

A CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEW OF THE ATHLETE AS GOD'S IMAGE

BEARER

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Introduction

What is it to be a human being? From a Christian anthropological perspective, Ezigbo (2015) contended, “questions about human origins, identity, significance, and purpose cannot be successfully answered in isolation from the concept of a creator – God” (p. 2). To this end, Genesis 1:26 can be considered as the *locus classicus* of Christian personhood and identity. The verse introduces the reader to the term “the image of God” (*imago Dei*, Latin). The phrase grounds our relationship with the Creator. In his classic work entitled *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) expressed that the *imago Dei* creates an instinct in humankind to worship God. He wrote,

And man desires to praise you, for he is a part of your creation ... You prompted him, that he should delight to praise you, for you have made us for yourself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you. (Outler & Vessey, 2007, p. 3)

Contextually speaking, Augustine’s reflections express that the personhood and purpose of a Christian athlete are intimately connected to their capacity to know God and the meaning of their divine design.

The work of New Testament scholar N. T. Wright (2011) also is important in forming a biblically sound perspective on the Apostle Paul’s anthropological views. Wright drew attention to the overlapping, multifaceted, and richly integrated makeup of human beings, which are

already present in the Old Testament's use of the Hebrew word *nephesh*. He disbanded the age-old debate about whether Paul's anthropology was bipartite or tripartite by stating:

...three terms commonly used interchangeably to refer to non-material element(s) within dualist anthropology – mind, soul, and spirit (*nous*, *psyche*, and *pneuma*), are emphatically not interchangeable. Paul urges the Romans to be transformed by the renewal of the *mind*, not the soul or spirit. Jesus warns against gaining the whole world and forfeiting the *psyche*, not mind or spirit. (Wright, 2011)

This richly integrated unity is significant for forming a biblical understanding of the identity of a Christian athlete, namely because the athlete's entire personhood is involved in the contest. Humanism may advocate an athlete's personhood is summed up in a body-mind dualism, but from a theological standpoint an athlete's identity is that "their feeling, thinking, attitudes and behavior, should be grounded in, and flow from, the heart of a loving Father God" (Watson, 2011, p. 109). Here, the Christian understanding of identity in Christ is an important component for understanding how the Christian athlete relates to competition (Romans 8:1-3; 2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV). Biblically speaking, the redemptive work of Christ eliminates the condemnation caused by sin and positions the Christian athlete to express and experience their identity in Christ in the athletic context. Furthermore, Watson (2011) was correct in affirming a biblical and ultimately Jewish anthropology of athletic identity. He believed "...mind, body and spirit are viewed as one (*nephesh*) – supporting the notion that our experience of suffering, loss, joy, and sorrow is valid in all of life's diverse situations and messiness" (p. 116).

The *imago Dei* sets humankind apart from the rest of creation but does not imply humankind is equal with God. God's omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence are qualities that belong to God alone. Ezigbo (2015) explained that "When Christians confess that human

beings are made in the ‘image of God,’ they express humanity’s dependence upon God for their existence, dignity, and meaning” (p. 5). From a Christian anthropological perspective, identity and worth are not contingent on national ranking, a win-loss record, or any other accolades the athletic context has provided. Rather, to fully understand what it means to be a Christian athlete entails we frame our existence in terms of a loving relationship with the loving Creator.

In his classic work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin (1509-1564) framed the comprehensive nature of the *imago Dei*:

...the likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man’s nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures . . . And although the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some spark did not glow. (McNeil & Battles, 1960, p. 188)

Some modern theologians (McGrath, 2012; Thorsen, 2008; Wenham, 1987; Willard, 1991) have attributed the term “image of God” to include certain immaterial qualities that distinguish humankind from the rest of creation. These attributes include creativity, speech, self-determination, the capacity to reason and make sense of the world, as well as the moral and spiritual faculties that humans share with their Creator. Furthermore, Willard (1991) made an important observation about spirituality, that can be conceptualized in terms of the centrality of spirituality in sport, when he stated that “the physical human frame as created was designed for interaction with the spiritual realm and that this interaction can be resumed at the initiative of God” (p. 77). From this perspective, without engaging the spiritual dimension of what it means to be human, the Christian athlete faces an identity crisis.

Traditionally, there are four major theological interpretations of the *imago Dei*: the structural view, the functional view, the relational view, and the Christological view (Erickson, 2013; Ezigbo, 2015; Thorsen, 2008). Each is important for developing a fuller understanding of the Christian athlete as God’s image-bearer.

Structural View of the Imago Dei

The structural view, also referred to as the constitutive view, of the image of God asserts that “the psychological, rational, volitional, and spiritual qualities in people” (Thorsen, 2008, p. 131) constitute the substance of what it means to be made in the image of God. Further, this understanding of the *imago Dei* “refers to what a human being *is* and not what a human being *does*” (Erickson, 2013, p. 532). The Apostle Paul contextualized this view of Christian personhood in his sermon to the Greek philosopher at the Areopagus. He stated, “For in him [God] we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28, NIV). The scripture confirms that the Christian worldview promotes the idea that identity flows from *being* into every other aspect of life. This distinction is paramount for the Christian athlete because competition and athletic competence—what the athlete *does*—are likely to become the most formative pillars of an athlete’s identity. However, from a structural understanding of the *imago Dei*, the personhood of a Christian athlete flows first from being created by a loving God into the various aspects of competition and sport.

With regard to identity and competition in sport, former Olympic yachtsman Stuart H. Walker made a timeless observation when examining issues related to athletic identity. He stated, “Most competitors think of themselves as being primarily motivated to develop, demonstrate, and enjoy competence... Winning is the object of the game, so competitors attempt to win...and they feel disappointed, distressed when they fail to do so” (Walker, 1986, p. 4). In

other words, competition and winning can easily become the central pillars in the formation of the athlete's self-worth and personhood. Conversely, the Christian athlete, on the other hand, is likely to avoid this pitfall because their understanding of personhood is shaped not by winning but by being made in the *imago Dei*.

Similarly, Watson (2011) observed that in the event an athlete is “unable to play for whatever reason, [it] can have catastrophic consequences for the emotional and psychological balance of an individual; that is, their identity” (p. 114). Again, the structural view of the *imago Dei* forms a safeguard for the Christian athlete because their identity is first and foremost tied to an understanding that they are “God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10, NIV). Identity for the Christian athlete flows from being God's creation to doing sports. This is the structural view of the *imago Dei*.

Functional View of the Imago Dei

The functional view, also called the operative view, asserts “people reflect the likeness of God by what they do rather than by who they are in their structural makeup” (Thorsen, 2008, p. 131). Theologically speaking, this understanding of the *imago Dei* emphasizes the functional roles of dominion and stewardship in creation. In the creation narrative, God gives authority to humankind over the rest of creation and commissions them by saying, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8:5-8, NIV). Here the word *subdue* should not be understood as a violent overtaking but, rather, a divine call for human beings to respect, protect, and act responsibly in creation. Contextually speaking, the functional view denotes that the Christian athlete embraces the God-given commission to act morally in the larger context of creation as a whole - beyond the scope of athletic competition.

At first glance, the functional view of the *imago Dei* may appear incongruent with the athletic context because sports and creation-care are not typically associated with each other, but the impact of sport on the environment is a very real issue. Jarvie (2018) noted for this reason, “students of sport, culture, and society should recognize that many environmental sporting problems and concerns are linked to the generation and distribution of wealth, knowledge, power, patterns of energy consumption, population growth, affluence and poverty” (pp. 252 - 253). With this in mind, the functional view of the *imago Dei* entails that an aspect of the Christian athlete’s identity is worked out as an advocate and ambassador of responsible environmentalism, or creation-care, in the context of sport. Jarvie (2018) went on to note that “The Greening of sport has tended to involve a number of actions designed to reduce the negative impact of sport’s environmental footprint...” (p. 255). For the Christian athlete, the *imago Dei* involves embracing the divine call to responsible stewardship in the way athletic resources and sports equipment are used, sports organization travel schedules are created, and even in the construction of new athletic venues.

Relational View of the Imago Dei

The relational view of the image of God maintains God created humankind for the purpose of relationship with himself and with others. The creation narrative expresses that when God made humankind, he made them male and female (Genesis 1:27, NIV). We are by nature relational beings, and an aspect of our identity is expressed in our interaction with others. “That is to say, to be created in the image of God is to be created a social being; to be fully human the way God intended for us to be is to be a human-in-relationship” (Phillips & Okholm, 2001, p. 74). Human life, according to Willard (1991), cannot flourish the way God intended if we see ourselves as totally independent beings. He explained, “When we are in isolation from God and

not in proper social bonds with others, we cannot rule the earth for good – the idea is simply absurd” (p. 56).

For the Christian athlete, the relational view of the *imago Dei* is worked out in the context of an athlete’s relationship to his or her peers. From a biblical perspective, the proper social bonds of these athletes are intended to be altruistic and centrifugal; outward spiraling, self-giving, and motivated by Christ’s love. Although at times humans are prone to enter into relations because of self-interest, for the Christian athlete to “...truly reflect God’s self-giving life of relationship and communion, humans should live their lives in conformity to the life of Jesus who is the true image of God...” (Ezigbo, 2015, p. 12). The Apostle Paul explained our relationship must be grounded in Christ and we should “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-5, NIV). Therefore, Christian athletes express an aspect of their identity in Christ through selflessness and service, whether in the context of athletic communities or the athlete’s relationships outside the sphere of sports.

Christological View of the Imago Dei

A Christological view of the *imago Dei* rises from the Apostle Paul’s usage of the term in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3, NIV). These passages highlight Jesus as the visible, perfect, and precise expression of the image of God. Renowned theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) held a Christological interpretation of the *imago Dei* with certain presuppositions. Barth (1957) stated:

Christology is not anthropology. We cannot expect, therefore, to find directly in others the humanity of Jesus, and therefore His fellow-humanity, His being for man, and therefore that

final and supreme determination, the image of God. Jesus is man for His fellows, and therefore the image of God, in a way which others cannot even approach, just as they cannot be for God in the sense that He is... There can be no repetition of this in anthropology. (p. 222)

Instead, anthropology must be based on Christology; the key to Barth's Christocentric view of the *imago Dei* is God's gracious initiation of a covenant relationship in Jesus (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-39; Hebrews 8:6-13, NIV). Ezigbo (2015) explained that "by participating in the life of Jesus Christ and by living a life that is governed by the life of Jesus, human beings can gradually discover what it is to be God's image bearer" (p.

13). Contextually speaking for the Christian athlete, Jesus is the central figure for knowing God, as well as the primary axis for understanding what the *imago Dei* entails. Issues pertaining to identity, personhood, and purpose are, for these individuals directly related to the centrality of Christ in the life of the athlete.

Conclusion

In conclusion, two central ideas are important to emphasize in the discussion on a Christian athlete's identity. First, while a "Platonist-Cartesian mind-body dualism [is] entrenched in Western thought..." (Watson, 2011, p. 110), it is not congruent with the biblical understanding of what it means to be human. Even though we tend to think in pairs—body and mind, good and evil, hot and cold, right and wrong, winning and losing—the Christian understanding of the *imago Dei* suggests that the makeup of humans is far more robust. Deconstructing this dualistic philosophy, especially as it relates to the identity of a Christian athlete, requires a theological approach to what it means to be human. The opening pages of the creation narrative form the basis of a Christian understanding of personhood in that the Creator "breathed into [man's] nostril the breath of life, and the man became a living being"

(Genesis 2:7, NIV). This act implies there is more to being human than a body-mind duality. Rather human beings are multifaceted and richly integrated beings who possess the divine “breath of life.” The Early Church Fathers related this creation act to the origins of the human soul. Tertullian, the second-century theologian, said, “The soul has its origin in the breath of God and did not come from matter” (Louth, 2001, p. 50). Chrysostom, the fifth-century church father, also explained that “the inbreathing communicated to the one created out of the earth the power of life, and thus the nature of the souls was formed” (p. 50). The implication is that a discussion on the identity of a Christian athlete must not be limited to a body-mind dualism but must take a more integrated approach for understanding the whole person as made in the *imago Dei* (1 Thessalonians 5:23, NIV).

Second, Christian selfhood or identity is not defined in terms of self-actualization. It is instead defined by the culminating work of Jesus’ death and resurrection. From a biblical perspective, in surrendering their life to Christ, a Christian does not lose their true self but, rather they find their truest version of themselves in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV). Therefore, the Christian athlete’s identity is not based on winning or losing; it is not based on a coach’s approval or the athlete’s national ranking. The athlete’s identity is based on the reality that “...if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV). From a biblical standpoint, while the integrity of our original design was compromised by sin, the redemptive work of Christ restores our identity (Genesis 3:1-24, NIV). C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) stated it well:

The more we get what we now call “ourselves” out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become . . . It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up

to His Personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own. (Lewis, 1952, pp. 225–226)

Contextually, for the Christian athlete their sport is not their identity; but rather, the sport is a context in which the athlete's identity in Christ can be worked out. Watson (2011) noted that athletes who are not grounded in Christ may develop a sport-is-life mindset and “to lose, or be unable to play for whatever the reason, can have catastrophic consequences for the emotional and psychological balance of an individual that is, their identity” (pp. 113 – 114).

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