

May God Deliver Us from Our Obsession with Numbers and Popularity

In this world, we have to deal with numbers. That is a simple fact of life. From paying our bills to counting inventory to measuring results, calculating numbers cannot be avoided.

An increase in numbers can also point to real success, which is why the book of Acts sometimes records information like this: “. . . many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand,” (Acts 4:4).

That was great news. More lives were being transformed.

That's why my heart burns daily to have the maximum impact on the maximum number of people, from touching believers to reaching the lost, and from America to the nations and Israel. Every day of my life, I want to reach more people more effectively.

That's also why our ministry seeks to operate at the highest level of professionalism, carefully stewarding the funds that are sent our way and giving careful attention to numbers. In fact, some of my team leaders are gifted by God to deal with and evaluate numbers. This is part of their calling.

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At the same time, numbers alone can be terribly deceiving, since greater reach does not necessarily mean greater impact, especially in the light of eternity. Just ask yourself the question: Who is having a greater eternal impact, an unknown underground evangelist in China who is winning the lost and

making disciples, or the world's most famous celebrity?

Numbers can also be a serious distraction, especially for ministers of the gospel. It can be so easy for us to focus on budget or church growth or social media influence that we take our eyes off intimacy with the Lord. Numbers can be a trap as much as a distraction and even a deception. We must not be obsessed with numbers!

In the same way, being "popular" can never be our goal. Not only can popularity be terribly seductive, but it, too, can be a great deception. Often the most popular among us are the worldliest and the least popular the godliest. Bigger is not always better.

That's why when final accounting is done, the first will be last and the last will be first.

As for seeking to please the crowds, we must never forget that the same crowds who yell "Crown him" one day are shouting "Crucify him" the next day.

Beware the snare of popularity!

As I was praying and meditating about these things recently, I was reminded of some quotes I had cited in my 1995 book, *From Holy Laughter to Holy Fire: America on the Edge of Revival*. Reviewing these quotes again was deeply convicting, and so I share them here with you with the hope that God Himself will speak to you as read them:

"I was once told that I would never be a very popular evangelist because I did not sufficiently 'sell my personality.' Oh, the shame! Our business is to magnify the Christ of God and not to fling about our personalities. Dr. Herbert Lockyer, in pointing out the peril of man-worship in evangelism, says, 'If a man is somewhat attractive, blessed with a fascinating personality and with power to influence multitudes, that man is often sought after rather than the

Master.'” (James A. Stewart)

“One of [Evan Roberts’] severest trials during the revival was his being the object of men’s worship. A friend of his once told me of finding him lying on the floor crying to the Lord to bring this to naught so that all the glory should go to God alone.” (I. V. Neprash)

“There are many great lessons for us in the worship and reverence of the heavenly seraphim Isaiah described in his vision. I notice that they covered their feet and they covered their faces. Because of the presence of the Holy God, they reverently covered their faces. Reverence is a beautiful thing, and it is so rare in this terrible day in which we live. But a man who has passed the veil, and looked even briefly upon the holy face of Isaiah’s God can never be irreverent again. There will be a reverence in his spirit and instead of boasting, he will cover his feet modestly. Even if he’s been somewhere, instead of coming home and bragging about it, chances are he’ll cover his feet.” (A. W. Tozer)

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“I am only a wick. With many of us it takes a long time to learn this lesson. It is only when the wick is soaked in oil that it can burn. If you wish for the fullness of the Spirit in order that your church should be crowded or people flock to hear you, the Holy Spirit cannot work through you. If people begin to talk about the wick, there is generally something wrong with the burning.” (D. H. Dolman)

“The mightiest work the Holy Spirit did through Dwight L. Moody in Great Britain was in small groups of five or six hundred people, not in the large audiences of 20- and 30,000. One may well be afraid of the crowds. We cannot journey far with God unless we are saved from numbers. It is sadly

possible to think more of numbers than of Christ, who in the days of His earthly ministry went, not only to the cities but to inconspicuous places, proclaiming the Word.” (James A. Stewart)

“The worship of success is generally the form of idol worship which the devil cultivates most assiduously.” (Helmut Thielecke)

“When a prophet is accepted and deified, his message is lost. The prophet is only useful so long as he is stoned as a public nuisance, calling us to repentance, disturbing our comfortable routines, breaking our respectable idols, shattering our sacred conventions.” (A. G. Gardiner)

Are these quotes speaking to you? Then here’s one more for you, one that was not cited in the Holy Fire book, from Leonard Ravenhill: “You take care of the depth of your ministry. God will take care of the breadth of your ministry.”

May we take these words to heart!{eoa}

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