social program designed to create virtues in young men. I show how Walter Camp, given the title “the Father of American Football,” used a theological analysis of social conditions shared with the Protestant theologies of Muscular Christianity and the Social Gospel to argue for the benefit of football to society. Second, I show how a “professional” theology of football arose in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century alongside the mass commodification of the sport. Football became a distinctive realm of existence where a man could redeem himself from his personal and spiritual shortcomings. This understanding coincided with a newfound emphasis on radical grace, original sin and the estrangement of man from God in the post-WWII American neoliberal theology of figures like Paul Tillich and Billy Graham. In professional theology, football is siloed away from the political dimension of social existence. Football at its most meaningful is the one place where man has total agency, turning all else into a matter of faith, that is, putting everything but football

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<sup>10</sup> The NFL has 75 of 100 of the top viewed television events of the year in 2021 in the United States. See Michael David Smith, “NFL games were 75 of the 100 most-watched television programs of 2021.” NBC Sports, 8 January 2022. <https://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2022/01/08/nfl-games-were-75-of-the-100-most-watched-television-programs-of-2021/>.



in God's hands. The legendary anecdotes of Coach Vince Lombardi, for whom the NFL's most immortal trophy is named, best articulate the professional theology of football.

This essay is an intervention in the study of religion and football that engages both the field of Religion & Sport and the yet unrecognized field of the theology of football. I consider the experience of the football player with the sensitivity of a former practitioner, and the critical theological eye of a white American Jew. In surveying the literature on football, I find that recent critical studies of the sport fail to account for the experiences of the young man that would lead him to put his body through the violence of football.<sup>11</sup> The religious nature of football for its players is different from other sports, and a proper anthropological account of how boys try to become men through football is lacking. It came to my attention only later in the process of writing this thesis that anthropologist Tracie Canada has a forthcoming monograph titled *Tackling the Everyday: Race, Family, and Nation in Big-Time College Football*. This book will provide the essential ethnographic data and address the racial makeup of modern football more adequately than I do in these pages, a much-needed account. Football is all about race, and I believe my theological argument in this paper supports that argument.<sup>12</sup>

The literature on football also fails to account for the role of theology, and not just "religion," within the practice of football.<sup>13</sup> I critique contemporary Christian understandings of

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<sup>11</sup> Studies of football in Religious Studies and the Social Sciences tend to focus on the cultural impact of football fandom on race, class, and gender. See in particular: Gerald R Gens, *For Pride, Profit, and Patriarchy: Football and the Incorporation of American Cultural Values* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000), Nathan Kalman-Lamb, *Game Misconduct: Injury, Fandom, and the Business of Sport* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2018), Thomas P. Oates, *Football and Manliness: An Unauthorized Feminist Account of the NFL* (University of Illinois Press, 2017), and Jaime Schultz, *Moments of Impact: Injury, Racialized Memory, and Reconciliation in College Football* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2016). Most scholars construct football as a civil religion, pulling from the theory of Robert Bellah. See: Robert Neelly Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Racism is accounted for in the theology of the religion of whiteness, per the work of J. Kameron Carter. See: J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Eric Bain-Selbo only goes so far as to conclude that "college football in the South, with all of its faults, nevertheless nourishes the soul." Exactly how football might nourish the soul, or how its participants understand it

the theological significance of football from within my Jewish theological tradition. From my account, the formative and professional theologies have become doctrine in football, and they are normatively white and Constantinian. To that end, in the final section of this essay I consider what the resources of Jewish theology from Buber to Levinas might contribute to beginning to rethink both the positive and negative benefits of football. I wish to recover football as a site of profound critical, theological, and interreligious reflection. Perhaps my discussion here can open avenues for other marginalized theological voices who are invested in football and the people who play it. There are many theologians of football, after all; whether in writing or in sermon, both on and off the field.

### *The Formative Theology of the Founding Fathers of Football*

When I speak about the formative theology of football, I am referring to the idea that through football, men *create* something that was not there before. The fact that football creates something in men is observed over time in the physical stature of the player. When a young boy with undefined muscles begins to play football, he will soon create a noticeable amount of muscle mass. Along with the creation of muscle mass, football is understood as creating virtues in young men. The virtues that football is thought to create have their roots in Protestant theology in the Northeastern United States after the Civil War. The young man uses his

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as nourishing their soul, lies outside the frame of his study, and is unaddressed in the Social Sciences. See, Eric Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South* (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 2009), 239. Robert Higgs maintains that sport and religion are “entirely different categories of human experience.” See, Robert J. Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports & Religion in America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 21 encountered in Eric Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 213. The study of theological meaning in football remains outside of the academy and is almost solely the enterprise of evangelical ministries like the *Fellowship of Christian Athletes* (FCA). Notable exceptions to this include Daniel Grano, *The Eternal Present of Sport: Rethinking Sport and Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press), and the work being done in the field of theology and popular culture, particularly: Juan Floyd-Thomas, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, and Mark Toulouse, *The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2016). The role of FCA in football nationwide is deserving of more study.

“primitive” and “barbaric” instincts to create in himself a character worthy of walking with Christ.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, white Protestant theologians were responding to the perceived moral and physical decay of American Protestantism in what came to be known as the Gilded Age. The theological movement of the Social Gospel, a constructive influence in society at the time, claimed that salvation did not occur only on the personal level with God, but also on the social level.<sup>14</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, the most prominent theologian of the Social Gospel, described the social crisis created through the mass displacements and upheavals of rapid industrialization as a theological problem. The Social Gospel painted the sanctification of social relationships as the final frontier of a progressing humanity. Christians needed a new theology to “bring to pass the kingdom of righteousness...and redeem all social relations.”<sup>15</sup> The body and the social were the last creative sites of God’s providence.

The Social Gospel was not the only attempt to address the social crisis through a theology of the body and the social. Among these other responses was the Muscular Christianity movement, most associated institutionally with the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Muscular Christianity is defined by its most prominent scholar Clifford Putney as “a Christian commitment to health and manliness.” This commitment roots itself in a certain reading of the Gospel that sees the Christian man as only being truly Christian if their body is healthy and “manly.”<sup>16</sup> Instead of social programs fighting injustice, the theological movement

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<sup>14</sup> Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 156. The Social Gospel’s leading theology was Walter Rauschenbusch, who captured the theology of the movement in the following works: Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1907), and Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Ely, *Social Aspects of Christianity and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1889), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11. See also, Steven J. Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*

of Muscular Christianity prescribed Christians a solution to moral decay focused solely on the development of male bodies. Originating in Great Britain, the movement highlighted three benefits of its theology. First, on an individual level it served as a remedy to the perceived failings of the Anglican Church at the time: both the theological atrophy of the body in the Church's emphasis on asceticism and the perceived practice of a feminized decadence in the Church. Second, it socialized young men and had a strong tendency to unite men across differences. Third, it strengthened the British imperial cause and manifest destiny through creating stronger British men.<sup>17</sup>

In America, Muscular Christianity became most prominent for its "notion of using primitive bodies to advance civilized ideas."<sup>18</sup> Muscular Christianity was institutionalized in organizations like the YMCA, but it never attempted to replace the institutions of the Church. The primary tenants of Muscular Christianity became the basis for a theory of development which placed sport and physical activity as a cornerstone of education for white American boys. The sport channeled the "primitive" phase of young men into a concentrated focus on building character. It also important to note that at this stage, football was a game intended only for white men of Anglo-Saxon origin. Indeed, only the white population were given access to this positive understanding of the "primitive" in the construction of civilized persons. Other races and religions were thought of as too inclined to give into their primitive nature. Only the white Christian male had the capacity towards realizing God's vision for humanity.

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(Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), 160. Tony Collins finds that Muscular Christianity was not a determinant for the spread of football rule codes: "Ultimately, the vast majority of footballers just wanted to play a game and codes of rules were merely a means to this end." Tony Collins, *How Football Began: A Global History of How the World's Football Codes Were Born* (Milton: Routledge, 2019), 22. I disagree with Collins' assertion.

<sup>17</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 6.

Viewed through the lens of the social crisis described by the Social Gospel and Muscular Christianity, the theological value of football in its earliest stages is clear. Quickly, football garnered a reputation as a factory of manly virtue in the face of uncertain times. The term “American football” can be traced back to Walter Camp as early as 1886.<sup>19</sup> A. M. Weyand authored the first history of the sport using that name in 1926. In his foreword, Weyand, a former captain of the football team at West Point, constructs a theology of football from the sayings of some of its most distinguished observers at the time:

Many distinguished men have unqualifiedly recognized the great value of football. The great French warrior, Marshal Foch, after attending the Yale-Princeton game in 1921, stated that in his opinion football was an ideal game for young men, because it required excellent discipline, quick thinking, and physical strength. Doctor John Greir Hibben, President of Princeton University, in a speech to Princeton mothers in 1926 called athletics “moral safeguards.” Bishop William Manning’s recent contention that the highest ideals of sport and the ideals of Christianity were not far apart, was rather supported by the opinions of two of the leading coaches. William W. Roper, listed the great football virtues as loyalty, unselfishness, courage and intelligence, and Knute K. Rockne made the laconic statement that “Outside the Church, the best thing we’ve got is good, clean football.”<sup>20</sup>

The value of football, in Weyand’s estimation, is in its capacity to create a white Christian ideal through its performance. Its theological worth was in its moral nature. Within the confines of the game, the virtues of loyalty, unselfishness, courage, and intelligence are allowed to flourish in the young men who can execute the game’s performance. The world of ideals built within the confines of the game outlasts its performance, however. The participant in football creates within the bounds of the game “moral safeguards,” a strength of character, which creates an ideal man akin to the pious Christian. The performance of “good, clean football” is like the Church, bleeding outside its confines of time and space and into the eternal realm of virtue. The

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Camp, “The Game and Laws of American Football.” *Outing* 11 (October, 1886): 68.

<sup>20</sup> A. M. Weyand, *American Football: Its History and Development* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1926), ix.

performance of football puts divine armor upon young men whose bodies already are considered holy.

The Social Gospel and Muscular Christianity clearly influenced the football patriarch Walter Camp (1859-1925).<sup>21</sup> A famous coach and author of many books on the sport of football in its earliest days, Camp is perhaps best known for proposing the rule of the line of scrimmage. This rule ultimately distinguished American football from its cousin Rugby Union in England. Camp often articulated that the goal of American football was not to win, but to cultivate the athletic impulse of young men into some version of the Muscular Christian ideal. Like the line of scrimmage, the creation of character was a line to be crossed through concerted athletic effort. The effort, and not the crossing of the line, was ultimately the benefit of football:

“Nature has provided in the boy’s love of personal physical combat and competition the real suggestion as to how to instill desired habits and character traits. . . . Training means restraint and temperance and ultimate perfect physical condition. Without the game there would be little interest and without the rivalry there would be no training.”<sup>22</sup>

Camp identified the physical impulse of young men as inherent, yet unchanneled without the sport of football. Football is necessary in the creation of “restraint,” “temperance,” and “ultimate perfect physical condition.” The game and its competitive nature are a framework to build such traits. The implication when this statement is put into the context of Muscular Christianity is that young boys who do not channel their physical impulse into a framework of creative acts like football are at risk of coming under the sway of “savage” or “primitive” impulses, which again are highly racialized terms in this context. More important than winning

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<sup>21</sup> On Walter Camp, see: Roger Tamate, *Walter Camp and the Creation of American Football* (Urban, Il.: University of Illinois Press, 2018) and Julie Des Jardins, *Walter Camp: Football and the Modern Man* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Notice, also, the elements of the naturalization of gender in the quote above. Walter Camp, “What Are Athletics Good For?,” *Outing* (December 1913): 266.

the game was the utility of the sport in creating positive traits. Camp often recited lines from an explicitly theological poem by William Makepeace Thackeray that showed winning as secondary to acting as an ideal man should:

Who misses or who wins the prize,  
Go lose or conquer as you can;  
But if you fail or if you rise  
Be each, pray God, a gentleman!<sup>23</sup>

Camp was a public advocate of his philosophy of “gentlemanly” play in football. As the sport grew more popular in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he decried increased spectatorship. He argued that it took away from the ability of the enactment of the game to instill ideal characteristics into its young men.<sup>24</sup> The young men were able to hone the characteristics of godliness in a concentrated performance. A contemporary of Camp, Amos Alonzo Stagg (1862-1965) studied at Yale Divinity School before deciding that he could make more impact on the lives of young men as a coach. Stagg’s roots on the East Coast of the United States, and his prominence as one of the first great figures of college football in the Midwest and West Coast meant that his mark on football was nationwide. He developed a philosophy of coaching that focused on the development of individuals under his watch: “I won’t know how a good a job I did for twenty years. That’s when I’ll see how my boys turned out.” Stagg believed in the ability of the coach to reach the soul of the player, and the coach’s role in creating a theological ideal within his players: “Winning isn’t worthwhile unless one has something finer and nobler behind

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<sup>23</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, “The End of the Play,” in *Ballads* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1855). He also used this poem in one of his weekly columns in *Collier’s Magazine*. See Roger Tamate, *Walter Camp and the Creation of American Football*, 211.

<sup>24</sup> Roger Tamate, *Walter Camp and the Creation of American Football*, 212.

it. When I reach the soul of one of my boys with an idea, or ideal, or vision, then I have done my job as a coach.”<sup>25</sup>

Supporting my argument for formative theology as a primary theological strain in football are two recent Protestant theologies of sport that likewise feature creative potential as sport’s primary contribution to humanity. In *The Fit Shall Inherit the Earth: A Theology of Sport and Fitness*, Erik Dailey, a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and theologian, ultimately concludes that sporting activity should be considered “God-honoring creative endeavors.”<sup>26</sup> The athlete “can take the elements of creation, which in this case is the human body, and lovingly fashion and mold it—or more specifically train it—to do amazing feats.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Lincoln Harvey, an Anglican theologian, proposes that sport is a form of play, and “that when we play – unnecessary but meaningfully – we are living out our deepest identity as unnecessary but meaningful creatures.”<sup>28</sup> Since we as creatures are unnecessary but meaningful, creation through sport is unnecessary but meaningfully involved in “being freely loved into existence in Jesus Christ.”<sup>29</sup> Seen in both these recent theologies of sport and in the language of some foundational figures of football, the idea that playing football “builds character” or “creates men” evolved directly from the idea that we can create ourselves in a Christ-like image.

The formative theology of football that I described above takes a very optimistic view of man. The ability to create righteous men in this formative theology is available to anyone who is willing to do the work. But we know that football is not full of righteous men. Rather, rosters are

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<sup>25</sup> Quotes found in: Robin Lester, *Stagg’s University: The Rise, Decline, and Fall of Big-Time Football at Chicago* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 12. See also David Sumner, *Amos Alonzo Stagg: College Football’s Greatest Pioneer* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Publishers, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Erik W. Dailey, *The Fit Shall Inherit the Earth: A Theology of Sport and Fitness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 158.

<sup>27</sup> Dailey, *The Fit Shall Inherit the Earth*, 159.

<sup>28</sup> Lincoln Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 84.

<sup>29</sup> Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, 83.



filled with complicated and intricate individuals. Sometimes, football does not create good men. Sometimes, the fact that a man plays football is the only redeemable thing about him. The way that he has the dedication and tenacity to sacrifice his body and his time for a team sport, if nothing else, is admirable. In the next section, I will discuss how a “professional theology” came to highlight the redemptive benefits of football in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *The Professional Theology of Vince Lombardi*

If you’re going to play football, you better be ready to get hit in the fucking mouth. If you’re going to be good at football, you’re going to have to like it too. Football is a great equalizer of men. It separates the weak from the strong. Or at least, it used to. “The game has changed,” says the former practitioner at your corner bar, reflecting on his glory days. These days, to a certain demographic, the sport has become a watered-down farce of yellow flags and dancing pansies. To these folks, football in its prime is a profession only for those who bear the violence with a certain honor and pride. Football is a sphere of life in America that remains separated from messy political realities. The separation and sanctification of football occurred in the period of global uncertainty following World War II. Within the space of football could be witnessed the glory and purity of a nation which could do no wrong in its confrontation against the evils of fascism and communism. Football became an American act of faith in an irredeemable world, a profession of courage in the face of an endless void. Football was a path to redemption.

The difference between the creative ability of formative theology and the redemptive quality of professional theology in football may seem very subtle at first glance. While creation adds something that was not there before, redemption transforms something that was already

there into something else; it is self-referential. The formative theology envisions Christ alongside the football player as he creates virtue, but the professional theology sees the athlete as being like-Christ in the moment he is redeemed. Two examples from my high school football experience illuminate this distinction. When I was in high school, the name of one of our star players on the football team was painted on a couple of the lockers in our dingy public school locker-room. When we arrived to practice that day, our head coach hollered at us to “get on the line,” to line up on the field and prepare to run sprints. He warned us that we would run sprints until somebody came forward and claimed responsibility for the defamation of the locker. We all knew that, most likely, the star player himself had written his name. However, he refused to come forward. We continued to run for almost the remainder of the practice, until half the team was bent over panting or puking, and the other half was fuming at the selfishness of one individual to allow such a punishment to continue. But no one would rat him out to the head coach. That was an unspoken rule.

Before this event, the act of profession in professional theology had already taken place. The star player had professed that he was a star and we as a team had professed our loyalty to him. What was an event initiated through an act of selfishness and perpetuated through the male power dynamics of team loyalty became a form of conditioning that benefitted the performance of the team on gameday. Nothing was created through the grueling punishment, but those actions were redeemed in perceived physical value to the team. If that extra amount of conditioning were to be the deciding factor that won us the game the following weekend, then it would be as if the star player were completely absolved of his initial sin. He will continue to be able to strut around and believe that he can do as he wants because he is the star player, a redeemed position. This example was relatively low stakes, but imagine how prevalent professional theology becomes

when millions of dollars are suddenly on the line. Professional theology understands all acts in terms of their use in redeeming the profession.

Every individual moment of athletic performance is a reflection on the initial profession, the stance of the football player. As a junior in high school, I was named captain of the football team over the aforementioned star player. Many on the team thought he should have been captain instead. In our game that year against our crosstown rival, the opposing team put their best player, a defensive lineman with scholarship offers from multiple Division I teams, at the linebacker position and told him to bullrush me every play. In the first half, he put me on the ground on half of the plays, and hit me so hard that I lost my breath on the other half of the plays. In the locker-room at halftime, the head coach singled me out for my poor performance: “You are being bullied out there, *captain*. This dude is making you his bitch, *captain*. When are you going to stop playing like a pussy and start playing like a *captain*?”<sup>30</sup> I was being humiliated by my head coach in front of the entire team, who already doubted my position. In perhaps one of my proudest moments as a player, I performed remarkably better in the second half.<sup>31</sup> I stood my ground, and during one pivotal scoring play, it was my opponent who was on the ground and not me. After the game, my head coach pointed out how I responded to his challenge, and redeemed my position as captain.

My profession as a captain needed to be redeemed through performance. Whether it actually was redeemed or not does not change its potential and need to be redeemed. A highly recruited player out of high school who goes on to have a disappointing collegiate career will

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<sup>30</sup> My emphasis. In including this example, I do not intend to express anger or displeasure. Rather, I believe it is a good example of how professional theology is experienced at the level of the game. I have a great deal of respect for my high school coach and am continually grateful for his presence in my life.

<sup>31</sup> As early as the 1960, Valerie Saiving recognized “pride” as the male theological focus of 20<sup>th</sup> century theology, and for good reason. The stubbornness of the football player remains perhaps his greatest sin. See: Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View.” *The Journal of Religion* 40:2 (1960): 100-112.

leave potential unredeemed. They will never know if football could have given them something more through performance. Redemption occurs at many levels. The actions necessary to be redeemed in the eyes of the team, for instance, are those actions deemed necessary in the pursuit of winning. Winning, I might suggest, is the ultimate source of redemption in the professional theology. I should also note that some players have more access to redemption than others. While in formative theology, all are privy to the ends of football as a builder of character, not all players will win games or perform successfully on the field. Similarly, while winning redeems the entire team, the quarterback in particular is given more opportunities towards redemption, seen literally in the quarterback possessing the most touches of the football. Race, religion, and class are also barriers to accessing redemption on a football field.

The emphasis on redemption in football is paralleled in the development of American theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the days of the Social Gospel, the kingdom of heaven was close at hand in the sanctification of social relationships. There reigned a progressive outlook on the world; all that was needed were organized, Gospel-inspired social programs to bring about God's kingdom. Man's primitive nature was not a detriment to society, but something used to create virtues in young men. After the catastrophic events of World War II and the major questions it raised for Western Christianity, the "savage" element of man no longer seemed like it could be tamed. It became glaringly apparent that even the white Christian male was not free from sin and was all too far from perfection. The Social Gospel was ousted by the Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and Neo-Orthodoxy of Paul Tillich. These theologies had a much more skeptical outlook of human nature, with a newfound emphasis on original sin and the estrangement of God from humanity. Man was in desperate need of redemption.

The existential threat of nuclear war inspired a fresh take on the doctrine of radical grace in a public and ecumenical American theology.<sup>32</sup> Old religious, gendered, and racial divisions were maintained but transformed. Man faced new possibilities for the meaninglessness of existence. The acceptance of God's grace served to affirm the precariousness of nuclear reality and to redeem the individual from amidst this uncertainty. In the face of non-Being, faith was redefined by theologian Paul Tillich as the "courage-to-be."<sup>33</sup> In a similar way, the theology of football shifted to understanding that God vindicated football as an act of faith. The individual commitment necessary to perform football served as an act of redemptive faith. Although football was violent, it was deemed a necessary "lesser evil" which redeemed the manly characteristics of an imperfect American democracy fighting the evils of Communism and Fascism.<sup>34</sup>

It is no accident that Billy Graham often used sports metaphors in his sermons, and became famous for filling football stadiums with his preaching. The sort of radical embrace of Jesus he called for was easily reflected in the radical pursuit of athletic prowess seen in American athletics. The totality of these commitments are their saving grace; the statement of the profession of football is to enter a covenant. The NFL coach who most exemplified this historical shift in the theology of American football was Coach Vince Lombardi (1913-1970).<sup>35</sup> The theology Lombardi, an Italian Catholic, espoused was indicative of ecumenical deal between

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<sup>32</sup> Its most popular public proponent being Billy Graham. See: Michael G. Long, ed. *The Legacy of Billy Graham: Critical Reflections on America's Greatest Evangelist* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> See Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> As influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr's most important works about the immorality of groups of people and the "lesser-evil" of democracy. See: Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1932), and Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence* (New York, C. Scribner's Sons, 1944).

<sup>35</sup> On Vince Lombardi, see: Michael O'Brien, *Vince: A Personal Biography of Vince Lombardi* (New York: Morrow, 1987).

American Protestants, Catholics, and Jews along white racial lines in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>36</sup>

Football was consolidated as a truly “American” and not solely Protestant game. The man often considered the greatest football coach of all time, was notorious for his voracious pursuit of winning. Memorable quotes include: “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing,” and “show me a good loser, and I’ll show you a loser.” These are still tossed around as legendary anecdotes wherever the game is played. He treated his players according to their inherently sinful nature; “Lombardi treated us all the same, like dogs,” remarked one of Lombardi’s former player, Defensive Tackle Henry Jordan. In his explicit theological claims, Lombardi describes the role of faith from a graceful and transcendent God in becoming a better football player:

When we place our dependence on God, we are unencumbered, and we have no worry. In fact, we may even be reckless, insofar as our part in the production is concerned. This confidence, this sureness of action, is both contagious and an aid to the perfect action. The rest is in the hands of God – and this is the same God, gentlemen, who has won all His battles up to now.<sup>37</sup>

The conscious profession of faith relieves the believer of existential dread and empowers them to act according to their own will in “the hands of God.” The recklessness, the unapologetic commitment to God in the pursuit of Him, is an instinct towards perfection in the name of a transcendent God. Vince Lombardi’s football redeems its players through the discipline of sacrificing one’s body to the performance of football. If the body is injured, then it is done so in

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<sup>36</sup> Perhaps most famously theorized in Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960). For Herberg’s relationship to Christianity and particularly Reinhold Niebuhr see Healan K. Gaston, “The Cold War Romance of Religious Authenticity: Will Herberg, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Rise of the New Right.” *The Journal of American History* 99:4 (2013): 1133-58. For more on Jews and whiteness in America see Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> As encountered in Vince Lombardi, *What It Takes to Be Number 1: Vince Lombardi on Leadership* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 57. The theology in this quote is reminiscent of Tillich and even Billy Graham. Lombardi was not the only Catholic to come under the sway of “neo-Orthodox” theological views. The influence of Tillich and Niebuhr was widespread among Catholic conservatives, including Michael Novak, author of the *The Joy of Sports*. Novak devotes an entire chapter to Niebuhr’s political realism in his most important work: Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1982). See also Reuben Hoetmer, “Michael Novak’s Alternate Route: Political Realism in The Joy of Sports.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 45:1 (2018): 22-36.

the name of God, “who has won all His battles up to now.” The players are not held accountable for their actions since their actions are already accounted for by God; their actions are the realization of the potential for redemption initiated in their commitment to the profession of the game. The lack of accountability and emphasis on winning went hand in hand with the mass commercialization of the sport that occurred rapidly in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>38</sup> More winning meant more redemption, and also more money.

Though it is easy to critique Lombardi from the extremity of his statements on winning, his personal character and conduct cannot be abstracted from his fiery words. Michael Novak defends Lombardi on three counts: first, that his rhetoric does not translate well from the “practice field” to the “media room,” second, that he is a teacher and a coach who is required to provide unity to the team, and third, the style of rhetoric must be placed into context with his class, ethnicity, and cultural upbringing.<sup>39</sup> Lombardi was also loved and respected by the majority of his players. He puts further conditions on Lombardi’s assertion that playing football is only about winning:

“Winning is the only thing” does not mean “win at all costs, by any means, fair or foul.” Nor does it mean that losing is without dignity. Every team, even the Green Bay Packers at their best, loses sometimes. It means that losing is, in the end, one’s own responsibility. One’s own fault. It means that there are no excuses. “Winning is the only” is capable of sinister interpretations. But it is also capable of expressing the highest human cravings for perfection.<sup>40</sup>

The professional theology of football is about achieving a sense of completeness in the professional act, and when that unity is not achieved, it is not the fault of anyone else but the

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<sup>38</sup> There are many profitable studies on the intersection between football, capitalism and colonialism. See in particular: Fa’anofa Lisaclair Uperesa, “Seeking New Fields of Labor: Football and Colonial Political Economies in American Samoa,” in *Formations of United States Colonialism* (New York: Duke University Press, 2020): 207-232, Nathan Kalman-Lamb, “Athletic Labor and Social Reproduction.” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 43:6 (2019): 515-530, and Kalman-Lamb, “Imagined Communities of Fandom: Sport, Spectatorship, Meaning, and Alienation in Late Capitalism.” *Sport in Society* 24:6 (2021): 922-936.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports*, 229.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports*, 230-231.

individual that professes. Redemption serves to mark the individual as further prepared for salvation. Once a person has sufficiently redeemed their profession, then they are saved, immortalized, and glorified, at least in the discrete space of the game. In football, the ultimate redemptive function is enshrinement in the various “Halls of Fame” at different levels of the game. Over the course of their careers, hall of fame players earned enough redemptive merit to guarantee eternal life in these ritualized and hallowed halls.

Ideas about redemption in the performance of sport remain popular among Protestant theologians of sport today. In *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, Baptist minister and theologian Robert Ellis argues with Paul Tillich that sport is a domain of culture that cultivates “depth” experiences that deserve to be explored “behind” their perceived meaning.<sup>41</sup> Drawing further on C. S. Lewis, Ellis maintains that sport is theological in that it can lead to a redemptive conversion experience in Christ, although Ellis stipulates that: “some of the more problematic aspects of sport may form its participants in undesirable ways, and a distorted competitiveness is as likely to lead away from as toward God.”<sup>42</sup> Sport, if treated properly as an “antipasto” to genuine worship, can reveal the path towards redemption. For Ellis, football is a redemptive means towards a salvific end, and can be a productive site of spiritual growth where “imitation may pass into initiation” of a Christ-like individual.<sup>43</sup> The “distorted” and “problematic aspects” of sport go unaddressed.

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 285, drawing on Paul Tillich’s definition of “depth” and “behind.” See: Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1970), and Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, vol. I* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1953), 45.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Ellis, *The Games People Play*, 290. See also: C. S. Lewis, “Culture and Christianity,” in *C.S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 40.

<sup>43</sup> I note that C. S. Lewis’ phrasing here of “imitation into initiation” is strikingly similar to Franz Rosenzweig’s understanding in his essay “The Builders: Concerning the Law” of turning Law [*gesetz*] into commandment [*gebot*], moving in relation to the Law from “I must,” to “I can.” See: Franz Rosenzweig, “The Builders: Concerning the Law” in *On Jewish Learning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), 85-86.



The emphasis on individual accountability in Lombardi's professional theology explains why systemic critiques of violence within the ranks of football are dismissed in favor of rhetoric that disparages "quitters." According to Dr. Baugh, instances of players proactively leaving the game due to health concerns are exceedingly rare. The internal pressure to "tough it out," to play through the pain, and the glory that waits at the other end is more appealing to these young men. The practice of football is more important to them than the well-being of the individual, who would be a "better" individual in the redemptive sphere of football. The quitter is violently expelled from the sport, from the brotherhood, from the claim to a certain degree of manhood. Violence occurs whether you play football or not, but in football, at least the violence is meaningful.

The violence is meaningful. This much I know to be true about football. As I have argued, the violence of football is thought to be beneficial to young men because the violence is *formative* and *professional*, and that these constructions are theological in origin. We see in our current moment that these theologies are no longer tenable to understand what football gives to young men.<sup>44</sup> Already on the public stage we see critical and prophetic theologies challenging football dogma. Most prominent among these interventions is the prophetic work of Colin Kaepernick. In beginning to rethink the theology of football, I consider in the next section the theological shortcomings of the two claims I describe above using the thought of Emil Fackenheim's critique of humanism. I suggest in their place that we see the benefit of football to man more simply as an arbiter of deep and complicated relationships. I briefly discuss how

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<sup>44</sup> I use the word "give" here to evoke the language of the modern study of theological phenomenology, which tries to understand the irreducible event of revelation in terms of its ultimate "gift." See Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Martin Buber's *I-Thou* and Emmanuel Levinas' conception of encounter with the other as "trauma" might open alternative avenues for a theology of football.

*Towards a Critical Theology of Football: The Relational Turn*

A major problem for the formative and professional theologies I describe above is the presence of God. The popularity of these approaches to football is in part due to their assumption of a transcendent, ontological God that makes no immediate demands on most aspects of human experience. These theologies do not take seriously a moment of immanent revelation of God's presence in the performance of football. Notably, Jeffrey Scholes has shown that this normative overly-transcendental understanding of God in football is widespread and racially motivated, to the point that Black voices in the NFL employing an immanent theology are silenced.<sup>45</sup>

In his article "Self-Realization and the Search for God," Emil Fackenheim critiques the formative and professional paths towards a unity in existence that are commonly found in modern humanist thinking. The formative path, which Fackenheim calls the idealist path, seeks to achieve self-realization through the creation of an ideal self. The professional, or pragmatist path seeks to achieve self-realization through a full command of human living, both physical and spiritual. Underlying both notions is the idea that "self-realization" can be accomplished through actions initiated through the self. Yet, to create an ideal self, one must have a preformed notion of what an "ideal" is, and that preformed notion will ultimately be a flawed human construction.

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<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Scholes, "Pray the White Way," 470. Tim Tebow is typical of the sort of theological expression celebrated in the NFL media. Critical literature discusses the impact of Tim Tebow and its relationship to religion and white supremacy in football viewership. See: Andrew Park and Nick J. Watson, "Sport, Celebrity and Religion: Christianity, Morality and the Tebow Phenomenon." *Studies in World Christianity* 21:3 (2015): 223-238. Matthew G. Hawzen and Joshua I. Newman, "The Gospel According to Tim Tebow: Sporting Celebrity, Whiteness, and the Cultural Politics of Christian Fundamentalism in America." *Sociology of Sport Journal* (2017) vol. 34 (1): 12-24.

The existence of such an ideal does not require “the guidance or mercy of an existing God.”<sup>46</sup> Man’s own will to a self-fashioned ideal becomes the unqualified measure of a holy person. His metaphysical lust for power may be misinterpreted as a mere urge for security, his desire to create in himself ideal character traits becomes unleashed as a “mystic yearning for eternal glory gained through terror and destruction.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, if pragmatic action and care for one’s spiritual and physical condition is the primary means towards self-realization, then it precludes the possibility of an eternal obligation outside of oneself. Fackenheim describes pragmatic action in terms of health:

Health, with all its happy implications, seems to be merely what makes him fit to face the obligation. At times, it even seems necessary to sacrifice health in the service of ultimate responsibility. Health comes to seem something like an ultimate criterion only when sickness renders him unable to be genuinely responsible.<sup>48</sup>

If health becomes the ultimate concern of man’s life, then nothing stops him from the all-out pursuit of human health, unleashing the “blond beast” of eugenic thinking, “set free for breaking the fetters of morality.”<sup>49</sup> Fackenheim’s argument against the idealistic and pragmatic paths towards self-realization also holds against the primary theological benefit of football being placed on formative creation or professional redemption. If creation is the ultimate value of football, then what is it exactly that we are supposed to create? What happens to me if I play football? There is a huge discrepancy between the scientific reality of what football creates and what football is said to create. Violence goes unacknowledged, or is glorified. Likewise, if redemption is the ultimate purpose of football, then football risks becoming an all-out pursuit of

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<sup>46</sup> Emil Fackenheim, “Self-Realization and the Search for God: A Critique of Modern Humanism and a Defense of Jewish Supernaturalism” in *Quest for Past and Future: Essays in Jewish Theology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 30.

<sup>47</sup> Emil Fackenheim, “Self-Realization and the Search for God,” 31.

<sup>48</sup> Emil Fackenheim, “Self-Realization and the Search for God,” 30.

<sup>49</sup> Emil Fackenheim, “Self-Realization and the Search for God,” 31.

redemption. Football becomes set apart as sacred from other realms of existence with which football is inextricably intertwined.<sup>50</sup> Thus arises the danger from which Novak attempted to rescue Lombardi, that the pursuit of winning may result in the collapse of morality outside the borders of the self, like it did in Nazi Germany. Football players that commit acts of violence off the field are redeemed by their violent acts on the field, and are allowed to continue through life without accountability for their actions. More than once, I had teammates who volunteered with me to provide sexual violence prevention trainings to younger football players, only to hear from someone later that they had committed acts of sexual violence themselves. They thought that no harm had been done, and that their role as a football player empowered them to try and solve an issue they repeatedly created.

The formative and professional theologies and their emphasis on creation and redemption in football do not ultimately capture the irreducible theological benefit of football. One can see when a man creates muscles or builds resiliency, and one can demonstrate how the successful performance of the captain on the field redeems his position as captain. What comes prior to these observable features is the primary subject of theological reflection: the relational encounter, the confrontation of a subject with other subjects, with themselves, and with God. I can say now that my relationships with my teammates and coaches may be the only positive benefit of football for me in the long run.

There are numerous Jewish theologians who detail the presence of an immanent God in all relationships, but none captures this idea more clearly than Martin Buber in his work *I and Thou*. The *I-Thou* encounter is the direct confrontation between beings, before the onset of logical human perception. We cannot fully capture the revelation of the *I-Thou* encounter in

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<sup>50</sup> Non-masculine folks are the ones most affected by this separation.

words because to describe it would be to immediately move it into the realm of the *I-It*, the discernible realm of human knowledge. The more descriptive human language becomes of the *I-Thou* phenomenon, the further our understanding is plunged into the realm of the *I-It*. That is why Buber finds that “primitive” language is more capable of capturing the force of the *I-Thou* encounter than the scrupulous detail of modern language. The memory of the *I-Thou* encounter is impressed onto the languages and stories of people further from the labyrinth of logical deduction:

The “world-image” of primitive man is magical not because human magical power is set in the midst of it but because this human power is only a particular variety of the general magic power from which all effective action is derived. Causality in his world-image is no unbroken sequence but an ever new flashing forth of power and moving out towards its production; it is a volcanic movement without continuity.<sup>51</sup>

In comparing the football player to Buber’s “primitive man,” the sport of football becomes full of those magical and volcanic moments that blast out of the realm of the *I-Thou* to leave an impression of the eternal other upon the self. This form of revelation is only legible within the “world-image” of the game of football where the mark of revelation is continually preserved. Shared physical and emotional encounters facilitated through the “world-image” of football both creates a communal understanding of language and experience that is shared and passed along, while also redeeming individuals within the “world-image,” and establishing football as a continual site of revelation.

While Buber’s deployment of the word “primitive” is problematic, it is helpful in the project of constructing a relational theology of football to recover and better understand the “primitive” element of football, namely its raw and unmitigated violence. To make such a simple shift in the theological valuation of football allows the scholar and theologian to consider more

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<sup>51</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 20-21.

dynamically the relationship between the football player and violence without losing sight of the meaning of the sport to the player. For Emmanuel Levinas, violence is the lack of the words to describe a phenomenon. More specifically, Levinas designates this violence as a trauma, an impression made upon the self that resists adequate representation.<sup>52</sup> Trauma occurs at every encounter with the other. Yet it is me who is traumatized upon this encounter, and not the other. Coming into an *I-Thou* relationship with the other destroys the image I previously had of them and the image I previously had of myself.<sup>53</sup> Not only is violence at the center of football, it is at the center of all relationships. Football can be seen as giving embodied expression to the trauma that by definition is logically undefinable. It materializes a pattern of relationships that “flash forward” the primitive violent encounter of being. It can give deep meaning to the violence young men experience at such high rates. The performance of football may be the closest a young man gets in expressing in concrete terms their own inexpressible trauma in relation. Further explorations into the bearings of the work of Levinas on football might explore the ramifications of his definition of the ethical for the violence of football, as well as his distinction between political and traumatic violence.

Lastly, a relational theology of football does not necessarily seek to find unity in the experience. While the theologies of formation and profession identify clear through-lines in the experience of football that renders the whole experience meaningful, a relational theology assumes that everything beyond the initial theological encounter is subject to the distorted and culturally-conditioned world of the *I-It*. The relational approach does not exclude the structural

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<sup>52</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 116.

<sup>53</sup> Ruud Welten, “In the Beginning was Violence: Emmanuel Levinas on Religion and Violence.” *Continental Philosophy Review* 53:3 (2020): 358, and Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity; an Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.

ambivalence towards the violence of football that arises in the experience of the player and its affect at the intersections of multiple cultural domains.<sup>54</sup> We must hold the structures of football accountable to their perpetuation of harm. The only element of football that I have claimed as sacred is its capacity for deep relationships; all else must remain the territory of constant scrutiny.

### *Conclusion*

I have argued that two primary approaches to understanding the positive benefits of football developed over the history of the game. I have shown how formative theology came first in the founding era of football and in its white Protestant context. Professional theology came later in the conditions of post-WWII America. Today, elements of both theologies are active in football witnessed on the national stage and experienced at the local level. I argued from the lens of Jewish theology that the relational element of football should be considered the true site of theological reflection within football, and that the formative and professional dimensions highlighted in the theology of football spring from this initial moment of encounter.

I mean for the reinterpretation of football's theology to raise questions about potential new avenues of practice and performance. Is there a way to play football that minimizes harm? What are the possibilities of American football if the emphasis is no longer on redemption, winning, or the creation of Protestant virtue? What if people of faith within football centered relationships as their ultimate concern? What if football's primary purpose was to create relationships with teammates, with coaches, with fans, and with one's own body? What if the

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<sup>54</sup> The frameworks of structural ambivalence and intersectionality would be fruitfully applied to the study of football and theology. See: Jakeet Singh, "Religious Agency and the Limits of Intersectionality." *Hypatia* 30:4 (2015): 657-74, and Jennifer Roebuck Bulanda, "Doing Family, Doing Gender, Doing Religion: Structured Ambivalence and the Religion-Family Connection." *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 3:3 (2011): 179-97.

practice of the sport was concerned more with the production of healthy and sustainable relationships than with its own perpetuation or self-perfection? How can football challenge its legacy of white supremacy and patriarchy while maintaining the elements of the sport that have given so much to myself and others like me? Can such a thing be done? Could football be a covenantal community with teammates that sought genuine relationships between all sorts of people without omitting their differences and particularities? I believe that the transformation of American football will be tightly bound up with the transformation of faith in this country. Football enacts constructions of masculinity, religion, and race throughout the country, while holding influence in the realms of politics, culture, and education. The game has a knack for bringing people together from a diversity of backgrounds in a way that mainline religions have failed to do in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We need new ways to understand and connect with men who work tirelessly at the performance of a sport that so many love, but at the same time, causes so much harm.



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