

## **Writing a Future Story that Requires Faith**

Joshua 7:17-21

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Baptists like to count. Since one of the books of the Bible is called “Numbers,” maybe that’s not such a bad thing.

I learned that keeping count in church was important when I attended church as a child at Prospect Baptist Church.

In that country church, every Sunday morning between Sunday School and worship service the Sunday school director would come into the sanctuary and change numbers on the church attendance board.

In those days, nearly every Baptist church, especially a country church had one of these boards somewhere on the wall for church members to see. Some churches also had a hymn board that listed the numbers of the hymns that would be sung that day.

The church attendance board had enrollment numbers, the attendance for the day, the attendance for last Sunday, the numbers of people that read their Sunday school lesson, the number of people that brought their Bibles, the offering that was collected in Sunday school, and the number attending worship.

These were also the times when churches had yearly summer revivals that lasted a week and sometimes two weeks.

Revivals were one of the most successful ways Baptists had of adding people to the church. During revivals, people got saved. After the revivals, people were baptized and the numbers of people going to heaven increased. That’s how people saw things.

So it was important to get people to attend revivals. As if it wasn’t important enough to us to get people to come to church to hear the gospel so they might get saved and go to heaven, the pastor had to sweeten the pot and make it a competition for us Baptists, because we like numbers.

We’d have a pack-a-pew night at our revival meetings.

Various people were assigned a pew and someone like the Chairman of the Deacons would ask the pew packers to have their people to stand up so he could count how many people came that they invited.

Sometimes the person invited so many people they were sitting in someone else’s pew. So you never knew who invited the most people until they stood up. The person that brought the most people would win a prize.

I remember it well because during the revival of 1971, I had the most people stand up for me and I won a Barlow folding pocketknife.

I was nine years old. That hymn “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus,” has been dear to my heart ever since.

Now some churches have gone from giving away knives to giving away guns to motivate people to come hear about Jesus because as Baptists we don’t seem to care how we get people to come; we are just happy when the church is full.

A lot of people think that’s better than the alternative, which is having no motivation and having an empty church.

Make no mistake, a lot of churches are empty. Most have been losing people for years.

In the last ten years membership in Southern Baptist churches has declined by over one million members.

Baptisms have dropped for five years in a row and last year Southern Baptists baptized the fewest number of believers since 1946. (Baptist News Global, “Southern Baptists have lost a million members in 10 years, Bob Allen, June9, 2017).

Perhaps even greater than baptisms are the declining number of people attending Sunday school. Even the word “Sunday school” sounds outdated. New churches opt for some other kind of small groups to disciple people.

However, the fact is that the church faces greater challenges than ever as more and more opportunities are available for families on Sunday and we have not come up with a viable alternative to disciple families.

Of course, numbers do not tell the full story of a church.

You can have large numbers and have a church that does little ministry.

You can have a full church and not be filled with the Holy Spirit.

You can have a full church and be filled with controversy.

Jesus drew large crowds but they thinned out when his message of discipleship began to demand sacrifices.

The story of Gideon reminds us that you can have a lot of people showing up without having a lot of commitment from people to follow God’s plan.

Think about the extra hitch Gideon must have had in his step when he sent out messengers to tell men in the land to come join his army and help him fight the Midianites and his army swelled to 32,000 men.

In those days of hand-to-hand combat, you needed huge numbers to defeat an enemy.

But God told Gideon he had too many men. That's like telling a preacher he or she just took up too much offering. Some of it needs to be given back.

Too much? How can you take up too much?

How can you have too many men?

The Lord said to Gideon, "The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.' Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home'" (Judges 7:2-3 NRSV).

So Gideon did and he lost 22,000 men.

Imagine if Gideon had been a pastor and he said to the church, "Now if anyone here is afraid to move forward and follow God's plan for our church you are free to leave," and the pastor lost over half the congregation. The deacons in many churches would call a meeting that afternoon to discuss the pastor's future.

However, God wasn't finished trimming Gideon's numbers.

God came to him again to tell him he still had too many men. Gideon must have shaken his head in disbelief.

He was instructed to take them down to a stream and there, God would test the men for Gideon.

"All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths you shall put to the other side." 6 The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water. 7 Then the Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes" (vs. 7-8 NRSV).

Gideon must have had some Baptist in him because he was keeping count. He realized that under normal circumstances 300 men cannot defeat an army like the Midianites.

That was the point.

God is not as concerned about numbers as He is concerned about us faithfully following him into the future.

Of course, if Gideon had been leading a Baptist church, he would have been looking for another job. Baptists keep count, too.

We all understand the economics of church. Churches have budgets and without people we cannot meet budgets and if we do not meet budget we cannot do ministry and if we cannot do ministry we cannot function as we desire.

So we become fixated on numbers. Like the Sunday school director of my childhood, those most connected to the church look at the numbers every week to make sure we are solvent.

Are we afloat? Can we pay the bills? Can we give to missions? Can we pay the staff? Will we make budget? Are we holding down expenses?

This number checking must be done. There must be good management to be successful as a church. In our church, this is the role of our Administrative Board.

However, if these numbers become the sole barometer for the healthiness of the church, we have lost our way.

Also, if numbers become the spiritual driver in the church, we have lost our way. Numbers ought to run in the background like software on a computer. They shouldn't be driving what we do.

If we ever have a campaign for anything and we are trying to reach a number-driven goal, we need to remember what the spiritual purpose of that goal is all about.

Gideon was excited about his numbers. He had 32,000 men. He was confident and comfortable with his numbers. That is what he was placing his faith in, not God. God wasn't happy about that.

"If you win this battle with all those men, who are you going to credit?" That's what God wanted to know.

God needed Gideon to live on some faith.

Churches become comfortable because they can count enough noses and see enough nickels to meet the budget, and if they can't, then they just adjust the budget to downsize their goals so they can continue to feel comfortable.

These churches never reach, stretch, dream, or do anything that resembles following God into the future on faith.

They become comfortable if they see they are going to survive for another year, so they do not risk anything.

They have no passion, and they are not motivated for listening to God to see what God wants for the future of the church. All they want to do is survive the next battle, which might be as boring and uninspiring as repairing the roof or blacktopping the parking lot, things that must be done, but not things that are going to win people to Christ.

These churches never reach their potential and they never soar with faith.

God often has to start over with new churches to accomplish a lot of faith-oriented plans. Many of the old ones are in a slow descent and if not corrected will eventually die.

Now in a very ironic twist, God whittled down the numbers in Gideon's army to teach Gideon something important about faith.

God knew that just the fact that Gideon had a huge army didn't mean all of them were willing to follow Gideon into battle and obey his commands.

Just because you see churches that are huge and have lots of people attending, this doesn't mean all those people are faithfully serving God, either.

A lot of them have shown up for a lot of shallow reasons, just like those men did that answered Gideon's call to come join his army.

What matters isn't whether a church is large or small, but whether we are willing to answer God's call and serve God with faith utilizing the resources God has given us.

If that is who we are, then the future of FBC Jefferson is bright. If we are willing to follow God into the future by faith, this church can mount up with wings as eagles.

The three hundred men with Gideon were willing to walk by faith. They were willing to follow Gideon's leadership. It took faith to do what Gideon asked them to do.

Each man was given a trumpet, a torch, and a pot. They didn't carry any weapons. They split up into three separate units.

As the Midianites slept, Gideon's men surrounded the camp.

At midnight, Gideon gave the signal. All three hundred men blew their trumpets and the sound came from all around the enemy camp.

They broke their clay pots, exposing their flaming torches, and the enemy knew they were surrounded.

With all the trumpets blowing and all the torches blazing the Midianites believed that the army was huge. They believed if they didn't escape at once they would all be killed.

There was mass chaos, like people trying to leave a theatre when someone shouts, "Shooter!"

As they ran through the darkness, they stumbled over each other and they fell on each other's swords.

Many of them were trampled to death and some were wounded and killed by their own people. The rest retreated to the Jordan River and headed back toward Midian.

Church, I need to start preaching now.

I said earlier that God is not as concerned about numbers as He is concerned about us faithfully following him into the future.

However, as Baptists we believe in 1 Timothy 2:4 that God "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4 NIV).

Because of that, we believe that each person that comes to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ counts.

God wants humble, faithful, risk-taking, sold out, walking by faith, visionary Christians to follow Him, to take His message of love and redemption where He asks us to take it and share it with those He asks us to share it with.

It's tempting to see ourselves as small and insignificant compared to larger churches around us, but a lot of churches around us think we are a large church.

We need to remember that God can do a lot with a little.

When he made Adam and Eve, he started with just a lump of clay, and look where we are now.

God started over with an ark full of animals and one family and look where we are now.

Jesus took a few loaves of bread and a few fish and look what he did.

Jesus called only 12 disciples and look at what happened with the message about his resurrection.

God is not consumed by or fixated on numbers like we are. What God is concerned about is faithfulness.

But if we use our numbers as a crutch for comfortableness so that we do not have to be bold and faithful with our future story, I do not think God is going to be pleased with us.

Remember, the Midianites were sleeping well in their tents in great numbers the night Gideon gave the signal for 300 men to break pots and blow trumpets and allow the torches to burn. If we ever think that we can relax and think all is well just because we have good numbers, just look at what happened to the Midianites as they stumbled all over themselves.

If I stretched a scale across the stage with comfort being at one end and faith being at the other end, which end of that scale do you typically find yourself at as a member?

Do you like being comfortable? Do you like it when the church is being challenged to live by faith? That usually means we are striving for higher goals, but we don't know if we will reach them because we are not sure if the resources will come. We need God's help.

Now what about the future? When we write our future story do you think God is going to ask us to write a story where we stay comfortable? Do you think God wants us to write a story that's easy for us to accomplish? Or do you think God wants us to write a story that requires faith and one that we know for it to be accomplished, God must be involved for it to happen?

Which side will you stand on as we move into the future: comfort or faith?

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