

Blast from the past

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Competition and the Christian Ethic, D. Royce Sadler, Faculty of Education, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland. JCE Vol30 No. 1, April 1996.

Competition permeates our society. It is widely espoused in a free-enterprise economy because it is believed to lead to efficiency in production and distribution of goods and services, and to reward those with initiative, drive, imagination and skill.

In education, achievements are typically assessed competitively. But is competition Christian?

Competition and the assessment of performance

Assessing performance is the crux of accountability. Basically there are three approaches to assessing performance:

1. compares an actual performance with fixed, external, objective markers or standards. (Standards-referenced)
2. compares a person's actual performance with the performance of the same person on earlier occasions. (Self-referenced)
3. compare(s) one person's performance with the performances of other people in a defined group. (Norm-referenced)

Competition is said to occur under the following conditions: there exists two or more parties who seek the same reward, the reward is in short supply and the parties agree or are required to act under some constraints. Wins and losses are mutually exclusive; if one person wins, another loses.

Many secular writers on competition make do distinction between the concept of competition as an operating principle or ethic and an analysis of the desirable and undesirable effects of competition. Christian writers,treat the basic concept of competition as a moral matter.....accepting that there are fundamental principles derived from a distinct (and higher) authority (God) *and not only on the desirability of the ends.*

Towards a Biblical perspective

Christians hold widely different views on the place of competition in contemporary living. Two observations can be made from a reading of Genesis 1-3. God evaluated his creation, and found it good. He had absolute standards *and* much of the Bible is devoted to a communication of divine standards. The second observation is that God made the first man and woman in his image. There is no evidence that this image included the will to win over or to surpass others.

The New Testament is more explicit about the competitive spirit. Jesus said that whoever finds his life will lose it and reprimanded his disciples over disputes that arose among them as to who was considered to be the greatest. Paul advised the Philippian church "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit" Competition has little if any place in the church (or school) life....however, Paul does use the metaphor of competition. "I have fought the good fight and finished the race." Observe that the crowns will be rewardedon whether that person has fought, finished, and kept on target in the divine pattern of living. Is it possible to partition total activities of the church...into body-life...and social? A second consideration is that, for many people, the experience of success or failure transfers to their feelings of self-worth.

Possible responses

Some schools have responded by eliminating from their activities anything that deliberately sets up situations where there are winners and losers. There would have to be a search for or creation of appropriate activities. A less radical alternative is to examine the nature of competitive activities and their effects on participants to see if ways can be discovered to reduce the negative side effects.

The pervasiveness of competition does not provide, however, sufficient reason for Christians to build competition into their own or school's activities without close examination. The doctrines of the body-life of the school have to do with the creation and maintenance of a harmonious whole, with all parts supporting each other.

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