

*Jesus and Rugby : the Gospel as a  
Contact Sport*

*By  
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**JESUS AND RUGBY: THE GOSPEL AS A  
CONTACT SPORT**

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by

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**ABSTRACT**

This research paper attempts to connect the Gospel as a contact sport to the sport of rugby. It is the effect of the Gospel and rugby, has on not only individuals but the society itself that this paper will explore. This thesis examines the Congregation Christian Church of Samoa and how it is associated to a rugby community/game. With the use of rugby terminologies and theological reflection to elaborate on the contact being made in both worlds.

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## DEDICATION

In memory of my little brother Isaraelu Eliata Iakopo Pele who loved playing Rugby, you left your presence in this world and you still continue to inspire me, you will never be forgotten.

To my wife Florence Lupeline Pele, thank you for your love and support and everything that you do for our family to ensure I have time to finish the task at hand, thank you.

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## List of Abbreviations

CCCS – Congregation Christian Church of Samoa

EFKS – Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano Samoa

NRSV – New Revised Standard Version

TMO – Television Match Official

Rev – Reverend

AM – Aoao Malua

## Introduction

Rugby is a contact sport. It's a sport about intensity, determination, and drive. It is both physically and mentally challenging. Many people across the globe have a love and passion for the game of Rugby<sup>1</sup>. It is good exercise for our bodies, lessons in sociability, the value of teamwork, sacrifice, frustration, and the joy of a game well-played. Rugby is all about learning to coordinate your own body and mind through instinct and training, as well as that of your teammates and opponents. You pass the ball to another person, who, upon receiving it, will pass it back to you, and a try is scored. On the other hand, the opposition may have the ball, for which you are required under the rules to make contact through a tackle, and perhaps pilfer the ball and you're away for a runaway try.

Anyone can play rugby, regardless of age or gender, or physical attributes. There are several competitive levels ranging from under 6's to senior level. Depending on how serious you want to take it and where your physical limitations lie, there is a team and a club for you. More importantly the bond that forms between teammates cannot be compared to anything else that the game has to offer. Rugby is a game played with rules to follow, so too for Christians. Rugby is not only played for the enjoyment of the game but also to win, despite the fact that for most of the times, there has to be a winner and a loser. But not every team is a winner. So how do we know whether we have won as Christians?

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<sup>1</sup>In 1823, during a game of soccer at Rugby School in England, 16 year old William Webb Ellis picked up the ball and ran with it towards his opponent's goal line. The game of rugby was born. William and his school colleges then created rules of the game which has been modified over the years. Greg Growden, *Rugby for Dummies: 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian and New Zealand edition*, (Milton, Queensland: Wiley Publishing Australia Pty Ltd & sons, 2011), 9.



When the team is working together and a game plan safely embedded in each player, they all have the great ability to “socially inspire” their community/congregations. It is never just about the team but it is always about the impact (contact) that they make on the wider community that makes the great difference. However, rugby does have its down fall when it comes to injuries that can have a long term effect on an individual. It can also lead to cases such a depression and anxiety but such injuries can be avoidable and be cured with the right treatment and care.

Rugby as a contact sport in my utmost belief has great potential in furthering our theological insights into how the Gospel comes into contact with whoever will listen, learn, and have faith in the Lord. For purposes of this study, I shall endeavour to utilize my personal experiences as a full time Rugby Union player under the Waratahs<sup>2</sup> Academy and also in Rugby League with the Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs<sup>3</sup> to explore this theological connection and insights therein.

### *Methodology*

The transcendental model of Contextual theology by Stephen Bevans will be used to explain the Gospel and compare it to rugby. This methodology will allow us to have a different approach when it comes to the Gospel and how it is changing lives. The transcendental model emphasizes on what is called the personal view of human experience.<sup>4</sup> Here theology is not viewed as a teaching from a textbook, but rather as the product of someone’s mind and how he or she sees reality. And, reality is not a concept

<sup>2</sup>Waratahs Rugby is a Super Rugby franchise in New South Wales, Australia based in Moore Park, Sydney

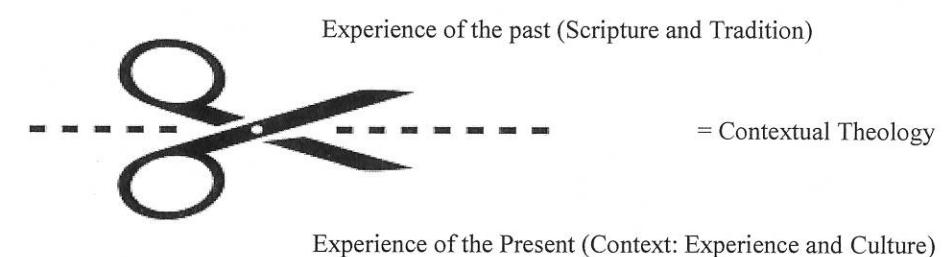
<sup>3</sup> Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs is a team within the National Rugby League (NRL) competition based in Belmore, Sydney Australia.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Culture*, Revised and Expanded ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 104.

that is extraneous to experience, but of the ‘now’ and directly related to the realities of ‘now’.

The transcendental model is explained by a process of interpretation, where the process of a scissor’s action is used for interpretation. A scissors has two blades with the top blade being the Experience of the Past, that is Scripture and Tradition, whereas, the bottom blade refers to Experience of the Present, that is the context, experience and culture. Now when the scissors action is used and the two blades meet one another in a cutting motion, when these two blades connect, there we have our contextual theology. There are some things that cannot be understood without a complete change of mind.

Figure 1.1 Scissor’s Action



This methodology will be applied to how the Gospel and Rugby can be inter-related theologically. The fusion of both Gospel and Rugby can be a new horizon when approaching and understanding Contextual Theology. The top blade refers to the Gospel with examples of both scripture and tradition, where it will be used to emphasize the means of what is the Gospel. Whereas the bottom blade of our scissors action indicates my personal experience as a Rugby player and also what these experiences and culture of a Rugby environment is. Once our scissors makes the cut and the merging of the two come together, hopefully, we will have a different approach when reading and having a look at the Gospel from a Rugby point of view where it interests the reader.



It is also important to note that while studying contextual theology, there are always possibilities that it may or may not be accountable for all readers as there are different perspectives and contexts within each person's heart.

This study consists of three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One is an explanation and meaning of what rugby is and what the Gospel is. Firstly, rugby will be clarified as a sport and its starting point as to its history not only in England, where it originated, but also in Samoa. A brief explanation as to the purpose of the game of rugby will also be explained. This will be followed, by a brief definition of the word 'Gospel', where certain scriptures will be cited in order to broaden our understanding as to the validity of 'contact' that Jesus had made on the faith community. Together with his teachings and commandments, the aim is to explore how 'rugby' as a contact sport resonates with how the 'Gospel' came into contact with Jesus' world then, and the world of today, as Christianity has grown as a global religion.

Chapter Two is an explanation of rugby as a contact sport, highlighting in general how the game is played. Through my own experience as a rugby player, both the attack and defensive sides of rugby will be explained, together with some other aspects of the modern game. A few rugby terminologies will be explained so as to widen our knowledge of the relationship between the game of rugby, and the Gospel in the essence of being a 'contact' phenomenon. In this chapter also, an explanation of the 'scissors action plan' will be highlighted as part of the 'contextual theology' approach central to the argument of this project; that the Gospel indeed is a 'contact sport.' The concept of rugby merging together with the Gospel will also be explained through my analogy of a rugby environment likened to the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa (CCCS) also known as the Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano Samoa.

Chapter Three represents our theological critique, where the author attempts to present a theological apprehension of not only the theological connection between rugby and the Gospel, but more significantly, the challenges we face as Christians in our attempts to make the Gospel known to others. The result of the interaction between the Gospel and Rugby is vital for our study as it will indicate whether the Gospel can be viewed as a contact sport. The theological critique will be based on the importance and comparison of rugby development to one's Christian faith. The main question that lies ahead for us is this; who wins in a game of Rugby? The objective of our study will be applied in our Conclusion and perhaps to enhance our own theological perspective to the church ministry, and more importantly our theological discourses as members of the Congregation Christian Church of Samoa.



## Chapter 1

### Rugby and Gospel

#### Introduction

This chapter will focus on the explanation of the term, 'rugby' and also discussing the meaning of the term 'Gospel.' Rugby will touch base on its history together with how the game was introduced in Samoa. The Gospel however, will be explained as to its origin and meaning. Furthermore, this chapter will explain not only the kind of contact Jesus made with people within the Bible but also how those people made contact with Him. The transcendental approach chosen for this project is the task of constructing a contextualized theology but the starting point is with the theologian/writer's concerned with one's own religious experience. Stephen Bevans asserts that the theologian/writer must operate as an authentic, converted subject in his/her attempt to explain the revelation God has shown through one's reality.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the starting point of theological conversation is not scripture or church tradition, rather his/her personal experience and journey with God. Thus, this project shall begin with an outline of the game of rugby, whilst also accommodating the relevant experiences from the author's participation as the starting point.

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<sup>1</sup>The Translation model, The Anthropological model, The Praxis model, The Synthetic model, The Transcendental model and The Cross-cultural model.(Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Cultures.)

#### 1.1 Rugby: A Game of Contact

In 1823, a student by the name of William Webb Ellis<sup>2</sup>, first picked the ball up in the middle of a football game and ran with it, thereby breaking the old rules and setting a precedent for the entirely distinct game of rugby. The game of football contains 11 players on either side of the field. However, rugby consisted of 15 players per team allowed on the field at the one time. The game is named after a school where William attended in a town in the English Midlands called the Rugby School<sup>3</sup>. What is certain is that the game was developed at Rugby School with William and his friends adjusting rules and also changing the round ball to an oval shape. The game developed when students from Rugby took the sport to other schools around the district and from there it was taken up by university undergraduates at Cambridge and Oxford. Gradually, after many years, it was refined into a game suitable for upwardly mobile Englishmen. Rugby quickly spread throughout the English speaking world. Rugby union is now played all over the world, from large countries such as France and Japan, to small nations such as Barbados, Guam and Kazakhstan.<sup>4</sup> The game is of rugby heavily influenced within the pacific with Rugby being the number one sport in most Pacific Island countries.

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<sup>2</sup> William Webb Ellis, born on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1806 in Salford, England. (Richards, Huw. A Game for Hooligans: The History of Rugby Union., [Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Mainstream Publishing, 2011], 43)

<sup>3</sup> Rugby School is a boarding independent school in the city called Rugby in Warwickshire, England where the game of Rugby first started. (Richards, Huw. A Game for Hooligans: The History of Rugby Union. [Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Mainstream Publishing, 2011], 43)

<sup>4</sup> Richard, Bath. *The Complete book of Rugby*, (Kent, London: Sevenoaks, 1997), 78.

### 1.1.1 Rugby<sup>5</sup> in Samoa

Rugby was first introduced into Samoa around the turn of the 20th century, when it was still a German colony. It is believed that the first people to introduce it there were missionaries from New Zealand.<sup>6</sup> The Marist Brothers brought the game to Samoa in 1920 and The Apia Rugby Union was formed in 1924.<sup>7</sup> There was also a large amount of contact with New Zealand, where many Samoans would migrate to in the 20th century. Here, the development of the game grew within Samoa as the people will travel and take the game with them teaching and passing on the game of rugby. Samoa is now well known on the world rugby stage, with its national team, the *Manu Samoa*, with Samoan players also representing countries such as New Zealand, Australia and England.

### 1.1.2 Why play Rugby?

The game of rugby is played mostly to have fun, the emphasis being on the enjoyment factor, as ought to be stipulated by coaches, parents, players, and spectators alike. One cannot also deny the fact that rugby is indeed a competitive contact game, a game that calls for unity, cohesion and co-operation for it to achieve its goals. The game includes 15 players per team on the field at the one time, working together to achieve victory by scoring more points than the opposition. The opposing teams do make contact as they test out their skills and organization against their opponents within the laws of the game. There are set goals for players prior to taking the field, on top of the main goal which is to win, whilst adhering to the rules of the game, at all times.

<sup>5</sup>When using the word 'rugby' I shall be referring to the game of 'rugby union' respectively, since there is also another game called 'rugby league' being played, but only with 13 players per team,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>7</sup><https://maristbrothers.org.nz/about-us/samoa/> (accessed June 30, 2017)

Assigned referees and linesmen [nowadays called the 'third umpires or touch judges'] are given full control of a game in play. Players discipline are closely monitored, and for each player to strictly adhere to the rules, as the game progresses. However, prior to even taking the field, respective team coaches are also given the ultimatum to prepare each player physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And then there are the moral support provided by the spectators, who attend not only to enjoy the game itself, but also lend their voices of support, and sometimes adding a bit of flavour by wearing team colours, banners, and body-painting, to name a few. It denotes how supporters are also united behind their team, who are also playing the game, as a unified team of souls opting to enjoy a game of rugby.

The players are expected to demonstrate the relevant skills on the field, and also to show respect, not only for the opposition, but also for those controlling the game. The aim at the most is to avoid being penalized for straying off the rules, however, it is the enjoyment principle that ought to be engrained and embedded in the mindset of each player, as they work together in tandem, with whoever is leading the team, or the 'captain'. Team members are strongly encouraged throughout to support and encourage one another as the game progresses till the end. A team wins by being able to score more points than the opposition. There are cases of both teams scoring the same number of points at the end, resulting in a draw.

Thus, winning, losing or settling for a draw is perhaps secondary to the whole essence of playing rugby, or any other sport for that matter. Coming into 'contact' with the opposition does create that special bond, that long-term friendship and comradeship, which in the end, overrides all the tensions and struggles that a player experiences in a game. The Gospel, likewise reflects to an extent that spirit of competition to win, to unify people of all ages, class and colour, and building that special bond amongst the



players of a believing community of faith – that is what this project aims to explore, and shall form part of our conclusion.

### 1.1.3 Challenges in Rugby

Rugby is a team sport where contact is heavily involved. As a former rugby player, and a current theological student, I am at ease to make a sound theological connection between 'rugby' as a contact sport, and how the Gospel makes contact with those who come to hear, believe and have faith in Christ. Rugby in essence was a full time job, and that not only was a time-consuming vocation for the author, but also called for one to be a completely dedicated individual. With the exception of Sundays, it was a call for commitment from all sides, whether it be family, school, dietary restrictions, and being a team person, one must adhere to strict team protocols in terms of discipline at all times.

Training in order to fulfil the calling as a full contact-playing rugby player is no easy task. Acquiring all the relevant skills to being able to make 'contact' and playing to the best of one's ability is a major factor in rugby, as in any other sport. There are also the elements of self-discipline and sacrifice, where commitment is the only way one's 'contact' is measured, once you enter the realm of a rugby game being played. It is these elements within the nature of contact being made in rugby that the author feels strongly about, for they, and others which will be mentioned later that resonates well with how the Gospel has, and will continue to be made known to the world at large.

## 1.2 Gospel: A Brief Definition

The word 'Gospel' is originally an Anglo-Saxon term meaning, '*gōdspel*' which is translated "good news". It is divided as *gōdspel*, meaning *gōd* 'good' + *spel* 'news, a

story'<sup>8</sup>. The New Testament Greek noun *euangelion* literally translates the Gospel as 'good news'. However, within the bible there are different usages of the word Gospel. The apostle Paul often uses the expression 'Gospel of Christ', as a theological abbreviation for the 'good news of Christ'<sup>9</sup>. Paul emphasizes the term Gospel to that he and his congregations understood to mean 'the saving message about Jesus'.

The author of Mark uses the word Gospel implicating to the career of Jesus in addition to His death and resurrection<sup>10</sup>. Mark 1:1 uses the term *euangelion* referring to "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ"<sup>11</sup>, that is transforming what had been an oral proclamation about Jesus into literary work. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not simply a story remembered; it is a message proclaimed. It is news, and an essential part of this news is the act of proclamation itself and that there is a messenger to announce the news. For the news is that God has reached out to man in order to save him from his sins and all their consequences<sup>12</sup>.

Jesus Christ has reached out and found someone to send to someone else with the message of His redeeming love. It is a cycle that has been carried on from one believer to another since the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christianity is a universal religion where it has reached and touched many different people around the world from the beginning till the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

<sup>8</sup> David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1989), 17.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>12</sup>D. T. Niles, *World Christian Book: Living with the Gospel* (Mile Cross Lane, Norwich: Page bros Ltd, 1961), 9.

### 1.2.1 The Gospel and the Point of contact

A point of contact can relate to many different things, and you can choose which action you will use as your point of contact. A point of contact will have a beginning and an end, where the results can either leave a positive or negative effect on the receiving end. A point of contact does not necessarily mean a physical contact between two parties but to have an effect on someone else's life. As a Christian and believer in Jesus Christ, our point of contact could simply be the prayer of faith, the Holy Communion and simply just attending Church. A point of contact is the method we use to reach God. A point of contact provides a way for us to act on our belief, and when we do that, we release our faith to God.

Within the New Testament alone, people approach God in many different ways. Whatever way that may be, it leaves a positive outcome to where one's faith is fulfilled. For example, in Matthew 9: 20 – 22<sup>13</sup>, the story is about a lady with haemorrhages, and how she came in contact with Jesus through the fringe of his coat. Anyone with this kind of sickness was seen as unclean which meant she couldn't go to the synagogues or come into contact with others. A simple touch of faith enlightened her sickness to be healed and brought her back into society and was accepted again within the Jewish community. A touch of hope, in hoping she will receive the answer she was after which was to be saved and healed.

Another example is the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4: 7 – 42; by coming into contact with Jesus at the water well, she gained salvation for not only her, but for all Gentiles.

<sup>13</sup>Matthew 9: 20-22, "And a woman who had been suffering from a haemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; for she was saying to herself, 'If I only touch His garment, I will get well.' But Jesus turning and seeing her said, 'Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.' At once the woman was made well". (New Revised Standard Version Bible)

For it was not a physical contact but being in contact with the presence of Jesus himself. She was shocked with her conversation with Jesus that she went back to her village and gathered people to come and see Jesus who is the Messiah. Their disbelief turned into a moment of truth for what they had witnessed. This point of contact opened up a gateway for all Gentile Christians. For John 4: 42<sup>14</sup>, explains that now that they witnessed Jesus, the Saviour of the world for themselves that they also believed in everything the Samaritan woman had said.

Paul the apostle, a person who I take as a typical rugby player who came into contact with Christ on the Damascus road, until touched by Ananias, had been making contact from a wrong angle, who was then 'spiritually penalized' so to speak. Prior to accepting Christ and becoming a layer himself, indeed a messenger of Christ, Paul had not been a 'team player' opting instead to apply the rules of engagement from a personal point of view.<sup>15</sup> Once Saul had learned to play the game of 'contact' according to the rules of faith, he for once never looked back but strived to furthering spiritual 'contact' with followers of the risen Christ.

### Summary

This chapter sets a tone of what is rugby and also the meaning of Gospel and how through contact, the Gospel has being a movement that has captured the world today. Rugby has developed significantly over the years since it was first introduced. Rugby has many aspects of the game that we have yet to explore, however, the next chapter will have an insight of the game itself. The Gospel of Jesus has been inspiring in the

<sup>14</sup> John 4: 42, "They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'" (New Revised Standard Version Bible)

<sup>15</sup>Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 3.



biblical text. We see the effect it has on individuals and a community, whether is it physical contact or just contact of being in the presence of Jesus and witnessing His miracles and testimonies. Rugby and Gospel both have their main purpose of how it is portrayed and revealed to not only individuals but people overall. The point of contact is important as it leaves a mark and effects the way think and live our lives today. The next chapter will develop the merging of the game of rugby and the Gospel with terminologies and different aspects of rugby explained through the Gospel. We look into how a contact sport like rugby can have the same effect with the Gospel in making contact with Christians.

## Chapter 2

### Jesus and Rugby: A Theological Contact

#### Introduction

This chapter will develop the concept of rugby merging with the Gospel in finding a new horizon or ideas. Contextual theology is the reflective conversations about God through the lens of the subjective human context or experience and how this engages with the traditional sources of Christian theology, Scripture and Church Tradition.<sup>1</sup> Contextual theology is based on the belief that God's unending revelation is also encountered in the everyday life of human experience. Therefore, cutting the scissors according to the transcendental method of Models of Contextual theology enables us to merge the two together. This merging of the two horizons starts with the explanation of different types of rugby terminologies with comparisons to our lives as Christians. It is important to know the terminologies before we comment on the connection to the Gospel. Also included in this chapter is the comparison of the CCCS or EFKS church to a rugby club setting.

#### 2.1 Rugby: The Game and its Contact Particularities

There are many different slangs and terminologies within the rugby community that only a rugby player will understand. In saying that, those who spectate and are well educated on the game of rugby also know the basic rules and terminologies of the game. From such terminologies, this section will only explain and elaborate on a number on

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen. B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Cultures*, Revised and Expanded ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 99.

terms used in a game of rugby. Moreover, with explaining each terminology, follows a brief contrast from my point of view and how each term can be liken to the Christian faith.

In a game of rugby, when a player with the ball loses control of the ball causing the ball to go forward, it's called a 'knock-on'. A knock-on is losing, dropping, or knocking the ball forward from a player's hand resulting in the ball being awarded to the other team in a scrum.<sup>2</sup> To knock-on the ball, it can be either accidental or forced. Knocking the ball on can reflect in letting the team down as you lose possession of the ball. Usually when this happens, as the player that knocked on, you try and make up for your mistake by putting in more effort at the next phase of play whether it be in a tackle or at the breakdown. As Christians, we make mistakes, for no one is perfect, but from these mistakes we try not to repeat it. We are sinners, in the sense that we may 'knock on' with our daily walk with God, yet though we 'knock on' on numerous occasions, there is always the next opportunity to get it back and to retrieve our self-belief in Christ.

Teamwork is needed in order to minimize turnover ball. A turnover is when one side takes possession of the ball from their opponents.<sup>3</sup> Turnover ball often occurs when there is poor ball security or weak support play securing the tackled team player with the ball. From such poor ball security and protection of the ball no matter the situation it can lead the opposition scoring a try or penalty. We tend to leave our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to be left in the dark, one out running with no support play, with the possibility of losing that friend to other denominations and beliefs because of lack of support. Rugby is so competitive that turnover ball can be a tug-of-war match with both

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<sup>2</sup> terminology' world rugby accessed June 30<sup>th</sup> 2017 <http://playerwelfare.worldrugby.org/?section=13>

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

teams eager for that ball to win. To try and decrease turnover ball it is important to work together to enable good ball security and flow of the game.

There are times in a game that a player with possession of the ball is being held up by the opposition in a tackle, but when players from both teams encounter, a 'maul' is formed. A maul takes place once a runner comes into contact with an opposing player, and the ball is still being held by a player once any combination of at least three players have bound themselves. The primary difference from a ruck is that the ball is not on the ground.<sup>4</sup> An important significance of the maul that I intend to emphasize is the idea of 'going forward.' The maul has to keep moving forward and cannot be static as the team that has the ball will lose it. Once a maul is formed, working together as a team to push forward to gain that momentum, can be a difficult task to stop once on a roll. Our lives as Christians resonates to that of a rugby maul. No matter what life throws at us with our ups and downs, as Christians we ought to keep moving forward, whether it be simple steps or by hitting and turning. Perhaps, the main thing is that one keeps on moving before being penalized for holding on for too long and not using the ball.

A ruck is when the ball carrier has come into contact and the ball has been delivered to the ground. Once any combination of at least three players have bound themselves, then a ruck has been set. The primary difference from a maul is that the ball is on the ground.<sup>5</sup> The ruck is constantly occurring in a game of rugby. It is when the ball is contested with the strength of players, either through trying to steal the ball or counter rucking to push over the gain line to try and retrieve the ball back. The team who has the ball then must aim to try and keep the ball by securing it from the opposition.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.,



In a game of rugby there is an offside rule where you are never allowed to be in front of a kicker in a kick chase or be in front of a player while in possession of the ball. Offside occurs during rucks, scrums, lineouts, and mauls. An imaginary line is present over any player crossing before the set piece is completed. Whoever crosses this line will then receive a penalty.<sup>6</sup> Offside play is initiated by a play advantage call from the referee where the player is given a chance to retrieve back to the gain line. The aim is to not be involved in any play until the player is back onside as it will cause for an immediate penalty if the player decides to get involved. Our God is a loving God and always cares for his people. If we even play offside as Christians, we are always given a second chance to redeem ourselves before we get penalized. So there is always that window of opportunity to do what is right.

For whatever reason when passing a ball it must never go forward. If so that's what we call a forward pass. In a game of rugby all passes must go backwards, and this is an illegal pass where the ball goes forwards. The penalty is a scrum in favour of the other side.<sup>7</sup> Forward passes are not allowed in a game of rugby, however, there are times where teams have gotten away with a forward pass or two as both the referee and touch judges have missed it. It does not mean it is legal to do so. Some forward passes are accidental some may even be on purpose in trying to get that ball and player over that advantage line and wanting to win the game. The key phrase is 'patient', as one must remain humble and show humility, so as to enjoy the game.

The last facet of the game is that of a penalty. A penalty is any number of infractions or violations which award the other team a free kick or even a penalty try.<sup>8</sup> There are different kind of penalties with different options at hand to choose from.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.,

When the referee awards a short hand penalty the team with the ball has two options. One, a quick tap to try and get the opposition offside and to gain either another penalty or a try. Two, opt for a scrum. When it's a long arm penalty by the referee, this then results to a kick to the side line for a line out. Depending on the extreme of the incident, penalties can also be given by a yellow or red card, or even a penalty try. A yellow card is 10 [ten] minutes in the bin where as a red card you will be sitting the remainder of the game on the side line and a possible penalty of suspension.

## 2.2 Merging Rugby and Gospel

Rugby can provide a theological insight into one's journey as a Christian. According to Nathan Jones, "no sport whether played or watched could ever substitute for authentic worship of the true God who knows us as individuals even as we praise Him together. But sports can offer a powerful vehicle for the practice of the Christian faith."<sup>9</sup> As a Christian, rugby can be an insight into how we encounter ourselves with the Gospel. As Jones refers to sports as a powerful vehicle, rugby, a contact sport, can also reflect a power vehicle that is driven by God.

When rugby is played at its best, the players execute their key roles in their preferred positions. There are times when someone will over run a play or over commit to a ruck. However, a player is duly responsible for their position on the field. In the CCCS environment, that scenario is quite similar. Each person in the church has been uniquely gifted by God to serve the church, by playing key roles as individuals in a team environment. Playing one's position to the best of your capability, guided by God who has called us to be players in the game of faith. In other words, a coach must play

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>9</sup>Nathan, Jones. "Feeling God's Pleasure: Christian Faith in the World of Sports" *Word & World* Fall 35 (2015): 339, accessed June 10, 2017.

the role of a coach, likewise the players and the spectators. The whole idea is utilizing the amount of space on the field, without the need to bunch up at once. The key is to spread out and play one's position, where, if all goes well in a game, it will be easier to score points without wasting too much energy in roaming around. Above all, rejoice in your position that best suits you with your God given talents. Not all of us can be a fly-half or the popular winger but all in all, even the props and hookers are the real workers. They might not get all the glory but they too play an important role in the success of the team. Each member of the church has a role to play within the church. When the apostle Paul spoke about the Church being the "body of Christ" in 1 Corinthians 12:12<sup>10</sup>, it perhaps mirrors Paul's insights into the role of Christ in the church.

For a team to succeed, individually, each position on a rugby field is vital with each player having a set task or focus to maintain in their preferred positions. Likewise, a Christian has been assigned a role in the community of faith, where one comes into 'contact' at church with other 'players' whilst also surrounded by the realm of the spiritual presence of the Minister and others. The question however is that as an individual, can one be spiritually filled and connected to God when he or she decides to remain at home rather than attending church services? I make this reference to that of a rugby scrum half, where as an 'individual', his passing game needs to be spot on by hitting the target of other players at all times which in all determines the pace of the game. Furthermore, the scrum half has to be present at the break downs to deliver quick quality ball, and also gifted with a quality kicking game. I believe that such qualities of a scrum half can be a key component to the team's success. The players and their individual efforts overall is reflected upon how well the team performance is overall, a

<sup>10</sup>1 Corinthians 12: 12, "For just as the body is one and has many members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." (NRSV)

situation which is duly reflected in how we participate in matters of faith. Our dedicated and total commitment, armed with our individual talents granted upon by the grace of God, is of utmost significance to the success of the Gospel, the game or the message of peace, love, faith and hope attained once a player makes contact with other faithful believers.

### 2.3 Jesus, Rugby and the CCCS: An Analogy

According to the Constitution of the CCCS, the 'aulotu'<sup>11</sup> (church) is basically the local congregation in the village in Samoa, and in a town or city for overseas congregations outside Samoa. The 'aulotu' comprises of 'tagata lotu'<sup>12</sup> (Church goers), 'tagata ekalesia'<sup>13</sup> (congregants), 'tiakono'<sup>14</sup> (deacon), 'A'oa'o Fesoasoani'<sup>15</sup> (lay-preacher), and the 'faifeau'<sup>16</sup>, (Church minister), at the top of this organisation. The 'Faifeau' is the leader of the 'aulotu' in all matters, especially those involving the spiritual and pastoral dynamics of the Church.

From a rugby standpoint, one can see similarities or resonates the faith communities of the CCCS church to that of a rugby team. The Coach is the Minister and his wife, while the Assistant Coaches may be represented by the Lay Preachers. The Captain is the Church Secretary and the Vice-captain is the Treasurer. Most importantly, the players are the Deacons and members of the Congregation. For a game of rugby to eventuate, a referee has to be in place, and in that sense, I see the role of our Lord Jesus

<sup>11</sup>EFKS, O le Fa'avae o le Ekalesia Fa'apopotoga Kerisiano Samoa (The Constitution of the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa), 5.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 11.



as the main Referee, who is in full control of the game. On the other hand, in the modern game of rugby, when there is foul play or a second opinion needed, the Referee usually calls upon the video referee or the TMO (Television Match Official). The video referee makes that final decision. We place God as our video referee who has eyes on every single play and can see the game from all angles and bird's eye view on everything that we do.

This is our team structure as believers when it comes to the church and rugby. Like any team sport there is the need for practice and training to not only better the individual skills of a player but to gain strength and fitness for game day. As far as the insights of our game with game plans and ideas, we rely solely on the Coach, the Minister and at times the Minister's wife or *Faletua*. The Minister provides the spiritual vision and understanding of the Gospel to help with the spiritual life of each player as individuals and a team overall. Whereas the team, that is the church, unity is important. Paul expresses to us in letter to the Ephesians 4:1 – 3<sup>17</sup>, that we are to contemplate the needs of others before our own. A church filled with such people as explained by Paul cannot help but have peace, unity and harmony. The truly humble person sees his own faults in light of the perfections of Christ. He does not seek to see the faults of others, but when he does, he speaks the truth in love and desires their sanctification so they will be built up in the image of Christ.

Robert Cipiriani noted that "The similarity between tactics in games and the liturgy in religious services is not the result of mere coincidence."<sup>18</sup> However, both tactics in games and liturgy in service cooperate with one another. Passing of the rugby

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 4: 1 – 3, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (NRSV)

<sup>18</sup> Robert, Cipiriani, *Sports as Spirituality, Impact Religion*, (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2012), 145

ball all belong to an order and logic not totally dissimilar from a well performed liturgical act or a well sung hymn. Each team has their own unique way of conducting their services but all long for the one goal which is to praise and worship God.

## Summary

This chapter explains the merging of the Gospel and rugby with the explanation of a few terminologies and also how it relates to the CCCS. As explained in this chapter, the meaning of rugby compared to ones Christian faith has its similarities. Our lives as Christians can be put into perspective as we look at the terminologies used in rugby. Rugby as a community is liken to a Congregation and we all have a part to play within the community. Whether you are the Minister, deacon, church attendee or even our children, you have an important role not only for Jesus and His ministry but also as individuals. We turn to the theological reflection of how rugby and Gospel is a contact sport in the following chapter. The following chapter will elaborate and give theologically examples of contact being made as well as the important question of who wins in our game of rugby.

## Chapter 3

### Game Time: Contact Established and Reaffirmed

#### Introduction

Its game time, the walk out of that tunnel from the dressing shed out onto the rugby field and waiting for that opening whistle by the referee to begin play and the sound of a screaming crowd cheering your team on. Interestingly, the atmosphere and the game is on a high and just matter of being a part of something special. Similarly, arriving to Church on a beautiful Sunday morning, walking out of your car as a family hearing the sound of the organ playing church hymns with peace and quiet and waiting for that bell to ring, ready to Praise and Worship God. The mood is set for a spiritually filled Sunday service to give thanks to God. Our final chapter will explain how rugby resonates with the essence and significance of the message of the Gospel as it comes into contact with the world of the believer.

#### 3.1 Rugby: A Theological Expression at Play

The biblical and theological basis of the EFKS<sup>19</sup> as a Congregational Church is derived from Jesus' teaching in Mathew 18:19 – 20<sup>20</sup>, where Jesus speaks about His Father in heaven and how He is amongst those who gather in His name. Rugby is a culture and a congregation liken to the CCCS. It is a team sport where there are more

<sup>19</sup>EFKS, O le Fa'avae o le Ekalesia Fa'apotopotoga Kerisiano Samoa (The Constitution of the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa), 2006, 5.

<sup>20</sup>Matthew 18: 19 – 20 "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (New Revised Standard Version); see also Ibid., 5.

than two or three gathered in the name of rugby. However, the effect of rugby is a dynamic and important ongoing aspect of our social and cultural development not only as individuals but also as a team overall as Christians within a Church. Rugby development from a young age is similar to the importance of Christian education. Education of church doctrine would lead to a greater understanding of the mechanism of the church, but most importantly the enhancement of our faith in Christ. This is a very general observation in regards to the context outside of Samoa, but many of our young youth members are not educated about our church doctrine. Maybe this is one way of stemming their flow to other church denominations as they become spiritually awakened in the teachings of Christ and the importance of doctrine.

Rugby development is preparing the young age the core values and importance of the game such as enjoyment, respect, discipline, teamwork and sportsmanship. These are the fundamentals of the game that the coach and supporting staff in parents and friends should be approaching at first hand. A child's first instance of picking up a rugby ball is to run and have fun. The motivation of the sport of rugby is that everyone plays and it is not based on the child's ability to perform, but on their ability to participate. As with all aspects of development, these areas will require continued work and should not be neglected once they have been demonstrated. The aspects should be practiced and constantly referred to by the coach. This is where our analogy from the previous chapter comes into place with the coach being the Minister of the church who is constantly monitoring the well-being and growth of his players/congregations including children.

Christian education and rugby development is a significant contributor to the well-being and life of the congregation. It embeds Christian values, beliefs and teachings of Christ. The emphasis should always be the outcome of the faithful

believers and their growth within any church organisation. The values and beliefs that one can instil in a child increases the likelihood of their emotional, physical and spiritual development and growth within this challenging world. It sets the foundation of their Christian upbringing in the hope that they become integral members of the church and the life and mission of Christ. To solidify and emphasise Christian education, is to solidify Christ's teachings within the church. To see a child grow spiritually in Christ, is the greatest outcome of the good work that the minister, teachers, families and church provide. Therefore, Christian education is a must and a priority for our church, in order for it to make contact and continually grow as a body of Christ.

Rugby as a contact sport is unique in many ways. Charlie Rudd clearly elaborates to that effect, as he made comment that,

'in competition and sport, one can practice and live out wonderful characteristics of living in God's grace, perseverance, hope, bearing and working with one another, dealing with hardship and failure, acknowledging the varied gifts of others—these are all learned, taught, experienced, and practiced in the best of what sport has to offer. Not to mention, it gives great opportunity for just plain fun, recreation, and exercise—surely good for health and life when engaged responsibly.'<sup>21</sup>

This is the basis framework that helps provide guidance on how we might be able to receive God's grace and hope in the sporting world. Rugby is a game that enables confident, competent decision-making rugby players transformed into confident, competent, decision-making and God fearing people. There is an important aspect of the game which allows individuals to improve their health physically and to be ready to gain spiritual wealth from the Gospel.

<sup>21</sup> Charlie, Rudd. 'Christ of Curveballs: A Reflection on Competition, Life, and Cross'. Word & World. Volume 35, (2015): 329, accessed June 10.

John White also asserted that sports, such as rugby, has religious significance because of its religious experience.<sup>22</sup> The experience one can gain from not only the game itself but also the environment of a rugby club is comparable to the Church. Rugby gives us an adrenaline rush that keeps us excited and wanting the game to be well over 80mins. Sports deserves our attention because it is a matter of the spirit, the religious or sacred realm.<sup>23</sup> Religious experiences are typically God himself, understood as an eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, free, and perfectly good spirit. God, in which reveals Himself to people because they have undertaken a severe practice to draw closer to Him. Rugby teams are worshipped as gods with all the pride and passion of spectators and supporters in that team colours and jersey which gain an experience one can stay loyal to for the rest of their life.

Sports, such as rugby is played across the globe in countries such as Spain, Japan, England, South Africa and countries in the Pacific which include Samoa and Fiji, and it has become a global phenomenon over the years. This very game in the form of a 7's aside team has been introduced into the Olympics for the very first time in 2016. Mark Chapman explains how diversity of the Olympics began as a religion, however affirms, "Christianity is not a religion alongside others, but is the religion."<sup>24</sup> The spread of the Gospel is also global similar to the game of rugby which other religions spreading more rapidly.

<sup>22</sup> John, White. *The Enduring Problem of Dualism Christianity and Sports*, Review Article, (Landcester, Shieffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd), 2012, 230.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>24</sup> Mark, Chapman. *Theology at the Olympics: St Louis 1904 and London 2012*. De Gruyter, 2014, 1, 258.



### 3.2 Rugby and the Gospel: Determining the Winner?

We often see rugby players who after scoring a try, will point to the sky in a sign of relief and happiness in acknowledgement to God for their given talents. But then if both teams are pointing to the sky then which side is the sky on? In today's competitive world, everyone is eager to win. No one is ready to accept the second position in their lives. Life is turning into a game in which people are not realizing that they are leaving behind many things of worrying importance. We should all have the will to win, however winning is not everything. The struggle to win something is very important but sometimes, losing is also beneficial for us. It is not necessary to win every time you participate, instead, sometimes we have to go through failures too. At that time we should not be disappointed or frustrated at the result. Every experience teaches us something which makes us more mature and capable of dealing with problems.

Participation in a game of rugby is more important than just winning. If you keep on participating then surely one day you will get the result of the hard work you put in. It is not necessary that every time the winner alone gets appreciation and fame for his work. There are many examples of real life champions who have never come first in their life but they are perfect in their lives. It does not matter that you win or lose, all that matters is the courage to participate. It is very essential to fight in life rather than just conquering it. Players should be ready to face all kinds of challenges and hurdles which come their way.

This is duly reflected in Audrey West's redefinition of an athlete's participation and eagerness to win through training and practices, stressing the fact that athletes equate to the Christian way of life. Says West, 'successful athletes focus commitment, fitness and skills during practice so that it will be possible to do them automatically when it comes to the day of the game or race, freeing their minds to respond fully to the

moment at hand.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, when the followers of Christ read Scripture, sing hymns, participate in public prayer or corporate worship, pass the peace, gather in solidarity with the marginalized, serve one another, work for justice, and so on, we engage in the practices of faith that free us to respond fully to all that God has given in Christ Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

We fight from victory, not for victory for Christ has already offered His life for those who believe. When Jesus cried out on the cross, "it is finished" (John 19:30), Satan was finished and because of the cross, we have victory in Jesus. In saying so, the opposition is not referred to as the team of Satan because in rugby, there is no discrimination as it is a game for all. When Manu Samoa or any other team for that matter plays a game and loses, people do question the reasons for its demise, with some searching for divine answers to a certain extent. However, the opposing team also faces the same reality, for they too had placed their emphasis on winning at all costs.

Paul says in Romans 8: 37-39 that nothing in all creation can come in between the loving God and His redeemed people that has to include the behaviour and belief of His own children as well. Here, Paul uses the extremes of comparison that nothing will disrupt the work of Christ, for victory has already been assured, as in the words of Paul, "If God is for us, who is against us?"<sup>27</sup> Theologically speaking, in a contact situation such as playing the game of rugby, there can only be one real winner for Christ has already achieved that for the world.

<sup>25</sup> Audrey, West. *On Not Running in Vain: Preaching the Good News in a Sports-Crazed World*, Text in Contexts, Volume 35, 4 (2015), 385.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>27</sup> Romans 8: 31 "If God is for us, who is against us?" (New Revised Standard Version)

## Summary

The connection between rugby and the Gospel has been the main focus of this chapter, highlighting the game of rugby, with its highs and lows, and how it is reflected in the life of the Church and individuals as Christians. Nothing is ever perfect but God Himself. We all have our weaknesses in life but there is always a window of opportunity to regain strength, to pass the ball around and move forward at all times, seeking God in all that we do. Rugby is a game that is played by opposing teams, open to everyone so too is Christ but it is up to the player and individual to seek Him.

## Conclusion

Through this study, we have come to an understanding that the Gospel is just as much of a contact sport as Rugby. Rugby can be played anywhere at any time of the day. According to Angela Denker, 'sports have incredible power: to stir, to move, to unite, to overcome, and to empower. When the church understands this power, then church leaders and Christians everywhere can use it, for the good of the greatest true story of all.'<sup>28</sup> This is the same effect that Rugby as a contact sport can have amongst those who part take in the sport and even those on the side line spectating. Rugby, like the Gospel has the incredible power to stir up and spark the adrenaline in one's body to ensure that they feel the spirit allowing them to move, unite, and overcome and most importantly to empower one's soul for the better. Our analogy of the CCCS church defines the importance of every role and the different responsibilities, tasks and duties that come with each individual. Any coach (minister) of a rugby team is there to help, guide, advise and empower not only the team as a whole, but also as individuals.

The players in our team which includes the deacons, congregants and children need to be committed and dedicated in all that they do. This requires a complete commitment and dedication to training and game day. It is about self-sacrifice from the temptations of life to allowing the individual to prepare for game day. A player needs to possess such qualities, for they are then challenged on the field, the field of Christ and the Gospel, the field of faith that one must face on a daily basis, as we play the game of

our lives. The challenge for players is to manage performance influencing factors while maintaining and developing themselves in aspects of their lives other than sport. We are juggling at maintaining life as Christian players in the team of God in the society we live in.

Eric D Baretto outlines sports as a form of civil religion, where it draws people together around ritual, song and symbols of secretly sacred places.<sup>29</sup> In essence, Baretto refers to sport as one's aspirations, a sense of belonging to something special. At sporting events, such as rugby, belonging happens when we exult in victories and lament losses. Belonging at a game of rugby happens when we wear common uniforms of allegiance to a particular side. Belonging happens when we sing or cheer in unison. There are elements of religious practice scattered throughout these modes of belonging. As a community/team we find ways to gather, to celebrate, to rejoice, to mourn and to pay our respect to God for His steadfast love.

The community of rugby and church is great as we come to understand the essence of unification and how the love of a game of rugby brings our team together. Rugby Union is a contact sport where as the Gospel is in union. As a team, unity is important just the same as any contact sport does not allow discrimination, so to the Church. As explained previously the Church according to Paul, has to be founded on peace, harmony and unity. Achieving one's full potential is about committing oneself to the process of self-improvement and playing to one's potential. When one does this, not only in a game of rugby but with the church and following the Gospel, one will gain salvation. Salvation is attributed above all to God and no one can save us but God alone.

<sup>28</sup> Angela Denker, 'Sports Culture and the Gospel story of Redemption'. Pastoral Perspective, Word & World, Volume 35, Number 4 (2015): 401, accessed June 10.

<sup>29</sup> Eric, D Baretto. Sports and Race: *A Cauldron of Theological deliberation and Discernment*, Word & World Fall. (Volume 35: 2015), 370, accessed June 10.

All sports have rules and laws to follow to ensure the flow and continuity of the game. Therefore, in our game of rugby, Jesus is our referee and being a referee means needing to be at every movement of the game. In life we sometimes forget that Jesus is with us wherever we go. He is always there 'refereeing' our decisions and the way we play in life. In hindsight, the referee would not be happy to just let us play the way we wanted, for discipline ought to be adhered to at all times of 'contact'. A game will be a disaster without Christ, the referee applying all the applicable rules.

Participation in rugby enables the individual to improve on social, mental and physical health. Social is learning to cooperate with others gaining new friends and relationships. When partaking in rugby and church commitments one's confidence levels boast and shows more passion to the game and Gospel. The game being played challenges one's mental health. Such attributes enables one to be competitive during competition which challenges the mind to think right from wrong where it relieves stress and helps improve self-esteem and satisfaction. A player's physical health allows the individual to improve performance, fitness, muscular strength, flexibility, body shape and prevent injury.

Enjoyment, of all the aspects associated with all other 'contact' sports', is the key to playing and participating in a team sport such as rugby. This also resonates with our own participation as members of the community of faith, upon our calling in the Church as players by no other than God. Players from both worlds are encouraged to enjoy training and playing. As we enjoy the game we treat other players as also part of God's realm. Rugby and the Gospel also adopt a healthy lifestyle phenomenon, and likewise establish strong relational skills with others. Players including children are monitored and protected by the coach and team staff and to help and to ensure that they have fun. Being a part of a team and the family of God allows the players to have fun.



Dedication and commitment, two key elements of rugby come from the desire to achieve success. In our game of rugby, one must establish goals that will guide the path to success. Being dedicated and committed to these goals is essential for anyone to shine. Dedication is the will to work on achieving goals. Commitment is the inner drive to put heart and soul into accomplishing them. To reach your potential as a player of God you must have a strong work ethic and an underlying belief that you can succeed. High achievers are dedicated to work hard even when they do not enjoy some of the tasks, because they are committed to the efforts necessary for their goals. Committing oneself to achieving a dream is a key attribute in a 'player of faith,' whilst also dedicating oneself to working hard in order to achieve one's goals, and most importantly to have fun while doing it.

As players and children of God, the importance of perseverance in our rugby game means to continue steadfastly, especially in something that is difficult or dull. It requires regular practice to develop the quality of perseverance. Only a patient player with strong determination can achieve his goal by perseverance. Perseverance is the secret to success, for without it, no great achievement is possible even if a person possesses limited rugby talents and technical knowledge. Likewise in our lives as faithful followers of Christ, we are ought to exercise perseverance, especially in times when our team is starved of 'possession' at almost every 'ruck' or 'maul' that we face in life. At times also, we tend to lose focus on our roles as players, thus becoming part of reason why our 'contact' with our fellow Christians and others may not succeed. However, through perseverance, our focus on God remains strong not only as scrumhalves-come- individuals, but also as team players in Christ.

In all, the game of rugby, with all its rules, conditions, attributes and regulations, does have great similarities and resonates much with our lives as Christians. The game resembles our own calling as players, who have been called to make 'contact' with the world of others, whilst also adhering to the rules set apart by Christ. The game of contact ensures us, as players ought to exercise caution, and be mindful of our own preparations, in both mind and spirit, as well as our physical and mental awareness. Though we may not win some games, this is the true essence of playing the game of our lives, to strive forward until we win that ruck or maul or retaining the kick-off, under all sorts of pressure that life throws at us. God reminds us of failures and 'penalties' imposed upon our inadequacies whilst playing, and so we ought to remain focused at all times, during the entire game of faith, to win for Christ and the Gospel.

**Glossary**

a'oa'o fesoasoani – lay preacher

aulotu – church

Faifeau – minister/pastor

Faletua – Minister's wife

tagata ekalesia – congregants

tagata lotu – church goers

tiakono – deacons

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