

ABSTRACT

Perspectives on Competition - Christian and Otherwise

Dr. Sharon G. Johnson and Dr. Galen Smith,
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This paper proposes to study something that for many teachers has become an unspoken, and too often unthinking, presupposition: that we know what competition is, and that competition is essentially useful in accomplishing important goals.

This paper presents the results of an initial exploration into the complex, and often contradictory, world of research and thinking on the topic of competition. Taking a multi-discipline perspective, this paper:

1. sets out the often contradictory views of writers and researchers regarding competition's benefits and draw backs
2. presents a variety of perspectives of competition from such fields of study as psychology, economics, education, anthropology
3. proposes a set of themes that seem common to many of these perspectives of competition
4. identifies a set of conflicts among these perspectives of competition
5. proposes a framework for the exploration of contrasting perspectives about competition among Christians

The study ends with six conclusions targeted at generating continued dialogue among Christian faculty related to competition as a theological construct, a research focus, and a pedagogical tool.

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OVERVIEW OF THE PAPER

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It is important for the authors of this paper to clarify what this paper does not do. This paper is not meant to be a definitive discussion of competition, nor does the paper seek to reach conclusions about the "best" Christian perspective on competition. Our exploration over the last 2 years has revealed that the topic is far too complicated for such an approach - at least at this point in our journey. Furthermore, this paper does not seek to establish (nor defend) the author's personal position on competition. Our own research agenda calls for further study, including examination of the effects of student competitiveness on academic performance. It is our desire to invite faculty from other schools to join with us in this research. Also, this paper does not seek to compare and contrast the virtues of cooperation as versus competition. While some of the material we quote in this paper does touch on that theme, this paper seeks more to clarify different views on competition than to contrast it with cooperation. We believe the study of cooperation is a worthy objective - it simply is not the objective of this paper.

A SIMPLE BEGINNING - BUT A SURPRISINGLY COMPLEX AND CONTENTIOUS JOURNEY

This analysis began rather innocently. One of our children asked a simple question: "If Jesus had been a basketball player, would he have charged someone in order to make a basket?" The question was intriguing. Scripture tells us that Jesus did have brothers and sisters - would he have engaged them in foot races and, if so, would he have tried to outrun them? That small beginning launched a search that has taken these authors over a widely varied landscape of ideas about competition.

We have read a masters thesis in theology on competition. We have read books (especially in the arena of sports) where competition has been both extolled and excoriated. We have read analysis in economics where competition has been explained, justified, glorified and crucified. We have read magazines and journals in education where competition has been both praised and perjured. We have read articles in the fields of sociology where competition has been treated both as a valuable tool for success and as a certain path of failure. We have read testimonies from athletes, both personal and professional, where competition has been cited as both a source of excellence and a source of exasperation. We have studied the literature in educational pedagogy and have seen competition viewed as both a great benefit and a great barrier to learning.

Indeed, our research has led us to be both less sanguine about the supposed benefits of competition and more sensitive to the possible harm of competition. We have come to understand more clearly both the possibilities and

perils of competition as both a systemic approach (as in economics) and a personal aspiration (as in athletics). As educators, we have been challenged personally in terms of the presuppositions we have made about the value of competition as a learning modality. As Christians and church members we have been forced to take a fresh look at competition in terms of whether such a concept has any validity within a faith-based community.

A SENSE OF CONTENTION: THE MANY DIFFERENCES ABOUT COMPETITION

One of the earliest discoveries we made was the existence of almost polar opposite views about competition . We offer some of those different views in the paralleled passages that follow:

“The more closely I have examined the topic, the more firmly I have become convinced that competition is an inherently undesirable arrangement, that the phrase *healthy competition* is actually a contradiction in terms.¹ ... I believe the case against competition is so compelling that parenthetical qualifications to the effect that competition can sometimes be constructive would be incongruous and unwarranted.”²

“ ... competition brings out different talents in different students and allows those talents to develop. Competition helps us recognize that we are not all the same, but each is an individual. Competitive games showed me where I fit into the classroom; I was better than others at spelling bees and math flashcards, but not as good as Tim in finding Bible verses. ... [competition] helps make learning interesting and stimulating. Competitive games break the monotony of the classroom routines. They stimulate the students by causing them to concentrate their energies to achieve more than their opponents ... Competition may also be seen as positive because it produces a lift in the winner’s morale and encourages him to continue working.”⁴

“Competition produces aggression, rivalry, conflict, cheating and discrimination which are anathema to the Christian conscience. For the Christian the ideal is not competition but cooperation, which by comparison produces mutual benefits, modesty and harmony.”⁶

“Many [competitive] sporting and leisure activities would close to meaningless without competition. It provides the challenge, the fun, the motivation, and the reward for achievement. Competition forces people to extend themselves, to scale greater heights, to run faster, to hit harder, in short, to excel.”³

“I strongly believe that when we force competition prior to the child’s capability of handling the pressures involved - and without the proper support and encouragement - the long term detriments will outweigh any supposed benefits ... By imposing a competitive ethic fashioned by adults, we may be damaging the child’s growing-up process. We interfere with a positive development by telling the child that he’s not any good in a particular area and by placing great emphasis on that lack of ability. If he continues to be criticized, or rides the bench every season, or always plays on a losing team with a coach who stresses that winning is the most important thing, he may start to take on the identity of a loser - ‘Ah, I’m no good.’ If children can’t learn to enjoy themselves outside the confines of winning, if they are led to believe that they are failures if they don’t succeed, that what values are sports imparting.”⁵

“ ... the Bible describes human beings making choices to stand against natural limitations of any kind when these are the result of the Fall, of sin, or of a broken world. Competition is necessary in order to struggle for that balance required to live ... Not equality, but an adequate life is the goal. To that end, virtue and knowledge are required. They want to be reached for, ever beyond our grasp, through personal effort. Once found, they produce rich rewards in relationships and material goods and services. That struggle to live requires competition the scarcity of life after the Fall. We compete in order to fulfill our purpose as human beings and live.”⁷

“If there is anything on which divergent interpretations would have to agree, it would be the admission that the Christian conception of goodness is the antithesis of competitive. We are by no means forced to believe that the central figure of the Gospels was an ascetic; he never condemned pleasure as such, and seems to have had his own pleasure in life. But his participation in any sort of competitive sport is not to be imagined. Among his most characteristic utterances were the fervent exhortations that the last should be first and that he who would be chief should be the servant of all. ... Thus we appear to search in vain for any really ethical basis for the approval of competition as a basis for an ideal type of human relations, or as a motive to action. It fails to harmonize ... with ... the Christian ideal of Christian fellowship.”⁸

“... a study of His [Jesus] life reveals characteristics essential in championship athletics. ... He lived His life as a human being, subject to the same physical frailties all humans have. We can be sure of one thing. Whatever athletic ability He did possess would have been maximized.”⁹

A SENSE OF COMPLEXITY: THE MANY DEFINITIONS OF COMPETITION

Our search led us across a great many definitions of competition. We offer four different definitions below (others appear in Appendix A). We discovered that part of the complexity (and contentiousness) of the discussion surrounding competition is that it is defined in so many different ways between various fields of study (for instance, economics versus psychology), and between authors in the same field of study.

“For our purposes, competition will be defined as a process through which success is measured by directly comparing the achievements of those who are performing the same physical activity under standardized conditions and rules.”¹⁰

“In thinking about competition it is important to define it in as neutral a way as possible. ... competition is a perfectly general human phenomenon which results from scarcity. It is because the prizes to be won are limited and the resources to be allocated are finite that competition exists. Competition is simply a way of resolving conflicts of interest in society. It may take many forms: it may be a game of sport, or it may be the violence of the jungle, it could be a beauty contest, an essay prize, or a job interview. As the examples indicate, the basis of competition may be skill, beauty, violence, or just chance.”¹¹

“The economists’ concept of competition is very specific. A competitive market is one in which there exists substantial freedom of entry and exit for producers and people. A competitive car market is one in which new firms are free to enter and compete or in which old firms can leave the business. By contrast a non-competitive market would be one [for example] in which existing producers set prices by agreement among themselves and kept out potential competition. ... Sometimes competition may be an end in itself as in a game of sport. But in the economic sphere the purpose of competition is to provide goods and services to the consumer as cheaply as possible ... In economic life competition is not an end in itself but a means to an end.”¹²

“Competition arises whenever men strive for identical objects which cannot be possessed in common. Indeed, the act of such striving is the very essence of competition. ... (1) *Deliberate competition* is an act of striving with other people in order to (a) do something better, (b) be thought more of, (c) obtain more power, [and/or to] (d) possess more material wealth than those other people. ... (2) *Involuntary Competition* is the act of striving for identical objects which cannot be possessed or enjoyed in common, but striving solely for the sake of the object and not with reference, conscious or unconscious, to the other people concerned.”¹³

Our review of definitions has left us believing there is a very real phenomena called competition - but it is too big to be captured in its whole by any one definition from any one discipline or author. What we can do is to offer an initial set of observations that focus on what most of the definitions have in common (themes in concert), and then a set of contrasts that capture the differences creating tensions among the definitions (themes in conflict).

Competitive themes in concert

- A **sense** of shortage (the belief that some objective or some resource is rare or in “short supply”)
- A **seeking** to obtain (the determination that the resource or objective is valuable and desirable)
- A **struggle** to overcome (the observation that obtaining that objective or resource will require intense and sustained effort, a pushing against something and/or someone)
- A **society** (community) of competitors (the recognition that competition is personalized - that is, embedded in the interaction between living beings who are more, or less, cognizant of the competitive struggle and of each other)
- A **structure** of boundaries (the creation and/or existence of some set of implicit and/or explicit understanding among competitors of the rules governing the competition)
- A **selection** of competition as the mode to obtain our goals

Each of these themes is a necessary but not sufficient condition for competition. Three of these themes or elements could use some words of comment.

- **A sense of shortage**

The belief that some objective or some resource is rare or in “short supply” need not be based on reality for competition to exist at the human level. For instance, it may be “in fact” that many people could get admitted to a college - but students may be under the impression that only the top 10% will actually get admitted creating, for them, a sense of competitive shortage. In the business world the belief that something is “hard to get” has led to consumers fighting over dolls and action figures- when in fact there was no “actual” shortage.

- **A seeking to obtain**

The determination that the resource or objective is valuable and desirable enough to warrant effort is a subjective judgment. One can compete over artificial as well natural shortages. In sports we “dream up” artificial rewards (medals, standings). Not too far from our [the authors’] houses is a small but popular amateur race track. Each Thursday night throughout the summer competitive drag races are held. People from all over the area, some obviously traveling great distances, come to compete for relatively meager prizes. Their behavior may seem to some to be totally irrational - they spend on their cars much more than they could ever hope to win in prize money. Is winning the Boston Marathon “worth” the price of training and self-denial it takes to win the first prize - that wholly depends on the person making the judgment.

- **A society (community) of competitors**

Clearly American society is immersed in a competitive ethic. For reasons reaching back as far as the Protestant Reformation, competition has become engrained not only as a process but a virtue. We will address this in more detail later, but it may be helpful to post a word of “warning” here about the too easy assumptions that competition is normal and preferable to other forms of behavior:

“That most of us consistently fail to consider the alternatives to competition is a testament to the effectiveness of our socialization. We have been trained not only to compete but to believe in competition. If we are asked about it, we unthinkingly repeat what we have been told. Unfortunately, the case for competition, as most of us have learned it, does not stand up under close scrutiny . . . Most of all, the case for competition is based on a great deal of misinformation. Specifically, it has been constructed on four central myths . . . The first myth is that competition is an unavoidable fact of life, part of ‘human nature.’ ..The second myth is that competition

motivates us to do our best ... {The] Third [myth], it is sometimes asserted that contest provide the best, if not the only, way to have a good time. ... The last [fourth] myth is that competition builds character, that it is good for self-confidence.”¹⁴

Important at this point is simply that competition requires that the contest be personalized - that is, embedded in the interaction between living beings who are more, or less, cognizant of the competitive struggle and of each other. The struggle need not be so savagely unprincipled as to rule out any consideration of others as something more than mere barriers to our success and as mere beings to be defeated and eliminated. In fact such an unprincipled and unbridled “competition” might better be called warfare than true competition. However, even in warfare the contestants frequently agree to some standards by which the war will be fought.

- **A selection of competition as the mode to obtain our goals**

While one could argue that every “desirable” resource (from space to live, to things to own) is in short supply (relative to demand), then everybody and every organism is in competition, whether they are conscious of the situation or not. What is manifestly true, however, is that shortages among either humans or animals do not have to give rise to competition. Competition is not the only way to respond to resource shortages. Alfie Kohn writes:

“Competition is not the only way to organize a classroom or a workplace. This is hardly a controversial observation, but because we have come to take competition for granted, we rarely think about alternatives.” Kohn goes on to suggest “ways of achieving one’s goals: competitively, which means working against others; cooperatively, which means working with others; and independently, which means working without regard to others.”¹⁵

For instance, a shortage of rice may be an occasion for competition (to work against each other to achieve a division of the rice) or cooperation (to work with each other to cultivate more rice).

As it is most usually formulated, competition is ultimately a choice.

There is a wonderful illustration of this dynamic of choice found in the Old Testament Bible book of Genesis. Abraham and his cousin, Lot, had been traveling together for sometime. Both Abram (later named Abraham) and Lot had prospered. In fact, they ran into a classic land shortage (ironically, in the midst of great prosperity):

“Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also [like Abram] had flocks and herds and tents. But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. And quarreling arose between Abram’s herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot...”¹⁶

The situation was one of what would seem to be inevitable competition. As the elder, Abram had every right to insist on preference for his herds and family. And, yet, Abram took a very unusual step:

“So Abram said to Lot, ‘Let’s not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left.’”¹⁷

Competitive themes in conflict

A review of the definitions of competition also surfaces what are inevitable differences in perspectives.

- Impersonal process or personal pursuit
- Something to be grown or something to be guarded against
- Essentially institutional or essentially interpersonal
- One-dimensional or multidimensional
- Ends or means
- Neutral vs. determining (or driving) process
- Mutually exclusive or meaningfully inclusive

We want to make a few initial notations about each of these “conflicts.”

- **Impersonal process or personal pursuit**

The fundamental character of competition involves the “pitting” of one being “against” another to achieve ownership or possession of some scarce object or objective. The issues raised by this conflict have to do with whether this competition refers essentially to an inevitable and impersonal process (as might be the claim in an economics system which regards competition as simply a mechanism whereby buying and selling choices are adjudicated in a public marketplace) or a personal choice (as might be the case in a sports arena). A simple way to express this tension is to ask whether we see competition as a condition (or circumstance) or a choice.

If competition is simply a mechanism then the criteria for judging its performance would be efficiency and effectiveness: does it deliver whatever it is supposed to deliver, and does it deliver whatever value it delivers with the least waste (of time, energy, and resources). For instance, if the only aim is to deliver to a graduate program people who will successfully matriculate from that program, then the use of a competitive score (like a GMAT or MCAT) is both efficient and effective. This would mean that other considerations, such as concerns about racial or gender biases or desires for racial and gender balances, would be deemed to be simply unfortunate or irrelevant. If, on the other hand, competition is viewed as a personalized pursuit, then its conduct by people and its effect on people becomes a legitimate matter of concern. This may mean that alternative methods of determining entry into MBA and medical programs should be entertained.

- **Something to be grown or something to be guarded against**

Even if we do assume that people are naturally competitive (something that is a judgment, not a fact, as we have already pointed out in this paper), we are still left to wrestle with whether this natural state is to be encouraged or discouraged.

Consider this perspective:

“So many examples abound of man’s competitiveness, rivalry and ruthless exploitation of his fellow man within our culture that many people are convinced that this is the nature of man. If one views only the present and only product-oriented industrialized societies, urban jungles, it is easy to see why this misconception exists. However, this belief is dangerous as it serves to justify and strengthen the very behavior which we find repulsive.”¹⁸

We can assume that competition, like many types of human behavior, has advantages and disadvantages. Differences in conclusions about competition often are based on differences in calculating and weighting the perceived costs and benefits of a competitive activity. For instance, one person may count the gain in self esteem from winners of an athletic contest as more important than the loss of self esteem among the losers of the contest. In economics, one person may conclude that the efficiency benefits of a competitive economic system are more important than the equity concerns about wealth distribution in the system.

From a Christian perspective, the decision about whether to endorse or decry the effects of competition in any arena is challenging. As we shall demonstrate later in this paper different Christians have reached very different conclusions about competition ranging from whole-hearted endorsement to wholesale enmity.

“Competition and Christianity are compatible in some respects, but man aspects of the competitive system work against one’s desire to be like Christ.”¹⁹

An interesting light is thrown on this desirable/undesirable dynamic of competition by Geoff Moore:

“There is an interesting dichotomy between the views of economists and those of businessmen on the subject of competition. Economists view competition as an essential elements of a market system; something to be encouraged if scarce resources are to be used in the most efficient manner. Businessmen, on the other hand, view competition as something to be avoided or defeated - almost as though it were an unfortunate outcome of a market system.”²⁰

- **Essentially institutional or essentially interpersonal**

The locus of competition is a crucial determinant of one’s perspective on the promise and problems of competition. There is a very real difference between the critique of competition as a systematic phenomena (as in economics or natural ecological systems), and competition as a mode of interpersonal relationship.

Consider the following matrix:

	Supporter of interpersonal competition	Critic of interpersonal competition
Supporter of institutional competition	Competition benefits both the culture and the individual. A culture is strengthened by a focus on performance excellence. Individuals in that culture also benefit as they accept the urging to seek their personal best.	An economy driven by competition increases the efficiency and effectiveness of production and benefits all consumers in a culture. However, at the person-to-person level competition increases hostility and damages the urge to cooperate (the essential element in cultural cohesion).
Critic of institutional competition	While individuals gain from the excitement and “sharpening” that characterizes competition on a person-to-person or team-to-team basis, an economic system based on competition means that the most vulnerable and needy in the system have the least voice and leverage.	Competition creates a mal-distribution of wealth at the system level, placing greater and greater power in the hands of fewer and fewer people whose decisions are increasingly egocentric rather than efficient and effective. At the person-to-person level competition creates cults of “winners” and “losers,” most often based on the least important of all personal qualifications (for instance, rewarding running fast while ignoring thinking creatively).

- **One-dimensional or multidimensional**

Some differences in perspective regarding competition have to do with the degree to which competition is seen as “essentially” one-dimensional or whether it is seen as multidimensional. The issue is not usually that a writer will argue that competition is in fact only “one thing.” Rather, the issue is whether the writer sees the essence of competition as involving one dominant dynamic.

Alfie Kohn basis his objections to competition on a definition that contains one essential: “*mutually exclusive goal attainment* (‘MEGA,’ for short). This means, very simply, that my success requires your failure. Our fates are negatively linked. ... This is the essence of [structural] competition”²¹ Kohn creates in his definition a condition with which others would take issue, arguing that competition need not involve either the urge for nor necessity of another to lose:

“The joy of sport is the competition. The essence is the conflict. But competition is not a simple concept. There are many ways of approaching it. For some people, there is, indeed, a need to be number one. ... The most important distinction, however, is that the ultimate competition in sports is not with others but with oneself. ... Competition in such sports [like swimming and long-distance running] provides both stimulation and the pressure of producing on demand. The presence of other good athletes forces one to ‘outdo’ oneself, to push oneself to new accomplishments. Still, one does not so much defeat one’s rivals as defeat one’s old self. Both in training and in the meet, one’s attention is ultimately upon one’s own performance: one’s own best time, one’s own best distance.”²²

- **Ends or means**

Another competitive dynamic that gives rise to differences in perspectives is whether one sees competition as an end or a means. The issue might be framed this way: is competition best judged by the results it produces, or by the way those results are produced? Some would argue that competition is simply one way to achieve an end result. For example, in economics, one might argue that the issue in any economy is the distribution of goods and services and that competition can be evaluated only in regard to other ways of achieving this distribution. One might conclude that whatever reservations one might have about the results of competition as a way of “deciding” who gets what in a marketplace, it is a better system than, say, arbitrary decisions by some dictator (communism) or by some elected/self-appointed rulers (socialism):

“Competition among producers for scarce resources ensures that these go to the most efficient firms. Competition among buyers will ensure that the goods most in demand are produced. Competition motivates businesses to continually look for better and cheaper ways to make these goods. .. While in theory, only a perfectly competitive market provides the enumerated benefits, in real life, a certain degree of imperfection seems to be acceptable. That the [competitive] market system has proven to work significantly better than the communist/socialist system is not really in doubt. Markets - even if imperfectly competitive - permit us to operate more stewardly than the alternative.”²³

Others would argue that to overlook the “dark side” of competitive economic systems is to accept a system as simply the lesser of two (or more) evils.

“The competitive system, viewed simply as a want-satisfying mechanism, falls far short of our highest ideals. To the theoretical tendencies of perfect competition must be opposed just as fundamental limitations and counter tendencies, of which careful scrutiny discloses a rather lengthy list.”²⁴ “... economic production has been made a fascinating sport for the leaders, but this has been accomplished by reducing it to mechanical drudgery for the rank and file. In the large is the competitive urge a lure, or is it rather a goad?”²⁵

- **Neutral vs. determining (or driving) process**

The final point of potential conflict (that we discuss at this point in the paper) relates to one's view of competition as a neutral mechanism versus a shaper of ideas and ideals. Some argue that competition is simply a process that can deliver good or bad depending on the motives and methods of those involved in the competition: "Competition, then, can offer the opportunity for sin or service of others."²⁶

Others are not so sanguine about the "neutrality" of competition:

"Much of the Bible is devoted to a communication of divine standards for ... things, including human behavior. In other words, the concept of assessing performance against external standards rather than against the performances of other people, is clearly a Biblical position. The second observation is that God made the first man and woman in His image. There is no evidence [in Genesis 1-3] here or elsewhere that this image included the will to win over or to surpass others, although it is clearly necessary to draw a line between competitiveness as a [chosen] way of life, and the desire to survive when threatened or faced with annihilation."²⁷

"Unfortunately, individuals are almost totally dispensable in today's [competitive] economy. We are not people; we are human resources that can be manipulated at the will of the captains of industry, who seek to maximize their own wealth. ... This is the dark side of competition policy that the business, political and intellectual elites seem to ignore. The rationalists seem to accept a Darwinian conception of economics as an arena of activity where the survival of the fittest is a natural, inevitable, right and proper state of affairs."²⁸

"The economic order does far more than select and compare wants for exchangeable goods and services: its activity extends to the formation and radical transformation, if not the outright creation, of the wants themselves; they as well as the means of their gratification are largely products of the system. An examination of the ethics of the economic system must consider the question of the kinds of wants which it tends to generate and nourish as well as the treatment of wants as they exist at any given time. ... Economic activity is *at the same time* a means of want-satisfaction, an agency for want- and character-formation, a field of creative self-expression, and a competitive sport. While men are 'playing the game' of business, they are also molding their own and others personalities, and creating a civilization whose worthiness to endure cannot be a matter of indifference."²⁹

- **Mutually exclusive or meaningfully inclusive**

Competition and cooperation can be seen as allies or enemies. Some would consider the presence of competition as anathema to the promotion of cooperation - others have concluded that the two are mutually necessary.

Consider the views expressed in these contrasting commentaries:

"We find intriguing the things that mirror our daily lives and the lives of other creatures in nature, and all of those lives involve some element of cooperation as well as competition. I don't think we would watch a thing that was only competition, with no hint of any cooperation, and I'm not sure we would find it realistic that something was all sweetness and light and cooperation, either. **All the animals that live in groups are always a complex mixture of cooperation and competition.** Most of the time they do best to cooperate with each other, and they reproduce most effectively by being part of a cooperative society. But if we watch them long enough, and in enough different contexts, we realize that even the most cooperative societies have elements of competition at the appropriate moment. If we think about the most popular TV show in recent weeks, Survivor, that's extreme cooperation as well as competition. They have those teams, and they go through all kinds of team challenges. On a day-to-day basis, these people are cooperating with each other against the elements. They're very much cooperative, but there's also a competitive element. The kinds of events that blend the two seem reasonable and interesting to us, because they are so truly reflective of how we behave ourselves."³⁰ (Emphasis added)

“Even though competition may encourage the pursuit of excellence in some children, it is not the only way, or possibly, the best way. ... Even if sports establish an enthusiasm for life’s challenges, there would still be concern, because competition may also generate self-orientation and hostility. Studies have concluded that competition nurtures ‘me-ism.’ ... competition incorporates a tendency toward self-concern. If you and I are striving for the same prize, I don’t expect you to act generously in my behalf. In fact, if you become sympathetic while winning, you may ease up, allowing me to overtake you. If so, you will be chided for lacking a ‘killer’s instinct.’ ... Research [also] has confirmed that unfriendly acts between participants increase during competition. ... Research indicates that sports are frequently a stimulant to, rather than a repressor of, aggressive feelings. Even watching some sporting events can increase a person’s aggression.”³¹

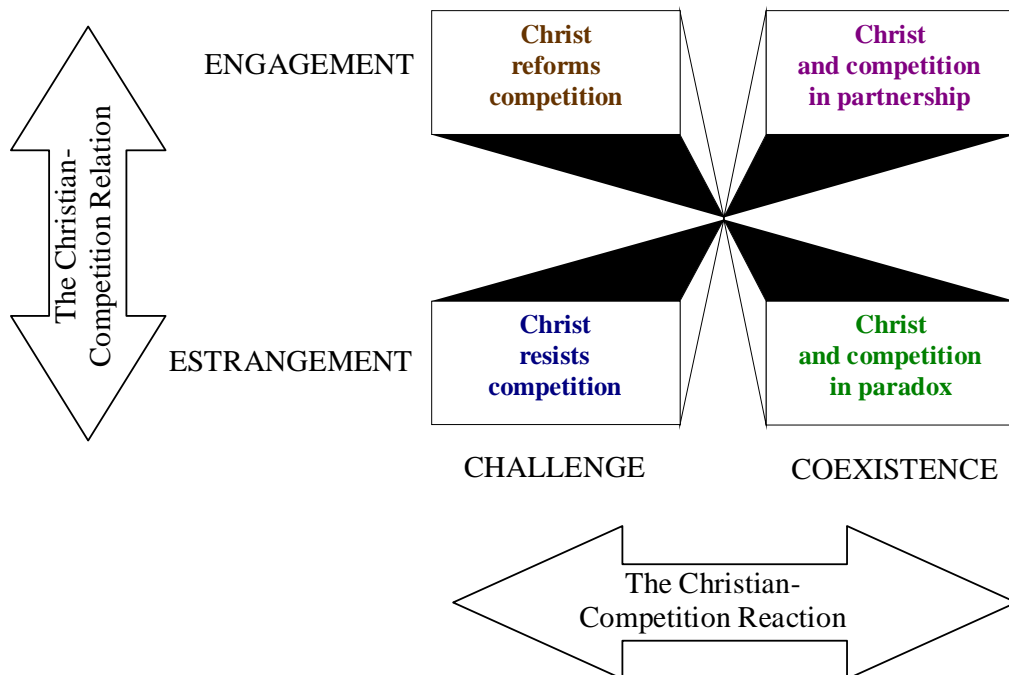
A CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSING COMPETITION

As already demonstrated in this paper’s examination of both definitions and differences, there is no single “accepted definition or perspective on competition. As we shifted our study toward integrating what we had so far learned about competition we assumed, correctly, that there would be conflicting points of view.

Our studies revealed that some Christians have concluded that Christianity and competition are essentially incompatible, while others claim that competition is not only compatible with Christianity but also that Christianity actually enhances one’s competitive performance. We will review some of the literature speaking to these differences, but the diagram and discussion following that initial review propose a framework for understanding the tensions between various perspectives in the Christian community about the problems with and prospects for competition within that community of believers.³²

Christians in relationship, and response, to competition

The diagram following posits that there are two key dimensions Christian face when confronting competition. The first dimension focuses on the way a Christian chooses to relate to competition: at the extremes Christians can choose to fully engage in competition, or to be fully disengaged (estranged) from competition. The second dimension focuses on the reaction Christians can have to competition: at the extremes they can challenge



competition (for example, question its necessity or desirability, debate its ends and/or means), or accept and coexist with competition (as it currently manifests itself in whatever setting the Christian finds themselves).

The result of the relational and reaction dimensions is four positions which seem to capture at least the boundary marks of Christian perspectives on competition.

Christ resists competition

The essential tenet of this perspective is that competitive desires and Christ-likeness are inherently, irreconcilably opposed. The belief is that the Bible condemns competition as an evil condition to be mourned (and, in the life of the Believer, to be removed). Christians are seen as in “combat” with the evil effects of competition. The existence of competition is viewed as a testimony to man’s fall from God’s kingdom. Our role as Christians is to remain separate from the competition because Christians involved in competition will experience corruption of their loyalties to God. This perspective would say that those Christians who advocate competition are doing so only as a pretense to sanctify their desire for worldly pleasure and success. The thrust of the teaching of scripture is how to avoid the entrapping lure and attendant perils of competition.

Christ and competition in partnership

The essential tenet of this perspective is that the Bible commends competition as an exciting condition to be enjoyed. The claim is that Christianity and competition are not only compatible but inclusively complementary - that is, Christians both can and should compete, and doing so helps us grow spiritually, physically, socially and economically. Competition is a present to be enjoyed and cultivated wherever possible and in that competition we can truly experience God’s delight. Christ comes to competition as encourager, and the existence of competition in our world is perceived as testimony to God’s common grace for His kingdom resulting in aspirations for excellence that help in both personal and community growth and development. Christians involved in competition will experience confirmation of their loyalties to God. Successful (principled) competition is seen as a reward and blessing from God. Scripture helps us to apply God’s principles to competition. In this view there is no inherent conflict between Christianity and competition - rather, they are seen as mutually supporting each other.

Christ reforms competition

In this perspective Christ comes to competition as transformer, seeking to rediscover God’s design for competition. In this view many of the practices of competition “in the world” (such as cheating, a win-at-any-cost mentality, seeking to exploit others) are to be challenged. The aim is to seek the reformation of competition, not its elimination. Our role as Christians is to engage in competition and seek to make a difference in both the means and ends of competition. Christians involved in competition will experience covenanting of their loyalties to God as they seek to bring God’s power and purposes into competitive arenas, and as they target competition as a process to be exploited for God’s glory. Scripture offers a variety of insights of how to use God’s power in competition to advance His kingdom. Whether on the racetrack or in the marketplace, Christians are called to engage as God’s warriors to reclaim competition for His glory.

Christ and competition in paradox

This perspective focuses on the very real tensions Christians can experience in competitive situations. This perspective on competition is best summarized as one of irreducible complexity. Our role as Christians in this view is to engage in the paradoxical call to be “in,” but not “of,” competition - that is, participating in competition where we are called (and gifted?) to, yet fully knowing that competitive situations may bring conflict in our lives as the demands of the “game” may raise issues about our loyalties to God in non-easily resolvable ways. The Bible, in this perspective, does not specifically embrace competition nor does it condemn it outright. There is a recognition, however, that the Bible’s overall “position” on competition is one that repeatedly cautions about competition. Indeed competition is seen as an uneasy condition to be subordinated to God’s priorities and principles. Christians are reminded, in this perspective, that our real aim is to “witness for Christ.” To the degree that competition provides a platform for our witness then it may prove to be helpful in advancing that “missionary” cause.

The table that follows offers a series of contrasts designed to explore in more detail the specific points of difference between the positions.³³

Table 1: Summary of Four Generic Christian Perspectives on Competition

	CHRIST RESISTS COMPETITION	CHRIST AND COMPETITION IN PARTNERSHIP	CHRIST REFORMS COMPETITION	CHRIST AND COMPETITION IN PARADOX
Christ comes to competition as ...	Judge	Encourager	Transformer (redeemer)	Shepherd
The Bible ...	condemns competition	commends competition	controls competition	cautions about competition
The Biblical perspective on competition is best summarized as ...	Combat	Compatibility	Challenge	Complexity
Competition is seen as ...	an evil condition to be mourned	an exciting condition to be enjoyed	an existing condition to be redeemed	an uneasy condition to be subordinated
Competition results from ...	God's judgment	God's delight	God's design	God's grace
Competitive desire and Christ-likeness are ...	inherently opposed	inclusively complementary	intendedly necessary	independently parallel
The existence of competition is a testimony to ...	man's fall from God's kingdom	God's common grace for His kingdom	the realization of God's kingdom on earth	God's special grace for His kingdom people
Our role as Christians is to ...	remain separate from the competition	get involved in the competition	make a difference in the competition	be in, but not of, competition
Christians involved in competition will experience ...	corruption of their loyalties to God	confirmation of their loyalties to God	covenanting of their loyalties to God	conflict in their loyalties to God
The claim that someone is called to engage in competition ...	is a pretense (to sanctify one's desire for worldliness)	is a present (to be enjoyed and cultivated wherever possible)	is a position (to be exploited for God's glory)	is a possibility (depending on one's ends and means)
God's Word tells those in competition ...	how to avoid the perils of competition	how to apply God's principles to competition	how to use God's power in competition	how to achieve God's purposes in competition

SOME CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. There is no common agreement in the Christian community about either the definition or the value of competition. While there are those whose praise of the value of competition seems unabashed, many more seem to feel a tension about both the means and ends of competition.
2. A great deal of the discussion of competition in the Christian community seems anecdotal rather than analytical. This is especially true in the arena of sports competition. A variety of “pop” books have been written by Christian athletes who rather uncritically note how competition has made them more reliant on God, more conscious of the need for teamwork, and more humble (as they cope with losses and injuries). While all this may be true, such discussions are hardly provide the thorough empirical and theological examination that competition should invoke.
3. It is common in some Christian circles to point to Paul’s use of competitive sports metaphors as a Biblical endorsement of such competition. It is our conclusion that such use of scriptural analogies is, simply, wrong. For example, because Paul discusses “running the race” in several of his letters does not mean he endorsed foot racing. An analogy is a comparison of phenomena A to Phenomena B in order to clarify our understanding of Phenomena A. If I say that “life is like gambling” I am not, thereby, automatically endorsing gambling. Our examination of some Christian defenses of competition leads us to conclude that too often those defenses are based on faulty exegesis of scripture.
4. Because our study at this time is still exploratory we are continuing to examine the perspectives on competition present in different Christian traditions. Our initial impression is that the fundamentalist, evangelical Christian tradition has been more likely to embrace the “Christ and competition in partnership” perspective while the Quaker/Mennonite tradition has embraced the “Christ resists competition.” We believe research in this vein would be profitable and helpful.
5. We believe that competition as a pedagogical issue deserves further empirical analysis. Because one of this paper’s authors uses a competitive business simulation in a course he teaches, we plan on pursuing an analysis of the effect of competitiveness on performance in a competitive business situation. Our initial research into extent literature about competition and its impact on the classroom had indicated that cooperative pedagogies are far more productive educationally than competitive pedagogies. If our research results were to track the existing literature, it would have important implications for any business professor using competitive methods in their class. We are especially interested in joining with professors from other colleges/universities in conducting systematic studies of this phenomena.
6. We are quite aware that within the Christian community some see competition as praiseworthy while others see it as a pathology. It is our intuitive (at this time) assertion that a full, exegetically correct analysis of scripture regarding the themes of competition and cooperation will reveal a decided scriptural bias for cooperation. Further, we would also assert that competition is seen in scripture primarily in a negative way. We invite others to join us in a careful analysis of scripture to determine just what we should be teaching about competition in our classrooms. CBFA members are committed to the thorough integration of biblical perspectives with business philosophy and practice. We suspect that an honest evaluation of competition from a biblical perspective would, at the very least, lead us to be far more cautious about the untempered endorsement of competition we have seen among many evangelical Christians today - at the most, we believe a study of scripture freed from a pre-agenda to seek endorsement for competition might lead us to some very radically different conclusions.

7. APPENDIX A: Definitions of Competition

“Competitiveness is defined as a disposition to strive for satisfaction when making comparisons with some standard of excellence in the presence of evaluative others in sport.”³⁴

“A contest is a con-test, a testing or testifying with. This ‘with’ includes and supplements an ‘against.’ A contest involves strife, conflict, and an effort to be victorious, but with others who acknowledge the rules and grant one the right to be treated fairly. When the competition is severe and the struggle strenuous, we tend to forget that the justification of contests is their provision of opportunities to find out who one is in relation to other men in a bounded situation.”³⁵

“Competition is the activity whereby two or more participants strive to reach the same objective. Contest and rivalry are two words commonly included in many definition. ... There is always a winner and a loser”³⁶

“Competition [itself] is neither good nor bad. It is a social process whereby individuals or groups compare themselves with others using some agreed upon criteria for evaluation.”³⁷

Martens, et.al., describe competition as a process which contains four elements. (1) The *objective competitive situation* (OCS) which consists of the type of task, the difficulty of opponents, the playing conditions and playing rules, and the available extrinsic rewards. The OCS specifies the environmental or *objective* demand of a situation. In the competitive process, the environmental demand is dictated by what the individual must do to obtain a favorable outcome when compared to a standard. This standard may include another individual’s performance (an opponent), an idealized performance level, or the individual’s own past performance. (2) The *subjective competitive situation* (SCS) is how the person perceives, accepts and appraises the OCS, and is mediated by such factors as personality, attitudes, motives and abilities. In addition to these two factors, competition also includes (3) the person’s *response* (behavioral, physiological and psychological) and (4) the *consequences* (usually viewed in terms of success or failure) of the person’s participation in the competition.³⁸

“Competition is the attempt (according to agreed-upon rules) to get or to keep any valuable thing either to the exclusion of others or in greater measure than others.”³⁹

“The original meaning of the Latin verb *compeo* itself suggests an activity quite different from that described by the above definition [the author is referring to James W. Keating’s definition cited just preceding]. This verb refers to acting together or seeking together; hence, it implies the notion of coming together to reach an agreement. An additional notion, one of contest, infiltrated the term as it was applied to athletic encounters. The original meaning of the Latin term for contest is also significant for our purposes. The verb *contendo* signifies to stretch, to strain or exert oneself. As implied in the Greek term *agon*, a contest is an encounter in which one stretches himself towards his physical and mental limits. A contestant is one who is engaged in an activity that calls forth the full exercise of his powers. By contending, he testifies to his aptitude and ability. Competition signifies an interpersonal contest in which participants testify to their competence as they interact.”⁴⁰

“It is clear that most researchers have not viewed competition as a simple behavior or set of responses. Rather, competition is viewed as a complex relation between the behavior of one person and that of another with respect to a common stimulus or event that cannot be shared or divided among the persons involved. [A review of definitions of competition will] ... point to the critical components of the competitive situation: (1) usually two or more organisms are involved; (2) behavior is directed toward obtaining or taking reinforcement (note, however, that the behavior of competitors need not occur simultaneously with respect to the reinforcement, as in golf or bowling); (3) reinforcement is made contingent on some aspect of behavior, i.e. speed, accuracy, topography, frequency, etc., and some criterion must exist to determine which subjects response,

relative to that of the other, will be reinforced; (4) reinforcement in any specified segment of the competitive event or episode is mutually exclusive; (5) trials or time criteria usually exist for termination of the competitive event.”⁴¹

“More formally, competition is said to occur under the following conditions: (a) There exist two or more parties who seek the same reward; (b) the reward is in short supply; (c) the parties agree or are required to act under the same constraints, ostensibly to ensure fair play.”⁴²

“...competition calls for the means to strive together, to do what is suitable to achieve a goal or to reach an objective, to win a prize or to make a profit. It requires insight into the characteristic manner in which a challenge is to be met with adequate abilities. Related to competition, competence is that ability to have sufficient means for the necessities of life and the capacity to function in a particular way in response to an aggressor. It is an active demand for some resource in short supply.”⁴³

“I think it is useful to distinguish between what might be called *structural competition* and *intentional competition*. The former refers to a situation; the latter, to an attitude. Whereas structural competition has to do with the win/lose framework, which is external, intentional competition is internal; it concerns the desire on the part of the individual to be number one. To say that an activity is structurally competitive is to say that it is characterized by what I will call *mutually exclusive goal attainment* (“MEGA,” for short). This means, very simply, that my success requires your failure. Our fates are negatively linked. If one of us must lose as much as the other wins, as in poker, then we are talking about a “zero-sum game.” But in any MEGA arrangement, two or more individuals are trying to achieve a goal that cannot be achieved by all of them. This is the essence of [structural] competition ... Intentional competition is ... an individual’s competitiveness, his or her proclivity for besting others.”⁴⁴

ENDNOTES

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- ³³ Intentionally these positions are painted in the extreme. Any given Christian might actually hold “parts” of each of the positions in theory and/or in practice. Further, someone who might identify themselves as essentially in agreement with any one of the positions as a whole might be in disagreement with any one of the parts of the positions as described here.
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