

What It Means to Be Filled with the Spirit

I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; Ephesians 5:15-20

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I had a barber once. That tells you how old this story is! It goes back to when I was a student at Samford University. His name was Geno, and he loved to talk. He learned that I was a ministerial student, and that, of course, opened the door for him to tell me about his religious background. He had no need for the church, he said. Religion was all make believe, and he just didn't need it. He much preferred to stay home on Sunday mornings and read the news. His wife, however, was very active in her church. A Pentecostal church. He said he used to make fun of them with all the whooping and hollering, speaking in tongues, and dancing in the aisle. All just make believe, he said. It was for the gullible, the emotionally immature, and he didn't need it.

Until his wife begged him one Sunday to go to church with her. He didn't want to, but this time she prevailed upon him. Reluctantly, just to keep peace in the family, he agreed to go to the Pentecostal church with his wife. Expecting to hate it. Expecting to roll his eyes and leave the way he came, as he had done so many times before. But not this time. Geno, the skeptic, the one who didn't need it, told me that the Holy Spirit "fell" upon him that day. He was filled with the Spirit, and suddenly he was whooping and hollering. He was speaking in tongues and dancing in the aisle. He said it was unlike anything he had ever experienced. It changed his life, he said. He realized he did need it.

I was working with the youth at a church in the Birmingham area. I would go to Geno for a haircut, and he would start telling me about all the miraculous things that were happening at his church—people being healed, speaking in tongues, all these people being filled with the Holy Spirit. And then he would stop himself and say, "Enough about me and my church. Tell me what's going on at your church."

I would say, "Well, we have a potluck supper coming up. You know, people really love a good potluck supper. And let me think...the youth are planning for a retreat to Gatlinburg! And, uh...."

I felt so provincial, so boring, soooooo dull! I would leave Geno feeling inadequate, like my church experience was less than his.

Is that true? Do the Pentecostal traditions have something superior to us? Baptists have always been a little afraid of the Holy Spirit. We've focused more on Jesus and his teachings, which is not a bad thing. My former professor at Southern Seminary, Dr. Molly Marshall, says Baptists are afraid the Holy Spirit will make them do something "weird." Well, that's not entirely wrong, is it? We don't necessarily want to dance in the aisles, do we? We don't want to do weird. But we do want to know the fullness of God and to have a dynamic relationship with God. So what does it mean when Paul says to "be filled with the Spirit?"

First, what or who is the Holy Spirit? We refer to the Spirit as the third person of the Trinity. God as Heavenly Parent is the first person of the Trinity, the creator and sustainer, the One who has gone before us. Jesus as the Son of God is the second person of the Trinity. He lived for some 32 years and modeled the way of God for us, the One beside us. The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is God present and active in the world today, the One within us. The Spirit works within our innermost being—call it our conscience, our soul, our spirit—to awaken, enlighten and strengthen us.

Here's my favorite teaching from Paul. It is to the Philippians. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;" he challenged them, "for God is at work *in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (2:12-13) How do we work out our salvation? That's serious work. God, as Holy Spirit, is at work within us. The third person of the Trinity is at work in our innermost being.

I love how St. Irenaeus long ago tied the three persons of the Trinity together. He was one of the fathers of the early church who died about A.D. 202. He said that Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit are God's two hands extended to embrace the world. Isn't that good?

You may remember John's account of Jesus' last evening with his disciples. We call it the Farewell Discourse. It was that Thursday evening when Jesus washed the disciples' feet. They shared their final meal together. Jesus also gave them the new commandment to love one another.

“By this,” he told them, “everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” On that same evening, he told them something else very important. He said, “I will not leave you orphaned.” Remember, the disciples had given up everything to follow Jesus. Careers, families, everything. Now, he was talking about going away. Where he was going, he said, they could not follow. It was all so confusing. They placed everything on the line. They believed in him. They trusted him. And now he was going away? So Jesus reassured them that they would not be orphaned, left alone. Another would come, the Advocate, the Spirit of truth. Here’s what he told them:

I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

That is the role of the Spirit in our lives today. The Spirit teaches us and reminds us of what Jesus taught and did. Here’s what Dr. Marshall says, “The mission of the Holy Spirit is to complete the work of Christ through us.” Let me say that again. The mission of the Holy Spirit is to complete the work of Christ through us. Not the work of the cross. That’s done. That work is complete. The Spirit indwells us and empowers us to do what Jesus did—love people who are hard to love, care for people on the margins of life, feed hungry children during fall break, heal people who are wounded, forgive when we would rather take revenge, extend hospitality to a stranger in our midst, and show mercy where it’s not necessarily deserved.

That’s who the Holy Spirit is and how the Spirit works in our lives. The Spirit is making us more and more like Jesus, so the work he started may be completed through us.

But what about my barber, Geno? What about the whooping and hollering, the speaking in tongues and dancing in the aisle? Is an experience like the Pentecostal tradition necessary, or is it all make believe? I don’t think we have to present it in those either/or terms. I would never say that the Pentecostal tradition is make believe. It appears to be a real experience for some people. Likewise, I would also never say that the Pentecostal experience is necessary for all people. We are wired differently. We each experience the Spirit in our unique way. You may have the gift of speaking in tongues. I say, “Congratulations! Use your gift to the glory of God, and

may it make you more like Jesus.” But I don’t have that gift. I have the gift of teaching. Is your gift greater than mine or mine greater than yours? No, they’re just different gifts from the same Spirit. You and I must use whatever we have to the glory of God and to complete the work of Christ in the world.

So we need not feel inadequate or inferior to anyone else. In fact, anyone who would suggest such is guilty of spiritual arrogance. At the same time we must not make light of other people’s experience. That too is spiritual arrogance. The Church is big, broad, and diverse. We need the Episcopalians, with their formality and ritual. We need the Pentecostals, with their exuberance. We need the Catholics, with their continuity through the ages. We need the Presbyterians, with their sense of order. We need the Quakers, with their quiet, still reverence. We need the Unitarian Universalists, with their expansive view of God. We need the Methodists, with their heart-warming experience. And we need the Baptists, all the different Baptists, with their love of Jesus and the Bible. The Spirit is alive and well in this big, broad, and diverse body called the Church.

So we don’t dance in the aisles. Is that okay? Better be, right? It is okay. We still seek to know the fullness of God and to have a dynamic relationship with God. So, Weatherly, let us be filled with the Spirit. And may that third person of the Trinity complete the work of Christ through you and me.

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit of God, indwelling, empowering energy from on high, complete the work our Lord started. Complete it through us. Amen.