

The Idolatry of Numbers

It would be quite a statement to say that the church at large is worshipping idols. The reaction would be horror and outcry at such a statement. “How dare you suggest we worship anything or anyone but God! Why would we bother continuing to have church if we worshipped someone or something other than God?” But I believe many, many churches, Christians, and Christian organisations are following after another god – and that god the god of numbers.

Idolatry does not only consist of worshipping another deity – it happens any time we replace God as the centre of our affections, devotions and desires with something else. For many a church and Christian organisation, there appears to be a love greater than the love of God – it is the love of filled seats. There is a desire greater than the desire for God Himself – it is the desire for a larger list of members, subscribers, listeners or followers.

The problem is that it’s very subtle. There is a spiritual sleight of hand at work here. The ultimate motive of loving God, of glorifying Him, is almost imperceptibly switched for a lower one – have more people come, have more people listen, or buy your book or follow you online. And without explicitly stating it, the popularity of your church or book or organisation is made equal to God’s approval, and hence – it is for God’s glory.

Supposedly, the more people come, the more people hear about God, and so God is more glorified. And overlooking the fatal leap of logic contained in that last statement, the church rushes headlong into pursuing whatever method or means will draw and attract and bring in more people. A famous seeker-friendly author is quoted as saying, “Never criticise any method God is blessing.” I take that to mean, ‘Never criticise any church or Christian organisation if the numbers are growing.’

The idolatry of numbers is a sad substitution. Because as the trend increases, the true motive of God’s glory must necessarily take a back-seat. This is seen on a number of fronts. When you idolise numbers, it will affect the preaching of the Word of God. Since the Word of God can offend, since the Word of God is can be difficult to understand, since the Word of God requires humility and submission to the Spirit to comprehend, there will be a dumbing down of the Word. Preaching begins to lose its central place.

Instead, ‘sharing’ is seen as more appropriate to draw people. Ideally, preaching is shortened to little sermonettes. Expository preaching – working through the Word of God verse by verse – is seen as dry and irrelevant, and instead anecdotal, cliché-filled talks filled with stories and open-ended applications are used. The preacher becomes part comedian, part dramatist, part storyteller, part motivational speaker.

No one is thoroughly convicted, everyone is somewhat entertained, somewhat informed, and will be back more next Sunday with their friends. It is sweet-tasting candyfloss for the itching ear, and certainly draws a fun-fair crowd on Sunday morning. But people are not nourished. You’ll certainly draw a crowd quickly, and if that is your god, then it seems he is pleased. If the idolatry of numbers is what you worship, then sermons with very little biblical exegesis or exposition seem to be the method your god is blessing.

When you idolise numbers, it will affect the ministries of the church, starting with the teaching. A church is supposed to be the place where believers grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. To that end, all of a church’s activities and ministries

with regards to its members are to focus on discipleship. Believers are to be taught how to mimic the Lord Jesus Christ. They are to be taught how to have a God-centred worldview. They are to be taught how to be worshippers in all of life.

However, this teaching isn't always immediately palatable. Babies do not immediately like the food you give them, but they need it. Parents who would feed their children sweets all the time would harm their children. But if numbers are your god, then everything becomes about creating little niche ministries for the various groups in your church.

So there must be a group for little children, a group for teenagers, a group of young adults that are unmarried, a group for college students, a premarital group, a group for young adults that are married, a group for young adults with young children, a group for the single parents, a group for divorced people, a group for widowed people, a group for the elderly, speciality ministries like sports ministries, and so on.

Now I am not condemning having age-group ministries, nor am I saying special-interest ministries are out of place. But it's clear it is out of control. The church is doing the marketing equivalent of the world – trying to create little niches for every supposed target market, so as to increase the numbers. The fallout is this: people feel that their little niche group or ministry is more relevant to them than the corporate meeting of the church on Sunday. They actually feel disconnected from the church as a whole, and really only connected to their youth group or cell group or whatever.

I believe God's plan was for us to be one body – where the young learn from and respect the elderly, and the elderly teach and enjoy the young, and there is a learning and teaching environment going specifically because of the diversity in unity. This is precisely Paul's point in **1 Corinthians 12** – 'you members are all different, but necessary.' But when you make your focus to draw groups through niche-market techniques, you ultimately end up with a number of different congregations meeting under one roof. And if your god is numbers, this doesn't matter to you – as long as people are coming, it must be right.

When you idolise numbers, it will affect your musical worship. Though we understand that every church exists within a given culture, and its music will reflect much of the culture it is in, that does not mean the church must always embrace all that is in that culture. Culture must be judged by the Bible – not the Bible by culture.

Much of pop culture is anti-God, relativistic, humanistic, amoral and thrives of promoting banality, triviality and silliness. If your God is Jehovah, you will not draw from this pool of sounds when desiring to exalt, magnify and praise His name. But if your god is numbers, then you will draw on whatever sounds you think will draw a crowd. If they want rap, then rap the Gospel. If they want hard rock, then hard rock about Jesus. If they are used to pop, then make sure songs about Christ have a pop beat.

If the crowd enjoys a driving beat whenever they listen to the radio, make sure you have the same when you sing hymns, otherwise they will not come. In this way, music in church becomes a poor mimic of that which is used to sell immorality, drugs, rebellion and foolishness, only now we are told it is okay because the lyrics are sanctified. And if you are after numbers, the ends justify the means.

Such music doesn't compel people to behold a God bigger than they are, it instead consoles them that God and religion can slot right into their present way of living. It in fact drags God

down to the level of thought and life established in the culture that such pop music emerges from. But pop stands for popular, and popular music is music where more people like it than dislike it. As such, if your god is numbers, then pop music is what you must use to attract your crowd.

When you idolise numbers, it will affect your evangelism. It will affect it in both its message and its means. The message will change. Evangelism loses the massive realities of heaven and hell, God's glory and righteousness and justice. It becomes all about personal persuasion and acceptance. So your message starts to lose its God-centeredness. It is no longer about God, His glory, His demand for righteousness and the atonement of Jesus Christ.

Instead, the message become about you, your felt needs, and how God has a wonderful plan for your life. It also loses the message of repentance, where you must admit you have been wrong and done wrong and turn from it, instead you need just assimilate this whole Christian philosophy. There is no break, no absolute turning point, just a kind of absorbing of a better ethic, rather like becoming a Christian by osmosis.

After all, it would offend a modern, 21st century professional to tell them they are a sinner, condemned by God, headed for a lake of fire, and requiring the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ to save them. So the message must be edited of those points, which seem a bit unpalatable to modern man; they must be dumbed down or diluted if we are to attract the masses. So we major on God's love and His grace, and how He meets your needs, and in essence advertise the best possible consumable to the still self-centred man.

Not only will numbers-idolatry influence the message, but it will also influence the methods used to evangelise. If the god is numbers, then anything and everything is permissible to draw them, even if those methods contradict the message itself. Essentially, it's about baiting the hook. Now Jesus told us to be fishers of men, of that there is no doubt. What is debatable is whether we are authorised to bait the hook with anything and everything.

There are places, presentations, activities and music that clearly contradict the message of repentance in Christ. But if numbers are what you are after – it's open season on any type of evangelism. Christian rock concerts, dances and nightclubs are not unknown anymore as the church chants the mantra, "Be like them to win them!"

The problem is, if anyone raises their voice against the idolatry of numbers, they are liable to be accused of jealousy. "You're just jealous of what God is blessing. Your jealousy is turning into bitter criticism." And so most are afraid to say anything about the seemingly irresistible momentum in this direction, lest they expose themselves to being criticised in this way. And furthermore, even valid criticism is weighed against the numbers.

Plus, modern culture almost always whispers: popularity means quality. Wide acceptance means value. And so many, if not most, are content to allow the crowds to shape their opinion. After all, they think, "So many people can't be wrong. Look at the critics with their small following by comparison."

But what does the Bible say? What is the Bible's attitude toward numbers, majority versus minority approval? Our first stop is in the Law. There we find an interesting passage in Exodus:

When you take the census of the children of Israel for their number, then every man shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them. This is what everyone among those who are numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (a shekel is twenty gerahs). The half-shekel shall be an offering to the LORD.

Exodus 30:12-13

Half a shekel was to be paid by every man above 20 years as a ransom for his soul, that there should be no plague whenever a numbering of the people took place. Now this is very interesting. Why should God have demanded a form of redemption or payment money when a census was taken? It seems because the whole notion was not very pleasing to Him.

The taking of a census was something only to be done out of necessity, such as when Israel returned from exile and there needed to be lists of the families and their number. And the Bible has a number of chapters where the names of tribes and families are recorded, along with the number of people. So the Bible is not shy of telling us of the numbers of people. But it seems that God was never pleased with a census when the idolatry of numbers crept in.

When David chose to number the people, as recorded in **2 Samuel 24** and **1 Chronicles 21**, God was very displeased, and struck Israel with a plague that killed 70 000 people. It seems David's heart had drifted into the idolatry of numbers. His census was a tickling of pride, an appeal to the flesh's desire to boast in strength of numbers.

Perhaps, David wanted to hear what a massive army could be at his fingertips, or to hear just how many subjects he rules over in his kingdom. His first love, his first desire was no longer the glory of God, it was the glory brought about by the head-counting of people. Even Joab objected to the census:

And Joab answered, "May the LORD make His people a hundred times more than they are. But, my lord the king, are they not all my lord's servants? Why then does my lord require this thing? Why should he be a cause of guilt in Israel?"

1 Chronicles 21:3

God's plague on Israel was His discipline on David and Israel for seeking to glory in numbers rather than in God Himself. It also appears that David did not obtain the necessary ransom money from each man.

Now does this mean, that God hates numbering the people? No, God does not have some obscure dislike for numbers. Large portions of the Scripture are devoted to lists of people, their genealogies, their families, and the size thereof. Even in the New Testament we find the early church clearly doing some form of headcount. They knew three thousand were saved and baptised on the day of Pentecost, because obviously someone was counting and keeping records. God has no objection to good administration.

But God is jealous for His glory. And when churches, Christian publishers, Christian radio and television stations, and other Christian organisations find more joy in the number of people they have attracted than in God Himself, it is the idolatry of numbers. When churches show more loyalty to the crowds than to Christ, He is displeased. When Christians have more of an eye on what pleases man than on what pleases God, this displeases God.

See, where is your treasure? What delights your heart? The thought of more people coming or the thought of who your God is to you, and will be to you, in Jesus Christ? What is success to you? Proclaiming a glorious God so as to magnify Him, or seeing more and more people attend your services? What is your eye really on? The smile of God – or the weekly headcount? The Word of God – or the listenership and viewership figures? The content of the book – or its sales figures? What is the desire of your heart? To know God, or to be known by the world as a big, thriving church?

Say someone objects: “Having increased numbers is not sinful! It’s not sinful to seek to grow!” No it’s not. It is a great blessing when it happens. And we certainly should seek to expand God’s kingdom. Only a very few will argue with that, or disparage growth itself. But that would be a caricature of what I mean here.

What is wrong and displeasing to God is when we value numbers more than the glory of God. What is wrong is when being approved of by our congregation, audience, consumers or subscribers becomes more important than being approved of and pleasing to God Himself. What’s wrong is when growth is a self-justifying monolith, flattening objections and consuming everyone’s attention, desire and focus. Everything becomes about more numbers. God becomes a means to this end, not the end Himself!

In other words, God becomes a subsidiary goal, not actually the goal itself. Now very few people will see themselves in that last statement. But unfortunately, church growth experts have demoted God’s glory and enshrined big churches, and now the goal of ministry seems to be to have a mega-church. It hardly needs to be said that sometimes the true motive is less than honourable, for some, a big church means big bucks.

But is a large following always the sign of God’s blessing? Or for that matter, is the lack of a large following a sign of God’s absence or displeasure? Jesus answered this in answering another question: *“Then one said to Him, ‘Lord, are there few who are saved?’ And He said to them, ‘Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able’”* (Luke 13:23-24).

It seems here Jesus is saying – yes, the true road is narrow, and few make it. In Matthew 7, He said it this way: *“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it”* (Matthew 7:13-14).

This verse is a deathblow to the idea that majority approval proves its correctness. It seems the reverse is true in the spiritual realm. The majority, Jesus says, will end up wrong. And Jesus experienced this first-hand. After a strong sermon on how He was the bread they needed, on how they needed to be drawn to come, the crowd’s response is not entirely favourable: *“From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more”* (John 6:66).

His message was not all that palatable, and He did not try cater to the crowds. Modern church-growth experts would have chastised many of Christ’s methods and statements as being confrontational, threatening, and not very seeker-sensitive! For that matter, look at the ministry of Jeremiah. Not a single convert, it appears, after a long and difficult ministry. He was by no means a failure in God’s eyes, though He certainly did not see much fruit in terms of numbers.

Well, what then should be our focus? We need to seek church growth that glorifies God. This is seen in three ways:

1) Firstly, the growth we most want to see is spiritual growth. Far better to make one man more of a God-loving, Christ-centred, Spirit-filled, Word-saturated believer, than to have ten shallow, half-hearted, worldly, professing believers. The growth that will most glorify God is to make worshippers out of self-centred people, not to simply add faces to a crowd. As Jesus said: *“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him” (John 4:23).*

2) Secondly, the growth we want to see is numerical growth. But the numerical growth we want is saved souls committed to their local church. When God was working in the Jerusalem church we read, *“And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).* The Lord did not add mere hitchhiker Christians or seat warmers. He added true disciples of Christ.

Anyone can fill a room with people. Get the right atmosphere, the right décor, the right personalities, the right music, the right speaker, and you can pack an auditorium with thousands. That’s not growth that necessarily glorifies God. What will glorify God is when there are clear testimonies of repentant faith in Jesus Christ. What will glorify God is not when we say, our auditorium is packed, it is when we can say, like **Acts 6:7**: *“and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly.”* When regenerated followers of Christ are added – this glorifies God.

3) Thirdly, the growth we want to see that glorifies God is geographical growth. The tendency today is for each church to want to become a little megachurch in itself, to be like some church that they secretly envy. Therefore, when they do begin to grow, instead of planting another church, or sending out from their own number, they seek to consolidate, fortify, secure and enlarge themselves.

But the Bible speaks not of each church becoming a mini-kingdom in itself. It speaks about being witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the world. It speaks about going into all the world and preaching the Gospel. In other words, growth is not just when our little corner grows, but when we are able to spread the Word in other places as well, when we obey the call to missions. What is better? One church of 15 000, or 100 churches of 150? Surely the latter.

We must seek spiritual growth, the right kind of numerical growth, and then geographical growth, through the spread of the Gospel, far and wide. And as God blesses, or as God sends periods of leanness, we thank God and remain faithful, trusting Him to do the work. The idolatry of numbers is leading many a church and many a Christian down the wrong path. May we make our ultimate treasure not the amount of people we have coming or listening or reading, but rather, knowing and experiencing the glory of God as we obey Him.