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The Filling With the Holy Spirit

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The phrases “filled with the Spirit” and “Spirit-filled” are phrases commonly heard in Evangelical circles. These phrases (or similar ones) are used to describe a variety of experiences presumed to be associated with the Holy Spirit. Their usefulness as “catch-all” labels to be adopted by people or groups who wish to make their particular experiences normative for all Christians seems almost limitless! However, we must be careful that our experiences do not determine our doctrine. As Christians we must be dedicated to the goal that God’s word be the source of our doctrine and the interpreter of our experiences. This paper does not seek to evaluate any one group’s use of these phrases except as might happen incidentally. The question that this paper seeks to answer is, “What does the **Bible** and, in particular, the **New Testament** (NT) say about the filling of the Holy Spirit?”

This broad question can be broken down into three specific questions: 1) What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit, 2) What are the results of being filled with the Spirit, and 3) How does one get to be filled with the Spirit? Before these questions are individually looked at some preliminary comments need to be made. First, forms of the verbs that mean “I fill” in the NT are mostly Lucan. As a matter of fact, when these verbs occur in the NT of a person with respect to his/her relationship to the Holy Spirit they are almost exclusively found in Luke and Acts. The only other occurrence is found in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians in 5:18! Second, the adjective “full”, when used in the NT specifically of a person with respect to his/her relationship to the Holy Spirit, is found only five times (once in Luke and four times in Acts). Third, because the passages where the pertinent phrases in Luke and Acts are found are descriptive (as opposed to prescriptive) it is clear that in our attempt to understand the filling of the Spirit for us today much will depend on our exegesis of the Ephesians passage.

In the Old Testament (OT) the Holy Spirit is seen filling both buildings as well as people. For instance, with regard to the Holy Spirit filling buildings, in Exodus 40:34-35 he (“the glory of the LORD”) is said to have filled the tabernacle and in I Kings 8:10-11 he (again, “the glory of the LORD”) is said to have filled the temple. Thus, God’s holy presence among his people was made known to them. Also, with regard to the Holy Spirit filling people, in

Exodus 31:1-5 God says of Bazalel, “I have filled him with the Spirit of God.” This filling was to give him the ability “to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.” Thus, not only was the construction of the Tent of Meeting and the ark of the Testimony, etc. to be accomplished according to the instructions of God but also as God gave them the necessary skills through the filling of the Spirit of at least Bazalel. As another example, it is possible that Deuteronomy 34:9 tells us that Joshua was filled with the Spirit of wisdom (i.e., the Holy Spirit). If this is the case then the purpose of Joshua being filled with the Spirit would have been to provide him with the wisdom needed to lead the people of Israel into the promised land. In summary, it appears to be fair to say with respect to the filling of the Spirit in the OT that it was the result of the sovereign choice of God **in order to accomplish a particular task** through a certain person and to remind the people of his holy presence among them.

It also seems to be valid to apply the same summary to the examples of the filling of the Holy Spirit in Luke and Acts. First, in Luke 1:14-17 the angel Gabriel says that John the Baptist “will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.” This will allow him “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”. Second, in 1:41-45 Elizabeth, John the Baptist’s mother, upon seeing Mary the mother of Jesus was said to be “filled with the Holy Spirit.” The result in this case seems to be that she would have understanding concerning Mary’s condition and be able to prophesy about it. (Note that Mary did not even get a chance to say anything to her other than a greeting before Elizabeth launched into her prophecy!) Third, in 1:67 Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father “was filled with the Holy Spirit” when John was born. This resulted in a prophecy (1:68-79) about both John and Jesus. Fourth, in 4:1-2 we find the one occurrence of the adjective “full” in Luke. This also happens to be the only reference we have of Jesus being specifically described as “full” of the Holy Spirit. The result of his “fullness” was that “he was led by the Spirit in the desert” where he was tempted by the devil. Note that in all of the above four cases the filling of the Holy Spirit resulted in the performance of some activity desired by God. This fits very well with the descriptions of the filling of the Spirit in the OT. It also seems fair to conclude that the filling was only temporary in that it seems so closely tied to the performance of the associated task that after the task was

completed the filling would no longer be needed. In the case of Jesus, however, another element is added. The use of the adjective “full” by Luke seems to draw attention to the fact that Jesus is one who is **characterized by being full** of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Luke seems to use the phrase to describe a man’s governing characteristic or controlling disposition. Michael Green writes, “Thus we read of a man ‘full of leprosy’ (Luke 5:12), that is to say gripped by the disease. We read that Elymas was ‘full of all deceit and villainy’ (13:10) and understand that he was controlled by these evil impulses. The meaning of ‘full of the Holy Spirit’ is therefore not hard to fathom. It signifies someone who is habitually governed and controlled by the Lord the Spirit, just as Jesus was.”¹ The fullness of the Spirit in Jesus was therefore not simply for the performance of a task or the “sudden inspiration of a moment” (as is depicted in the other references so far) but it was said to characterize his whole life. This added dimension of the filling of the Spirit is also confirmed by the other four occurrences of the adjective “full” that have yet to be investigated. For these four we need to turn to Acts.

In Acts 6:3 the Twelve gather all of the disciples together and ask them to choose from among themselves seven men who will be able to look after the Grecian Jewish widows. One of the qualifications required of the Seven was that they be “full of the Spirit.” The disciples were to look for this quality as they would any other quality that might characterize someone’s life (like “wisdom” which was the other qualification required of the Seven). Verse 5 confirms that Stephen (one of the Seven) was in fact “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” In 7:55 Luke once again tells us that Stephen was “full of the Holy Spirit.” Although the “fullness” of the Spirit here seems to have allowed him to see a heavenly vision of Jesus it is also clear that it characterized his whole life. The fourth and last occurrence of the adjective “full” with respect to the Holy Spirit in Acts is found in 11:24 and pertains to Barnabas. The fact that “he was a good man” seems to be further explained by the fact that “he was full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” In other words, goodness characterized his life and the reason he could be considered good was that his life was characterized by being “full of the Holy Spirit and faith.”

¹ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* p. 149.

There are also five examples of the filling of the Holy Spirit in Acts. The first occurrence (in 2:4) is of all the disciples (not just the Twelve but about 120 people – 1:13-15) on the Day of Pentecost. This is a very interesting (and important) event. Phrases other than “filled with the Spirit” are used to describe the disciple’s experience. In 1:4-5 Jesus foretold of the event by saying to the disciples, “wait for **the gift** my Father promised... in a few days **you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**” And in 1:8 he said that **the Holy Spirit would come on them.** Also, in 2:17-18 Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32 as being fulfilled by the event. There the event is described as the **pouring out of God’s Spirit.** The results included speaking “in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (1:4), “declaring the wonders of God” (1:11), and Peter, as their spokesman, preaching the Gospel to the crowd. As a pivotal event in Acts it is referred to many times. For instance, in 10:44-47 Peter is seen preaching in the house of Cornelius when “**the Holy Spirit came on all** who heard the message.” The Jewish “believers who had come with Peter were astonished that **the gift of the Holy Spirit** had been **poured out even on the Gentiles.** For they had heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.” Then Peter said, “They have **received the Holy Spirit just as we have.**” And when Peter explained this to the believers back in Jerusalem in 11:15-17 he said, “**the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.** Then I remembered what the Lord [Jesus] had said, ‘...you will be **baptized with the Holy Spirit.**’ ...**God gave them the same gift as he gave us,** who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Within these few verses we find many different phrases used to refer to the same event involving both the disciples and the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost! The Holy Spirit “came on”, was “poured out”, was a “gift”, was “received”, was the medium in which they were “baptized”, and “filled”! Though the experience of the disciples in chapter 2 is viewed as one event are we to understand all of these phrases as being equivalent? The answer to this is that although each phrase need not represent a separate reality there is reason to believe that there is at least a difference between the baptism of the Spirit and the filling of the Spirit. Although the phrase “baptized with the Spirit” occurs only seven times in the NT it seems to refer to an *initial event* in the lives of all believers that results in their incorporation into the Church, the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:13). Also, the “baptism” of the Spirit seems to be equated with the “coming on”, the “promise”, and the “gift” of the Spirit which is “poured out” and “received” (Acts 1:4-5, 10:45-47, 11:15-17). Stott writes, “We

could sum it up by saying that these penitent believers received the *gift* of the Spirit which God had *promised* before the Day of Pentecost, and were thus *baptized* with the Spirit whom God [first] *poured out* on the Day of Pentecost.”² Notice also that in any one person’s life this event would not be repeatable because it is an initiatory event. In other words, once one is made part of the body of Christ he/she does not need to be made part of the body of Christ a second time! Once someone is initiated into the Football Hall of Fame they do not need to be initiated a second time! However, this is not the case with the “filling of the Spirit”. In Acts 4:8 we see that Peter is said to have been “filled with the Spirit” *again* (he was one of the disciples who was filled on the Day of Pentecost in 2:4) for the purpose of bearing witness to Jesus. Therefore, it seems fair to draw the conclusion that it is possible to be filled with the Spirit more than once. Also, as was observed above, being filled with the Spirit is either 1) something which God temporarily provides a person with for the accomplishing of a special task, or 2) a phrase which can be used to describe the governing characteristic of a person’s whole life. Thus, the baptism and the filling of the Spirit must be understood as two separate and distinct operations of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, as must have been the case with the disciples on the Day of Pentecost (2:4), the filling of the Spirit can (and in one sense actually does) occur at the same time as the baptism or initial reception of the Holy Spirit when a person becomes a believer.

Another occurrence of the filling of the Spirit in Acts is found in 4:31 where the disciples had just finished praying after Peter and John had been punished by the Sanhedrin. The verse says that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” Two things should be noted: 1) this is the second time that the disciples were said to have been filled with the Spirit (the first time was on the Day of Pentecost - 2:4), and 2) it resulted in their speaking the word of God boldly. The fourth instance of the filling of the Holy Spirit in Acts is in 9:17 and involves Saul (Paul) shortly after his encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. This event (although it may have occurred at the time of his conversion) seems to be God’s commissioning of Paul to be “my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before

² John R. W. Stott, *Baptism & Fullness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975) p. 25.

the people of Israel.” (9:15) Indeed, in verse 20 we read, “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.” It did not take Paul very long to start fulfilling his God-given role as an apostle after he had received the enabling and empowering of the filling of the Holy Spirit! The fifth instance of the filling of the Spirit that is specifically mentioned in Acts is found in 13:9 and again involves Saul (Paul). Elymas the sorcerer was trying to interfere with the spread of the gospel by keeping the proconsul, Sergius Paulos, “from the faith.” Saul speaks God’s judgment against him and Elymas becomes blind as Saul pronounced it! As a result, the proconsul believed not only because of the display of God’s power but because “he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord” (13:10-12). It seems that Luke wanted his reader(s) to understand that “the filling with the Holy Spirit is directly related to witness-bearing.”³ Indeed, the context of the sixth and final occurrence of specific references to the filling of the Spirit in Acts teaches the same thing. 13:52 says that “the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.” This is a summary statement that occurs after verse 49 which says, “The word of the Lord spread throughout the whole region.”

There is one more specific reference to the filling of the Holy Spirit in the NT and it is significant in more than one way. First, it is not in either Luke or Acts; it is in Eph. 5:18. Second, it occurs in a command to be filled. It is obvious that this verse and its context will be crucial for our understanding of the filling of the Holy Spirit.

It is enlightening to notice that the context of verse 18 pertains to Christian conduct and Christian living. Indeed, Chapter 5 is replete with phrases such as “Be imitators of God” (5:1), “live a life of love” (5:2), “among you there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people” (5:3), “Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (5:4), “Let no one deceive you with empty words” (5:6), “Live as children of light... and find out what pleases the Lord” (5:9-10), “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (5:11), “Be very careful, then, how you live... making the most of every opportunity” (5:15-16), “Wives, submit to your husbands”

³ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* p. 150.

(5:22), “Husbands, love your wives” (5:25). More could be said from chapters 4 and 6! All of these phrases insist on right conduct on the part of Christians. The exhortation in verse 18—“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit”—falls right in the middle of all these others!

The first thing that must be pointed out about verse 18 with regard to the contrast that Paul makes between being drunk on wine and being filled with the Spirit is stated well by F. F. Bruce. He writes, “The Spirit is [not] a substance with which man’s personality can be filled just as his body can be filled with wine.”⁴ In other words, Paul’s readers are to let their fullness be that which the Holy Spirit produces as opposed to the fullness or drunkenness which a material substance like wine produces. It would be ridiculous to talk about a person who is “half-full” of the Spirit (as we might about a glass of water, etc.). It should be obvious that with respect to being filled with the Holy Spirit one is either “full” or “not full”—there can be no in-between. Although there are some similarities between the two, the parallel can be taken too far. Stott’s warning is pertinent here, “it is a serious mistake to suppose that to be filled with the Spirit is a kind of spiritual inebriation in which we lose control of ourselves. On the contrary, ‘self-control’ is the final quality named as ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ in Gal. 5:22-23. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit we do not lose control; we gain it.”⁵ We are not to be “under the influence of alcohol” but “under the influence” of the Holy Spirit. The word *asotia* (debauchery or profligacy) “literally describes a condition in which a person cannot ‘save’ or control himself. It is because drunkenness involves a loss of self-control, Paul writes, that it is to be avoided. It is implied that the contrasting state, the fullness of the Spirit, involves no loss of self-control.”⁶

Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. argues for a cultic background of Dionysian worship for the verse. Apparently, during the pagan worship of Dionysus or Baachus (the god of wine) there was much drinking of wine accompanied by frenzied dancing and the eating of raw animal flesh.

⁴ F. F. Bruce *The Epistle to the Ephesians, A Verse-by-verse Exposition* (Pickering & Inglis, 1961) p. 110.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society - The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980) p. 204.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *Baptism & Fullness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975) p. 56.

“The purpose of the intoxication by wine and also the chewing of ivy, as well as the eating of raw animal flesh, was to have Dionysus enter the body of the worshiper and fill him with ‘enthusiasm’ or the spirit of the god.”⁷ Although it seems very likely that this was part of the culture in Ephesus it seems unlikely that this is what Paul is addressing in verse 18. First, the parallel would not fit because Paul was addressing people (Christians) in whom the Holy Spirit was already indwelling; He has already “entered” believers. Also, the verse does not require any specific cultural background in order to be understood. It is simply enough to know that alcohol by itself is enough to “influence” a person!

In order to most completely understand verse 18 the verb used by Paul in it must be closely looked at. First, *plerousthe* is in the imperative mood. Thus, “be filled” is an authoritative command; it is an obligation; it is a duty; it is *not* optional for Christians. Therefore, it is wrong (i.e., it would be a sin!) to not be filled with the Spirit. It is also implied in the fact that because Paul had to make this exhortation it is *possible* for a Christian to not be filled. Second, it is in the plural form. It is addressed to a group of people (“the saints in Ephesus”—1:1) and is not limited to any one person or persons. The command is universally made to (and is expected to be obeyed by) all Christians of all generations; it is not a privilege reserved for an elite few. Third, the verb is in the passive voice. It is something that *God does* for us. The NEB correctly highlights this aspect: “Let the Holy Spirit fill you.” Yet, at the same time, it must be remembered, that it is a command which indicates that we also have a responsibility in it. Four, it is in the present tense. The implication of this is that we are to “go on being filled”; it is to be continuously renewed. We are not to let ourselves be “emptied” only later to be filled again but we are to be “being filled”; we are to “be filled and keep on being filled”.⁸ Now that we understand the implications of Paul’s command we are ready to learn how to fulfill it! However, in verses 19f Paul does not tell us how! Or does he?

Verses 19-21 are built around five participles: “speaking”, “singing”, “making music”, “giving thanks” and “submitting”. The next question that we need to ask is how are these

⁷ Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. *The Dionysian Background of Ephesians 5:18* (Bibliotheca Sacra, Volume 136, July-September, 1979) p. 249-257.

⁸ Billy Graham *The Holy Spirit* (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 1978) p. 143.

participles related to the verb *plerousthe* of verse 18? There are a number of possibilities. First, they could be imperatival and function simply as imperatives in their own phrases. This is possible; many translations reflect this interpretation. Second, they could be adverbial under which there are numerous sub-types: Telic/Purposive/Result—“be filled in order to or and so speak...”, Instrumental/Modal—“be filled by speaking...”, or Circumstantial/Concomitant—“as you are filled also speak...” or a combination of them! Note that if the participles are taken as modal then Paul has in fact told us how to be filled! This, however, does not seem likely because it is hard to see how a verb could be followed by five modal participles (five ways of doing something!). Also, the imperatival force is not lost if the participles are taken as concomitant (attendant circumstances). Although I found no author who really discusses this issue Dr. M. J. Harris offers the suggestion that the participles function as both telic and concomitant. He suggests that there exists aspects of each: the actions described by the participles are both simultaneous (not subsequent) to and the results of being filled. If this is indeed the case then Paul is offering some solid objective evidences for the fullness of the Spirit. First, it should not be understood as a private or mystical experience. The participles describe activities that are to take place in the context of Christian fellowship and public, corporate worship. Those who claim to be filled with the Spirit should be characterized by “intelligent, controlled, healthy relationships with God and each other.”⁹ Indeed, the evidences are primarily moral not miraculous (though that, too, is possible). To summarize the implications of this passage: the person who claims to be filled with the Holy Spirit should be known by others as one who participates in mutual exhortation with fellow believers (e.g., the reciprocal invitation to praise God seen in Psalm 85), joyful public worship of God, thanksgiving to God for everything (a complaining or “grumbling ‘spirit’ is not compatible with the Holy Spirit”), and selfless service toward others (aggressive, self-assertive, brash, or self-centered behavior does not accompany the filling of the Holy Spirit).¹⁰ The list of results that Paul gives us here does not have to be exclusive. Indeed, we have already noted other

⁹ John R. W. Stott, *Baptism & Fullness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975) p. 56-57.

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society - The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980) p. 207-208.

results mentioned by Luke and they need not stop there, either. The fact that Paul only mentions it once seems to be an indication that he refers to it in other places by different names (e.g., perhaps “walk in the Spirit”—Gal. 5:16, etc.). In fact, Billy Graham has *volunteered* that on the basis of there being no concise formula to be found in the NT for fulfilling Paul’s command, that Christians of the early church did not need to know how because it is a description of the normal Christian life and everything that is involved in living it!¹¹

The point has been reached where the question, “How does one obey Paul’s command; how does someone ‘be filled with the Spirit’?” must now be answered. It is not as simple as praying for it. Although that may be valid we are not told to do so and there are no examples of it in the NT. It may be difficult to sum it up and create a formula that is not specifically laid out in Scripture but Billy Graham offers a most comprehensive approach.¹² He says that it involves three main things: 1) Understanding, 2) Submission, and 3) Faith. There are three things one must understand: a) That the Holy Spirit dwells in all Christians (Rom. 8:9), b) God commands us to be filled and wants us to be filled (Eph. 5:18), and 3) We must deal honestly and completely with all known sin. As sin is a continuous problem we must deal with it continually. Submission involves two things: a) confession of sins and repentance, and b) yielding to God’s will (Rom. 6:13, 12:1). There is a difference between a servant and a slave. A servant just gives part of his time and energy to the one he serves while for a slave there is not even one moment that does not belong to his master. We must be God’s slaves. Dr. Graham writes, “I believe that we should pray that God will take possession of our lives totally and completely. We should pray that we would be emptied of self -- self-love, self-will, self-ambition -- and be placed completely at His disposal.” God will be our guide and strength as we yield to Him.¹³ The step of faith involves reckoning (Rom.6:11) that we are filled *if* the first two steps have been taken. The filling of the Spirit may not be accompanied by any feelings. And, it certainly does not result in any kind of perfectionism. It will have to be a continuous process (Eph. 5:18). Green writes, “To be filled with the Spirit means to allow Jesus to have

¹¹ Billy Graham *The Holy Spirit* (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 1978) p. 160.

¹² Billy Graham *The Holy Spirit* (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 1978) p. 161-180.

¹³ Billy Graham *The Holy Spirit* (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 1978) p. 174.

the fullest control in our lives that we are conscious of. In so far as we do that, we will always be finding new areas of self-centeredness to surrender as the Lord who is Spirit possesses us more and more fully. To such submission all Christians are called.”¹⁴

The Christian is command to be continuously filled with the Spirit. “It is not a plateau on to which you are ushered by some second stage in initiation... Call it a second blessing if you will. But do not let it rest there... Let us look for a third, and a hundred and third as we press on...” It is to be a continual state for the Christian, “but he can look for special fillings of the Spirit in special circumstances, particularly when he has opportunity to witness for Christ... It is also important to remember that bold witness, a united prayer meeting, humble administration, and courageous joyful testimony in the face of persecution are no less marks of men who are filled with the Spirit of God” than are displays of miraculous signs!¹⁵

¹⁴ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* p. 153.

¹⁵ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* p. 152.

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