

## **BREAKING THE SPIRIT OF COMPETITION:**

I was recently having a conversation with a Christian leader in the Twin Cities. We were talking about the vision of Heart of the City Ministries and the desire to bring the congregations in the Twin Cities into a stronger sense of unity. He said something interesting. He said, "The biggest issue that you face isn't so much denominationalism or racism, it's *competition*." He went on to talk about how so many pastors have a mental list of the five or so other churches that are their competitors. He said they don't want to lose any of their flock to those other churches. They feel a need to "keep" their people and keep up with whatever might draw them somewhere else. Then along comes something like Heart of the City and they might think, "We don't have worship like that. What if our people go and hear about another church that does it that way and our people end up going there." So they also discourage their people from being a part of Heart of the City and anything else outside of their control.

What this man told me wasn't new to us. But hearing it articulated so clearly made it seem all the more sad to me.

I have another friend who was pondering changing ministry positions from one church to another in the same city. He'd like to consider it but conventional church wisdom would say that it's unethical. He wanted my thoughts. This is what I told him.

*"Okay, here's the concept. There is one Church with many congregations. Each congregation is not the Church. They are just a place where part of the Church congregates. The health of the whole Church is what Jesus cares about. Jesus would despise the divisions and wouldn't recognize the denominations except for separating due to heresy of some sort (maybe that's what they all think). So, as Paul traveled from place to place, I don't think he hung out in just one congregation in the city when he stayed there for a year or more. I don't think one congregation was thinking about how they could get a hip guy like Paul at their congregation. I don't think that when they heard about a neighboring town having hundreds of believers added to their midst that they were jealous. I don't think they went to find out what their program was in their weekend service so they could copy it or one up it. I think they rejoiced "Look at all the people who are coming to Christ like we have! The Church is growing and conquering the kingdom of darkness!"*

*To go from one congregation of the Church to another in order to minister to that Body and work in harmony with the leadership seems like no big deal. But if it's about competition between one mega-church to the other, between one high powered preacher to the other, between one exclusive club to the other, then it's a bad thing. If it's about the CEO of one corporation looking at the bottom line ie. losing customers, losing market share, getting the edge over the competitor, then it's a bad thing. If it's about the CEO losing his VP of marketing to a competitor, then there's a problem. If it's about stockholders having their stocks devalued because the value of its' shares went down, then there's a problem. If it's about hostile takeovers where the most powerful, charismatic, influential corporation absorbs and then crushes the smaller one, then there's a problem. But if it's about you ministering in another congregation of the Church where you feel more free to do what God has called you to in order to build up the Body of Christ with the gifts you've been given, then I don't think it's a problem.*

Ephesians 4:4-16 says, "We are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious futures. There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and there is only one God and Father, who is over us all and in us all and living through us all. However, He has given each one of us a special gift according to the generosity of

Christ....He is the one who gave these gifts to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. THEIR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO EQUIP GOD'S PEOPLE TO DO HIS WORK AND BUILD UP THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST, UNTIL WE COME TO SUCH UNITY IN OUR FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S SON THAT WE WILL BE MATURE AND FULL GROWN IN THE LORD, MEASURING UP TO THE FULL STATURE OF CHRIST,

Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth. ***Instead, we will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ, who is the Head of His Body, the Church. Under His directions, the whole Body is fitted together perfectly. AS EACH PART DOES ITS OWN SPECIAL WORK, IT HELPS THE OTHER PARTS GROW, SO THAT THE WHOLE BODY IS HEALTHY AND GROWING AND FULL OF LOVE.***

Read that passage again. What is the responsibility of gifted leaders in the Kingdom? To keep membership at a certain level in their congregation? To control and hoard and manipulate resources of people and money in order to keep a tight grip on their own position? ***GOD FORBID!! The Lord provided such spiritually gifted individuals for one reason only--to bring His Body to wholeness, maturity, unity, love, and Christlikeness.***

The trouble is, so much of what drives us and motivates us in the Church is not Spirit-led or Biblical. So much of what drives us and directs us and motivates us is our flesh. It's about money and power, pride and ambition. On the one hand, I find it very relatable and understandable. In the flesh, we all want to succeed. We need congregants to make our church grow. We need their offerings to pay our bills and salaries. It's discouraging to lose people and struggle with finances. If we can control our people, we can more easily accomplish what we want. Different ways of marketing our church can bring more people in. That's understandable in the flesh. But we are not called to walk in the flesh. God calls us to build His Church, His kingdom--not ours. God wants us to care about the health of THE church--not just our congregation. God tells us that HE is our provider--not the people and their offerings. God calls us to serve Him--not the people's opinions and whims. God says that He will build His Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He calls us to join Him in that process--however it looks.

James 3:14-16 says, ***“But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your hearts, don't brag about being wise. That is the worst kind of lie. For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and motivated by the devil. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find confusion and every kind of evil.”*** Confusion and every kind of evil mark the history of so many congregations. There are too many stories of too many congregations that have as bad of things happen in them as you would ever hear about in the worst of the corporate world. This verse, I believe, gives the core reason why.

We are not called to build walls around our congregations. We are not in competition with the congregation down the street or across town. We are not called to pursue our own ambitions. **We are called to cooperate with God as He builds His whole Church. We are called to be one holy nation, one royal priesthood, in one Body that is well fit together.**

The only way for us to keep on track with Him in this process is to have the attitude of John the Baptist, who instead of continuing to build his own growing following, pointed his congregants to Christ. **Let his words, “HE MUST INCREASE, I MUST DECREASE” be our example.** And let this mind be in us which was also in Christ Jesus...who humbled himself and became obedient, even to death on a cross. What an incredibly difficult calling this is. But it is our calling! And this is where life is and this is where we find the blessing of God. God help us! Come heal your Church!