

# Unraveling the Filling of the Spirit, Part 1

*by Geoff Volker*

## **The Problem, As I See It**

"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."  
Ephesians 5:18 (NIV)

### **What does it mean to be "filled with the Spirit"?**

A large section of evangelicalism views the "Filling of the Spirit" as a state one enters by faith -- a state of being "controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit." Now, the question I want to pose is: What exactly does that mean? My intent in this article is to demonstrate that the popular understanding of this concept is absolutely unbiblical as well as completely unworkable. This is asking the believer to do something that cannot be done. Yet, in saying this, it must be clearly understood I am in no way questioning the spiritual integrity of those who hold this view. I believe it is their sincere desire to please their Lord that motivates them to hold this particular doctrinal concept.

This view is espoused by the theological system of Dispensationalism. Lewis Sperry Chafer most clearly spells out how this concept is worked out in the whole scheme of sanctification in his book: *He That is Spiritual: A Classic Study of the Christian Life*.

### **It's a matter of definition**

The first problem that confronts us is trying to come up with a definition of being "filled with the Spirit" that applies to all the verses where the phrase is used. This is an impossible task.

Evidently, the phrase "filled with the Spirit" is used in more than one way. In principle, this ought not to surprise us because the word "justify" (*dikaioo*) is used precisely this way. In Romans 3:28 it is obvious the Apostle Paul uses "justify" in a legal sense to show our acceptance by the Father is not based on what we do, but rather, on what Jesus did on the cross for us.

"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." Romans 3:28 (NIV)

Whereas, in James 2:24 "justify" is used in a very different sense. James is using "justify" in the sense of "demonstrating" or "making evident" a saving faith -- that is, a true saving faith must have a corresponding desire to obey the Lord or it is not a saving faith.

"You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." James 2:24 (NIV)

So, we have the same word "justify," yet two different meanings. The context determines which definition is being used.

Now, let's turn to the phrase "filled with the Spirit." It is my contention this phrase is used in at least two different ways. In Acts 4:8 we have the account of Peter's response to the Sanhedrin's question concerning by what power or name he healed the crippled beggar at the Temple gate. Before Peter's response is given, we have this verse:

"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them ..." Acts 4:8 (NIV)

This seems to describe something that happened to Peter. The same idea is found in Acts 4:31 where we find the phrase "filled with the Spirit" used to describe what happened after the believers prayed.

"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." Acts 4:31 (NIV)

Once again this seems to be describing something that happened to the believers. This use of "filled with the Spirit" is an experience that God gave believers, not something that they were to do.

Now, let us look at Acts 6:3 where the believers were called on to choose seven men "full of the Spirit" to be in charge of the distribution of food.

"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and Wisdom." Acts 6:3 (NIV)

Here the "filled with the Spirit" is a description of the life of certain believers. What Luke is describing is not an experience that God "dumped" on individuals (one might call this "Biblical Dumpology"), but a way of life that the believers were responsible to live out before their Lord.

So, it seems that we have at least two different definitions of being "filled with the Spirit." One definition is an experience the Lord bring on someone (Dumpology), and where or if it will occur is up to God, not man. This "filling with the Spirit" is not normative (to be expected in the usual course of the Christian life) but a divine surprise that ought to be thoroughly enjoyed but never expected. The second definition refers to something the believer is responsible to do. What that is, we will examine next.

In trying to figure out exactly what Ephesians 5:18 means, our first place to look is a parallel passage in Paul's letter to the church at Colosse. Much of Colossians is contained in Ephesians. Our particular verse in question (Eph. 5:18) is defined in Colossians 3:16. The context of both verses is the same.

"Let the word of God dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." Colossians 3:16 (NIV)

Now the question is, what does it mean to "let the word of God dwell in you richly?" In both Ephesians and Colossians, what comes after our passage in question reveals obeying Biblical commands such as giving thanks for all things, as well as handling an authority relationship in a particular manner (i.e., husbands loving wives and wives submitting to husbands). My contention is that the phrase "let the word of God dwell in you richly," as well as "be filled with the Spirit," is another way of saying, "make Jesus Lord," or "obey the commands of your Lord." The Greek language in this instance is very helpful, for the phrase "be filled" is in the form of an on-going command. "Keep on being filled with the Spirit." What the Apostle Paul seems to be saying to the believers is that they are to pursue making Jesus Lord of every area of their lives as they are now in fact doing. In doing this, they would be "letting the word of God dwell in them richly," allowing Scripture to have its full effect in their lives.

The problem with this understanding of the "Filling" is that it runs counter to the popular understanding which is "being controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit." The popular view teaches that by faith you are to allow the Spirit of God to control your life. Now, my question is:

How do you allow the Holy Spirit to control your life? In answering this question it ought to be pointed out that the only place in Scripture where the Spirit is said to control the believer's life is in Romans 8.

"You are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." Romans 8:9 (NIV)

Here the Apostle Paul is pointing out that if one is a believer in Jesus Christ, the Spirit is controlling him. This describes a state in which the believer lives, not something the believer is to attain. Romans 8 sets forth the "changed life" purchased by Jesus Christ on the cross for all those who were to receive the gift of faith.