

Why Measure in Apostolic Ministry

Some activities in ministry just feel *right*: praying, sharing the gospel, leading a Bible study. But with other pursuits, sometimes we're not quite sure. The counting of ministry results is one such undertaking that continues to spark confusion and disagreement. Is it a good thing? A bad thing? Biblical? Unbiblical? Spiritual or worldly? Local church ministries as well as pioneer missions all grapple with this. And with the current popularity of a *disciple-making movements* approach to ministry, the issue becomes absolutely crucial to resolve. DMM unabashedly stresses the importance of a growing number of Bible study groups, the tracking of how many of these become churches of believers, and the *reproduction* of such into multiple generations.

Detractors will point out that God cares about people, not numbers. A focus on counting can lead to pride and self-dependence, which are the opposite of how we must operate in the Kingdom. And what about David's great sin of ordering a census? We've all experienced how setting numerical goals or tallying up numbers—whether it be attendance or groups or whatever—can make it all feel a little *business-y* rather than a work of the Spirit. And since we have the Holy Spirit, isn't that enough to keep us going? Finally, people will point out that our ultimate aims are spiritual and internal. We long to see lives transformed from the inside out. How do you measure that? Whereas measuring has to inspect the visible and tangible (the *measurable*), it's the invisible that's of greater significance. How can you put a yardstick up against faith, hope and love?

All good points. So should we toss out the numerical, the quantitative, the counting? If we did so, we might feel better temporarily, but we would be harming the work of God. And we would be going down a path inconsistent with His Word. This paper aims to lay out six reasons why quantitative appraisal in ministry is both strategic and biblical. And we will see how at the end of the day it is not about numbers per se, but about the kind of fruit the Lord wants to bring about that brings Him glory.

Here we focus on the "Why" of measuring in ministry. More needs to be written about the "What" specifically to measure and the "How" of going about it.

This paper is not about *reproduction*, as that subject requires its own treatment. Nonetheless we would be remiss not to briefly observe in the context of measurement how the Lord set forth the principle of reproduction from the very beginning of Scripture: "*And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...'*" [Genesis 1:28] Whenever exponential growth is necessary the same principle emerges, whether it has to do with growing a population, miraculous feeding of thousands (Mt. 14:20; 15:37; et.al.), the multiplying effect of the *seed* in our lives (Mt. 13:8), the spread of the gospel (Mt.28:18-20; Acts 19:10), a healthy saturation of discipleship within the church (2 Tim. 2:2), or the overall expansion of the Kingdom on earth (Mt. 13:33). This reproduction principle speaks to the importance of measurement in ministry.

And now, the six reasons...

1. THERE'S LOTS OF COUNTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Our God is not anti- numbers. He even has a whole book called *Numbers*. We find throughout the Old Testament the counting and measuring of all sorts of things: days of Creation, years of lives, countless censuses of tribes and troops, and exact specifications for the tabernacle and temples. Some people might have an aversion to anything numerical, but clearly God does not.

What about actually measuring attainment of God-given tasks? Just one example of this would be God's command in Exodus 35:4-9 that the people of Israel make freewill donations of gold, silver and valuable materials for the construction of the tabernacle. Then in 38:24-31 we get a glimpse of the people's overwhelming response. A vague report of, "Praise the Lord, he provided enough for the project," would have been sadly inadequate and would not have glorified Him in the same way.

2. DAVID'S SIN WAS NOT JUST THAT HE COUNTED MEN.

Whenever the subject of counting and measuring in ministry comes up, there's this elephant in the room: David's ordering of the census. Wasn't that his terrible sin? What a perplexing story we find near the end of King David's life in 2 Samuel 24 (and its parallel account in 1 Chronicles 21).

Whatever it was that David did, it resulted in God's judgment and the deaths of 70,000 men. It also resulted in the acquiring of the specific land that the Temple was later built upon (and precisely where Abraham was spared from sacrificing Isaac). This is a wonderful lesson that although David, and us, are guilty sinners, God has made a way back to Him through His work of atonement. It's always about grace.

The counting of troops was not inherently sinful. We see this in Numbers 1, as the Lord directed Moses to count all the fighting men. And at the beginning of David's reign all the troops available to him were evidently counted (1 Chronicles 12:23-37). No problem. So what was David's sin in this particular instance? Whatever it was, it was immediately clear to Joab, who strenuously objected, though he was overruled. And David himself was convicted of the offence in his conscience right after receiving the report, even before the judgment was pronounced through the prophet Gad.

Joab sensed that David was moving beyond a reliance on God to relying on human capacity and strength. There was pride. There was also probably ambition beyond the Lord's mandate, perhaps even contemplating *empire* in the ways of the Near Eastern despots. Some also note that 1 Chronicles 21:6 seems to imply that David was planning to deploy even the Levites into battle, which was a violation of the Law. Whatever it was, he was disregarding God's faithfulness and leading, and doing something with an unbelieving, secular mentality. His heart was way off.

If this were the only story in the Bible about counting, then one might surmise that counting, per se, is problematic. But instead it is only one counting process among dozens. It is the only negative case, whereas the others are all positive. There are cautions for us in David's sinful census. But that we should not gauge fulfilment toward a God-given objective is not the lesson to draw from this event.

3. THE NEW TESTAMENT IS ALSO FULL OF MEASURING THINGS.

The hairs of our heads are all numbered! (Matthew 10:30) In many of Jesus' teachings and parables he cites lots of numbers, such as in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and of the minas (Luke 19:11-27). In the first miraculous feeding, all four gospels explicitly mention the number of people, loaves, fish and leftover baskets. It's similar with regard to the second such feeding, recorded only in Matthew and Mark. So when Jesus had to get the disciples' attention, to get their minds off of the next meal and on to bigger issues, he chided them about the NUMBERS of loaves and leftover baskets (Matthew 16:8-11). And when Paul needed to drive home his point about the reality of the Resurrection, he pointed out that Jesus appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time (1 Corinthians 15:6), not just "a whole bunch of guys."

But what about actually gauging ministry progress, the number of people reached, that sort of thing? That's exactly what we find throughout the book of Acts (emphasis added):

1:15 In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120)...

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

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

4:4 But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

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

6:7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

11:24 And a great many people were added to the Lord.

19:10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

21:19-20 After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 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."

Finally, in the book of Revelation we likewise find this same passion concerning the number of people saved: 5:9-10 and 7:1-10. Isn't it delightful how in 7:9 [*"a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages"*] the number of God's redeemed is impossible to count? It's as if we'd like to somehow count them all, but the work of the Harvest has simply been too successful for that to be humanly possible!

4. IF WE'RE SERIOUS ABOUT THE VALUE OF OUR MINISTRY AIMS, WE'LL BE SERIOUS ABOUT TRACKING THEIR FORWARD PROGRESS.

As noted in both the Old and New Testaments, we find instances of what the people wanted to accomplish, by the command of God, and the numerical tracking of its fulfillment. That just makes sense. If something is worth doing—and what is more worth doing than the sacred commission given to us for the nations by Christ Himself?—then it would make no sense at all not to care whether or not it's being achieved. That would be careless and lackadaisical toward the Task. Only with measurement can we get a glimpse, however imperfect, of the dimensions toward attainment.

Counting is principally a tool for the benefit of those closest to fruit production, to help them revise their strategy and tactics by aligning more with what God is doing. It is a way of seeing. It is not primarily to send up to leadership, though that too has its place. As the workers see progress being made, they are encouraged and rejoice in working with God. Imagine: we are measuring the supernatural! This speaks to our partnership with God (1 Corinthians 3:5-7). No wonder Paul says, "we have received **grace** and apostleship" (Romans 1:5 about the great privilege of the apostolic calling).

5. THE LARGE SCALE VIEW IS AT LEAST AS VALID AS THE PERSONAL VIEW.

Sometimes we're viewing what is happening with a few individuals or a family, and that is a good thing. Other times, however, we need to see the bigger picture, perhaps even reckoning hundreds or thousands or more. Of course God cares deeply for each person and each family. But those are not *more* on His heart than the wider collection of His children. We might struggle holding the two views together, but there is no such tension with Him. We count and measure progress toward the bigger goals because He and we care about people.

Suppose ten people in an unreached environment come to faith and their lives are being transformed. That's a cause for rejoicing. What if later on the ministry is counted and 300 are saved? That sounds more like a statistic. But in reality what it points to is 290 more individuals, and many whole families, touched by grace. And taking it further, if you're in an apostolic endeavor to reach an unreached people group or city, you're now that much closer to the wider group being reached than when there were just ten. It's not that one is about people and the other about numbers (and pride). Both are about people, and about God's glory.

I've already mentioned the tension between the invisible (what's happening in people's hearts) and the visible (what we are normally able to count). The qualitative versus the quantitative. As we are in the business of heart-change, how do we go about this? As Albert Einstein is claimed to have said, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." But this complexity is not a reason to give up on measurement. We often have to rely on what some call *proxy* measurements, i.e. things you can measure that are your best handle on what you are actually wanting to assess. For example, you want to see a spread of the gospel and changes in people's lives as they increasingly live according to the Kingdom of God. But perhaps all you can count are things like baptisms, how many are regularly participating in fellowship, or an advanced step, such as committing to ministry. Though those markers are not an infallible picture of spiritual life, they are nonetheless a pretty good indication of growth. And is this conundrum just a modern one? Not at all. When we reflect back to those verses in Acts we see that they were more or less confined to measuring the same kind of things. Proxy measuring is OK if it is of the right things. This brings us humility, knowing we will never truly know all that is going on. Only God has complete knowledge of such things.

6. YOU CANNOT GIVE EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP TO WHAT YOU ARE NOT MEASURING¹

Ministry leaders have a sacred stewardship to give oversight, direction and encouragement to our fellow-workers. The point is, measurement gives spiritual insight to what's going well or not well. An *outcomes-based evaluation* provides occasion to reshape how we're going about things. An overseer needs to encourage those under his care. But how can you give affirmation to what you can't see? I've had the privilege of serving as a field director in a particular mission agency. In such a role you regularly see "the good, the bad, and the ugly." Encouraging things. Great stories. But also suffering, martyrdoms, teams that break up, even immorality and marriages breaking apart. But nothing would lead me into praise more than seeing how our Lord was bringing about a Harvest through our collective efforts, however inadequate and imperfect. It would speak a word: "Christ IS being lifted up. It is worth it all."

¹ This is akin to the old saying, "You can't manage what you don't measure." However, ministry leadership is never primarily a work of management. Rather it is about vision, setting an example, spiritual encouragement and Word-centered oversight. The principle is similar, that leaders must have a sense of what is happening or not happening to be effective.

Measurement brings us closer to seeing things from God's perspective. If counting ever moves us toward pride or self-reliance, then we need to nip that in the bud and renounce such a spirit. The glory for anything positive must always and immediately go to Christ, and not to persons or organizations. But if we're in prayer and operating in the Holy Spirit, then knowing where things are at should just make us all the more dependent on Him and His adequacy (2 Corinthians 3:4-6). As Rickett and Morrison attest: "Measuring outcomes takes us beyond counting numbers, keeping us true to our mission, humble in reflection, and passionate about making a lasting difference in the world."²

Nothing motivates like objective evidence of a team's forward progress. This builds faith! Being clear therefore about what you are going for and tracking its progress are two sides of the same coin. In that regard, Rick Warren's words are sobering: "Knowing your purpose motivates your life. Purpose always produces passion. Nothing energizes like a clear purpose. On the other hand, passion dissipates when you lack a purpose. Just getting out of bed becomes a major chore. It is usually meaningless work, not overwork, that wears us down, saps our strength, and robs our joy."³ Conversely, measuring certain things incentivizes those things and communicates priorities that shape a work.

In conclusion, I'm continually thrilled by Jesus' promise in Matthew 24:14, "*And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*" Only the Father knows the precise progress toward that end today and exactly when it will be fulfilled. But each of us engaged in making disciples and bringing this *gospel of the kingdom* to unreached people groups have a little piece of the harvest field to go after. Tracking and measuring how that is going in each of our respective spheres is not only a very helpful thing to do, it is the biblical thing to do.

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² Rickett, Daniel and Morrison, Bob. "How to Measure Ministry Outcomes." A paper.
<https://pdf4pro.com/view/how-to-measure-ministry-outcomes-daniel-rickett-580f40.html>

³ Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Life*. p.33