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## Church Growth, Numbers, and Record Keeping

John W. Ellas

Adapted from: *Measuring Church Growth: A Research-Based Tool for Evaluating and Planning* (Houston, TX: Center for Church Growth, 1997).

Well, it finally happened. I had successfully avoided it for nearly five decades. But time and fate were not to be denied. The day came for me to spend my first night in a hospital as a patient.

In many ways it was an unforgettable experience. I never knew there were so many ways to probe, test, and measure the health of a body. After a few days the verdict was in. Based more on the test results than on my own testimony, a decision was made to let me go home. The hospital staff received no arguments from me. I was just delighted that the pictures, graphs, and numbers meant one thing—adiós, amigos, I am out of here.

### *Origin of Numbers*

No one, even in good health, can escape the reality and presence of numbers. It runs much deeper than test results, phone numbers, or a checkbook balance. Numbers are an inseparable part of nature and therefore a part of life itself. Life begins as one cell. That one cell divides into two cells and each continues to divide. As long as we live, we depend on this numerical reality. Whether we consider the inner world or outer world, numbers are present.

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From the beginning, ancient peoples were faced with reoccurring and countable celestial phenomena. Before their view were days, nights, moon phases, and on a clear evening, more than a thousand bright stars to count. Curiosity led them to discover the regularities of movement in the heavens. Ancient cultures had an almost slavish devotion to celestial study. And this fascination developed into an invaluable tool for determining planting and harvesting time, for direction and travel, and for expanding their understanding of the universe.

In every field of endeavor, ancient and modern, numbers and mathematics are required. Every bridge, building, and bungalow was first designed by the numbers. All workmen—whether carpenters, plumbers, or electricians—had to work with them to complete the job. Even the clothes you are now wearing were first designed as a two-dimensional pattern that has the correct proportion for your size.

Everywhere we turn, reality is set in two or three dimensions. The page you are reading is considered a two-dimensional picture. Visually the words have length and width, but the entire book also has depth. These three dimensions are filled with measurable lines, angles, and curves. A beautiful face or an attractive body, we are told, is really a matter of the correct numerical proportions set in three dimensions. Tasty food is made possible by the best ingredients mixed in the right proportions. The list could go on and on because numbers are woven into the fabric of life.

Based on a Christian worldview, numbers are a part of God's creation rather than an invention of man. The concept and use of numbers precedes the creation of humanity. In Genesis five days of creation are accounted for before humanity appeared on the sixth day (Gen. 1:1–31).

There are systems designed by people to name and count numbers. Numbers are ideas that cannot be seen or touched. So, man-made symbols are used to stand for numbers—called numerical systems. The reality of numbers, however, resides in the very fabric of creation. This makes them a divinely created gift from God for our use (James 1:17).

*Old Testament and Numbers*

Scripture reveals more than a casual attitude about the use of numbers. They are utilized in counting people in assemblies, tribes, and troops; taking large population censuses; and conducting inventory accounts of accumulated wealth. Like any other gift from God, the Bible records the beneficial use of numbers and counting, and it also records their misuse.

Census taking became an accepted part of Israel's existence. God himself commanded the first count after the exodus from Egypt (Num. 1:1–3). It provided the organizational basis for keeping track of God's people while in the wilderness (Num. 2:32–34). And it also identified the number of men available for war. There were 603,550 men over the age of twenty who were able to bear arms (Num. 1:46).

Again, after the wilderness wandering, God commanded the second census. This count demonstrated God's truthfulness (Num. 26:1–2). All of the original faithless population perished in the wilderness, and only Joshua and Caleb survived (Num. 26:65). Israel was still strong with 601,730 men over age twenty who were able to bear arms (Num. 26:51).

In each census the Levites were counted separately. There were 22,273 who were one month and older at the first census (Num. 3:43). Other counts were made for the purpose of organizing them into different areas of priestly service. For example, when Solomon began his reign, there were 38,000 male Levites thirty years of age or older ready for service (1 Chron. 23:3).

After the Babylonian captivity, Ezra and Nehemiah record the number of returning exiles. The Israelites were called together and enrolled by genealogy. Ezra's and Nehemiah's count of the assembly was 42,360 (Ezra 2:64; Neh. 7:66).

Not every recorded census was pleasing to God. Late in King David's reign he ordered a head count of Israel. His military leader, Joab, recognized the error and tried to dissuade him—but without success. Joab's report to David is revealing. He gave the number of men making up the military strength of Judah and Israel (1 Chron. 21:1–5). God's judgment fell upon the entire nation, and David's carnal motives were the culprit.

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Joshua's past military campaigns had demonstrated that Israel's strength and victories came through faith in God and not through military might or numerical superiority. Before Joshua departed, he had reminded Israel that, "One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, as he promised you" (Josh. 23:10).

Therefore, it was not David's act of counting that was sinful. His motives for the late census were self-serving and carnal rather than designed to honor God. Originally, when the nation was turned over to the reign of David, troops were counted as they poured into Hebron to marshal support for David and form his loyal army (1 Chron. 12:23–38). However, there was a contrasting motive for counting and reporting the numbers from this early census: "For from day to day men kept coming to David to help him, until there was a great army, like an army of God" (1 Chron. 12:22). This count was to glorify God and not for David's self-glorification.

#### *New Testament and Numbers*

The New Testament writers do not shy away from presenting numbers and giving counts. Jesus employed numbers in the course of teaching Kingdom truths, and some of them imply counting. It is axiomatic that the Master would never use an evil tool to teach a godly truth. And what is true about Jesus is also true for all inspired writers.

Numbers, counting, and record keeping have a divine origin. In teaching about fear and trust, Jesus offers comfort in the fact that God counts. No sparrow falls without the Father's knowledge and even the hairs on a person's head are numbered (Matt. 10:29–30).

To every Christian's delight, God keeps accurate records. Paul lists several of his co-workers whose names are recorded in the book of life (Phil. 4:3). John reveals more on the subject and calls it the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21:27). It reminds me of singing one of the old favorites, "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder." I certainly want to be there. By that time everyone will understand the right motives and eternal value of counting and keeping good records.

Luke helps us see what stands behind numbers that makes them so important to God. He places together three of Jesus' parables that are concerned with numbers. In them Jesus asked questions of His audience. If a shepherd lost one of a hundred sheep, or a woman lost one of ten coins, wouldn't they do everything possible to recover the lost item? And when they were found, wouldn't there be rejoicing? If a father lost one of two sons and the lost one returned, wouldn't there be rejoicing (Luke 15:3–32)?

The parables reveal the value of each number because each represents a human soul—a soul once separated from God and then restored to life. To make the parables' message clear, Jesus said, "Just so, I tell you there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

It is very difficult at times to maintain God's view of reality. Mass media have collapsed our world into a small community and flooded us with visual images from around the world of human starvation, attempts at genocide, and a population explosion of billions. It is challenging to see beyond the vast numbers and staggering world problems to see what God sees—the value of a single human soul. Jesus' parables possess the power to restore sight to our blind eyes. Observe carefully, God has valued one person's soul more than the entire material universe (Mark 8:36–37).

#### *Faithfulness and Numbers*

Today where can you place your trust? Elected officials offer bridges to the future; citizens frequently see a tightrope walk of infidelity and insincerity. Some state legislators promise that at the end of the rainbow is lottery money for education; what really happens is the poor get soaked and educators are often left in the fog of funding lies.

Big companies are also having difficulties in dealing faithfully with employees and customers. Insurance companies offer policyholders a piece of the rock, but many customers discover a sinkhole of insurance fraud. Employees of large companies are consistently assured of job security, but many consistently receive pink slips just short of retirement time. This depressing litany could

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go on listing other culpable institutions. More importantly, is there faithfulness anywhere? Is there anyone we can trust?

We can lift our eyes above the human condition and have assurance there is One who is faithful: “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations” (Deut. 7:9). Scripture abundantly affirms that God is faithful, and it provides evidence to support the claims.

Flowing from God’s love are numerous promises to those who love Him (2 Peter 1:4). In *All the Promises of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1962), Herbert Lockyer has presented a compilation and exposition of divine promises recorded in Scripture. His research uncovered one student’s count of 7,487 promises by God to man. All promises are important, but a few are paramount.

God made some promises to Abraham of such magnitude they are beyond human measurement. He promised to make Abraham’s descendants into a great nation, and through Abraham’s seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3, 22:17–18). Whatever God promises, He personally fulfills. And from Genesis 12 onward, Scriptures reveal God’s great acts that demonstrate His faithfulness to those promises.

Luke records the verbal defense made by the first Christian martyr, Stephen. In his historical narrative Stephen describes several of God’s mighty acts in redemptive history. He begins with the promises made to Abraham and identifies Israel as the nation of promise (Acts 7:1–60). At the end of his discourse he presents Jesus as the Righteous One or Messiah murdered by the Jews (Acts 7:51–53). Peter and Paul also identify Jesus as the seed of Abraham through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Acts 3:24–26; Gal. 3:16).

Luke recognizes that he is recording redemptive history in the book of Acts and providing the evidence that God is faithful in fulfilling His promises to Abraham and to Israel.<sup>1</sup> Luke records the growth of the Jewish and Gentile churches. He provides ample evidence of numerical growth as the nations of the earth are being blessed with eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, the seed of

Abraham:<sup>2</sup>

Acts 2:41 “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”

Acts 2:47 “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Acts 4:4 “But many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to about five thousand.”

Acts 5:14 “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.”

Acts 6:7 “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.”

Acts 9:31 “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria . . . was multiplied.”

Acts 9:35 “And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.”

Acts 16:5 “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.”

Acts 21:20 And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed.”

Jesus was not ambiguous about His earthly mission. He said, “For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10; Matt. 18:11). Obviously, this is a quantifiable or measurable mission. He invested His time preparing twelve other men to help carry out the same purpose (John 20:21). Jesus very strategically passed on the mission baton, not just to the twelve, but to the entire church (Matt. 28:16–20; Acts 1:8). Luke records the church’s mission results in quantified terms, recognizing that God gives the increase.

God has been faithful in keeping His promises to Abraham, but the blessing to all the nations has not ended. The mission to make disciples and to mature disciples will continue until the end



of the age (Matt. 28:20). God desires that more souls receive the blessing in Christ and that the church increase in numbers (2 Peter 3:9; Acts 2:47). And this, again, is a quantifiable mission.

#### *Matters of Perspective*

The odds are, if you are reading this article, you already believe there is some value in keeping records, tracking trends, and using numbers as a tool for evaluating and planning. While the purpose of this text is to encourage churches in these efforts, there are inherent dangers in working with numbers.

A few of my own church consultations have surfaced some abuse of numbers. For example, attendance figures have been inflated over a period of time to perpetuate a positive impression. And in a case or two, member involvement numbers have been padded to protect a less than stellar job performance.

While these are rare cases, there is a danger of getting pride, ambition, and even job security entangled with numbers. And this causes people to see numbers as a personal threat and a potential obstacle to the purity of the gospel rather than a useful tool to help in accomplishing a mission. It is important to remember that a person's attitude about numbers is really a matter of perspective.

#### *Criticism as Caveats*

Because of a few cases of blatant misuse of numbers, most aspects of growth analysis have fallen under harsh criticism. Criticism has value as a warning about abuses. However, it should never sidetrack the church from her mission. We will look at three frequently vaunted objections to measuring growth and offer a different perspective:

1. *Scriptures never command us to count numbers and keep records.*

This is true. There are no direct commands in the New Testament requiring churches to count and keep records. Neither are there any directives for congregations to develop annual budgets and to balance their checking accounts regularly. But there are

some major consequences that follow the neglect of such responsibilities.

As stated earlier, numbers and record keeping have a divine origin. They are tools. When used in appropriate ways, they can serve to glorify God. On the other hand, misuses can pander to human pride and self-exaltation. Let this stand as a clear warning, not a deterrent. We have numerous Biblical examples of counting, census taking, and record keeping that magnify the Lord. The church can do the same if the motive flows from a serious commitment to obey and honor God.

*2. We should focus on quality not quantity; quality is what counts.*

The idea here is that spiritual growth is the most, if not the only, important dimension of growth. It is true that growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ is essential (2 Peter 3:18). And it is also true that some early church growth literature was imbalanced toward the numerical growth dimension to the point that it looked like a numbers game.

Nevertheless, this criticism is unfortunate because it sets two very important Biblical mandates at odds with one another. Recorded in Matthew 28, Jesus personally handed over our mission to make disciples (numerical growth) and to teach them to observe all that He commanded (spiritual growth). The early Christians responded to that commission. And Luke records their progress without dichotomizing these two growth dimensions. He writes, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily" (Acts 16:5).

*3. God did not call us to be successful; He called us to be faithful.*

Every Bible student would agree that faithfulness is expected of Christians (1 Cor. 4:1–2). Faithfulness is demonstrated when an individual takes the time to build a personal relationship with God and obeys all He commands.

There are problems, however, with this criticism. In most cases "success" is never defined. It is left to our imagination to

leap into worldly images of large plush facilities with multimillion-dollar budgets where the megachurches are successful and all others are failures. Based on this scenario, I do not know of one single advocate of such nonsense.

Even worse, the criticism implies there is no relationship between actions and outcomes. In this view, successful outcomes have been jettisoned due to their worldly nature, so we need concern ourselves only with faithful actions regardless of outcomes.

While God did not call us to worldly success, He did call us to a Biblical standard of success. Jesus told His disciples they would bear much fruit (John 15:8,16). In verse 16 Jesus told them they would go (faithful actions) and bear fruit (successful outcomes).

“Fruit” in the New Testament refers to both spiritual growth (Gal. 5:22–23) and numerical growth (John 4:34–36; Rom. 1:13; Phil. 1:22). God is concerned with actions and outcomes. He calls us to be faithful and successful.

This objection should surface a helpful warning. God’s kingdom is built with divine power. What He asks of us to do, He empowers us to accomplish. And there is no room for egotism or boasting. Jesus made it clear when He said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Therefore, churches of all sizes can be faithful and fruitful, and God alone is the judge of success.

#### *Value of Record Keeping*

In a summary fashion, I will highlight some of the practical benefits of keeping good records and evaluating church growth trends in your congregation.<sup>3</sup> It is time-consuming and hard work, so church leaders need to catch a vision for the purpose and value of the endeavor. With the right motives, it is a valuable tool for the leader’s job.<sup>4</sup>

1. Record keeping creates an environment of orderliness in what appears as a chaotic world. In the beginning God took His creation and step by step brought order to the heavens and earth. God considered this “work,” but His final evaluation declares, “It was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Thorough and well-kept church

records are hard work, but they also can help bring order to the world of Christian ministry and serve as a valuable tool for the leader's task.

2. Record keeping promotes renewal by helping churches remain focused on their God-given purpose and mission. Redemptive history recorded in the Old Testament reveals God as a God of mission. He desires to seek and restore the lost. His mighty acts in history are culminated in sending His only Son (John 3:16). Jesus accepted the passing of the Father's torch, and His Father's mission became His mission (John 6:38). Jesus concluded His work by passing the torch to the church (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8). Record keeping is the essential first step in accepting the torch and demonstrating a seriousness about the Father's business.

3. Record keeping serves as a reminder that God has placed eternal value on every single person. Jesus spent His earthly ministry in close personal contact with individuals including the twelve disciples. He modeled and taught about the value of each living soul. According to Jesus, a good shepherd would risk leaving ninety-nine sheep to seek just one gone astray (Matt. 18:12–14). He revealed that in heaven there is joy when even one person repents (Luke 15:10). Accurate and thorough records serve as a reminder that each number represents a soul more valuable than the entire material universe—a soul worth a shepherd's time and care.

4. Record keeping establishes the necessary groundwork for accurate evaluation of methods. Jesus taught that discipleship carries a high cost, and He illustrates it with two insightful parables. A person desiring to build a tower and a king facing the prospects of war would be wise to sit down and thoroughly evaluate their condition before taking action (Luke 14:25–33). Nehemiah understood the principle of wise assessment. After returning to Jerusalem, he carefully inspected the walls by night before proceeding (Neh. 2:11–18). Past church trends and present ministry conditions are often hidden from easy view. Hidden in small and unnoticed changes are trends that can affect a church's future. When brought together, these small changes can reveal large movements. Good records provide the necessary groundwork to

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clear the fog and unveil the trends for accurate evaluations.

5. Record keeping forms the knowledge base for informed planning. From the beginning God has had a plan for humankind, and He is still working the plan (Gen. 12:1–3; Eph. 1:3–6). The church is part of and participates in God's redemptive plan. Our partnership with God and His agenda is revealed in passages like: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6). Faithful stewardship calls for informed and intelligent planning, just as good farming calls for intelligent planting and watering. Thorough and accurate records form the knowledge base for faithful planning.

6. Record keeping reveals concrete opportunities to give God praise and glory. The Father is presently working in our lives and in our congregations (Phil. 2:12–13). Paul opens his letter to the Ephesian church by describing the wonderful works of God through Christ on our behalf, and the appropriate response should be, "To the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6). Unfortunately, some members are unaware of what God is doing in their congregation when there is no recording or reporting of divine activity. On the other hand, recording, reporting, and praising God benefits everyone. One of the greatest human needs is knowing that one's life has meaning. Nothing fills that need greater than seeing ways God is working through our lives and congregations. Diligent record keeping will reveal opportunities to praise God publicly and build His people.

### *Conclusion*

The motive for numbering and accurate record keeping is not self-glorification. Rather, the motive springs from a sincere desire to glorify God by doing His will. In other words, church leaders want to serve as good stewards and good shepherds of their God-given mission. If we faithfully plant and water, God is still giving the increase. Counting the harvest provides an opportunity to glorify God and proclaim His faithfulness.

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691006, Houston, TX 77269-1006. Title: Director. John earned degrees at Northwestern State University of Louisiana in 1970 (B.S.), Georgia Southern College in 1972 (M.S.), Harding Graduate School of Religion in 1981 (M.A.) and Fuller Theological Seminary (D.Min.). Dr. Ellas is an author, consultant, workshop leader, and publishes *Church Growth Magazine*.

#### NOTES

1. Jacob Jervell, in *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), pp. 41–45, demonstrates that Luke carefully documents the large number of Jews who believed, and they constitute the true Israel. Most of the numerical growth passages are Jewish conversions. Salvation must begin with the restored Israel before it can flow to the Gentiles (Acts 15:15–17).

2. For an excellent two-part article by John Mark Hicks on numerical growth in the theology of Acts, see *Church Growth* 11, no. 2 (1996): 8–10, and 11, no. 3 (1996): 12–13.

3. For additional insights on the value of keeping records, see George O. Woods, “What Date Is Worth Your Memory,” *Pastor’s Update Cassettes*, no. 5021, vol. 47, side two.

4. Darrell Holtz, “Numbers: The If and the How,” *Christianity Today* 27, no. 10 (June 17, 1983): 65. Holtz describes the positive impact upon his congregation from proper use of numbers and record keeping.