

A Christian Ethic for Coaches

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Coaching is a calling and ministry. At least for many in the Christian tradition, that's true. Be they little-league coaches, birthing coaches, or executive coaches, coaches often view their work as a sacred vocation. While in seminary, I moonlighted as a speech and debate coach at a state university. I quickly discovered that my so-called secular work transformed lives as surely as youth ministry in the local parish. Whether it occurs in the context of the church or the public sphere, the practice of coaching invites sacramental moments of transformation by grace.

What follows is my attempt to think theologically about coaching in the vocabulary of the Christian tradition. Many coaches, myself included, may possess excellence know-how, but spend comparatively little time reflecting on the "know-why" of day-to-day decisions (Gerdes 4). An orienting philosophy of coaching is certainly important, and I wonder how my faith ought to inform the practice of coaching.

Coaching is an increasingly popular approach to Christian ministry (Hawkins 292-93). Reflecting the explosion of interest in life coaches in the corporate sphere,¹ Christian coaches now offer church leaders a unique combination of consulting and spiritual direction. At first I hoped to articulate an ethic that would speak to all kinds of coaching, from the life coach to the basketball coach. All kinds of coaching, after all, share a common root. The coach, like the horse-drawn vehicle from which the word takes its name, helps people move from point A to point B. Despite the appeal of a universal ethic for coaches, we can name several different kinds of coaching relationships with unique qualities. Life coaches, for example, distinguish their work from mentoring or consulting in this way: the mentor or the consultant holds expertise and provides training; the life coach presumes that the expertise already resides in the person being coached. The life coach is a perceptive guide equipped with good questions who has, nonetheless, not traveled this way before (Creswell 15). In contrast, consider the words of one long-time speech and debate coach. I asked why he had stayed in the activity for so many years. He replied simply, "It's a good way to teach."² Teaching, however student-centered, presumes imparting knowledge and skill. (That said, all coaches may find themselves occasio-

nally thrust into the role of life coach with their students – a sacred responsibility that we will return to later.) Two more divisions among coaches make a difference for thinking theologically about ethical obligations. The first is that some coaches prepare people for competition, and competition raises a special set of ethical questions. The second is that some coaches work primarily with youth or young adults.³ This Christian ethic for coaches will address coaches as teachers of specialized knowledge and skill who work with young adults and prepare them for competition. Though I have in mind the community of inter-collegiate speech and debate coaches, the perspective sketched here should speak equally well to the coach of a high-school volley ball team or the coach of a junior high chess club.

Coaches are managers and motivators, mentors and trainers, supervisors and strategists – not to mention janitors and secretaries. My conviction is that the relationship between a coach and a student is an opportunity for the coach to participate in God's work of grace, transforming the lives of students.⁴ The job is full of ethical obligations. Like it or not, the coach is a role model. Nearly everything the coach does, verbally or nonverbally, teaches something (Warren). Moreover, as the team's symbolic head, the coach frames the context for ethical decision making. Students will follow the coach's lead (at least as often as not), and so we who coach ought to know not only where we are going, but why.

This Christian ethic for coaches will not provide an extended list of do's and don'ts, nor carve out simple rules to govern behavior. Rather, I provide an orienting framework that grounds a few key priorities for coaches in the Christian tradition. My hope is to encourage prayerful reflection on the practice of coaching. As Karl Barth writes, ethical theory is not meant to provide a program for life, or even principles to be put into practice.... but to remind us of our encounter with God, whose light may illuminate our actions (*The Humanity of God* 86). While I have

¹ Fortune magazine has called coaching "the hottest thing in management" today (Morris).

² For those who are wondering, the coach is Mark Hickman of West Chester University.

³ In inter-collegiate activities, non-traditional students may well surpass their coaches in age and maturity. Moreover, we should not assume that coaches of traditional age college students function *in loco parentis*. In the 1960's student activists fought hard to win the right to be recognized as adults. Nevertheless, coaches very often serve as mentors for 18-21 year old students. For a discussion of the coach as an "adult guarantor," see LaMaster.

⁴ I will refer to the persons being coached throughout as students rather than "players," as this is the convention in intercollegiate speech and debate. I also prefer the term student to "competitor" for the former term's emphasis on education.

just set aside a deontological tact, we might productively treat any number of Christian ethics: an ethic that springs from natural law or an ethic that values casuistry; an ethic grounded in narrative, feminist, or liberation theology; a virtue ethics or a utilitarian ethics; a central theme of servant leadership, justice and peace, or the kin(g)dom community—the options are plentiful.

Agape love is selfless love. For Christians, it is the love of God for the world, the love revealed in Christ, and the love to which we are called. I have chosen agape love as an ethical framework for the simple reason that I believe it is a perspective that already undergirds the work of many coaches. Coaching is a labor of love, often selfless and self-sacrificing love. Moreover, love is a shorthand mark for the message and the demands of the gospel – and one with widespread, intuitive appeal. As Anders Nygren argued, agape is “the Christian fundamental motif *par excellence*” (48).

In the pages that follow, I first briefly review the tradition of agape love in Christian ethics and outline a perspective tailored to speak to the obligations of a coach. I then discuss three responsibilities of a coach in relation to agape love: honoring boundaries in the coach-student relationship, communicating unconditional acceptance of students in the context of competition, and coaching the whole person, that is, dealing with those times when the coach who prepares students for competition is enlisted as a “life coach.”

Agape Love

Agape love is self-less, all-giving love – and central to the Christian worldview. To begin, God creates the world out of love. The doctrine of creation *ex-nihilo* means that God did not have to make this world. Before the dawn of creation, God is the center of all. In the act of creation, God limits God’s self by entering into a relationship with the world. All of creation is a gift offered in freedom, an act of agape (Allen 42-45).

The life, death, and resurrection of Christ all reflect God’s love for the world. The doctrine of the incarnation, for example, points to the self-less love of God. In order to communicate the gospel of love, God humbles God’s self. Paul reflects on that love as motive for ethics in Philippians.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and

became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:3-8)

The moral lesson Paul lifts from the incarnation is a call to agape. Moreover, the life and teaching of Jesus is perhaps best summarized as a demonstration of agape love. Solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, welcome for the stranger, the nonviolent resistance articulated in the Sermon on the Mount – a complete review is unnecessary. Recall, though, the words of Jesus about the greatest commandments.⁵

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’ (Matthew 22: 37-40).

Agape love is a fine contender for the core of the Christian gospel.

Joseph Fletcher’s *Situation Ethics* provides an orienting framework for interpreting the call to agape. Fletcher writes that love is the only categorical good, the only universal law of Christian ethics. All other rules and principles are relative to the law of love (36). Rules and principles are valuable, but not absolute. Love is not one virtue among many, but the “one and only regulatory principle of Christian ethics” (61).⁶

Fletcher’s approach is situational in the sense that ethical actions are a function of the individual’s judgment, drawing on the wisdom of the community and the culture in order to act in ways that offer a “fitting” or “appropriate” response to specific cases in a particular time and place, addressing all their concrete particularities (27-29). Fletcher’s situational ethic is also relational. Love is not a good in itself *per se*, but a way of relating to people and using things (61). Love is not merely liking and defiantly not sentimental (103-04). It is not a feeling that one gets, but an act of the will and an attitude (79). Love makes judgments and “to love is not necessarily to please.” (117). Agape is concerned with the neighbor’s well-being for the neighbor’s sake, and ultimately, for God’s sake (117).

For Fletcher, agape love is a Christian ethic, but not exclusively so. Christians have no monopoly on love; many non-Christians practice love better than many Christians (155). Love is a universal standard. This Christian ethic is different from other traditions

⁵ These words appear just after the parable of the Good Samaritan. For this reason agape love is often described as neighbor love.

⁶ Even justice is a function of love. “Justice is Christian love using its head, calculating its duties, obligations, opportunities, resources” (95).

not normatively, but motivationally. The Christian's motivation to love is a grateful response to God, particularly as God has revealed God's own redemptive love in Christ (156).

What are the key features of agape love? Gene Outka describes its essence as equal regard, that is, neighbor-love for all people by virtue of their humanity (9). My neighbor is anyone and everyone. Agape is love that reaches out to the stranger or the enemy at the expense of the self. And agape is unconditional love. As John Calvin put it, agape "does not regard an individual's merits, but pours itself out on the unworthy, the perverse, the ungrateful" (198). As a radical ideal, agape allows for no partiality or favoritism. It calls for selfless, sacrificial giving.

At least as the dominant tradition defines it, agape differs significantly from eros (desire) and philia (friendship). Eros is desire for something or someone, and to some degree always self-serving. Although he offers more charitable readings of eros in other moments, Karl Barth describes this love as a hunger that "demands the food that the other seems to hold out." Eros is the "desire to possess and control and enjoy" (*Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 832-3). Philia is a mutual love, prototypically that shared by friends; but in contrast, agape love is not a two-way street. Agape loves selflessly, perhaps hoping the love will be reciprocated, but always loving regardless.

The stark opposition of agape to eros and philia has received significant critique.⁷ Rather than redefining agape to make room for eros or philia, I suggest that most relationships reflect tensions between eros, philia, and agape. As we will discuss when we turn to the relationship between coaches and students, agape provides a guiding norm that limits potentially self-serving eros and philia.

The most significant critique of agape love for our purposes concerns self-sacrifice and self-love. Nygren defines agape as sacrificial love in contrast to eros, which he equates with self-love. As Outka notes, the theme of self-sacrifice may invite self-negation. What are the limits to sacrifice for the other? Outka call this "the blank check problem." Attention to another person's needs may turn into submission to another's exploitation (275). Andolsen adds that making self-sacrifice the quintessential Christian virtue is a cure prescribed by predominantly male theologians for what they take to be the central sin of pride. Many women, however, already live for others to the point of their own detriment. Too often, in practice, "Christian self-sacrifice means the sacrifice of women for the sake of men" (75). Sacrificial love holds the potential to devalue self-care, a theme we will revisit shortly. Framed as self-sacrifice, agape also seems to leave little room for self-love. As Karl Barth writes of self-love, "God will

never think of blowing on this fire, which is bright enough already" (*Church Dogmatics* I/2, 388).

One persuasive answer is that self-love is necessary and good as a function of love for God and neighbor. Outka argues that the good of others limits the selfless giving of agape (30-31). Self-love is thus derivative of agape; self-love is instrumental in my ability to love others (69). Similarly, attending to my own needs may help me serve the needs of others. Fletcher adopts this line of thought. The self is considered, secondarily, for the neighbor's sake (110). "The logic of love is that self-concern is obligated to cancel neighbor-good whenever *more* neighbor-good will be served through serving the self" (113). Self love, though, is not only a psychological tool for serving others. Self-love is theologically justified as well (Outka 291). I, too, am created in the image of God. God's providence charts the unique course of my life, and as Christ dwells in my life, I discover my true self. If I am worthy of God's love, I am surely also worthy of my own.

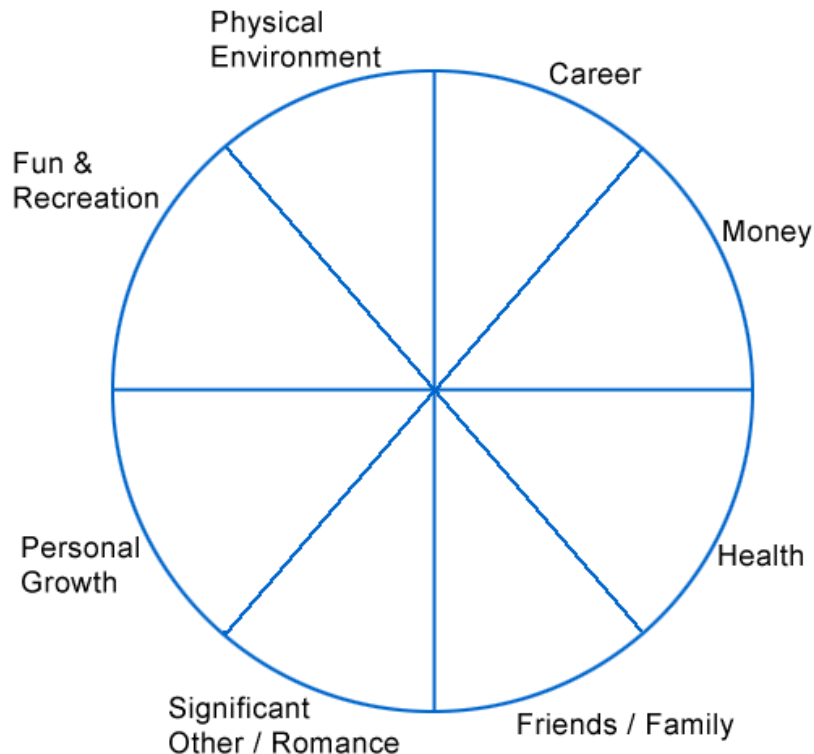
Honoring Boundaries: Self-sacrifice and Self-Care

The problem of agape love and self-sacrifice immediately raises a danger for coaches. Agape love framed as self-sacrifice might justify the very kind of behavior that leads to burnout. Probably many of us know coaches that view their job as a call to self-sacrifice, if not martyrdom. Working long hours in the evening and on weekends for little or no pay, coaching certainly seems to demand giving up my life. Rainer Martens states the problem succinctly. "Coaching is a helping profession. A cardinal principle for all helping professionals is, Take care of yourself first in order to take care of others" (183). Coaching is such hard work that neglecting self-care is all too easy. Leland, for example, suggests that many coaches of intercollegiate speech and debate suffer from a lack of exercise, alcohol abuse, addiction to nicotine, reliance on caffeine, and obesity (14). Lack of sleep and elevated stress levels also contribute to burnout (Littlefield). All of these symptoms are familiar to me. Perhaps the list is no surprise, considering the toll coaching takes on professionals. "Sports pages today are replete with stories about ulcers, early retirement, stress disorders, and divorce because of the overwhelming demands placed on team leadership" (Gerdes 65).

Self-care is essential to caring for others. Counselors should routinely be in therapy. Pastors should seek out a spiritual director. Perhaps coaches can benefit from the advice of a life coach. In the first session with a life coach, that person might well ask you to complete a "life balance wheel" like the one on the next page from Wendy Mackowski of Inner North Coaching. I invite you to complete it before reading further.

⁷ For an overview of these critiques see Grant.

Life Balance Wheel



Instructions:

Before you fill in the wheel, you can rename sections to match the important areas of your life. You may also choose to split one or two sections or add one or two sections of your own. For example, many people prefer to divide "Friends & Family" into two wedges.

The center of the wheel is 0, and the outer edge of the wheel as 10. Rank your level of satisfaction with each life area by drawing an arc at the number that represents your level of satisfaction. A 0 means you are not satisfied at all with an area right now; A 10 means everything in that area is absolutely perfect for you right now.

Write the number that the arc represents. For example, if you are 75% satisfied with your career, draw an arc about 3/4 of the way out from the center of the circle in the Career section of the Wheel, and label it 7.5. (Mackowski)

The "Life Balance Wheel" helps me assess how well my needs are being met so that I can meet the needs of others. Of course, my wheel is far from 10's all the way around the circle – I'm no more ready to be a coach than a parent or a teacher – but the exercise helps me attend to my well-being. The danger of coaching others when my life is not in balance is much greater than my own burnout. The danger is that I will use the students I coach to meet my own

needs. This danger returns us to the relationship between *apage*, *philia*, and *eros*.

Philia is mutual love, and we all need it. I need the love of family and friends. The team that I coach is "like a family," and in a meaningful sense, the students that I coach are my friends. The primary dimension of the relationship, though, is the coach-student relationship, one characterized by *agape*. If I rely on the students to meet my needs for mutual love, I cross a boundary – and the results can be harmful. I might favor some students over others, impose on a student's time and energy, convey that personal companionship with me is required, or burden a student with my own cares by treating that student as a confidant. In order to make choices grounded in the best interest of my students, I can not use students to meet my own needs to be loved.

Eros plays a role in my relationship with students as well. *Eros* is desire (prototypically sexual) for pleasure. As a coach, I exercise a lot of control over students – and control is pleasing. The students perform acts in front of me, and I correct them – tell them how to do it and ask them to do it again. If coaching meets my needs for deriving pleasure from control, I have entered a danger zone. If a student meets my emotional or sexual needs for intimacy, I have crossed a serious boundary. Once again, I must ensure that my needs are met elsewhere so that, in

the spirit of agape, I can focus entirely on meeting the needs of students.

Here's another personal inventory, this one adapted for coaches by Todd Crosset from "Are you in Trouble with a Client?" by Estelle Disch.

A Coach's Self Assessment: Are You Crossing the Line with an Athlete?

The purpose of this questionnaire is to alert coaches to boundary issues which might be interfering with their ability to work effectively with a team or an athlete. Coaching is an emotionally intense profession. Strong bonds and emotions are part of the job. The line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior is often a matter of intent and context. The following list of questions is intended to help coaches know when they may be extending the boundaries of their role as coach and potentially crossing the line with an athlete.

Check any statements which reflect your behavior or attitude toward an athlete:

1. I often tell my personal problems to this athlete.
2. I want to be friends with this athlete when his/her career ends.
3. To be honest, my physical contact with this athlete is motivated by desires that go beyond an attempt to support and motivate the athlete.
4. I find myself thinking of ways to work individually with this athlete and in special practice sessions which run before or after practice.
5. This athlete invites me to social events, and I don't feel comfortable saying either yes or no.
6. There is something I like about being in the office with this athlete when no one else is around.
7. The athlete feels more like a friend than someone I coach.
8. I have invited this athlete to public/social events which were not team functions.
9. I often listen to the personal problems of this athlete.
10. I find myself wanting to coach practices when I know this athlete will be there and unusually disappointed when this person is absent.
11. I find myself cajoling, teasing, joking a lot with this athlete.
12. I find myself talking a lot about this athlete to other people.
13. I find myself saying a lot about myself with this athlete -- telling stories, engaging in peer-like conversation.
14. This athlete has spent time at my home (other than a team function).
15. I am doing so much on this athlete's behalf I feel exhausted.
- 16a. I agreed to take this athlete on for a very low fee, and now I feel like I need to be paid more for my work. OR
- 16b. I agreed to take this athlete on for a very low fee, and now I feel like I need to get more out of this athlete.
17. I find myself looking at this athlete's body in a sexual fashion.
18. I make comments to my athletes about bodies which have no relevance to the sport.
19. Sometimes I worry this athlete is going to get so good he/she thinks he/she doesn't need me.
20. Sometimes I resent this athlete's success.
21. To be honest, sometimes I make demands on this athlete with the intention of limiting his/her social life.
22. I find myself making sexual jokes around this athlete.
23. To be honest, I feel jealous when this athlete spends time with other people.
24. Sometimes I check up on this athlete, wanting to know what he/she is doing when he/she is away from practice.

Self-Assessment

Coaching involves intense emotional and complicated relationships with athletes. It is difficult to make blanket statements about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Certain items above might not always reflect poor coaching. This self administered test is offered as a means to locate potential moral and professional dilemmas. If you checked any of the above statements you may be crossing the line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. (Crosset)

Most of my relationships with students will contain a degree of self-serving desire (eros) and a degree of mutual love (philia). Agape love, though, ought to be the dominate feature of the relationship. Agape disciplines eros and philia, holding the focus of the relationship on the good of the student. Agape thus involves keeping a professional distance from those I'm coaching. The distance does not compromise agape, but enables it. Boundaries create a safe space for agape. Maintaining those boundaries requires self-care.

And self-reflection. I have to take time to listen to my motives and oust my demons. One of the hardest lessons I have learned (and continue to learn) as a coach is that to be good coach I have to stop competing. I cannot use a student to relive my glory days or rely on my team to satisfy my unfulfilled desires for success. I have to learn to be a teacher rather than a competitor, though the whole enterprise of preparing students for competition seems to work against that impulse. No doubt, the context of competition presents a number of ethical challenges.

Communicating Unconditional Acceptance: Self-Confidence and Competition

Whether the competition is a battle of the bands or a chess meet, the culture of sports in America colors the context of preparing students for competition. Competitive contests bear significant symbolic weight, and they impose a lot of pressure to succeed (Thompson 5). We can appreciate the pressure more fully by considering why students choose to compete. Their primary needs, so sport psychologists claim, are two-fold: (1) to have fun, and (2) “to feel worthy, which includes the need to feel competent and successful” (Martens 43). So they need to win? Not quite. Winning and losing both can get in the way of feeling worthy. For many, competition threatens their sense of self-worth. Some students fear failure. Their self worth is so contingent upon accomplishment, defined as winning a trophy, that they will sacrifice everything to avoid losing. Others fear success. The trouble with success is that it raises the bar for future performance. It’s much easier to win the approval of others or myself when we all have low expectations (Thompson 248). Either way, the student’s identity is on the line.

How can coaches meet students’ needs to feel worthy? First and most importantly, we can offer agape love’s unconditional acceptance. Recall that agape loves each person as a person, regardless of talent, merit, achievement, or attractiveness (Outka 261-263). When the coach-student relationship is characterized by agape, that relationship provides a liberating environment for the student. Students who know that they are unconditionally valued are free to pursue the highest levels of excellence; and, free to fail because their sense of self-worth is not in jeopardy (Gerdes 19).⁸ Unconditional acceptance also builds trust and motivates students to excel (Gerdes 53). Unconditional acceptance stands in contrast to conditional coaching, or giving preferential treatment to those who measure-up to certain criteria, such as winning more often than others (Gerdes 23). Thompson calls conditional coaching a “transaction model” for the coach’s relationship with students. Like a transaction at a bank, students must give something to get something. The message – intended or not – is that their value as people depends on how well they perform. Thompson says simply, “This is deadly to the development of strong self-esteem” (89).

How can coaches communicate agape love in ways that build students’ sense of self-worth? To begin, we share affirming and constructive feedback. Thompson suggests providing affirmation that is as concrete and specific as possible. Written feedback is

especially meaningful (Thompson 99-100). In addition to feedback about the skills and knowledge acquired, words of affirmation about the student as a person emphasize that the student is valued as a person rather than a competitor. In short, tell students you like them as people – and tell them why.

Of course, the coaches unconditional acceptance of the student does not mean that everyone is treated exactly the same way. As Outka writes, equal regard does not mean identical treatment (21). If the little league team values developing all players, then all players should play all positions as much as possible – even if it may mean losing a game. A player who is not ready to play a position such as catcher, though, should obviously not be placed in a position where he or she could be hurt. Similarly, if a student breaks certain rules, that student may not be allowed to play at all. Agape love makes the students’ best interest the number one criterion for every decision. Communicating the reason for those choices – upholding the best interests of every student – may build trust with the team, even when students disagree with a coach’s judgment.

Perhaps the most challenging demand of agape in the context of competition is this: we must redefine success. Success is not winning in competition. Competition relies on comparing one person to another. Agape love, as equal regard, rejects ranking one person over another. When coaches give a typical pep talk that stresses the importance of winning the game, they may only add to the anxiety of some students who will now worry about how the coach will evaluate them as well as how the competition will evaluate them (Martens 55). Winning may be a priority, but as all good coaches know, it is never the first priority. Agape insists that our first priority is the well-being of students.

Yet, students need to achieve and accomplish goals. Part of self-worth is self-efficacy, that is, students’ beliefs about their “capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives” (Bandura). Self-efficacy is a situation-specific form of self-confidence. It requires that I trust my abilities and believe that I am capable (Thompson 249). How can success be redefined so that it does not rely on comparison to others in competition? If not by placing ahead of others competition, how can students develop self-efficacy? The answer is that success is measured in terms of improvement vs. potential as opposed to comparison with an opponent (Gerdes 54). Martens underscores this point: “*Success must be seen in terms of athletes exceeding their own goals rather than surpassing the performance of others*” (51). He suggests that students set specific individual goals such as jumping a few inches further than last week, hitting my backhand deep into the corner 75% of the time, or learning to relax more during a game (51). Setting individual goals based on the student’s own performance can enhance motiva-

⁸ This presumes, of course, that the coach plays a major role in the student’s developing self-confidence. Obviously teammates, parents, and others play a significant role as well.

tion and promote the student's well-being. We can reframe contests, then, as tests along the way to achieving individual performance goals as opposed to the final judgment of the student's efforts (52). The coach helps students set challenging, yet realistic goals so that they stretch for those goals and achieve them. The results? "Realistic goals rob failure of its threat" (Martens 52). Coaches and students can both prioritize the student's development over winning in competition. Martins even suggests that team goals such as winning a certain number of games or claiming a particular championship are counter-productive. Team goals that compare one team to another reinforce the priority of winning. In so far as we need team goals, they ought to focus on sportsmanship, team unity, having fun, and the like (52). If every individual on the team is setting and striving for personal goals, the championships may well follow. More importantly, as coaches, we can redefine success.

Resisting the temptation to make winning the first priority is counter-cultural, and it requires a team effort. Building a community grounded in agape's equal regard for all people is no easy task. Students must learn to affirm each other's progress without measuring themselves against each other. One option for building community is clearly ruled out. Scapegoating an "enemy" team or a particular member of one's own team is an easy way to motivate a team. Agape love proscribes any option that requires putting others down so that we can feel up.

Instead, when we engage students with agape, we value the student's development as an individual over winning in competition. We invite students to value the intrinsic rewards (having fun, feeling worthy) of an activity or sport over the extrinsic rewards (recognition of others, trophies) (Martens 44). By placing intrinsic rewards at the center of their motivation, students think like true champions. Thompson points out that "great athletes are motivated more by their own internal goals than by external rewards such as fame, money, and status. It is internal passion for the sport that unleashes super performance" (235). Coaches cultivate a focus on intrinsic rewards by emphasizing the process of learning over the product. Reframing competition makes clear that our efforts are for the student's own benefit, win or lose.

Coaching the Whole Person

When students trust that their coaches care for them unconditionally, they often turn to us for consolation and advice in other areas of life. Coaches of track and field or speech and debate suddenly find themselves thrust into the role of life coach. Time management, family conflicts, romantic relationships, career plans, faith and doubt, grief and joy – all these topics find their way into significant conversations with coaches. In these talks, the coach is

no longer teaching specialized knowledge out of expertise in a particular area. Neither, though, is the coach simply a friend lending an ear. The relationship is not mutual. The student turns to the coach as trusted older adult. These are sacred moments in coaching, and agape love provides some guidance for handling them with care.

To begin, coaching is not therapy. One of our obligations is to recognize when a student needs professional help and suggest it. Moreover, a coach's openness to "life coaching conversations" is a boundary issue that each coach must negotiate. The lacrosse team is not a support group. Finally, when one student is in serious conflict with another member of the team and turns to the coach, the coach should be particularly aware of propping up just one side of a triangular relationship. At times, the most loving response to a question may be, "I care about you, but I don't think I'm the best person to talk with about that." Like a many counselors, though, coaches who occasional play the role of a life coach can listen, ask questions, and help students to understand themselves.

Like a counselor who offers unconditional positive regard, a coach working out of agape love will resist the temptation to guide students to the "right" answers to their problems. One might assume that a Christian ethic would prescribe disciplining students in a particular direction. My own sense is that the unconditional acceptance of agape love rules out pointing students to the star that they should follow. Proselytizing, however subtle, is as an obvious abuse of the position of coach. When the conversation turns from basketball or next week's debate tournament to overprotective parents or an unplanned pregnancy, the student leads the coach out of his or her area of expertise. The coach must stop imparting knowledge and skill, and self-consciously adopt the very different stance of a life coach: letting the student take the lead. Offering an explicitly Christian perspective on life coaching, Miller and Hall suggest that holding back personal biases and beliefs is the responsibility of a Christian coach – and doing so can be hard work. The coach is obligated to own personal judgments. For example, a life coach might say, "I just realized that my last comment is more about me than it is about you. My attitude just got in the way. I'm really sorry. Let's try that again" (Miller 77). Bracketing personal judgments keeps the emphasis on the student.

Empowering the student to find his or her own way expresses the unconditional love of agape. As Robinson writes of pastoral counseling, agape love in the pastoral relationship provides a context for people to articulate the truth in their own narratives (148). Agape love calls for an empowering dynamic rather than moral intervention. Agape grants to others the power – the freedom and responsibility – to chart their own ethical course (155). While coaches

are not pastoral counselors, coaches can offer students the same unconditional acceptance and freedom. Coaches can practice a ministry of presence – bearing the presence of Christ, rather than providing answers.

In so far as a student finds answers, those answers come from within his or her own heart by grace. As Hall puts it, life coaching “assumes that a unique ‘solution seed’ lies within every challenge. This seed simply needs to be given the right environment in order to germinate and reveal itself” (Hall 62). The coach fosters that environment by listening, asking questions, reflecting the truth as he or she hears it, and affirming the person being coached (64). When coaches serve as life coaches, they can adopt a similar stance out of agape love. The coach as life coach assumes a dialogic orientation: withholding judgment, suspending assumptions, inquiring with open questions, and listening with empathy all facilitate the student’s discernment. Out of agape’s unconditional acceptance, the coach focuses the conversation on the student’s own challenge and journey.

Agape love may even impose an obligation on coaches to open the door to life coaching. I care about the development of students as whole people – mind, body, and spirit. If I am aware that a student is struggling in an area of life other than speech and debate, then I feel obligated to reach out to that student. I ask a question – like “What’s really going on?” – and make myself available for conversation. I think most good coaches do the same. Agape’s unconditional love for each person as a whole person calls me to awareness of students and availability to students, lest I miss the moment when the Spirit will nudge me to ask that question.

Grace and Agape

Each of the three ethical issues discussed here – self-care, competition, and life coaching – emphasizes the importance of self-giving, unconditional love for students. Agape love provides an orienting ethic for the relationship between students and coaches. One limitation of this discussion is that I have focused almost exclusively on the relationship between one coach and an individual student. Any coach who works with a team builds and nurtures a community. The coach helps name the team’s core values and shape the team’s mission. The coach makes the rules, and the coach monitors the boundaries of who is on the team and who is not. Coaches decide how much leadership students will exercise on the team, and they mediate conflicts between team members. Coaches also work within larger institutions and represent the team in the public sphere. I wonder how agape love might speak to the obligations of a coach as one who leads a community.

One final thought about agape love returns us from ethics to thinking theologically in the vocabu-

lary of the Christian faith. Agape love is an ideal, and an unattainable one this side of the beatific vision. One might well ask, why aim so high? Surely a more pragmatic ethic would be fair and reasonable, require a less heroic standard. One answer from the Christian tradition is that the way of agape is the way of response. Christian charity is founded in gratitude (Grant 18). God’s love for us is revealed in Christ to be complete and unconditional. Our love for God is a response to God’s love for us. Love for God motivates striving to live out this demanding, excessive agape love. The second great commandment thus flows out of the first.

Christians look up to the impossibly high standard of agape love because God has loved us that way. The next question is, how? Living for this ideal is likely to produce failure and frustration; thus, agape love exposes the need for a lived religion to undergird the ethic (Grant 17). Agape love in the Christian tradition presumes the renewal of life in Christ through worship (18). In short, don’t try this ethic on your own. The rhythm of life in connection with prayer and Christian community sustains striving for agape. Grace is when God does something for us that we can’t do on our own. Meekness is dependence on God. The way of agape is meekness seeking grace.

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