

"Who Does God Root For?"

1 John 5:14, 15

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Some years ago, *The New Yorker* magazine published a cartoon of a large football player being interviewed by a sideline reporter with the scowling player saying into the microphone, "First, I'd like to blame the Lord for causing us to lose today." The caption seemed to have been a deliberate reference to then Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow- a former Heisman Trophy winner who once led the University of Florida Gators to two national championships. Tebow has never been shy about his Christian faith and over the years, he inspired a lot of SUPPORT while equally inciting a large share of DETRACTORS for putting his Christian faith on display game after game. He never failed to credit God for his success, beginning every postgame interview with: "First of all, I want to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!"

Of course, Tim Tebow was not the FIRST nor will he be the LAST sports figure to have regularly thanked God for touchdowns or home runs. The fact is that I love to see people share their testimony and publicly express their faith. Hearing them thank God for helping to develop their character and making them better persons, especially if their walk backs up their talk, can be truly inspiring. However, when they convey the impression that God somehow gave them an edge in games the other team did NOT have or that God was the one ultimately responsible for the victory, then that's crossing the line.

Hall of Fame quarterback Fran Tarkenton once penned an article for *The Wall Street Journal* asking the question "Does God Care Who Wins Football Games?" The son of a Pentecostal Holiness minister, Tarkenton grew up in church every Wednesday night, Friday night, Sunday morning and Sunday night- every week of his childhood. In the piece, he expressed his tremendous admiration for Tim Tebow and how he regards him to be a great role model for many of today's youth. He also related how faith has always been a part of football. Before every game, no matter what team he was on at the time, the coach would always ask the most devout player to say a prayer. The prayer was always pretty much for the same thing: Let there not be any injuries, let everybody play a good game- anything except to win the game. No one ever asked to win the game, he said, probably for fear that God would punish them for asking. Then, after that moment of devotion, the team would all shout in unison, "Now let's go out and KILL those son of a bitches!"

Even though the Buffalo Bills lost to the Steelers last Sunday, the Bills have a great team this year with a tremendous young quarterback in Josh Allen. Well thirty years ago, the New York Giants beat the Bills in the Super Bowl when a last second field goal attempt by Scott Norwood, the kicker, failed to make it through the uprights. Only moments before the kick, some of the Giants players could be seen huddled together in prayer. Giants' tight end Mark Bavaro was later asked what it was he was praying for and he replied, "I was praying for a VICTORY." Afterwards, Bill Parcells, then coach of the Giants, told announcer Brent Musburger in an interview, "I realized a long time ago, Brent, that God is playing some of these games and He was on OUR side today."

But the Giants weren't the only ones saying their prayers- on the other side of the field were a number of **BILLS** players on bended knees before the Almighty. They **TOO** were imploring God, but for their **OWN** miracle- a come-from-behind win. Alas, the kick sailed wide to the right settling once and for all what so many New Yorkers have known- that God is a Giants fan. Bill Kelso, the Bills safety, remarked afterwards: "I'm a Christian and I was praying about it, and I knew if God wanted us to win, it would go through the uprights. But for some reason, He didn't want us to win, so it didn't go through."

This strange theology, that God is there to help win our football games for us, is not just limited to sports; this reduction of God to some kind of tribal deity is **ESPECIALLY** pronounced in the arena of politics and international affairs. During times of war, every leader calls upon the nation's high priest for his blessing. I remember how shortly before the outbreak of the first Persian Gulf War in 1990—"Operation Desert Storm"--Billy Graham was invited for the night to the White House and was seen accompanying the President to church the next day. On the same day, CNN showed pictures of Saddam Hussein at **HIS** mosque, praying to **HIS** God, Allah. The picture it created for the viewer was one of "dueling deities," of which one had the stronger God-America with our Yahweh, or Iraq with their "Baal"? The irony was that throughout that conflict, we saw Americans and Afghans, Christians and Muslims at war with each other- each side convinced of the righteousness of their cause and certain that God was on **THEIR** side and **NOT THE OTHER'S**. Of course, appropriating God for one's benefit has never been new. During World War II, the Nazis were so convinced that God was with **THEM** that German soldiers had inscribed on their belt buckle the phrase "Gott mit uns" which translated means "God is with us." And so the question **REALLY** becomes "DOES God win football games or even **WARS** for us? **WHOSE** side is God on? Does God **TAKE** sides? Or perhaps the most **DISTURBING** question of **ALL**, does God **EVEN CARE** who wins?"

During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was purportedly asked if God was on his side. The President is reported to have responded, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on **OUR** side. My greatest concern is to be on **GOD'S** side, for God is **ALWAYS** right." I wholeheartedly agree with Lincoln, that the question shouldn't be "Is God on **OUR** side?" but rather "Are we on **GOD'S** side?" The truth is that God does not take sides in **THIS** or **ANY OTHER** war because from a divine perspective, God knows that **NOBODY** wins, that **EVERYBODY** is a loser whether on the playing fields of a **FOOTBALL STADIUM** or the muddy fields of **MILITARY BATTLE**. That is because war, plain and simple, is the result of human sin- of hypocrisy, treachery, greed, and pride. War becomes humanity's worst judgment upon itself- America's as well as Afghanistan's. War is an abomination, a stench in the nostrils of God- of that I am convinced. God does not support one nation or one army, any more than God supports one football team over another.

Instead, I believe God supports **PEOPLE**, God supports **INDIVIDUALS**, God supports **HUMAN BEINGS**. God cares for all the **VICTIMS** of war- for those who have lost limbs, for those who cry out at night from their hospital beds, for those who tremble in foxholes, for those who are lonely for their loved ones. God cares for those widowed wives, for all children left fatherless, for those families left homeless and bereft of their possessions. God is not an American nor an Afghan, and neither is God a Christian, a Jew, or a Muslim. God takes no sides because on **ALL** sides he can see nothing but hatred and pride and self-righteousness- the

consequences of human sin. Rather, God is on the side of the one who ACKNOWLEDGES him, the one who calls out to him for help and comfort- that is the ONLY side God ever takes! God is no infantryman with a rifle slung over his shoulder but rather more like a medic or nurse running from one side of the battlefield to the other seeking to offer assistance and comfort wherever it is needed.

Dan Beard, founder of the Boy Scouts of America, was a naturalist who illustrated a number of the books of his friend Mark Twain. During one of his visits with Twain, the humorist read a new piece of writing entitled *The War Prayer*. "Everyone who has heard it so far," said Twain, "tells me I must not let it be published. They say that people would call it a sacrilege." "Still," said Beard, "you are going to publish it, are you not?" Twain shook his head. He said he had told the truth in *The War Prayer*, and the only people in this world who can tell the truth are the dead. "It can be published after I am dead." It was, but little was heard of this remarkable work until Harper & Row published it in book form.

The War Prayer begins with the excitement of a country that has just become involved in war. Flags are flying, patriotic speeches are being made everywhere, and in a certain church the minister makes a very patriotic prayer. He asks the protection of God on the young men in the armed forces, victory on the war fronts, and defeat for the enemy. During the pastoral prayer an old man wearing a long robe and long white hair walks slowly up the aisle, and as the startled minister concluded his prayer, touches him on the arm and takes his place in the pulpit with the words, "I come from the Throne- bearing a message from Almighty God!" The amazed congregation listens as the stranger with the burning eyes explains what the pastoral prayer really means. Beseeking God for victory in the war, he says, really means, "Help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds." It means, "Blast their homes, and send their wives and children out into the snow with bleeding wounds, utterly destroy them." The stranger asks the congregation if THIS is what they truly desire. *The War Prayer* concludes, "It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said."

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' taught his followers that TRUE prayer, EFFICACIOUS prayer, prayer that is HEARD AND ACTED UPON, only avails us when we pray ACCORDING TO GOD'S WILL. Jesus himself said that when we speak to God, we are to pray, "Thy kingdom come, THY WILL BE DONE." And what is God's will? Not that we pray for God to become Commander-in-Chief over our armed forces and that he lead us in an overwhelming victory over our enemies; not that we pray for every bomb we drop to hit its target and every bullet fired to find our enemy's heart. THAT is not praying according to God's will. Rather, Christ taught that to do God's will was TO LOVE THEIR ENEMIES, TO DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO HATED THEM, TO BLESS THOSE WHO CURSED THEM, AND TO PRAY FOR THOSE WHO MISTREATED THEM. (Luke 6:27)

I believe that God's will for us, ESPECIALLY during times of war, is that we PRAY for a speedy and bloodless conclusion to any and ALL conflicts; PRAY that we might see a cessation of ALL hostilities with the least amount of casualties and destruction to the region; pray that EVERYONE—REGARDLESS OF RELIGION--would eventually arrive home to the outstretched arms of their families. It is God's will that we PRAY for the solace and comfort of ALL families who have lost loved ones in times of such conflict. Sure, it is God's will that we

pray for the President and our military leaders along with the courageous men and women of our armed forces. But we are NO LESS enjoined to pray for those with whom we are at war with and that includes THEIR leaders and THEIR generals and THEIR fighters AS WELL. It is God's will that we pray for ALL of them- pray that wisdom and truth may dawn upon their hearts and minds, pray that they might recognize the folly of such conflict and the utter destruction it will bring to so many innocent victims.

And finally, it is God's will that we pray for OURSELVES- pray that we might understand how God abhors ALL war, that it not only tears apart his CREATION but rips God's OWN HEART in two. It is God's will that we be honest enough to recognize and repent of the greed and pride and hypocrisy and self-righteousness that make all wars possible. And it is important that we ALSO pray that God might continue to show mercy towards us and assist us as we struggle for greater peace in the world.

My friends, I'm not going to say I believe it's God's will that we all become pacifists as there HAVE been moments when going to war was clearly NOT AN OPTION, when we HAD to fight in order to prevent some GREATER EVIL from triumphing. World War II comes to mind- a time when freedom and democracy were under assault by the forces of Nazism and its wicked leader, Adolf Hitler. However, there have been many MORE wars throughout history that began, not for defensive purposes but for OFFENSIVE reasons- whether to enlarge that nation's territory, or to enrich itself economically by seizing the other's resources, or to strategically acquire a military foothold or gain some political advantage among the other world's powers. Those are times we need to be ESPECIALLY careful about invoking the name of God or trying to portray it as some righteous crusade!

I conclude by saying that when we wonder where God is, why God doesn't suddenly intervene to end such conflicts and why all our prayers for peace seem to go unanswered, God's response is unmistakable. God answers us, "But I have ALREADY intervened- I entered all the conflict and turbulence of this world bearing peace when I sent my beloved Son Jesus into history to offer you new life, to teach you the way of meekness, forgiveness, and love. That is the ONLY answer to war and strife; the ONLY peace that will EVER last. If you look to him, imitate him, invite him into your life, you will have all the courage and wisdom and strength you will ever need to wage peace instead of war, to build bridges instead of destroying them." Let us pray...

Lord, help us to not only LEARN, but more importantly to LIVE OUT the meaning of your creed as spoken through your servant Micah: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." If we do THAT, then we will truly KNOW and, of course, PRAY in accordance with your will- prayers that you do INDEED hear and love. Amen and amen.