

Gathering Numbers vs. Intimacy

By Michael Clark

In the last twenty or more years we have heard the call for "Church growth" and "Church planting" in many Church circles. What really surprises me is that this mantra is now being heard even in the "unchurch," the house church movement.

The difference between religion and its methods of reproduction and life in Christ and true spiritual reproduction is INTIMACY. Religion wants to make babies with no thought of any long-term relationship based on quality, the way God meant it to be in families. The creed of the religionist seems to be, "Go forth, multiply and fill the pews." And when the pews are full, "tear down your 'barns' and build bigger ones." Quantity seems to be all that counts. I am afraid that this is the spirit behind the current emphasis on "church growth" and "church planting."

Nowhere did Jesus or the apostles command or teach, either by word or example, that it is our duty as ministers in Christ to go out and "plant or grow Churches." But it is plain that we are commanded to make disciples and not mere converts. Paul said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but it was God that gave the increase." He was not speaking here of Churches, but people! As a dear friend of mine put it, "If church planters are so important, then why don't we have the office of "Church Waterer"? Did Paul plant Churches or did he plant Jesus Christ in the hearts of individuals?"



A quick study of Paul's methods shows that He placed people in Christ, not Churches in towns. He did this by pouring Christ into individuals until they were established in the Son. Then he would move on and do it again, letting the sheep reproduce sheep. Churches were an outgrowth of these new disciples being compelled by the love of Christ to come together. In one of my favorite verses Paul says, "For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ."(2 Corinthians 11:2) Paul was jealous over the Bride of Christ, not over the "followers of Paul." There is a huge difference between these two attitudes in God's economy. The story of Abraham's servant going out with ten camel loads of wealth to find a bride for Isaac speaks volumes of what God is looking for in His ministers in Christ. He was totally unselfish and his only desire was to bring forth a

bride for his master's son. He desired neither the wealth or the bride for himself, but longed for that moment when the son beheld the bride and took her to himself.

The attitude of heart in leaders that want a following, and seek to make a name and leave a legacy for themselves is killing the Church. The first recorded instance of this was a man named Nimrod who set out to build for himself a legacy, the city of Babel, mankind's first corporate religious act.

And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens (that we might see God); let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:4, NKJV)

Man has continued in his religiosity down through the ages since that time to build structures "for the glory of the gods" and to fill them with people, but God makes it clear that he does not dwell in houses made by the hands of men, but in the hearts of those who have been established in His Spirit. It was this argument that the keepers of the temple two thousand years ago, killed Stephen over. Temple keepers are still bloody men to this day.

I have spent much of my life denying myself, although I know that I have what it takes to get a following. I don't do this, because I believe Jesus' words when He said, "He who finds his life, shall lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake and the kingdom's sake, shall find it." One of the hardest temptations I have to deal with is watching my years go by with my mental quickness and body fading, knowing that I am not leaving my mark on this earth.

As they get older, men become obsessed with "leaving a legacy." Our former President Clinton was one of the worse cases I have ever seen. I have to believe that if I succeed in leaving a legacy in the power of my soul, "finding my life," I will end up being a loser in God's eyes. Jesus, Paul, Peter, and all the early saints were losers in this life. They were failures while they were alive! At the end, Paul said of himself, "[All have left me...](#)" and "[I am the chief of sinners.](#)" This is the earmark of one who has laid down his life for others. Jesus first lost the crowds in John six, then the seventy disciples. Later as He was taken captive, He even lost the twelve, with one betraying Him and one denying that he ever knew Him. That, my brothers, is success in God's economy! The grain of wheat must die before it brings forth much fruit. Let go of that legacy mentality for your sake and the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Those of the institutional mindset find that intimacy gets in the way. For one thing, intimacy with the people of God requires time, and if you are building your own kingdom, you have to make every minute count. You have to focus on the forest and forget the trees. The mantra of a recent nationwide Christian men's movement was "Seize the moment!" The attitude of these sheep herders (notice that I did not say shepherds) seems to be, "Just herd up those sheep and get them off to the market! Who cares whether they are sick. There is power in numbers." One man or woman who will lay down all ambition for "the least of these," one of Jesus' little ones, will have far greater impact than any million man march on Washington D.C. "in his name."

What a difference I see in the heart of Jesus as my Shepherd who said of Himself, "the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." No cattle prod, no dogs, no driving them with four wheel drives as it is in the institutions of sheep herders. Can you hear the call for intimacy in Jesus' words? "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own."

Jesus would often stop in the middle of a procession of admirers filled with hoopla and fanfare and minister to just one person ignoring the rest. He had His greatest successes one on one, whether it was the hemorrhaging woman, the woman at the well, Mary and the alabaster box, the tree climbing Zacchaeus, the lame man by the pool, or the humble Centurion. The crowds just never got it. The Father spoke from heaven and they thought it thundered. He taught the crowds in parables giving them spiritual food and they wanted carnal food. The interpretation of the parables and the true teaching was given to a handful of disciples. To God, bigger is not better, but quality and investing your life in a few is His way. Many a mother will shine in the kingdom because she laid down her life daily for her family instead of chasing after a career.

Intimacy also requires honesty and commitment. You can not fool people who live with you daily very long. Have you ever noticed how seminaries teach pastors and ministers to stay distant from the people and to never let them know that they are human or that anything is going wrong in their private lives? When I first heard this I couldn't believe it, until I looked around a bit and saw that it was so. Pastors start right off hiding their hearts from the people for fear of being attacked or appearing weak. After all, to the carnal mind, knowledge is power. On the other hand, Paul boasted in his human

weakness. The whole relationship (that is stretching the word) of today's professional shepherds with their church is based on lies, fear and dishonesty. It is built on sand and cannot and does not stand. If marriages were based on the same type of relationships that pastors have with their flocks, they would all fail. No wonder there are so many church splits and blowups.

Intimacy gets lost in numbers, but if you do not let intimacy get in the way, you can have a whole harem for yourself and sleep with a different one every night of the year. It worked for the king of the Medes and the Persians didn't it (read Esther)? The only trouble is that God is not a human, despotic king like this man who almost succeeded in wiping out all the captives of Israel in his domain. God has always wanted intimacy with His bride, not a harem.

The families of America for the most part are dysfunctional. They lack intimacy. Children are in the way and sent off to one event or institution after another until we can push them out the door on their own, ready or not. Is it a wonder the schools are plagued with shootings, vandalism and crime? There is no mentoring, just teaching. You can have teaching without mentoring, but you cannot have mentoring without teaching and intimacy. The same is true in the Church. We are "ever learning, but never able to come *into* the knowledge of the Truth." Our fellow Christians for the most part can parrot many Bible verses and doctrines, but they often lack intimacy with the Author of all truth, Jesus. The so-called "ministers" have reproduced themselves in their followers, but have not reproduced Christ in them. It was such a shock when I discovered that organized religion is one huge dysfunctional family headed mostly by men with compulsive personalities, dry drunks intoxicated on power.

Sheep desire intimacy. I once went to a church in which the pastor had a close relationship with the ones that started out with him while they were still meeting in a home. He started attending "church growth" seminars and became driven to "grow the church." After a while the church did grow in numbers, but he could not have intimacy with all of the people anymore. There was not enough of him to go around. He still tried to maintain the close relationship with the original folks, though, and it became clear to us that we would never be able to pierce that inner circle of friends and know him as "pastor," because we came too late.

One day our family went to a Church picnic and I arrived after it started. As I walked through the park to the site of the gathering, there sat "Pastor Bob" (not his real name) on a blanket with the insiders crowded around him tightly on the same blanket! And there was my family and my kids' friends sitting alone on another blanket. I felt sick at what I saw. There was only so much room on his blanket and it would never get any bigger no matter how many people came to the church. Needless to say that church is no more. This is what happens when we focus on quantity and not quality.

Madison Avenue says, "Bigger is better, and that the answer to every problem is more money." So does the modern church planter and grower. The world has changed him more than he will change the world for Christ. "The horse leach has two daughters that cry out, 'More, more!'" One daughter is false religion, and the other is governments of men. These two working together are the Whore riding on the Beast. They work hand in hand and cry out for more donations, money and power, but Jesus never took up an offering. Instead He always gave. No wonder in the judgment He will say to these, ["Depart from me you who work iniquity, I never knew you."](#)

Church growth (numbers) and Church planting are not the answer, but as Paul told Timothy, ["You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."](#) This is intimacy.

Mentoring in intimacy IS God's way of bringing a fallen world back to the Father. Invest the life of Christ in you in just one other person and you will do more than all the programs that ambitious men can dream up which are soon forgotten. God will bless you as you do.

God bless each of you as you seek His face.