

Counting the People

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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From time to time in the stories of the Word we read about people and things being “numbered,” or counted. Perhaps the best known is the census ordered by Caesar Augustus at the time of the Lord’s birth, when “all went to be registered, everyone to his own city,” so that, in Providence, He would be born in Bethlehem. Another is in Luke, where we read, “Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it?” (Luke 14:28).

When it comes to people, sometimes the numbering is described as good and necessary, but at other times it is described as a sin worthy of deadly consequences.

For example, the fourth book of the Old Testament, the book of Numbers, begins with four full chapters detailing the Lord’s command to count the people, and the results of that count – with no ill effects. Chapter 26 of the same book gives another head count, again at the Lord’s command with no ill effects. But in 2 Samuel 24 King David orders a head count done by his commander, Joab (over Joab’s objections), and as a result is given the choice of one of three dreadful punishments for doing so. Why? Well, in David’s case the census was his own idea, and not directly ordered by the Lord. But even so, what’s the big deal about counting heads?

Today we will try to answer that question by discovering the real meaning and purpose of numbering in the Word, and see why it is important in our present day lives, and how we can be sure we are engaged in the right kind of numbering rather than the wrong kind with its disastrous results.

But first let’s go back to a fundamental rule in the Old Testament, which was that every time a census was taken everyone who was counted or numbered was obliged to make an offering of half a shekel to the Lord *lest there be a plague because of the numbering* (Exodus 30:12). But why would there be a plague anyway? And why the offering – sometimes called a ransom?

One way to answer the questions is with another question: – Why (in ordinary life) do we count people or things? It could of course be idle curiosity, but usually it’s because we’re concerned about the *strength* or *quality* of what we’re counting. We say there’s strength in numbers, especially going into a battle or other contest, so a count helps us determine strength. Counting the cost before doing a project also makes perfect sense. But counting *people* usually carries the connotation of evaluating them individually and collectively. And in the Word people represent goods and truths, and men in particular the truths of faith. So here’s the catch: we must not try to evaluate the truths we have from our own judgment, but only on instruction from the Lord. And when we do this, it is important that we acknowledge the Lord and give HIM the credit for all the truths we find. That credit is represented by the half shekel ransom, or offering to Him.

In fact numbers – even numbers of people – literally are unimportant to the Lord when it comes to getting things done. Remember the story of Gideon in the book of Judges: the Lord actually pared down his army from 32,000 to only 300 men to fight against the Midianites, “lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me’” (Judges 7:2). Remember, too, the story of Jonathan, Saul’s son and David’s friend, who with his armor-bearer crawled up a rocky mountain pass and single-handedly attacked a whole garrison of the Philistines, “For,” as he said, “nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few” (I Sam. 14:6). Many other examples

could be given. So in Psalm 33 we read, “No king is saved by the multitude of an army; a mighty man is not delivered by great strength.” It is the Lord who saves, and the Lord alone, according to the laws of His own love and wisdom. This is made especially clear to us in this church where we read about the small numbers of people required to perform the use of connecting heaven and earth, by which all people everywhere in the world are given their inflowing life. We read,

“No conjunction with heaven is possible unless somewhere on the earth there is a church that has the Word, and by means of the Word the Lord is known; for the Lord is the God of heaven and earth, and without Him there is no salvation.... It is sufficient that there be a church where the Word is; and *although it consist of comparatively few, the Lord nevertheless is present by means of it throughout the whole world*, since by means of it there is a conjunction of heaven with the human race” (TCR 267).

Still numbers *in the Word* do represent states or qualities. Gideon’s 300 men, for instance, represent a full complement of what is good and true and useful, and therefore what is holy, since Gideon’s men represent the truths of faith from the Lord fighting for our spiritual lives. The number, 144,000, which the book of Revelation (chapter 7) declares to be the sum total of all who are to be saved at the time of judgment, also represents a full complement of the truths of faith, since it is said there would be 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel, and each of the 12 tribes represents some particular aspect of “the truths of doctrine from the good of love from the Lord” (AR 348).

Still, what we have in the 144,000 is *by no means* a limit to the number of *people* who can be saved – as is quite clear from the very next verse in Revelation where it says “a great multitude, *which no one could number*, of all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues” were also saved (Rev. 7:9). The specified number is just a reminder that it is the truths of faith and charity that provide for our salvation, and that we are ALL saved when we live according to these truths.

Now then, let’s go back to the book of Numbers. As noted, the first four chapters are ALL about counting the people, and this with the Lord’s blessing – at His command. So, one by one the tribes are listed and the number of men age 20 and up (i.e., those able to go to war) is given, 46,500 from Reuben, 59,300 from Simeon, and so on, for a grand total of 603,550. Then they are all listed again in the order of their camp, so many on the east side of the tabernacle, so many on the west side, and so on. At first the Levites are *not* counted, and then they *are* counted, for a separate total of 8,580, but in that case *only those between 30 and 50 years* old were counted.

We are not told directly what the numbers in these cases represent, though with careful analysis and comparison of passages we could come up with a reasonably accurate understanding. The point here, now, is to see what the counting, or numbering itself means, and on this the message is clear. For example, we read,

“‘As they have been numbered’ [a phrase from Exodus] means as they have been *arranged and set in order*. This is clear from the meaning of ‘numbering’ – when it refers to all things of the Church, which are truths and goods of faith and love – as an arrangement and setting of them in order, so that ‘those who have been numbered’ means the things which have been arranged and set in order.

“Numbering has this meaning because numbering implies reviewing, and what the Lord reviews is also arranged and set in order by Him. Furthermore *the word used here to express the idea of numbering means in the original language reviewing, counting up, taking note of, and also visiting, giving orders, and taking control of, thus arranging and setting in order.* That word has these meanings because in the spiritual sense each of these activities implies the next, and the spiritual sense consists in that inner meaning which the words of languages, especially eastern ones, frequently possess....

“Once it is known what ‘numbering’ and ‘the children of Israel’ mean it may be seen why it was that David was not allowed to number the people, and why after he had numbered them the prophet Gad was sent to him to declare a punishment, 2 Sam. 24:1-15.... By ‘the children of Israel’ the true and good (states) of the Church are meant, and by ‘numbering’ arranging and setting in order is meant. ***The arranging and setting in order of the truths and goods of faith and love that are present with each person in the Church and in heaven belongs to the Lord alone.*** Consequently when such numbering is done by man, as was done by David through Joab, *an arranging and setting in order of those things by man, and not by the Lord,* is meant; and ***this is not to arrange or set in order but to destroy***”(AC 10217; see also AR 364).

OK. So what is the difference between a numbering (arranging and setting in order) by the Lord, and a numbering (arranging and setting in order) by man?

Along with the idea of reviewing, taking note, taking control, arranging, setting in order, and so on, the concept of counting, or numbering, includes that of knowing the real quality of a thing. But when it comes to people, we read, *“no man and no angel knows the quality of good and truth with another in every series and connection, but only something of it that is apparent in externals; and yet every quality is of infinite extension, for it joins and associates itself with innumerable things that lie concealed within, and that abide without, and that spread out in every direction. All this no one sees but the Lord alone; therefore it is the Lord alone by whom all are arranged and set in order according to their quality, for He sees the quality of everyone, thus what his nature is and what will happen to him to eternity, since the Lord’s sight which is called omniscience, foresight, and providence, is eternal. This is why no one except the Lord alone knows the quality of good and truth with anyone”* (AE 453).

The clear message here is the *familiar* message that we simply cannot judge the spiritual states of any person. We may of course say “If he is as he appears to be, then he will go to heaven or hell” (CL 523), but if we go further we will almost certainly mess up, causing grief for ourselves, for the other person, and – in this case – for the church. After all the church – the real, spiritual church – is not limited to the membership rolls of any particular organization; it consists of all who love the Lord and live according to His Word.

Now all this puts us in a rather delicate position when it comes to counting people. Of course every good shepherd knows his sheep, and he counts them frequently to be sure none is lost. So, too, every Sunday here we count attendance and record it. And every year we report our statistics to the church’s central office. And there are good reasons for this. But if we think the church is better because the numbers are up, or worse because they are down; or if we think that the good

people are coming to church and the bad people are not, then we have a problem. It is not the number itself, but the quality of those who are counted that matters. This is why the whole link between heaven and earth can be sustained by “comparatively few.”

As someone once wisely commented, we who come to church come because we need it. We who join join because we need it. We may think others need it, too, but what do we know? Our job, like the fruit tree bearing good fruit, is not to worry about the state and quality of others, but to be the best church members we can. So when we count heads we should remember that the Lord, and the Lord alone knows why some are here and others are not. But if we want to put a value judgment on the numbers we see, rather than evaluating THOSE people we can think about what the numbers say about US.

We can review our own states, take note and control of our own spiritual lives, arrange and set in order the goods and truths of our own faith, and let the Lord do what He will with us. Like the men of Gideon who lapped the water in their eagerness to get going in the fight against Midian, or Jonathan who attacked the Philistines, we can accomplish tremendous things against unbelievable odds if we will only trust the Lord and follow His Word.

Most of all, though, the lesson about numbering in the Word is a lesson about authority. It is about who we think we are in relation to the Lord. Throughout most of our lives, hour by hour, day by day, we enjoy the freedom of thinking and doing whatever we want *as if of ourselves*. We feel as if we are in control. We make decisions as if we know best what is true and good. We weigh the pro's and con's and draw conclusions as if what we can see and feel is sufficient for the judgments we make. But it isn't so. The internal qualities that constitute every human life extend to incomprehensible lengths and depths that only the Lord can see.

This is why when we sit down deliberately to “count” what is good and true and useful in our lives – especially the truths – we must take care not to discount the power of even one vital teaching from the Word, which, we read, can overcome a whole onslaught from the hells if we stay focused and trust the Lord as to how He can use it.

not take credit to ourselves, but accept that it is all from the Lord. We must not presume anything but give the half-shekel of acknowledgment to HIM, lest there be a plague in our spiritual lives because we think that somehow we know better what we need than He does. In short, especially when it comes to the church, we must be careful not to jump to conclusions about our strength, our weakness, our use, our work, or anything else, but take all our questions and concerns to HIM as we read and reflect on His Word.

Amen.

Lessons: Judges 7:1-8, 16-22;
Children's Talk on Gideon's Strength being from the Lord

Luke 12:13-21 ; Arcana Caelestia #10218: selections