

Filled with the Spirit?

What does it mean to be 'filled with the (Holy) Spirit' in the manner described in Acts 4:31?

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. **And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit** and spoke the word of God boldly. (Acts 4:31).

There are several issues here, but this paper will attempt to address these three:

- (i) Is 'filling,' when used in association with the Holy Spirit, a "technical term", or is it an analogical description or metaphor?
- (ii) Is this a 'second blessing' of the Holy Spirit, subsequent to Acts 2:4, which somehow permanently changed the spiritual state or condition or giftedness of the believers following their first 'filling' with the Holy Spirit?
- (iii) What actually happened to those who are described as being 'filled with the Holy Spirit'?

The Data

The term 'filled with/by the Holy Spirit' occurs in the following places in the bible:

Ex. 31:3; Ex. 35:31; Mic. 3:8; Luke 1:15; Luke 1:41; Luke 1:67; Acts 2:4; Acts 4:8; Acts 4:31; Acts 7:55; Acts 9:17; Acts 13:9; Acts 13:52; Eph. 5:18.

In the NT verses, two different but related word groups for 'filled' are used;

- (i) *πίμπλημι* (*pimplemi*); Luke 1:15; 1:41; 1:67; Acts 2:4; 4:8; 4:31; 9:17; 13:9. In the Septuagint¹, Ex. 31:3; Ex. 35:31; Mic. 3:8 also use a form of this word.
- (ii) *πληρώω* (*plerōō*); Acts 13:52; Eph 5:18².

Acts 7:55 uses the adjective *πλήρης* "full" to describe Stephen as he sees a vision.

These two greek words are part of a word group³ which means "to cause to happen, with the implication of fulfilling some purpose"⁴. The *pimplemi* word more commonly has the sense of filling as one fills/saturates a sponge with water. The *plerōō* word has the sense of fulfilling, completion, even perfection.

¹The Old Testament translated into Greek in the C2nd BC which was known, used and quoted by all the NT writers.

²note also that in Acts 5:3 Satan has 'filled' (*πληρώω*) Ananias' heart so that he lies to the Holy Spirit.

³*πληροφορέω ; πληρώω ; εκπληρώω ; ἀναπληρώω ; πίμπλημι*

⁴Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, Editors, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1989) 13.106.

Observations

There is not a lot of data here upon which to build any significant doctrine or view of the Spirit's work or action in the life of a believer. To do this, we ought to look at texts which are specifically teaching on the topic of the person and work of the Holy Spirit (eg Jn 3; Jn 15-16, Rom 8). However, we may observe the following:

1. Note that the expression occurs only once outside Luke's authorship in the NT⁵, and only three times in the OT.
2. Paul's command to be 'filled / fulfilled / completed' (*plero*) with the Holy Spirit is given as an adversative to being drunk with wine (Eph 5:18). The context of this instruction in Ephesians gives ample clarity to Paul's intent here: instead of getting drunk, the believer is to conform their life to the holiness which the Spirit works in every believer.
3. It would seem that Luke's one use of *plero* (Acts 13:52) occurs as a synonym for *pimplemi*.
4. We are then left with Luke's expression 'filled' (*pimplemi*) which is not picked up by any other NT writer.

We will unpack Luke's use of this expression shortly, but at this point we can reasonably conclude that 'filled with/by the Holy Spirit' is not a commonly used 'technical' term in the bible. It is perhaps an expression which Luke uses descriptively, even metaphorically or analogically.

What does Luke mean by 'filled with/by the Holy Spirit'?

Luke is no doubt aware of the OT expression 'filled with/by the Holy Spirit' in Exodus and Micah. In Exodus, Bezalel son of Uri, is 'filled with the Holy Spirit' in order to carry out his particular commission or ministry as an artisan/craftsman⁶. Micah the prophet is filled with the Holy Spirit to enable him to carry out his prophetic role (Mic 3:8).

When Luke writes his gospel, he describes Zechariah, Elizabeth and John the Baptist with this same idea in mind: they are filled by the Holy Spirit in order to carry out their particular commission, ministry or function (Luke 1:15; 1:41; 1:67). Luke uses the same idea of Spirit-empowerment for commission, ministry or function when describing Jesus, although he does not describe him as being 'filled' with the Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14; Acts 10:38). Instead, Jesus is the one who receives the Holy Spirit at his baptism (Luke 3:22-23)⁷ and who 'baptises' with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16).

When the Spirit comes to the believers at Pentecost, they are described as 'filled' with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4), which Luke sees as the fulfilment of (i) the promise of baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5); and (ii) the fulfilment of 'pouring out my Spirit upon all

⁵Luke is the author of Acts.

⁶He is the guy who builds and decorates the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and all its paraphernalia.

⁷Note that he receives the Holy Spirit at the commencement of his public ministry.

flesh' (Joel 2:28-32). There is therefore assumed a strong link between baptism with the Holy Spirit and 'filling' with the Holy Spirit in Luke. The idea of baptism with the Holy Spirit seems to be a 'technical' term used widely in the NT (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; Acts 11:16; Rom. 6:3; 1Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5; Col. 2:12).

What, therefore, does Luke mean by the term 'filled with/by the Holy Spirit'? Some observations follow:

- (i) Peter is described as being 'filled' on three different occasions (Acts 2:4; 4:8; 4:31), Paul also is associated with a 'filling' on three different occasions (Acts 9:17; 13:9; 13:52). This particular 'filling with/by the Spirit' may therefore be experienced by an individual on multiple occasions and in different circumstances. The repeated nature of the events suggest that Luke is not describing a change of status or state for the person.
- (ii) 'Filling' with the Holy Spirit is associated with the idea of commissioning for a particular ministry or empowerment for a particular occasion. Acts 4:8; 4:31 describe an equipping for gospel proclamation. Acts 7:55 precedes a visionary experience in the middle of gospel proclamation. Acts 13:9 precedes a prophetic utterance and miracle. Acts 9:17 seals Paul's apostolic commissioning and completes a miracle.
- (iii) 'Filling' and 'Baptism' with the Holy Spirit are linked, and possibly synonymous in Acts 2:4.
- (iv) 'Filling' is associated with joy, in response to persecution (Acts 13:5).

Conclusions

The most common usage of the term 'filling with/by the Holy Spirit' in the NT indicates a special commissioning and equipping for a particular ministry, which may be experienced several times (not once or even twice).

It is hard to make any more definitive conclusions because the evidence shows Luke is not using the term in a technical manner, but rather in a descriptive manner. In each case he is trying to give expression to an experience or event which is intangible and spiritual in nature. Whatever else is meant, we can reasonably conclude that the expression does not indicate a permanently changed spiritual state or condition or giftedness for the believer subsequent to their 'baptism' with the Holy Spirit at conversion⁸.

We may also note that being 'filled with the Spirit' has no strong connection with the receipt of Spiritual Gifts. This is an argument from silence, but one would expect that in all of Paul's teaching about Spiritual Gifts (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4) that he would have

⁸ "Baptism" with/in the Holy Spirit is used throughout the NT to refer to conversion. For example, see Romans 6:2-5. 'Baptism' generally refers to the idea of union. At conversion, the Christian is united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. In the NT baptism in water (usually by immersion), at or subsequent to conversion, refers to this spiritual union with Christ. Hence, going down into the water refers to 'dying with Christ' and coming up out of the water refers to 'rising with Christ'.

made some connection between the two— but he does not. If there is a connection between being 'filled' with the Spirit and gifts, it would likely relate to the ministry which the person was being commissioned for. This is the context in which we see various incidental manifestations of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), at Samaria (Acts 8:14-19), at Cornelius' house (Acts 10:44-48) etc—they are signs of the veracity of the baptism with the Holy Spirit (i.e. conversion) and markers of the 'salvation history' significance of the events.

Hence, we conclude that the term 'filling with/by the Holy Spirit' in the NT indicates a commissioning and empowering for a particular ministry.