



# Feeding the Wolves

BY BOB OSBURN

**T**he intensifying pace of world evangelism is feeding the wolves. Sheep are dying at an ever-increasing pace.

The problem? Decisions are taking precedence over discipleship. In the process, there is an increasing gap between the numbers who are deciding for Christ and the numbers who are being trained as disciples. The wolves are eating the difference.

Is it time to slow the pace of evangelism and to increase the pace of training and discipleship?

“But, you’re knowingly leaving the masses in darkness and the prospect of eternal damnation.”

Is it any worse to offer Christ to people, who, after having decided for Him, lose their faith for lack of training in Christian living, Bible study, sound theology, and apologetics? Could this be the point of Jesus’ story in Luke 11:23-26, where an evil spirit, having been cast out of a person, rounds up seven more spirits to re-inhabit the poor man? “And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.” Matthew’s account adds this application:

“That is how it will be with this wicked generation” (Mt. 12:45b).

The Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:1-9) should also give us pause. Is it any joy that so many sprang up “quickly” and then “withered” (v.5) or were eventually “choked?” The former “quickly falls away” because of “trouble and persecution” (v. 21). The latter is choked by the worries and cares of this life (v. 22). In both cases, there is no fruit and the metaphorical wolves have been fattened.

A little reflection on the metaphor should alarm us. Does a wolf need fully-grown animals, the kind that can and have been reproducing, bearing children, for its food? Hardly. It prefers the weaker and younger offspring. Newborns are just fine, if you can get to them. Just as young sheep are easy prey for wolves, so are young, undisciplined believers. Masses and masses of young, undisciplined believers, left without training and solid food for growth, leave the wolves salivating overtime. And, reproducing overtime, as well.

Dare we ask ourselves if the proliferation of cults and perverse systems with some tenuous link to the



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Bible are not due to the masses of tender converts upon which to feed and to prey? Is it surprising that the “burned-over” district of upstate New York (a region where every square inch of land was somehow touched by the Second Great Awakening) gave rise to all sorts of false cults (including Mormonism) in the following several decades?

Evangelism no doubt maintains the size of the sheep herd. And, so the church is growing, at least nominally. But, it may also be unwittingly fattening, strengthening and vitalizing the enemies of truth, at the same time.

If it is true that a high evangelism-to-discipleship ratio is actually strengthening the position of fiendish unbelief, how might this situation have occurred? It is because Western-funded and managed Christian movements have measured success in terms of numbers of converts instead of measuring evidences of transformation in people and society. Another way of framing this is to say that modern believers, under the spell of reductionist, modern Western thinking, have so emphasized the evangelistic mandate of Matt. 28:19-20 as to virtually ignore the equally compelling cultural mandate of Genesis 1 and 2. Lest this be seen as re-visiting the old “quantity vs. quality” dilemma, we agree that the book of Acts is replete with numbers of converts (such as Acts 2), but the real question is: “How did the early believers measure the success of their mission?”

Success was measured by evidences of the Kingdom. Personal and social transformation were the *sine qua non* of the early Christian movement. The Apostolic Church beheld the joy of community, of God's reality in their midst. Convert-making programs don't seem to have headed their agenda.

But, let us go back further to Jesus Himself. How did He measure the success of His mission? When the Apostles came back to Jesus after their first journey, He said, “I've seen Satan fall!” We don't see Him quizzing them about the numbers of converts they made. In His earlier instruction before He sent them out, He didn't lay emphasis on methods. He rather said “Proclaim the Kingdom!”

On top of that, He threw up big barriers to discipleship. The narrow road was hardly inviting. The promise of martyrdom attracted the hearty few. If Jesus' view of success was tied into numbers of converts, He was a failure.

A final clue comes in Jesus' High Priestly prayer of John 17. He seems to measure His success by indicating that He had completed the work assigned to Him by His Father, by which He brought glory to the Father. His prayer (at the end of the chapter) is not that more will be added to the small group of followers, but, rather, that they will display an incredible, unheard-of unity.

Let us move to Paul, the best-known of the Apostles, besides Peter. Are there commands to witness, to make converts? Precious few, if any, dot his letters; rather, his letters are written with the clear intent of training and discipleship.

While his epistles offer very little by way of exhortation to evangelism, what we do see are intense commands to effect transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit. And lurking in the background are warnings about our menacing Enemy. He lurks about to devour, to cast fireballs, to deceive, and so forth. His “frontmen” (literally) are those who “take captives by means of hollow and deceptive philosophy.” They

are “mutilators of the flesh, men who do evil” “hypocritical liars” who teach people to “abandon the faith and to follow deceiving spirits.” To summarize, Paul recognized, as did Jesus, that transformation (not numbers of converts) is our goal, a goal that is constantly threatened by, among other things, the presence of false teachers and their teachings.

What is the modest proposal of this paper? Simply, that we throttle-back on evangelism and throttle-forward on discipleship. This is not a call for cessation of evangelism, but rather a plea for us to examine the reality of the situation—many converts, little transformation.

Understanding this may help to understand why places like sub-Saharan Africa teem with converts, and yet, the societies, at least, are going “to hell in a handbasket.” If Christians are the “salt of the earth” whose transformative impact should greatly outweigh our numbers, why are so many developing countries awash with converts and with crushing debt at the same time? Many of these converts will not be able to live long lives by which to glorify God as they fulfill their callings—and why?

Untaught to apply the truth to all dimensions of reality, unskilled in contextualizing Biblical truth in a way so that it transforms their worldview and their way of living, these believers are food for the wolf of hunger as well as the wolf of false teaching. One kills the body, the other the soul, and, in either case, God's Kingdom is hindered.

Is it fair to suggest that our massive crusades and evangelistic campaigns are one vast feeding and breeding ground for the Enemy? Perhaps not, but are we honestly willing to face the problem of the masses of untaught, undisciplined believers? f