

Football Theology

Colleagues,

Call me un-American. I've never been enthralled by U.S.-style football, and the older I get the more my interest in it, such as it ever was, continues to fade. So when I joined the mass of the citizenry in attending to the super-doings two Sundays ago it was mainly to check out this year's crop of million-dollar commercials and to see if the half-time show would establish yet another benchmark of garishness and excess. I do believe it did. Parenthetically, if one of you out there is adept at reading the message in the medium and can clue the rest of us in to the operative dogmas that formed and drove Madonna's Big Show, we'd love to hear from you.

For now we get to hear from someone who watched on Super Bowl night to see the football. Well, of course he did. Dr. Peter Keyel, a member of the Crossings Board, grew up in Racine, Wisconsin where no red-blooded boy could avoid following Brett Favre and the Packers, or so I imagine. Today he lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, home to a host of rabid folk who are strangely fixated on my town's least favorite team, the Steelers. (I live in Cleveland.) Last year, as Peter watched the Packers beat the Steelers in Super Bowl XLV, he fell to thinking about theology. An immunologist by training and profession, he had nonetheless come down with a serious case of the Law/Gospel bug through conversations with Ed Schroeder, who he went to church with while completing post-doctoral work at Washington University in St. Louis.

That's how it came to pass that Peter found himself watching last year's big game and the frenetic hoopla surrounding it through the eyes of a thoughtful, confessional Lutheran layperson. The results are below, with some minor edits to synch

his reflection with the new realities of Super Bowl XLVI. Enjoy. Could be, by the way, that the preachers who read this will come away a fresh idea or two on how to pitch the two-edged Word of God in terms that will spark a fresh “Aha” in the folks they’re talking to. If so, God be praised.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

P.S. No sooner had I finished this than Peter sent me a note about what he’s up to these days. Here it is:

“I am working as a postdoc at the University of Pittsburgh, in the field of Immunology. I’m trying to figure out how one of the early-warning systems the body has against infectious diseases works. This system is called the “inflammasome” because it promotes inflammation. Knowing how it works will ultimately help us design better vaccines and cure diseases resulting from too much inflammation, like arthritis.”

Americans, at least those who like football, have a grasp on Christian theology.

Wait, what?

Look at the language we use for football. Where I live we have signs up announcing that you’re entering “Steeler country”, because WE live here, not any actual Steelers. We talk about how we need to beat team X and team Y so we can move on and make it to the Super Bowl. It’s our team, even though we don’t manage the team or pick the players. We know that our place is in the bleachers, as fans, and that we don’t contribute to the team winning. Even so, when the Giants won the big game this year, it was a win for everyone in the New York megalopolis. On the Tuesday after the game, people swarmed to watch the ticker-tape

parade up the so-called Canyon of Heroes in Manhattan, where they reveled in a victory to which they contributed nothing. And most fans realize it would be completely ludicrous for them to expect victory or even avoid injury if they tried to play in place of the Giants, or the Steelers.

Americans get Christian theology, at least when it comes to football. So how does that work? Well, the hardest part for people in New England, the Bay Area, and Wisconsin to get is that Jesus is for us as the Giants were for New Yorkers a week and a half ago. He won the Super Bowl through absolutely no help from us, and that victory IS our victory.

Of course, there are some differences, since the Super Bowl Jesus wins for us is salvation from sin and death, instead of a seasonal sporting event, but we can still use the Super Bowl to better understand atonement theology and where we get the theology end wrong. The biggest part we tend to get wrong is that we are the fans, not the football team. While we understand in football that our team stands no chance if we're the ones actually on the field, it's a lot harder when it comes to life and breaking the power of sin and death. We're not happy with how our team seems to be doing. We want to take to the field, and play this one. We need to be good enough, try hard enough, save enough, be holy enough, feed enough poor people, give enough to the church, and if we work hard enough, we can win. Yes we can. And yet, there are two problems here. One is that if the Bible is any indication of how well God's chosen people have played, then it's clear we've got a longer losing streak than the Pittsburgh Pirates'. Read it: all through the Old Testament, Israel has sinned, and turned away from God, over and over again. Even in the midst of God moving the Israelites to the Promised Land, they go and make themselves a Golden Calf. And today, we're not doing any better. Given the amount of exhortation to feed the poor, remember the widows and orphans,

stick up for the exploited, we're still not noticeably closer to that goal. We can't field a winning team, and that's a problem.

Just in case that wasn't bad enough, there's actually worse news. If we're fielding a team ourselves, we're not playing on God's team. We're playing against God's team. I think we all know just how brutal that game would turn out. I've heard there's a 100% injury rate in the NFL, and that part of the analogy translates perfectly well. When we take to the field of salvation ourselves, we're playing against God, and it's going to destroy us. How much of our hurt comes directly from trying to play God, and win one for ourselves?

This is where we might need to leave the sports analogy. Christ's victory is not that he played a perfect game while walking the earth. His triumph over sin and death does not come through delivering the ultimate thrashing to every other team against him. Instead, Jesus comes to our side and takes the plays Himself. He is destroyed—nailed to a cross to die a criminal—because He played for us against God's team, which is named "The Law". But that isn't the end. God raises Jesus from the dead and declares him the victor. Moreover, that victory is ours, and not because we played a good game once we had Jesus as our coach or quarterback. That victory is ours the same way the Giants' win is a win for every Giants fan. In trusting Jesus to take the field, we become fans. We're back in the bleachers, where we belong. Even though we didn't do anything to earn this victory, it is ours, given to us freely.

That also gives us a new perspective on our lives. We're no longer playing to win the game, or save the world, or undo sin and death. That's what Jesus has accomplished. We're fans, celebrating and talking about our team—Jesus. Our sports jerseys and terrible towels are forgiveness of sins, love for our enemies, and providing for the less fortunate amongst us. Those

are the team colors that we now wear, thanks to Christ. Like football fans, we talk up our team—God’s promises for us, and for everyone, regardless of which team they are currently playing on, because we trust that we have been chosen by the winning team. We also share the same solidarity football fans have, only on a grander scale. And in life, that solidarity is reaching out to our enemies, to the rival teams and fans, not to trash talk them, but to help them when they are in trouble, even at risk to ourselves.

So if you like football, you can do Christian theology.