



The Work of the Holy Spirit

A message from the
**ORTHODOX
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH**

BY RICHARD B. GAFFIN, JR.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

Published by
The Committee on Christian Education
of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

© 2011 The Committee on Christian Education
of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

Digital edition, 2012

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from
The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles,
a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The author is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and
recently retired from teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary.

To order copies of this booklet or other literature,
call 215/830-0900 (you will be billed)
or order online (and pay by credit card)
at www.opc.org/publications.html.

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Spirituality | 5 |
| The Gift of the Spirit..... | 9 |
| Sharing in the Gift of the Spirit | 15 |
| Living Out of the Gift of the Spirit | 21 |
| How to Be Filled with the Spirit | 29 |



Spirituality

What is spirituality, true spirituality? What is it that makes a person genuinely “spiritual”? How do you recognize such a person? Are you, reader, spiritual?

Ours is a time very much preoccupied with questions like these. At the time of writing this, Oprah Winfrey’s great popularity, at least in North America, is apparently explained in large part because she has convinced many that she has found true spirituality—by freeing herself, she believes, from her repressive Christian upbringing—and she is ready to share with you how you can find it for yourself.

The interest of screen star Richard Gere and many others in the Dalai Lama runs much deeper than a concern for the freedom and political rights of the Tibetan people. Large numbers of people are drawn to him as a religious leader because they believe he embodies and knows the way to authentic spirituality.

When we inquire into the specifics of contemporary claims like these, the answers forthcoming tend to be fairly vague. But along with much that’s nebulous, a couple of things come through quite clearly: spirituality is *personal* and it’s *plural*. I must find it *within me* and I must find it *for myself*. My spirituality is mine, a capacity I have that only I can discover and express, as is yours. I mustn’t try to impose mine on you, nor should you try to impose yours on me.

For Christians, who trust in Christ as their Savior and Lord, and who believe the Bible is God’s Word—and I’m writing this primarily for them—it shouldn’t be hard to point out what is flawed and fundamentally wrong with so much current spirituality. It reflects the religious relativism and pluralism of our day, with its adamant aversion to the Bible’s teaching on spirituality.

The Bible is unmistakably clear about two fundamental spiritual realities. First, all human beings are sinners, in fact so hopelessly sinful, so inexcusably guilty and helplessly corrupt, as to be spiritually *dead*. Second, Jesus Christ, because of what he has done in his life, death, and resurrection, is the only Savior of sinners able to deliver us from our sin and its consequences. He and he alone is able to make us spiritually alive and

sound.

So, Christians must resist the aberrant spiritualities of our day. These deny the inescapable spiritual black holes we are, when left to our own resources. Still, the questions I began with above are there for Christians. In the midst of so much false spirituality, what is true spirituality? What does it look like? What does it mean to be spiritual?

Answers to these questions, we anticipate, lie in the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the activity of the Spirit of the one true and living God. But with that said—and it’s certainly correct—it also bears recalling that these are perennial questions. We are hardly the first Christians to raise them. Issues of spirituality have been with the church from its beginning, a paramount and often contentious concern. In the course of its history, as the church has diversified and divided, different types or traditions of spirituality have emerged—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant, to mention only the main lines of a large and complicated picture.

My interest here is not to explore these traditional differences further—some of that will happen as we go on—but rather to take note of some more recent developments. About fifty years ago, when I was a seminary student, a slogan sometimes heard was “The Holy Spirit is the forgotten member of the Trinity.” But that can hardly be said today. The intervening decades have witnessed an unprecedented surge of renewed and widespread, indeed worldwide, interest in the Holy Spirit and his work. Throughout this period, probably no issue has occupied the world church more than this. Just about everyone, it seems, is talking about the Holy Spirit.

But, while everyone may be talking about the Spirit, everyone is not saying the same thing. A nearly unending flood of literature continues to exhibit a confusing welter of claims and counterclaims. The result, as many Christians know from their personal contacts, is this disconcerting state of affairs: the one Holy Spirit of God, given to unify the church, has become an occasion for tension and division within the church.

What is the solution to this distressing situation? Is there one? There is. Notice what I did *not* say just above. I didn’t say *the Spirit* is the source or cause of division among Christians about his work and gifts. The source of that discord lies elsewhere. It comes from not listening to the Spirit.

But how do we listen to the Spirit? Is that even possible? Where can I hear what the Spirit has to say and know for sure it’s the Spirit I’m hearing? The answer to that crucial question does not come from any person or church claiming to speak with final authority for or about the Spirit. Nor is it

found in my or anyone else's experience of the Spirit.

Rather, the answer—the only answer—is, in that memorable phrase, “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.10). The Bible alone is God-breathing today, from beginning to end, because of its unique, “God-breathed” origin in the past (2 Timothy 3:16). It is the only certain and infallibly reliable voice of the Spirit for the church today on all matters that pertain to Christian faith and life, including those that concern the Spirit and his work. We learn *of* the Spirit and his work only as we listen, first and last, *to* the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10–14). We discover what are to be our expectations of his work in our lives only as, in possession of the Bible, we are armed with “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17) and are exposed to that penetrating Spirit-sword as it, “living and active,” addresses us at the core of our being and in our deepest concerns (Hebrews 4:12).

But what about Christian experience of the Spirit? Doesn't that count for something? Of course it does. But neither my experience nor yours nor any other Christian's is the definitive source for settling our understanding and determining our expectations of the Spirit's work in our lives. That source is Scripture and Scripture alone, rightly understood. Our experience is essential, but only as it corroborates that teaching by conforming to it.



The Gift of the Spirit

No doubt there is more than one way to go about briefly examining the Bible's teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit. One, however, we should not adopt, though it is widely followed today, particularly in Pentecostal and other charismatic circles. That approach focuses on the book of Acts, in particular on accounts there of baptism with the Holy Spirit and instances of tongues-speaking, prophesying, and miracle working. These accounts are then read as providing models to be replicated in the experience of Christians today.

That sort of approach misses the primary purpose of Acts. That purpose is indicated in 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." It is important to recognize that this promise is not addressed, at least not directly, to every Christian regardless of time and place. The "you" in verse 8 refers to *the apostles* (see verse 2), that is, those who were set apart, from among a larger number who had been with Christ during his earthly ministry, to be his authoritative witnesses, primarily to his resurrection (verses 20–26). Accordingly, the promise of verse 8 expresses a program of *apostolic* activity that includes others in the church associated with them. The rest of Acts describes the ongoing realization and completion of this apostolic program.

An overall purpose of Acts, in other words, is to document an *apostolic* agenda that has been *completed*: the apostolic spread of the gospel, the extension of the church, from "Jerusalem ... to the ends of earth" (Rome). The ethnic significance of this geographic movement is unmistakable, made clear, for instance, by the parallelism in the Isaiah 49 passage Paul cites in Acts 13:47: "light for *the Gentiles*, ... salvation to *the ends of the earth*." Acts describes the expanding scope, through the apostles, of this church-building gospel from Jew (Jerusalem-Judea) to half-Jew (Samaria) to non-Jew (the Gentile ends of the earth). Their activity signals the universality of God's saving purpose, as the proclamation of the promised salvation fulfilled in Christ spreads from one nation, Israel, to all nations.

This aspect of the apostles' activity is captured graphically in Ephesians 2:19–22 (see also 1 Peter 2:4–5), where Paul pictures the church as a building under construction. In a context (verses 11–18) where the

universality of salvation and the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ effected by the gospel is again prominent, the apostles (and prophets), with Christ as the cornerstone, constitute the *foundation* of the *one* church-house that God is constructing in the period between Christ's ascension and his return.

This house, in other words, is a *historical* model. The laying of the apostolic-prophetic foundation of the church-house is complete. It is not an ongoing activity that continues to the present. Nor does it have to be relaid periodically (assuming, as we must, that God, its master architect-builder, knows what he's doing!). As the work of Christ, the foundation-cornerstone (see 1 Corinthians 3:11), is completed, unrepeatable, and noncontinuing, so also is the foundational role of the apostles. Answering to the once-for-all, finished work of Christ is the once-for-all, finished witness of the apostles to that saving work and its implications. The foundational period of the church is over, in the past, as is, accordingly, the time when apostles (and prophets) were alive and active in the church. The church today is in its postapostolic period when, in terms of Paul's model, its *superstructure* is being erected, an ongoing activity until Christ returns that rests firmly on the building's finished, well-laid, Christ-centered, and apostolic foundation.

Acts, then, is not an open-ended chronicling of loosely chosen episodes from the earliest days of the church's history ("when Christians were really Christians"!) for our emulation today. Acts is not amenable to an added chapter 29 (or more) or a Part 3 to Theophilus needed to complete the narrative it presumably leaves unfinished. Rather, it ends where Luke intended, with the completion of the worldwide apostolic task he set out to document. Notice in this regard that Paul is aware that through his ministry as "an apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13), the gospel is being spread "in the whole world," "in all creation" (Colossians 1: 5–6, 23).

What about Pentecost then? If the experience of the apostles and the others present with them described in Acts 2 doesn't provide a model or pattern to be sought and replicated in the lives of Christians subsequently until Christ returns, what is the significance of what happened on that day?

Though occurring near the beginning of Acts, Pentecost is clearly the high point of the book as a whole, of the entire history that Luke narrates in Part 2 to Theophilus. Why? Pentecost has this climactic prominence because the baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5)—also described as the "pouring out" or "sending" of the Spirit (2:33; Luke 24:49)—completes the once-for-all work of Christ. The importance of Pentecost is nothing less than this.

We miss the point of Pentecost if we focus on the experience of those

who were present and its assumed potential as a model for our own, no matter how striking and memorable that experience undoubtedly was. Pentecost is much more important than their experience. Without what took place then, we may fairly say, the work that Christ entered history to do would be unfinished.

This importance may be seen from a couple of related angles in Luke-Acts. In Acts 1:5, Jesus looks both forward and backward by connecting his promise that soon the apostles will be baptized with the Spirit, a promise that we know was fulfilled on Pentecost, with the ministry of John the Baptist marked by his water baptism. Why Jesus makes this connection is clear from all four gospel accounts of John's ministry.

The opening verses of Luke 3 summarize John's ministry by capturing what was central in it and defining it as a whole. Verses 15–17 recount a comparison John made in response to the crowd's question whether he was the Messiah. In that comparison, baptism is the common denominator that highlights the difference between the ministries of John and the coming Messiah. But why does baptism serve as the basis of comparison? Because a baptizing activity is a basic index of each ministry. "I am not the Messiah," John says in effect. "I am but the forerunner, the one who prepares for the Messiah's imminent coming. Accordingly, my baptism is with water; it is only a sign, a pointer. In contrast, the Messiah's baptism, a basic index of his ministry, will be with the Holy Spirit and fire. That baptism is the reality to which my ministry, marked by water baptism, points."

In this passage, then, John surveys the ministry of Christ as a whole, and at its heart, as central as anything else, is baptism with the Holy Spirit. From this perspective, Christ's work on earth, culminating in the cross as the atonement for the sins of those he came to save, is properly seen as one large effort to secure for them, and give to them, the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is what Christ did for his people on the day of Pentecost. There is nothing subsidiary or secondary about what happened at Pentecost; it was no mere "second blessing." The baptism with the Spirit that took place then is a matter of first order, primary blessing, blessing integral to the salvation Christ came to accomplish. Without that baptism, that gift, Christ's work for our salvation would not be complete.

These reflections on John the Baptist's revelation concerning Jesus are reinforced by Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. As that preaching draws to its close, he affirms climactically, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has

poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:32–33). Four events are linked here: Jesus’ resurrection (revealing the saving efficacy of his messianic ministry culminating in the cross, verses 22–31), his ascension, his reception of the Spirit from the Father, and his outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Clearly these events are inseparable; any one only occurred with the others either having already taken place or in view. Together, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, reception of the Spirit in the ascension, and Pentecost constitute a single complex of events. In fact, they constitute a once-for-all event-complex. Pentecost is no more capable of being repeated in individual Christian experience than Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension are capable of such repetition.

Despite a widespread misconception, Pentecost does not bring a fundamentally new or different experience of the Spirit. The differences in experiencing the Spirit between Old Testament believers and New Testament Christians are real and important, but no more than comparative: richer or greater or fuller for the latter. Rather, the newness of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost resides primarily in two related considerations. First, the Spirit is finally present because Christ’s work of accomplishing salvation has been completed. The Spirit that came at Pentecost, fulfilling the promise of the Father, is the Spirit of the now-glorified Christ (“the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified,” John 7:39 *NASB*); he is the *eschatological* Spirit. Second, the Spirit that came at Pentecost is the Spirit poured out on all flesh. The people of God are now the fellowship of the Spirit, consisting of Gentiles as well as Jews, from every nation, kindred, tribe, and tongue; he is the *universal* Spirit.

If Pentecost means anything, it is that the Spirit is here with the church to stay—permanently, irrevocably. Because of Pentecost, believers can be confident that the Spirit will not abandon them. But to say that is also to say that Pentecost means that Christ is here to stay and will not abandon believers. In John 14, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to the Father (verse 12) and promises them that when he does he will ask the Father to send them the Spirit as Helper or Advocate (verses 16–17). And then he immediately adds, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (verse 18; see also verse 23). This statement hardly refers either to his temporary resurrection appearances or to his return at the end of history, but to what will be true in the sending of the Spirit.

For the Spirit to come is for Jesus to come. So inseparable are the two

in their activity that the presence of the Spirit is the presence of Christ. Paul expresses this reality—in what is in effect a one-sentence commentary on Pentecost—by saying that in his resurrection the glorified Christ, as the last Adam, has become the “life-giving Spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45). Hence, he subsequently writes, “the Lord [Christ] is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Consider the Great Commission. What sanctions that mega-mandate and gives the church enduring confidence about it, is the assurance of its resurrected and soon-to-ascend Lord: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). This is a promise of Pentecost. The presence of the Spirit coming at Pentecost will be the presence of the exalted Christ. This is a presence the church can always count on, and believers know this sublimely mysterious reality in a sacramental way every time they gather at the Lord’s Table. There their exalted Lord, though physically absent from them at “the right hand of God,” is truly, because “spiritually,” present with them, just as the Spirit is present with them and in them.

To summarize our reflections on the gift of the Spirit, when Peter, in preaching the gospel on the day of Pentecost, declared that those who repent “will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38), he was not promising, at least not in the first place, the gift of speaking in tongues they had just been witnessing or, for that matter, any other particular gift the Spirit gives. Rather he has in view much more than that: the Spirit himself as “the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4; Luke 24:49). The gift is nothing less than the Giver himself. In fact, the great gift, in which, as we will presently see, every believer shares, is God himself—God our Father, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. We are bound to maintain nothing less than this full, Trinitarian perspective on all matters that concern true spirituality.



Sharing in the Gift of the Spirit

The outpouring of the Spirit that took place on Pentecost completes Christ's once-for-all work for the church's salvation. Therefore, the whole church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church at all times and in every place, not just one or other denomination—is the Pentecostal church. All Christians, not just some, are Pentecostals. All believers, not just some, have been baptized with the Spirit and share in the gift of the Spirit. How does that happen? The New Testament answers that question in various places, but one passage is particularly pointed and instructive: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). This verse is notable as the one place in the New Testament other than those in Luke-Acts referring to Pentecost where the phrase “in (or with) the (Holy) Spirit” modifies the verb “baptize.” So, it serves to explain how believers share in the Pentecostal gift who were not participants in the once-for-all fulfillment of John's prophecy in Acts 2 and its extensions or echoes elsewhere in Acts (chapters 8, 10/11, 19).

Two questions may be put to this statement. First, who is baptized with the Spirit? The answer is clear, even emphatic. “All,” “we all,” have been Holy Spirit baptized. “All” in this instance is of course not indiscriminate, but has its sense in the context of chapter 12 as a whole, where Paul is comparing the church to the human body made up of many parts with various functions (see also Romans 12:4–5). “All” in verse 13 refers to the many members of the one church-body seen together, not as a uniformity, where every member is the same, but as a unity in diversity, as the various parts with different gifts function harmoniously like the various parts of the human body (verses 14–26).

With that qualification noted, however, no further limitation may be put on “all” in verse 13. All in the church, every member, not just some within it, have been baptized with the Spirit. All in the church, not just some, share in the gift of the Spirit. All Christians have that gift in common.

Some hold that here the preposition Paul uses should be translated “by” instead of “with” or “in.” On this view, the beginning of verse 13 speaks of all in the church being baptized *by* the Spirit, but not of being baptized *with* the Spirit—a baptism in which the Spirit is active, but results in something

other than sharing in the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit.

But that view is almost certainly excluded by what Paul immediately goes on to say in the rest of the verse: “and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” This is not saying something essentially new or different than what is said in the first part of the verse. Rather, for emphasis Paul—good teacher that he is—repeats the point he has just made in different words. In both parts of the verse, the Spirit is likened to a liquid, poured over (baptizing) or drunk by a person. Recall that in Luke-Acts, as we noted earlier, there are various expressions, including “baptizing,” “sending,” “being clothed with,” “coming upon,” and “pouring out,” that describe the Spirit at Pentecost. “All” in the church, Paul says here, are Spirit baptized. Everyone is on an equal footing in sharing in that Pentecostal gift.

A second question may be put to verse 13, a time question. If “all” have been baptized with the Spirit, *when* does that take place? At first glance, it may seem that this verse doesn’t provide an answer. But it does. It’s there in the word “into,” which in its use here suggests motion or movement toward. Being baptized with the Spirit, the apostle tells us, takes place at that point in time when we are first brought into the fellowship of Christ’s body, the church. But that happens, his teaching throughout his letters and the rest of Scripture makes clear, when sinners are united to Christ by faith and begin to share in the salvation he has accomplished. Union with Christ and incorporation into his church-body are inseparable, two sides of the same Spirit-minted coin. To be joined to Christ is to become a part of his body.

This verse is clear. Being baptized with the Spirit, sharing in the gift of the Spirit poured out on the church at Pentecost, is not what happens only to some Christians, but not others. Nor does it occur at some point subsequent to their being united to Christ. Rather, all believers, not just some, are Spirit baptized and share in the gift of the Spirit at the moment each is united to Christ by faith. In this sense, every Christian is a spiritual Christian (see 1 Corinthians 2:15). An “unspiritual Christian” is a contradiction in terms.

But isn’t that, in effect, what Paul calls these same Corinthian believers (“brothers”) earlier in this letter (3:1, 3)? True, but his point there hardly provides a rationale for a presumably lower, second-class believer (“carnal Christian”). To draw that conclusion, as some do, blunts the sharpness of Paul’s exhortation. Their immature behavior, he wants them to know, is not innocent, but infantile and puerile (verses 1–2); it is childish, not childlike, and as such it is utterly perverse (verses 1–2). There is no acceptable place in the church for the “jealousy and strife” (verse 3) of which they are guilty. Such conduct in the church is not somehow excusable or tolerable

immaturity; rather, it is the very opposite (“fleshly,” “carnal”) of who they are in Christ (“spiritual,” 2:15).

Notice that in Galatians 5:20, where “strife, jealousy” also occur in sequence (see also 2 Corinthians 12:20), they are among “the works of the flesh” (verses 19–21) that are totally in opposition to “the fruit of the Spirit” (verses 22–23). Sin is sin wherever it is found, even in God’s people. For the Corinthians to be acting as they do is to be acting as if they were not Christians, that is, as if they were not “spiritual.”

The Gift and the Gifts

Not to be missed in 1 Corinthians 12 is the important distinction in the teaching of Paul and the rest of the New Testament between the *gift* (singular) and the *gifts* (plural) of the Spirit. Where the Spirit is at work in the church, both are present, but they should not be confused. The difference can be seen from at least two angles.

For one, the gift (singular), being baptized with the Spirit, is, as we have seen, received by all believers. It is present in the church on the principle of “universal donation.” In contrast, the gifts (plural) are variously distributed, present on the principle of “differential distribution.” No one gift in this sense is intended for every believer.

That is clear from the string of rhetorical questions in verses 29–30, each of which expects a negative answer. The reason for these negative answers—why all aren’t apostles, all aren’t prophets, all don’t interpret tongues, etc.—is not that some lack the faith that others have or fail to seek one or more of these gifts. Rather, these negative answers are for the entirely positive reason of God’s design for the makeup of the church. The church is to be a body with many parts and diverse gifts, not just a single part or the same gift shared by all. No one gift in the plural sense (speaking in tongues, for instance, when it was present in the life of the church) is intended by God for every believer. No point would seem clearer from this passage, yet none is more often disregarded or overridden when the gifts of the Spirit are discussed.

There is another important difference between the gift and the gifts of the Spirit. The gift, as we have seen, is the Spirit himself, present within every believer, creating new life in each and, as the basic expression of that life, faith that unites him to Christ, so that all believers share equally in the salvation he has accomplished. The gift, then, involves the presence of the Spirit with blessings that are final, permanent, and irrevocable—present spiritual blessings that provide a foretaste of blessings that will be

ours in consummate fullness when God's saving purposes for the church, along with the entire creation, are completely fulfilled when Christ returns (Romans 8:18–23).

In a word, the gift of the Spirit, to use a technical term, is an *eschatological* gift. Paul makes that graphically clear with a couple of metaphors for the Spirit drawn from the culture of his day—one commercial, the other agricultural. The Spirit—as given to all believers, not just some—is the “down payment” or “deposit” that guarantees the “inheritance” (Ephesians 1:14) that will become theirs fully on “the day of redemption” at Christ's return (Ephesians 4:30). Again, the Spirit given to them is the “deposit” toward their future resurrection bodies (2 Corinthians 5:5)—the eschatological, Spirit-transformed body that each will have when Christ returns (1 Corinthians 15:42–49).

Similarly, the resurrected Christ, the “life-giving Spirit,” is the “firstfruits” of the final harvest of resurrection at the end of history (1 Corinthians 15:20, 45). Consequently, the Spirit presently indwelling believers, “the Spirit of Christ” (Romans 8:9), is the “firstfruits” of that full resurrection-harvest, when the redemption of their bodies will show openly that they are God's adopted children (Romans 8:23). Again, just as God (the Father, Galatians 1:1) raised Christ from the dead, he will one day also “give life” to the “mortal bodies” of believers through the Spirit that indwells them (Romans 8:11). The Spirit already indwelling all believers is nothing less than the source of resurrection life—power on the order of magnitude of God's power in raising Christ from the dead (Ephesians 1:19–20).

In contrast, the gifts (plural), not one of which is for every believer, are temporary and provisional. Nowhere is that point made clearer than in the teaching of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 about the gifts of prophecy and tongues. These word gifts, with the limited and partial knowledge they provide, are transient and destined to pass away (verses 8, 10—without considering here when that will be) and stand in marked contrast to faith, hope, and love, which are permanent and characterize every believer (verse 13).

To sum up, the gift (singular) of the Spirit is for all believers and involves his activities that are eschatological. The gifts (plural) involve sub-eschatological functions, no one of which is for every believer.

This involves a most important practical consideration. The gifts of the Spirit are *not* “means of grace.” They are not necessary for our growth as Christians, for us to mature in holy living. The New Testament simply does not teach that if I receive a particular gift (say, tongues), then my fellowship with God and other believers will be more warm and vital, my prayer life will

be more spontaneous and joyful, and my witnessing will be more free and vibrant.

The New Testament nowhere teaches that we are dependent on some particular gift before we can do the things that God expects from every one of his people. We can be sure, and comforted, that in our sanctification, in our concern to grow in that holiness “without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14), God does not put some believers at a disadvantage in relationship to others by giving a particular gift that would advance that sanctification for some while withholding it from others. For what is necessary to our sanctification, for what is essential for our growth in grace, God’s provisions put all in the church on an equal footing. We all have access in faith to his word, the sacraments, and prayer.



Living Out of the Gift of the Spirit

We have been emphasizing that all Christians, not just some, share in the gift of the Spirit. Put negatively, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Romans 8:9). It might seem, then, that there is little, if anything, left for us to say about our topic, and that beyond what we have already stressed, believers need not be concerned about the Spirit’s work in their lives. My emphasis may seem to imply that his activity within us is automatic, something that we can simply take for granted.

But that impression, or anything like it, is a distortion, a half-truth—and half-truths, as has been observed, have a way of becoming total errors, errors that can have disastrous consequences. That is certainly so in this instance.

Christians may certainly *presuppose* the Spirit’s saving, sanctifying, and empowering presence within them; that is their grace-given privilege. But we must not *presume* that gracious and undeserved presence. This distinction between presupposing and presuming is crucial. Warrant for it is clear from the many places where the New Testament *commands* believers concerning the Spirit’s work in their lives. For instance, it is not non-Christians but the church that Paul commands not to “quench” the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Again, believers, not unbelievers, are warned in their conduct not to “grieve” the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). Just those who “live by the Spirit” (have the gift of the Spirit) are commanded to “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). Such commands show that the Spirit’s work in our lives is not an indifferent or automatic matter, but is to be an ongoing involvement, an ever-present concern. A grammatical model may be helpful here: the Spirit’s presence and activity in the believer is both an indicative and an imperative, both a settled reality and a continuing aspiration, and it is the latter because it is the former, not the reverse. We don’t receive the gift of the Spirit by striving for it, by attaining it in our own strength through some regimen of spiritual exercises.

So, the Spirit’s activity in believers is to be a continuing concern for them. That important truth can be considered further from a variety of angles in the New Testament. One that is particularly instructive is Ephesians 5:18 with its command, “Be filled with the Spirit.” That will be our focus here.

A couple of things are immediately noteworthy about this command. First, like the other commands just noted, it is addressed to the church, not the world. Further, this command shows that being filled with the Spirit is not the same thing as being baptized with the Spirit, though many today confuse them by identifying them. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find believers commanded to be baptized with the Spirit or to seek that baptism. Why? Because, as we have seen (1 Corinthians 12:13), all believers are baptized with the Spirit when they first believe and are united to Christ, not at some point subsequently. To be a Christian is to be baptized with the Spirit. Here, however, Paul commands Christians to be filled with the Spirit. In other words, those who are already Spirit baptized are to seek to be Spirit filled. Because they are baptized with the Spirit, they can be commanded to be filled with the Spirit.

This is true not only for Paul's teaching and use of language, but also in Luke-Acts. True, what happened on Pentecost is described as being "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4). But those of whom that is said—Peter and others—are later "filled" with the Spirit again (Acts 4:8, 31). Similarly, Paul, "filled with the Holy Spirit" at his conversion (Acts 9:17), is later on again "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:9). No one that I'm aware of, not even those who maintain that Holy Spirit baptism is a distinct experience, whether coincident or subsequent to conversion, maintains that these subsequent refillings experienced by Peter, Paul, and others are rebaptisms. This shows how little being baptized with the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are the same.

What then does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? That question may be answered by reflecting on several aspects of the command in Ephesians 5:18, seen in its immediate and broader contexts, which, as we will see, are interrelated. First to be noted is *the contrast* involved. In verse 18, Paul not only commands but also prohibits. "Be filled with the Spirit" is set in opposition to "do not get drunk with wine."

Our likely tendency is to begin immediately thinking about how these commands apply to each of us individually, to the specifics of our lives and what may or may not be our particular temptations and sins that need to be overcome by the Spirit's filling work in us. But to do that properly, we must be aware of a larger picture, one that enables us to make the best sense of our individual experience as Christians.

The situation in verse 18 reflects on what has taken place in the death and resurrection of Christ. In the background is the church as the "one new man" (2:15), which has come into existence in Christ and through his work

of reconciling God to sinners as well as sinners to each other. Not only Jews but Gentiles as well become identified with this “new man” when they are united to Christ by faith. In the background as well is both the “old self,” which they are to put off, since it has been destroyed by the cross of Christ, and the “new self” in Christ, which they are to put on (4:22–24).

At 4:25 Paul begins drawing out various aspects or implications of this process—of being united with Christ, of putting off the old and putting on the new. The contrast in 5:18 highlights a key instance of this opposition as it impacts our lives as believers. Drunkenness is a part of the old order done away with in Christ. The Spirit represents, preeminently, the new order, the new creation that has arrived in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). This larger, overall picture needs to be kept in view here.

Why does Paul mention drunkenness on the one side? Certainly because he is concerned to warn against this specific sin; the abusive use of alcohol is a serious sin (see 1 Corinthians 6:10; Galatians 5:21). But to conclude that this abuse is his sole concern is to miss an important point. In fact it misses an important *positive* point that Paul is concerned to make clear about the Spirit’s filling work. The reference to drunkenness is illustrative. “Being drunk” with wine may also be fairly described as “being full” of wine. So another way of stating the contrast in verse 18 is that we are to be filled, not with wine, but with the Spirit.

What is the sin in being drunk or filled with wine? Most seriously, it is in being under the control or influence of wine—DUI, as we say, driving under the influence—an influence so dominating that it completely controls a person. This highlights the central issue in verse 18: what it is that we are and are not to be “full” of, that is, what is and what is not to be the dominating influence, the controlling power, in our lives. Or, in a word, who or what is to be the *Lord* we serve?

Paul’s answer is the Spirit of the living God, to the exclusion of anyone or anything else. The Spirit is to have sole and absolute dominion in our lives—not drunkenness, the thing mentioned in this verse, but also, as we consider our world today, things like drugs, pornography, gambling, and even things that are good in themselves, like a personal relationship, marriage, family, a job, money, and power. Where any one of these dominates, where any becomes an ultimate commitment, as they tend to do, the counterproductive result is, using Paul’s word, debauchery, or dissipation, which, if persisted in, has consequences in our lives that are inevitably disintegrating and eventually destructive. In Ephesians 5:18, the command to be filled with the Spirit, we may say, is the first of the

Ten Commandments, “You shall have no other gods before me,” applied specifically to the Holy Spirit.

The contrast in Ephesians 5:18 provides an important reminder of a basic truth about who we are as human beings. We are dependent beings, uniquely created by God in his image to depend on him by trusting and being devoted to serving him unreservedly. In that sense, we can say that by nature we are “addicts.” By design, every one of us has a built-in dependency issue. There is only one sound solution to that problem, and it is found in the freedom of being enslaved to God and serving him. Everything else, any other ultimate commitment, is a deep-seated dependency problem that involves one or another destructive bondage.

In terms of one of the leading ideas in our verse, we are created by God to be intoxicated—either with God, for which he has made us and saves sinners, or with someone or something else, which leaves us trapped in our sinfulness and will destroy us. A key point on the positive side in verse 18 is that when it comes to the presence and activity of God’s Spirit in our lives, there is no room for “sobriety” in the sense of moderation, no room for anything less than total abandonment of ourselves. When it comes to the Spirit’s filling work in their lives, Christians have no interest in any “detox” program! The first important thing to learn from the contrast in verse 18 is that the filling work of the Spirit is a *controlling* reality. A primary mark of a Spirit-filled Christian is a life subject to the Spirit’s *control*.

A second important reality about being filled with the Spirit comes with a closer look at the *command* in verse 18, specifically its grammatical form. The Greek in which Paul wrote has two different forms for imperatives. One form (the aorist tense), much like English grammar, expresses the command simply or indefinitely. The other (the present tense) makes clear that the action commanded is to recur or be continuing. The latter form is the one used in verse 18. Since English has no corresponding form, its sense can be captured only by paraphrasing it in various ways: “Be filled with the Spirit again and again.” “Keep on being filled with the Spirit.” “Constantly be seeking the filling of the Spirit.” “Continue seeking an ever fuller outworking of the Spirit’s activity in your life.”

So the grammatical form Paul uses here shows that being filled with the Spirit is not a once-and-done occurrence in the past experience of some believers that brings them instantaneously to a higher level of spirituality above other believers. As we have already shown, being filled with the Spirit and being baptized with the Spirit are not the same. The latter happens once for all and irrevocably for every believer at conversion, in being united to

Christ. In contrast, the filling of the Spirit is an ongoing and recurring work in believers.

It should be clear, then, that a Spirit-filled Christian is marked, not by being preoccupied with a particular past experience of the Spirit, no matter how memorable (and some Christians undoubtedly have such experiences), but rather by focusing on the present, on what the Spirit is doing in one's life today. And out of that present concern, that Christian should be focused on the future, anticipating the even greater filling work that is coming. As the filling of the Spirit is to be a *controlling* reality, it is also a *continuing* reality.

A third important aspect of being filled with the Spirit emerges in verses 19–21. Here again, a point of grammar is helpful: all the verbs in these verses are participles. How is that significant? In Greek, much like English, participles are dependent verb forms. Unable to function on their own, they depend on a main verb, usually nearby, for support. In this instance, the main verb that anchors these participles is the command at the end of verse 18 to be filled with the Spirit. This shows that verses 19–21 are best understood as describing things that accompany that filling work, certain *consequences* that follow from it.

Certainly Paul is not intending to be complete in what he mentions here. The Spirit's filling work is, well, just too full to be exhausted in any single description like this. But surely, too, since this is the only place in Paul's writings where he commands Christians to be filled with the Spirit, a fair surmise is that he highlights matters in which that filling work is most prominent, things that most characterize it, what you most expect to find in those who are Spirit filled.

So a further look at these verses is in order. Mentioned first is "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." Clearly in view is worship, particularly communal or corporate worship, considered from the angle of singing. An essential mark of Spirit-filled Christians is worship of God. Nothing is more important for them than worship. Specifically, they put a premium on being present when the church is assembled for worship.

Next is "singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart." Again worship is in view from the aspect of singing, but now with the accent that worship is to be from the heart. Another important mark of Spirit-filled Christians is that they worship God from the core of their being. They are fully invested in that worship. There is nothing superficial about it. For them, worshiping is never just a matter of forms to be followed (whether the liturgy involved, always relative to culture and circumstances, is more

“formal” and ordered or more “informal” and spontaneous).

Highlighted third is “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This broadens the outlook beyond worship, for in view here is the whole of life. Specifically, thanksgiving is to permeate every aspect of our lives as believers. A further crucial mark of those who are filled with the Spirit is that they overflow with gratitude. How limitless and uninhibited their thankfulness is should not be missed: believers should be thankful, not just some of the time for favorable things and when circumstances are promising, but “always” and “for all things.” Such thankfulness is not a naive and forced optimism that tries to ignore the dark side of life. Neither does it come with a perverse delighting in suffering, as somehow good in itself or for its own sake. Nor is it a vaguely grateful disposition, a positive outlook on life without a focus.

Rather, Paul explicitly says, this thanksgiving is rooted in Christ and stems from having God as one’s loving Father and Christ as one’s caring Savior and Lord. It is gratitude that comes to Christians with the joy of knowing that even in suffering, when it is suffering “as a Christian” (1 Peter 4:16), “you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (verses 13–14). It is gratefulness that is irrepressible in those who “count it all joy ... when you meet trials of various kinds,” because they experience the maturing effect of these trials on their discipleship (James 1:2–4). It is thankfulness that comes from having “been granted ... that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1:29).

Mentioned finally is “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” This as much as anything defines those who are Spirit filled. They are marked by a readiness, particularly within the church, to defer to the concerns and needs of others. Moreover, this is done not to ingratiate or as inverted self-promotion, but ultimately out of devotion to Christ as Lord of the church.

This fourth factor appears to weigh heavily with Paul, for it is fairly seen as triggering the section that immediately follows, from 5:22 through 6:9. In this long section, he spell outs, with an eye to some of the basic relationships of life, what this mutual self-submission looks like. In doing that, in light of what we have already seen, he shows how being filled with the Spirit impacts and shapes these relationships. There is much material in this section for extensive reflection. Here a brief survey to highlight an important overall picture will have to suffice.

First, in verses 22–33, he considers marriage and what a Spirit-filled

marriage looks like. What are Spirit-filled wives like? They are fully engaged and resourceful helpers in submitting to their husbands as their heads. And Spirit-filled husbands are fully engaged and resourceful in loving their wives as a reflection of Christ's self-sacrificing love for the church.

Next, in chapter 6, verses 1–4 look further into home life, now with the relationship between children and parents in view. Children who are being filled by the Spirit obey their parents, not reluctantly or only because they are their parents. They do so because they have their identity “in the Lord,” and by obeying their parents they obey the Lord. By the same token, the Spirit's filling work in parents, addressed here through the leading role of fathers, is evidenced by how they raise their children, not with parenting skills they have of themselves, but with discipline wed to instruction that is “of the Lord.” Such discipline, inevitably loving and balanced, serves their children in a way that does not provoke anger by being either unduly harsh or irresponsibly permissive.

Finally, verses 5–9 broaden the outlook beyond the home to take in the always essential economic aspect of life, seen here in the basic relationship between slave and master—or, fairly transposed into our contemporary cultural setting, the relationship between employer and employee, labor and management. We catch a glimpse of job situations where the Spirit's filling activity is controlling on one or both sides.

What is noteworthy is the equity the Spirit promotes. Spirit-filled employees are those who conduct themselves out of the awareness that they are ultimately accountable, not to the person who signs the paycheck, but to Christ. Knowing themselves to be “servants of Christ,” they will not be content with doing work that is halfhearted or merely people pleasing. By the same token, Spirit-filled employers will not use their economic power to manipulate or intimidate. They recognize that they are ultimately accountable for their conduct to the same Lord as the people they employ.

This brief survey of Ephesians 5:22–6:9 brings to light an exceedingly important point, one that must not be missed, particularly in light of so much current misunderstanding about what it means to be filled with the Spirit. His filling presence does not result, at least in the first place, in some unusual or remarkable experience or set of experiences. Rather, as this passage shows, it is a matter of what happens in the basic responsibilities and routines of everyday living. We are filled with the Spirit, not in special religious experiences at the edge of our lives, so to speak, but in our common, daily relationships and the activities they involve. To relate all this to another key aspect of Paul's teaching on the work of the Spirit, where the

filling of the Spirit is present, the *fruit* of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, and all the rest (Galatians 5:22–23)—will be evident in the basic relationships and rhythms of life.

Are you spiritual? Are you Spirit filled? Concrete answers to these questions can be found in large part by examining your attitudes and conduct in your marriage, in your home life, in your job, in school, in your recreation, and indeed in the whole of your life, as you trust in Christ as your Savior and submit to his lordship.

As the filling of the Spirit is an *all-controlling* and *continuing* reality, it is also a *comprehensive* reality.

How to Be Filled with the Spirit

We have looked in some detail at some of the most important consequences of being filled with the Spirit, at what we most expect to find in the lives of those who are Spirit filled. But a question, as critical as it is practical, still remains to be addressed: how does the filling of the Spirit take place? As we have already seen, a command is involved. How are Christians to obey God's command to be filled with the Spirit?

Note that Paul does not write, "Fill yourself with the Spirit." The command is expressed in the passive voice—"be filled"—and that way of putting it signals that we are being commanded to do something that we can't do for ourselves. We cannot by our own efforts control the Spirit or secure his filling presence in our lives. We are absolutely dependent on the Spirit in order to be filled with the Spirit. Thus, it should be clear that we are not filled with the Spirit by deciding to initiate some regimen or set of spiritual exercises that secures in a single decisive act the result of being brought to a new and elevated level of spirituality beyond what is considered ordinary experiencing of the Spirit.

How then are we filled with the Spirit? Two things, above all, are to be stressed. The first is *prayer*—obvious perhaps, but too often overlooked or neglected. To be filled with the Spirit, we must pray, and pray continually, for that filling, and that praying must be "in the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:18). Here a widespread misconception needs to be removed. Praying in the Spirit is not a special kind of praying in distinction from ordinary praying by Christians. Paul says here that praying in the Spirit is to take place "at all times," not just some of the time. He means the same thing here as he does elsewhere when, without explicit (but nonetheless with implicit) reference to the Spirit, he commands all Christians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Within the overall framework of his teaching, the only alternative to praying in the Spirit that Paul would recognize (and reject) would be its complete opposite, praying "in the flesh," that is, praying that stems from and is controlled by the sinful impulses of our human nature, making it one of "the works of the flesh" that are the absolute antithesis of "the fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:19, 22).

Praying in the Spirit, in other words, is "the prayer of faith" (James

5:15), which should mark, not only the elders (verse 14), but all in the church at all times. All believers are armed with “the shield of faith” (Ephesians 6:16) and have received “the Spirit of adoption” (Romans 8:15; cf. Galatians 4:5–6). So they pray in that Spirit, without fear, to God as their loving Father, asking among other things that the Spirit would fill them.

Of much more that could be said here about the role of prayer, the Lord’s Prayer is noteworthy. “Your kingdom come” is among the petitions that Jesus provides for his disciples (Matthew 6:10). It should not be missed that this is, in part, a prayer for the Spirit. That can be seen from the inner tie between the kingdom and the Holy Spirit throughout the teaching of Jesus. That bond is particularly clear when, in healing a blind and mute demon-possessed man, Jesus declares, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). Where God’s Spirit is at work, there his kingdom is present. The Spirit’s activity is the power of the kingdom, the effective exercise of God’s royal rule. Elsewhere, this tie is seen in that the greatest of gifts that God the Father gives is “the Holy Spirit” (Luke 11:13) or, alternatively and correlatively, “the kingdom” (12:32). The Spirit and the kingdom are inseparable; to have the Spirit is to be included in God’s kingdom and subject to his saving rule.

So, every time Jesus’ disciples pray, “Your kingdom come,” we are asking for God, by his Spirit, according to his will (“your will be done”), to establish, maintain, and expand his saving rule, not only worldwide and in others, but also and particularly in us. We are praying for the Spirit to be at work in us, so that our submission to God’s rule will be absolute and all-controlling. This petition is another way of praying, as we have seen in Ephesians 5:18, to be filled with the Spirit. That prayer, as Jesus teaches us here, we are privileged to pray again and again, and “our Father in heaven” delights to hear and answer it, again and again.

While nothing is more indispensable to being filled with the Spirit than prayer, another factor is also essential. That factor can be seen by comparing Colossians 3:16–4:1 with Ephesians 5:18–6:9. Both letters were written at around the same time, and because of substantial similarities between them, Paul may even have used one when he wrote the other. Those similarities, not only in content, but also in structure and wording, are particularly evident when these two passages are placed side by side.

Specifically noteworthy for us is that where Ephesians 5:18 has “Be filled with the Spirit,” the corresponding place in Colossians 3:16 reads “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” For the church today, “the word of

Christ” is his written word, the Bible. And the connection we are to draw is unmistakable. The way to be filled with the Spirit is to let God’s word dwell in you richly. We will be more and more filled with the Spirit as we are more and more filled with Scripture.

There is a reminder here of the vital truth that was so basic for the Reformation: the Spirit of God and the word of God work together inseparably and harmoniously. Where do you “get” the Spirit? The answer the Reformers gave, still true today, is neither by using a sacramental system that virtually obliterates the heart of the gospel by obscuring the sole sufficiency of Christ’s atoning sacrifice for sinners nor in an experience or regimen apart from the word, but rather in and through the word—the Spirit working with the word. The Reformers grasped Paul’s point in comparing Ephesians 5:18 and Colossians 3:16: where the word of Christ is present and received by faith, there you will find his Spirit, the Spirit of the living God, effectively and “fillingly” at work.

How are we to be filled with the Spirit? Considering what we have just seen about the importance of *prayer* and *God’s word*, it is hard to improve on the language of the answer to question 90 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “... we must attend thereunto [unto God’s word] with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.” In doing that, through the Spirit and continually seeking his power, we will more and more be filled with the Spirit.

And with that happening, we have the answer to the questions I asked at the beginning. We will not only know what true spirituality is, but experience it. We will more and more be the spiritual persons whom God has made and continually calls every Christian to be.

