

# **The Body Divided: Competition in the Church**

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*This paper is presented to emphasize how strongly God condemns a competitive spirit among His people.*

THE BIBLE TELLS US that Jesus Christ is “the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Colossians 1:18). The word “preeminence” means “to be first in rank or influence” (*proteuo*, 4409). Jesus is first place in all things. He alone is the Head of the Church, the one who created the Church, and the first one to be raised permanently from the dead. As Spirit-filled believers, we are all subordinate to Him, all members of His one body. Our functions may differ, but our various functions do not effect our status within the body. No member is superior in status to any other. We have all been equalized by the Cross.

In spite of this, John the apostle wrote of a man named Diotrephes, whom he described as loving “to have the preeminence among them” (3 John 1:9). The phrase “loves to have the preeminence” is actually a single word in the Greek, which means “fond of being first, i.e. ambitious of distinction” (*philoproteuo*, 5383). Apparently this man was a leader of one of the churches that John had intended to visit. His name is interesting in that it literally means fed, nourished, or fattened by Zeus, who was the supreme god of the Greeks. From a Christian perspective, Zeus is none other than Satan himself. Keeping this in mind, let's see if we can discern the spirit that was inspiring Diotrephes' fondness for basking in the limelight of human superiority.

Where do we find the origins of this spirit? Isaiah the prophet described it for us when he wrote:

How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I

will be like the Most High.’ Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit (Isaiah 14:12-15).

Because Lucifer attempted to exalt himself above his fellows, he was reduced in stature and will one day be reduced to the depths of the Pit. No longer is he known as Lucifer, the shining one, but instead he is known as the devil and Satan, the adversary of the people of God. And so will it be for every believer who follows after Satan’s example to exalt himself.

In the kingdom of God, we do not take ministry upon ourselves, we give ministry to others in behalf of our Lord. As ministers of the gospel, we are working for Jesus, not for ourselves and not for the people we are ministering to. Neither we, nor any other human being, determines the scope or nature of our ministry; Jesus does (though He will confirm it through others). For this reason, we must be careful to minister in the spirit of Jesus, that is, in the spirit of love and humility.

### **The Spirit of Competition**

The antithesis of the spirit of Jesus is the spirit of competition. This spirit can be recognized by what it seeks to accomplish. Rather than seeking the glory of God, it seeks the glory of man. Rather than inspiring trust in God, it inspires trust in human ability. Rather than yielding to the influence of God’s Spirit, it yields to the dictates of human desire. And rather than striving to reach the stature of the fullness of Christ, it strives only to be superior to others. The spirit of competition detracts from personal excellence as defined by the Scriptures, since it seeks only to be ranked above someone else.

The spirit of competition is the dominant spirit of this world. It is the spirit that incites men to strive to be “better” than their fellows—not to be better than they were yesterday, not to grow up into the likeness of Christ, only to be “better” than their fellows so they can feel superior to others. But Paul wrote, “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God” (1 Corinthians 2:12). Like God, we ought to be emptying and humbling ourselves, not striving to exalt ourselves above our fellow believers and fill ourselves up on the accolades of men.

As a matter of fact, Jesus warned that “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). The devil is an excellent example of the first part of this principle, and Jesus Himself is the perfect illustration of the second. The Bible says that even though He would have been taking nothing that did not belong to Him if He had insisted on being treated as God, He nevertheless emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant.

Then, going even further, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. “Therefore,” Paul explained, “God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name...” (Philippians 2:9).

There are two directions in life that each of us can strive to move in: 1) vertically, up and down, and 2) horizontally, side to side. Vertical movement has to do with our status or position: how high or how low we are in comparison to other people. Horizontal movement has to do with our connections or relationships: how close or how distant we are to other people.

In the kingdom of God, ministry is a matter of moving vertically downward into servanthood and horizontally toward the people we are ministering to—the objective being to get close enough to influence them and help them. The only upward movement we have in this life is spiritual: the ascendancy God gives us over the powers of evil and our own flesh. Our ultimate upward movement is yet for a future time when we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. In the end, the only way any of us will go up is by willingly going down for the present.

### **Jesus’ Warning to the Disciples**

The disciples of Jesus struggled with the spirit of competition. On one occasion in Capernaum, He asked them, “What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?” The Bible says they kept silent, because on the road they had disputed about who would be the greatest among them. After calling the twelve together, Jesus told them, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:33-35).

The preeminent One was doing His best to model the spirit of love to His disciples by taking upon Himself the form of a servant. He was demonstrating what ministry is all about by humbling Himself and becoming obedient. He was showing them, if you want to go up, you must first go down.

Apparently Jesus’ words didn’t sink in. Just a short time later James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.” Jesus replied, “What do you want Me to do for you?” And they answered without the least bit of embarrassment, “Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory” (Mark 10:35-37).

What they were really asking for was, “Raise us up above the other guys. We want to be higher than them.” And look at what happens when the members of the body of Christ compete with each other for position and status. The Bible says

that when the ten heard it, “they began to be greatly displeased with James and John” (Mark 10:41). At that point there were two factions among the disciples and unity had been tossed out the window. Competition always results in strife and division.

Because of the way He was soon to achieve His exaltation, Jesus was preeminently qualified to rebuke his competitive disciples with the words, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.” And why could Jesus say this so emphatically? Because, “even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

The Bible admonishes, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...” (Philippians 2:5). Oh, that all God’s ministers would heed those words today!

### **The Boasting of the Spirit of Competition**

As we look down through the annals of human history, we can see the spirit of competition at work in every age. This spirit is...

- The devil’s spirit, who said, “I will ascend...I will be like the Most High.”
- The spirit of Babylon, where men attempted to build a tower to heaven.
- The spirit of ancient Greece, where the Olympic games were born and the “thrill of victory” dominated.
- The spirit of idolatry, which is the worship of false gods and ultimately the worship of selfish interests.
- The spirit of evolution, which has as its foundation the survival of the fittest.
- The spirit of philosophy, which promotes the transcendence of human intellect.
- The aristocratic spirit, which places power in the hands of the “best people.”
- The spirit of Korah, who exalted himself against God's appointed leaders.

- The spirit of the sons of Zebedee, who wanted to be set above their fellow disciples.
- The spirit of the Pharisees, who loved taking the best seats.
- The spirit of the Saducees, who loved wielding power over the common people.
- The spirit of Diotrophes, who loved having the preeminence in the church.
- The spirit of the Nicolaitans, who were victorious over the people of God (Jesus said He hates their deeds and their doctrine).
- The spirit of Gnosticism, which used esoteric knowledge to form an elitist club of pseudo-Christians.
- The spirit of Roman Catholicism, with its domineering hierarchy and “infallible” pope.
- The spirit of Protestant denominationalism, with its numerous divisions due to doctrinal rivalries.
- The spirit of Nazism, with its vile teaching of racial superiority.
- The spirit of professional sports, where superiority is the highest value.
- The spirit of antichrist, who exalts himself against all that is called God.

Most Americans come to God infected to some degree by the competitive spirit. After all, competition is all around us. But we must never accept competition as a valid method in working for God. Instead, we must diligently drive it out of our lives.

To do this, we must first be able to recognize it. Jesus revealed some of the symptoms of this spirit when He cautioned, “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward” (Matthew 6:1-2).

Jesus warned not to go around tooting our own horn. In fact, the Bible has many

cautions about seeking after the praises of men. Why is this? It's a trap that places you in bondage to man. In the end, it prevents you from being a true servant of God. As Paul wrote, "Do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

When you feel the need to tell how someone complimented you about your ministry, you are entertaining the spirit of competition. When you feel the need to tell how mightily God used you in some situation, you are again entertaining the spirit of competition. In fact, anything you say about yourself that is calculated to make yourself look good is nothing more than self-exultation which reveals our spiritual immaturity. It may be subtle, but what you are saying is, "Aren't I wonderful. Aren't I doing a great job. Come on, praise me." And even worse, you are saying, "Aren't I better than so and so...."

Instead, we should be endeavoring to hide our accomplishments, not even letting the right hand know what the left is doing. If we were truly humble, we would desperately avoid letting anyone know about our accomplishments, since when we reveal them we are stripping ourselves of our eternal reward and accepting the reward of human praise in its place.

This does not mean that no one will ever know about anything we do. It only means that they will not know because we felt compelled to tell it. As Solomon advised, "Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips" (Proverbs 27:2). Our attitude should be that we are totally undeserving of praise of any kind—that we are nothing. As Paul warned, "If anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (Galatians 6:3). The word translated "nothing" means "not even one." This is the value of man. We are dust. We have been given a great treasure, but we house it in "earthen vessels." The vessel has no value, only the treasure! The vessel is not worthy of praise, only the treasure!

Every time we toot our own horn, even subtly, we are strengthening the spirit of competition within our hearts. Sometimes it can be very subtle and can seem justified. Let us seek God that He would give us discernment in this area. A competitive spirit left unchecked can very easily take a sincere man in and eventually take him down.

The desire to appear to be in any way superior to others is wrong, prideful, and evil. As James warned, "But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil" (James 4:16). As believers we have but one thing to boast about: "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14).

**Note to the reader:**

If you would like to comment on the contents of this paper, please contact us through our website at [www.GloriousChurch.com](http://www.GloriousChurch.com). We welcome and appreciate all honest comments, questions, and criticisms.

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