

Numbers & Popularity

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In the physical realm, there is often safety in numbers. We witness this in the animal kingdom with “herd” animals. Dangers come for the animal that ventures too far away from the herd.

Humans understand this safety principle as well. We teach youths the “buddy-system.” We tell them to not separate from their “group” when they are in places of potential danger. We instruct them to stay with their friends, and not travel alone. In illustrating the importance of “counting the cost” of discipleship, Jesus cited the example of a king comparing the number of his own soldiers to the number of his enemy. He would want to decide whether or not his “ten thousand” soldiers could stand up against an army of “twenty thousand” (Luke 14:31,32). Obviously, numbers can be very important in the *physical* realm.

But is this true in the *spiritual* realm? Does spiritual safety come from numbers? Does numerical “might” make “right” in religion? Sadly, the religious world reveals that many people believe that it does. In the denominational world, this is clearly seen in the growing popularity of the mega-church movement. Members of such churches exchange their doctrinal convictions for the experience of being a member of a large church. We are witnessing the same mentality in non-denominational churches. I know some churches of Christ that have grown in numbers, but only because they have loosened their stance against various forms of sin and error. Doctrinal soundness is no longer a necessary quality in a preacher. People are more concerned with the preacher’s *speaking* and *interpersonal* skills. We should recall that the apostles were perceived as “*unlearned and ignorant men*” (Acts 4:13), and Paul’s speech was represented as being “*contemptible*” and “*rude*” (2 Cor. 10:10; 11:6). By modern pulpit standards, Peter, John and Paul would not qualify to speak in some of today’s pulpits.

Churches also boost their numbers by refusing to involve themselves in *controversial* issues. They refuse to speak out against certain errors on the basis that those errors are being promoted by well-liked, “popular” preachers. Such ignoring of doctrinal purity, and such blind acceptance of false teachers is not without terrible consequences: The apostle John said that by refusing to abide in the doctrine of Christ, and by receiving those who refuse to bring the doctrine of Christ, one loses his own fellowship with God (2 John 9-11). Emphasis on numbers and popularity is very dangerous in religion. God’s people “*walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Cor. 5:7). Their faith is not defined or determined by *how many*

people are saying or doing a particular thing. Their faith comes from "hearing the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

"Popularity" has become a driving force in religion, and many people see no danger in this connection. Our English word "popular" comes from the Latin word "popularis," meaning "of the people." Perhaps you have noticed the word "popular" in the Latin word for "people" (populus). The problem for religionists who are focused on popularity is that religious beliefs and practices descend, not "from the people," but *from God*. The "inspired" Scriptures are what "thoroughly furnish us to every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17). What the "majority" either says or does is irrelevant in consideration of such matters. With respect to things that are legislated by God, the so-called "conventional wisdom" of men is insignificant. After all, human wisdom pales in comparison to God's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:25; Isaiah 55:8,9). In the spiritual realm, humans cannot correctly "direct their own steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). God's people are told to "be not conformed to this world" and to not be "friends" of the world (Romans 12:1; James 4:4). It is not the purpose of God's people to be "approved" by the world, but to be approved by God (2 Timothy 2:15).

Let us consider some scriptures that address the issue of numbers.

Matthew 7:13, 14 - *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter in through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."* Though it is a disturbing prospect, it is nonetheless *true*: More people will face spiritual "destruction" than will enjoy spiritual "life." Jesus spoke these words just after warning people of the spiritual danger of hypocrisy (Matthew 6; 7:12), and just before warning them of the dangers posed by false teachers (verses 15-20), disobedience (verses 21, 24-27), and failing to respect divine authority (verses 22, 23). I should emphasize that, even though the "broad road leads to destruction," it is the "many" (rather than the "few") who are traveling that road! This proves that the road that is taken by the *largest* crowd is not necessarily the *right* road. And the crowd that is the *largest* is not necessarily the crowd that is *right*. With respect to salvation, the majority of humans will lose their souls. Salvation is obviously not based upon numbers.

Deuteronomy 7:7 - *"For the Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples."* God's selection of the Jewish nation was not based upon that nation's size, but upon God's own affection for it. Though humans often make the mistake of doing so, God does not measure faithfulness by how many people are doing a particular thing. We must guard ourselves against thinking that the largest churches and

religious movements are necessarily the ones that are right. They may not be at all! Members of the religion of Islam comprise 1 sixth of the earth's population, yet they don't even believe that Jesus is the Son of God!

2 Samuel 24 - David sinned when he took a military census of Israel and Judah. God was displeased with David because he placed his trust in *numbers*, rather than in God. David had experienced God's help in earlier situations (remember the Goliath incident), but for some reason, this time, he placed his confidence in his empire. He sought security from the hands of men, rather than from the hand of God. He was later "conscience-stricken" by his actions, and he repented of his lack of faith in God. And truly, it is a lack of faith on man's part when he seeks spiritual security in human numbers. There is a reason why Moses said, "*Do not follow the crowd in doing evil*" (Ex. 23:2). The "crowd" is not always right. Even those who are "in the majority" can be wrong. "Friendship with the world is enmity against God" (James 4:4) We should seek to please God, not men (Galatians 1:10). The apostle Paul defined a true "Jew" as being one whose praise is "not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:28). Such a person seeks acceptance from God, and he understands that his service to God may affect the way in which he is perceived and judged by others. The Christian is often criticized and ridiculed for his doctrinal and moral stance. We should concern ourselves with what God thinks of us, not what men think of us.

John 12:42, 43 - John described some people who "*believed on Jesus, but would not confess him.*" And why wouldn't they confess him? Because "*they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God*" (John 12:42, 43). They focused upon numbers, acceptance and popularity, rather than upon pleasing God. We must not allow our desire to be accepted by humans to interfere with our effort to please God. Bible history shows this to be one of the primary causes of sin and rebellion against God. Why did Old Testament Jews want a king? So that they could be "*like the nations around them*" (1 Samuel 8:5). People conform to certain political, social and religious norms in order to be liked and to be accepted by the people that are around them. Paul told the saints at Rome to "*be not conformed to this world*" (Romans 12:1), and John told saints to "*love not the world, neither the things that are in the world*" (1 John 2:15). What can we do to help ourselves and others to avoid the pitfalls of sinful conformity?

We must do God's will, and not worry about what this makes other people think of us. I have observed that people, including many religious people, often have a great weakness in this area. It is much easier for us socially if we will draw back from taking firm stands. A "thus saith the Lord" approach to ethical, moral and doctrinal issues can cost us

our popularity. And so, on one level people want to serve God, but on another level they wish to keep their old friends and even win new ones.

Conclusion

So, what do we do? The apostle Paul gave us the solution when he wrote, *“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not judge myself”* (1 Cor. 4:3). These words are a shock and an affront to the thinking of a politically correct generation. Some people are amazed to know that we *can actually take such a stand!* The Christian’s motto in this regard should be to worry more about the well-being of the **souls** of other people than we do about what those people think of us. Paul’s faith did not allow him to yield to the “court” of human opinion. He did not fret over what others thought or said about him. We “stand by faith” (2 Cor. 1:24). Genuine faith does not bend itself in order to accommodate the whims, wishes and expectations of the crowd. It stands as uncompromising and as unchangeable as the very word of God upon which it is constructed (Romans 10:17; Psalm 119:89). Our ultimate and eternal fate will not be determined by what others think of us, but by what God thinks of us. *“Therefore,”* as James says, *“speak and act, as those who will be judged by the law of liberty”* (James 2:12).

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