

What Does It Mean Today To Be Spirit-Filled?

Ephesians and Ecumenism

(Or Ecumenical Pneumatology)

Study Group: Charismatic Themes in Luke-Acts
and Related Issues

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I hope that the title of this paper will invite thought on the subject from more than a detached cognitive mindset. I think of the words of the German pastor and theologian Helmet Thielicke: "A theological thought can breathe only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God."¹ At the same time, the title is confessedly ambiguous. Do I intend to survey what being "Spirit-filled" means in various Christian communions *today*? Do I intend to give an apologetic from a particular *present day* Pentecostal or Wesleyan perspective? Or do I intend to evaluate what being "Spirit-filled" means *today* in light of the New Testament?

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the subject as developed in Ephesians. But more than that, I hope to show the relation of being "Spirit-filled" according to Ephesians in relation to Acts. Finally, I hope to spark our interest in how we today might "flesh out" even more authentically the holy words in Ephesians on *living* a Spirit-filled life. I suppose my thoughts will thus relate in some way to all of the above objectives in my opening paragraph.

Our subject is particularly relevant for what has been called "The Century of the Holy Spirit."² The "pentecostal outpouring" of the Holy Spirit has affected in one way or another practically every Christian communion whether Protestant or Roman Catholic. Furthermore, it is far from restricted only to North America. "Pentecostalism," with its significant effects in what has been called "charismatic renewal," is worldwide.³

1. *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) p. 34.

² The title of a book by Vinson Synan (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).

³ Cf. Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal* p. 372. Here the number is estimated at 530,000,000. David Howard, former president of the Latin American

Speaking of North America, Evangelical researcher David Noll, in discussing spiritual renewal since the 1960's, says that "far and away the most important changes in the regular worship services have been due to the broadening influence of Pentecostals and charismatics."⁴ Noll goes so far to say that it may be that "the last third of the twentieth century has been the age in America of charismatic spirituality, just as the colonial period was dominated by Puritan spirituality. . . ."⁵

The extensive geographical, ethnic, and cultural proliferation of what has been called pentecostal spirituality certainly should help us understand further how the significance of being "Spirit-filled" is subject to diverse understanding in today's world.⁶

Let us now open up our question further. What should determine the meaning of being "Spirit-filled," as ecumenical relations are pursued within the professing Christian church? Actually the same question is also relevant even within congregations that are predominately "Pentecostal" or "charismatic." The issue can be particularized with the following questions (with "charismatic" subsumed under "pentecostal" with respect to the issue).

1. How should a pentecostal practical theology of being "Spirit-filled" relate to other members of the body of Christ who emphasize the power of the Holy

Mission, references Patrick Johnstone as stating that 28% of Pentecostals and charismatics in the world are in Latin America, where they comprise 70 percent of the evangelicals," quoted from *World Pulse*, April 19, 2002, p. 6.

⁴ *The Old Religion in a New World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 179-180.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁶ For further exploration one might consult Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995). For interaction between Pentecostal and Reformed denominations worldwide, one may consult "Word and Spirit, Church and World: The Final Report of the International Dialogue between Representatives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches And Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders 1996-2000," in *Pneuma* (Spring, 2001, pp. 9-94.

Spirit and believe themselves to be "Spirit-filled," but who do not share the pentecostal experience of glossolalia?

2. What is the relation of Spirit baptism to considering oneself to be Spirit-filled?
3. What ongoing criteria should there be for a pentecostal view of living a Spirit-filled life?
4. What does it mean for a church to be considered a Spirit-filled church? Is it a "Spirit-filled" pastoral staff? Is it most of the membership? And again, what does it mean to be Spirit-filled anyway?

In approaching this topic, Pentecostals are widely known to be very comfortable in surveying and interpreting the book of Acts. On the other hand, other Evangelicals are often more comfortable in answering pneumatological questions from other parts of the New Testament. In using Paul's letter to the Ephesians to pursue our question, we are looking at a part of the New Testament that was evidently written to a wide variety of early Christian congregations and with a minimal amount of localized problems determining the text.⁷

At the same time, it has been shown that there are significant points of literary correspondence between Ephesians and Acts. Ralph P. Martin has rather persuasively (in my opinion) demonstrated an intimate connection between Acts and Ephesians. He has

⁷ I am assuming Pauline authorship of Ephesians, although a number of scholars take Ephesians to be "Pauline tradition," composed after Paul's death, e.g. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher 1990), lix-lxxiii. Representing those maintaining Pauline authorship is Marcus Barth, *Ephesians*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974), 36-50. It has been widely held that Ephesians is a circular letter for churches in the Roman province of Asia, especially given the doubtful presence of "at Ephesus," in verse 1 in the original manuscript, e.g. Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 226-227. Martin begins his Ephesians discussion with the following. "No part of the New Testament has a more contemporary relevance than Ephesians. Its importance as a timely message to the modern church has been recognized by both Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars at a time when divided Christendom seeks to find common ground by participating in a joint study of the Scripture," 223.

documented several unique points of correspondence between Acts and Ephesians, both in vocabulary not found elsewhere in Paul and in various other data found strikingly in common between the two works. In addition, according to Martin's analysis, "the closest parallels between a single section from Luke's writing and Ephesians are with Acts 20:17-38." The account is that of Paul speaking to *Ephesian* elders toward the end of his third missionary journey. Here Martin documents the specifics. He consequently sees Luke, the author of Acts, as the one who gave Ephesians "its final form," with its "compilation and publication . . . entrusted [thus] by the apostle to a disciple-colleague and amanuensis."⁸ If there is demonstrably close literary and verbal continuity between Acts and Ephesians, this will have important implications in our consideration.

For our study it is significant that the phrase "filled with the Spirit" (translation my own here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated) is in Ephesians 5:18 and in Acts 13:52, but nowhere else in the New Testament with the same Greek verb (*pleroo*). (Curiously, I do not see that Martin includes this in his list of common points between Acts and Ephesians.) It is in the present tense and imperative mood in Ephesians and in the imperfect (progressive past) tense and indicative mood in Acts, but it is the same verb and expression otherwise. However, the idea of being "filled with the Spirit" is also prominent in Acts with the Greek verb *pimplemi* (2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9), a synonym of the verb in 13:52 and Ephesians 5:18. Furthermore, the adjective "full" (*pleres*) in relation to persons having the Spirit is found in Acts 4 times. None of the total number of these Acts references have their linguistic counterpart in the Pauline corpus, *except for Ephesians*. In fact Ephesians stands out from the rest of the New Testament in this

⁸ See *Ibid.*, 230-233, regarding the relation of Acts to Ephesians.

regard. These data, along data indicated above from R. P. Martin, should lead us to see some interplay between Ephesians and Acts with respect to our question, however we choose to handle the authorship question.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in believers of the Christian community punctuates this letter in terms of reception (1:13-14), union with the Father through Christ (2:18), union with other believers (2:21-22), empowerment (3:16), and the Spirit's role in spiritual warfare and prayer (6:10 with vs. 18). But the passage that comes closest to our consideration is 5:18-21. Here believers have the command to be FILLED with the Spirit, who already lives within them and finds expression in various areas of the Christian life.

The following considerations are important as we develop our topic, based on Ephesians 5:18-21, but also in relation to Luke-Acts.

First, the idea of Spirit impartation does have a prominence in Luke-Acts that should inform us here.⁹ We see the Spirit *coming upon* Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3:22); the Spirit *fills* disciples of Jesus at Pentecost (Acts 2:4); the Spirit *falls upon/is received* by new believers (Acts 8:16-17; 10:44; cf. 19:6). Granted, these are initial receptions of the Spirit. But the same thought of a definite and specific bestowal at particular times for believers is found in other Acts references (4:31; 13:52; cf. 13:9). It may well be that it is with such subsequent ministries of the Spirit in mind that Luke highlights bestowal of the Spirit in his parallel of the Jesus *logion* on prayer, Luke 11:9-13 with Matthew 7:7-11. Luke has: "How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those

⁹ For a detailed study, one may see James B. Shelton, "'Filled with the Holy Spirit' and 'Full of the Holy Spirit': Lucan Redactional Phrases," in *Faces of Renewal*, ed. Paul Elbert (Peabody: MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), pp. 80-107.

who ask Him" (vs. 13, NASB). We know that Luke-Acts emphasizes both the role of prayer and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Could it be that Luke 11:13 is a redactional use of a Jesus *logion* for the benefit of those whom he is writing (granting the "dedication" of his work to Theophilus in Luke 1:1-4), including believers? The semantic field of "filling" allows us to see an ideological relationship with the significance of "being filled" in our Ephesians text. This is not simply a reference to "growing in grace" as important as that is! Since the "filling" of Ephesians 5:18 is subsequent to initiation into Christian faith, when the Spirit was initially received (cf. 1:13), there is a subsequence of experience referenced here that echoes the kind of experience in the early church of which Luke writes.¹⁰

Secondly, if we may place weight on the present tense of the verb, it is an experience that is meant to be *ongoing* or *repeated* some real sense. (Greek grammarians will agree that the present tense imperative of a verb may justifiably be so interpreted.) Thus, this text is particularly significant for our question of: "What does it mean to be Spirit-filled"; or we may put it this way: "Who is Spirit-filled?" More specifically: what are the ongoing behavioral characteristics that reveal a Spirit-filled person, or, that reveal a Spirit-filled community, if we may speak in corporate terms?

Thirdly, our passage follows through to give specific characteristics of what it means to be Spirit-filled. In summary, we may identify these as:

1. *worshipful praise* (vs. 19: speaking to yourselves in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.)

¹⁰ This does not disallow the kind of "conversion-initiation" event that was apparently common in the early church, wherein regeneration and an "outpouring" of the Spirit were linked together at the start of the

2. *giving thanks at all times* for all things in the name of Christ to God
(vs. 20)
3. *being submitted to each other* out of reverence for Christ (vs. 21).

There is a cause-effect relation between verse 18 (the command) and verses 19-21 (the outworking), indicated by the participial phrases that follow verse 18, including that of verse 21 of submission to other believers. Of course verse 21 also serves to introduce the following discussion of submission within the nuclear family. But it is often overlooked that verse 21 is the outflow of verse 18, setting forth submission to each other as one characteristic of the Spirit-filled life!

Is it appropriate to see these behavioral characteristics as reflection of a kind of life style? I must say "yes," in light not only of verse 18 and the present imperative verb ("go on being filled"), but in view of the entire context that especially goes back to 4:1, with its admonition to "walk worthily" of the divine calling as Christians.

Let us now look more carefully at these characteristics of the Spirit-filled life, in light of our foregoing comments on Acts and Ephesians.

1. In Ephesians 5:19 we note first the worshipful praise in song. The response of praise to God on the occasion of the Spirit filling disciples is also clearly seen in Acts. In the Pentecost event one hundred and twenty are speaking in other tongues, *declaring the magnificent works of God* (2:4 with vs. 11). Also, in Acts 4:23-31, although here praise *preceded* the outpouring of the Spirit (note vs. 24: "they lifted their voices to God with one accord," NASB). Perhaps focusing especially on house church worship scenes, in Ephesians 5:19 we find praise including "spiritual" singing (*odais pneumatikais*, cf. Col.

Christian life (especially Titus 3:5-7).

3:16). Some have held this refers to charismatic singing, or singing in tongues.¹¹ Others see speaking to each other in song (v. 19a: "speaking to each other") not allowing for singing in other tongues.¹² However, given the context of verse 18, and having in mind the literary similarities with Acts discussed above, it is best to see here reference to *charismatic* singing (at least in the broader sense of that term), and even possibly in tongues, though this is not clarified in the text. It is interesting that at Pentecost the glossolalia, giving words of praise toward God, is seen as also instructive for those who heard. Could this inform us of a dual effect in Ephesians 5:19, with singing in another tongue also meaningful to those who hear, particularly if we grant interpretation? 1 Corinthians 14:15-17 establishes the appropriate place for glossolalic singing with interpretation. The phenomenon of glorifying God in glossolalia is in the context also of Acts 10:46 and clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 14:2, 16. It is difficult to be certain about our Ephesians 5:19 text, but charismatic singing in some form is surely here, as an outflow of the Spirit-filled life.

2. The giving of thanks for all things certainly reflects a joyous and positive spirit, as well as a humble attitude, acknowledging that both successes as well as challenges in life are from God. Here the manifestation of the Spirit is seen in a recognition of divine grace and sovereignty. This also is the outflow of a Spirit-filled life. One who is "Spirit-filled" will have an aroma about him or her that testifies to the love of Jesus, even amidst the hard circumstances of life!

¹¹ E.g. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1975), 238-239; J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Salvation, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Living*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 218.

¹² E.g. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 345-346, who says that "intelligible singing rather than singing in tongues" is likely in view here.

3. Finally, submission to other brothers and sisters in the Christian family is a sign of the Spirit-filled life, according to our passage. No doubt this also is part of humility that comes from a deep realization that God is the source of spiritual success and that He is at work in others, as well as in ourselves. A Spirit filled person knows this!

The last two characteristics here mentioned are not clearly spelled out in the book of Acts as indicators of the Spirit-filled life, although thanksgiving and submission may be seen in the lives of leading characters in Acts. This brings up important hermeneutical considerations. In our application of biblical truth, we need to consider genre issues of the biblical literature and engage in a synthesis of diverse ideas and themes in arriving at application for us today. The book of Acts is historical narrative, with authorial intent seen in the leading theme of divine enabling and direction for the gospel mission of the church into various cultures and geographical areas of the world. Thus in Acts, pneumatology is especially related to this overall theme. *In Acts to be Spirit enabled is related most often to this mission.*

In the epistolary literature of the New Testament, we are also concerned with church mission, but there is more focus on problems in the church, as well as issues of godly community life and worship as the people of God.

Where does this leave us with respect to our question: "What does it mean today to be Spirit-filled?" First, we may even wonder if it is right to ask the question. Are we not in danger of dividing our congregations into "haves" and "have nots"? At this point we do well to recall that the earliest Jerusalem church was faced with the same decision. They had to choose between Spirit-filled and apparently non Spirit-filled believers for an important service in the church by those filled with the Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:1-3).

On what basis did they decide this question? Here we are only told of Stephen as a man full of faith, grace, and power (vss. 5, 8). These characteristics fit with those of Ephesians 5:18-21, but with the more distinctive Acts emphasis, particularly seen in "power" (*dunamis*). The Philip of Acts 8 (cf. 6:5) was apparently one of the chosen ones also, and the gifts of power and evangelism are seen in him.

But what about the Spirit-filled characteristics seen in Ephesians 5:18-21? There is no mention of "power" per se or evangelism? Does this not warn us against making too restrictive a list of criteria, or of making only one particular manifestation as the infallible indicator of who is Spirit-filled? Surely in the selection of church and denominational leaders it is important for the church today to identify and acknowledge Spirit-filled leadership! And in addition, for our concern with God-honoring "ecumenical" fellowship (carefully defining this!), certainly this is a most important consideration.

Can we single out a basic criterion that is subsumed in both the Ephesians passage and Acts more generally? Here I find evidence of an intimate relationship with Christ that is manifested in a joyous and radical spiritual dependence and godly life style as we bring these passages together. The life of "praise and worship" and "thanksgiving" seen in Ephesians is certainly not only to be found at eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings! Given our discussion above, we may expect to find the kind of charismatic worship and life style seen in Acts and reflected in Ephesians 5 pervading ones life beyond this, even though the ancient house church worship may be the immediate assumed context of our passage. In addition, what about family life in the home on Monday mornings? Is there a place in our contemporary understanding of pneumatology for the Spirit-filled life to be

evident both in our congregational settings and also outside the church, and including the home?¹³

In conclusion I find a case for ecumenical pneumatology in Ephesians. This may be expressed differently amongst varying ethnic and cultural communities in our modern world. But the *basics* we find in a carefully worked out New Testament theology of being "Spirit-filled" will stand. It is possible to find in Ephesians echoes of a verbal manifestation of the presence of the Spirit that accords with the book of Acts. At the same time, we also need to take Ephesians seriously in other ways that a Spirit-filled life is evident. Finally, to be Spirit-filled means in some ongoing way to be effusively responsive to our Lord and to all he has for his people in the realm of the Spirit.

What then may be considered a Spirit-filled community? As far as I can see, the closest we come in seeing the New Testament speaking of a Spirit-filled *community* is in the exhortation addressed to the Asian community in Ephesians 5:18. I suppose a Spirit-filled church would be one in which a majority of members participate in such a Spirit-filled life as is described in our Ephesians passage. It is ironic that in addressing a community that got an "A" on the apostle's report card for not falling behind in any "gift," (1 Cor. 1:4-7), Paul could not speak to them as "spiritual" people, but as people "of the flesh" (1 Cor. 3:1). Was this then a "Spirit-filled community"?

As we meditate on the meaning of living a Spirit-filled life, may God truly pour out his Spirit upon us in these "last days"!

¹³ Note the appropos word in Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 722, in discussing Ephesians 5:18. "But in its immediate context the imperative has to do with community life. Here, perhaps, is an even greater need--that God's people collectively be so 'full of God' by his Spirit that our worship and our homes give full evidence of the Spirit's presence: by song, praise, and thanksgiving that simultaneously praise and adore God and teach the community, and by the kind of submission of ourselves to one another in which the concern is not 'who's in charge around here,' but how to love in the family as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her."

In this brief paper I am sure that I have not addressed all pertinent issues or answered all possible questions. But this paper is a modest attempt to encourage serious reflection and prayer on an issue that is at the heart of present day renewal interest.

Charles L. Holman, "Who is Spirit-Filled Anyway?"