

Counting Souls

Intro: We had a great meeting with Harold Comer! Last Saturday night Harold gave us a broad picture view of how to reach people in this culture and how it had worked in the congregation in Birmingham where he labors. Then on Sunday he talked to us about the ten essentials of congregational growth and then the motivations needed to evangelize. In the week-night sessions talked to us about our daily contacts with others, seeing spiritual values in people around us, acknowledging them and the importance of promoting spiritual values by recommendations, response to visitors, and non-verbal messages we may send that affect others. He ended the series by discussing some of the future issues that churches face as they grow. In all these lesson there was a wealth of practical information to use.

Among Harold recommendations to us was the practice of documenting our “gentle touches”, keeping count of how many people we speak with and how many respond to our efforts. Sometimes we don’t immediately see the importance of this step in our planning and work. So I am following up a little today by speaking with you for a few moments about “counting souls”.

God is interested in counting souls!

The numbering of Israel after the Exodus

It is interesting that one of our OT books actually gets its name from counting souls, “Numbers”. God urged Moses to count the Israelite men when they came out of Egypt. The book of Numbers gets its name from this event which was designed to identify those who would serve in the army of Israel as they embarked upon their task of taking the land of Canaan in keeping with God’s promise to Abraham. Then they registered by ancestry in their families, by their fathers’ households, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, head by head, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. So he numbered them in the wilderness of Sinai. (Numbers 1:18-19)
The number counted was 603,550 of those who had been delivered from the land of Egypt.

The numbering of Israel after the Captivity

Ezra records the number of those who came back from Babylonian captivity to Jerusalem.
Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city. (Ezra 2:1)
The number was 42,360 and represented all who God had delivered from captivity.

The numbering of the church

It is interesting to see how the Holy Spirit guided Luke in counting the souls of those who responded to the gospel.

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:41)
But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. (Acts 4:4)
And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7)
Luke is not only interesting in documenting how many obeyed the gospel in Jerusalem, he is interested when the number is not so large, but served as a beginning of a new congregation. For example in his report of Paul's first baptisms in Ephesus.
And there were in all about twelve men. (Acts 19:7)
Or in Corinth:
And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. (Acts 18:8)
Surely this much evidence would suggest that there must be some significance to taking the time to count those responding to the gospel. And in the same way and in the same spirit, we might also count those to whom we extend invitations and recommendations with the view of their salvation.

Why counting souls is important

It is a way of glorifying God

It is interesting that each of the counts I mentioned previously is related to God's saving promises and documents the greatness of His work in redeeming the Israelites from slavery, in return Israel from captivity, and in adding the saved to His church. You don't get the impression that the counting centered upon human glory but God's glory. And that is the way it should be:
Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)
And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:17)
Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:11)

Counting souls is never an occasion to glorify men. The purpose of counting souls is not to say "Hurrah for us! Look at how big we've become!" We should count with humility understanding that it is God who gives the increase. In fact, it should humble us to see how God uses the little things we can do to bring about such wonderful results!

It is a way of encouraging accountability and work.

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia...For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, (2 Corinthians 8:1,3)

Why did the apostle feel the need to report what others were doing?

There is encouragement in that!

By counting souls we can encourage each other. By counting souls we are reminded of what is being done. It is good to know what others are doing.

By counting souls we can document whether we are busy working to reach out to others around us. It will give us a means of accountability. If everyone participates we can have a good idea of how many people we are touching.

It is a way of monitoring the success of our efforts.

Why did Luke feel the need to report the number of original converts in Jerusalem, and the incremental increases he documented. Was it not to make clear the impact that the gospel was having in that city? So counting souls can be useful in monitoring our success.

Are more people attending now than a year ago? How do you know?

Have those who are weak grown to a new level of commitment? How do you know?

Does making recommendation make a difference in the number of visitors? Is it better than mass advertising? How do you know?

Of course, there are many aspects of the Lord's work that cannot be quantified. You can quantify how many people are invited, or how many people attend, or how many people respond. But you cannot quantify the increase in faith, love, and devotion. It is important to remember that these too are important but cannot be measured as easily.

Counting "gentle touches"

In keeping with Harold's recommendations I'm encouraging you to look for occasions each week to give invitations and make recommendations to those who are not Christians.

Then I'm asking you when you come in to put a check in a box for each person you've invited; and then when that person comes, put a circle around a check mark (any one will be fine just to show that a person who was invited has come to visit us).

By charting our activity we can do a number of important things:

We can glorify God for the opportunities He gives us.

We can document our obedience in seeking to reach others.

We can test the effectiveness of our efforts.

We can encourage each other.

Conclusion: I hope you will participate in inviting and sharing your stories with others. It will encourage us all.

To those not Christians, we don't ever want anyone who comes among us to feel like a statistic. Counting souls is not about mere numbers, but about people—people for whom Christ died, people whom we love, people who we want to see obey the Lord. Let us help you do that today!