

Dialogue V

Response to “Competition Among Religious Denominations: Adam Smith’s View”

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It is always enlightening to return to the works of an influential thinker of another era, such as Adam Smith, who addressed subjects in his day that are still relevant. And John Stapleford has done a superb job of putting Adam Smith’s thoughts on “denominational competition” before us. My subsequent comments are to be interpreted as reflecting entirely on the thinking of Adam Smith, and not on the work of Stapleford. He has set Smith’s thoughts before us faithfully, as I understand Smith’s thinking. Stapleford noted in his article that “Adam Smith was generally a weak theologian,” and it is this truth and its potential consequences that I wish to draw the reader’s attention to. And I wish to do this as an expansion on Stapleford’s comments on Smith’s “rejection of the innate indwelling of God’s righteous decrees,” and Stapleford’s observation that “The job of the church is to present God’s truth as

revealed by the Holy Spirit in Scripture.” Five observations are in order, I believe.

First, Smith has confused “causation” with “observation.” Let me illustrate. In the 1950s when I was teaching statistics, I used a text that had the following illustration in it for the specific purpose of warning the students about correlating uncorrelatable observations. The book noted that there was a near perfect correlation between a 25-year decline in the consumption of chewing tobacco by the youth in rural America and the increase in the number of automobiles stolen in the major urban areas during the same time period. There was perfect correlation, but no causal connection between the two phenomena. (The students had much fun conjuring up “logical causation” relationships between the two observations.)

Smith observed the emergence of small, conservative denominational bodies in the face

of larger, long established, more liberal church bodies, and cast his observations into the hopper with his observations of the commercial marketplace. He treated the church as he would treat any other economic or political entity. That constituted a significant error, in my opinion. The church—*invisible church*—has a Leader that is sovereign, omnipotent, and faithful, who has promised that the “gates of Hades shall not overpower [His church]” (Matthew 16:18, NASB). God guards the church invisible and raises up His own leaders to seek its purity when He deems it appropriate. The invisible church is a “living phenomena” and not a mere human organization. There is interaction aplenty, under Christ’s leadership, between the visible church and invisible church that is not true of any other social, political, economic, educational, or judicial entity. *God is not competing with the world*, and it is blasphemous for any to believe that they can compete with God. He is redeeming His children. He is waiting patiently for the unredeemed to repent. If they will not, their cup of iniquity will be filled to overflowing to await the “day-of-judgment.” The “natural eye” may see what it calls

competition, but the “eye of the heart” sees God’s superintending, cleansing, renovating, and sanctifying works of grace.

Second, Smith badly distorts the motives that are generally at work in the hearts of Spirit-led church leaders. The paraphrase “New denominational entries, on the other hand, tend to evidence more exertion, zeal, and industry *because* they depend upon voluntary contributions” is an example of this twisting of motives (emphasis added). Their “zeal and industry” are much more likely to reveal their commitment to Christ and His truth than to their desire to be supported financially by the “common people.” The church has had its share of “Elmer Gantrys,” but they are neither the norm nor the common denominator amongst its leaders. The very idea that the emerging leaders are competing for members is to reduce the “body of Christ” (the church) to “coin of the realm”—to communicate that members represent \$\$\$\$\$\$. The visible church can degenerate to this low level, but not the invisible church, for the Holy Spirit will not allow it to.

Third, Adam Smith had a habit of valuing competition over

motives. Indeed, he was very influential in his day in removing the public’s concern about the individual’s motives in the commercial marketplace from the human consciousness. He was so successful that any public concern about human motives in the marketplace is still submerged beyond the human ability to resurface such a concern effectively. Smith argued that the motives of the individual did not matter in the marketplace, because the “invisible hand of competition” would govern their behavior in the public arena. In fact, he argued that competition would cause them to behave in a manner that would serve the public good, even when their motives might be absolutely self-serving. Competition, in Smith’s mind, became the “sovereign ruler” of the marketplace.

It can even be argued, as Calvin E. Beisner does, that Adam Smith’s so-called “invisible hand of competition” is really a natural order aspect of God’s “common grace.” By its use God regulates the behavior that ultimately emerges out of the twisted and perverted motives of the hearts of the unregenerate in the marketplace so that their behavior serves the good of the

whole community. While this argument may be debated, and it may even be true to a degree, it certainly has no place in the overall evaluation of God’s church or the motives of those whom God has raised up to lead the church.

Fourth, thoughts like “Humans engage in acts of kindness and charity in order to win the affection and praise of their companions” or “ultimate satisfaction can only be achieved when the individual also gains personal self-respect” are completely out of place in the context of biblical teaching. And they are equally misplaced in the realm of Christian experience. Yet such beliefs are associated with the work of Adam Smith. God’s love spread abroad in the hearts of His children is the biblical antidote and the Christians’ hope against such palaver. Smith’s contention that we must first love ourselves before we can love our neighbor is devoid of the most basic biblical truth. We must first experience and believe that we are truly loved by God before we are set free from the fetters of “self-interest” to engage in acts of love toward our neighbors. But our being “set free” is dependent upon our first being

brought to the cross of Christ by the Holy Spirit. It is there our ungodly and sinful old nature is exposed to us in the depths of its ugliness. And it is there that God's pure grace is poured out on us through our believing in and accepting the Father's gift of His Son, a pure and holy sacrifice for the atonement of our *sin nature and sins*. It is in recognizing our true "zero value" apart from Christ and our "perfect value" in Christ that sets us free to respond in love to God's love. "We love, because He first loved us" (I John 4:19).

In the context of a discussion about the church, love is the motivator of the regenerate heart. For the Christian, competition is not even a good motivator of the heart in the marketplace. The more mature one's Christian world/lifeview becomes, the more the mind of Christ will fill their heart and the more they will be governed by *love—a commitment of the heart (mind, affections, and will) to serve Christ by serving our "neighbors."*

Fifth, and most important, I believe, Smith ignored the ever-present superintending work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's children who make up the entire body of the *invisible church*—Christ's body. The visible

church has always had its theological problems and, consequently, many behavioral difficulties. We have been warned, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths" (II Timothy 4:3-4). And this should not surprise us, for in our midst there "are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (II Corinthians 11:13-14).

It might be said that Satan is in competition with God, with all the false and perverted motives that emanate from his rebellious and evil state. But it cannot be said that God is in competition with His enemies. God is sovereign, and, in the language of Martin Luther, Satan, like a dog on a leash, cannot move forward one inch beyond the bounds within which he is allowed to move and operate. Unintentionally, from his perspective, Satan is accomplishing the perfect and infinitely wise will of God—permissive will, in this case.

God has "declar[ed] the end from the beginning" (Isaiah 46:10). God is in charge of everything, especially His church. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of God—again, God's permissive will (Matthew 10:29). Adam Smith has, I believe, left God out of his account of the goings on both within and between denominations. Smith seems to be unaware of the fact that God is acutely aware of the failings of the visible church and its influencing people so they stumble and go astray. Indeed, it is for this very reason that God's judgment of a nation always begins with the "household of God" (I Peter 4:17; Jeremiah 25:29; Ezekiel 9:6), for those who bear the name of God are assigned the task of being salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16).

A personal note: I am grateful to God for Adam Smith's insights into human behavior and the reality of the presence of competition in the world of "common grace." But I will not sanctify competition in the realm of "special grace," where the true church is ultimately guided and protected by the chastening, comforting, and redeeming hand of the Holy Spirit. The Bible does

not glorify competition. In talking about God's church, neither will I.

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