

## Supporting Your Football Team as a Quasi-Religious Experience.



I've often wondered why it is that tens of thousands of people will attend a top-class football match to support their team whereas, here in Britain at least, maybe only a hundred people or so will attend a Church Service.

What are the psychological and spiritual needs the football match is meeting for its 'disciples' which is proving to be a greater attraction for them than attending the local Church?

This conundrum came into sharper focus for me recently as I worshipped at the Church of which I am a member on a Sunday morning, before travelling to watch a game at a big London Club in the afternoon.

There is no doubt in my mind that attendance at a football game provides a powerful, though quasi, religious experience for its adherents, which many churches, sadly, appear not to be able to match.

In attending the game, with my extended family ranging in age from 4 to 73, I experienced the following, all of which, I believe, have a powerful psychological and religious impact for the fans.

**The Pilgrimage** – As you walk towards the ground you become aware that you are not alone but part of a growing crowd moving towards a common destination.

**The Stadium** – As the stadium comes into view it appears as a modern, vast and impressive cathedral. This one was constructed of shiny glass, metal, concrete, and finished with 35,000 decorative tiles. It seats 62,000 people and cost £1 billion to build. It provides for every basic human need: food, drink, toilets etc.

**The Players** – Perhaps these are the true idols whose photographic images, and sometimes statues, tower over you as you enter the ground. The pictures I saw of each star player, male and female, were about 18 feet high!

**The Anticipation** – There is a palpable sense of excitement and suspense (pre-match and during) created mainly by not knowing what is going to happen next and what the outcome will be.

**The ‘Worship’** – Singing and chanting are an integral part of what takes place. Sometimes they are spiritual songs or even hymns like ‘Abide with me’. Each team has its own special choruses and anthems.

**The Message** – This was spelled out throughout the game and all around the ground in flashing coloured LED lights and had 3 points: -

- The game is glory
- You are not isolated or alone, you are part of this club, it is your club
- We are together

**The Challenge** – The motto for this club is ‘To do is to dare’.

**The Contest** – Unless the game is drawn, there is a winner and a loser. Winning is everything, losing is nothing.

**The ‘Comedown’** – If your team loses there is a keen sense of loss, disappointment, and bereavement even. This is a powerful reflector of what happens in real life.

**The Controller(s)** – All authority for controlling what happens on the pitch is vested almost exclusively in one person, the referee. That person then so easily becomes an object of ridicule, scorn and even hate.

**The Cost** – This is not only financial, but also in terms of the time, effort and energy expended to travel considerable distances for home games and especially away games if you are an ardent fan.

**The Chalice** – The climax, as a result of vanquishing all opponents over a long and arduous period of struggle, is the holding up and veneration of the Cup.

**The Completion** – Every game has a beginning, a middle (half-time), and an end.

It is possible to go through all 13 of these quasi-religious aspects of attending a football match (and many other team sports) and compare them with the reality of what God offers to us in the Bible and what we can genuinely experience in relation to Him and to one another.

**The Pilgrimage** – Christians are a pilgrim people who are on the march (Ps. 84:5-7). The songs of ascents (Psalms 121 to 134) were sung as all the people journeyed together up to Jerusalem for the 3 major festivals each year. Throughout the gospels, Jesus bids us to ‘follow him’. Sometimes God calls us to be still, but never static.

**The Stadium** – Cathedrals and other church buildings were, and still are in some places, built to the glory of God, communicating spiritual truths and bringing to life Biblical passages in wood, stone, glass, mosaic, metal etc.

**The Players** – We have a rich heritage of heroes of faith, men and women who performed towering endeavours for God (Hebrews 11). Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Esther, Ruth, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David etc. These are mentioned, not that we might worship them, but that we might allow their example to inspire and encourage us on our journey today.

**The Anticipation** – As Christians, God wants us to have a sense of excitement in the present as we serve Him and especially in relation to what is to come in the future (1 Cor. 2:9; Mt. 19:28&29). There is even excitement and anticipation in the ‘not knowing’ (Eccles. 11:1-6).

**The Worship** – Whereas worship and singing in the stadium is directed towards the players and the club, we are to ‘sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Eph. 5:19&20).

**The Message** – For us also, glory is important, and it is centred around Jesus. ‘We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son’ (Jn.1: 14). Glory is mediated to us through Jesus (Jn. 17:22). Indeed, glory emanates from the whole Trinity (Jn. 17:1-5). The ‘glory of the game’ cannot compete with the glory God offers us.

We saw that the other two parts of the message mediated through the flashing images inside the ground were, ‘You are not alone but part of something bigger’ and ‘We are together.’

This is not only intended to meet the need for human companionship but also the need to feel that we are part of something bigger, and much more important, than ourselves. It deals with the issue of loneliness and also the need for a sense of the transcendent.

These needs, it seems to me, may indeed be partially met in the football fan's experience, but can only be fully met in our relationship with Christ and with one another in the Body of Christ. God has raised us up with Christ and seated us in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus (the transcendent experience) and the importance of our relationship with 'one another' is everywhere presented in the New Testament (the human, togetherness experience).

**The Challenge.** The Christian life is full of challenges. The challenge to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, the challenge to face ostracism, ridicule or even death itself.

**The Contest.** We face opposition, we have an enemy against whom we are to stand firm (Eph. 6:10-20). And the good news is that we are always on the winning side! 'Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession.'

**The Comedown.** However, we may not always feel as though we are on the winning side! We may be hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted and even struck down (2 Cor. 4:8&9). Like the disciples on the Emmaus road, our hopes may have been dashed and we may feel 'downcast' (Lk. 24:17-21).

**The Controller(s).** We believe that all authority is vested in Jesus, not the referee! Authority has to be vested in someone otherwise things collapse. And in the same way that referees are much abused today, so Jesus' authority was challenged at every turn until finally he was crucified.

**The Cost.** We live in a culture today where everything has to be easy, instant and reduced in price. Jesus never bought into this mindset as he called people to follow him. The way to life, he said, was, and is, narrow and hard, and unless we are willing to leave everything and follow him, we cannot be his disciples (Mt. 7:13&14; Lk. 14:25-33).

**The Chalice.** For Christians, 'Chalice' is the name given to the Cup held up in the Eucharist. It is a cup of thanksgiving, a participation in the blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16&17).

**The Completion.** Just like a football match, the Bible has a beginning, middle and an end. Jesus himself had a sense of completion as he uttered the words, 'It is finished' on the Cross. Because God has built a sense of time within us, we operate best when we are able to move freely between past, present and future. This enables us to acknowledge the importance of 'new beginnings', 'on-goings' and 'endings.'

Conclusion: In comparing and contrasting these 13 aspects, we are able to discern between the real and the imitation, the genuine and the fake.

There is no doubt that many thousands of people are moved to attend football matches and other sporting events by the powerful transcendental and psycho-social persuaders at work. As someone who once worshipped at the altar of sport, I can still see its attraction and also how it can mimic true worship. I still enjoy sport, but hopefully now in its rightful place, not as the idol it once was.

But in order to attract more people, churches may well need to address these psychological, social and spiritual issues and assess how well they are meeting the needs of their congregations in the way they operate.

And for those for whom sport is not an attraction, check out what other things may have come into your life that press some of the buttons mentioned here.

All of us can assess how and where we are being moved and aim to keep God and His Kingdom as the number 1 priority in our lives.

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