

The Spirit of Competition and the Town & Country Pastor Lee J. Smith

In doing research for a monograph on “athletics from a biblical perspective” I found some interesting opinions about competition. Some secular writers say that competition is natural to the human species, tied to the evolutionary drive for the survival of the fittest. Some Christian writers suggest that the competitive spirit is God-given, to enable us to preserve our lives and protect and provide for our families. However, others suggest that the competitive spirit is a product of the Fall, an aspect of the sinful nature, driven by selfishness, greed and pride and that God’s intention for us is cooperation not competition. They ask, “Will there be competition in heaven?”

My conclusion is that competition is both good and bad. To some extent the competitive spirit is a natural, God-given thing which motivates us to diligent action to protect and provide for those we love and accomplish worthy tasks. But, obviously, this God-given drive has been greatly distorted by sin

So how does the spirit of competition affect the town or country pastor? In both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, a certain jealousy for the truth, which competes with other worldviews and faith systems, is a virtue. We speak the truth to compete with the Devil for the souls of men and women who live in our communities. Of course, we must speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15, 2 Timothy 4:2) We also compete with theological liberalism, secularism and other isms for the minds and hearts of many in our communities. In one community we discovered that 80% of those who attended church were depending on good works to get them to heaven. I have no problem with evangelizing lost church members and depopulating liberal churches.

The ability to compete, for example, athletically, can be a tool toward reaching people for Christ. I recently gained a hearing of a couple of Jr. High boys by playing a little basketball with them. One was heard saying, “I never met a pastor who played basketball before!”

Of course, there is a very dark side to the spirit of competition, both on a personal level as well as on a church level. We may be sinfully competitive. We may be overly competitive in athletics—like the pastor I once met who was known in the community for getting angry in the midst of a game and for wanting to win so badly he would cheat. We may be sinfully competitive in the church too. We have all heard of pastors who have to win every argument, have every decision go their way and who will accept no idea that any one else came up with. As pastors, we can sinfully compete with other leaders of our congregation for attention.

It is also tempting to view other evangelical pastors and churches as competitors, especially when believers have a habit of church-hopping. Randolph is about 15 miles away from three other EFCA churches and other Gospel preaching churches are in Randolph, too. Sometimes people switch churches. When a family decides to change churches it is easy to become defensive, protective, fearful or even angry. “That pastor is a sheep-stealer!” “Those people

only left our church because they are self-absorbed, looking for entertainment, etc.” This is especially difficult for small congregations where each family is a significant percentage of the congregation. I have had to learn to let people go gracefully, giving them an open invitation to return. (Of course, there are a few you are glad to see go!)

To avoid negative feelings toward other pastors I have found it helpful to meet with other local and area pastors for prayer. We must just do what God has enabled and equipped us to do and leave the results in the hands of God. The churches we pastor don't belong to us anyway, they belong to the Lord.