

Game Day: Becoming a New Church in an Old South

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On April 20, 2013, thousands of people (83,401 people to be exact) gathered in an Alabama town to mourn two trees. The live oaks which stood at the corner of College and Magnolia for at least 85 years welcomed generations of students to the campus of Auburn University. The trees were also the epicenter of every athletic victory, as students, fans, and families “rolled” them in celebration—a simple tradition among many in college sports. All that changed three years earlier when a rival fan dumped a lethal load of Spike80df (Tebuthiuron) under the oaks. Despite the work of horticulturists, the trees died. They were subsequently removed, but only after hundreds of people came to grieve them. What possesses reasonable people to mourn two trees? What possesses man to poison them? What possesses so many people to emote so much around a *game*? The gathering at Toomer’s Corner, from a bird’s eye view, might have looked curiously similar to a Muslim funeral gathering at Martyr’s Square in Beirut or an evangelical service in Washington or a march just over one hundred miles away in Selma. The difference, of course, is that this gathering was about football and not faith.

The enticing allure of sports is not necessarily regional. Other places and other countries have their own affinities. The draw in New England may be baseball. The draw in the Carolinas may be basketball. In most every hamlet across the globe, it would be European-styled football, where 3.2 billion tuned in to the 2014 World Cup. As early as the 1970s, researchers have noted the power of sport as an instrument for individuals to identify with a community.¹ Social Identity Theory has particularly lent itself to the awareness that sports teams can serve as important targets of identification.² The twenty-first century has brought with it a global connectivity never before seen. At the same time, it has brought overwhelming numbers of sports fans to stadiums, TV screens, and digital devices. Early in this transition researchers revealed that people were experiencing community through informal organizations rather than through traditional venues like churches, families, or volunteer organizations.³ This is a global matter. This essay focuses on one corner of that globe.

Sacraments

The South has been considered the most religious region of the country. Twelve of the thirteen highest worship attending states continue to be in the southeast.⁴ Still, Christian faith is not the only religion in town. No other activity might capture a region the way college football does in the South. College football viewership figures go up every year across the country, and southern states consistently lead those statistics.⁵ Renowned statistician Nate Silver studied regional variances for the college football markets, comparing the size of the markets with the populations that follow the sport. The largest television markets predictably include New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Dallas/Ft. Worth. Curiously, even though Birmingham’s population is ten times smaller, the large percentage of football followers pushes the city just a few points below Big Apple status as the largest foot-

ball market place.⁶ Team branding is everywhere in the region: cars, homes, shirts, shoes, boats, caskets. Radio stations and websites offer 365 day, 24/7 coverage from recruiting season through spring ball and fall practice. It all culminates, of course, in the fall, when thousands upon thousands of believers unload upon college towns. They arrive in RVs on Thursdays and leave on Mondays, creating ad hoc populations over and above the students. Nothing gets in the way of the game, including worship services. *New York Times* columnist Warren St. John details a story of a couple who missed their daughter's wedding on account of a University of Alabama game. "We told her, just don't get married on a game day and we'll be there, hundred percent. And she went off and picked the third Saturday in October, which everybody knows is when 'Bama plays Tennessee. So we told her we had a ball game to go to. We made the reception."⁷

It is hard to explain such bizarre enthusiasm. It is common to relate the popularity of the sport to the poor educational scores or a perceived lack of individual self-worth. St. John disputes such notions. He offers a 1993 study that compares graduation rates and grade point average of students who do and do not care about the game. In the study, 64% of fans graduated in six years or less as compared to 47% of the other variety.⁸ In a report by Learfield Sports Marketing, college football viewers, compared to other major sports, are among the most educated sports fans.⁹ As for the assumption that fans are people of low self-worth, St. John points to a study by a Murray State University professor that shows that hardcore fans at University of Kansas had higher self-esteem and suffered lower rates of depression than non-fans.¹⁰

One might also think for a region so publically religious, faith would provide some counterbalance, some healthy perspective. This, though, is not necessarily the case. Chad Gibbs is an evangelical Christian who "was immersed in the waters of Southeastern Conference football twelve months before he was submerged into those of believer's baptism." To his spiritual chagrin, though, he cannot shake his golden calf. "Why do I worship something that I know will let me down when I could be worshipping a God that I know never will? We've all known people who are so godly that things like football, *Star Wars*, and video games mean nothing to them. In public, we praise these people for being so spiritual; privately we pity them because we think their lives must suck."¹¹ For a region that is so historically religious, such tensions are curious but not unusual. As St. John points out in his book, as absurd as it sounds for the Bible Belt, there are more atheists in Alabama than non-football fans.¹²

Why college football elicits such passion in the Southeast has been the subject of much speculation and research.¹³ Certainly gambling has its draw, but that does not explain why thousands of people would show up to bury two trees. Many hypothesize it has something to do with a Civil War hangover. UNC professor John Shelton Reed said, "We like winners down here because we got a bellyful of losing in 1865."¹⁴ Some scholars trace it back to the 1925 Rose Bowl game where a nationally dismissed Alabama squad upended a University of Washington team and gave the region something to finally cheer about. Other scholars trace it back to a confluence of events that came together at the end of the nineteenth century, including a renewed populism, industrialization, and the emergence of land-grant schools through the Morrill Act. Leaders also realized that the region must seek new ways for "men to direct and assert their masculinity short of taking up arms."¹⁵ Still other scholars dig deeper. According to Leah Rawls Atkins, years before Europeans attempted to

settle the region, native Americans were playing games of ball that resembled modern day football. In research on early Alabama history, she notes when the indigenous population gathered to play these ball games, “they also included a time for dancing, which served social and religious purposes. Often named for animals, dances were accompanied by skin drums, gourd rattles, and cane flutes and by special songs and chants. Stomp dances often preceded major festivals and they always took place at harvest-time ceremonies.”¹⁶ Is it such a stretch to suggest that such history has affected present-day cultural interest?

The purpose of this article, though, is not inception, but reception. More specifically, it is a question of ecclesiology. College football in the South is providing something that borders on religious experience. As the church contends with this golden calf, it should ask what about this phenomenon is so enticing? What is it offering? What is it providing that the church doesn’t seem to provide? Not that the church needs to or should ever seek to emulate a sport, but what spiritual needs are being met in the game? It is well documented that religious affiliation continues to decline across the country, including the South.¹⁷ By contrast, the popularity of college football only is rising.¹⁸ These days when congregations plan events, they refer to their football schedules as much as their liturgical calendars.

The protestant tradition maintains two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Rich in history and meaning, baptism historically is the initiation into the household of faith. It is the sign and seal of one’s engrafting into the body of Christ. In baptism, we are washed clean. We participate in the death and resurrection, dying from what separates us from God and being raised to new life through Christ. Communion is the sharing in the meal and fellowship that Christ established, which nourishes us in life and faith. In it, we are reminded of our broken nature that is restored by the repairing work of Christ, and we are reconciled with our Lord and our neighbors. Church is where sacraments are received and shared. Curiously though, when viewed through the lenses of sacraments, college football in the South looks increasingly religious.

Baptism

A university president yells at a mass of uneasy first-year students at an orientation session, “Are you ready to become Buccaneers?”¹⁹ Everyone cheers. It is not an unusual scene for students to be baptized into the community with such enthusiasm and accompanying gear. School logos are printed and sold on everything from cell phones to underwear. Merchandising, though, does not only target students. Every SEC student bookstore has merchandise for adults, youth, and children—onesies, bloomers, footies, diapers, bottles, and pacifiers. Parents are bringing infants to games. Almost every SEC stadium has diaper changing stations in women’s and men’s restrooms. (Can the same be said of all our congregations?) All this makes clear this is not simply believers’ baptism territory. Like good Calvinists, children are born into this. They do not pick a team. They are given one. Allegiances are inherited and are generations old, passed down from grandparents to parents to children. Upon requests, alumni boards will provide each newborn a certificate of welcome into the football family, certificates very similar to the ones given at a baptism: “On this day, the Auburn Alumni Association warmly welcomed our newest cub into the tiger family.” Then, over time, the new convert is indoctrinated. She learns the shared story. She hears of the legends, the heroes, and the victories. She also hears of and begins

to experience the losses.

More than forty years ago, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced her five stages of grief model in her book *On Death and Dying*. Since then many reapplications of the model have been made, including in the world of sports.²⁰ Certainly, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are familiar to the grieving fan. Some losses hurt more than other hurts, and some teams lose more than other teams. In many cases, the losses affect seasons as much if not more than the victories. Coaches are often fired more on what they lost rather than what they won. Taken together, the victories and defeats shape a fan base's common identity of who they are so every new cub in the tiger family enters an almost baptismal pattern of dying with every loss and rising again with every victory until she becomes seasoned and part of the story as well.

Communion

People gather to watch games. They meet at restaurants, bars, and homes. Hordes of them traverse like pilgrims to the holy lands of their respective campuses. They come often even without tickets. They come with no intent to even purchase tickets. They come simply to be part of the community and share in the experience. These gatherings are full of tradition, ritual, and common liturgy. There is fellowship, song, and no doubt, much prayer. Faces are painted and dress is marked with appropriate loyalties. Here in this messy mass of fans, an unlikely community emerges.

Mainline protestant churches continue to "grey." Almost half its members were born prior to 1945, and among religious groups, the mainlines have the lowest retention rates.²¹ Rarely do grandparents, parents, and children share the same church, denomination, or even faith. Some argue that this age segregation is simply a growing trend in a society in which differing generations live in different neighborhoods, shop in different stores, watch different movies, and eat different foods.²² Nonetheless, college football seems to buck this trend. It is an experience which grandparents, parents, and children enjoy together. Fan demographics are surprisingly close between people in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and above.²³ Moreover, this isn't simply a men's game. Women follow the sport at increasing rates and buy products as well. The Collegiate Licensing Company says the sale of women's apparel has increased 148% over the last five years.²⁴

Racial divides have marked the country and most certainly the American South for generations. Even with legal changes to enhance integration, America continues to segregate itself along racial lines.²⁵ Curiously, though, a different picture is painted on Saturdays in the fall. Southern universities were the site of some of the ugliest integration battles of the sixties. In a matter of great irony, college football stadiums are now more integrated than churches that fought those very battles fifty years ago. Outside of the NBA, college football has the greatest share of African American fans among all major sports.²⁶ There may be no place where southern whites and blacks gather together more than football stadiums. While certainly not by intent, southern college football has managed to create, out of a context of great division, communities of at least some unified purpose. The church has nothing close to that. The church remains one of the most segregated communities in America.²⁷

There is no doubt that college football has problems. Issues of pay-for-play, rule-breaking, and ethic violations persist. The violent nature of the sport generates

on-field concerns around concussions and off-field concerns around domestic abuse. This article is not to defend the corruption or sanction the violence. It is also not to make something into more than it is. College football is a game and therefore a shallow spiritual venture. What it stirs in people, though, is anything but shallow. Matters of belonging, fellowship, and purpose are not trivial matters. What is happening here is a matter of identity. This golden calf is part of the fabric of the southern culture and therefore part of the fabric of people's lives and common history. Their initiating into it is subsequently validated by communal and familial connections and seasoned by the battle scars of collective suffering. As absurd as it might seem, college football provides southern people an identity. It is easy to dismiss such a bold claim, but while southern Americans remain religious, they, like the rest of the country, are going to church less. At the same time, college football allegiances only grow.

Team

In such a context, Christians need to ask a few questions. First, does not the church provide the kind of historical rooted community that is so often sought these days? When so many other institutions seem to be failing, college football, oddly enough, is filling a gap for a people seeking identity. It provides a community with rich histories and celebrated heroes. It provides an avenue to exercise both tragedy and triumph with others. Why is the church not stepping into this gap? The church has deep history and celebrated heroes. It has triumphs and tragedies. It offers identity that is greater and more enduring than pignatelli.

Americans are mobile. They are busy. They are wired. They are also very lonely. One study by the National Science Foundation found that an unprecedented number of Americans feel abandoned and isolated. In face-to-face interviews, a quarter of the respondents said that they had no one with whom they could talk about "personal troubles or triumphs."²⁸ In spite of advanced communications, people are less connected. Institutions, once revered, are fractured and crumbling. Fewer couples are getting married. Fewer individuals join political parties. Denominations are breaking apart. General Motors went bankrupt. "What happens," Diana Butler Bass asks, "when old forms of belonging disappear? When the old labels no longer express who we are? When family ties are broken, when nationalities and ethnicities blur, and churches and denominations go into decline? People lose a sense of themselves, that is what happens. Instead of being grounded, people feel unmoored."²⁹ In such a world, the church provides the only promise that is truly historic and truly enduring. It provides a community that connects one to generations of fellow believers, to a great "cloud of witnesses."

The church also needs to assess its entry points, places where individuals can be received as they find themselves captured in the Spirit. While baptism is that sign of welcome into the body of Christ, the Holy Spirit is not restricted to that moment of water and Trinitarian formula. God is present before, during, and after that moment. So, how might the church develop inclusion into the community that is something other than visitor badges, new member classes, and membership roles? Where do outsiders enter a community of faith and begin to share in its life? To people who demonstrate an interest in a congregation, the church has generally asked one question: "Are you joining by letter of transfer or profession of faith or reaffirmation of

faith?” This question makes absolutely no sense to these visitors, and it is ultimately irrelevant.

In a book on the changing of the Christian religious landscape, Diana Butler Bass has argued that the church needs to reorder the institutional religious patterns we have morphed into. “Instead of believing, behaving, and belonging, we need to reverse the order to belonging, behaving, and believing.” “Jesus,” she said, “did not begin with questions of belief. Jesus’ public ministry started when he formed a community. Christianity did not begin with confession. It began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service.”³⁰ It is in the participation of church that one identifies oneself as part of the church. Fans who have no official affiliation with colleges are caught up in the spirit of their team and are encouraged to do so. They are not asked to show their diploma at the stadium gate. Perhaps congregations should begin to nurture relationships with those individuals who claim connections to congregations but never join.

Finally, how might individual losses and victories be claimed by the community of faith? Our lives are shaped by loss, by a succession of things given up and things taken on. Some losses are tragic. Some are natural. Regardless, loss is reality, and loss (as well as victory) can be an isolating experience.³¹ College football is, of course, about winning and losing. And though a given fan may never have worn a helmet, the loss is taken personally: “We won.” “We lost.” It is also shared: “*We* won.” “*We* lost.” This common commiseration and/or celebration is key. It is also where the church might enter the picture. The church is that one community above all others whose very life is centering around a dying and rising. That is the church’s story—dying and rising in Christ. The church, of all places, can provide a home where those isolating life experiences of triumph and tragedy can be taken up by the whole. Moreover, the church provides an alternative view of these experiences, allowing them to be understood through the lenses of faith in Jesus Christ.

This change of perspective is important not only as we celebrate individual victories in life, but also as we deal more effectively with our losses. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has lamented the loss of laments in church. He says that it is curious that “the church has, by and large, continued to sing songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disoriented.”³² One could argue that such positive affirmations week after week constitute protesting proclamations of Good News in weeks when no news is good. One could also argue, though, that such positivism can be a denial of people’s real life experience. Thankfully, this is not beyond recovery. The church has resources to re-embrace lament in a disorienting world and reestablish liturgy that speaks to individual losses. Congregations courageous enough to practice what they preach might find a people eager to listen.

In September, my congregation will “kick-off” the new Sunday School year with yet another Rally Day. We will arm-twist enough teachers to fill our classrooms and hoot-and-holler when the members arrive. Then we will pray to God that attendance holds at least through Christmas. It is a different world today in church than it was fifty years ago, even twenty years ago. The church can no longer model its life after industry. It should not model its practices after sports or other cultural success stories. The church does, though, need to read the signs of the times and understand the deep longings that are rising up in unusual places all around us. For a funeral of two trees, 83,401 people showed up. People are looking for something.

Notes

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