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Imambu Epe — The Good Spirit

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This paper was delivered as a sermon in the chapel at Concordia Seminary. The author is presently engaged in advanced studies at the seminary.

The Christians in Wabag are part of a culture which never saw a piece of metal, a written symbol, or a white skin until about 35 years ago. When a Westerner attempts to work for Christians with that kind of background, Jesus' words about the Spirit being like a wind which blows according to its own inclination become clearer than would be the case in more familiar surroundings.

The Christian from the West soon learns that he is involved in a situation definitely beyond his control—and that's good.

The Enga people call the person who makes the situation uncontrollable the Imambu Epe or the Good Spirit. This Good Spirit shows His goodness to the church at Wabag mainly by being good enough to act in peculiar ways and to give peculiar gifts to the church at Wabag, gifts which seem peculiar to the Western Christian and also peculiar to the Enga Christian. These peculiar gifts of the Good Spirit are what is enabling the church to stand.

The Enga Christians have to add the modifier "good" when talking about the Holy Spirit because previously *spirit* was generally synonymous with *harmful*. Every man, woman, or child that dies releases a vengeful spirit which roams the clan ground until it has brought sickness or death by biting somebody. But this Good Spirit brings the gift of life, so that you

don't have to pray to Him not to kill your child or friend because you know He's on the *life side*. The faith that believes that is a welcome but peculiar gift to the Enga Church.

We Western Christians at Wabag would prefer the Good Spirit to be a nice orderly Spirit who works in churches whose floor plans are square and whose walls are in plumb. But He's too good to be nice and orderly, thank heavens, and gives the Enga Church a disorderly power which somehow enables it to function in worship out in the fields next to the falling church buildings that we encouraged the congregations to build. That power which operates out-of-doors, in poorly organized services, among people who aren't quiet during the service, is another peculiar gift of the Good Spirit.

And not only does the Good Spirit operate in disorderly situations, but He doesn't stay in His place. The Engas preferred the spirits to stay up in the sky, and when they came down, the goal was to persuade them to get back to their own place as soon as possible. The Good Spirit is giving the church the gift of keeping His feet on the ground. He is good enough to get involved in earthy things like marriage and farming and fights. That's a peculiar gift to the Enga Christians.

And finally the Good Spirit provides the

gift of peculiar ministers. The doers of the Wabag Lutheran Church were and are men who are more often than not functionally illiterate, inadequately trained, but motivated by the Good Spirit and rich in experience. Using what to our way of thinking are unorganized and irregular ways, they try to goad the people along the road where the stumbling stone lies. They are the ones with questions in their minds, salutary questions which produce faith and action—questions like, "Shouldn't Christ

have something to say about inter-clan fighting and ghost bites and healthy children?" They are the most valuable gift of the Good Spirit to the church at Wabag.

I haven't been around long enough to have any feeling for which way the Good Spirit is blowing in the States these days, but, as in New Guinea, I hope the situation in your life and my life and our Synod and our culture is beyond our control.

St. Louis, Mo.