

Quit Trying to Be Big ... and Just Be Faithful

There's nothing more disheartening to a preacher than to see empty seats in a church service. I'll be honest—I like meetings where you have to pull out extra chairs and put people in the aisles. Why? Because I assume if God's blessing is on a meeting it will be packed. I like numbers because, in my carnal thinking, crowds are more significant.

Our culture puts value on things depending on how popular they are, and we are guilty of applying this rule in the church. We like big. We even rate churches based on size. We know that the three largest churches in America in 2013 are (1) Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church, (2) Andy Stanley's North Point Ministries and (3) Bill Hybels' Willow Creek Community Church. The assumption is that these churches are leading the way in making spiritual impact.

But God doesn't evaluate us based on numbers, nor does He rate our effectiveness by comparing us to someone else. Many pastors of small or mid-size churches get discouraged because they evaluate their ministries by counting the number of rear ends in seats or the amount of money in offering plates. But God's ways are not our ways! Remember these kingdom principles:

Less is sometimes more. Jesus attracted big crowds, but the numbers didn't impress Him because He knew many who were healed in His meetings wouldn't follow Him to the cross. He even told one of His crowds that the gospel seeds He was sowing would be eaten by birds, scorched and withered, or choked by thorns (see Mark 4:3-8). Only a small percentage, He said, would bear fruit. Jesus was looking for quality, not quantity.

In the end, after thousands heard Jesus' messages and ate His free lunches, only 120 of His followers gathered in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost. That is not an impressive number, and today's church growth specialists might say Jesus failed to break the 200 barrier within three years of ministry!

Follow the cloud, not the crowd. There are a few crowd shots in the Book of Acts. But most scenes of the early church are less impressive. An Ethiopian is converted on a desert road. The Holy Spirit falls on members of an Italian family gathered in a home in Caesarea. A woman named Lydia comes to Christ at a small prayer gathering by a river in Philippi. She becomes the first convert in Europe.

Why are these seemingly inconsequential stories highlighted in Scripture? Because God moves as powerfully in one-on-one conversations and small group gatherings as He does in big meetings. When we follow the cloud of His presence, He often leads us to the one instead of the many.

The book of Acts ends with a scene of Paul ministering quietly to people in a small apartment while he is under house arrest (see Acts 28:30-31). Paul certainly didn't measure His impact by large buildings, big mailing lists, media exposure or book sales. (His writings didn't become popular until he was dead!)

Make disciples, don't entertain audiences. Every man's work will be tested by fire, and every ministry will be evaluated not by church-growth experts but by God's holy standards. Sitting in a church does not make a person a faithful follower of Jesus. Don't confuse disciples with pew-warmers. He will not evaluate us by how many people were in attendance, or even by how many danced in the aisles or shouted when we preached, but by how many disciples we made.

Stop trying to be popular. The three largest concerts in history were performed by (1) Indian singer Babbu Maan, who

recently attracted 4.8 million fans; (2) raspy-voiced British rocker Rod Stewart; and (3) French New Age composer Jean Michel Jarre. If you asked, “Who in the world is Babbu Maan?” then you prove my point. Crowds or fleeting popularity do not determine significance.

Justin Bieber has more Twitter followers—37.3 million—than anyone on the planet. He is followed by Lady Gaga and Katy Perry. We are supposed to be impressed, because in our culture value is determined by star power. But you have to wonder: Is this 19-year-old pop singer the world’s most powerful man? No, because in the light of eternity the size of Bieber’s fan base is as meaningless as how frequently he changes his hairstyle.

Let’s stop evaluating our own effectiveness—and each other’s—by crowd size. Be faithful with the people you have, whether it is a home church of seven, an office Bible study of 10, a rural congregation of 30 or a megachurch of 2,000. Whether you are ministering to a handful of inmates, a roomful of Alzheimer’s patients, a dozen orphans or one depressed friend, forget your need for the spotlight. Just let Jesus use you, and make Him popular.

J. Lee Grady is the former editor of *Charisma* and the director of The Mordecai Project ([\(\)](#)). His latest book is *Fearless Daughters of the Bible*.

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