

32963 Super Bowl 12-25-09
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Praying to Win?

This Sunday hundreds of millions of people will gather for one of the greatest spectacles on the yearly sports calendar – the Super Bowl. So universal is the appeal of this event, that people in some 187 countries are expected to tune in to witness the game, along with the special and clever advertising that accompanies it. The game has become synonymous with the epitome of excellence. After all, don't we use the term "Super Bowl" to speak of the peak experience in many different venues? We've heard people say they attended the Super Bowl of flower shows or the Super Bowl of chili cook-offs. We've even heard someone refer to the Super Bowl of church services!

Actually, mixing the worlds of sports and faith is not a rare occurrence. Each year we hear players from the Super Bowl teams petition God for success, or urge God to protect them, or claim that God is on their side in the upcoming contest. We're always a little taken aback by these assertions. And while it is gratifying to find that celebrities, such as the Super Bowl athletes, are faithful people willing to publicly acknowledge their commitments, these claims about God's favoritism and God's management of human events is disquieting.

What can it mean to claim that God will pull strings to assure one team's victory over another? Does God micro-manage our lives like that? What would that imply about human free will and initiative? How can both sides claim that God is on their side? And if God DOES mastermind human events, then why is God not actively intervening to bring about a "win" in what are without question far more serious conflicts than occur on the gridiron ... such as ongoing violence and warfare in various parts of the world?

Does God care about us, our hopes and dreams, our wins and losses? Of course. Does God take sides in our disputes? That is harder to discern. We've always appreciated President Abraham Lincoln's assessment of this question when, during the Civil War he heard both the Confederate and the Union soldiers praying for victory and claiming that God stood squarely on their side. Once when a man told Lincoln that he believed the Lord was on the Union's side, Lincoln's response to him was this: "I am not at all concerned about that ... But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."

What a marvelous, wise, and humble acknowledgement by the President. Perhaps this weekend, and in the other "Super Bowls" of our own lives, we might echo Lincoln's conviction that it is less critical to claim that God is on our side, than to hope that we are on God's side! If we are on God's side, then our prayers will reflect not our own personal hopes only. If we are on God's side, our prayers will encompass the hopes and dreams of all God's children. Imagine if we all prayed, not for our side, but for God's side. We just might ALL win!