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In honor of Bishop Sundo Kim

Abstract

This paper was presented in Asbury Theological Seminary, on November 14, 2012, at Dr. Art McPhee’s installation in the Sundo Kim Chair for Evangelism and Practical Theology Expertise: Evangelization Studies. In this essay, he explores the role of the Holy Spirit in mission and evangelism as an often-overlooked subject in the Church today.

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The church is God’s fleet. In it are barques and brigs, cutters and clippers, and dhows and dinghies—not to mention East Indiamen, frigates, galleons, hulks, ironclads, junks, ketches, lugers, and masulas. From argosies to schooners, sloops to windjammers, xebecs to yachts, this alphabet of sailing ships, propelled by the wind of the Spirit, plies the waters of the world on God’s errand. Of course, the ships all have their own ports, and waters, and tasks; yet their roles are marvelously in synch. Their individual missions are, in fact, one mission—the mission of the Master and Commander, which is the redemption of lost humanity and, indeed, the whole created order.

I spent a little time one summer on the island of Masig in the Torres Strait. Many of the 300 people there retrace their ancestry to an American whose name was Edward Mosby. As a young man, “Yankee Ned,” as they called him, jumped ship in Sydney. He found his way north to Masig, helped the natives fight invading cannibals, hid a stash of pearls no one has ever found, and, fathered a large brood of children. He became a legend.

However, one day, along a sandy path, I discovered a bronze plaque that pointed to some other foreigners who gave the islanders an even greater source of protection and whose spiritual progeny far outnumbered Yankee Ned’s biological progeny. The plaque read:

THANK GOD FOR THE FIRST MISSIONARIES, WHO ON 1ST. JULY 1871 AT DARNLEY ISLAND BROUGHT THE LIGHT OF CHRIST TO THE TORRES STRAITS.¹

Those missionaries came on a ship of course—an image I find engaging. In fact, I can’t think of a more fitting way of visualizing a local church than as a ship filled with missionaries.

It may not surprise you that early Christians used the image of a ship for the church. ¹ You see it in the catacombs. But the metaphor had a different meaning. Harkening back to Noah’s ark, Peter’s boat, and the ship in Acts that gave protection to Paul and everyone else on board, the early Christians’ used the image of a ship to symbolize safety for God’s people in the storms of life. I find that image attractive too. However, the image of a ship of God’s emissaries looking for modern Darnley islanders to offer them Christ rivets me.

What kinds of crews occupy those ships? What makes them missionary sailors? First and foremost, they have the wind in their veins. “Listen to the wind,” said Jesus to a prospective crewmember—Sailor Nick, we’ll call him. “You need that wind! Breathe it in and you will be reborn, changed forever.”² What was that wind? It was the wind of the Holy Spirit, who not only comes to us but remains beside us as counselor, comforter, and guide.

Soon afterwards, Jesus gave the same word to a woman from Sychar.³ “Drink the living water I can offer you,” he said, “and you will never thirst again.” What living water? John’s Gospel tells us: “By this he meant the
Without allowing the Spirit to do his transforming work within, the best anyone can be is a passenger on a Sunday worship cruise or, perhaps, an actor, impersonating a crewmember.

Yet, it is never enough for the crew to have the Spirit. If it is to participate in God’s mission, the Spirit needs to have the crew. Sailing vessels are not made for self-propulsion; you can’t row them. They need wind. “You will be my witnesses,” Jesus told his disciples, “but first you need to wait.” Wait for what? For the Spirit! Only when they heard the wind of the Spirit at Pentecost could the disciples weigh anchor, set their sails, and join the mission of God.

That is why the sailors in God’s fleet give priority to prayer. Luke says that, in that room where Jesus’ disciples gathered to wait for the Spirit, they were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.”

Bishop Kim, whose remarkable service to the church this essay celebrates, can tell you a lot about that: about the role prayer played in Kwanglim Methodist Church’s beginning; about the wonderful story of the Horeb prayer gathering and the 5,000 who prayed each morning for 40 days; and about the Kwanglim retreat center and its prayer garden.

The church cannot do without prayer. In prayer, it gets its sailing orders. In prayer, it finds discernment. In prayer, it seeks the wind to fill its sails.

Because they are in God’s fleet—part of God’s task force—every church is required to weigh anchor and put to sea. Houseboats have no place in God’s fleet—skiffs and smacks and other small working vessels, yes, but not houseboats. God builds small ships but not stationary ones...big ones too, but not Queen Mary museum ships. God builds ships to commission them and deploy them. “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you,” said Jesus. “Set sail!”

People used to ask my friend Richard Halverson, “Where is your church?” He always responded with something like, “Let’s see, it is two-o’clock on Monday, so several are at work in that factory over there. And quite a few are at home caring for their small children...” The questioners soon got the picture.

Jesus expects his church to be in the world as fishers, ambassadors, salt, light, letters, good seed, and stars in the night sky—all described in the indicative in the New Testament, not the imperative. Why? Because being salt and light is not just their duty but also their nature. The ships of the fleet are made for plying the waters of the world. They have a message to convey—the message of the kingdom. And they have a task to perform—the making of disciples. Both require being in the world.

Salt has no impact without contact. Light is only light as it illuminates the darkness. Ambassadors do not stay at home. They become emissaries. Therefore, the narrow road, of which Jesus spoke, is not some lonely woodland path. No, no. It goes right up the middle of the broad road, but in just the opposite direction. Following Jesus on that road, his disciples invite others to turn and follow him too.
That is why the one prayer Jesus would not pray was for the Father take his disciples out of the world. Protect them, yes—Jesus did pray that—but strand them in port? Never! 14

The wind that fills a church’s sails is its power, the force that propels it. But the wind of the Spirit is not about power alone. It is also about authority. 15

One need only read of Philip’s Spirit-led encounter with the Ethiopian treasurer, or of Paul and his companions being kept by the Spirit from going to Asiana and Bithynia to know the Holy Spirit is the Master and Commander. 16 As Paul says, “the Spirit is the Lord.” Moreover, he is “the Spirit of the Lord.” That has not changed. It is he who gives the orders, charts the course, fills the churches’ sails, and directs them where he chooses. “The wind blows where it wills.” 18

It was the Spirit who compelled the apostles to preach at Pentecost—at that particular moment and to that particular gathering of Diaspora Jews. It was the Spirit who, through the apostles’ preaching, gathered the believers in Jerusalem, then scattered them throughout the Mediterranean Basin and beyond to Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Orient. James is reputed to have gone to Spain, Mark to Egypt, and Thomas to India in 53 A.D., at the same time as Paul’s second missionary journey. What impelled them? Under whose influence were they emboldened to proclaim the gospel? The Book of Acts is clear. They did so in response to the impulse, and influence, and inspiration of the Spirit. Without the Spirit, none of it would have happened. Without the Spirit, there would be no church in America or Korea, or anywhere else. There would be no Asbury Theological Seminary, no modern missionary enterprise, no rising church in the global South, no fresh expressions of the church in the U.K., no diaspora missiology, no planting churches at sea among thousands of Filipino and Nepali cruise ship workers. At best, the people called Christians would, like the Essenes of old and hundreds of other religious sects scarcely be remembered—if remembered at all. Convictions and commitments to the mission of God are, of course, key to the spread of the gospel; however, it is the Spirit who brings it about through his church. That is why, in Luke, the Great Commission is not really a commission at all but a description, and why Acts begins, not with a charge but a promise. 19

It is, therefore, as dispiriting for us today—or ought to be—as it was for John Wesley leaving Oxford in the 1740s, or Roland Allen retiring to Kenya in the 1940s, to reflect on how oblivious the church can become to the primacy of the Spirit in fulfilling its call to evangelize and make disciples. One is reminded of Mark Twain’s account of his first crossing of the Pacific on a sailing ship and how, 2,000 miles from shore, the vessel was unable to move for 14 days through lack of wind. Twain recalled the nonchalant indifference of a group of young people:
They used to group themselves on the stern, in the starlight or the moonlight every evening, and sing sea-songs till after midnight in that hot, silent, motionless calm. They had no sense of humor, and they always sang “Homeward Bound,” without reflecting that that was pretty ridiculous, since they were standing still and not proceeding in any direction at all; and they often followed that song with “Are we almost there?…”

That, to me, is a perfect parable of the many churches that, unaware of their limp sails, go through the motions week after week, singing, “Anywhere with Jesus.”

John Wesley preached his parting message at Oxford on an August Monday in 1744. It was based on Acts 4:31, which says: When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

On New Year’s morning, five years earlier, John Wesley had experienced Acts 4:31 himself. As he wrote in his journal:

About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exulting joy and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from the awe and amazement at the presence of His majesty, we broke out with one voice, ‘We praise Thee O God, we acknowledge Thee to be Lord.’

Thus, at St. Mary’s, Oxford, we are not surprised to hear a disheartened Wesley ask, “Is this a community filled with the Holy Spirit?” The question was rhetorical. On the contrary, he said, “Many of you are…triflers with God.” He suggested that if someone even brought up the Holy Spirit, they would be labeled frauds or fanatics.

It is still true. There is a book called, Who’s Afraid of the Holy Spirit? The answer is, “much of the church.” Just like Wesley’s Oxford community, many self-identified Christians are wary of an uncontrollable, unmanageable, and ungovernable Holy Spirit. Like Adam and Eve, they want to control their own destinies. As Henry Van Dusen wrote:

The Holy Spirit has always been troublesome, disturbing because it has seemed to be unruly, radical, and unpredictable… And so it has been carefully taken in hand by Church authorities, whether Catholic or Protestant, and securely tethered in impotence.

It is a fit analysis. Many Christian people are afraid that unfettering the Spirit is all but asking for things to get out of control and to be thrust into the hands of fanatics. So, to play it safe, they quench the Spirit.
But I wonder if you noticed something else in Van Dusen’s statement? He repeatedly speaks of the Holy Spirit as “it.” In the 1950s, Van Dusen was one of the best-known Protestant theologians in the world. He was the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York. He once made the cover of Time. Yet, to him, the Holy Spirit was an “it.” That, I find surprising. But this I find troubling: many modern Christians, including evangelicals and the spiritual descendants of John Wesley, think of the Holy Spirit in precisely that way—as an “it”—as a mere symbol of God’s presence. In a study done by the Barna Research Group three years ago, 60 percent of self-identified Christians said they did not believe the Holy Spirit is a living entity.

Let me give another example. Despite the strong emphasis in Acts on the Spirit as the leader of the church in mission, a recent book on the Spirit from a leading evangelical publisher gives that topic only three pages out of 275. In neither the table of contents nor the index is there a single reference to the Holy Spirit and mission, or anything close to it. There is only one page on the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. There is nothing about the Spirit’s redirecting Paul three times in Acts 16—not even a sentence. Of the Spirit’s sending Philip to the Ethiopian’s chariot, there is not a word. In modern books on the Spirit, that is more representative than unique.

These days, we hear a lot about missional ecclesiology and the missio Dei. The mission is not the church’s we are reminded: it is, instead, the mission of the Triune God. But does it make sense to speak of missional ecclesiology as Trinitarian if we are only ready to embrace two-thirds of the Trinity?

Or take the Wesleyan idea of the prevenient work of the Spirit. Does it make sense to restrict that conversation to seminary classrooms and forget about it on the ground?

Or take the reminders we hear on the synergism of word and deed in evangelism. Does it have any meaning at all if the witnesses are not animated by the Spirit?

When churches forget the Spirit, they unavoidably put themselves in the Spirit’s place. Roll up the sails, and you must get out the oars! So, ignoring what Jesus told Nicodemus (that there is no entering the kingdom without the Spirit), they embrace the ethos of an Oklahoma church whose sign I drove by that said, “BUILDING THE KINGDOM FOR 26 YEARS!”

You know such churches too. Because they assume church and kingdom are coterminous, they conflate their own plans and purposes with God’s. It is a practice with a history, dating all the way back to 17th and 18th century Pietism. But it has no authority. It does not comport with the Scriptures, for it presumes to do what only the Spirit can do.

A number of ill winds can blow a church off course. For example, a church is struggling to maintain its membership roll. What does it do? It tries to remake itself after the image of some growing church. “If they can do
it, so can we,” they say. Then, they pour all their energies into cloning the best of what they find. Inevitably, though, preachers, programs, and promotions prevail. There is a lot of action on deck, but no wind in the sails.

Or a church sees that the gospel is broader than it has supposed—that God’s plan entails the reclamation of all that was affected by sin and the fall. So, with due respect to John Wesley, the church decides it has other things to do than save souls. It surmises that all that concerns God—from poverty, to political corruption, to the abuse of God’s creation—should be its concern too. However, that is not where it gets off course. The trouble comes when such churches go beyond that and presume they are responsible to fix all they find wrong. It is not the recovery of holistic mission that has blown them off course, but, instead, the presumption that their job is to right all the wrongs themselves, through various programs.

This view has a history too. In the 1920s, many churches merged the notions of social progress and Christianization—mainly through modernization and education. In that way, they thought they could themselves build the kingdom of God. At the 1938 World Missionary Conference at Tambaram, India, that line of thinking began to be challenged by the case made for the “otherness” of the kingdom of God. Yet, the notion of building God’s kingdom for him is still with us.

None of this, by the way, is to suggest the church has no work to do. The Spirit leads the church precisely because God chooses to use human means. Prayer, proclamation, ministries of compassion, healing the sick, capacity building—all these and more are vital responsibilities of the church. But, ultimately, setting things right is in the hands of God. Our work is but a joining in. It is trusting God to do the work he chooses through us. Therefore, we begin by discerning what the Spirit is doing. Then, we get on board.

Because he is the spirit of the Lord, the Holy Spirit never contravenes the ways and teaching of Jesus. So, our commitment to the Scriptures is firm. But every generation faces fresh scenarios. And every Christian faces situations the Scriptures don’t speak to. How, then, can we be sure in complex situations what Jesus would do? How can we know in foreign contexts, how to respond to various issues that present themselves? Where do we turn for help with those?

Well, we turn to the Lord who is alive through the Spirit. Unlike the followers of the religions, we are not restricted to the teaching of some dead person or series of dead persons. That is the difference the Resurrection makes. So, we don’t stop with. “What would Jesus do?” We go on to, “What is Jesus doing?” And, as Henry Blackaby famously asserted in his Experiencing God, when we find out, we get on board.29

Let me conclude with another sea story—a true one. Long ago, a small ship called the San Pablo (St. Paul) was caught in one of those fierce North Atlantic storms we have all read about—with forty-foot waves crashing over
the decks. It was said the San Pablo could roll 60 degrees without capsizing, and in this storm, one wave took it 53 degrees. The storm dragged on for days. None of the crew was allowed on the weather decks: they could easily be washed over board. But there came a day when the storm subsided and the seas calmed.

On that first evening of the calm, a San Pablo sailor, who had been reading a Bible during the tempest, climbed the ladder to the ship's boat deck. From there, he could see a full moon resting on the horizon—much larger than usual it seemed. As always happens when you are on the ocean or a lake in the moonlight, the moon's reflection made a silver path of light across the water directly to the sailor. And on that path, the sailor imagined he saw Jesus, beckoning to him as he had beckoned to the disciples of old, saying, "Follow me." And the sailor did.

The sailor remained on the boat deck long into the night. There, on the Arctic Circle, the stars were exceptionally bright. But it was something other than the stars that caught the sailor's attention: a luminous arch that appeared in the sky… and then another … and another, and another—each of them sinking and soaring, swelling and surging, shimmering and glistening—dancing through the night sky. Another sailor, Herman Melville, depicting the same Aurora dance, wrote of "retreatings and advancings… transitions and enhancing."  

But our sailor was struck by something Melville did not see, or at least did not describe—something in the foreground of that joyous sky. It was the ship's foremast, soaring over him like an immense cross—but an empty one. So, like the praises of the psalmist—up from the pit, or safe from some enemy—the dance had a context. The story in the sky was of the freedom of the Son—no longer bound to little Galilee or Judea, or to that cross, but at-large in the world: helping a Henry Martyn translate the Scriptures in a pagoda on the Hooghly River; redeeming the deaths of five missionaries on an Amazon beach with the salvation of a tribe; steering a little Albanian woman to the dying in Calcutta; and escorting San Pablo sailors everywhere on God’s errand of redemption to the world’s Darnley Islands. “For the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”
Endnotes


2. The ship was the LMS Surprise. Cf. A.W. Murray, and Samuel MacFarlane.1872. *Cf. Journal of a Missionary Voyage to New Guinea.* (London: J. Snow & Co.) for a firsthand account of the voyage and landing. There are many such journal accounts of LMS missionary ships as well as others.


13. 1 Corinthians 11:1.


17. 2 Corinthians 3:17.


25 1 Thessalonians 5:19.
27 I have no desire to pan an otherwise good book. So, I will refrain from naming it. It was published in the mid-1990s and, as noted in the text of this essay, the omissions I highlighted are not uncommon in books on the Holy Spirit.
28 It’s surprising how common this idea is. Even the reformed scholar, R.C. Sproul wrote recently: “It is our task to build the city of God… He who will work to build the kingdom of God must be on guard.” Retrieved November 12, 2012 from http://www.ligonier.org/blog/building-kingdom-god/.

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