

## ESSAY

## One Square Inch We Won't Concede: Super Bowl Christians and the God Outside the Stadium

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*And the Prime Minister sucks ice cream in the company of a happy band of children, while a naked man, sores on his neck, lies for days in Washington Boulevard gnawing chicken bones. . . . And there's a kung fu movie in every town. . . . And there's dancing in paradise.*

Bruce Cockburn, "Dancing in Paradise," *World of Wonders*

*But the barons in the balcony are laughing, and pointing to the pit. . . . And we're workin' it.*

Don Henley, "Workin' It," *Inside Job*

Over the past year, I've been teaching Sunday School for children in grades 3-5. Having done this before, I tend toward less cerebral pedagogies, preferring to engage my young charges in more tactile experiences requiring them to act out various scenes from the Bible. Last week—Super Bowl Sunday—we learned about young King Josiah (2 Kings 22-23), who began his reign at age 8 (the same as some kids in our class) and was recorded as "doing what was right in the sight of the Lord." He was a good king, who in due time set about repairing the house of the Lord, which, as it turned out, required more destruction than building. When renovations uncover the long-lost book of the law, which is read aloud to good King Josiah, he tears his clothes, "for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book" (2 Kings 22:13b). After inquiring of the Lord, Josiah cleans house, smashing, destroying, and burning the rather impressive array of idols that have accumulated in and around the house of the Lord. Idolatrous priests are deposed, male temple prostitutes have their houses demolished, and the high places of false gods are crushed to dust. And this is just the PG version. The rest I can scarcely read to a group of 8–10-year-olds! They're banning books with far tamer content from public school libraries in the state where I live.

The Sunday morning after the Super Bowl, I gathered my class outside the church building where, after donning safety glasses and armed with sledgehammers and such, we collectively demolished a bunch of old junk that had accumulated at my house. Sunday school kids smashing idols just outside the house of the Lord. If only I had a flame-thrower—they would have enjoyed that!

The irony is that for all this symbolic destruction taking place on our church lawn, some of our most potent false deities enjoy protected space *inside* the house of the Lord. What of the moniker “Super Bowl Sunday”—an event that is all but included on the Christian calendar? What of the youth parties we advertise from pulpits and host in celebration of this dubious event? What of adult members who deem this a public good requiring little Christian reflection? Is the Super Bowl not one of our idols? For the most part, our 21<sup>st</sup> century idols are not made of wood and stone. They’re constructed of more sinister stuff. Our idols are the culturally implicit sort about which Antonio Gramsci wrote, “[I]t can be difficult to fight an enemy that has outposts in your head” (Coakley 2017:74). How do you smash a Super Bowl, especially when to do so would require dismantling the universally embraced and mutually reinforcing hegemonies of social class, gender, violence, consumerism, nationalism, civil religion, and race? Difficult to deconstruct? Sure. But Josiah did it, and with no small disruption to “business as usual.” Josiah didn’t give an inch. No Asherah-pole-themed youth parties on temple grounds under his tenure. Josiah burned it down.

Idols are social constructions that point us away from God and the ways of God. Reading Josiah’s story in 2 Kings, most Christians find themselves rooting for Josiah. Few, if any of us would argue in favor of the cultic practices the good king sought to eliminate. But I’m guessing that average Judeans under Josiah’s rule had, over time, gradually merged their idolatrous practices with their more orthodox religious observance, without really noticing the stark contradiction we see with clarity centuries later. That’s the thing about idols. The most dangerous are not the obvious ones, but rather, the ones we take for granted. And my vote for the largest, most pernicious, most celebrated, most supported, hidden-in-plain-sight, idol of our age is the Super Bowl.

By celebrating that which kindles God’s wrath, idol worship advances the idea that God’s values do not matter, and that God can be replaced with other gods. What we bemoan as the secular world is the progeny of idolatrous practice. Lose track of the book of the law; gradually move in the altars of Baal; submit to the rule of a new priestly order; go on with life. And teach your children to do the same. The Super Bowl packages together a vast collection of cultural practices that historic Christianity both passively laments and actively opposes. Key to understanding the Super Bowl as invisible idol is its packaging. Disaggregate various components of the Super Bowl package, and the opaque becomes visible. Were I to approach my church with a plan to watch Victoria’s Secret commercials with the youth group, or to celebrate the life work of Snoop Dogg (the 2022 Super Bowl halftime show headliner), serious questions would rightfully be raised about my suitability to teach the aforementioned Sunday School class. Package those same items into the larger Super Bowl and they become cleansed of iniquity—or at least more palatable. Likewise, excise a few suspect items such as the half-time show, the cheerleaders, or commercials with overt erotic content, and it’s easy to believe that

purity has been restored to this sacred event, and consequently that other components, including the competition itself, would require no intervention by a modern King Josiah.

Though by no means comprehensive, I offer the following disaggregation of select Super Bowl components from the larger event which, I believe, kindle God's wrath and help pave the way to a secular world where God's values do not matter, and we do not care. My comments are organized under the headings of *Social Class*, *Race*, and *Gender*—three social forms that combine to produce the stratified order we take for granted in our society. I conclude by briefly explaining how a post-structural critique of the Super Bowl can help redirect and focus our collective gaze, and by so doing kindle a little more of Josiah's zeal (in us), and a lot less of God's wrath (toward us).

## Social Class in the Super Bowl

God's wrath is kindled when the needs of vulnerable people in a society—widows, orphans, and strangers—are neglected and the “business as usual” of the wealthy takes priority. A Nielson survey found that more than 208 million viewers watched Super Bowl 2022. Nearly 90% of all people using a television that evening were watching the game, the highest Super Bowl share on record (SVG 2022). Tickets to the live event cost around \$10,000 per seat on average. With a capacity crowd of 70,000+, the revenue generated was roughly \$700 million, plus concessions, plus commercials, plus revenues from sports betting, and so on. In 2022, advertising prices hit record highs, with some 30-second ad spots costing as much as \$7 million dollars—just over \$233,333 per second! These prices reveal the priorities of a culture, and place in-person participation out of reach of most people, but especially the poor. While some might argue that this simply reflects the realities of free-market capitalism, most will be unaware that many major league stadiums are built and maintained via a rigged capitalism using sales tax revenues that find their way into the pockets of billionaire team owners. Though it's difficult to tell how much public money (from sales taxes or tax breaks) was used to cover the cost of around \$5 billion to build the SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles, site of this year's Super Bowl, it's fair to say that building a new stadium reflects a city's priorities. For example, the AT&T Stadium in Dallas received \$444 million in public funding for its construction. Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis received a whopping \$619 million in public funds. Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta received about \$200 million from tax revenues, and Raymond James Stadium in Tampa drew \$168.5 million from public coffers. All these venues hosted Super Bowls between 2011 and the present.

Sociology of sport literature documents how city officials funnel tax revenues to NFL team owners for new stadium costs, even while schools, libraries, and after-school programs in their cities are grossly underfunded or have shut down entirely (Eitzen 2016). Investments in pro stadiums, while touted as an economic boom, tend to have little long-term benefit for

cities, while investments in schools, housing, and other infrastructure offers much greater long-term benefit (BER 2019). Most revenue generated from professional sports stadiums does not go back into the community in which the stadium is located, but rather is invested and spent elsewhere. Multiple news stories offer first-person accounts of how encampments of homeless people living near SoFi Stadium were literally pushed out of the way, and their belongings taken, to clear things out and clean things up for the 2022 Super Bowl. The rich physically push out the poor, so their entertainment isn't compromised by the uncomfortable presence of the poor. Cue God's wrath. While football players are pointing skyward, giving God a bit of credit as they bask in the *Shekinah* glory of their own magnificence, the Jesus they claim to worship is *outside* the stadium offering comfort to the marginal and forgotten. Perhaps the worship assemblies God hates (Amos 5:21) are located in Super Bowl stadiums. Perhaps we should remain outside the walls of those temples whose \$5 billion dollar construction costs far exceed anything Solomon ever saw, lest the God whose anger burns against those who disregard and disrespect the poor take note of our allegiances.

## Reinforcing a Racialized Society

My three children are all non-White. My oldest daughter, adopted from Bulgaria, is Roma, and my younger daughter and son are both Chinese. Imagine watching the Super Bowl through their eyes. No one of significance in the spectacle looks like they do or makes recognized contributions to the event. That, in itself, while concerning to me as their father, is true of many social environments my children inhabit. My greater concern falls on how the Super Bowl reproduces, legitimates, and normalizes the racialized social order of the United States—something that profoundly affects my children. While most are familiar with the term “racist,” far fewer understand the concept of racialization. Majority group people may legitimately take issue with a charge of racism—something that implies intentionality—yet fail to grasp the larger and related problem of racialization. Consequently, we—I write as a majority group person—come to believe that racial problems reduce to whether we intentionally injure or disparage those in minority groups.

Sociologist Michael Emerson explains that the concept of racialization is rooted in the principle of inequality (Emerson 2015). In the United States, African Americans are unequal to Whites on all social indicators, including income, wealth, health and mortality, social mobility, mortgage rates, child poverty, politics, criminal justice, education, housing, social networks, and a host of other variables. In other words, inequality maps along racial lines. Racial inequality is vast, measurable, predictable, and stable in the United States. The ideology of meritocracy—that we receive in proportion to our merit—supports social inequality by blaming the victim. In effect, you would be better off if you just tried harder; you have only yourself to blame. If we accept meritocracy as an explanation for inequality, we tend to perceive differences between

racial groups as the “natural” consequence of individual choices, rather than a function of social structures and related cultural norms. However, this explanation raises troubling questions for those at the top of the stratified order. How do we in good conscience accept such profound social inequality? How can we enjoy our abundance in the face of so many who do without? The answer, Emerson says, is racism. Racism offers a justification for why racial inequality is acceptable. Racism legitimates the inequality so pervasive in American society. Why are we unequal? Because “they” are inferior, and inferior people make poor choices. Such thinking can function to absolve one of responsibility for their neighbor, and obscure the realities of a racialized system. This partly explains why we generally don’t categorize the distribution of public money to wealthy NFL franchise owners as welfare. When “aid” goes to those we already see as having “merit,” it doesn’t upset our beliefs about the way things should be. Conversely, when a Black, single mother with two children receives public assistance, it can reinforce dominant beliefs about the relationship between race and inequality.

The Super Bowl offers the public a magnified view of the racialized order. With few exceptions, the Super Bowl displays White team owners, a White Commissioner, White head coaches, White quarterbacks, mostly Black defenders, and predominantly White fans in the stadium. All this in a league where some 60% of players identify as Black, and 70% as people of color. In fact, in Super Bowl history, there have only been seven Black quarterbacks, two of which appeared in two Super Bowls. While Black NFL players certainly make a great deal of money, the lion’s share of NFL rewards go to Whites—especially White owners. Some years the Super Bowl shows a bit of progress and fans may see a Black Coach or a Black quarterback in play. For the most part, the Super Bowl—that central arena where skill and merit purport to prevail—offers the public pleasurable experiences that ensure the racialized symbols of White superiority stand without serious challenge. The dominant image supplied by the Super Bowl depicts Black people at the bottom of the stratified order providing entertainment and profit for the White people who preside over them. Business as usual.

Many think that sports are a place where African Americans get ahead—where they have the same chance as anyone else. Some even believe that African Americans have “taken over” sport. Such beliefs have little merit. Few know that Blacks are underrepresented in all sports, save three (Coakley 2017). There’s no Black dominance in hockey, NASCAR, tennis, golf, yacht racing, polo, swimming, downhill skiing, or lacrosse. Yet many young athletes of color set their sights on playing in the NFL or NBA— places where it seems they can succeed. But the evidence is against it. African American boys have an infinitely greater likelihood of becoming attorneys or medical doctors than professional athletes. And the Super Bowl does little to dispel the cultural mythology that envelops young Black athletes and deprives them of better opportunities. Few institutions do a better job at reinforcing the racialized status quo and legitimating inequality than the NFL and its iconic culture-defining event, the Super Bowl. And few Christians seem to voice opposition, or if they do, it’s mostly directed at the window

dressings surrounding the NFL/Super Bowl apparatus—peripheral elements like the halftime show or crass commercials. But what do my minority children learn when all around them, including many in our churches, celebrate and unreservedly support an institution that powerfully promotes inequality and legitimates a stratified order? Christians against “the world?” In supporting the Super Bowl—not its peripherals, but the game itself—Christians mostly stand in lock-step solidarity with the “world” from which we claim distinction. The Super Bowl represents an idealized world, but not an inevitable one, and not one we should enthusiastically accept.

### **Important Men and Invisible Hotties: Gender in the Super Bowl**

Every year I offer a sociology of sport course at the conservative Presbyterian college where I teach. Because this course takes place in the spring semester, I’ve been able to time a lecture on the Super Bowl to correspond with the actual event. Much of my lecture centers on identifying and analyzing the roles played by women in this secular festival. Where are they? What are they doing? If they are absent, why is that the case? And so on. I conclude that amidst the never-ending debates Christians, churches, and their governing bodies have concerning women’s roles, what we really believe about women, gender, and gender roles is revealed in how we watch and support the Super Bowl.<sup>1</sup> And oh, does our support run deep! I’ve come to believe that almost nothing objectionable, no matter how crass or fallen, will deter us from giving the event our enthusiastic support the very next year. In 2014, Bruno Mars, the Super Bowl halftime show headliner, sang his hit “Locked Out of Heaven,” serenading us with words that combined religious and sexual imagery with dubious theology:

You bring me to my knees, You make me testify  
 You can make a sinner change his ways  
 Open up your gates ‘cause I can’t wait to see the light  
 And right there is where I wanna stay

‘Cause your sex takes me to paradise  
 Yeah, your sex takes me to paradise  
 And it shows, yeah, yeah, yeah  
 ‘Cause you make me feel like I’ve been locked out of heaven

When Mars and his all-male band performs this for a Super Bowl audience, they bring their message to just about every 10-year-old boy and girl in the nation and beyond. The event is billed as family entertainment and is broadcast on prime-time network television. Were I to

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<sup>1</sup> I developed this more fully in Matthew S. Vos, 2013. “Prizes and Consumables: The Super Bowl as a Theology of Women.” *Comment: Public Theology for the Common Good*. (<https://comment.org/prizes-and-consumables-the-super-bowl-as-a-theology-of-women/#>).

sing this to some 10-year-old in a smaller setting, I'd be arrested on the spot, and rightfully so! Yet the next day in the Christian circles in which I move, I heard little besides praise for the show Mars put on.

In 2015 Katy Perry headlined the Super Bowl. As part of her act, she performed a highly erotic rendition of her hit song "I Kissed a Girl" while "twerking" (look it up, I had to!) with Lenny Kravitz. At the time, Kravitz was 51 and Perry 31, just four years older than Kravitz' daughter. Here are a few lines from the song:

This was never the way I planned, not my intention  
I got so brave, drink in hand, lost my discretion  
It's not what I'm used to, just wanna try you on  
I'm curious for you, caught my attention

I kissed a girl and I liked it. . .

At a cursory glance this song seems to be about lesbian experimentation. But make no mistake, this is about garden variety heterosexual male fantasy—the sort of thing with which we've become comfortable. Either way, no one took much issue with it. But it is precisely the sort of thing many Christians lament when they bemoan our secular and worldly culture . . . when not part of the Super Bowl.

In 2020, entertainers Shakira and Jennifer Lopez performed a choreographed, highly erotic, highly graphic duet in which a stripper pole featured prominently. During my sociology of sport class the following morning, when I offered to replay the routine on the classroom screen so we could analyze it, multiple male students begged me not to show it. To which I replied, "Why not, every 10-year-old boy in the nation has seen this? Why can't we watch it in a Christian college class setting where we can view it through a critical lens?" But I didn't show it. As part of the "big game," we will watch it, but disaggregated from the event as a whole and brought under analysis, we consider it profane. And that was the lesson for Super Bowl Monday.

The 2022 Super Bowl brought rap and hip-hop to the biggest stage in the world. The headliners included Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Kendrick Lamar, and Eminem—some of the biggest names in misogyny—among others. As a sociologist and college professor, I receive various flyers in the mail promoting academic books, documentary videos, and other educational resources. Almost without exception, videos critiquing, lamenting, and explaining misogyny, gender-based violence, and pop-culture oriented exploitation of women showcase the work of Snoop Dogg as their central example. I ordered Sut Jhally's documentary "The Codes of Gender" (Jhally 2009) for my college library, but have never shown it in class. The imagery from Snoop Dogg videos and other similar fare is just too raw and disturbing. Snoop has turned the trivialization of women's bodies, and especially Black women's bodies into an extremely lucrative industry. Look up a few of his lyrics. . . or not. Almost everything he's written requires

complete redaction. His “hit” “Ain’t No Fun” provides a chilling example. Dr. Dre is, as one columnist put it, a serial abuser. He’s well known for punching women, including the mother of several of his children while she was pregnant. Kendrick Lamar’s discography includes “Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe,” and Eminem is well-known for misogynist and homophobic lyrics. Critics of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell’s choice for Super Bowl halftime headliners in 2022 point out the obvious hypocrisy in his stated concern with the NFL’s problem with racism and gender-based violence, while at the same time hiring some of the best-known misogynists on the planet (Kennedy 2022). All in the name of diversity and not getting sued. And as long as Snoop and the others keep it reasonably clean for one night, we marvel at the show. Wasn’t it great?! Read their lyrics to your daughters. Read their lyrics to women at the places you work. Read their lyrics at your Synods and General Assemblies. Is this the best we can do?

There’s so much more. Take for example the ongoing accusations against the NFL by their own cheerleaders for the sexual abuse and harassment many endure as part of the job, and for their spectacularly low pay in an industry where the league’s minimum salary was \$660,000 in 2021. Or consider the complete absence of women among those who call the game, offer serious during-game commentary, or are in head coaching positions. But is this not our normal? Is this not how we like things—men doing the high paid important work and women doing the low paid sexuo-supportive work? Maybe that’s just the game. But for Christians, especially those who see themselves in contrast with “the world,” there’s little in Scripture that commends allegiance to the worldly rules of the game. What sort of world do we want anyway? If I throw my support behind the dark, misogynist, fleece-the-poor hopeless world of the Super Bowl, whatever can I offer to my minority children?

### **Post-structural Critique: A Brief Recommendation**

In discussing the concept of ideology, sport sociologist Jay Coakley writes:

Researchers using cultural theories and a post-structuralist approach are primarily concerned with whose stories about sports become dominant in a culture and whose stories are ignored. The dominant or most widely told stories are important because they are based on ideological assumptions of what is natural, normal, and legitimate in social worlds; therefore, they promote ideas and beliefs that often privilege some people more than others. . . . Researchers using a post-structuralist approach also study more privately told stories representing voices that are silenced or “erased” from the widely circulated and accepted stories in the dominant culture. (Coakley 2017:72)

A post-structuralist approach subverts the hegemonic normal and directs us to locate, listen to, take seriously, and bring to public expression the stories of those marginal ones buried under the deafening noise of the dominant culture. The homeless ones outside SoFi Stadium. The



women trivialized, objectified, used, and hurt by the Snoop Doggs of this world. The ones punched by Dr. Dre between cutting platinum hits. The African American boys and girls living under racialized horizons that deny them the fullness of life and future. The children from poor parts of our cities who sit in underfunded schools and who struggle to locate themselves in a world that continually pushes them under. The women athletes who, Title IX notwithstanding, stand quite a way behind their male counterparts despite paying the taxes that fund the stadiums where they rarely get to play. Jesus stood with such as these, and advocated for a world that honored them, cared for them, privileged them, listened to them, and took them seriously. We have the opportunity to stand with King Jesus, but he's outside the stadium where it's a lot easier to hear the quieter ones pushed aside by those rushing for the \$10,000 seats inside.

The title of this essay contains a partial quotation from Abraham Kuyper, Dutch statesman and neo-Calvinist theologian. The full quotation reads, "There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" (Bratt 1998:488). Though I agree with the point Kuyper is making, I've never really cared for the statement's tone. To me it seems a bit "grabby" for Jesus, as I understand him. I prefer altering it to read, "There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Ours!" We join *with* Christ in exercising just dominion over God's creation. However, the Super Bowl, what it stands for and our no-matter-what allegiance to it, to me represents one square inch we refuse to concede. The Super Bowl is the symbolic epicenter of American and Western culture, and it celebrates the violence, racism, misogyny, inequality, and disregard for the poor that place Jesus decisively outside the stadium.<sup>2</sup> Though American football is rooted in the military principle of holding ground and never giving an inch, perhaps this is one inch we should concede.

Of course, there are plenty of ways to rationalize this away and keep watching this version of a world that should not be. But, WWJD? What would Josiah do?

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<sup>2</sup> The spirit animating the Super Bowl is, of course, alive and well in places other than the United States. In response to my 2013 article, "Prizes and Consumables: The Super Bowl as a Theology of Women," a journalist who wrote for "Saturday Dispatch," a newspaper in South Africa, contacted me asking if I would adapt it for their publication. She told me that their Super Rugby was plagued with many of the same problems I had identified in the American Super Bowl. I shortened the article to meet their requirements and they printed it.

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