

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT? A BIBLICAL INVESTIGATION

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A popular pamphlet challenges “carnal Christians” to embark on the “Spirit-filled life” by confessing their sins and presenting every area of their lives to God.¹ Thus they will experience the “abundant life” Jesus promised (John 10:10) and be “filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18). While the intention behind the teaching is doubtless commendable—who would disagree that many fall short of the Biblical ideal for the Christian and desperately need to renew their commitment to their Lord?—the theology and terminology upon which this approach is based need to be reexamined to see whether they in fact reflect Biblical categories. The following essay, after providing a brief survey of the OT backdrop, is therefore devoted to a detailed study of all the references to a “filling” with the Spirit or a person’s being “full of the Spirit” in the NT. It is hoped that such an analysis will provide a clear, Biblical answer to the question, “What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit?”²

I. THE SPIRIT’S COMING UPON OR FILLING PEOPLE IN THE OT

The OT speaks of the Holy Spirit’s “coming upon” or “filling” a person for the sake of a prophetic commissioning (Ezek 2:2; 3:24) or of issuing a particular prophecy (1 Sam 10:6, 10; 19:23; Mic 3:8). The Spirit enables a chosen divine instrument to carry out a particular task or ministry, be it the building of the temple or the leadership of God’s people, including skill in waging warfare (Exod 28:3; 31:3–5; 35:31; Deut 34:9; Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:19; 1 Sam 16:13; 2 Chr 15:1; 20:14).³ The Greek terms equivalent to

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¹ The reference is to a pamphlet by Campus Crusade for Christ entitled “Have You Made the Wonderful Discovery of the Spirit-Filled Life?” This type of teaching is found in a variety of spiritual renewal movements such as the Keswick movement, on which see the critique by J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1984) 149–150. Cf. also R. Pache, *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody, 1954) 114–136.

² For helpful summaries on being baptized with and being filled with the Spirit see M. Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (rev. ed.; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985) 149–194; B. M. Barrie, “Spirit-Baptism and Spirit-Filling in Luke-Acts” (master’s thesis, Regent College, 1986). A helpful treatment on the theology surrounding the baptism of the Spirit is P. D. Feinberg, “Charismatic Theology and Neo-Pentecostalism: The Baptism in the Holy Spirit,” *Theology and Mission* (ed. D. J. Hesselgrave; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 39–54.

³ Cf. L. J. Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), esp. 39–52.

“coming upon” in the LXX range from γίνομαι (Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 1 Sam 19:23; 2 Chr 15:1; 20:14) and ἔρχομαι (both meaning “come upon”; Ezek 2:2; 3:24) to ἐνδύναμαι (“empower”; Judg 6:34) and πίπτω (“fall upon”; Ezek 11:5). Terminology of “filling” comprises the terms πίμπλημι/ἐμπίμπλημι (Exod 28:3; 31:3; 35:31; 40:35; Deut 34:9; 1 Kgs 8:11; 2 Chr 7:1–2; Isa 11:3; Mic 3:8; Hag 2:7), πληρώω (Ps 72:19; Zeph 1:9; Isa 40:4; Jer 31:12–13) and πλήρης (Isa 6:1, 3; Ezek 43:5; 44:4). All of these “filling” terms usually translate the Hebrew כָּלַל (“to fill, be full”). The verbs πίμπλημι and πληρώω appear to overlap substantially in meaning, with the former term being slightly more frequent.⁴ Four significant observations for the present investigation emerge from a study of these passages.

1. *The association of terms of “filling” with temple terminology.* A number of references cluster around the temple being filled with the glory of God (Exod 40:34–35; 1 Kgs 8:10–11; 2 Chr 5:13–14; 7:1–2; Hag 2:7; Ezek 10:4; 43:5; 44:4). But God’s glory is not limited to the temple. All the earth is, or one day will be, full of his glory (cf. Num 14:21; Ps 72:19; Isa 6:3; 11:9; Hab 2:14).

2. *An eschatological dimension.* The eschatological element in OT “filling” language is most evident in Ezek 36:26–27 where God promises a new covenant entailing the giving of a “new spirit,” even “my [God’s] Spirit.” The references to God’s filling of the entire earth likewise transcend all particular boundaries and speak of a universal scope of God’s reach that has eschatological connotations (e.g. Ps 72:19; Isa 6:3). This eschatological component is frequently linked with a corporate element.

3. *A corporate dimension.* In the case of Ezek 36:26–27, the promise of the giving of a new spirit is constrained not primarily individually but zicorporately (cf. esp. vv. 6, 14; cf. also Acts 23:6; 26:6–8). There the vision of the dry bones raised to life provides an eschatological description of a restored new covenant community (cf. also John 10, esp. v. 16). The prophet’s vision is one of a new creation endowed with the breath of God.

This corporate element is also found in the eschatological passage Isa 63:10–11. There reference is made to Israel’s rebellion against God despite his deliverance during the exodus. The people turned against God and “grieved the Holy Spirit” (v. 10), even though God was the one who had “put the Holy Spirit in their midst” (v. 11; LXX ἐν αὐτοῖς). The Holy Spirit is thus said to have worked in God’s covenant community—but his people had grieved the Spirit. This passage appears to provide a close conceptual link with Eph 4:30; 5:18.

4. *An individual dimension.* In OT times the Holy Spirit would occasionally “come upon” individuals, usually select instruments of God such as military (judges) or other leaders (prophets).⁵ This event occurred generally

⁴ Cf. TDNT 6.290 n. 21.

⁵ See already the references given above.

not in response to a human request in prayer but by sovereign divine initiative. The Spirit was given for the purpose of enabling God's chosen person to carry out the commission given to him or her.⁶

This backdrop will prove useful in the following investigation. Paul's teaching on believers' being the "temple" of the Holy Spirit and his vision of an eschatological, restored covenant community can be seen in continuity with OT revelation. Also the concept of the Spirit's "coming upon" or "filling" particular chosen individuals to authenticate them as God's representatives and to accomplish certain tasks constitutes an important antecedent, and perhaps informing, theology for the NT's teaching on the filling of the Holy Spirit.

II. "BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT" (EPH 5:18)

Notably, Eph 5:18 is the only reference to being filled with the Spirit⁷ in the entire Pauline corpus⁸ (the Greek word here is *πληρώω*).⁹ This fact alone should caution one against making this aspect the focus of one's pneumatology or even one's entire approach to the Christian life.¹⁰ The following observations pertain to a proper interpretation of this passage.

First, the terminology is used in conjunction with the reference to being "drunk with wine" earlier in the verse (cf. also Luke 1:15; cf. Acts 2:4 with 2:13). Thus "being filled with the Spirit" should be understood in a metaphorical sense of someone's being "full" of a given substance, be it material (wine) or spiritual (the Holy Spirit).¹¹

⁶ A fifth dimension may also be briefly noted, i.e. a messianic dimension (cf. Isa 11:3; 42:1; 61:1).

⁷ On the phrase "with the Spirit" see K. H. Easley, "The Pauline Usage of *Pneumati* as a Reference to the Spirit of God," *JETS* 27 (1984) 299–313. Note that the same phrase is used in Eph 2:22; 3:5; 6:18.

⁸ While the argument below does not rest on it, the Pauline authorship of Ephesians is assumed in this essay. For a defense of the Pauline authorship of the epistle see D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (rev. ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 496–528.

⁹ The word *πληρώω* occurs four times in the present epistle (Eph 1:23; 3:19; 4:10; 5:18); two of these references (1:23; 3:19) also feature the noun *πλήρωμα* (cf. also 4:13; Col 1:19; 2:9). Paul never uses the terms *πλήρης* or *πλήρημι*. While "fullness" terminology may have been used by the apostle in part in relation to the expression's use in Greek thought, it appears that Paul's prayer for believers to be "filled" with various divine gifts primarily reflects OT conceptualities (see the discussions above and below). On the "filling" words used in the NT (*πλήρης*, *πληρώω*, *πλήρημι*) see the respective entries by H. Hübner in *EDNT* 3.106–111, G. Dellling in *TDNT* 6.128–131; 286–298, and R. Schippers in *NIDNTT* 1.733–741. Cf. also R. Stronstad, "'Filled with the Holy Spirit' Terminology in Luke-Acts," *The Holy Spirit in the Scriptures and the Church. Essays presented to Leslie Thomas Holdcroft on his 65th Birthday* (ed. Stronstad and L. M. Van Kleek; Clayburn: Western Pentecostal Bible College, 1987) 1–13, who unconvincingly seeks to limit Spirit-filling to prophetic inspiration and vocation; C. F. D. Moule, "'Fulness' and 'Fill' in the New Testament," *SJT* 4 (1951) 79–86.

¹⁰ For Johannine passages on the fullness of the Spirit see John 4:13–14; 7:38.

¹¹ Cf. Paul's earlier prayer for the Ephesian believers to be "filled unto all the fulness of God" in Eph 3:19. Cf. also M. Barth, *Ephesians 4–6* (AB 34A; New York: Doubleday, 1974) 582, esp. n. 117. On the background to Eph 5:18 cf. P. W. Gosnell, "Ephesians 5:18–20 and Mealtime Propriety," *TynBul* 44 (1993) 363–371.

Second, when read in conjunction with 5:17, being drunk with wine is paralleled with foolishness,¹² and being filled with the Spirit is linked with wisdom.¹³ Wisdom of course is a function of Christian maturity (cf. e.g. 1 Cor 2:6; cf. also Exod 31:3–5; 35:31). This fact seems inadequately represented by a theology that interprets Eph 5:18 in terms of a confession of sins and a “filling with the spirit,” since attention is drawn primarily to the event of the asking and filling rather than to the process of growing.

Third, when Paul commands the Ephesian believers to be “filled with the Spirit,” no explicit reference is made to their need to ask for this “filling.” The need to ask for such a filling is at times assumed owing to the fact that Paul is here issuing a command. Thus the need to ask may well be compatible with Biblical teaching as a whole. Even if this were so, however, the focus here appears to be not on the means of securing such a filling but on believers’ need to be filled with the Spirit, whatever the means.

This is underscored by the fact that grammatically the command to “be filled” is passive rather than active, an instance of the divine passive construction with God as the implied agent of the filling. Looking to God for the filling thus appears to be the major emphasis, the minor theme being believers’ responsibility to lead obedient, circumspect lives in relation to God and others within and outside the Church. The Spirit of course already indwells believers. What God desires is for the Christian community, and for individual believers, to manifest the Spirit’s presence in ever-increasing fullness (cf. Rom 8:14; Gal 5:16, 25).

The passage in Isa 63:10–11 is highly instructive. There it is said that God had put his Spirit in Israel’s midst, but God’s people had grieved his Holy Spirit. God had already put the Spirit in the midst of his people. All they had to do was not to grieve him but rather to live obedient lives. We may conclude that there is not a single reference in the NT that enjoins believers to ask to be filled with the Spirit. While this fact does not speak conclusively against such a practice, it would caution against placing an undue emphasis on asking to be filled with the Spirit as part of a set procedure for individual believers.¹⁴

¹² Delling, *TDNT* 6.291, sees the contrast between the licentious life of a drunkard and the disciplined life of a believer.

¹³ For the juxtaposition of the phrases “filled with the Spirit” or “full of the Spirit” with wisdom terminology see also Acts 6:3; cf. further Col 1:9; Eph 3:14–21. The emphasis appears to be not so much on being controlled by the Spirit rather than by wine, as is often maintained, as on the presence of the Spirit in the corporate life of the Christian community, resulting in a variety of spiritual manifestations (see further below). In the OT, being “filled with wine/drunkenness” connotes divine judgment (cf. e.g. Jer 13:12–13).

¹⁴ Cf. C. D. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 94–95: “Indeed, one searches without success to find an instance when believers ever prayed for the filling of the Spirit since the day of Pentecost. . . . God does not ask believers . . . to pray for the filling.” Contra W. A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 783, who claims that “there is nothing wrong with teaching people to pray and seek this greater infilling of the Holy Spirit, or to expect and ask the Lord for an outpouring of more spiritual gifts in their lives,” referring also in a footnote to the hunger of many Christians to know how they may be filled with the Holy Spirit, encouraging “prayer that the Holy Spirit would fill us,” even “to pray daily” along those lines. Grudem, by

Fourth, the use of the present tense appears to suggest that Paul's desire for believers is to be filled with the Spirit continually (cf. Acts 13:52 below).¹⁵ Christians' lives are to be characterized by the Spirit's presence, which will manifest itself in wise living (Eph 5:15–17), grateful worship (5:19–20), and God-honoring, properly submitted relationships (5:21–6:9). Thus Paul does not here seem to think of believers' asking to be filled with the Spirit but rather is encouraging them to live lives permeated by the Spirit's presence.¹⁶

Fifth, the thrust of the passage is corporate, not merely individualistic.¹⁷ All of the expressions of lives full of the spirit are in relationships, be it among Christians at worship, in the home, or at the workplace. This corporate dimension to "being filled with the Spirit" is often inadequately recognized in a theology of a "Spirit-filled life" that deals primarily with an individual's personal—even private—experience.¹⁸

Sixth, the injunction in Eph 5:18 should primarily be understood in the context of Pauline ecclesiology rather than anthropology.¹⁹ Paul's primary concern appears to be the Church's corporate growth and its effectiveness in

substantiating these injunctions with passages from 1 Corinthians 12–14, appears to have subtly shifted ground here and fails to note that the encouragement for Christians to seek certain spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12–14 is never referred to in terms of a need to ask to be "filled with the Spirit." Moreover even in the case of spiritual gifts it is doubtful whether we are to ask for them. We are to desire them and to exercise them, but they are sovereignly bestowed on us by the Spirit (cf. 12:11).

¹⁵ Grudem, *Systematic* 781, takes this to imply that being "filled with the Spirit" is something that should "repeatedly be happening" to Christians. But it may be more accurate to see being "filled with the Spirit" as a state of being that should continually characterize the worship and relationships of the Christian community, thus focusing not on repeated events but on a continued state of being. Again, when Grudem states that being "filled with the Spirit" should be understood "not as a one-time event but as an event that can occur over and over again in a Christian's life" (p. 782) he can hardly get this from the present tense in Eph 5:18 which seems to suggest that being "filled with the Spirit" in Pauline terminology does not primarily refer to an event or even a number of events at all but to a continual reality in the life of the community. Grudem's comments may be borne out by various references in Acts (which is indeed where he claims support for his latter statement). But whether a reader unfamiliar with Acts would have understood Eph 5:18 that way is doubtful.

¹⁶ See also Eph 4:3 where believers are exhorted to maintain the unity of the Spirit they already have rather than to strive for something they have yet to attain.

¹⁷ Cf. G. D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 721–722; Green, *I Believe* 189–190.

¹⁸ This is a weakness in B. Graham, *The Holy Spirit* (Waco: Word, 1978) 140–159, who discusses being filled with the Spirit almost exclusively in individualistic terms.

¹⁹ Cf. F. W. Horn in *ABD* 3:276; R. Schnackenburg, "Christus, Geist und Gemeinde (Eph 4:1–16)," *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1973) 279–296. Cf. also C. Anderson, "Rethinking 'Be Filled with the Spirit,' Ephesians 5:18 and the Purpose of Ephesians," *Evangelical Journal* 7 (1989) 57–67, who points out that "fullness" terminology in Ephesians is usually related to God's activity in Christ (cf. 1:10, 22–23; 3:19; 4:10, 13). Hence "being filled with the Spirit is coming under the influence of the Spirit's power, aligning one's time and energy with the plan and purpose of God which is the summing up of all things in Christ" (p. 64). Cf. also E. D. Roels, *God's Mission: The Epistle to the Ephesians in Mission Perspective* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1962); A. J. Köstenberger, "The Mystery of Christ and the Church: Head and Body, 'One Flesh,'" *Trinity Journal* 12 (1991) 79–94.

mission, especially in the light of an eschatological perspective of “summing up of all things in Christ” (1:10). To this end the apostle develops his earlier teaching that the Church is Christ’s body (cf. 1:23; 2:16; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 28, 30; cf. also Rom 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12; Col 1:18; 3:15). God’s subjection of all things under one head—that is, Christ (Eph 1:10)—sets the remainder of the epistle in proper perspective.

Paul proceeds to discuss Jewish-Gentile unity in one body in chap. 2, using temple terminology to describe God’s people as “a holy temple in the Lord,” “built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (2:21–22). The concluding prayer of the first part of the epistle in 3:14–21 applies Paul’s teachings to the entire Church. Chapters 4–6 develop these insights in greater detail. In the unity of the Spirit (4:3), God’s new covenant community is to attain to the “fullness of Christ” (4:13), which involves the use of spiritual gifts, turning from sin, inner renewal, and spiritual separation from the world.

In the light of the OT emphasis on God’s glory filling the temple and Paul’s teaching that it is now believers—that is, the new covenant community—who are God’s temple (cf. 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19–20; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:20–21; cf. also 1 Pet 2:4–5),²⁰ it appears that Eph 5:18 should be understood against such a salvation-historical, eschatological and corporate backdrop.²¹ The new covenant community is to be God’s new temple, his “new creation.”²² The Church is to be the new people of God who do not grieve the Holy Spirit whom God has placed in their midst (4:30; cf. Isa 63:11). The new covenant community is also the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision of a restored Israel resurrected by God and invested with a “new spirit” (cf. Ezek 36:26–27; chap. 37; cf. also Gal 6:16).

Seventh, reference should also be made to Paul’s prayer for believers to be “filled unto all the fulness of God” (Eph 3:19), “filled with the fruit of righteousness” (Phil 1:11), or “filled with the knowledge of [God’s] will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Col 1:9; cf. 2:9–10; see also Rom 15:13–14).²³ It may be asked whether these prayers constitute evidence that it is legitimate for a person to ask to be filled with the Spirit. In the context of our individualistic age, it should be pointed out that Paul’s prayer is for the congregation as a whole rather than merely for individuals. Thus Paul’s concern in these instances appears to be foremost of all for a congregation to grow in spiritual maturity rather than for individuals to transition from

²⁰ Cf. P. T. O’Brien, “The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity,” *The Church in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 98–105; cf. also R. J. McKelvey, *The New Temple: The Church in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1969); R. Y. K. Fung, “Some Pauline Pictures of the Church,” *EvQ* 53 (1981) 89–107.

²¹ The terminology used in 1 Cor 3:16 is that the Spirit “lives” in God’s people; in 6:19–20 reference is made to the Spirit’s being “in” God’s people, a Spirit they had received from God (note also the catena of OT passages relating to God’s commitment to his covenant community from Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel; cf. 1 Cor 12:13). The terms “being in,” “living in” and “indwelling” appear therefore to be approximate synonyms of “being filled with” the Spirit. Cf. John 14:17; Rom 5:5 (cf. 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5); 1 Cor 3:16.

²² Cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15. See also Rev 21:22 where, in John’s vision of God’s new creation, he sees no more temple.

²³ Cf. *TDNT* 6.291.

“carnality” into spiritual effectiveness. At the same time it should be acknowledged that churches are Spirit-filled when their members are. Thus it would be wrong to erect an absolute dichotomy between being “filled with the Spirit” individually and corporately.

In summary, Paul’s use of the expression “Be filled with the Spirit” in Eph 5:18 in contrast to being drunk with wine enjoins believers to exhibit a wise, maturing lifestyle which is to be expressed in corporate praise and worship as well as in proper Christian relationships. Corporately the Church is to be God’s pneumatic community, the body of Christ, the place where God now dwells by his Spirit. Individual believers, as members of this body, are to manifest the Spirit’s presence and to avoid anything that might grieve him or hinder his operation. No explicit mention is made of believers’ need to ask to be filled with the Spirit, a fact that at least should caution one against an undue focus on this element. Since the Spirit already lives in them, believers’ major efforts should be directed toward manifesting the Spirit’s presence in ever-increasing measure, both individually and corporately, just as believers are to preserve the Spirit’s unity in the bond of peace.

III. LUKE/ACTS

The remaining references to being “filled with” or “full of” the Holy Spirit are found in the Lucan writings. All three passages in Luke’s gospel are located in the first chapter (1:15, 41, 67; the Greek word is *πῖμπλημι*). In 1:15 the angel appearing to Elizabeth pronounces that the Baptist would be “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” As in Eph 5:18 this reference contrasts the filling of the Spirit with the drinking of wine. Interestingly the truth of these words is borne out in 1:44, where the infant in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy as one filled with the Spirit when Mary, pregnant with the Messiah, pays a visit to her cousin Elizabeth. In 1:41 reference is made to Elizabeth’s being “filled with the Holy Spirit,” issuing in her blessing of Mary as “the mother of my Lord” (v. 43). Finally, the Baptist’s father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, resulting in a prophecy regarding the significance of his son’s ministry (v. 67).²⁴ As G. Delling notes, all these references function within Luke’s salvation-historical framework: “The Spirit of prophecy causes Elisabeth (1:41) and Zachariah (1:67) to magnify the fulfilment of God’s promise of salvation in the sons of Mary and Elisabeth.”²⁵

The book of Acts contains an additional six references to a person’s or a group of people’s being filled with the Spirit (2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9: *πῖμπλημι*; 13:52: *πληρώω*). The first passage relates to the believers’ experience at

²⁴ It appears that especially these early references resemble closely the OT notion of the Holy Spirit’s “coming upon,” “taking possession of” or “filling” a person for the sake of issuing a particular prophecy or carrying out a particular task or ministry. Cf. *TDNT* 6.130, noting that Luke 1 continues an OT trend, referring also to Num 11:25–29; Isa 59:21; 61:1. See also the discussion of the OT background above.

²⁵ Delling, *TDNT* 6.130.

Pentecost, an experience that is also referred to as “being baptized with the Holy Spirit”²⁶ in 1:5 and as “falling upon” (ἐπιπίπτω) believers in 11:15.²⁷ In 4:8 Peter, “after having been filled with the Holy Spirit,” gives his defense to the Sanhedrin for his healing of a lame man (see Acts 3; cf. also Matt 10:17–20). In Acts 4:31, immediately following this defense the believers, when they had prayed but not necessarily asked to be filled with the Holy Spirit, were filled with the Spirit with the result that they spoke the word of God with boldness.

The following two references relate to the apostle Paul. In 9:17 Ananias’ mission toward Saul is linked with Saul’s being filled with the Spirit, an event that is linked with Saul’s regaining of his sight and with his baptism (9:18). Also Saul (Paul), after having been filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. 4:8), rebukes the magician opposing his ministry to the proconsul on Cyprus. This rebuke results in the magician’s temporary blindness as well as in the proconsul’s faith (13:11–12). Finally, in 13:52 we learn that the disciples “were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” This reference features a Greek imperfect tense (cf. Eph 5:18 where the present is used), a fact that is significant since here mention is made of people’s being filled with the Spirit continually rather than merely at a given point in time. This, then, should be the experience of believers: to be continually filled with the Spirit.

There remain five references to individuals who are “full of the Spirit,” one in Luke’s gospel (4:1) and four in the book of Acts (6:3, 5; 7:55; 11:24; cf. also 6:8; Greek πλήρης). In Luke 4:1 Jesus is said to be “full of the Spirit” after his baptism. Acts 6:3 refers to the seven men chosen from among the Greeks to serve the widows and 6:5 to one from among their midst (Stephen). This Stephen is also said to be “full of the Holy Spirit” (7:55) shortly before

²⁶ The distinction between being baptized and being filled with the Spirit cannot be discussed in detail here. Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (SBT 2/15; London: SCM, 1970); *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975); J. R. W. Stott, *Baptism and Fullness* (2d ed.; London: InterVarsity, 1975); Green, *I Believe* 149–194.

²⁷ In the light of the contemporary teaching of a so-called “second blessing”—that is, a time of cleansing from sin and commitment to the Lord for life and ministry—the distinction between terms like “baptize” and “fill” is important. Notably the significance of the phrase “to baptize” in the Holy Spirit in the six places where the expression occurs in the NT is bound up first and foremost with a major redemptive-historical appointment (the usage in 1 Cor 12:13 is a partial exception). It appears that being “baptized” in the Spirit speaks metaphorically of initiation, while being “filled” with the Spirit focuses on empowerment without regard for when in the process of a Christian’s life it occurs. Thus it appears that in Biblical terminology a person is “baptized” by the Spirit only once, at the inception of one’s Christian life (i.e. he or she is regenerated or experiencing spiritual birth), while the same person may be “filled” with the Spirit (i.e. empowered for ministry) numerous times. Moreover the Christian community, and individual believers as members of it, are to be continually filled with the Spirit. In the ensuing discussion the question whether one should ask to be filled with the Spirit will deal primarily with the question of whether Scripture teaches that believers should ask God to fill them with the Spirit to empower them for ministry. Furthermore the question will be asked whether such a filling is in the Scriptural records linked with “carnal” Christians’ shedding their standard Christian experience by yielding their lives entirely to God, a theology reflected in both “second blessing” theology and the popular pamphlet mentioned above. On “second blessing” theology cf. D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 158–160.

his being martyred, describing a vision of the exalted Jesus. Finally Barnabas is described in like manner in 11:24 in conjunction with his ministry of teaching and exhortation in Antioch. The difference between the references to being “filled with” and being “full of” the Spirit appears to be essentially one of event (in the case of the former) versus general characteristic (in the case of the latter). Acts 7:55, however, where Stephen, “full of the Spirit,” describes a vision (cf. also 6:15) indicates that this distinction is not a rigid one.

In summary, it appears that the majority of these references resemble quite closely the OT phenomenon of the Spirit’s “coming upon” a person for the purpose of empowering that individual for a given task. Some passages also entail a corporate dimension (Acts 2:4; 4:31; 13:52). Attention should be drawn especially to 2:4 where the pouring out of the Spirit is salvation-historically significant as the fulfillment of Joel’s eschatological prophecy. As in the Pauline reference of Eph 5:18, none of the Lucan passages makes explicit reference to individuals’ asking to be filled with the Spirit. In every situation the initiative lies with God, and the filling of the Spirit is tied not to a confession of sins but to special challenges in ministry.

IV. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EPH 5:18 AND LUKE/ACTS: THEOLOGICAL INTEGRATION

How do the Pauline and Lucan theologies regarding being “filled with the Spirit” relate? It appears that while there are slightly different emphases these theologies are compatible and complementary. In Paul’s only passage referring to Spirit-filling (Eph 5:18) the corporate element, while constituting the primary emphasis, clearly involves an individual dimension as well. In Luke/Acts some passages focus on the corporate-eschatological aspect (e.g. Acts 2:4; 4:31; 13:52) and others on the Spirit’s filling of individuals (cf. Luke 1:14, 41, 67; Acts 4:8; 7:55; 9:17; 13:9).

It appears that these two strands of teaching build upon different aspects of the OT’s theology of the Spirit. The eschatological and corporate element, represented in Eph 5:18 as well as in Acts 2:4 and other passages, is found in the OT in Isa 63:10–11; Ezek 36:26–27; chap. 37. Israel was God’s covenant community in whose midst God has put his Spirit. The prophets envisioned an eschatological scenario where God’s operation in his covenant community by the Spirit would no longer be hindered.

The terminology of “filling” associated with the temple that is filled with God’s glory probably provides the informing theology for the Pauline teaching on individual believers and the entire community being the temple of the Holy Spirit. Indeed as already pointed out in the survey of the OT background God’s glory does not merely dwell in the temple but in the entire universe. The psalmists as well as the prophets envisioned a time when the entire creation would be filled with the knowledge of God’s glory. This emphasis is developed further in the Pauline teaching on believers and the community being a new creation as firstfruits of the consummation of God’s purposes in the future (cf. Rom 8:18–28; cf. also Rev 21:22).

The second element providing the backdrop for the NT teaching on the filling of the Spirit appears to be passages where certain individuals were filled with the Spirit or where the Spirit “came upon,” “took possession of” or “fell upon” selected persons as a sovereign act of God, marking them out as his chosen representatives and equipping and empowering them for the accomplishment of a given task. Thus we find in the book of Acts the Spirit “filling” Peter, Stephen or Paul for the purpose of preaching, martyrdom or spiritual warfare. In 4:31 the entire community is filled with the Spirit for the purpose of bold gospel proclamation. The latter passage reveals that there is a certain degree of convergence of the two strands in that the Spirit now empowers not merely individual spokesmen of God but the entire Church as God’s witnessing community. This same community, apart from special enablements such as this, is also to function as God’s Spirit-filled temple, as a place of worship and testimony to God’s truth and goodness (cf. Eph 5:18; Acts 13:52).

V. IMPLICATIONS

What are some of the implications of the above exploration of the relevant passages on the “filling” of the Spirit in the OT and NT? We will focus on the question asked at the beginning—that is, whether Scripture supports the contemporary notion of the need for backslidden, struggling believers (so-called “carnal Christians”) to repent and ask to be filled with the Spirit as a means of taking a serious step of Christian commitment.

1. *Not a single reference explicitly calls on believers to ask to be filled with the Spirit.*²⁸ It rather appears that God sovereignly chooses to fill believers when they need to give a defense (Acts 4:8) or speak God’s word (4:31), when they encounter spiritual opposition (13:9) or find themselves in other circumstances where they need the Holy Spirit to empower them for a particular task or challenge in ministry. In general the initiative for the filling with the Spirit thus properly lies, contrary to the prevalent contemporary understanding and practice, not with the believer but with God.

This does not mean that believers should not earnestly desire or even pray for such a filling. It suggests, however, that the theology of Spirit-filling critiqued here does not adequately reflect Biblical emphases. Rather than being unduly concerned with whether they are Spirit-filled, believers today should be advised to live obediently and wisely, seeking to manifest the Spirit’s presence both individually and corporately. While they may desire or even pray for a filling with the Spirit, God’s filling believers with his Spirit should in no way be limited to occasions where believers actually ask for such a filling. Rather, God may fill them with the Spirit whenever he deems

²⁸ The statement in Luke 11:13—“How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”—is no real exception, since there the reference is to asking for the Holy Spirit, not to asking to be filled with the Holy Spirit (contra Green, *I Believe* 186). Some may cite Acts 4:31 where believers are filled with the Spirit after praying, but there is no indication that they asked to be filled with the Spirit in their prayer.

it necessary in the light of special ministry opportunities or the presence of spiritual opposition.

2. *In all these instances the individuals who receive such a filling are not struggling Christians who repent of their sins or otherwise seek to escape a substandard Christian experience.* The subjects of such a filling are rather committed, obedient Christians in the context of ministry. Not in a single instance is the filling with the Spirit in Scripture linked with repentance or the confession of sins. It is therefore unclear on what basis these elements are linked in contemporary teaching on the filling of the Spirit. That is not to say that Christians are not to confess their sins (cf. e.g. 1 John 1:9). They are required to do so, however, on other grounds, such as in order to enjoy continued fellowship with the Spirit and with other believers (cf. 1:6–10). Likewise there are injunctions not to quench or grieve the Spirit (cf. 1 Thess 5:19; Eph 4:30). But these terms again should be distinguished from linking confession of sins with the filling of the Spirit.

3. *The general framework for understanding the continual filling of the Spirit in the individual's life and the corporate community is one of spiritual growth in maturity and one of Christian ministry.* The one who is filled with the Spirit or the community that is so filled exhibits an increasingly wise lifestyle, including grateful worship and God-honoring relationships. The issue of “carnality” is never linked with such a “filling with the Spirit.” In this context it should be noted, however, that a careful study of passages such as 1 Cor 3:1–4 indicates that the reference there is not to a third category of Christians—that is, “carnal” ones—but to “babes in Christ” (thus genuine believers) who have failed to live up to their Christian commitment and are therefore immature believers.²⁹ Thus it would be more accurate to limit oneself to two categories of people (believers and unbelievers) and to acknowledge that among believers there are different degrees of progress in people's maturation process. Most importantly, the impression that “carnal Christians” can somehow shed their substandard experience merely by confessing their sins and by being “filled with the Spirit” is unduly simplistic. It is further contradicted by the above-noted emphasis on wisdom, faith and Christian character in the Biblical references to being filled with or being full of the Spirit.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the light of these observations from this introductory study of all the relevant Biblical references, it may be concluded that the kind of theology communicated by the popular pamphlet mentioned above should be questioned. Are we therefore to conclude that the concerns underlying such teaching are illegitimate? This would certainly be ill-advised. There are plenty of

²⁹ Cf. esp. G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 121–128, esp. 128.

Christians whose values are worldly and who have not matured in their Christian lives the way they should have. It should be emphasized, however, that the slow road to maturity entails a process of mental and spiritual renewal (Eph 5:17; Rom 12:1–2) as well as practice (Heb 5:14), not merely prayers to be filled with the Spirit.³⁰

True discipleship is a complex and long-term process. Believers are to work out their salvation, knowing that God is working in them to complete his good purposes (Phil 1:6; 2:12). With regard to Spirit-filling, emphasis should again be placed on God who sovereignly filled in answer to believers' prayers or desires, but at any rate for the sake of his glory or by his own choice and initiative. Thus believers should be advised to shed any undue preoccupation with whether they are filled with the Spirit, focusing rather on living obedient Christian lives that are increasingly characterized by the Spirit's presence. At times they may be too involved in ministry even to recognize their need to be filled with the Spirit, but the sovereign God who bestows the Spirit will nevertheless "fill" them with the Spirit if he deems it necessary.

It is hoped that this brief study will put the discussion on what it means to be filled with the Spirit on a more Biblical footing and facilitate further discussion on this important topic. Being "filled with the Spirit" is of course just a small part of the Biblical teaching on the variety of roles exercised by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit as a person of the Godhead lives in every believer (cf. e.g. John 14:17). He teaches and guides him or her (cf. John 16:13; cf. also examples in the book of Acts). He provides comfort, boldness and assurance, with many more things besides. He gives spiritual gifts to every believer (cf. e.g. 1 Corinthians 12–14), and he develops the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22–24). Thus it is important for us to appreciate the various ways in which the Spirit helps and blesses us. May his ministry continue to produce the fruit God desires for his glory and our good, and may we live lives full of his presence.

³⁰ For a Biblical-theological treatment of sanctification see D. Peterson, *Possessed by God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).