

Tim Geddert, PhD

## **“You Will Be My Witnesses”** (re-thinking our role in persuading others)

### **Introduction: *Guilt for not witnessing!***

As a young Christian, I was confronted often with the expectation that I should be a “witness,” so that my unsaved friends, not to mention the millions of unsaved strangers all over the world, would have an opportunity to make a decision for Jesus Christ.

I was able to shake off the guilt for not evangelizing the millions . . . most of the time . . . though at mission conferences that was more difficult than at other times. The guilt for not effectively witnessing to my unsaved friends at school was harder to deal with. After all, I saw them every day. And, I was told more than once, it was my responsibility to witness to them. After all, what if no one else did? What if they were never given an opportunity to accept Jesus? What if I were the one who might have made the difference? What if their eternal destiny was mine to influence?

But guilt has never been a very effective motivator for me. It is more likely to make me feel *bad for not doing something*, than to actually lead me to *do* what I feel *guilty for not doing*.

Does anyone have a clue what I am talking about? Anyone ever experienced anything remotely similar?

Let me go on . . .

### **Evangelism Programs**

In the village where I grew up, there were far more Christians than non-Christians. We were a fairly small ethnic Mennonite community. At least two thirds of the students in my school were friends that I also met in church, in Sunday School, in kids clubs, in youth group. We Christians outnumbered the “evangelism targets” at least 2 to 1 . . . which of course gave me a nice excuse to rationalize my reluctance to witness . . . “Surely someone else will!” After all, there are enough of us, and so few of them.

I guess I was not the only person in the Hepburn Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren Church that was hard to motivate into becoming an effective evangelist. At any rate, our church seemed to introduce a new program every year, trying to get people involved in evangelism. For a while we tried the one that starts with “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life” . . . then the one that starts with, “If you were to die tonight and St. Peter met you at the pearly gates.” Once we studied a book called “Witnessing Made Easy.” I remember one piece of good advice from that book. At precisely the moment we were asking our targets whether or not they wanted to be born again, we

were supposed to nod our heads, so that it would be easier for them also to nod their heads, and then we'd have them.

Now if you have used any of these methods, and if they have been effective, please do not hear me saying that they are not good, or should not be used. I have full admiration for anyone who can take any of the carefully thought through methods of evangelism and use them to share the good news of Jesus Christ with anyone who will listen, in a way that faithfully says what needs to be said, and that helps people along the road to a positive response.

But these methods have not worked for many individuals and many churches. What to do?

### *Evangelism Plus*

Well some have moved to what I call "Evangelism Plus!" We just can't get motivated to knock on doors and confront total strangers with the claims of the Gospel, so we look for the secret ingredient, that missing element that will prime the pump of evangelism.

For some "Evangelism Plus" takes the form of "**Evangelism plus Signs and Wonders.**" A very influential book called "Power Evangelism" suggests that our evangelism is bound to be ineffective, at least compared to what we read about in Acts, if we are not doing what the early Christians did. They did miracles! People saw the signs and wonders, and they started to ask questions. The amazing things they observed made them wide open to hear the claims of the Gospel. On the day of Pentecost it was tongues-speaking. Later it was the healing of a lame man in the temple. Sometimes angels or earthquakes sprang people out of prison. Sometimes the blind were healed, the demonized delivered, those who fell asleep in church awoken from the dead. And the Gospel spread. What we need to recover, so it is claimed, is the combination of signs and wonders with Gospel proclamation. We'll never be effective evangelists until we do it the way the early church did.

Well, I am teaching the book of Acts this semester. And I concur that signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the early apostles. And I have been in many foreign countries and know that signs and wonders have often accompanied Gospel proclamation there. And even in North America, I know that there are times and places where God's amazing miraculous interventions have had the same effect that was seen in the first century. Yet . . . to argue that all we need to do to become effective evangelists is start producing more signs and wonders is to supplement our "guilt trips" with "inferiority complexes." What if we are not the kind of Christian that can produce miracles-on-demand? What if we've not been given gifts of healing or miracle-working? If "Power Evangelism" really were the final solution, I think *even more* of us would say, "Evangelism is for others . . . for those who have what it takes. I'll just leave it to them."

But there are other kinds of "Evangelism Plus" like "**Evangelism Plus Entertainment**" for example. Sometimes the church services themselves are made as entertaining as

possible, so that people who would not think of darkening a church door, might be persuaded to attend the best show in town . . . which just happens to be in our church building. And if we can get them through the door, we can either hit them hard with the Gospel invitation, or more likely, give them just enough of a tantalizing tidbit, that they just might come back for more, and more, and more . . . and maybe get hooked rather than scared away in the end.

At other times the entertainment takes the form of special events that take place in more neutral places . . . but still put on by *us*, in order to gain a hearing by *them*. Now I am all in favor of entertainment. I love entertainment. And I think that some entertainment can also be combined well with evangelism. But I also know that sometimes things can go rather wrong when the entertainment overshadows and thus distorts the evangelism. Let me report one example of that.

There was an evangelistic campaign underway in Fresno, CA where I live. Saturday morning was supposed to be “children’s morning” at the arena where the evangelist was holding meetings. Publicity for the event was impressive. People wore big “buttons” on their shirts; they handed out flyers. There were ads on radio and in the newspaper. This was going to be a *big* event, a whole arena full of kids experiencing “the greatest show on earth.” My sons, age 6 and 8 at the time, wanted me to take them. I did. And it truly was a great show. There were skateboarding competitions. There were acrobatic stunts. There was a musical about Noah’s ark, done expertly . . . and all those who had been trained to be counselors for the event were dressed up like animals . . . the costumes were wonderful! We clapped, and sang, and danced, and laughed.

Then the evangelist got up to make his contribution. He started by shouting out some of the fun lines from the musical production and had the kids shout them back after him. Gradually he changed the lines until he was shouting out parts of Bible verses. The kids shouted them back! And then there was a gradual shift again, so that the lines he was shouting out were in the form of a prayer. “Dear God, I know I am a sinner.” Dutifully the kids shouted back his lines. “Thank-you for sending Jesus to die for me.” Again a thunderous shout from 15,000 kids. I think somewhere along the way I had stopped shouting and became merely a spectator of what was unfolding.

Finally the shouting stopped and the evangelist spoke in a soft voice to the children, saying something like this: “If you just said those words, then you are now a Christian. And now I am going to give you permission to get up out of your seats and go up to those animals you’ve been enjoying. Each one of them has a paper and pen, and if you are willing to give them your name, they’ll give you some free books.”

Kids streamed down from their seats to the arena floor and gladly gave their names in exchange for some colorful reading material . . . and a chance to touch a real live “almost-lion” and “almost-elephant.”

When it was all over, we got back into the car. I wasn’t quite sure what to think or to say. My boys also seemed a bit unsure. Finally I asked a very open-ended question. “So, what

did you think?" My eight-year-old responded with a very insightful comment. He said, "Well, it wasn't quite as good as the circus, but at least it was free!"

The next day the newspaper reported that over 15,000 had responded to the Gospel invitation and accepted Jesus as their personal savior. I assume my two boys were counted among them.

Evangelism Plus . . . if signs and wonders don't work for us, maybe entertainment will.

### Witnesses

Well, in case you are beginning to think that I came only to critique others, I am about to change gears. And please let me say again: if you or your churches are using effective methods of evangelism, please carry on. But please also understand those of us who are a bit disillusioned with all those evangelism programs, and with some forms of "Evangelism Plus."

My own journey with this topic led me through various programs that left me feeling discouraged and ineffective. Then one day I encountered a book by a man named Allison Trites, entitled, "The New Testament Concept of Witness." As I read it, I sensed that God was about to help me deal with the guilt of all those missed opportunities to evangelize my friends and the lost world, and that God was about to replace it with insights that would help me to become an effective contributor to one of the greatest joys and challenges that God has given the church . . . the joy and challenge of being an effective witness of the Gospel in a lost world.

Trites' book centers on Acts 1:8, the well-known verse that sets the agenda for the whole book of Acts.

"But you will be my witnesses, first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth."

Instead of focusing on the geographic spread of the Gospel, as everyone else who comments on this verse does, Trites asks the penetrating question: "What does it mean to be a witness?" In all my years of trying to figure out how to be a good witness, I'm not sure I ever really thought about that question.

Trites points out that this verse is a prediction . . . "You will be my witnesses." It is not a command, "You must be witnesses" (even though the KJV translated it "You shall be!") This verse predicts what the apostles *will be*, what the church will be, what you and I will be. We might be good or bad witnesses. But we are witnesses. We cannot be anything but witnesses.

I had spent my whole life thinking I "should" be a witness. I eagerly read on. Trites asked why we try so hard to be the prosecuting attorney, when God has equipped us to be the witnesses. And suddenly I noticed what I suppose should have been obvious all along.

Jesus is here using the imagery of a law court. In a law court someone is on trial. There's a judge; there's a jury; there are attorneys; there are witnesses. Our role is to be the witnesses.

I'm not sure if it was Allison Trites or my own imagination that started to fill out the picture. Jesus is on trial . . . well, at least people are making a decision about Jesus. Those still undecided . . . well that would be the jury (or if you are from any other country . . . the panel of judges . . . since juries are a uniquely American phenomenon.) In this trial, there are attorneys at work. So who is it that plays the role of the defense attorney, the one seeking to lead people to think well of Jesus . . . to acquit him of all charges . . . to declare him innocent . . . to prove that when he was arrested and brought to trial, well it was all a mistake!? That would of course be God's Spirit. In fact Jesus even called the Holy Spirit an "advocate," using a word that both then and now can apply to an attorney-at-law.

But there is also an accuser. Then, as now, the accuser seeks to bring a negative verdict, seeks to lead the jury to condemn and reject. Of course, every analogy breaks down, so not every role in a court case matches exactly what happens when people are confronted with the need to make a decision about Jesus. But some parts fit pretty well.

Especially our role! *We are the witnesses*. In a law court, something would be going wrong if a witness were to turn to the jury and plead passionately with the jury to reach a particular conclusion. They would have stepped out of their proper role. Their role is to be witnesses, to respond to the leading of the attorney, to provide the information needed, so that the jury or the panel of judges can reach a correct conclusion. Their job is not to convince, but to bear witness . . . to say what they have seen and heard . . . to be honest and forthright. It is the *lawyer's* job to take what witnesses contribute, and use it to persuade the jury or the judge.

In his book, Trites argues that the New Testament concept of witness is drawn from the Old Testament, particularly from Isaiah. In numerous passages from Isaiah 41 through 54 the image of a law court is used to help Israel understand its role in God's plan. God and the pagan gods are locked in a court battle. God challenges the foreign gods: "Set forth your case . . . bring your proof! Where is the proof that Yahweh, Israel's God, is the one true God? There are a variety of proofs that Isaiah puts forth. One proof is that God created heaven and earth. Another is that God guides the destiny of nations and thus the course of history. Yet another is that God predicts what will come to pass, and then brings it to pass. But ultimately God's case stands or falls with the star witness. God says in the packed courthouse, "Just look at the evidence!" But what is the evidence? It is Israel! "You are my witnesses" says God, no less than three times in this part of Isaiah (43:10; 43:12; 44:8).

But what does that mean? It doesn't mean, "It is your job to convince people." It means "You are my evidence." The very existence of Israel, the very fact that God redeemed Israel from slavery, led Israel to the Promised Land, stood by Israel in good and hard

times, called Israel back again and again when Israel was unfaithful, these provide the proof of God's claims! God points to Israel and says to the nations: "There's the proof!"

The concept of "witness" is really the concept of "evidence." God wants to be able to point to Israel . . . to the church . . . and say, "There's the proof!" God will be the one who will convince people. That is not our job. Our role is to experience God's acts of deliverance and salvation. Our role is to be transformed individually and corporately into the faithful people of God. Our role is to be God's proof! Isaiah calls it "being God's witnesses."

And that is what *Jesus* meant, claimed Allison Trites, when he said, "You will be my witnesses!" Jesus meant . . . the Holy Spirit is about to fall upon the church. And the Holy Spirit's primary role is to transform you . . . and use you . . . to carry out the mission of the church. The Holy Spirit wants to win people in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. But the Holy Spirit needs to be able to point to some evidence supporting the claims of the Gospel. And that is where you come in. You will be the witnesses. You will be the people who have experienced the Gospel. You will be the ones transformed by the Gospel. The communities you form will be so extraordinary, that God's Spirit will be able to point to them and say, "There's the proof!"

Of what exactly does God's Spirit wants to convince the watching world? Well, of lots of things. For example, the Holy Spirit wants to persuade the world that *God is a loving and gracious God*. And so God's Spirit wants to be able to point to the church and say, "There's the proof!" There are the people who have experienced God as loving and gracious.

God's Spirit also wants to persuade the watching world that *the Gospel breaks down barriers between people*, unites Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. But who will believe it if there is no visible community where things like that happen? So the Spirit wants to point to the church and say, "See, there's the proof! Something miraculous has happened here; there's no other explanation for what you see!"

God's Spirit wants to convince individuals that there is *hope for the hopeless*, power to free those in bondage, a new beginning for those at the end of their rope, a renewal of joy for those in despair. And so God's Spirit needs to be able to point to the transformed believers and say, "There's the proof! See what God did for them!"

The Spirit is about the business of persuading people. And our role is to be the evidence God's Spirit can point to and say, "There's the proof!"

So often the church tries to take over the Spirit's role. The church often thinks its primary job is to find effective strategies for persuading the skeptical jury or an undecided judge. But we could develop a hundred programs, try out every "Evangelism Plus" approach we can think of, and we'd never come up with a more effective strategy than the primary strategy God has decided to use . . . And that is the concept of "witness." God is about the

business of persuading the unconvinced. But God needs evidence. Our job is to *be* that evidence . . . to *be* the proof. The New Testament calls it “witness.”

Now that does not mean that we don’t have to *say* anything, that we can simply be silent and somehow still effective. It doesn’t mean we simply keep our mouths shut and just *be Christian*. In a court case the witnesses would be pretty useless if they just sat in the witness stand and refused to open their mouths . . . if they thought they could just sit there and *be witnesses*, expecting the jury to just watch them and reach all the right conclusions. *No, speaking is a part of it.* We respond to the cues of the advocate, the Holy Spirit, and when given the right opportunities, we talk about what we have experienced, what we have seen and heard. We play the role of witnesses by *being there* when it happened, and by sharing what happened with those who should know.

But the way the early church did this was a far cry from the way we so often try it. We think evangelism is all about each individual mustering up the courage and learning the techniques of persuading people to accept the Gospel.

In the Old Testament it was Israel, corporate Israel, a people group, that provided the evidence that played the role of the witness. In Acts it is the church, the redeemed community, the fellowship of people living lives in relation to Christ and to each other . . . not each individual, but the church was the star witness. Sometimes the undecided jury will take careful note of how a particular individual has been transformed by God. More often, the watching world will pay attention to the quality of the Christian community, how people relate to each other, whether or not they love one another, serve one another, build up one another, and act corporately to serve the needs of the world.

The jury that is still deliberating takes careful note of how God has created out of ordinary people an extra-ordinary community of love and forgiveness and grace and holiness and generosity and self-giving service in the world. And the community will be given opportunities to bear witness to the fact that it is all God’s doing. Some in the community will speak more . . . others less. But the evidence will not be first and foremost the logical arguments of the talkers . . . or those trained in this or that evangelism method . . . the evidence will be “us” . . . We have experienced what God has done. We have become part of a visible redeemed community that God can use to convince the unconvinced.

That is how it worked in the book of Acts. Some spoke more often and more publicly. But what the watching world noticed was that there was a whole movement . . . a movement of people who claimed Jesus as their Lord and whose lives Jesus had transformed . . . visible communities were being formed in which people fellowshiped with people very different from themselves . . . generously shared with those less fortunate . . . courageously faced rejection and persecution if following Jesus led to that. People saw and were amazed. Some said, “Behold how they love one another.” Others said, “They must have been with Jesus!” And over and over again people made a decision to join the movement, confessing their sins and finding salvation in Jesus. Was it because those who spoke were so incredibly persuasive, because their arguments were so logical

and cogent? Not really. It was because the Holy Spirit was the real advocate and the Holy Spirit could point to evidence that the Gospel is true. The church was that evidence. The church bore witnesses. And God could use that.

It is certainly true that the early church supported missionaries and sent them out to plant churches. No question about that at all. But when we look at how each local church was involved in the task of witness, we see something amazing. They just didn't seem to need programs! In fact there's really no evidence that any church tried to recruit its members into some kind of evangelistic program, nor that Paul or the early missionaries ever told the churches they had to do that.

In fact when their church life is described, the one thing conspicuously missing from the list is an evangelistic program. In one telling passage, Luke describes the priorities of the church.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to the fellowship and to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42)

And when Luke then goes on to describe their church life . . . to show what flowed out of these priorities he speaks of the wonderful works of God. Sometimes there were signs and wonders. Sometimes God motivated people to generously sell possessions and share with others in need. A supernatural unity, and love and joy characterized the community. All these were evidences of the hand of God transforming them, because they were devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

At the very end of the passage, Luke states, “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

God was the one who persuaded people to accept Jesus. God did it by bringing forth persuasive evidence of the truth of the Gospel . . . and that evidence was the reality, the integrity, the supernatural quality of the Christian community.

Success in evangelism was a *consequence* of something else . . . a consequence of being the kind of community that knew what belonged at the center of church life. And at the center is not some canned program that works wonderfully somewhere and therefore gets packaged for churches everywhere to imitate, or more often to feel guilty for not imitating very well. At the center is the word, fellowship, communion, prayer. We can do that! And if we will let these priorities be the life-transforming experiences they became for the early church . . . if we allow the Spirit to transform us individually and communally through all these things . . . then the Spirit will be able to point to our faith communities as well and tell the watching world, “There’s the proof!” And some of us will be called by God to help explain to the world what this all means, and that it is all God’s doing. But everyone will be part of the evidence. Everyone will be part of the witness.

Do you see what is happening here? The church did not “set out to witness.” Rather the church *was the witness*. The Lord drew those into the fellowship who were being saved, because the church was about its business of *being the evidence* that God could use . . . of being the kind of community God could point to and say, “There’s the proof! There’s the evidence that I love people; that I forgive sin; that I accept all who turn to me; that I transform hearts; that I break down barriers between races and classes and genders and economic levels. There’s the proof that the Gospel is true . . . just look at the church.”

A favorite worship song a half a generation ago said, “He brought me to his banqueting table; his banner over me is love.” And somewhere in one of the transitions the text goes like this: “He’s done all things well, just look at our lives!” “*He’s done all things well, just look at our lives!*” Can we dare to say that to the world? Not, “just look at *my* life!” No, rather to direct the attention of the world to the community God has created of us, and say, “He’s done all things well . . . here’s the proof! We are living witnesses! Look what a wonderful thing God has made of us!”

Do you see what is happening? The church was practicing “Evangelism Plus!” . . . but it was not “Evangelism plus Signs and Wonders” . . . it certainly was not “Evangelism plus Entertainment.” It was rather “Evangelism plus the evidence, the lived evidence, that the Gospel is the greatest power in the world.

If we can learn to do it that way, I suspect that we will not do less talking, but rather more talking! We’ll find ourselves doing what the early church did . . . “noising abroad” the truth, or to mimic Luke’s style, “gossiping the gospel.” They couldn’t keep quiet.

Each contributed what they could . . . to teaching, to fellowship, to sharing bread, to prayer. And *God* added to the church. Their living witness . . . the witness of their lives themselves . . . attracted people’s attention, provoked questions, generated opportunities for a verbal witness to accompany the living witness.

I am convinced that the long term health and growth of the Christian church and of individual congregations is ultimately dependent more on the kind of witness we are, than it is on learning programs designed to turn us all into evangelists. As we learn to make central what the early church made central, we too will be God’s witnesses, God’s evidence!

Some will continue to make effective use of evangelistic programs. Some churches will find effective ways of planning events that appeal to the unconverted. But if we want more than short term growth . . . if we want long term health and effectiveness . . . then the backbone of our witness will need to be something we can all be a part of, and can all get excited about. I can get excited about being a “witness” of the sort that Acts 1:8 is talking about . . . being a part of God’s evidence to the world, by participating in the kind of Christian community that only the Holy Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ are able to create!

If *everyone* is going to be involved in God's mission, the way God planned it to be, then many of those the church has not yet recruited for our evangelistic programs, many of those living with guilt for not aggressively evangelizing their neighbors and friends, many of those who've simply not had the courage to confront strangers with the claims of the Gospel, can now find a new way to making a huge contribution to the witness of the church! They can be part of the evidence. Wouldn't it be wonderful we we'd let God's Spirit transform us and our communities of faith, in ways that will provoke the world to ask, "What in the world is happening here?" And as we have opportunity, we'll say, "It's not us! It's God! It's the power of the Gospel that is like nothing in this world!"

Amen.