

The Guilt Trip

I heard it again and cringed. The young pastor loves God and His people and serves with a sincere heart. He was preaching a stirring message from Luke 5:1-11, calling the church to let down the nets and bring in the harvest.

He asked, "Why doesn't the church do more of this?," and continued, "Some would say we're not all called to be evangelists." I said to myself, "That's right!" He continued, "But I disagree. We're all called to be evangelists!" I'm glad he didn't see me shaking my head "No."

He went on, "I have to confess to you - - I enjoy talking with needy Christians and helping them work through the hard spots in life. And I enjoy studying, and the preaching/teaching ministry. I enjoy my work as a pastor." ("What a rich gift," I thought.) "But I don't evangelize," he said, "I don't walk up to people and present the gospel to them, and invite them to accept Jesus. I need to learn to do that." There was a kind of sadness in his voice. My heart dropped.

This pastor joined probably thousands of other good pastors across America that Sunday morning, who laid a guilt trip on themselves and their flock. A guilt trip for not being something God did not call them to be!

Nowhere does the Bible call us all to be evangelists. Yes, we're all to be witnesses. But we're not all evangelists. "It's just a matter of semantics," you say? No it's not. It's a matter of gifting and calling.

Words, of course, are only sounds with meaning and they have the meaning we give them. I would use the word "witness" to include a verbal testimony or the testimony of a godly life. This includes sowing seed, and some watering and nurturing of that seed. "Evangelizing" implies a more specific effort to reap the harvest. It's throwing out the net to bring in the fish. It's my guess that many of us use those words in a similar way.

We are all to be witnesses. Certainly we are to live a life which bears witness to the Lordship of Christ. We ought to have a word to share too, but our freedom in that will vary a lot. Often a positive attitude or a smile at the right time is an effective witness. And a consistently godly life is a powerful statement.

Evangelism is a special gifting and calling. So are the offices of the apostle, prophet, pastor and teacher. (Ephesians 4:11-12) The evangelist has that spiritual knack (gifting, calling, personality) which equips him to approach people and confront them with "their need for Jesus." He baits the hook, throws it out, and prays for a catch.

The ministry of the evangelist is important, but very likely he doesn't have the patience to walk with the new convert through the growth process and its accompanying struggles. He just wants to go out and get more fish! And that's okay!

But here's this pastor – feeling guilty for not being an evangelist when he has such a wonderful pastoral gift. He truly has a pastor's heart. He's gentle, patient, and kind. And he's an excellent teacher.

And there's this church full of fine Christians. They want to do anything God wants them

to do. They're really sincere. But many of them are not "evangelizing."

Yes, there are numerous prayer warriors there. Some businessmen invite their unsaved employees to church. And in an unusual way the financial prosperity of the congregation is reflected in the missions' budget instead of in cars, houses and "toys."

In general they live their lives and conduct their affairs in a way that is truly a testimony to Jesus. And they do talk with others about Him as the opportunity arises. But many of them do not actually "throw out the baited hook." And they feel guilty. *Very* guilty. Even condemned. And thus they join millions of other sincere believers around the world.

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus says we are to "make disciples." Evangelizing is a part of making disciples. But it is only a small part. First comes the sowing of seed, through the various forms of witnessing. Then the actual evangelizing. Following that comes the long term and often tedious task of nurturing. This calls for those with a gentle, pastoral heart. Patience is a watch-word. The evangelist bombs out here – he's out looking for the next catch.

So what am I saying? Let's know ourselves and be what we are. Let's identify the various gifts, and benefit from the wholeness which comes through the diversity among us. Let's equip the saints and build the kingdom through teaching, encouragement, experience and oversight. And let's free them from the false guilt of not being what they're not called to be.

As long as we accept guilt for not being what we're not supposed to be, we will never become what we *are* supposed to be! We won't accept and nurture the gift God has given us. So we all act guilty, sad and frustrated. We want to change but we don't know how to and we hardly expect to. The precious gifts which are so richly present among us lie nearly dormant because they're not the right gift – the really "spiritual" one – the gift of evangelism.

What small part has God given you in the church's task of making disciples? Are you exercising that gift? Are you asking God to build and strengthen it?

Whatever God has called you to, is the right thing for you, for now. Tomorrow may be different. But walk in freedom and in the joy of serving Him in the way and the place He has called you to! We are not all "evangelists" – and the sooner we get that into our pious heads the better off we'll be!

Born in 1940, Ken Stoltzfus has worked as a pilot, ordained Christian minister, businessman, missionary to Africa and writer. This is #10 in his series "The View from up Life's Path," and is one of many short articles that can be found at www.John2031.com.

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