

Be Filled with the Spirit, Eph. 5:18–20 **Preliminary Notes on a Disputed Passage**

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Eph. 5:18 is commonly assumed to be a very straight-forward text regarding which “everyone” knows the meaning and “how to do it.” It may come as a surprise that there are a host of diverse interpretations—even within fundamental circles. There seems to have been very little cross-discussion of these views. As a result many believers assume that their view is the only one in existence. The accompanying chart should dispel that notion.

Bibliography of some lesser-known sources reflected in the chart (the more common views can be found in many familiar writings¹; those views outside “our circle” are not included):

Arp, William E. “An Interpretation of ‘Be Filled in Spirit’ in Ephesians 5:18.” Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1983.

_____. “Preunderstanding and Interpretation of Ephesians 5:18.” A paper presented at the eastern regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Lanham, MD, 4 April 1986.

Fairman, Richard G. “An Exegesis of ‘Filling’ Texts Which Refer to the Doctrine of Filling.” Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1986.

Pettegrew, Larry D. *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit: A Study in Continuity and Discontinuity*. Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1993. (This volume contains a documented discussion of many of the views that are summarized on the accompanying chart.)

The following exegetical issues must be included in any conclusion regarding the text.²

1. Exegetical Ambiguity

In the most common views of filling, the means or process by which a person is filled is not exegetically related to the text. They are, instead, drawn from a wide variety of texts without any explicit connection with the concept of filling. The only association of some (not all) is that the Spirit is mentioned. This is not to deny that a Christian should yield to the Spirit or that he should not quench the Spirit—only that there is no textual basis to justify their use in defining the filling described in Eph. 5:18.³

¹Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*; Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, etc.

²This is not a systematically, fully-argued treatment of the text at this point. Perhaps someday...

³See Arp’s diss., 34–36, for further discussion and documentation.

2. Meaning of πληρώω

Many interpretations of Eph. 5:18 explain that πληρώω means *control*. But *control* is not part of the semantic field of πληρώω. It is not listed as a meaning in BAGD, *LSD*, *TDNT*,⁴ *NIDNTT*, *EDT*, or L&S. It would seem to demand a considerable effort to argue for adding a additional aspect of meaning not found in any of this wide range of lexical authorities—yet advocates of the control view simply state that it means *control* with (so far as I have been able to discover) little or no argumentation.⁵ Such a definition confuses the meaning of the word (or the action so described) with the *results* of the action.

The probable basis which many assume for such a definition is the popular (but poorly thought out) parallel with *drunk*, but this is inadequate (and inaccurate). To translate πληρώω as *control* implies causation: a positive, volitional factor (esp. when describing a person).⁶ But wine is a negative, anti-volitional agent that facilitates *loss* of control and restraint. It makes people seem/feel bolder, more confident and capable, because the moral constraints of conscience and moral judgment (inhibitions, etiquette, self-restraint, propriety) are *hindered*. As a result, people do (or attempt to do) things they ordinarily would not. Wine does *not* control a person; it removes controls. The result of being filled with wine is not control by the wine, but uncontrolled actions that are characterized as reflecting the debilitating influence of wine.

The word πληρώω means *to fill*. It is used in its non-metaphorical, unmarked sense to describe a process by which a container or object that does not have/contain a substance is changed so that it does have it. There is a void or space that is, after the filling, occupied by a previously absent substance. The same word can be used metaphorically in a variety of marked meanings in which a quantifiable, physical substance is not involved. Emotional terms are often used in this way: filled with anger/joy/etc. Prior to the filling the quality is absent; afterwards it is present. So long as *lack* is not understood to require a negative evaluation,⁷ an appropriate definition that is adaptable to a wide variety of uses is: *to fill or supply what is lacking or absent*.

3. Parallel with Col. 3 Is Significant

Note the parallels between Eph. 5:18–20 and Col. 3:15–17 as shown in the table below. The close parallel between these two passages strongly suggests that they are discussing the same topic, called “filling of the Spirit” in Ephesians and “indwelling of the word” in Colossians. The

⁴TDNT 6:291 does say that “in these sayings πληρώω also implies that a man is completely controlled and stamped by the powers which fill him” (re. Acts 13:52). But note that this does not attribute the meaning “control” to the word itself (which is still translated here as “fill”), but describes the *result* of the filling (see above).

⁵See Arp’s diss. for further discussion and documentation at this point (esp. 7, 21–22, 149–77).

⁶See the dictionary s.v. *control* used as a verb (as it is in this text); the noun has a greater range in this regard.

⁷A lack may be either positive or negative. To lack anger is normally positive; to lack joy is negative.

first of the parallel adverbial participles⁸ probably expresses means (“[do this] *by doing...*”) and the others likely are attendant circumstance participles (something one does while doing the first).⁹ These parallels help in defining what is meant: *being filled by the Spirit* is the same as *allowing the word of Christ to indwell*.

Eph. 5:18–20		Col. 3:15–17	
		15Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.	καὶ ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ Χριστοῦ βραβεύετω ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν, εἰς ἣν καὶ ἐκλήθητε ἐν ἐνὶ σώματι· καὶ εὐχάριστοι γίνεσθε.
καὶ μὴ μεθύσκεσθε οἴνῳ, ἐν ᾧ ἐστὶν ἀσωτία,	18Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.		
ἀλλὰ πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι,	Instead, be filled with the Spirit.	16Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly	Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικείτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως,
λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς	19Speak to one another	as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom,	ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νοουθετοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς,
ἐν ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς,	with <u>psalms, hymns</u> and <u>spiritual songs</u> .	and as you [<u>sing</u>] <u>psalms, hymns</u> and <u>spiritual songs</u>	<u>ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς</u>
ᾄδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν τῷ κυρίῳ,	Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,	[<u>singing</u>] with gratitude <u>in your hearts to God</u> .	ἐν τῇ χάριτι ᾄδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ·
		17And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus,	καὶ πᾶν ὃ τι ἐὰν ποιήτε ἐν λόγῳ ἢ ἐν ἔργῳ, πάντα ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου Ἰησοῦ,

⁸The three participles are λαλοῦντες, ᾄδοντες/ψάλλοντες, and εὐχαριστοῦντες = *speaking, singing/making music, and giving thanks* (Eph.) and διδάσκοντες/νουθετοῦντες, ᾄδοντες, and εὐχαριστοῦντες = *teaching/admonishing, singing, and giving thanks* (Col.).

⁹Alternately, all three might be described as adverbial participles of means; the difference is negligible.

εὐχαριστοῦντες πάντοτε ὑπὲρ πάντων ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ.	²⁰ always <u>giving thanks to God</u> the <u>Father</u> for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.	<u>giving thanks to God</u> the <u>Father</u> through him.	εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ δι' αὐτοῦ.
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4. Meaning of ἐν in Eph. 5:18

The traditional, victorious-life view often implies (if it does not state outright) that the Spirit is both the *content* with which the Christian is filled as well as the *agent* who performs the filling of the Christian. Though often assumed, the first (content) can be eliminated grammatically. The construction ἐν + dative never refers to the content of the filling; this is expressed by the genitive case.¹⁰ The suggestion that the Spirit is the content of the filling also poses theological problems in that it would result in a post-conversion reception of the Spirit.¹¹ It should also be noted that ἐν does not express the *agent* who performs the filling, but rather the *means* of filling. Personal agency is expressed by ὑπό + the genitive, not by ἐν + dative. The personal agent is actually unspecified in the text, though from the theology of Ephesians (e.g., 3:14–21) it can probably be assumed that it is Jesus' work.¹² With ἐν + dative Paul is describing the Spirit's work as the *means*¹³ that Jesus uses to fill the believer.

5. The Relationship of πληρῶ, πίμπλημι, and πλήρης

The verbs πληρῶ and πίμπλημι are essentially synonyms in that both mean *to fill*. They are used, however, in distinct ways in the NT, which probably means that a native speaker had some concept of a distinction between them even if it is not obvious to us. Based on the contexts in which each are used, the following functional distinctions may be suggested in NT usage.

πίμπλημι, as it refers to a filling of/by the Holy Spirit, describes “sudden, sovereign, unexpected, overwhelming, incident-oriented acts of enablement; undefined as to duration, lasting as long as its purpose and situation demand; and resulting in verbal proclamation.”¹⁴ This

¹⁰E.g., Acts 2:28 ἐγνώρισάς μοι ὁδοὺς ζωῆς, πληρώσεις με εὐφροσύνης μετὰ τοῦ προσώπου σου (‘You have made known to me the paths of life; *you will fill* me *with joy* in your presence’). Acts 13:52 οἱ τε μαθηταὶ ἐπληροῦντο χαρᾶς καὶ πνεύματος ἁγίου (And the disciples *were filled with joy* and with the Holy Spirit).

¹¹This may be part of the reason why some who hold a more traditional view have attempted to define πληρῶ as *control*, for this neatly sidesteps the problem of any content.

¹²Note that πληρῶ is used of the believer in v. 19. In light of the entire context of Eph. 3:14–21 it might also be possible to view this as the Father's work.

¹³Means, using ἐν + dative, expresses impersonal means rather than personal agency. This does not deny the personality of the Spirit; rather it describes the Spirit's *work*, viewing it as the means by which Jesus intends that the believer be filled.

¹⁴Richard G. Fairman, “An Exegesis of ‘Filling’ Texts Which Refer to the Doctrine of Filling” (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1986), 328.

word occurs in Luke 1:15, 41, 67; Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; and 13:9.¹⁵ Despite the fact that it is used only in Luke/Acts, the contextual descriptions of the event/condition points to a functional difference compared with πληρώ. Note that these passages all:

emphasize the event rather than the state of fullness. No conditions were required for this special filling, but instead, the Holy Spirit came upon the people sovereignly....

This special filling ... is not directly related to one's spirituality. And since there are no conditions to meet in order to obtain this special filling, we cannot seek it. Therefore we conclude that the "*pimplemi*" metaphor describes a special filling of the Holy Spirit which was needed by prophets and apostles during the ending days of the Old Covenant program and the beginning of the New Covenant program.¹⁶

The words πληρώ and πλήρης are distinct in their usage (i.e., when compared with πίμπλημι). The adjective (πλήρης) describes a condition of *fullness* in which someone/thing is characterized by the quality of that which fills him. The verb (πληρώ) describes the process by which that condition is achieved or the state in which it exists (see above).

The only texts that use πλήρης in reference to the Holy Spirit are also limited to Luke/Acts: Luke 4:1; Acts 6:3, 5; 7:55; 11:24.¹⁷ In none of these texts is there verbal proclamation as a result of the filling. Rather it describes the condition of the individual as characterized by faith, wisdom, or the Spirit. Since πληρώ and πλήρης are essentially the same word (verb and adjective), and since πληρώ is used of the Spirit only once (Eph. 5:18), it is reasonable to expect that they will have similar meanings. The only factor that would alter this expectation is if the context of the lone verbal use provided significant contextual indications that something different was in view.

As related to the concept of the Spirit's filling in this sense, πληρώ/πλήρης may be defined as "a disposition characterized by the control of the Spirit; involving appropriate attitudes and

¹⁵**Luke 1:15** for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. **Luke 1:41** When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. **Luke 1:67** His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: **Acts 2:4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. **Acts 4:8** Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! **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 9:17** Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord — Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here — has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." **Acts 13:9** Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said,

¹⁶Pettegrew, *New Covenant Ministry of the Spirit*, 209.

¹⁷**Luke 4:1** Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert. **Acts 6:3** Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them. **Acts 6:5** This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. **Acts 7:55** But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **Acts 11:24** He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

abilities which gradually develop in one who responds willingly to the Spirit's indirect oversight of his circumstances and experiences, and are durative in nature, being appropriate to the person and applicable to any relevant situation."¹⁸

6. Significance of the Present *Passive Imperative*

Passive imperatives are not common in the NT.¹⁹ At first glance the default definitions for these two categories, passive and imperative, seem contradictory: how can someone be commanded (imperative) to have someone do something to them (passive)?²⁰ There are several categories that explain various categories of passive imperatives,²¹ but the most appropriate explanation of this text is that πληρώ is a causative verb in the active voice. As such, its passive imperative describes "the condition or state resulting from that action."²² When this is combined with the verbal aspect indicated by the present form (imperfective aspect: action described as an ongoing process) it would suggest that Paul's command here has the force, *continue to be characterized by the ongoing condition of fullness by means of the Spirit's work in your life*. It is not, in other words, the type of command that requires the believer to meet a set of requirements to activate or perpetuate a process (i.e., not: "cause yourself to be filled by doing such and such"). Rather Paul describes the condition of Spirit fullness that characterizes these believers and exhorts them to keep on in the spiritual graces that have produced this condition: the application of and obedience to the Word, especially in the corporate and interpersonal ministry of exhortation and music.

7. Meaning of "s/Spirit"

The preceding discussion of the text has assumed that πνεῦμα refers to the Holy Spirit. In light, however, of Dr. Arp's contention (in agreement with Lenski, Abbott, Westcott) that πνεῦμα refers instead to the human spirit, a few brief comments are in order.

That πνεῦμα *can* refer to the human spirit is not in dispute here. The question is whether or not πνεῦμα refers to the human spirit *in this passage*. Dr. Arp gives the following reasons for his conclusion (see ch. 7–8 of his diss.):

¹⁸Fairman, "Exegesis of 'Filling' Texts," 32.

¹⁹Of the 1,630 imperatives in the NT, only 156 are passive imperatives, and of those, only 78 are present passive imperatives.

²⁰As Boyer puts it, "On the surface there seems to be something strange about a passive imperative, a command addressed to someone who is not the doer of the action but its recipient. The inquirer is told to be baptized, to be saved, whereas he can do neither. A tree is told to 'be plucked up and cast into the sea.' (*GTJ* 8 [1987]: 49.)

²¹Some are passive deponents, others are passive transforms of active constructions; see Boyer, *GTJ* 8 [1987]: 49, for details of these additional categories.

²²Boyer, *GTJ* 8 [1987]: 49. Boyer illustrates with φοβέω: "The verb φοβέω in the active voice in older Greek mean 'to frighten, to scare.' In the passive it means 'to be frightened, to be scared,' or simply 'to fear.' Strictly speaking, it is not deponent, since the active does occur in Greek; but in effect it is a deponent verb referring to the condition caused by the action involved in the active form of the verb." (*Ibid.*, 49–50.)

1. ἐν is to be taken as locative and thus human spirit makes better sense than Holy Spirit;
2. the context favors a reference to human spirit.

As to the meaning of ἐν, Dr. Arp's major argument is that the primary meaning of ἐν is *in* (locative) and that this meaning should be assumed unless good reason can be shown otherwise. He considers three other uses (agent, instrument, and content) and rejects all three. I agree with his rejection of *agent* and *content*. As to *instrument*, it depends on whether or not that is to be distinguished from *means*. He rejects instrument because there is no other example of πληρώ followed by ἐν to indicate this. But almost all other NT uses of πληρώ + ἐν (8x) have the meaning *fulfill* rather than *fill with content* (they *are* all locative), but this does not parallel the use in Eph. 5:18. There is only one other possible parallel example with which to compare it (Col. 2:10, which probably *is* locative). With only one counter example, and since ἐν + the dative is used with other words to indicate *means* (cf. BAGD), it would seem a legitimate possibility here.

The second argument, that the context favors a reference to human spirit, is based on only one contextual factor: that ἐν is locative. If this conclusion is correct, then yes, human spirit makes the best sense. But that conclusion is not established to my satisfaction.

(The other two reasons cited in the chapter: that “the meaning of πνεῦμα when used of person supports ‘human spirit’ as the sphere of the filling,” and that “the role and function of the human spirit in Christian experience provide reason for ‘human spirit’ to be the sphere of the filling,” do not provide reasons *why* πνεῦμα should be taken as human spirit, but only demonstrate that *if so taken*, the interpretation makes sense. They thus demonstrate that the interpretation is *possible*, but not that it is probable, correct, or necessary.)

As a counter argument, I would suggest that πνεῦμα is not normally used elsewhere in Ephesians to mean *human spirit* (though not all are Holy Spirit either). The 14 occurrences may be classed as follows.

- 10 of the 14 are unquestionably references to the Holy Spirit.
- One refers to an evil spirit (2:2).
- One might refer to a mental attitude rather than the Holy Spirit (1:17), but that is not quite the same as a reference to one's human spirit (which would be a component of one's constituent nature rather than a mental attitude).
- A second possible exception is found in 4:23. Two specific qualifiers which clarify the reference: 1) the genitive τοῦ νοός “of the mind”; and 2) the pronoun ὑμῶν, “your.” This

could refer to the human spirit, although I am not sure what “of your mind” would mean in that case.²³ More likely it refers, as in 1:17, to one’s attitude.

This would suggest a presumption (though not a definitive proof) that the most likely reference is to the Holy Spirit.

Eph. 1:13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,	Holy Spirit
Eph. 1:17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.	“attitude” or Holy Spirit
Eph. 2:2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.	evil spirit
Eph. 2:18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.	Holy Spirit
Eph. 2:22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.	Holy Spirit
Eph. 3:5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.	Holy Spirit
Eph. 3:16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,	Holy Spirit
Eph. 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.	Holy Spirit
Eph. 4:4 There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called —	Holy Spirit
Eph. 4:22–23 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life ... to be made new in the attitude of your minds;	“attitude” or human spirit
Eph. 4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.	Holy Spirit
Eph. 5:18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.	?
Eph. 6:17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.	Holy Spirit
Eph. 6:18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.	Holy Spirit

²³One possible explanation here is that of Lincoln (*Eph.*, WBC, 287): “In Ephesians’ characteristic of pleonastic accumulation of synonyms, both spirit and mind are employed to designate a person’s innermost being.”

8. Structural Parallel

Note the structural parallelism in vv. 17 & 18 (both verses contain a μή/ἀλλά [*not/but*] pair):

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| • Do not be foolish, 17a | = | • Do not get drunk with wine, 18a |
| • Understand the Lord's will, 17b | = | • Be filled with the Spirit, 18b |

It would seem that understanding the Lord's will (17b) is nicely paralleled by being filled with the Spirit (18b), especially if that is to be understood in terms of the Spirit's ministry using the Word of Christ—the Scriptures in the believer's life (Col. 3)—through which the Lord's will is known. (The parallel would be much less distinct if a subjective, experiential work of the Spirit were in view, i.e., the traditional Keswick view.)