

“Does the Bible Recommend Small Congregations?”

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By Reg Killingley

BIG SANDY—After Jesus’ resurrection and before His ascension, apparently not knowing what else to do, seven of His disciples went back to their previous life and old stomping ground as fishermen in Galilee. The journey of 75 miles from Jerusalem probably took them several days. But Jesus’ death and resurrection had changed everything. There would be no going back to the status quo ante.

We read, in John 21:4, that the disciples didn’t initially even recognize Jesus. When He asked them how the fishing had gone overnight, they had to admit they had caught nothing. Had they lost their old skills? Or was Jesus trying to teach them something?

He told them to try again, on the right side of the boat. Immediately, miraculously, the net became so full, they couldn’t even pull it in and had to drag it about 100 yards to land.

In an earlier fishing episode, recounted in Luke 5, when Peter and the others’ nets were also miraculously filled with fish, the nets began to tear and the boats began to sink. In that instance, Jesus told Peter that he and his friends would henceforth become fishers of men (Luke 5:10).

In John 21, however, the net, though full, did not break. In fact, John tells us that the net was full of large, adult fish, and he also provides the exact number: 153 (John 21:11).

After breakfast, Jesus reminded Peter three times of his—and the other disciples’—calling to love Him and to feed all those that Jesus would call.

In effect, Jesus was telling Peter that there was no going back to their previous jobs as ordinary fishermen. They must fulfill their calling to fish for people.

In this context, what could be the significance of the number 153?

Let's fast-forward to the present and meet Robin Dunbar. Dr. Dunbar is a biological anthropologist who studied humans and other primates and discovered that there is a "cognitive limit to the number of individuals with whom any one person can maintain stable relationships."

By studying the limits of human neocortical processing capacity, Dr. Dunbar concluded that it was possible for humans to have a solid relationship only with around 150 other people at any one time.

Quoting from Wikipedia: "Dunbar's number is a suggested cognitive limit to the number of people with whom one can maintain stable social relationships—relationships in which an individual knows who each person is and how each person relates to every other person . . . By using the average human brain size and extrapolating from the results of primates, he proposed that humans can comfortably maintain 150 stable relationships."

Dr. Dunbar's formula has been successfully applied in business and organizational management. One very successful company (repeatedly named one of *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For") decided that it would build a new factory every time an old factory exceeded 150 employees. Its success has continued.

Dr. Dunbar observed a phenomenon that long predated him. Could it be that the number 153 mentioned in John 21:11 was an indicator of the ideal maximum size for a Christian congregation? Too many more, and the net might have broken. But human beings seem to be capable of maintaining up to around 150 solid relationships.

After all, as the church grew from around 120 to 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost described in Acts 2, it would have been necessary to disciple and teach believers in smaller groups that could maintain their cohesion provided they did not become mega groups. Analogously, a typical 1st-century synagogue would not have had more than about 100 members in attendance, well within the Dunbar number limit.

Even by the end of the 1st century, none of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3 likely had more than 150 members. Several probably had many fewer. While there is no direct biblical or historical evidence that John intended this connection, could the number 153 in John 21 hint at the ideal maximum size for a Christian community?

What do you think?