

Numbers and Process

BY DAVID POSEY

In an interview recently, Dave Roberts, manager of the LA Dodgers, said of his players: “they are not chasing numbers; it’s about the process.” He didn’t explain that any further but I think I know what he means. And, there is a great lesson here for churches.

One of the most common questions asked of preachers — mainly by other preachers — is “how many attend where you preach?” When I’m asked that question, I try to make a joke or in some way make light of the importance of attendance statistics.

I do that because the average attendance among churches of Christ in the US is probably a number under 50 and I don’t want to sound as if I am bragging about our size. Also, some of our brethren will judge larger churches negatively, even without knowing anything about the church. In fact, a visitor once insisted that we must be “liberal” or we wouldn’t have as many attending as we do. Either way, some people put an unhealthy emphasis on numbers.

That Americans are obsessed with numbers is not news to anyone. Grades, scores and dollars are counted and, too often, used to measure the quality of a person. So it’s not surprising that attendance figures for a church are a big deal in the minds of some of our brethren.

So, Dave Roberts’ statement of philosophy, “we don’t chase numbers, it’s about the process” rings true to me and I believe there’s an important application to those of us who are leaders in the church. It’s not about numbers; it’s about the process.

But what is that process? Applied to baseball, Roberts means that if you focus on and practice doing things in the right way, the numbers will take care of themselves. As a hitter, you develop a repeatable, proven approach and stay with it, and the hits will come. It’s practicing the fundamentals, it’s utilizing talent appropriately — do the right thing, and forget about numbers.

The process in the church is to keep pointing people to Christ, to the scriptures. There is never a concern for numbers, as an end in themselves. When you teach the truth about giving, for example, sincere people will give cheerfully, as they have prospered (I Cor. 16:1-2; II Cor. 9:7). When we teach the truth about attendance — including v. 24 when talking about Hebrews 10:25, for example — the numbers will take care of themselves. Those who understand the true value and significance of the assemblies will be here; those who don’t, won’t.

If we preach the unvarnished truth, our numbers may suffer. But that’s not our concern. Consider Jude, who in his postcard to the church, felt that there were too *many* in the church. Listen,

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jude 3-4

He intended to *reduce* the number in the church by urging the church to mark those “ungodly people” who had “crept in unnoticed.” Jude clearly wasn’t concerned about getting a crowd together; his concern was for “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

That’s the process: keep contending for the faith, keep preaching the truth, keep asking and encouraging questions about how we are doing; be honest with ourselves, examine ourselves. What we never want to do is to “chase numbers.” Just stick to the process.