

# How to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit

by Dr. William W. Combs

The filling of the Holy Spirit is an important subject. We are all aware of Paul's command in Eph 5:18 "to be filled with the Spirit." Sometimes preachers will put their congregations on the spot by pointedly asking them: "Are you filled with the Holy Spirit?" The problem is that often Christians do not know how to be filled. That is not all that surprising since, contrary to what we may believe, the Bible nowhere *specifically* deals with the question of how one may experience the filling of the Spirit.

What does it mean to be filled with Spirit? The expression "filled with the Spirit" does not refer to a literal filling. God does not open the Christian up and pour the Spirit into him. In reality all Christians already possess, that is, are indwelt by the Spirit. "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ [another name for the Holy Spirit], he does not belong to Christ" (Rom 8:9). The word filled means "controlled." To be filled with Spirit means to be controlled by the Spirit. In the Gospels we find similar expressions such as "filled with fear" (Luke 5:26), which means to be controlled by fear. But how do we who already have the Spirit dwelling within us allow the Spirit to control us?

It is surprising that Eph 5:18 is the only place in his epistles that Paul mentions the filling of the Holy Spirit. Why does Paul not make the same exhortation to believers in other churches? In fact he does, but he uses different terminology. In Gal 5:16 he says, "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh." Another translation puts it this way, "Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature." To live or walk by the Spirit is really the same thing as being filled with the Spirit. Another synonymous expression is found in Gal 5:18, "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law." We commonly use the expression "to be led by the Spirit" to refer to guidance received from God, but that is not how Paul uses it. For Paul, to be led by the Spirit, to live by the spirit, and to filled with the Spirit are different ways of saying the same thing: to be controlled by the Spirit.

Unfortunately we often make too sharp a distinction between the indwelling of the Spirit and the filling of the Spirit. We tend to think of the filling as an either or situation, that is, one is either filled with the Spirit or he isn't. Actually, the Spirit's filling is a matter of degree. There is a sense, mind you only a sense, in which all true believers are filled with the Spirit. Paul himself says as much in Rom 8:14, "For as many as are led [or controlled] by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." Also, in one translation Rom 8:9 reads, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you." Disobedient Christians have so little of the Spirit's control in their lives that we commonly say they are not filled with the Spirit, and, for all practical purposes, that is true. But there is a sense in which all true Christians, whatever their spiritual condition, are influenced to some degree by the Holy Spirit since they are indwelt by Him. The question then is one of degree. To what degree is the Spirit filling or controlling us. It has been well said that we do not need more of the Spirit, but He needs more of us. Instead of thinking of the filling of the Spirit as a electric light switch which is either on or off (filled or not filled), we should compare His work to the light dimmer, which is now found in many homes. Just as the light controlled by the dimmer varies by degrees, so also the filling of the Spirit.

So then how do we allow the Spirit to control our lives to a greater degree? Simply by yielding and submitting ourselves to God. This seems clear from a number of Scripture passages. In Gal 5:16ff. Paul explains the struggle that goes on between the Spirit and the sinful nature within a believer. The implication is that one can either yield to one or the other. As one yields to God the Holy Spirit fills and controls the believer so that the fruit of the Spirit is produced. In Col 3:16 Paul says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...." This will result in the singing of psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, the giving of thanks, and an attitude of submission. This is exactly the same result of being filled with the Spirit in Eph 5:18ff. As we "let the word of Christ dwell" in us, that is, as we yield and submit ourselves to God and His word, we will be controlled by the Spirit. The more we submit to, yield to, and obey the word of God, the more the Spirit is able to control our lives and use us for the glory of Christ.