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QUESTION: What does it mean to be spirit-filled? In what sense (if any) are today's Christians commanded to be spirit-filled?

ANSWER: There is one and only one place in the Bible where Christians are commanded to be spirit-filled. In Ephesians 5:18: "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit." The question, then, is not whether Christians should be spirit-filled, but rather, what it means to be spirit-filled.

It is instructive to first address what is not meant by the command in Ephesians 5:18. Some Christians teach about spirit-filling primarily from the book of Acts and, accordingly, several comments are in order. First, the Acts is historical narrative. In it, Luke records historical events in the first century, particularly the development of the church in Jerusalem and the spread of the gospel and planting of churches in other areas. As part of Luke's recording of this history, Luke sometimes mentions a person or group being "filled" with the Holy Spirit. We need to first recognize that historical narrative is exactly that, namely history. It is poor hermeneutics to assume that simply because a certain event happened in a first century church that the same exact event should happen the same exact way today. We need the text to give some indication before making that leap. Although some Christians make this leap, they only do so for the passages they want to use to support their teaching about spirit-filling. For example, in Acts 5, we read about Ananias and Sapphira who fell dead in the church because they lied about the amount of money they received for their property. And yet, we do not routinely see people falling dead in the middle of church services today. But if we are going to read historical narrative (like the Acts or 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, etc.) as blueprints for modern Christian experience, then we should not cherry pick the passages that we are going to apply that way. The more solid approach to interpreting the Bible is to understand that historical narratives (like the Acts) do not necessarily give blue prints for modern experience, nor is that their intent.

Second, we can make some observations about the occurrences of spirit-filling in the book of Acts. The five occurrences are in Acts 2:4, 4:8, 4:31, 9:17 and 13:9. The first observation to be made is that in each case the person or persons filled with the Spirit did nothing to cause the filling; it was not a volitional choice they made. Instead, it simply happened when God made it happen. Second, in each case, the filling was for a ministry purpose. In Acts 2:4, the filling was associated with Pentecost and was used for a ministry purpose as persons of other languages (not some ecstatic speech, but genuine foreign languages) heard the good news. In Acts 4:8, Peter was filled with the Spirit preparatory to his preaching a sermon. In Acts 4:31, people were filled with the Spirit, which resulted in their speaking "the word of God with boldness" and then there was a "multitude of them that believed." In Acts 9:17, shortly after Paul's Damascus

Road salvation experience, he is filled with the Spirit just as the scales are removed from his eyes. Just as the Damascus Road experience was unique to Paul, so also was the removal of the scales as he was filled. Finally, in Acts 13:9, Paul was filled for a specific ministry purpose (dealing with Elymas the sorcerer and sharing the word of God with Sergius Paulus). Third, the filling was in each case temporary, presumably ending when the specific ministry purpose ended. Fourth, the Acts has 28 chapters, but no occurrences of spirit-filling after Acts 13:9.

Returning to Ephesians 5:18, we should note some reasons why the filling Paul commands there is not the same as the filling that occurred in the Acts verses referenced above. First, in each occurrence of spirit-filling in the Acts, the Greek word translated *filled* is *pimplemi* (Strong no. 4130). In Ephesians 5:18, the Greek word is *pleroo* (Strong no. 4137). Both words get used in the New Testament to indicate a literal filling and a figurative one (e.g., filled with anger) and although it is difficult to see any significant difference in the two terms, the fact that Paul uses a different term in Ephesians 5:18 than the term used in the Acts verses gives us at least a suggestion that the two ideas may not be the same. More importantly, in Ephesians 5:18, Paul commands (“be filled”) that his audience (originally the Christians at the local church in Ephesus) be spirit-filled. This means that, whatever the spirit-filling is, it is something that at least involves a volitional choice by the Christian, which is different from the instances in Acts where the filling occurred independent of a volitional choice. In addition, the command carries the idea of a continuous, not temporary, filling, which again is not the same as what happened in any of the instances in the Acts. Third, each spirit-filling in Acts was for a ministry purpose, but the filling in Ephesians 5:18 is not limited to any particular circumstance and is, instead, a general command applicable to all circumstances. Fourth, each spirit-filling in Acts resulted in ministry (although Paul’s losing the scales on his eyes does not quite fit the pattern, it was indisputably an experience unique to Paul). But the spirit-filling in Ephesians 5:18 does not result in ministry, but instead in singing, thanksgiving, and submission.

When we scrutinize the Acts occurrences of spirit-filling carefully against what Paul is discussing we see that plainly two different ideas are being addressed since the only thing they have in common is that both involve the Holy Spirit. This means that what occurred in Acts, since it is different than what Paul commands to the Ephesians, is nowhere commanded in the Scripture, nor could it be. Since neither Paul nor Peter did anything to be spirit-filled in the Acts occurrences, but rather it was done in God’s sovereign will, that sort of spirit-filling cannot be commanded. Instead, it will happen as and when God wants it to, if at all. In contrast, the spirit-filling Paul commands to the Ephesians is something he expected everyone in his audience to do consistently, and by application to us today, it is something we should do consistently. So then the question becomes, what is the spirit-filling in Ephesians 5:18 and how do you do it?

Notice carefully the language Paul uses: “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.” He sets up a simple compare/contrast between being drunk with wine and being filled with the Spirit. A person who is drunk with wine is one whose behavior is being influenced or controlled by the alcohol. Accordingly, one who is filled with the Spirit is one whose behavior (thoughts, words, deeds) is being influenced or controlled by God the Holy Spirit. This idea is not uncommon to our thinking. We often make statements like “he was filled with rage,” by which we mean his rage influenced or controlled his behavior. So now the question becomes, how do we allow the Holy Spirit to influence or control our lives?

The easiest way to see the answer to this question is to compare the parallel passages in Colossians and Ephesians, which are, after all, “parallel” letters (they were written very close in time by Paul to two churches geographically close together and addressing similar issues). Compare Ephesians 5:18 and the verses that follow explaining what the spirit-filling looks like in the life of a believer with Colossians 3:16 and the verses that follow explaining what the word of Christ dwelling richly in a believer looks like in the believer’s life. Consider the following verses:

Col. 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Col. 3:17 And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.

Eph. 5:18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

Eph. 5:19 Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;

Eph. 5:20 Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;

It is apparent in these verses, and in the verses that follow in both the Ephesians and Colossians passages addressing submission in various contexts that Paul is addressing the same idea in both epistles. The results of letting the “word of Christ dwell in you richly” and being “filled with the Spirit” are the same. Since each of these actions leads to identical results, the two actions are one and the same. Paul is speaking to flip sides of a coin. To be filled, i.e., controlled or influenced, by the Holy Spirit is to allow the word of Christ to dwell in us richly.

We need to be sure to understand that this is not mere academic knowledge of the Word of God, nor is it rote memorization. Instead, it is learning the Word of

God and living it out. We all come into our relationship with God with much baggage between our ears. All of that junk (the worldly thinking) must be jettisoned and replaced with God's thinking, and God's point of view is exclusively contained in the Bible:

Rom. 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is* your reasonable service.

Rom. 12:2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is* that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

The transformation occurs as our mind is renewed (old junk out, truth in). But again, it is not just learning, but living the truth that matters.

Heb. 5:14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

The writer to the Hebrews, referring to certain portions of the Word of God as "strong meat," explains that more mature believers take strong meat and that the more mature believers are those that have lived (or "exercised") the Word of God. They can "discern both good and evil," or to use Paul's phraseology in Romans, "prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

Although we are only admonished once to be spirit-filled, since we understand this to be the command of God superintended through Paul, once is quite enough. Christians need to stop chasing experiences that some are apt to label as spirit-filling and instead start focusing on being spirit-filled in the way God intended and commanded, which is a growing relationship with Jesus Christ as we both learn and live his Word, letting it dwell in us richly. God is about the business of transforming us into the likeness of his Son, from glory to glory, and the filling (control/influence) of God the Holy Spirit enabling us to understand and apply the Word of God to daily life is critical.