

Call to Obedience
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And David's heart smote him after he had numbered the people. 2 Samuel 24:10

By Pastor Reimar A. C. Schultze

In today's church world more than ever, there is an unhealthy obsession with numbers. In my 42 years in the ministry I have hardly ever met a minister who did not ask me in a matter of minutes, "how many members do you have?" When a Bishop considers a pastor for a larger church he wants to know his numbers. Church growth seminars abound in the effort to get more numbers. When a minister's numbers go down he is looked upon as a failure. If they go up he is considered a success.

Of course Jesus wishes many to drink of His fountain. Timothy plainly states that He "*will have all men to be saved*" (1 Tim. 2:4). We are encouraged when our sanctuaries are filled with obedient people praising God. So there is nothing wrong with numbers themselves, but what is wrong is when we lose our biblical perspective of them. That is, 1) we must not put quantity over quality; 2) we must not make numbers a measure of success and 3) our love for numbers must not exceed our love for God. Let me deal with each of these.

1. **God will not sacrifice quality for quantity.** We may be impressed if a church has a thousand worshippers on Sunday mornings. But if most of them do not show up at the prayer service, God is grieved. Without prayer you cannot breathe spiritually, neither can you abide in Christ nor win any battles without it. **Prayerless Christians are dead Christians.** They are *like clouds without water or as trees that have been plucked up by the roots* (Jude 1:12). They are useless and unprepared for Judgment Day. Gideon had 32,000 soldiers who bore arms. To some that looked good. Even Gideon saw no problem with this number. Even preachers can easily be deceived about quantity. But God was not impressed: He decreed that of the 32,000 only 300 were fit for battle. 29,000 soldiers *prevented* Israel from winning. That is, 99% of Gideon's congregation had to be sent home. They were only good for military parades. How many church people would God send home from your church if He had His way? Would it also be 99%? Don't be fooled by numbers.

We do not need numbers to win our battles. We need God. This truth was put into a precious little capsule when in the face of a large host of Philistines Jonathan said to his armor bearer, "*there is no restraint of the Lord to save by many as by few*" (1 Sam. 14:6). Then Jonathan and his armor bearer got on their knees and crawled toward the enemy. Two kneeling men facing the enemy with God on their side make an unbeatable combination. **It is quality God is looking for in us. It is His power that we are looking for in Him.** All you who pray in little groups of twos or sixes keep on praying. God is in the midst of you (Matt. 18:20). Expect great things to happen. You can do as much as Jonathan and his armor bearer. Think of it! Don't belittle yourself.

It took only *one* man to stay the wrath of God so He would not destroy His own people: Moses (Ex.32: 9-14). It took only *one* man to pray the fire down from heaven to consume the sacrifice, the water, the wood and the stones to bring revival: Elijah (1 Kings 13:38). It took only *one* man to defeat the Syrian army: Elisha (2 Kings 6:14-18). God said "*And I sought for a man among them to make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none*" (Eze. 22:30). God is looking for a man amongst the many.

Thousands followed Jesus. We get excited about thousands and try to accommodate them in every way. But Jesus said to the great multitudes with Him, "*If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14:25-27). These believers were only following Jesus physically, but not spiritually. They wanted miracles and excitement. **Jesus did not want spectators but disciples.** We need to teach self-denial from the pulpit as Jesus did here and not teach this message in a back corner. We may not look good by doing so, but we will be battle-ready and have the glory and power of Jesus in the midst of us. Hallelujah!

We need to have quality before we have quantity. The first church was born out of prayer warriors; self-denying, obedient God lovers. It says on the day of Pentecost there were "*devout men out of every nation under heaven*" (Acts 2:5). They were the likes of Enoch, Abraham, Zechariah, Elizabeth and Simeon. They were not people who had to be compelled to come in from the highways and hedges of life.

You must have *devout* men to build a church upon. If there is not enough fire in the church members, and you have converts, it is like putting the new converts into a freezer. All you can expect is that they will take on a "*form of godliness, denying the power thereof*" becoming like the rest of the church members. Paul says, "*from such turn away*" (2 Tim 3:5). Jesus turns away from churches of pretenders; He is not with them. He has nothing to do with them. Certainly pretenders can come up with a pretty impressive church program. But what is it worth if God is not in it? Don't attend churches of pretenders, unless God sends you there to start a fire. When the first couple of pretenders were found in the first church, God moved them from the pew to the cemetery within a day's time. The result: "*And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things*" (Acts 5:2-7).

2. **Numbers are neither a measure of success nor strength.** In the world numbers mean almost everything. But God's kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). It is supernatural. Indeed if numbers were a measure of success, then Noah would have been one of the greatest failures in church history. Yet the Bible says that Noah was just and perfect in his days (Gen. 6:9). It says that *Noah walked with God*. Enoch walked with God (Gen. 5:24). Here is our definition of success as early as Genesis: **Success is walking with God.** Jesus came into the world to save sinners in order for them to learn to walk with God, to abide in Him. If we are not abiding in Him we are none of His.

We shall be cast forth as a branch and be burned (John 15: 6). Noah was also a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5). Yet he did not make a single convert. If Noah would just have lowered the standard for righteousness a little, he could have had the ark full of people. But then God would have sunk the ark also. If you compromise your ark will sink. God calls us to non-conformity (Rom 12:2).

3. An obsession with numbers can cause us to lose our love for God. Numbers can become an idol. God will not be in churches where there is idolatry (1 Kings 9: 6, 7). An obsession with numbers can lead a preacher to become ruthless, harsh, pushy and proud. It can cause him to get into all kinds of worldly methods and tricks to get people in. Anybody who stands in the way of getting more numbers is pushed out. The church ceases to become a living organism and turns into a well-oiled piece of machinery that lacks the heartbeat of God. The machine can make a lot of noise. It can be impressive and receive the praise of man. But it is only a man-made machine. Soon the preacher is caught up in a treadmill. His schedule is filled from morning to night, day after day in order to get numbers and to keep the machinery going. He becomes neglectful of "little" people. There is less and less time for prayer. Time for waiting on God is soon lost, in the push and shove to get more numbers and recognition. Soon the preacher's marriage and children are sacrificed on the altar of "saving the world."

Pressure is put on lay people to bring in numbers by any means possible, from fish fries to basketball parties, to pressing people to receive Christ before they are ready to be born of God. People who cannot succeed in getting numbers are soon caught up with a sense of guilt and failure. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, do not ever get caught up in this whirlwind of numbers. You are called to walk with God. Everything God wants you to do will flow out of it. Everything! For Jesus said, *he that believes on me ...out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living waters* (John 7:38). The scripture says, *"It is not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit says the Lord"* (Zech. 4:6). **The whole history of the Bible proves that God has never been able to do much with the many.** Rather, nearly all the great works He has done, and will do in the future, will be done by the "ones" or the "few." Let us not lose sight of the *one* amongst the many. *There was a man sent from God whose name was John* (John 1:6). Be such a one.

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