

Filled with the Spirit: Seeking God is a Spiritual Endeavor

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Note: Most likely, most of those who read the materials available on this website are Christ-followers. In this essay, I write for Christians. I seek to clarify what it means biblically to be filled with the Spirit, followed by applications to Christian living.

Introduction

In another essay, I have showed that, since the establishment of the church on the day of Pentecost, water baptism has always been the point of initiation into a relationship with God for Christians, 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 of 1 Corinthians 12 makes clear that the word “Spirit” in v. 13 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 happy to study with you about how to obey God and begin a relationship with him through Jesus – contact me.)

In the previous essay, I concentrated on three expressions: promise, gift, and baptism in (of, 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, second 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 subject of this essay -- 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 specific situations 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 from personal experience that our awareness, appreciation, and use of the gift fluctuates. When we read about the promise, the gift, and baptism, we understand that the reference is to a once-for-all gift. When the Bible speaks of the fullness of the Spirit or being filled by the Spirit, we should recognize that the gift of the Spirit must be continuously and increasingly appropriated.

Full of the Holy Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit: What does the Bible say?²

In the Gospels, the only references to being filled with or full of the Holy Spirit are found in Luke’s Gospel. John the Baptist was to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth (Luke 1:15), his mother Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit when she felt the baby in her womb (Luke 1:41), Zechariah, John’s father was filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:67), and Jesus “full of the Holy Spirit” was led into the wilderness to be tempted (Luke 4:1).

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 Twelve and for 3000 believers. Continuing through the book of Acts, the coming of the Holy Spirit occurred for the Samaritans, the eunuch, Paul, Cornelius, and for all who received biblical baptism.

¹ I am indebted to John Stott for providing germ thoughts that gave me direction in developing this study. Parts of this study follow his *Baptism and Fullness*.

² Numerous New Testament passages mention fullness or filling with the Holy Spirit. Many of these are referenced in this essay, but the entire text of the verses is not included in the body of the essay. The complete list of passages is provided for reference and additional study in an appendix at the end of the essay.

The fullness of the Holy Spirit, being filled with 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 human capacity or ability but to the presence of the Holy Spirit; he is fully present, not just partially present. He is not present only through a representative or through the word. The fullness of the Holy Spirit is continuing, a permanent result, the norm. Baptism in water is not repeatable,³ and the results of baptism cannot be permanently lost in this life (those who fall away and afterward penitently return 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 Bible says that Satan filled the heart of Ananias to lie to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). Ananias could have repented, but did not.

The Holy Spirit is grieved by sin. When we are in sin, we are less full, perhaps even empty, regarding the fullness of the Spirit. 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. In the Bible, 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. Ephesians 5:18 applies the phrase to all Christians, a continuous imperative, a text to which we will return later. The seven servants were to be full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3, 5). The thought is not that these men were specially gifted or that they were special in other ways. The teaching is not that most Christians were not full of the Holy Spirit; the point is that the seven who were chosen were to be excellent representatives of the Christian life. Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:24). Newly converted disciples were full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52). Second, being filled with the Spirit sometimes referred 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 not to refer to his baptism but to his being chosen and prepared 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 afterward spoke; many spoke for God immediately after being filled. John the Baptist was prepared to announce the coming of the Messiah, Zechariah was filled just before prophesying, Peter and other apostles on Pentecost, Peter just before addressing the Sanhedrin, Christians in Jerusalem just before sharing the word during persecution, Stephen before he was martyred, Paul before he rebuked Elymas the magician, and so on. Christians filled with the Spirit are described as teaching, admonishing, singing, and giving thanks (Eph. 5:18-20). These characteristics of one filled with the Spirit are little appreciated in many churches today.

In the book of Acts, after the beginning of the church and the initial coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, one notes that being filled with the Spirit was immediately followed by speaking. Christians were filled with the Spirit in order to share the message. That Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit seems to fit into all three categories above — it was natural for him to be filled with the Spirit, he was prepared for ministry, and he was prepared for specific immediate tasks.

Returning to the command to be filled (passive command, allow yourself to be filled) with the Spirit in Ephesians 5, there is no such command regarding the promise, the gift, or the baptism of the Holy Spirit. References to the filling of the Holy Spirit often describe Christians who had earlier received the Spirit in water baptism and who were later being filled. (The reception of the Holy Spirit at baptism is never referred to as a “filling.”) The command in Eph. 5:18 is that all Christians were to be filled continually. That Paul found it necessary to write such a command also suggests that it is far too common for Christians who have been baptized in (with) the Holy Spirit to cease being filled with (or full of) the Holy Spirit, and thus to stop speaking.

The Corinthian church provides an example of the problem; this church serves as a warning for us. Seeking God is a spiritual endeavor. Here are Christians who had been baptized in the Holy Spirit (12:13), but they 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

³ Those who were baptized by Paul in Acts 16 were baptized a second time, but their first baptism in water was based on the teachings of John the Baptist. They knew only “the baptism of John.” There is no New Testament example of a person validly baptized and afterward being baptized a second time. Ephesians 4 says there is only one baptism.

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 baptism in one Spirit into one body. But where is the fullness? That is a relevant and pressing question for many Christians today.

What is the problem? We have not understood the significance of baptism, we have not honored the Holy Spirit as part of the action of baptism. As a result, we have not known that we were filled with the Holy Spirit, whether we are filled with the Holy Spirit, or how it is possible to tell.

When some with a misunderstanding of Bible teachings 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, attempting 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 Christians 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 passages do not. The gift of languages (tongues) was one of many gifts. Of all the gifts, the gift of tongues was the most temporary (1 Cor. 13:8-10).

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

In asking this question, I seek to make clear that Christians being filled with the Holy Spirit is the norm, even today in the 21st century. Christians receive the gift (singular) of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) when they are baptized in one Spirit into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). The wording in 1 Cor. 12:13 is grammatically parallel to every New Testament reference to “baptism in the Holy Spirit.”⁴

How can Christians be filled with the Holy Spirit today? First, we must keep coming to Jesus (John 7:37-39). The Holy Spirit had not yet been given in John 7, but the principles are clear. In John 7, Jesus is speaking 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, which will be the same condition also to the continuing filling. We keep drinking because we keep thirsting. In our constant coming to Jesus, the Holy Spirit flows through us.

Second, Christians must keep seeking God in worship and fellowship. Ephesians 5:18 commands filling, the present tense is continuous. There was carnality in Corinth; the sarcasm in 1 Cor. 4:8 must be recognized—“already you are filled.” The filling Paul refers to in 1 Cor. 4:8 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. The text has two contrasting imperative verbs, followed by present participles which “participate with” the main verb to explain it or expand it. The participles describe five consequences of Holy Spirit fullness. This text is not suggesting that the evidence of Holy Spirit fullness will be like a drunken stupor. The contrast deals with excess and loss of self-control. The consequences of the fullness of the Holy Spirit are controlled, healthy relationships (Gal. 5:16-26; Eph. 5:18-21). Drunkenness can transform the human into an animal; the fullness of the Holy Spirit transforms a human being 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. (Gal. 5:15-26 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

⁴ Gifts (plural) of the Holy Spirit were given to various Christians in the New Testament to equip and empower them for the specific works God was giving them. These gifts of the Holy Spirit do not represent a second “baptism in the Spirit.” See my previous article concerning the promise, the gift, and the reception of the Holy Spirit.

assemblies of the body, is studying the word of God, seeking understanding, growing in grace and knowledge, and putting aside self.

How is this possible? The command of Ephesians 5:18 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? The difference is in their capacity to receive air, and this illustration also applies in the case with Christians. As a Christian matures in Christ, that person will become more and more filled with the Spirit. 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 truth is clearly reflected in Eph. 1:17-19, 4:13. Therefore, we Christians 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 increased 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 (Eph. 2:22). We not only want to be filled with the Spirit; we want to develop spiritually to such an extent that being filled with the Spirit gives us enough breath to accomplish great things for God.

Developing a greater spirituality

Finally, we look briefly at a question that is present in virtually every church.

If all Christians are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, why is it that the majority do not appear to have had success in fulfilling God's intention! Can it be seriously maintained that the average Christian today has been baptized in (with) the Holy Spirit? Often there is 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, accompanied by 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 that the new birth 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 that regeneration 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 that some Christians live in mediocrity, or lower! Such Christians are robbed of their full inheritance, but it is still theirs by right, they have simply failed to enter it (Hebrews). The need is to repent and reflect that repentance in changed lives.
- Fourth, this low level of Christian living also occurs among those who believe in miraculous gifts; they also often fail in moral duties of honesty and purity. Carnality was not 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 experiences 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 with baptism in one Spirit into one body, receiving the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit. As Christians, whatever our spiritual condition, let us seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), let us live according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh. If one is living by the Spirit, then that one puts to death fleshly deeds. So (in this way) all who are thus led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rom. 8:4-14, the entire context is essential to understanding the biblical meaning of the phrase "led by the Spirit" in Rom. 8:14). Let us walk in the Holy Spirit so we will not fulfill the longings of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

APPENDIX

A concordance search (ESV) using “fill” and “Holy Spirit” yields the following list of verses.

Luke 1:15

for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

Luke 1:41

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit,

Luke 1:67

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

Acts 2:4

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Acts 4:8

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders,

Acts 4:31

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Acts 5:3

But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?”

Acts 9:17

So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 13:9

But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him

Acts 13:52

And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

A concordance search (ESV) using “fill” and “Spirit” adds one verse to the above list.

Ephesians 5:18

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

A concordance search (ESV) using “full” and “Holy Spirit” yields the following list of verses.

Luke 4:1

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness

Acts 6:5

And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

Acts 7:55

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Acts 11:24

for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

A concordance search (ESV) using “fill” and “spirit” adds one verse to the list immediately above.

Acts 6:3

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.