



"The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them."

—Albert Einstein

11-Apr-08

The Impossible Metric

"The days of our lives are seventy years," writes [Moses](#) in [Psalm 90:10](#). [King David](#) concurs: "Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow" ([Psalm 144:4](#)). Unlike [God](#), "who inhabits eternity" ([Isaiah 57:15](#)), we mortals have a limited existence. Because of our finite time, we tend to view things through the lens of immediacy. We continually take stock of where we are and how much progress we have made toward this or that goal. We take a short-term view of time—relative to God, at least—and in our zeal for efficiency, we measure where we are against where we have been to get an idea of how things are going.

This natural aspect of humanity is readily seen in business, where all manner of data is collected and analyzed to evaluate where a company is and where it seems to be headed. Companies publish press releases to highlight quarter-to-quarter and year-to-year growth. If a given metric can be massaged into a chart to show an upward trend, it will be the talk of the company. But unless their disclosure is required by law, the downward trends are typically boxed up and hidden in a dark closet. Companies highlight the metrics that make them look superior to their competitors, and downplay the impressive numbers their rivals trot out for display. Such is business in the Western world.

But problems—serious problems—arise when such practices are applied to the church because numbers cannot tell the whole story. In the relationship between God and man, the things that truly matter cannot be measured—and those that can do not really matter. Members, co-workers, visitors, and subscribers can all be tallied, yet who save God can track the increase of [faith](#) or the building of character of members of a church? No minister can present a yearly report to a church board on the ratios of sheep to goats or wheat to tares. Managers can keep close tabs on income and expenses, but no quarterly reports can be given on the ripening of the [fruit of the Spirit](#). No chart can mark the increase or decrease of the [poor in spirit](#), the [meek](#), or the [pure in heart](#). Humans cannot measure such things, yet paradoxically, those are precisely the matters about which a church should be most concerned.

We need to look no farther than the [Worldwide Church of God](#) (WCG) to see that impressive membership numbers and abundant income are profoundly poor indicators of spiritual health. Before

the scattering of the church, WCG had upwards of 140,000 members, approximately 80,000-90,000 of whom were baptized. It had eight million subscribers to the *Plain Truth* magazine, and radio and television programs that blanketed the globe, not to mention its own television studio and publishing department to handle all of its media. It had full-time ministers in nearly every corner of [the world](#), and an increasingly active youth program. It had a four-year college spread across three stunning campuses, complete with multiple gardens, fountains, streams, paths, and ponds. On every count, the metrics and markers pointed to growth and vibrancy. The people took these indicators as proof that God was with—and pleased with—them. Yet their *spiritual* state went unmeasured—and immeasurable, except through anecdotes.

Amazingly, some within the church of God are trying to resurrect all of this, apparently giving little thought to what went wrong the last time and what should be done differently this time to avoid the same outcome. Positive metrics give the impression—wrong at times—that all is well in the church. Yet, though it cannot be charted, there is still division within the church today. Though there is no hard data to point this out, human solutions are still being applied to spiritual problems. The numbers may not indicate it, but there is still leader- and organization-idolatry, where these things stand in *the place of God* rather than pointing people *to God*.

It is helpful to recall what God is doing. If we examine the many examples and statements in the Bible, we see that God's work is *not* defined as preaching [the gospel](#) of the Kingdom to the world. That is only a facet of what He is doing. God is *creating* men in His image ([Genesis 1:26](#)). Psalm 74 says He is *working salvation*. [John 6:29](#), the closest thing to a definition scripture in this regard, says clearly that the work of God is that we *believe* in Him whom God sent.

In short, the work of God is centered on *changing people*—bringing them into alignment with Him so that they are ready to live with Him for eternity. Currently, His work is primarily centered on *the church*, not the world. The *announcement* of a major step in this process—the establishment of His Kingdom on earth—is not His overriding concern. It will happen, to be sure, in the time and manner that He has ordained, for "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" ([Matthew 24:14](#)). But it does not appear to be His principal project right now. Are we in alignment with Him in this?

In the history of God's church, with the exception of the first century, the gospel of the Kingdom was never preached with more power than during the ministry of Herbert Armstrong, yet at the end, the church imploded. This suggests that a focus on preaching to the world does not give church members the staying power that they need to grow and persevere in the face of doctrinal confusion. The vast majority of the WCG's infrastructure and support used to preach the gospel under Herbert Armstrong—very impressive on paper—crumbled.

When things fell apart, it became evident that only a small percentage of those supporting that work were truly converted. If we follow the same pattern today—focusing on financial and membership growth rather than "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God [and growing] to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of [Christ](#)" ([Ephesians 4:13](#))—will the result be any different? Can a church make a faithful and true witness of God to the world if its members do not resemble Him?

Paul gives the proper approach in [I Corinthians 3:7](#): "So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase." The ones doing the planting and watering should not be the focus. God is the One leading *His* work and the One determining its results. While it may

be natural—and harmless enough by itself—to want to measure the number planted or watered, we must remember that such metrics *cannot* tell the whole story. The vital measurement is the *spiritual* increase that He gives—in faith, in character, in humility, in love, in unity with Him and with the brethren—the metric only He can track.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Purpose of the Church](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

John Ritenbaugh, reflecting on the term "church" observes that it can be applied only to Christianity, and when applied to the term "building," it refers to a spiritual habitation, as is seen in the imagery of Christ the Cornerstone and our part as "living stones." Just as prevalent in biblical imagery is the body analogy with interdependent organs. The function of the church (the Israel of God - Abraham's spiritual offspring) is analogous to a teacher's college, preparing the called-out firstfruits, providing them with the needed education and character development to assume positions of leadership, under Christ in the Kingdom of God, bringing about the salvation of humanity and reconciling the world to God.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Israel of God](#)

by Charles Whitaker

In Galatians 6, verse 16, the apostle Paul refers to the church as "the Israel of God." Why? Why not "the Judah of God," or "the Ephraim of God" or "the Galilee of God?" Why did God not inspire Paul to call the church by Israel's original name, Jacob—"the Jacob of God?" Charles Whitaker explains.

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our [Email Subscriptions page](#).
