

Are We Using the Right Measurements?

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In just about any church building in the country, one can look around and, usually either in the back of the auditorium or somewhere in the foyer, see the standard of measurements used to determine the health of the congregation. If attendance numbers go down, sometimes we wonder and ask what is happening or, worse yet, even place blame on those we perceive are responsible. If the contribution number doesn't add up to the budget, it might not be that big of a deal for one or possibly two weeks; however, if there are too many weeks in a row where there is a deficit then the questions fly and the pondering as to why begins.

While I completely understand the reasoning behind needing to keep tabs on the temperature of a congregation's spiritual health, I wonder if in only keeping up with *attendance* and *financial* contributions, are we really getting the complete picture of health. It would be like someone going to the doctor for a check-up, and the doctor using the instrument to look in the ears, nose, and throat and coming to the conclusion that the patient was completely healthy. If that were you, you might be curious as to why he did not check your blood pressure, weight, hearing, sight, reflexes, and any other number of things

the doctor usually checks on a well-ness check-up. In the same way, is it possible that by only looking at the two most posted measurements, attendance and contribution, we are only skimming the top of the surface of detecting spiritual health? What if we used other measurements as well?

Perhaps as we plan for a new year, shepherds might want to consider using at least two other spiritual measurements I believe deserve consideration:

1) Number of Bible Readers (Daily or Completing the New Testament) in the Congregation

In order for growth to occur, we first must define the category of growth we are interested in. Is it simply numeric? If that's the case, when the "going-gets-tough" or another congregation has something that is more attractive, the masses may just head right out the exit door. I'm not suggesting that numbers don't equal souls; however, what I want you to consider is that if spiritual growth is our goal, the souls will be added to the kingdom, thus increasing numeric growth. Along with this, those who are a part of the fold of the local congregation will be challenged to grow deeper spiritually, becoming more rooted and firmly grounded in the purpose they are to fulfill in the kingdom of God.

Throughout Scripture we're told of the enormous and eternal value of God's Word. It was Jesus who connected the dots between continuing in the Word of God, knowing the truth, and being one of His disciples (John 8: 31-32). In John 17:17, we see Jesus identify just exactly what the truth is when He prayed, "*Sanctify them in truth; Your word is truth.*" The apostle Paul would challenge Timothy to be "diligent" about presenting himself as a workman who accurately handled the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). It was Peter who—when writing to the Christians who were dispersed abroad—wrote, "*for you have been born again not of seed, which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God*" (1 Pet. 1: 23).

With these descriptions and admonitions (along with countless others found throughout the Bible) doesn't it stand as a logical conclusion that if we want our congregations to truly grow with lasting growth then we need to be encouraging them to be in study of God's Word outside of the times we gather for worship? It's through the *study* of the Word that we encounter Jesus. It's through the *study* of the Word where we see the will of God revealed to us. It's through the *study* of the Word we come to understand that we have been given all things pertaining to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). So, since the reading and studying of God's Word is that important, what if we started challenging our congregations to be regular Bible readers and Bible studiers? I know reading the Word doesn't always mean

studying the Word, but we need to start somewhere. What if we posted the number of people who read their Bibles every day throughout the week or those who've completely read through the New Testament? Wouldn't we be getting a better sense of health than simply measuring those who showed up to worship once or twice a week?

2) Number of Personal Bible Studies Conducted in Our Local Community

The hard truth is that when numeric growth is not occurring, many look around and begin diagnosing the situation. Everything from parking lots, pads on the pews, color of carpet, cleanliness of the building, Bible class selection, work of the elders, and of course the efforts of the preacher are all brought under the lens of the microscope as we seek answers. Many will offer solutions; however, few will take personal responsibility for the reason why numeric growth is not present and perhaps there's a shifting toward a decline. There's no doubt that the Bible teaches an underlying principle that God gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:7); however, what if we challenged the Christians in our local congregations in the area of planting and watering the seed—God's Word through personal Bible studies? What if we kept a running total of the number of personal Bible studies that have been conducted from week-to-week and posted an accumulated number on the measurement board for all to see?

The first thing that might come to your mind when reading that is, "There is no way the members at the congregation where I attend would go for that!" Some may even be concerned and say, "Are we really in the business of keeping tabs on people to make sure they are doing what needs to be done?" If either of these responses ventured through your head, you're not alone. Many to whom I have mentioned this seem to have a concerned or not so positive reaction, *but why?* Why is it that when we start talking about measuring the spiritual growth of a congregation by seeing how many personal Bible studies we've conducted do some become negative and concerned? It's not about controlling individuals any more than the doctor taking a blood pressure reading is about controlling the patient. The reading is simply a measurement as to the health of the patient and in our case the congregation.

On top of being able to more accurately discern the spiritual health of a congregation, I propose to you that by keeping a running total of the personal Bible studies conducted by the disciples in the congregation, you will perhaps provide better answers when people ask, "Why are we not growing?" or "Why are we decreasing in attendance?" As I said earlier, there will be an endless offering of conclusions to answer these and other questions like these; however, very few of them will ever be centered on the individual asking the right questions. In other words, when someone ask, "Why are we not growing?" most likely they

won't answer, "We aren't growing because I am not studying the Bible with anyone" or "We are not growing because in a year, as a congregation we have only conducted five personal Bible studies and brother Smith is responsible for 4 out of the 5." However, what if you could help change the mentality within the congregation to take personal responsibility? Wouldn't that be a huge step in the right direction of growing into spiritual maturity? You know the answer to these questions, and your congregation would be blessed by such.

There's no doubt in my mind that everyone who has taken the time to read to this point in the article is concerned about the health of the congregation where you attend. We all love it when the attendance and budget numbers are up. However, many times those numbers are going to be down. The intent behind even introducing these additional spiritual measurements is because we must transition our thinking into our responsibility to help disciple further their spiritual growth and let God take care of the numerical growth. When we are maturing in the faith, we will always be pleasing to God. That can't be said simply because the numbers on the board are increasing. There are large congregations that are spiritually dead. Each congregation would be blessed if they would reconsider the standard of measurements when it comes to the health of their congregations.