

What does it mean “be filled with the Spirit?”
A Series on the Holy Spirit - Baptism verses Filling: Part 4

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit. (Eph 5:18)

The “filling of the Holy Spirit” is understood to be a divine process that occurs with a Believer who is a passive participant. How does one understand the phrase “be filled with the Spirit” found in Ephesians 5:18? The context of Paul’s letter to the church of Ephesus indicates a command to the Believer to take some sort of active part in the process of filling.

Grammatically, Paul’s use of the verb “be filled” in Ephesians 5:18 is identified as a present passive imperative. Without going into the details of the grammatical structure and tenses, the Greek grammar can be seen in the following manner:

As an imperative, it is a command to Christians; thus, it is not an option.

“Filled” is a causative verb in the active voice. The present tense indicates that this filling is not a singular event, but rather a continuous replenishment. It literally means “go on being filled.”

The verb “be filled” is in the passive voice; the subject of the verb (Christians) is being acted upon by another (the Holy Spirit). This passive grammatical structure of “be filled” eliminates the possibility that a Believer can actively do something towards the process of being filled. What then does Paul’s imperative mean?

The immediate context of Ephesians 5:18 may provide some clarity to Paul’s command. The section begins with a conclusion to “be imitators of God,” which is a radical idea; true children of God want to grow up like Him (Eph 5:1)! In contrast, the immoral, impure and idolatrous will not inherit the kingdom of God (Eph 5:3-5). And, as Paul reminds the Ephesians of what they once were, he enlarges on the contrast between darkness and light (Eph 5:8-13).

It is in this context that Paul warns against the folly of drunkenness (Eph 5:18), which may imply that it is a serious temptation to the Ephesians. In contrast to craving the inebriating effects of alcohol, Paul wants the Ephesians to pursue the filling of the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to note that Paul does not command an abstinence from alcohol.

On Pentecost, mockers viewed the spirit filled disciples as drunk (Acts 2:13).

Paul’s command is to “continue to be characterized by the ongoing condition of fullness by means of the Spirit’s work in your life.” As drunkenness results in a wasteful profligate life, fullness of the Spirit results in a life of thankfulness and gratitude to God; “making melody with your heart” is a life fulfilled and content (Eph 5:18-19) and living with a love for one another.

While the Bible does not provide any explicit information about how a Believer responds to Paul’s present passive imperative “be filled,” there is an example of the apostles being filled with the Holy Spirit that may provide an answer (Acts 4:23-31).

Some observations can be made about the apostles being filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:23-31):

1. Observed by their opponents, the apostles’ faith was characterized as confident in their knowledge and belief in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:13-16).
2. The apostles’ prayer associates their opponents (Herod, Pontius Pilate, Gentiles and Israel) as fulfillment of the prophecy in Psalms 2:1-2 in praise to God (Acts 4:25-28).

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3. Their prayer includes a petition, “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond servants may speak Your word with all confidence” (Acts 4:29-30). It is a petition that does not ask for protection, relief or judgment of their opponents! Instead of on themselves, the apostles’ focus is on the gospel and glorifying Jesus Christ!

It appears that filling of the Spirit is founded on the foundation of strong faith, a faith that believes and wholly trusts in the historical facts of Jesus and His words and causes the apostles to behave in a manner that reflects that trust. Their filling also affects the congregation (Acts 4:33) as the Bible records the extraordinary generosity of Believers as they share everything (Acts 4:32-37).

There is a basis in this view as Jesus Himself comments on the quality of one’s faith.

“And He said to them, ‘Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.’” (Matt 17:20)

“And the Lord said, ‘If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and be planted in the sea’; and it would obey you.’” (Luke 17:6)

When the verb “to fill” is used as an adjective in relation to the Holy Spirit, it describes a condition of fullness as someone who is characterized by a quality of that which fills him. It is not a consequence of the filling, but as a reflection of the quality of faith and cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

Thus when one behaves in a manner that demonstrates a genuine lack of trust in God’s word, the Holy Spirit can be grieved (Eph 4:30) or quenched (1 Thess 5:19).

Paul’s imperative “be filled” places the focus of growing one’s faith, learning more about the work of Christ and increasing one’s trust in God’s word, on the Holy Spirit. While the indwelling of the Holy Spirit enables the Believer to sanctify, devote, and dedicate himself to God, the sanctification is determined to the extent of one’s efforts of cooperating with the Holy Spirit (Rom 12:1-2).

With this view, “be filled” is not having more of the Holy Spirit; instead, it is the Holy Spirit having more of the Believer.

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