

EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

“...FOR THE EQUIPPING OF THE SAINTS FOR THE WORK OF SERVICE...” ~ EPHESIANS 4:12

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THE SYMBOLISM OF NUMBERS IN THE BIBLE

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As you read through the Old and New Testaments, you occasionally may be struck by the numerical detail the Holy Spirit saw fit to include. Times, amounts, ages, censuses, weights, lists and the like can all be found in abundance throughout the Biblical text. Certainly, if they are included, these numbers are important—whether they are there to provide detail and accuracy to the account or, as is often the case with prophetic or symbolic passages, to supply an additional layer of meaning to the text. It is appropriate to ask, “What do all these numbers mean?” Answering this question is more difficult than one might count on.

In his book, *Symbolism in the Forth Gospel*, Craig Koester makes the following observation:

The interpreter’s frame of reference plays a crucial role in the interpretation of numbers. Augustine is a good example, since he explains the numbers in the Gospel with **considerable consistency** (emphasis added, RM), using the dichotomy between imperfection under the Mosaic Law and perfection in faith, love, or the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6-9). (312)

Augustine builds a compelling case for his understanding of the numbers used in John’s gospel because his interpretation “fits” in (practically) all instances. However, his interpretation is based on a preconceived schema of what John is trying to communicate. Thus, this form of symbolic interpretation is often contingent upon

determining the correct thematic viewpoint, and is therefore open to error if the wrong viewpoint is chosen. In other words, the answer to the question “What do these numbers mean?” might (and probably will) be different depending on the interpreter’s perspective. While striving to understand numbers in this way has value, ultimately it relies too much on the reader’s supposition. Unless the “frame of reference” is clearly provided by the text, it is tempting to make the numbers fit our framework, rather than letting the passage speak for itself. A good example of this type of misuse is found in Harold Camping and his failed prediction that “hidden numbers” in the Bible pointed to May 21, 2011 as judgment day.

The better question for us to ask might be, “what did these numbers mean to the Jews and/or first century Christians?” We can be much more certain of this meaning, and it gives us a very good indication of the intent of the inspired writers to their original audience. It is this second question the following list strives to answer. Please remember that this is merely a general guide, and that all numbers and their significance (or lack thereof) should be considered in context.

Common Good Numbers

One—conveys the idea of unity or independent existence.

Two—stands for strengthening and help.

Three—a symbol of the divine (Ex: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, Christ was in the grave three days, the cherubim cry out, “Holy, Holy, Holy” etc.).

Four—Symbolic of the world or creation (Ex: The four winds, the four corners of the earth, North/South/East/West, etc.).

Seven—the most sacred number to the Hebrews symbolizes for perfection—used 54 times in the Book of Revelation alone (70=very sacred) (Ex: Seven miracles and “I AM” statements in the Gospel of John, seven churches of Asia, seven angels/bowls of wrath/horns, etc.).

Ten—stands for completeness (1000=ultimate completeness). Note: Multiples of 10 and larger numbers (144,000, 70 x 7, etc) often indicate fullness to a superlative or ultimate degree.

Twelve—symbol of organized religion in the world, religious number (Ex: The twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles, etc.).

Forty—often used to symbolize that a time or work is being brought to perfection (Ex: The forty day fasts of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, Moses’ life divided into forty year increments, rain of the flood upon the earth forty days and nights, reigns of the United Kingdom, wandering in the wilderness, etc.).

Common Evil Numbers

Three and a Half—as half of seven, three and a half represents the incomplete or that which is imperfect. It is often used to describe trial, hardship, and testing.

Six—a sinister, evil number of opposition, oppression, and persecution by Satan. It falls just short of seven (perfection) and thus symbolizes failure and doom when success and victory seems to be in grasp.

Understanding these numbers doesn't change our understanding of the Bible, but they can give us greater insight into the images used by the inspired writers. Apply with caution!

NOTES: _____

AM LESSON:
Do We Need
Deaconesses?

PM LESSON:
The Suffering Church
(Revelation 4-16)

“GO THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES...”
(MATTHEW 28:19-20)