

What Does it Mean to be Brethren? It Means to Count the Cost! Luke 14:25-33 & 1 Peter 2:21

What do you invest in? I am not talking about stocks and bonds and CD's. I am not your accountant. What do you invest in when it comes to your life?

- Do you have a home you take pride and comfort in? ... How much of your income goes into that home: paying a mortgage, purchasing new carpet or repairing old plumbing?
- Do you keep a relatively green, growing lawn and perhaps a flower bed or two? ... How many Saturday afternoons have you invested in mowing, weeding, planting and sweating over them?
- Do you enjoy golfing, tennis, skiing, baseball or bowling? ... How much of your energy have you given to perfecting your sport-skills, finding the right equipment, locating just the place to play and commuting back and forth to it?
- Do you love your family? ... How much of your time is spent on your kids? How many hours do you spend with them? How much gas have you spent on taking them to ball games, ballet lessons, piano recitals, play practice, and soccer or football practice? How much do you get to spend with your spouse? How much energy do you give them?
- Do you count your career's success as the definition of your personal success? ... How many evenings, weekends and holidays have you given over to advancing your career? How many times have you opted for a late night at the office instead of a night out on the town? How many birthdays, anniversaries or vacations have you missed in order to get more "work done"?

You see, we all choose to invest in something. Time and time again, I am asking you to invest in our Church. Just this morning, I asked our Sunday School class to consider what it really means to be a member here. I asked them to consider investing three hours a week into our church:

One hour for Giving – serving in a ministry

One hour for Growing – studying the Scriptures

One hour for Glorifying God – worshipping God

Even though there is 168 hours per week, asking for three hours is huge! What am I asking you to invest in?

I had to ask myself before I came here, can I accept being part of this denomination? When I hold it up and look at it, is it something I can invest my life into? Is it something I can ask others to invest in? What does it really mean to be the Church of the Brethren?

What does the Church of the Brethren mean for you? TAKE RESPONSES

You see, the name on the door does matter. Some people in this town will not come here, because they have no clue what Church of the Brethren means? Is it a cult? Is it Christian? What is the big deal with being called a Church of the Brethren? Being called a Church of the Brethren means that we are part of something bigger: a movement, a denomination. What happens in Springfield, IL or what happens in Pennsylvania impacts our Church, because we are part of this denomination. We can't get away from this, and nor should we. You see, we are a family – the name even means that we are a family – Brethren – it means that we have to care.

Our denomination has been in decline every year that I have been alive. Since the 1960's, statistics show a steady drop in membership with only one year having an increase. Some even believe that this year wasn't really a year of growth. They believe that this was due to "funny math" by statisticians, rather than actual growth. Our denomination, and thus our brother churches, is not growing. Even attendance by members at the most cherished worship service by Brethren continues to decline. Most Brethren churches only have an average of 20% participate in the Love Feast. It seems that members also don't want to participate in our conferences. If you go to the Annual Conference, our yearly national gathering, you realize that the denomination has some problems. Contentious words are common from the floor, while Annual Conference leaders wonder out loud, "is the denomination on life-support?" Are we like Terry Shiavo and are waiting for someone to take our our feeding tube? If you ask some who has attended our District conference, they don't want to go back. Why? It seems that brethren are too busy pushing their agendas, rather than following Jesus. By the way, what does it mean to be a member at a Church of the Brethren? Does it just mean that you serve on a committee or two?

Here is the hard question that each person who is part of this Church needs to answer: what does it mean to be part of the Church of the Brethren? Do long standing Brethren beliefs, practices, and traditions have a place in this town, in this time, in this country, in this world, in this culture? Has the Church of the Brethren lost her relevance?

If we plan to keep our name, then we need to ask ourselves some hard questions. Why do we continue to support our District and our denomination? Why do we send money and resources to help the other Brethren churches? We can not sit back and allow our churches, what we are part of, to continue to decline. We can not sit back and allow people who have an agenda to take over our churches. We can not sit back and allow others to make the decisions, UNLESS...
...unless, we don't care.

Why should you care that your church is called a "Church of the Brethren"? What does it really mean to be Brethren?

Over the next ten weeks, we are going to look at what it really means to be part of the Church of the Brethren. I really believe that this is a movement that is worthy to be part of. It is a type of Christian church that is worth my time, my effort, and my life.

There are some major principles that I want to study with you that are truly at the heart of what it means to be Brethren. If you are going to invest your life here in this church, you need to know what Brethren believe, what the Church of the Brethren's history is, and what the Bible says all about this. You need to know the major Scriptures that the Brethren have always lifted up from its beginning.

The Church of the Brethren began in a land where there had been thirty years of war over religion. Catholics, Lutherans and followers of John Calvin had killed and tortured one another over creeds. The army of one of the churches would sweep over an area and force all the inhabitants to become a part of their church. Then another army would come and claim the area for another church.

Many of the common people began to feel they wanted nothing to do with this barbarism. They wanted nothing to do with the Church. The established churches had grown rich, powerful, and corrupt. They no longer shared the Gospel message of the New Testament and of Jesus.

But a young man named Alexander Mack and a few others felt there must be a Church for the people. The people need Jesus, not the religion the corrupt Church was giving them. Alexander Mack and his crew desired a Church that was like the church in the New Testament, a pure group of believer who cared only about following Christ. They set out to form such a church, taking the New Testament as their rule of faith and practice.

The most important thing to any of them was their burning desire to take Jesus very seriously. To believe that Jesus was their Lord and Savior as Scripture presents him. To do what Jesus asked. To go where Jesus would send them. To live, in accordance with his teachings, the kind of life he shared.

They realized that following Jesus meant taking his words very seriously. This is why a very important Scripture for the early Brethren was Jesus' caution that those who would follow him ought to first "count the cost". Their faith led to loss of home and property for some, division from family for others, and even prison and physical suffering, being sold as galley slaves and chained to an oar of a ship for a few. Because of this, it was important that no one take lightly following Jesus Christ. READ Luke 14:25-33

Jesus got their attention! He called these people to hate their family, to take up their cross, and to give up everything for Him. Jesus put it plainly: to be His disciple you must be committed to Him above all else!

Jesus is saying that if you don't count the cost – consider everything in your life less than me, then you are not worthy to be my disciple. Jesus said it again in Matthew 10:37 (NLT) – *If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine.*

Even the love for our families must not come above our love of Jesus. We must be willing to give Jesus everything!

Jesus said that His followers must be willing “to give everything up.” Everything is a very inclusive word! Everything means everything! Everything means your job, your favorite hobby, your most prized possessions, your free time, your money, your bank account, your goals and dreams, and more. Now we may not literally “give up everything”, but Jesus is referring to an attitude of the heart in which these things don't have priority over obeying Jesus in our lives. Jesus is asking us to say “goodbye” to the things we think are important and say “hello” to what He thinks is important. We must be willing to forsake anything that interferes with following Him faithfully and completely.

I don't want you to misunderstand what Jesus is saying. Grace is free. Jesus is not saying that the grace He offers comes with a price tag. There is nothing you can pay to receive God's grace – it is free! Accepting grace, however, means you are giving your life to Christ.

Let's suppose that you just received 100 acres of prime farm land from an inheritance. It's a good size chunk of land that is worth a lot! It was given to you for free. In fact, not only do you get the land, but you were given a brand new 2005 model John Deere tractor and a brand new combine with all the bells and whistles. You also get a bank account for anything that you need to get for the farm – like seed, animals, workers, or anything else. It is all free in this inheritance.

Here is the thing, though: if you accept this free offer, you have just committed yourself to months of difficult farm work (and if you don't know anything about farming – tons of hands-on training). Farming is an arduous effort. It will take blood, sweat, and tears to turn this size of a farm into a profitable business. Grace is like this – it is free, but in order to produce fruit, it takes our blood, our sweat, our tears. It takes everything!

Some churches, preachers and TV programs present the gospel as though they were selling a used car. No money down! Attractive terms! Low, low monthly payments! They make it sound as easy as possible, as though no real commitment were required.

Jesus' call was far different. He was not looking for superficial commitment or a crowd of tagalongs. Instead, he required his followers to be totally committed if they were going to follow at all.

To accept Christ is not only something we say with our lips, nor only a feeling we have in our hearts. It involves our very lives — all of us. This is why the Brethren continually call their member to carefully consider the step we are taking. To count the cost.

Being Brethren means following the Scriptures. As we come to the Scriptures our question must be not “What will others think?”, nor “what might do I have to give up?”, but only “What is Jesus saying? What does God want of me?”

So, what does it mean that we are people that count the cost? What does it mean to “count the cost”?

Counting the cost means three things:

1. To Believe
2. To Belong
3. To Become

This is at the heart of being part of the Church of the Brethren. To count the cost means to:

1. Believe – to believe in Jesus

The Church of the Brethren has no creed, but Christ. No book the Bible. Let me say that again, “no creed but Christ. No book but the Bible.” We follow Jesus, not a set of words that the Church has made up.

Remember people were killing each other over creeds. They said that you must believe exactly this or that, or you are not really a Christian. They literally fought over symmantics.

When I say to you that you need to believe, I am not telling you that you need to believe a certain set of words, or creed. The people of this Church, want you to believe at your deepest core of your being in the person of Jesus Christ.

Someone once wrote, “To be what is called happy, a person should have: (1) something to live on, (2) something to live for, and (3) something to die for. The lack of one of these results in drama. The lack of two results in tragedy.” (19th century poet Cyprian Norwid)

Believing in Jesus means that He is your foundation. It means that you live for Him everyday, and that your are willing to die for Him.

Maybe you have doubts about things of the faith. Maybe you believe in Jesus, but you struggle with other issues. Maybe you doubt yourself, your own forgiveness, the Bible being the Word of God, God's presence in your life, demons actually existing, or that God actually cares.

When you set your eyes on Jesus, however, the fog clears. Jesus is our lighthouse and believing in Him will guide us to safe waters. Believing in Jesus means keeping our eyes on Him until we get through the turbulence.

Belief about the other things of faith and the way you live your life will line up when believe in Jesus. He will lead you through them. He promises it!

Jesus told His disciples in John 20:29, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" Jesus said that about you - if you believe in Him, you will be blessed!

So I ask you, do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe in the Jesus of the Bible, our only guide in the Church of the Brethren?

Counting the cost means to Believe in Jesus, and to:

2. Belong – belong to His Church

Counting the cost, means truly to be part of His Church. In the Bible, the Church is called the Bride of Christ. Imagine for a moment that you tell someone that you want to be friends with someone, but you don't want the person's spouse to ever come around! There is no way that you supposed "friend" would really be your friend, if they really love their spouse. Jesus really loves the Church – He died for it – He rose again for it – He loves His Bride and waits for the day when He will be in communion with her on the day of His return. The Church of the Brethren has always taken seriously the call of Jesus to belong to His Bride.

In the late summer of 1708, Alexander Mack and 7 men and women walked down into the waters of the Eder River near the little village of Schwarzenau, Germany. They did something illegal: they were baptized! It was against the law for adults to be baptized and the penalty was death. They were willing to risk it all to belong to Christ's Church. Alexander Mack, after coming out of the water, in turn baptized his wife, Anna, and the six others who had been meeting together for several years for prayer and study of the Scriptures. Our denomination was born at a great risk.

In fact, our very name was chose to call people to belong. You might think it is weird that we use the term "brethren", but it is one of the most used terms in the Bible. You

do not find Baptist in the Bible, nor Methodist, nor Episcopalian. Our name was chosen straight from the Scriptures to remind us to belong to one another. In the New Testament (NAS) several different words were used to describe followers of Jesus:

- “Disciple” – 269 X
- “Church” – 112 X
- “Christian” – 3 X
- “Brethren” – 190 X

For the Brethren counting the cost means being part of Jesus’ true Church. Counting the cost means to believe in Jesus, to belong to His Church, and to:

3. Become – to become like Jesus

1 Peter 2:21 - *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

A hog and a hen sharing the same barnyard heard about a church’s program to feed the hungry. The hog and the hen begin to discuss how they can help. The hen said, “I’ve got it! We’ll provide bacon and eggs for the church to feed the hungry.” The hog thought about this suggestion and said, “There’s only one thing wrong with your bacon and eggs idea. For you, it only requires a contribution, but from me, it will mean total commitment!”

That is the cost of following Jesus! Jesus wants your whole being – He wants you so that you will become like Him!

Listen, Christ loves you enough to accept you the way you are, But He loves you enough to not leave you that way! Christ wants to transform you into His image.

Romans 8:29 (The Message) - *God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him.*

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NLT) - *And all of us have had that veil removed so that we can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more.*

Becoming like Jesus means that you are living life the fullest. Being like Jesus means:
 To do more than exist, TO LIVE,
 To do more than touch, TO FEEL.
 To do more than look, TO OBSERVE.
 To do more than speak about Jesus, TO ACT.

To do more than read, TO ABSORB.
 To do more than hear, TO LISTEN.
 To do more than be kind, TO LOVE,
 To do more than listen, TO UNDERSTAND.
 To do more than think, TO PONDER.
 To do more than talk about God, TO WITNESS.
 To do more than live, TO CELEBRATE.
 To do more than be thankful, TO WORSHIP.

2 Corinthians 5:17-18 (NLT) - *What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun! All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did.*

Counting the cost means becoming like Jesus!

I don't know if you know this or not: but my wife is about to have a baby! This means that I have to decide if this is the type of church, if this denomination, is really where I want to raise my child in. I believe, however, that this kind of church is worth it, if we get back to our roots of counting the cost.

Our future depends on it. The future of our church depends on it. The future of the denomination depends on it. The future of our lives depends on it.

Count the cost. Believe in Jesus. Belong to His Church. Become like Him.

This is at the heart of communion. I want to spend time with you preparing our hearts to be in His presence. Let's sing.

Gentle Shepherd, Come & Lead Us - #352

Pontius' Puddle

