



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“WHAT is meant and what are the implications of ‘Counting the Cost’ before entering the Kingdom of God. Did the Ethiopian eunuch have time to do such a thing before his immersion”?

DURING the past few years it seems to me that within the church we have had many so-called ‘conversions’ which have not really been conversions at all. Many who have been immersed have had to be disciplined, and this within a very short time after immersion. Of these, a good

number have had to be denied fellowship because of their unrelenting acquiescence to the demands of the world which they seem never to have left anyway; others have just drifted back into the world because, as one such put it to me, "I didn't have any real idea of what would be expected of me".

This state of affairs is obviously very undesirable from several standpoints. As regards the individual, he/she will be in a worse position than if they had not known the truth. The church leaders will be sad because they will have seen the joy of immersion turned to bitter ashes. Furthermore, the morale of the group will be lowered because of the seeming victory of Satan over those ideals which they themselves hold dear. Perhaps it is timely that this question is asked. Maybe we shall learn something from studying this question, not only from what I may be able to say, but more particularly in our own individual study of it in the future.

Counting the Cost

The questioner asks, 'what is meant by counting the cost?' In simple terms this means to sum up; to consider or esteem; to include. In practical terms it means that before we embark on a project, whatever that project may be, we must first make a reasonable assessment of whether we are able to carry it through, taking into account the resources we already have and other resources which we hope to obtain which will act as enabling agents. Now to reasonable people this may seem to be elementary practice, but my personal observations have convinced me that society is moving to the point when people in their secular dealings are no longer prepared to count the cost - if they want a thing they must have it - and if this is so then we should not be surprised if they take the same attitude when they view other relationships which they may be required to enter into. What concerns me, and I am sure other committed christians, is that people should attempt this loose and cynical attitude in their relationship with Christ. This should not happen, and we should see to it, as far as is possible, that it happens only very infrequently or not at all.

The Implications of Counting the Cost.

That 'Counting the cost' is a well attested scriptural principle is not in doubt. Clear teaching on this can be found in Luke 14:25-33 when Jesus taught the multitudes and recounted two parables which we refer to as the Tower Builder and the Warring King, even though these are not scriptural titles as such.

Before Jesus spoke these parables he uttered some words which people down the ages have found very difficult to accept. Luke records him as saying, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple". Luke 14:26,27.

These words of Jesus imply a veritable rejection of everything in our acceptance of him. How can we esteem Jesus, whom we have not seen, greater than the children who are our own flesh and blood and whom we are constantly in contact with? AND what of our lives? Those lives which we tend so assiduously. Are we prepared to give even our own lives for his sake? These are questions which the christians of long-standing has wrestled with throughout his christian experience. By what strange alchemy do we expect people who have no christian experience to sacrifice everything upon their confession of Christ as Saviour? We will return to this point later.

The parable of the Tower Builder actually mentions the principle of 'counting the cost' The main point that Jesus seems to be making is that the man who is going to build must take stock of the resources which he has in order to complete the job, and not to embark upon the building with resources sufficient only to finish the foundations. The spiritual implication seems to be consistent with what we see around us today. People accept the foundation, which is Christ, but are unable to build on that foundation because of their spiritual immaturity; or is it because they do not know the immediate resources on which they can call? It is true to say that given time spiritual maturity can develop through teaching; it is equally true to say, I think, that

a person who responds to the invitation to be immersed without any prior knowledge of what is expected of him may not allow us the time to teach him.

The parable of the Warring King gives us a further insight into the problem of counting the cost. One spiritual implication of this parable would seem to point to a person outside of Christ with limited resources of his own who might find himself fighting against a God who has illimitable resources. The person would then, after counting the cost, decide that he was in a situation where his resources would be inadequate to achieve what a God with illimitable resources could achieve for him. He would then come to his senses and agree with God while he was still able to. This would pre-suppose that the person already knew about God, His power, His love, and His ability to develop within the person the resources which would enable him to live the overcoming life.

SO what can we do?

Perhaps we have concentrated too much on getting people 'into the water' as the saying goes. There is a strong desire in some quarters for instant numerical success, but this may not always be the best way. I am only too aware that if a person sits through a gospel meeting for the first time and at the end of the meeting asks to be immersed that it is extremely difficult to refuse such a request, but would it not be better to talk with such a person and try to instil into him what was really meant by 'obeying the Lord?' May be we would have to spend one, two, three hours with such a person in an effort to increase his knowledge of what would realistically be expected of him after he was immersed. Perhaps this approach would be kinder than immersing him and then hitting him with the things he should be doing but which he had no prior knowledge that he would be expected to do.

I am not so naive as to think that you can teach a person all the christian virtues in a short period of time, but I do think that a person should know something in line with the following:—

- a) The sort of commitment that the Lord expects
- b) The resources that God will give in order for the commitment to be successful
- c) That he/she would be expected to meet with the saints in a given locality'
- d) That certain unchristian activities which the person might be engaged in should be replaced by christian virtues as the person grows in the Lord.

These things, and others, are all inherent in 'counting the cost'. I am sure that this should be critically examined in all of our minds so that we shall not have this depressing business of withdrawing fellowship from comparatively newly-born christians.

The Ethiopian Eunuch

The question is asked, "Would the Ethiopian eunuch have had time to count the cost before he was immersed?" Well, there are certain things we do not know concerning this situation, but there are certain facts that we do know which may help us.

In the first place we are told that the eunuch was reading the scriptures prior to Philip joining him; admittedly, there were certain things that he did not understand but he must have been gaining some knowledge. Secondly, the eunuch was travelling from Jerusalem to Gaza but we are not told how far he had travelled from Jerusalem when Philip, who was in Samaria, joined him. But the scripture says that after the incident Philip was found at Azotus which is on the coast West of Jerusalem. The distance from Jerusalem to Azotus is some forty miles over desert country, so if Philip joined himself to the chariot near to Jerusalem then he would have spent a considerable amount of time with the eunuch taking into account that the chariot could not travel very fast.

The point I am making is that there could reasonably have been a few hours in which Philip could teach the eunuch, hours which the eunuch could use for contemplation of those things which Philip was bringing before him. He could at least have fulfilled the condition that I am stating, i.e. that he had prior knowledge of what Christ would expect of him.

I am convinced that we need to count the cost before we commit ourselves. I contend that we need to know what commitment to Christ really means before we can hope to make a meaningful commitment. I feel sure that the eunuch understood what would be expected of him hence the rejoicing as he went on his way. We can rejoice also when we fully understand and know how to meet the just claims of Christ upon us.

(All questions please to Alf Marsden, 277 Billinge Road, Highfield, Wigan, Lancs)