

## The Sin of Counting

Scripture: 2 Samuel 24:1–10

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### The Sin of Counting

I'll admit to being weary, to the point of irritation, whenever I hear ministers of the gospel reporting their statistics as external evidences of success. And I know I'm not the only one. ([The first minute-and-a-half of this video makes the point.](#))

Enough already.

I'm not saying I'm less tempted than the next guy to hope for big numbers and stats, the apparent signs of God's blessing on my ministry. I am. But I've seen the focus on numbers as a *temptation to be resisted*, not something to be embraced. And when preachers find a way to mention the numbers in public, and often, it comes across as bragging; it's worldly and unbecoming of Christians who are to be characterized by humility and meekness.

One of the worst plagues to hit Israel came about when David numbered his troops, taking pride in his military might. For all the external, visible signs of success David could see and count on a human level, only God could know the *true* condition of Israel. Widespread spiritual decay would soon divide David's kingdom and eventually expel the people of Israel and Judah from the land of promise.

Counting isn't *always* pride, right? God commanded Moses to take a census of the people (Numbers 1:1-46; 26:1-62), and for very practical reasons (e.g., to register the fighting men, to determine per-tribe ransom for servicing the temple). Here at Grace to You, we have to keep track of certain numbers to make sure we're good stewards of the resources God entrusts to us.

But just like David's pride in counting the troops, we too can tend to grow proud when we look at the stats—baptism numbers, conference attendees, book sales, etc. It can get ugly pretty fast. Big numbers, or maybe just upward-tending numbers, can flatter. They're like the applause of a crowd, patting you on the back and making you feel good about what you're doing. Numbers can easily lull you into a false sense of security, keeping you from the hard and painful work of self-examination before the Word of God.

Our modern preoccupation with numbers—the emphasis on the visible, external, measurable—reminds me of a few theses in Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, which proved to be at the theological center of the Reformation.

19 That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.

22 That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely

puffed up, blinded, and hardened.

Without getting into the details, the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church justified themselves by pointing to external, visible signs of success. They assumed, as Luther pointed out, that God's work (which is invisible) are visibly manifest, something that could be perceived, measured, and counted. Simply put, if it worked, if it was successful, if it was mighty, if it was manifestly glorious, then God was in it. Luther called that a *theology of glory*, meaning a theology that is focused, not on the true glory of God, but on what appeared to be glorious in the estimation of man.

The error of the theologians of glory is the same as the pragmatists of our day. They assume they can perceive, measure, count, and glory in the invisible things of God, things that are truly imperceptible and uncountable. That kind of thinking, as Luther said, "is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened."

As he confronted the heart of Roman Catholic theology, Luther pit the theology of glory against the theology of the cross. Here's how he put it in thesis 20:

20 He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

The theology of the cross recognizes God's work as a subverting work, one that overturns human pride, thwarts human wisdom, and acts opposite of human expectation. The suffering of the cross—what is truly visible and manifest about God—is not impressive by any measure of man. That which is humble and weak and low and unimpressive—namely, the stuff of suffering—is not something that grabs attention, fills your conference, gains a following, or builds your fan base. But that's the way of the cross, which is God's true work, demonstrated "in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

The theology of the cross is not the message of pragmatic growth methodology, whether we're talking about old-school Seeker or today's more fashionable, hipster version. Pragmatists are like Luther's theologians of glory, practitioners of methodologies that "work." And the preoccupation with signs of visible success is making many Christian leaders, as Luther saw in his day, "completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened."

It's embarrassing to hear them couch their growth stats in pious sounding phrases like, "It's so amazing how many churches God is planting through us," or, "I'm so humbled to see that \_\_\_\_ people made decisions for Christ," or, "I was humbled to be speaking to \_\_\_\_-thousand people last week," and on and on. Parading acts of personal piety, completely contrary to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6, is proof positive of being puffed up. Those who are puffed up are blinded to their error and hardened to any correction.

None of us is completely free of the charge of pragmatism. Pragmatism is only a matter of degree, isn't it. But being sullied by the error of pragmatism doesn't exonerate us; it just shows how utterly in need of grace we really are.

That's what David learned, when God brought swift and deadly judgment against the people. "Behold, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done?" (2

Samuel 24:17). Would that today's church leaders would not only repent of their own sin of counting, but take a keener, more heartfelt interest in the good of the Lord's sheep.

Let us all strive to "cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1). In an attitude of humility and repentance, we'll truly find the grace and blessing of God.

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