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Chapter 10

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND SPORTS COACHING

Don Vinson and Andrew Parker

Introduction

The body of literature concerning the relationship between sports coaching and Christianity raises a number of questions about whether or not competitive sport might be considered a legitimate vocational field for Christian coach practitioners. Indeed, this literature has offered limited theoretical clarity for Christian sports coaches seeking a sound and legitimate foundation for their professional practice. In this chapter, the role of the coach is considered broader than the pedagogical function of helping athletes learn technically and tactically. Instead, we focus on the overarching concept of leadership and, in particular, servant leadership, with a view to offering Christian sports coaches an operational framework in relation to their practices and responsibilities regarding athletes and teams, predominantly in the competitive sporting domain. The central aim of the chapter is to provide insight into the connections between servant leadership and sports coaching and, in particular, the ways in which servant leadership behaviors might manifest themselves in and through coaching practice.

There has been considerable debate over the years concerning leadership theory and sports coaching. Common to all contemporary writing in this area has been the focus on follower-centered, or shared, models of leadership, that is, those that reject the authoritarian and domineering depictions of leaders in sport, which are commonly portrayed (and often lauded) in the media. Perhaps the most prominent body of scholarship has come from Chelladurai and colleagues and has concerned the development and refinement of the multidimensional model of leadership as part of a broader and sustained contribution to the field (see Chelladurai 1990, 2007, 2013; Chelladurai and Saleh 1980). Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) proposed that the alignment of required, actual, and preferred coaching behavior leads to group satisfaction and enhanced performance, with the specific actions of the coach being dependent upon the situational, leader, and member characteristics. As Chelladurai and Riemer (1998) later acknowledged, however, the multidimensional model lacked both specificity and actionable strategy, leading them to turn to transformational leadership (TFL) as an

alternative. TFL is best understood through the augmentation hypothesis, that is, that transactional behaviors such as praise or payment of financial bonuses essentially reward or punish followers for exceptional behavior. Such transactional behaviors are then supplemented and enhanced by more transformational behaviors, which can be described under the headings of inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence (Bass and Riggio 2006). In recent years, the prominence of TFL in sport has increased considerably, and a growing body of research has demonstrated a wide range of benefits in relation to such approaches. For example, TFL has been shown to be impactful in the development of task cohesion (Arthur, Woodman, Ong, Hardy, and Ntoumanis 2011), athlete well-being (Stenling and Tafvelin 2014), personal, social, cognitive, and goal-setting skills (Vella, Oades, and Crowe 2013) as well as athlete satisfaction, effort, and intrinsic motivation (Arthur et al. 2011; Charbonneau, Barling, and Kelloway 2001; Rowold 2006). Despite this impressive array of potential benefits, the principal focus of transformational approaches is on the superior achievement of organizational goals. In this view, the benefits to individuals, while crucially important, are not the ultimate driving factor (Bass and Riggio 2006; Smith, Montagno, and Kuzmenko 2004). For example, a national governing body of sport might advocate TFL with the ultimate aim of meeting or exceeding the organization's Olympic medal target as outlined by their nation's funding agency. Such a goal is ultimately focused on the number of medals won, rather than on the holistic personal development of the individual athletes.

Alternatively, servant leadership places the individual at the heart of the developmental process; the needs of the followers outweigh the emphasis on organizational goals (Kim, Kim, and Wells 2017; Smith et al. 2004). This focus on individuals represents a principle more compatible with a biblical, Christ-like perspective (Grudem 1994). Furthermore, the term "servant" resonates strongly with Christian teaching, including the infamous incident in which the disciples, James and John, approach Jesus requesting to sit at His side in heaven—Jesus responds that they should first seek to become a "servant of all" (Mark 10:43–45). The scholarly construct of servant leadership has been principally attributed to Robert K. Greenleaf (Page and Wong 2000). Greenleaf (1977: 7) described this concept by stating thus:

The Servant-Leader is servant first ... it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead ... the best test, and difficult one to administer is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, whilst being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed?

As Walker (2010: 113) has argued, central to the concept of servant leadership is that service precedes the desire to lead, and in this sense such a philosophy "cuts directly across the attitudes that prevail in so much of life and leadership in contemporary society. It insists on the moral priority of the other; it demands

that leadership is not self-serving but other-person-centred.” Walker goes on to point out how such ideas have been eagerly accepted and accommodated by those within the Christian faith whose calling to serve has come to form the mainstay of their religious identity. So too have such ideas fueled an increasing emphasis in recent years on pastoral care and leadership within broader ministry circles. In a secular sense, there are also connections here with the work of sociological scholars whose theoretical offerings have focused on the intrinsically oppressive nature of institutional power and the collective and individual inequalities that more traditional versions of leadership might sponsor. In contrast, the servant leader is one who considers their position of responsibility to be one of stewardship, that is, holding a position of trust in order to develop others by foregoing their own self-interest (Greenleaf 1977; van Dierendonck 2011). Indeed, consideration of the power relations between leader and follower is crucial to understanding Greenleaf’s (1977: 9–10) perspective:

A fresh critical look is being taken in these times at the issues of power and authority, and people are beginning to learn, however haltingly, to relate to one another in less coercive and more creatively supporting ways ... A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one’s allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader and in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader.

Perhaps most importantly for Greenleaf, servant leadership should not involve an attitude of subservience or submissiveness; rather, the servant leader resolutely sets out to ensure the flourishing of every follower to be of unique value to the organization.

Various authors have sought to model servant leadership in a number of different ways (e.g., Barbuto Jr. and Wheeler 2006; Patterson 2003; Russell and Stone 2002; Spears 1995; van Dierendonck 2011) in order to generate insightful and practical understanding of the philosophies, beliefs, and behaviors associated with its authentic outworking. In attempting to synthesize work in this area, van Dierendonck (2011) distilled six key characteristics of servant leadership that he felt resonated across the various conceptions published in the field to date. These comprised: (i) empowering and developing people, (ii) humility, (iii) authenticity, (iv) interpersonal acceptance, (v) providing direction, and (vi) stewardship. van Dierendonck (2011) combined these key characteristics with the antecedents of the leader’s predisposition to serve, a consideration of culture, and the leader’s individual characteristics to produce a conceptual model of servant leadership (Figure 10.1). The outcome was a modeling of the expected outcomes of servant leadership around six broad concepts, which comprised high-quality leader–follower relationship, a positive psychological climate, self-actualization, enhanced follower job attitudes, better performance, and improved organizational outcomes.

Measurement in servant leadership research has also featured a number of differing approaches. Perhaps the most prominent is the work of Paul Wong and

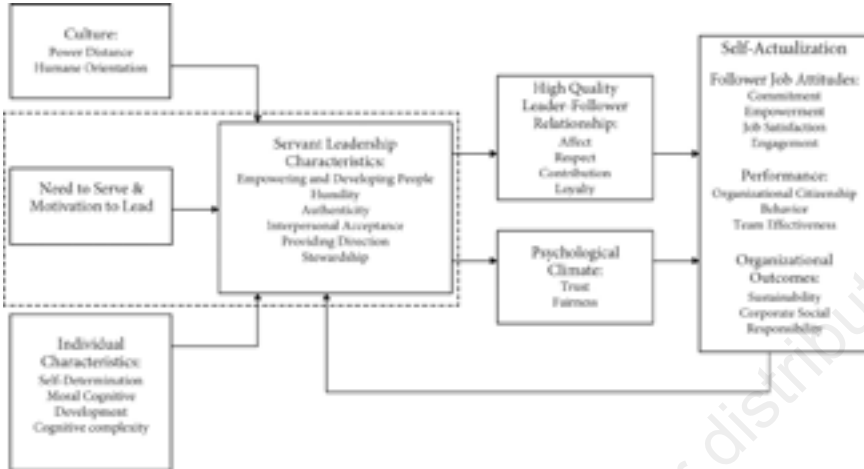


Figure 10.1 A conceptual model of servant leadership (van Dierendonck 2011).

Don Page (e.g., Page and Wong 2000; Wong 2004; Wong and Page 2003) who produced the (revised) Servant Leadership Profile (RSLP), a sixty-two-item instrument comprising seven factors (empowering and developing others); power and pride (inverse factor); serving others; open, participatory leadership; inspiring leadership; visionary leadership; and courageous leadership) derived via principal component analysis. In contrast to the Servant Leadership Survey (van Dierendonck and Nuijten 2011), the RSLP is a self-report tool that was validated to reflect followers' perceptions of their leader's behavior and beliefs. Other measures of servant leadership have been developed such as the Servant Leadership Assessment Instrument (Dennis and Bocarnea 2005), the Servant Leadership Questionnaire (Barbuto Jr. and Wheeler 2006), and the Servant Leader Behaviour Scale (Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora 2008), yet none has reliably and consistently established a measure or factor structure that fully captures the breadth of servant leadership characteristics or has become the predominant tool of choice within the field (van Dierendonck and Patterson 2010). Arguably, the RSLP remains the most widely used tool and has formed the basis for the limited survey work that has been conducted in the field of sport (Hammermeister et al. 2008).

One example of such work is that of Hammermeister et al. (2008) who developed the Revised Servant Leadership Profile for Sport (RSLP-S) by recruiting 251 collegiate athletes to complete a modified version of the RSLP and conducting a subsequent factor analysis. This process reduced the number of items from sixty-two to twenty-two and from seven to five factors. Perhaps not surprisingly, it would appear that a great deal of the RSLP's insight and intricacy is lost when asking athletes to complete the instrument based on their perceptions of their coach's beliefs, motivations, and behaviors. One subsequent use of this instrument was by Rieke, Hammermeister, and Chase (2008) who recruited 195 collegiate basketball players to also complete a wide range of psychological inventories in an attempt to show the benefits of being coached by a servant leader.

However, Rieke et al.'s (2008) attempt to demonstrate a performance benefit was undermined by the use of a non-validated research tool (the Basketball Athletic Performance Questionnaire) and their relatively arbitrary designation of the terms "servant leader" and "non-servant leader" with no greater insight than establishing the former category had simply been scored more highly overall by their athletes than the other group.

How to attribute the label "servant leader" has proved challenging. Gillham, Gillham, and Hansen (2015) also utilized the RSLP-S to examine the relationship among servant leadership, coach effectiveness, and other social behaviors, providing rigorous evidence to suggest that athletes may perceive a stronger coach-athlete relationship if they consider their coach to be trustworthy, empathetic, and servant-hearted. Nevertheless, as Gillham et al. (2015) acknowledge, the evidence concerning the relationship between servant leadership and coach effectiveness was much less strong. Jenkins' (2014a, 2014b) attempt to review the concept in relation to legendary basketball coach John Wooden ultimately proved much more convincing in terms of pragmatism and paternalistic leadership. Furthermore, other sport-related literature based on a framework of servant leadership has highlighted the potential of such approaches in relation to the coach-athlete relationship (Burton and Welty-Peachey 2013; Kim et al. 2017). Azadfada, Besmi, and Doroudian (2014) further confirmed the benefits of athletes' perceptions of servant-hearted behavior from their coach in terms of athlete satisfaction; however, as with all of the other empirically based sports coaching works in this field to date, little, if any, insight has been offered regarding the beliefs, intentions, and motivations of coaches from their own perspective. The aim of the present chapter is to offer some form of corrective in this respect by providing empirical evidence from coaches themselves around the following questions:

- To what extent do the philosophies of Christian sports coaches reflect the theoretical foundations of servant leadership?
- To what extent does the intended practice of Christian sports coaches reflect the theoretical foundations of servant leadership?
- What sociocultural factors influence the philosophies and intended practice of Christian sports coaches?

To reflect the distinction between servant leadership and other frameworks, we will particularly focus on the theoretical foundation of other-person-centeredness. Before we elaborate on our findings in relation to these questions, we will initially turn to a discussion of methods.

Methods

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Worcester (UK) Institute of Sport and Exercise Research Ethics Committee. The participants comprised 110 coaches ($N = 88$) and coach educators ($N = 22$) who responded to an invitation to complete an online survey (female = 24, male = 86). The

participants were drawn from an extensive internet search for sports coaches openly proclaiming a Christian faith or working for an overtly Christian educational institution or charity. The search was restricted to coaches featured on websites published in English. Participants were also requested to pass on the email invitation to anyone they considered might fall within the stated inclusion criteria of being actively engaged in sports coaching or coach education and proclaiming a Christian faith. In addition, invitations were sent to the administrators of a number of national (UK) and international Christian sports organizations with a request that the email be forwarded to anyone meeting the inclusion criteria. Overall, 1570 named, individual, invitations were sent out, with 84 respondents from the USA or Canada and 26 from other countries including the UK.

Participants were asked to affirm that they accepted the Evangelical Alliance (UK) "Statement of Faith" (Evangelical Alliance 2014) and to complete demographic information including gender, nationality, and coaching role. Participants were then asked to complete the sixty-two-item RSLP (Wong 2004) and to respond to six open-ended (qualitative) questions, which comprised: (1) Please tell us about your coaching journey, (2) Please tell us about your coaching practice, (3) To what extent is there a relationship between your Christian faith and your coaching practice? (4) What is your personal approach to leadership within your sporting context? (5) What values do you seek to promote within the sporting environment(s) in which you operate? and (6) How do you evaluate your success as a sports coach? Respondents were also invited to add anything else they thought might be relevant in a free-text box.

The quantitative data were screened for potential violations of the assumptions relating to parametric data testing including consideration of boxplots and P-P plots through which outliers were eliminated. Groups larger than thirty were considered to be normal following the Central Limit Theorem (Field 2013), while smaller groups were checked through visual analysis of histograms via the Shapiro-Wilk test (Field 2013). Data were then analyzed at a univariate level including three independent variables (gender, coaching role, and nationality) each featuring just two categories. Only one violation of the assumptions was identified and was analyzed via the Mann-Whitney *U* test. All other variables were entered into an independent sample *t*-test. Due to there being only one violation of the assumptions and for the sake of consistency, all data are reported as mean \pm SD. One-sample *t*-tests were utilized to compare the findings of the current investigation to previous studies. Where presented, effect sizes have been calculated via Pearson's *r*, using the cutoffs of 0.1 (small effect), 0.3 (medium effect), and 0.5 (large effect) (Field 2013). The internal consistency of the seven-factor structure of the RSLP was affirmed with Cronbach's α coefficients ranging satisfactorily between 0.73 and 0.86.

In terms of the analysis of the qualitative data, thematic and axial coding was used whereby the authors adopted a cyclical process of examination and inductive interpretation to draw out themes and meanings in response to the primary aims of the research and in line with the key themes and concepts identified from the existing literature (Charmaz 2002, 2014). Data were analyzed in four stages. First, responses were reread in full to facilitate data saturation. Second, each response was individually coded and indexed, whereby a detailed capturing of the different

aspects of participant experience took place. Third, these experiences were then categorized into a series of overarching topics, which broadly encompassed the key issues emerging from the data. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organization of these topics into generic themes by further exploring the key issues around participant experience and framing those experiences within the context of existing conceptual debate (differentiated by respondents). These themes provide the general context around which both our quantitative and qualitative findings were viewed and around which our subsequent discussions are structured.

Christian sports coaches as servant leaders

Results and discussion

There were no significant differences evident when comparing the seven dimensions across gender ($t(101-107) = 0.02-0.63$, $p = 0.53-0.99$) or coaching role ($t(102-108) = 0.22-1.07$, $p = 0.29-0.83$). North American coaches and coach educators rated themselves significantly higher in terms of courageous leadership ($t(108) = 2.91$, $p < 0.01$, $r = 0.27$) and visionary leadership ($U = 715.50$, $z = -2.40$, $p < 0.05$, $r = -0.23$) than those from other nations although these only demonstrated a small effect. Furthermore, there were no significant differences evident within the other five factors ($t(105-108) = 0.05-1.49$, $p = 0.15-0.96$). While very few meaningful differences were evident when making comparisons within the sample, it is apparent when contrasting the findings of the present study to previous investigations that these Christian coaches and coach educators rated themselves more highly in all seven of the servant leadership factors. In Table 10.1, data are presented alongside equivalent self-rated scores in business settings (Rude 2004) and by Methodist ministers (Gauby 2007). In each case, the participants within the present study rated themselves significantly higher across each of the seven factors when analyzed via the one-sample t -test.

Table 10.1 Sample means (SD) for servant leadership factors alongside Rude (2004) and Gauby (2007)

Factor	Present sample	Rude (2004)	Gauby (2007) ^a
Developing and empowering others	5.98 (0.43)	5.65 (0.86)	5.53
Power and pride	2.83 (0.91)	1.77 (0.72)	1.06
Serving others	6.12 (0.54)	5.60 (0.80)	5.71
Open, participatory leadership	6.32 (0.38)	6.08 (0.57)	6.08
Inspiring leadership	6.02 (0.57)	5.27 (1.03)	5.17
Visionary leadership	5.99 (0.63)	5.66 (0.93)	5.25
Courageous leadership	6.25 (0.54)	5.89 (0.80)	5.97

^a Gauby (2007) did not present SDs

Respondents in the present study scored themselves most highly for “Open, participatory leadership” and “Courageous leadership.” The “Developing and empowering others” and “Visionary” factors were scored less highly, although still significantly higher than those reported in either Rude (2004) or Gauby (2007). Alternatively, “Power and pride” characteristics are inverse factors whereby lower scores are more akin to servant leadership principles; however, respondents scored themselves significantly higher in this factor when compared to previous studies. The inverse of “Power and pride” is “Vulnerability and humility,” which might represent an easier concept to apply practically.

The significantly higher score in the “Power and pride” factor suggests that this element represents the one which our sample of Christian coaches and coach educators find the most difficult to resonate with in their professional practice. In sum, what these data suggest is that, as an operationalized concept, servant leadership resonated strongly with this particular cohort. Moreover, in terms of the existence of clear linkages between the quantitative and qualitative data, the development and empowerment of others appeared especially prominent as part of coaching practice. Hence, it is on this theme our qualitative analysis focuses.

Christian sports coaches developing and empowering others

There are various reasons why people become involved in sports coaching—winning, success, personal affirmation/gain—and yet for a number of the coaches in our sample, servant leadership was the underpinning principle of their sporting identities; therefore, the holistic health and well-being of their athletes were at the forefront of their coaching behaviors. More specifically, the development and empowerment of athletes as people was something that was evident in many of the coach responses to the open-ended question: “Please tell us about your coaching practice.” It was not unusual, for example, for coaches to adopt a nurturing approach toward their athletes and to express the desire to impart and encourage wider lifestyle attributes and abilities as these two data extracts illustrate:

I coach because I love seeing people achieve their goals, and gaining in their own self-belief and confidence. I hope that in my coaching I give out an air of confidence in my knowledge of the sport but, more significantly, that those I coach can see that I have their interests and abilities at heart and that I want to help them. As a coach, the most important elements of my role are honesty, fairness, understanding and setting the right example and I think if you can inspire people to be the best that they can and to work for others then you have coached well. I aim to create an environment in which people feel they can thrive, and in which they can achieve their personal and team goals.

My key responsibilities are to nurture, equip, empower the players to do their best ... I try to develop an environment where mistakes can be made without

condemnation or ridicule - failure leads to success - and where we can have fun but work hard and accomplish our goals.

In turn, coaches articulated the desire to influence the lives of their athletes beyond sport, that is, to emotionally and relationally transcend the conventional bounds of the coach-athlete relationship, with the intention of engendering certain character traits and values, which is consistent with previous research findings (Arthur et al. 2011; Charbonneau et al. 2001; Rowold 2006). One respondent talked of the desire to “help empower others to think for themselves and solve problems [by] slowly giv[ing] my players more and more responsibility.” Another stated: “I believe it is my personal goal and duty to build well-rounded individuals on the field and in the classroom.” Presenting something of a contrast to the “win at all costs” mentality of modern-day sporting practice (see Watson and White 2007), such an approach appeared to hold the potential to redefine coaching “success”:

I coach to inspire kids to be the best they can be. All coaches love to win and the world looks at our [coaching] record as a way to determine our success. I look at success as helping young men and women to grow into responsible adults and grow in their relationship with Christ. The team setting provides so many opportunities to learn how to get along with others and accomplish things as a unit. It is not about what each person can accomplish, but about what we can accomplish as a team. The growth is in the journey.

I believe athletics have the potential to develop the character of a person. As a coach, it is my job to harness and extend the potential of each individual on my team, pushing them past their perceived limitations and helping them to accomplish their goals. In a Christian institution, I also place high value on personal, mental, spiritual, and emotional health and wellbeing, not just physical. Improvement and winning are always a plus, but encouraging an individual to have more confidence, overcome obstacles, and believe in themselves is much more important.

Given the religious demographic of the sample cohort, it is perhaps unsurprising that spirituality played a key role for many coaches in terms of their wider personal development narrative although holistic coaching foci have also been a prominent focus of secular work over the last decade (Price and Weiss 2013). Instilling a sense of importance around the centrality of God to life both within and outside of sport was seen as a key responsibility for some participants in the present study:

I coached because I enjoyed the challenge and opportunity to help student-athletes to develop their sports skills, their interpersonal skills, and life skills, and to set goals and strive to reach them. And most importantly, while doing these things, to build relationships with each other and with God.

I try to encourage personal responsibility, gratitude, servant hearts, teammanship [sic.], and excellence in all that we do. We talk about living with no regrets, being strong women, and learning to have a voice. We acknowledge God as the giver of all good gifts, including our athletic ability, and we try to maximize our use of this gift. I try to care about the struggles of my athletes outside of the sport and help them. I believe the team considers me a tough coach, but I also believe they know I care deeply for them.

As one might expect, leadership skills were a key theme for many. One coach expressed a particular concern over the generational demise of such skills and the importance of sport in their promotion:

I coach to make a difference in the lives of young men. I believe that leadership skills are eroding in this generation and young men - particularly young Christian men - need this training and experience. Sport is a great way to reach them and train them.

Self-leadership also appeared frequently amidst participant responses being largely located alongside notions of responsibility, ownership, and discipline:

I coach to not only teach a sport, but to teach discipline, self-leadership, owning your role, and working well with others. This has developed over time as I have learned that by teaching the above qualities it helps with winning. So instead of just focusing on a win, you can develop a well-rounded athlete that can also produce. My key responsibilities as a coach is to engage the athlete in what is being taught, encourage them to grow as an athlete and an individual, and excel at every task they take on.

Conclusions

Our aim within this chapter has been to provide insight into the connections between servant leadership and sports coaching and, in particular, the ways in which servant leadership behaviors might manifest themselves in and through coaching practice. Our analysis of questionnaire responses from Christian practitioners suggests that where servant leadership features as a key point of reference, coaches adopt an athlete-centered approach, which translates into an intentional desire to develop and empower those with whom they work. Amidst an environment of trust and support, this, in turn, plays out in the promotion of a series of key values and attributes that have the potential to enhance the holistic development (emotional, relational, spiritual, physical) of the athlete and to impact their life beyond sport.

What these findings also suggest is that the sporting environment continues to pose challenges for Christian coaches and coach educators. While overtly focusing on the empowerment and growth of their athletes, respondents also acknowledged (albeit somewhat subliminally) the ever-present shadow of the importance of winning and the inevitability of the success of their role being judged by tangible and

objective aspects. Such findings resonate with previous research (e.g., Bennett et al. 2005; Hunt 1999) and highlight the difficulties of striving to act in a vulnerable and humble manner within an environment that lauds notions of “power and pride.” It is evident that further research is required to investigate the precise motives of Christian coaches and coach educators and to understand how these professionals deal with the overt and covert pressures of the secular sporting milieu.

Study Guide

We have seen that the theoretical underpinnings of servant leadership offer some strong foundational principles upon which Christian sports coaches might base their practice. However, the nature of sport will continue to present real challenges to practitioners who seek to put the development of the individual before winning or financial success. Addressing the following questions will enable you to revise your understandings of the key aspects of servant leadership and to consider for yourself the extent to which this particular leadership style offers Christian sports coaches a potential basis for their work.

Study Questions

1. What are the key characteristics of servant leadership?
2. In what ways might sport help promote servant leadership?
3. How can sports coaches incorporate servant leadership principles into their work?
4. In what ways might a servant leadership approach enhance athlete well-being?
5. How does servant leadership reflect Christian values?

Further Reading

- Bennett, G., Sagas, M., Fleming, D., & S. V. Roenn. (2005), “On Being a Living Contradiction: The Struggle of an Elite Intercollegiate Christian Coach,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 26 (3): 289–300.
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