

Crossings Seminar Monday, January 26, 2015

The Legend of Lambeau: The Sacred Space and Religious Ritual of Professional Football

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This is the last week before the Super Bowl. What began as the NFL-AFL Championship game in 1967, a game for which 40,000 tickets went unsold, has mushroomed 48 years later into a huge cultural event that has almost become a national holiday. The size of the event has grown along with the size of the NFL. The hysteria and hype have so ballooned that the Super Bowl TV commercials have become an art form. Cities will spend hundreds of millions of dollars to build stadiums hoping that then they will get to host a Super Bowl.

The growth of the Super Bowl has paralleled the growth in the popularity of football across our society on all levels of competition. For many, football has taken on the trappings of religion. It has sacred spaces, symbols and rituals that function just like the sacred spaces, symbols and rituals of traditional religion. Bill White will shortly give you his analysis of the fanatical growth of college football in the American South especially in the SEC, The Southeastern Conference. He will use the Crossings Method to show what God is doing to fans in college football through God's Law and then show how what God does through the Gospel offers a different way of being a football fan. I am going to do the same kind of analysis but on professional football and especially on the Green Bay Packers. I will utilize a Video that was made 12 years ago by Packers to celebrate the completion of the newly renovated and expanded Lambeau Field.

The video's use of religious language and imagery is stunning. Lambeau Field has become a sacred space where fans come to worship not just the Packers but a story, tradition and history that is bigger than life. The Packers are something that gives meaning and purpose to people who want something to believe. Some of the rituals seem silly. Fans will even laugh about them. Just look at the silly hats and costumes. However, deep down I sense that there is something much more going on here than just fun.

Here is one example. This is Saint Vince of Lambeau Field. For many years he has attended the games, walked around the stadium greeting fans and posed for pictures dressed like some green and gold Packer Bishop, a religious leader in the Cathedral of Lambeau. Complete with a chasuble, a miter with the picture of Vince Lombardi, a cheese head on his bishop's crozier and all the championship years listed on his stole, he would walk around the stadium and have admirers kiss his bishop's ring. It seemed to be all in jest but I suspect that his popularity reflected the religious longings that lurked deep in the hearts of many Packer fans. They know that Lambeau Field is not actually a church. They know that it is only a game. They know that whether the Packers win or lose does not affect the meaning of life. However, secretly, deep in their hearts, many wish it did. They long to belong to something that is bigger than their

individual lives. In a world where everything is in constant change and flux, the Packer tradition embodied in the Legend of Lambeau is something that transcends the march of time. By reliving, the great games of the past and retelling the stories of the great players in the Ring of Fame, a fan “communes” with the Legend and becomes part of the unique and sacred tradition that will endure long after they are in the grave.

Football is only supposed to be a game and not a matter of life and death. However, you would never guess it from the huge depression many Packer fans went into this past week after the colossal and historic collapse of the Packers in the NFC Championship game against Seattle. (I won’t rehearse the painful details.) As they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, tempers erupted. Talk radio and social media were filled with profanities as angry fans wanted to fire the coach and the players. Some wanted to do things far worse. Many felt betrayed and wanted their pound of flesh. The Packer’s loss was not the end of the world . . . but for many it might just as well have been. For many the colossal collapse was of Biblical proportions. It will live on for years, perhaps even decades, in the memories of disappointed fans, as they continue to rehearse the pain and disappointment just as Israel did for centuries after the colossal collapse of the Babylonian captivity.

But I am getting ahead of myself here. We need to watch the video, “The Legend of Lambeau Field.” I have selected several excerpts from the video that are especially illustrative of the religious dimension of football. For those of you who are knowledgeable, you will see that the video is a little dated. Brett Favre is still the quarterback. Aaron Rodgers is still in junior college. Even though a decade has past, the Legend, with another recent renovation and expansion of “the frozen tundra,” has only grown.

(Watch video)

Did you notice all of the religious language and imagery? Let me sight some examples. Lambeau Field is a “shrine” to be “revered.” The “legend” is renewed with by retelling the stories of great players and great games that took place in this “sacred place.” It is a “sacred place” because it reflects a tradition that is older than the NFL itself. It is a “monument” built on the “bedrock” of the great players and teams of the past. As we saw the grainy black and white film clips of the great players from a distant past, when the players wore leather helmets without facemasks and shoulder pads were barely visible, we caught a glimpse of a mythical time when the game was more pure and innocent. It was like a glimpse into the Garden of Eden before the Fall of football into the greedy hands of big business, selfish owners and corporate America. Lambeau Field and its team are monuments to an idyllic past, a time of lost innocence when men played for almost nothing, purely out of love for the game.

Lambeau and its Norman Rockwell setting in the small town of Green Bay remind of us a simpler time when kids tossed a football in the streets and you knew who your neighbors were. As the only professional team in American owned by its fans, the fans express their almost religious commitment by purchasing stock . . . that pays no dividends. Talk about true believers!

The “frozen tundra of Lambeau Field” is “hallowed ground” where the sacred stories are retold and relived. You see the names of holy men like the saints of the church displayed in the “ring of fame” on the inside of the stadium. Outside the stadium stand huge bronze statues in the likeness of two the greatest heroes of the Packer tradition, Curly Lambeau and Vince Lombardi. They might as well be Saints Peter and Paul at the Vatican in Rome. When true fans go to a game, they make a “pilgrimage” to what most Packer fans would reverentially call the “holy land.” When you go, you go to something that is bigger than you are. You go not just to a game but an “event.” One of the fans in the video even compares it to going to church on Sunday. He was being more truthful than he may have realized. Notice how fans (worshippers?) gather in the parking lot to tailgate and commune with their fellow believers, eat sacred foods like brats and cheese and drink sacred beverages which in Wisconsin means beer. You listen to the sacred music . . . of the oompah band. One passionate disciple in the video even said that to tailgate in the “shadow of the shrine” is “mythical.” Another brags that he has lived his whole life in the shadow of Lambeau as if it was Jerusalem or the Mount of Olives.

Going to Lambeau means that you get to be a part of sacred traditions and rituals that recall sacred events of the past. There is the Lambeau Leap. There is that cute training camp tradition when players adopt kids and ride their bikes to and from practice. Seeing those kids interact with their heroes is enough to make tears come to your eyes. Women used to wear hats to church. That was the proper way to show your respect. Here the fans wear cheeseheads and seek the blessing of St. Vince as he walks around the stadium greeting his congregants.

These are only some of the more visible religious symbols in the video. If you ever visit Lambeau, you will go to what is the finest Hall of Fame and museum of any team in the NFL. It is like a trip to the Holy Land. In this sacred place, games are relived. The accomplishments of players like saints of the past are reverently retold. Holy relics, today we call them sports memorabilia, are displayed with a sense of holy awe. For a fan it is a way to be a part of something that is transcendent, bigger than you, beyond time and space, eternal, even divine.

How do we make sense out of all of this? How can we bring Christ to this world of professional football. This conference is all about the Crossings Method. The Crossings Method is not only a tool to read and interpret Scripture theologically. The Crossings Method can also be a tool to read our culture theologically. Through the six step method, I will examine “The Legend of Lambeau.” How do we see God’s Law at work in this video and the culture of professional football it portrays, especially the Green Bay Packers? How can the Gospel of Jesus Christ speak the good news to this culture and make possible a different way of being a football fan?

Diagnosis: Lambeau - Just A Legend

Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) - A Laundered Legend

“The Legend of Lambeau” portrays a legendary football stadium and team that is like no other. The legend of Lambeau is mythic and foundational for the Packers and the NFL. However,

the informed viewer will soon discover a problem. The myth does not match reality. The Legend has been laundered. The historical facts do not always mesh with the sacred story. The embarrassing facts that might taint the legend are conveniently ignored. (Cf. the David Maraniss biography - "When Pride Still Mattered, The Biography of Vince Lombardi") A few examples:

- a) The won/loss record: no mention is made of the embarrassing years in the wilderness. First it was the 1950's, a decade without a winning season. Then, it may not have been 40 years in the wilderness but it was almost 30 between Super Bowl appearances. The Packers had a terrible string of simply awful teams in the 70's, 80's and early 90's. Green Bay was literally called the gulag of the NFL. Playing in Green Bay was like being sent to Siberia. No one wanted to play there. During this time even the sainted Bart Starr was fired as coach because he lost so many games.
- b) Attendance: yes 43 now 54 years of "sellouts" and a waiting list of 81,000 for season tickets for an average wait of 30 years. But during those 30 years in the wilderness there were many empty seats in Lambeau. Tickets may have been sold but many did not want to waste their time on a Legend that was less than legendary.
- c) Flawed saints: Saints "Peter and Paul" i.e., Lambeau and Lombardi, stand in bigger than life bronze statues outside the stadium. However, they both walked away from the Legend of Lambeau. Curly Lambeau was literally run out of town and Lombardi went to the Redskins and back to his East Coast friends tired of Green Bay. Titletown, which had long prided itself in its Midwestern, small town way life, felt betrayed.
- d) Kids and bikes: Super Bowl Coach, Mike Holmgren, tells in the video how The Legend disappointed the worshipful kids when their player gets "cut" from the team. Their faces flooded with tears.
- e) Much of the Lambeau renovation and expansion was publicly funded through a tax increase. The voters had to approve it. Many opposed it. It was a long and bitter struggle. The referendum barely passed. The Legend did not captivate everyone's wallet.

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) - A Disappointing Legend

Humans are incurably theolatrous. We must have our gods, a reason to get out bed in the morning, something in which to invest our hearts . . . our time, talent and treasure . . . something to fear, love and trust above all else. We long for a Legend, a sacred story, tradition, hero or drama that makes us feel good, that sustains us through thick and thin, for rituals and traditions that connect us to a Legend that endures. "The Legend of Lambeau" is filled such religious impulses. (see analysis above).

However, idolatry doesn't work. When we try to make the creature into the Creator, we will be disappointed. A false god is a false god. We do not want to face this truth. The video fails to be more honest and truthful about the cracks in the Legend, because the believers are afraid to admit the truth. Afraid that the Legend may not be what it is cracked up to be, they are determined to perpetuating a myth.

A member of my congregation is a dedicated Packer fan. His wife reported to me a few days ago . . . with a sense of humor and worry . . . that her husband was so upset by the colossal collapse in Seattle that he could not sleep for days. Sounds like someone with misplaced faith, a heart longing for a Legend to believe in, someone who is disappointed by an idol that let him down. Such stories and disappointments are not unique to Packer fans.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) - A Legend Lost

“The Legend of Lambeau” video is so optimistic, reverential and laundered (almost to the point of being comic) because it fears what lurks in the darkness. No one wants to admit it. No one wants to face it . . . because we are afraid that it actually is true . . . which of course . . . it is. This Legend has no transcendent authorization. It is like the fairy-tale we tell to our children so that they won’t be afraid of the dark. However, the darkness is real. The Legend has clay feet. We do have reason to be afraid, because someone is coming to smash our idols. We have invented a Legend and tried to make it look holy. However, like an idol made out of stone and silver, it can do nothing to save us from the One who is really in charge and calls all the shots. One day this One will decide to call in his chips. We are in trouble.

Prognosis: Calvary - THE Legend

Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) - THE Lasting Legend

Of course, one should never expect “The Legend of Lambeau” to be anything else. It is the fruit of Packer marketing and propaganda. Of course, it is religious hype. It is our job to sort out the truth from the hype. That is what the church does. The church has THE Legend/ story/ narrative/ tradition that lasts, endures and tells the truth. It focuses on another sacred place that offers not a laundered story but an uncensored account of the truth. It tells a story that climaxes not on the gridiron with thousands cheering but at the place which for Packer fans is even worse than the colossal collapse in Seattle. At the heart of this story is a public execution of the Son of God. Its story launders nothing. It includes all the warts and blemishes that mark real life. There are disciples who abandon and deny their coach. Their leader wins no trophy but dies on a cross. Instead of a loyal fan club they are fickle followers who in the end turn on their leader. No one offers this hero a bike ride. Instead, former admirers now enemies demand his blood. Civic leaders would never think of seeking public funding to support him.

This is the story that the church tells. It is the anti-legend Legend. It does not promote the virtues that must be practiced to win. Instead, it offers the virtuous One who gives away his life for the fans who no longer want to go the game, only want to scalp their tickets, get their money back and do what they want to do with their money and lives. Of course, God who has every right in the world to get back and get even with those who have so abused him. BUT amazingly, God chooses not to.

We have foolishly laundered our legends and propped up our idols. We have thumbed our noses at God. We deserve to get cut. Instead, God suffers for us on the cross. Instead, God takes our dirt and makes us clean. God launders what we could never hope to launder. This is

the Legend that lasts when others fail. This the Legend that not only give what others cannot but also does it freely and graciously to those who do not deserve it. God raises Jesus from the dead confirming that not even death can discredit this Legend.

That is legendary!

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) - Trusting on THE Legend

Here is the only Legend in which fans can trust. This is the Legend that truly transcends the tarnished and laundered traditions of the Packers or whatever our team happens to be. Here fans will never be betrayed because here is a Legend that never stops giving. This legendary coach will never walk away to another team. Fans, which have always been searching for something and someone they can trust, at last have a god they can count on. In Jesus Christ the frantic search for a legend, team, or god who will not disappointed at last comes to an end.

Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution) - Living THE Legend

Chad Gibbs in “God and Football” writes, “Football is a great hobby, but a horrible God.” When this is the legend that shapes our lives this is how we get to live. We can enjoy the game and our team like a good glass of wine. We can savor the taste in the moment and need do no more. We do not have to live for it. We do not have to die for it. The losses will not crush us. The victories will not fool us. We can relax and enjoy the game instead of letting it be what makes . . . or ruins our day. We can honestly talk about our football legends. We do not have to launder them and pretend that they are something they are not.

Remember the St. Vince . . . the tailgaters, silly costumes, the over-the-top sacred language, the bombastic tones of “the frozen tundra”? Now we can snicker at the silliness and enjoy the jokes. They are not desperate attempts to make football bigger than what it is. Rather, they are the playful ways we can poke fun of the Legendary pretensions of the Lambeau Field or whatever our team might be. We know in our hearts that they are not actually the Legends that their bombast proclaims. We do not need to take them so seriously. It is just a joke. It is just fun. It is just a game. We can dress up goofy costumes, act silly and have some fun. We won’t take this seriously if you don’t.

And don’t fret about a colossal collapse in Seattle or think you have died and gone to heaven because your team won the Super Bowl. Just go to bed. Have a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow is another day to enjoy. What did Luther say, plant an apple tree? When we are living in the legend of Jesus, we can let football be football . . . and let God be God.

