

XVIII

Filled with the Holy Spirit

*Do not get drunk on wine which leads to debauchery.
Instead be filled with the Spirit.*

(EPHESIANS 5:18)

At first glance the above passage may be somewhat surprising if not confusing. Why is it necessary to specify that we be filled with the Holy Spirit? This question is important because Paul has in this letter to the Ephesians already stated that the saints there *have* received the Spirit. See chapter 1:13: having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. We looked at this passage in the previous chapter. The Spirit had already come upon the Ephesians when the Gospel was first preached to them and they came to faith.

Also later in the same letter Paul refers again (4:30) to the fact that the Ephesian Christians “were sealed for the day of redemption” by the Spirit of God. “Sealed by the Spirit” means at least that the Holy Spirit had come over them and dwelt in them.

The Ephesians were no strangers to the Holy Spirit. In Acts 19 we read how the Holy Spirit came powerfully on the believers there and how many extraordinary miracles were performed by Paul. Some of the believers in Ephesus who had even practiced sorcery publicly burned their valuable scrolls on devil worship. We know that there arose a great disturbance in Ephesus because of the powerful effect of the work of the Holy Spirit. The craftsmen who made silver shrines and other objects of heathen worship saw their profits threatened, and a well-planned riot resulted.

In Ephesus, then, the church knew all about the power and the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul calls the church there “a dwelling in which God lives *by his Spirit*” (2:22). Why would he write to such a church that they must “be filled with the Spirit”? Were they not already filled? Is this not unnecessary? Is it not so that once filled, we are always filled?

Constant filling?

Must we see this passage in a different light, namely that *after* we have received the Holy Spirit, we still need to be *filled* with the Holy Spirit on a regular basis? Let's go one step farther. Is it so that we should not rely as believers on a one-time experience of being filled (let's say when we are born again) and that we cannot rely only on whatever may have happened in the past, but must time and again be filled with the Holy Spirit in each and every new situation or issue that comes our way? Is being filled with the Spirit a unique event or does it happen time and again?

How do we then experience this "being filled"? How does it happen? What does it lead to? I think we need to examine this passage carefully in the light of Scripture so that we may know what it means to walk by the Spirit of God.

One thing is indisputably certain here in this passage. All explainers which I consulted agree that the present tense of the verb to fill means that this filling takes place on a *constant* basis, not just once in our lives but many times, as the situation demands it.

One Reformed explainer translates as follows: *go on* being filled with the Spirit! Some focus on the moment when they first received the Spirit and even think that they have then achieved a certain status, but Paul exhorts the church which is sealed with the promised Holy Spirit to go on being filled with the Spirit. We are once sealed but repeatedly filled. The Lord Jesus calls us constantly to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

We will note three elements: how this being filled with the Spirit is prescribed, how this being filled with the Spirit is prevented, and how this being filled with the Spirit is presented.

Not an option

When we focus on the main words in the text, "be filled with the Spirit," we should note that this is not an option which we might consider, but it is a prescription or a command. It is written in the imperative sense. That's why I wrote in an earlier paragraph that the Lord Jesus *calls us* to be filled. Having received the Holy Spirit by faith as members of Christ's church, we must from then on also be *filled* with the Spirit.

How are we to understand this? Surely Paul does not mean that Pentecost must constantly be repeated. Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit are a one-time event which marked a new phase in the history of redemption, and which therefore is not repeated. There are a few in-

stances in which the reality of Pentecost is confirmed (in Jerusalem after the first threats of persecution, in Samaria, and also in the house of Cornelius). Pentecost-like manifestations occur when we see a major transition, when the circle of the Spirit's work is widened from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, but Pentecost, as such, is not repeated. The Spirit is poured out once and abides with the church.¹⁷

Therefore we must understand this being filled (also in the context of the letter itself) as the believers coming increasingly under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit and so under the dominion of Christ. It means that Christ shall rule over us more and more. "Filling" is not just done by the Holy Spirit, or by the Spirit loose from the other work of God as a separate item, but this being filled is always to be seen in connection with the redeeming and renewing work of Christ.

Filling and fullness

Let us turn back for a moment to Ephesians 1:22 and 23. There we find the verb to fill for the first time in this letter. It says: and God placed all things under his [Christ's] feet, and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, *the fullness of him who fills everything in every way!*

The church is called the "fullness of Christ." What does that mean? He fills the church with all his merited blessings. This means that our Lord Jesus Christ, who is in heaven, takes form and becomes visible on earth in his body, the church. If we want to see Christ at work, we must look at his church which is his body. It means the church has everything from Jesus Christ. The church has all its gifts, blessings, and resources from the Lord Jesus Christ. He fills his church in every way. In every need and situation, Jesus Christ provides for his church. He fills this church individually and together as a body.

How does the Lord Jesus do this? He does this through the wondrous presence and powerful work of the Holy Spirit who has been poured out over the church. In chapter 2 Paul calls this church a holy temple in the Lord, and he then states (2:22), "And in him you are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives *by his Spirit.*" God is at work in the church through Jesus Christ by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

17 See my publication *Celebrating Salvation*, Premier, Winnipeg, 1997, pp 251-259.

Draining empty

The expression “be filled with the Spirit” means, then, that more and more by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit we let our lives be governed by Jesus Christ, the head of the body. The Holy Spirit must gain decisive influence in and total dominion over our lives. For Christ rules us by His Spirit and Word. The Spirit has been received by faith, and he dwells in the hearts of the believers, but he must now also more and more govern us, lead us, and, indeed, fill us. The verb to fill means to fill to the brim, even to overflowing, so that we are completely filled, and there is no empty space left over.

This matter of being filled with the Spirit is an apostolic prescription. It is something that must happen and to which we also must give ourselves, on which we must focus, and about which we must be concerned. In this light we understand that this filling is an ongoing process that never stops. It does not stop because the Spirit cannot achieve this fullness, but because we always drain empty. Therefore the tense is in the present: be constantly filled with the Holy Spirit.

We drain empty. That is the consequence of our sinful and mortal nature. There are many problems in life that we have to tackle and the struggle takes so much out of us. We can become wearied and tired of fighting the same battle every day. It is hard to battle the same stubborn sins, to oppose constant weaknesses, and to face growing responsibilities. Sometimes all this can become too much for us, and we feel we can hardly keep our life together and continue living as God’s children.

Filled every day again

We should not say: I have the Holy Spirit, now I am filled, and I can travel on this full tank for the rest of my life. The truth is that we need to be filled *every day again*, our whole life through. As the challenges of life come to us day by day, so the daily filling with the Spirit is required to meet all these challenges. In this way Christ reveals and shows his dominion over us as our Savior and Lord.

We should not be surprised at this daily filling, but rather be amazed at Christ’s love for us. For every day we truly need the complete help of the Holy Spirit. We need God’s grace to fill us and Christ’s love to sustain us daily, or we will go under in the cesspool of this life. This world of darkness is like a strong suction mechanism or a huge vacuum-cleaner, that threatens

to swallow us, and if we are not constantly filled with the Spirit, how could we ever stand against this incessant attraction of the world?

Be filled. The verb means that we are to be focused and involved in this matter. Christ does the filling, but we need to realize *that* we must be filled, and *how* we must be filled. We may not stand idly by as if this does not spur us into action. In the church of Christ, you may not be a spiritual couch-potato, for then you will not last in the spiritual warfare that is going on. We must rise to meet the challenges of life in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Sharp contrast

Someone may ask: how do I tap into this daily filling with the Holy Spirit? How does one receive access to this blessing, to these riches, and to these wondrous gifts? Let us first see how the apostle tells us what we should *not* do: do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Then: *instead* be filled with the Spirit. There is a sharp contrast here. We have to be filled not with spirits but with the Spirit.

It is remarkable that Paul in this connection mentions drunkenness. Perhaps you remember how on Pentecost the people of Jerusalem thought that the disciples were drunk. Spiritual ecstasy should not be confused with drunken euphoria. Ephesus was a leading, commercial city in Asia which was devoted to the cult of Diana or Artemis, and therefore also of Bacchus, the god of wine and frolic. It was not uncommon for pagan worshipers to go to the heathen temples and there become utterly drunk, cavorting with shrine prostitutes.

Paul does not write that we may not drink wine, but that we may not get *drunk* on wine. Drunkenness is a state in which one is no longer in control of his thoughts, words, and actions. Drunkenness leads to “extravagant behavior, exaggerated self-confidence, and loss of self-control,” as Donald Macleod writes on this text. One is totally dominated by the alcohol.

Consider the contrast. Either the Holy Spirit is in complete control of you, or you are under the control of alcohol. The one cannot go with the other. Drunkenness rules out the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit rules out drunkenness. You cannot be filled with both, only with one of these. I am not sure if we all understand the implications here.

Drown the sorrows?

Does this mean that the Gentiles in Ephesus were always drunk? Paul is not suggesting this at all, but when it came to their heathen religion and

their way of dealing with the pressures and challenges of life, many Gentiles sought escape in wine and spirits. Those Ephesian Christians who still associated with Gentiles were always placing themselves in a situation of extreme temptation to drown the sorrows and join the party. We may as well in our time include all substances that change or control our moods and feelings. There is much alcohol and drug abuse, even the use of illegal drugs.

Our modern society needs this way of escape because it is so empty. People are drained. Many people live with pain and sorrow and they need alcohol and drugs to escape the harsh reality of life and to make the burdens seem lighter. But it is a false sense of euphoria that follows, for soon the world comes crashing down and the sad reality is even more painful.

We are to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is not a way of escape but a way to tackle life and its problems in the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ. We put on the armor of faith (Ephesians 6), and we fight the good fight. The Spirit fills us time and again to meet the challenges of life, to bear the pain, to overcome the disappointments, to weather the storms, and to carry the burdens. If we learn in our youth to escape reality in a worldly manner through alcohol and drugs, it will often affect us throughout our life. We may become addicted in due time or at least think that these things offer a way out.

When the Holy Spirit has no solid grip on our lives; we drift in and out of fellowship with the Lord, and one day we may drift out altogether. Christ therefore pleads here with all not to go the way of alcohol and drugs, for it is grieving to the Spirit, and much wine will quench the Spirit.

Debauchery

It says here that being drunk with wine leads to *debauchery*. What is debauchery? The Greek has a word that means something like “unsalvageable.” It denotes a behavior so disgusting that it has no redeeming feature whatsoever. People are totally out of control and are doing things they would otherwise not think of doing. All inhibitions are gone and the floodgates are loose. Everything is scattered all over the place.

Debauchery is a word that especially denotes extremely sensual activity leading to a complete loss of sexual control. How often is not alcohol a factor when there are date-rape and other sexual assaults? The one thing leads to another, and behavior becomes gross and deviant. It can happen to anyone, no matter of what status, learning, or age. In fact the age is becoming younger all the time, and when debauchery happens, it is disgraceful,

ruinous, and often victimizing. Paul writes earlier in this chapter: it is shameful even to *mention* what the disobedient do in secret. Some things are so disgraceful; they can not be mentioned by decent folks.

Do not ever say: it cannot happen to me, I am in control, don't worry. Before we know it, we have been swept away, sucked in, and have become debased. Let us all heed the biblical warning: let him who thinks to stand, take heed lest he fall (1 Cor 10:12). It is better to be safe with the Spirit than sorry with Satan.

Worldly escapism

The world needs these things to escape. We, too, can fall into the trap of worldly escapism. But we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He controls us, but he always leaves our senses intact. He never blows our mind apart, but does guide it to see the real beauty of life and creation. Our spiritual act of worship is reasonable, and not irrational (Romans 12:1-3). The Spirit fills us but never impairs us. He governs us but never enslaves us. He gives no hallucinations, but grants illuminations. He leads us always on a path of which we know it is the right path.

Before we examine how this being filled with the Spirit becomes evident and is presented, we should realize how it is prevented. Not that alcoholic drink and sexual extravagance are the only dangers in life. There are many other dangers as well. But none, perhaps, affect our sanity and soul so deeply as these. Here we can deeply wound our consciences to the point that we lose the sense of God's grace. Let it not happen to you, for it embitters life.

How are we filled with the Spirit?

There is still the question how this being filled with the Holy Spirit is presented. How does Scripture indicate this filling as happening? How are we filled by the Spirit on a constant, daily basis?

Paul does not specify in our text how this being filled takes place, so we must be careful not to speculate. But in the last verses, he does point us in the right direction: speak with one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I am not going to get into a debate about the possible difference between psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. In my understanding that debate

is a senseless controversy, for all these songs are glorifying to God. Paul here directs us not only to the worship services of the church but also to the fellowship that we have with one another at many other times. I find it remarkable that *singing and music* are mentioned so prominently. Who was it that said: when the saints sing their songs of praise, the demons trembling flee?

I once heard the expression that music is a facilitator of the Holy Spirit. I am not sure about that expression. I wonder if the Spirit really needs a facilitator, a means by which he enters more easily into our hearts. The Spirit may not need it then, I thought, but we might. Why else would the Bible itself contain so many psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs? We need to pour out our heart before the Lord also in song and praise. God has surrounded himself in heaven with choirs of angels; do you think he does not love to hear us sing? Is it not for us a way to be filled with the Spirit?

We used to do a lot more singing in our families than we do today. Music today is more for entertainment than participation. Some churches have instituted a ministry of music, even with a “director” of sorts, (many psalms are dedicated to the director of music) and we tend to dismiss such extravagant things, but we can indeed praise God and minister unto one another with song and music.

How can I be filled with the Spirit?

I find it rather striking that one of the biggest consumer industries in our society is the music industry. Modern, popular music of all sorts is bought by everyone. If we do not know what to give someone, we can always buy a CD. How many CD’s fall outside the category of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs? Is it strange that things often go together? Rock concerts are hot spots for booze and drugs. The devil knows what he is doing. The most potent combination is booze, drugs, and rock. Then you can forget about self-control.

How can I be filled with the Spirit? Go there, be there, where Christ rules. We should go where he imparts his gifts and blessings, where his Word is opened, where his praise is sung, and where people have spiritual music in their hearts. It says: sing and make music in your *heart* to the Lord. That’s the core of it all: the Spirit of Christ who dwells in our hearts.

To be filled with the Spirit, the following is required. The items I mention now in the line of Ephesians 5:19 and 20 are nothing special in themselves, just simple things which together change our entire life. If we search for the spectacular, we will overlook the obvious. First, let there be constant *prayer*. God will give his Holy Spirit only to those who constantly ask him,

we confess in Lord's Day 45 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*.. Let's put that into practice more and more. Pray daily for the filling with the Spirit.

Secondly, let *us open the Word* on a daily basis, read it, and also meditate on it personally. No one can do this for us or take this from us. I know that many Christians do not personally read Scripture or meditate on it. This will be very detrimental to the church in and over time.

Thirdly, we must be active participants in the communion of saints. Seek the fellowship of the believers: speak with one another, encourage one another, sing and make music together, as it says here. The more we enjoy the company of believers, the less we will seek the company of this world.

And, finally, always give thanks. Paul does not add this as an afterthought, but as an essential ingredient for being filled with the Spirit. We may receive a lot from the Lord, also many spiritual gifts, but if we stop giving thanks, realizing how blessed we are, the flow of spiritual gifts dries up. The Spirit does not give to those who do not desire his gifts, appreciate them, and show gratitude for them.

One of the marks of the secular society is lack of gratitude. Many people today have so much, but they are not satisfied or happy. Let us not fall into the mentality of today where instant satisfaction is demanded but gratitude is hardly expressed, where people take or grab, and do not receive with thankfulness.

Caring and sharing

Gratitude is a mark of the Christian, and it leads to caring and sharing. It also means that *humility* is present. It says: always give thanks *in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*. Now we are back at the beginning: Christ who fills everything in every way. We always give thanks in the Name of the Lord Jesus. All good things come from him and through him.

We do not deserve these blessings, especially not being filled with the Spirit. We cannot demand it of God. We cannot command the Spirit to come in, not even by forceful decisions of our will. We can take only when Jesus gives. Take only what he gives. But he gives much, and it is all undeserved from our side. He has earned it for us by his death on the cross, and he alone imparts it to us by the Holy Spirit.

So we give thanks *in his name*. In order to give thanks, we have to learn to count. Count our blessings, that is. There are those who do not see the blessings of Christ, and have never really learned to count. They have learned no spiritual arithmetic, but only manage earthly inventories.

A praising, thankful, and humble person, who is a living part of the body, the church which is the fullness of Christ, is also filled with the Spirit, time and again, to face this life with courage and to await eternal glory.