

Filled with the Spirit: Seeking God is a Spiritual Endeavor

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Note: I recognize that most of those who read the written materials available on this site are Christians. In this essay, I seek to clarify what it means to be filled with the Spirit and then I make an application to those who are Christians.

Introduction

In another essay, I have showed that baptism has always been the point of initiation of a relationship with God, including forgiveness of sins and reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christians have been baptized in one Spirit into one body, through water baptism (1 Cor. 12:13). (The context makes clear that this refers to the Holy Spirit.) For those who are not in a biblical relationship with God, this simple truth is a beginning point. I would be pleased to study with you about how to please God.

In that essay, I concentrated on three expressions: promise, gift, and baptism of (in, with, by) the Holy Spirit. I summarized the strong Bible evidence that these three expressions are describing one and the same thing, describing an initial blessing (received at the beginning of the Christian life) and not a subsequent reception of the Holy Spirit. There is one baptism, referring to baptism in water as practiced in the early church which baptism was also baptism in the Holy Spirit. The promise, the gift, and the reception of the Holy Spirit are universal for Christians.

Another expression that has troubled many, partially (or primarily) due to lack of contextual study, is the concept of the fullness of the Spirit, or being filled with the Spirit. At baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit so that the presence of the Holy Spirit is a continuous experience and reality for one walking in the light, even as the forgiveness of God is continuous. The idea advanced a few years ago by a certain author that the Holy Spirit comes and goes depending on specifics in our lives is not biblical. Let us say and understand clearly what the Bible says—we initially receive the gift (of the Holy Spirit) from God and that gift is continuously present, even though all of us know on the basis of our experience that our awareness, appreciation, and use of the gift may fluctuate. When we speak of the promise, gift, and baptism, we are referring to a once-for-all gift. But when the Bible speaks of the fullness of the Spirit we recognize that the gift of the Spirit must be continuously and increasingly appropriated.

Fullness of the Holy Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit: What does the Bible say?

On Pentecost, Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit from heaven, and the promise (gift, reception, baptism) of the Holy Spirit began. The coming of the Holy Spirit occurred for the 12, for the 3000, for the Samaritans, the eunuch, Paul, Cornelius, and all who received biblical baptism.

The fullness of the Holy Spirit is the result of the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives. We receive the fullness (are filled) because the Holy Spirit is not given in part (partially), but always in fullness. Fullness does not refer to capacity or ability but to the presence of the Holy Spirit; he is fully present, not just partially present, not just through a representative or through the word. The fullness of the Holy Spirit is continuing, a permanent result, the norm. Baptism is not repeatable, and the results of baptism cannot be permanently lost in this life (those who fall can be restored). On the other hand, the filling appears to be repeatable and must be maintained. If lessened, it can be increased; if lost, it can be recovered. The Holy Spirit is grieved by sin, and when we are in sin we are less full, perhaps even empty, with regard to fullness. That does not mean we do not have access to the Holy Spirit, or that we have not received the promise or gift of the Holy Spirit. Even when there is no evidence that the presence or fullness of Holy Spirit has been compromised or forfeited through sin, we read of people being filled.

Looking at the New Testament texts, there are three main categories or applications of the concept. First, being filled with the Spirit was normal for every Christian. The Seven were to be full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3,5), and the thought is not that they were specially gifted or that they were special in other ways; only that they were excellent representatives of the Christian life. Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:24).

¹ Parts of this study closely follow John Stott, *Baptism and Fullness*.

Newly converted disciples were full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52). Ephesians 5:18 applies the phrase to all Christians, a continuous imperative, a text to which we will return later. Second, being filled with the Spirit sometimes refers to being prepared for a special ministry: John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb; Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit, which seems to me not to refer to his baptism but to his preparation as an apostle (Acts 9, 22, 26). Third, the fullness of the Holy Spirit equipped for an immediate task. Quite noticeable in the New Testament is that certain persons were filled with the Spirit and immediately thereafter spoke for God. Zechariah is filled just before prophesying, Paul just before addressing the Sanhedrin, Christians in Jerusalem just before sharing the word in the midst of persecution, Stephen before he was martyred, Paul before he rebuked Elymas the magician, and so on. In fact, in the book of Acts immediately after the beginning of the church and the first reception of the Spirit, it seems that being filled with the Spirit was immediately followed by speaking. That is, Christians were filled with the Spirit in order to share the message. Jesus being filled with the Holy Spirit seems to fit into all three groups—it was natural for him to be filled with the Spirit, he was prepared for ministry, and he was prepared for specific immediate tasks.

Thinking about the command in Ephesians 5 to be filled with the Spirit, there is no such command with regard to the promise, gift, or baptism of the Holy Spirit. The fact is that the references to the filling of the Holy Spirit describe certain Christians who had already received the Spirit and who were filled again. The commandment of Eph. 5:18 is that all Christians go on being filled continually. This command also suggests that it is far too common for Christians who have been baptized with (in) the Holy Spirit to cease to be filled with (or full of) the Holy Spirit.

The Corinthian church is a good example; this church provides a warning for us. Seeking God is a spiritual endeavor. Here are Christians who had been baptized in the Holy Spirit (12:13), but were immature, carnal, unspiritual, even worldly. They were richly gifted with spiritual gifts but were not demonstrating the fullness and presence of the Holy Spirit. Even in the gifts (plural) bestowed by the Holy Spirit they were not demonstrating fullness but were in fact demonstrating worldliness. They were dominated by fleshly, physical, human desires. Is that not the condition of many today? We should not deny that we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit; we repented, believed, and our water baptism is evidence of our Holy Spirit baptism. But where is the fullness? That is the more relevant question for many Christians today.

Here is the problem. We have not understood the significance of baptism, we have not honored the Holy Spirit part of the action of baptism. And we have not known that we were filled with the Holy Spirit, or whether we are filled with the Holy Spirit, or how it is possible to tell.

When some with a misunderstanding of the word tell us that speaking in tongues is the indispensable sign of having received the Holy Spirit, we develop counter arguments beginning with their false argument rather than carefully studying the Bible (especially the relevant New Testament passages) and developing a positive understanding of this great, inspirational truth. Many, upon hearing the false concept presented, conclude that they have not received the Holy Spirit, or that they are not filled, or even deny that such is possible today in an effort to counteract the falsity. This approach pretty much eliminates the Holy Spirit from the life of the Christian today; this is not the answer!

The answer to false teaching is to show clearly what the Bible says, and to show that Holy Spirit presence and power is available to us today. It cannot be maintained from Scripture that tongues always follow the reception of the Holy Spirit. In Acts, only three contexts connect the two, at least seven do not. Tongues were only one of many gifts, and of all of the gifts the gift of tongues was apparently the most temporary (1 Cor. 13:8-10).

How can Christians today be continuously filled with the Holy Spirit?

First, we have to keep coming to Jesus (John 7:37-39). The Holy Spirit had not yet been given on this occasion, but the principles are clear. This text is about the Holy Spirit. We come to Jesus, we drink, we believe—the point is there will be one condition to the reception or gift, and also to the continuing filling. We keep drinking because we keep thirsting. The Holy Spirit flows through us.

Ephesians 5:18 commands filling, the present tense is continuous. There was carnality in Corinth and the sarcasm in 1 Cor. 4:8 must be recognized—"already you are filled." But the filling Paul refers to was not Holy Spirit fullness. In Eph. 5:18-21, Paul describes the consequences of the fullness of the Holy Spirit, qualities or actions of the Christian life. Here are two imperative verbs, followed by present participles which depend on the main verb and explain it or expand it. Here are five descriptive consequences of Holy Spirit fullness. This text does not suggest that the evidence of Holy Spirit fullness will be similar to a drunken stupor. The parallel does deal with the excess and loss of self-control. The consequences of the fullness of the Holy Spirit are controlled, healthy relationships (Gal. 5; Eph. 5). Drunkenness can transform the human into an animal; the fullness of the Holy Spirit transforms into the image of Christ. The results of being filled with the Holy Spirit are healthy relationships, thoughtful worship, gratitude, and changed attitudes. The Holy Spirit encourages relationship with God the Father, Jesus Christ, and one another. Not self-assertion, but self-submission is the evidence of the Spirit-filled Christian. Too often, our efforts to stand on principles are mostly evidence of our pride. (Galatians 5 reveals the same truth with a different illustration.) The person in whom the Holy Spirit is present is continually seeking God in worship and in fellowship, is present at the assemblies, is studying the text, seeking understanding, growing in grace and knowledge, and putting aside self.

How is this possible? The command of Ephesians 5 is imperative, plural, passive, present. How can we understand this filling of the Holy Spirit? Consider a baby and a fully-grown adult, both fit and healthy, both capable of breathing properly. When the lungs of the baby are filled, and the lungs of the adult are filled, what is the difference? It is in their capacity to receive air, and this is the case also with Christians. Since the body of every Christian is the temple of the Holy Spirit, should we not assume that the Spirit dwells in his temple, and that he enters it and fills it? This is clear in Eph. 1:17-19, 4:13. We are challenged to embrace fully the fullness of God's purpose for us as individuals, and for the church. We repent of unbelief and lack of faith, we cry for increase in faith, growth in knowledge, to be more and more like Christ, presenting his completeness, the habitation of Christ, indwelt by God through the Holy Spirit.

Developing a greater spirituality

Finally, let us take a quick look at a question that are present in virtually every church.

If all Christians are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, the majority do not appear to have had success in God's intention! Can it be seriously maintained that the average Christian today has been baptized in (with) the Holy Spirit? There is so little evidence of that truth!

- First, let us be careful to avoid a priori reasoning, thinking that the baptism of the Holy Spirit must invariably be emotional, with wind, fire, languages, and such like.
- Second, there is no biblical basis to understand that regeneration is a conscious process. It is not so physically, so why would it be so spiritually? Jesus told Nicodemus it is like the wind. Regeneration brings new life to dead souls, but are we conscious of that infusion of spiritual life? Were you conscious of your physical birth? There is no reason to insist it must be dramatic, it is not even conscious.
- Third, it is true that some Christians have a low level of Christian living. But is that reason to deny the validity of their faith response in baptism? I am not justifying sub-normality, it is true and sad. We are robbed of our full inheritance, but it is still ours by right, we have simply failed to enter it (Hebrews). We need to repent and reflect that repentance in changed lives.
- Fourth, this low level of Christian living occurs among those who believe in miraculous gifts; they also often fail in moral duties of honesty and purity. Carnality was not an evidence of lack of being baptized in the Spirit for the Corinthians, they simply needed to recover the fullness of the Spirit.

Conclusion

The will of God is that we develop a continuous and increasing appropriation of the presence and fullness of the Holy Spirit. Some seek special experiences as evidence of the Holy Spirit, but such experiences are too varied to be shown to have biblical validity. Such are of secondary importance biblically, they are incomplete, and they are temporary.

Let us recognize that seeking God is a spiritual endeavor. We begin the Christian journey in baptism. As Christians, whatever our spiritual condition, let us seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit, let us live according to the Spirit (being led by the Holy Spirit), and let us walk in the Holy Spirit so we will not fulfill the longings of the flesh.