

THE CHURCH AS CREATION OF THE SPIRIT:
Unpacking a Missionary Image

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"It is the proper work of the Holy Spirit," wrote Martin Luther in 1523, "to make the church." My hope here is to contribute a little bit to a theology of the church that is led into mission by the power of the Spirit, and so created by that power.

Of course, the church is not *just* the work of the Spirit. It is the work of the entire Trinity, "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (see LG 4). Nevertheless, as Luther rightly intuited, it is the Holy Spirit—whispering gently in history, blowing where she will, anointing Jesus with power for his ministry, stirring up the flames of faith in Jesus' Lordship and crying out God's intimate love in our hearts—who has a special, *proper* role in calling the church to be, equipping it for its mission, and leading it to ever new understandings of God's "wonderful works" (Acts 2:11) in Jesus Christ. If the church is *founded* by Jesus Christ, it is *built up* and *shaped* by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit CALLS the Church To Be a Missionary Church

"The story of the Spirit," writes Denis Edwards, "begins a long time before Pentecost" and the consequent emergence of the church. If the history of the universe were imagined as a single year, the foundation and creation of the church would happen only in the year's final seconds. In contrast, the history of the *Spirit* would encompass *every* second of that imagined year, for the Spirit has been present in the universe from the first nanosecond of its existence.

We Christians know of this Spirit, of course, only through the biblical witness, and that witness is vague and undifferentiated in the Old Testament. There the word *ruach*—wind, breath, spirit—is used to express the way God accomplishes God's work of salvation as a missionary God. Wherever God's Spirit blows, something new begins to stir in creation, in human history, or in women's and men's lives.

We see this already in the first lines of Genesis where the Spirit of God hovers over the primeval waters like a mother bird covering eggs with her body. In Genesis 2 God gives the newly-formed human creature life by breathing into the creature's nostrils the breath of life, and it becomes "a living being" (Gen 2:7). "The Spirit," says Basil of Caesarea, "is no stranger to the action of creation." Israel's heroes, kings and prophets are endowed with God's spirit for their mission. Israel's judges are all gifted with Yahweh's spirit (Ju 3:10, 5:1-31, 6:34, 11:29, 13:25, 14:6, 14:19). When Samuel anoints David king the spirit descends on him permanently (1Sam 16:13). Spirit entered into Ezekiel at the beginning of his career (Ez 2:2), and Micah too is filled with the spirit (Mic 3:8) as he begins to prophecy. The spirit of the Lord anoints Third Isaiah for the gift of prophecy in the passage that Luke uses to describe the prophetic program of Jesus. Finally, God's spirit is portrayed in Israel's scriptures as the eschatological gift for the revivification and reconstitution of Israel, as we see in the passages about the dry bones (Ez 37:1-14) and the new covenant (Ez 36:27). Second Isaiah, Zechariah and Joel all speak of God lavishing God's spirit upon all Israel, and even upon the whole of humanity (Is 42:1; Zech 6:1-8; Joel 2:28). This is the final purpose of God's mission—to gather all peoples into one family; and this will be the purpose of the church as well.

"In the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4), this spirit of life, prophecy and renewal found concrete expression in the life of one man, Jesus of Nazareth. As theologians in Asia have expressed it, Jesus' entire ministry was carried out "under the sway of the Spirit of God." His ministry began—like the heroes and prophets of Israel—with his anointing of the Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan (Mk 1:9-12; Matt 3:13-

4:1; Lk 3:21-22, 4:1; Jn 1:33), and his message of the imminent Reign of God was inspired by the same Spirit who spoke through the prophets. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus sums up his entire ministry in Isaiah's words: that the Spirit has anointed him to bring the good news to the poor and liberty to captives.

It was because of his fidelity to this mission that Jesus ran into opposition from Israel's leadership, and for this that, ultimately, he was brought to trial and executed as a common criminal. "The cross happened," writes evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock, "because of the Son's fidelity to God's call by the power of the Spirit." But, as we Christians know so well, Jesus' death was not the end.

Soon after his death, Jesus' disciples experienced him as alive, and at the feast of Pentecost—the feast of the harvest, the feast of fullness—the community experienced the power and presence of the Spirit in a way gave the community new insight and new courage. ". . . they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues 'of the mighty acts of God'" (Acts 2: 4, 11). Just as Jesus had been anointed by the Spirit at his baptism, so now Jesus' disciples are anointed to carry on Jesus' Spirit-inspired mission. This is why in Acts the "main character" is the Holy Spirit as such. Indeed, as many commentators suggest, Acts might better be named the "Gospel of the Holy Spirit."

But the Holy Spirit did not act all at once to create the church. Indeed, it seems to us that it is not quite exact to speak of the Spirit as creating the church immediately, or to speak of Pentecost as the "birthday of the church." Rather, the entire first half of Acts chronicles how only gradually, even painfully the community comes to understand its real mission, and thus understand its identity as a discrete reality from Israel, as a "church." The people gathered at Pentecost were all Jews, but gradually the Spirit led the community to half-Jews (Samaritans), to "wannabe Jews" (the Ethiopian Eunuch), to good Gentiles (Cornelius and his household), and then to Gentiles in general, without insisting that they become Jews through circumcision and Jewish dietary laws (the Greeks at Antioch).

The text of Acts is much richer than what I have had time to rehearse in these few lines, but my point is to show how the Spirit worked to create the church. I believe that it is only really at Antioch—when the Spirit has led the community, in mission, to the Gentiles, can we speak about the community as a "church"—that is, as a discrete community from Judaism, or a new religion. Of course, this emerging identity of the church did not yet involve the tragic break with Judaism altogether, as Paul's agonizing reflections in Romans evidence. In fact the connection with Judaism perdured for several centuries. But what Acts is witness to is the ineluctable movement of the Holy Spirit calling—as she called life, prophecy and renewal into being in the world's and in Israel's history—a new reality into being: the church, God's new People, a community which is to be Christ's presence, Christ's body, in the world. The Spirit creates the church, *calls the church into being* through mission.

The Spirit EQUIPS the Church to Be a Missionary Church

The Creator Spirit *calls* the church to be a missionary church, but the gentle yet powerful work of the Spirit does not leave it at that. From the beginning the Spirit has been present *within* the church, enabling it to be both *sign* and *instrument* of the Reign of God that Jesus preached, served and embodied. The church created by the Spirit never exists for itself; it exists entirely for the coming Reign of God. And yet, by the power of the Spirit, the church is *already*, in some imperfect way, a foretaste of the fullness for which it has been created. It is that partial yet authentic reality that the church is called to witness forth to the world; and it is the hope of complete fullness that the Spirit empowers the church to proclaim and work for in the world. In other words, the Spirit *equips* the church to be a missionary church.

Vatican II has taught us that the church is first and foremost a community of fundamentally equal persons through baptism (LG 32). Such fundamental equality, however, is only one part of the church's reality. The other part—equally important—is that within this reality there is an amazing diversity—and this is the work of the Spirit. The church is one People, one community; but the church, created by the Spirit,

is a community of varied gifts—gifts that need not compete with one another, but gifts that blend with and into one another in ministry and mission. These gifts are what we mean by charisms; the Holy Spirit creates a *charismatic community*, with a basic *charismatic* structure.

The Spirit equips the church to be a missionary church by giving each baptized person gifts that are “for some benefit” (1Cor 12:7) to the church as a whole. The image one gets is a community in which each can recognize her or his own dignity, in which each can offer her or his gift to others, and in which everyone ministers to everyone else. The Spirit’s creative activity of bestowing charisms on baptized men and women, therefore, makes of the church—simply by the way it lives—a missionary church. This is where, like in the temple in Jerusalem, God’s presence is palpable in the world, this is where God’s saving presence is seen and felt, this is where the wholeness and fullness of the Reign of God is experienced.

But not only does the church’s inner vitality, equipped by the Creator Spirit, give *witness* to the power of the gospel. The charismatic gifts with which the Spirit equips the church moves the church *beyond* itself into the world in mission. Those who are gifted with apostleship are not just preachers of the word to the church; they witness with their lives and announce with their words the meaning of the gospel to all peoples and cultures. Those who are gifted with a passion for justice not only inflame believers to live lives of justice, peacemaking and the care of creation; they confront and persuade the powers of this world, they march together on the “day without immigrants,” they demonstrate outside the School of the Americas. Those with the gift of the ability to bring about reconciliation are not only concerned with reconciliation between and among Christians in the church—although God knows we need plenty of that! The Spirit leads them outside the Christian community toward places of genocide in Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe. Those whom the Spirit has given the gift of compassion are moved to console and grieve with people with AIDS or victims of cancer. Robert Jensen writes, “the church is to stand in the street or the temple or the palace, like Amos or Isaiah or Jeremiah, and state the truth of the present situation by speaking the Word that evokes the future: ‘The one who inhabits and sends the future is this Jesus whom you crucified. . . .’”

As the Spirit moves her charismatic community beyond itself, she creates—again and again—the church. This is not only a community concerned for itself, but a community “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2).

The Spirit CHALLENGES the Church To Be a Missionary Church

Just as the Spirit equipped the early community to do and think what was for them—and perhaps even for Jesus—the unthinkable, so today the Spirit continues to create *us* as the church by calling us beyond our comfort zones, into unknown territories, turning us and our certainties “inside out.” Being church is never following a script; it is rather following the unpredictable, sometimes wild, always wonderful paths of the Spirit. Our first task as a missionary church, says Clark Pinnock, is to ride “the wind of God’s Spirit like a hawk endlessly and effortlessly circling and gliding in the summer sky.” After all, it is the *Spirit*, not we ourselves, who creates the church.

There are, to my mind, at least six challenges with which the Spirit confronts the church today as she creates the church through mission. Each of these challenges take us into dangerous areas, but they seem to be areas into which the Spirit is leading the church today, and by challenging us to engage with them in mission the Spirit is continuing to create the church.

Pentecostalism is the fastest growing Christian church in the world today, and trails only Roman Catholicism in terms of the number of members. And yet, in the missionary practice of the church, very little of the power of Pentecostalism has been recognized. This needs to change. The Spirit, it would seem, is calling the church *today* to be more experiential and exuberant in its worship, to trust her power

of healing and her strength in dealing with the demons that enslave women and men, to develop the potential of women, and to cultivate real communities of mutual support and forgiveness. For many of us this is a dangerous, scary agenda. Nevertheless, I think that a real dialogue and study of Pentecostalism is a major area of priority for the practice of mission today. This challenge of the Spirit can and will continue to create us as the church.

Second, the Spirit is creating the church as he reveals to us the truth present in the *world's religions*. The Spirit, says Vatican II's document on missionary activity, "was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified (AG 4). What this means for mission is that it can only be carried out today in a truly mutual dialogue; the church will be *created* as church—only as it learns from that same Spirit in other religions. This is admittedly a very dangerous stance, but only through dialogue will we be able to be created by the Spirit to be the Spirit's temple where the goodness and love of the God of Jesus Christ will shine forth.

Third, often because of the inequities brought on by certain aspects of contemporary globalization, or often because of the opportunities for economic advancement that globalization makes possible, *migrants* from Africa, Asia and Latin America are literally changing the face of the population of the countries in Europe, Canada and the United States, and Australia and New Zealand. In addition, depending on how you count them, there are some fifty million *refugees and displaced persons* in our world. There is no doubt in my mind that it is among these people—many of whom are the poorest of the poor—that the Spirit is present, beckoning the church to be the church by its presence and advocacy, by its practice of hospitality, and by its recognition of *itself* as a pilgrim people.

A fourth challenge from the Spirit is the challenge of her presence in all human experience. Because the Spirit is present in every aspect of human life and indeed all of creation, the church can only be a church of these particular people in this particular culture in this particular time. This is the way the Spirit is moving to create the church today: not some abstract universal institution with a universal, pre-packaged message, but a church in touch with the Spirit as she moves in the warp and woof of life. There is no such thing as "the church." There are only local churches, created by the Spirit as the community engages with the Spirit's presence in people's lives. Dangerous? Of course. There is also the possibility of "selling out" the gospel. But the other, perhaps even more imminent danger, is to miss the Spirit's power to create the church in all its particular vitality.

A fifth area of challenge by the Spirit is even more dangerous, and it is an issue over which the church is deeply and emotionally divided. The past century has opened up in an unprecedented way the beauties and the pitfalls of human sexuality. How is the church to deal with all of this? How can it respond to the challenges of the Spirit? Does it need to stand with the Spirit in a prophetic stance against sexual depravity? Should it welcome things hitherto unimagined—like same sex marriage? Whatever the answers might be, there is no doubt that the Spirit is creating the church anew as it wrestles with these questions that are so dangerous, and yet so central to the church's mission today.

Finally, the Spirit is creating the church today as she raises up a greater consciousness of the role of women in the church. At least two-thirds of Christians in the church today are women. In the Roman Catholic Church today, we are witnessing an explosion of "lay ecclesial ministers," and of the 30,000 or so of them, fully eighty percent are women! We have seen church after church admit women to full ministerial participation, much to the chagrin of some members, and to the frustration of many Roman Catholic women. Again, we are at a dangerous crossroads, but one where the Spirit hovers with her huge covering wings, beckoning the church to new life and new birth. What are the answers? We probably should ask and listen to women. But it is engaging in these questions, perhaps going where we are not comfortable in going, that the Spirit will once again create our church.

The amazing thing about the church as creation of the Spirit is that, although the Spirit pervades

the universe and is always and everywhere present in the processes of creation, we have been chosen to represent that life-giving, healing, renewing, challenging presence in our own particular world, at this particular time. In other words, we are not created for ourselves; we are created for mission. *Veni, Creator Spiritus!* Come, Creator Spirit!