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BELIEFS

Super Bowl Ads Will Leave a Religious Question Unanswered

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If you watch one football game all year, it will probably be Sunday's [Super Bowl](#). And if you happen to glance at the signs held up in the end zone, at least one will probably say "John



A commercial that explains a Bible verse often displayed in the stands during the Super Bowl has been rejected.

It is a reference to a Bible verse: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

That is the verse of choice for Christian spectators at sporting events, and for Christian athletes who paint "John 3:16" in grease paint on their faces — like [Tim Tebow](#), the 2007 Heisman Trophy winner, now with the [Denver Broncos](#).

But according to Fox Sports, which will broadcast the Super Bowl this year, the verse you can see in the stands on television is not suitable for a commercial. The network's rejection of a 30-second spot centered on John 3:16 is just one example of an advertising culture that can be allergic to expressions of faith.

According to Larry Taunton, executive director of the [Fixed Point Foundation](#), which produced the advertisement, inspiration came during last year's Super Bowl.

"Corporate America uses its creativity and millions of dollars to come up with 30-second blasts to get you to buy a beer or Coke or tennis ball," said Mr. Taunton, whose evangelical group, based in Birmingham, Ala., promotes campus debates between [atheists](#) and believers.

"Last year, as I began to reflect on this, I thought, 'If I had 30 seconds to speak to a billion people, what would I say?' "

What he decided to say, in his slickly produced 30 seconds, is that people who have seen the signs saying "John 3:16" should know what [the Bible](#) verse says.

The ad shows a group of enthusiastic fans cheering a football game on a flat-screen television. After one exciting play, the broadcast they are watching zooms in on the quarterback, who has "John 3:16" written across his cheekbones, on either side of his nose.

Two beefy guys are puzzled by the verse.

One of them says, "I'll look it up," and reaches for his smartphone.

The commercial ends on a black screen with the words "[Lookup316.com](#) — A Message of Hope." At that Web address, the text of the Bible verse floats above an empty football stadium.

Fox Sports refused the ad because, according to a statement, "Fox Broadcasting Company does not accept advertising from religious organizations for the purpose of advancing particular beliefs or practices."

But televised sports are infused with religion. Fans hold signs, coaches lead prayers, and the players kneel or cross themselves after touchdowns and routinely thank Jesus in interviews.

"We're not even forcing Christianity on the sport," Mr. Taunton said. "We're just springboarding off a current message that's there. You see it all the time, so what does it mean?"

Mr. Taunton says his nonprofit organization tries to promote civil discourse with those holding different opinions. Perhaps he should share some halftime pork rinds with the folks at [Living the Questions](#), a Phoenix company that publishes liberal Christian education materials. They too had an advertisement rejected, by broadcasters who may have shared Fox's fear that any religious message could anger some of the audience.

Last month, Living the Questions bought radio time for one of its products on stations in Portland, Ore. The one-minute ad for Saving Jesus, a 12-part video course, begins with the question, "Ever feel like Jesus has been kidnapped and taken hostage by the Christian right?"

In Portland, the advertisement was dropped after the first day by three stations owned by Entercom Radio, and dropped after 10 days, and 36 airings, by KINK-FM, owned by Alpha Broadcasting. Erin Hubert, program director for Entercom, said that although the station received only one complaint about the spot, it was dropped "because a local advertiser wanted that time."

But David M. Felton, co-owner of Living the Questions, said his media buyer told him in a Jan. 6 e-mail that "there is a radio group in Portland that asked us to pull their online streaming spots off of the air due to some listener complaints."

And KINK-FM was also responding to feedback from listeners, said Amy Leimbach, the director of sales for Alpha Broadcasting.

"If a commercial is offensive to our listeners, regardless of who the client might be, and we get a constant barrage of complaints, we will take it off the air," Ms. Leimbach said.

Of course, it is unclear who would be more upset by an ad defending Christianity from the "religious right": those on the religious right, who feel slighted, or secular rock-radio listeners who resent evangelism even from liberal Christians.

Ms. Leimbach refused to share any of the many e-mails she said her station received each day the ad aired.

The general reaction, she said, was "I can't believe KINK would take a position on this," Ms. Leimbach said. "They felt by running it, the station was taking a position on religion."

It is not just broadcasters who fear the power of religious advertising to anger customers.

In December, the Fort Worth Transportation Authority ran bus advertisements that read, "Millions of people are good without God."

Local Christians responded with a bus boycott, and one group hired a van bearing the message "I Still Love You. — God" to follow a city bus.

Within a week, the transportation authority resolved the conflict by banning all religious advertising, including that of atheists.

And so, liberated from eternal quarrels, Fort Worth city buses — like Fox Sports and KINK-FM — will have more space to sell us potato chips and car leases.

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