

## Unraveling the Filling of the Spirit, Part 2

*by Geoff Volker*

### **One Popular Definition**

One popular definition of what it means to be "filled with the Spirit" can be found in a small blue booklet published by Campus Crusade for Christ entitled *Have You Made the Wonderful Discovery of the Spirit-Filled Life?*, known affectionately as the "birdbook." This publication describes the Spirit-filled life as one in which the believer is being "directed and empowered" by the Holy Spirit. The booklet goes on to state: "The Spirit-filled life is the Christ-directed life by which Christ lives His life in and through us in the power of the Holy Spirit." We are told that the way one goes about receiving the filling of the Spirit is to --

1. Sincerely desire to be directed and empowered by the Lord
2. Confess your sins
3. Present every area of your life to God
4. By faith claim the fullness of the Holy Spirit

The question that has to be asked is what exactly does it mean to have the fullness of the Spirit? The popular view describes being "Spirit-filled" as allowing Jesus Christ to take control of your life by the Holy Spirit. This view is defended by an interpretation of Romans 7:14-25 that portrays the believer as trying to live the Christian life by his own efforts -- and consequently he ends up with a defeated existence.

"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing." Romans 7:18-19 (NIV)

What the believer needs is to move from a Romans 7 existence (in which one seeks to live out the Christian life in his own efforts) to a Romans 8 existence (where one allows the Holy Spirit to direct and empower him to live the Christian life).

"Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." Romans 8:5-7 (NIV)

### **The Point of Romans 7 and 8**

The only problem with this interpretation of Romans 7 & 8 is that it misses the whole point of what the Apostle Paul is saying. The struggle described in Romans 7:14-25 is what all true believers in Jesus Christ go through on a daily basis. There will never be a time when you will find that you have risen above this struggle with sin. In fact, this on-going struggle is one of the marks of the believer, for in it you are giving evidence that you have a desire to please you Lord, yet you are unable to live it out in a perfect manner. No matter what you do, you find that your effort is still tainted with sin.

"So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members." Romans 7:21-23 (NIV)

This describes a state the believer will find himself in until he dies. The view that Romans 8 sets forth an experience which must replace this struggle fails to recognize that when scripture speaks of the believer being controlled by the Spirit (Romans 8:9) it is describing a state in which every believer finds himself. (I made mention of this at the end of part 1 of this article.) What is being described is the work of the Holy Spirit in applying what was purchased on the cross by Jesus Christ for all those whom the Father had chosen to save. The aspect of Christ's saving work that is being applied by the Spirit is the changed life or spiritual growth that was promised to all believers.

"Being confident of this that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Philippians 1:6 (NIV)

This truth is also brought out in another part of Romans 8 where the believer is said to be "led" by the Spirit.

"Because those who are led by the spirit are sons of God." Romans 8:14 (NIV)

Here the Apostle Paul is not using "led by the Spirit" as something that believers are supposed to week after, but rather a state in which each believer finds himself. Each Christian is "being" led by the Spirit in the sense that he will experience without question a changed life since it was purchased for him by Jesus Christ on the cross. The concept of being "led" by the Spirit is the same as being "controlled" by the Spirit. It is with this in mind that the Apostle John can say in such a black-and-white fashion:

"No one who is born of God will continue to sin because God's seed remains in him: he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother." 1 John 3:9 (NIV)

It is absolutely unthinkable that a believer in Jesus Christ would not experience a changed life, for it has been purchased for him by Jesus Christ and applied to him by the Holy Spirit.

What then shall we say of the popular notion of the Spirit-Filled life? Since the Spirit "is" in control and we are "led" by the Spirit, there is simply no place left for the idea that the believer is to ask the Spirit to take control of his life, or that he is somehow in some way to cease living the Christian life by his own efforts. This concept of the Christian life is simply not taught in Scripture.

### **"Walking in the Flesh"**

With the above in mind, what then does the phrase "walking in the flesh" mean? It has been popularly taught as living the Christian life by your own efforts. But we have seen that Romans 7 and 8 do not relegate our efforts to a carnal state. Once that is said, it must be noticed that what is critical is the attitude with which we do what we do. Are we "doing" for the reasons: not being thankful (2 Thes. 5:18), not acknowledging that we do what we do by the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:10) that is, taking credit for what we do? In summary, if we are "sweating for Jesus" for the wrong reasons, then we are walking in the flesh (that is, in a sinful manner).

## **All For the Glory of God**

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." 1 Cor. 10:31 (NIV)

The Spirit-filled life is pursuing after biblical obedience, part of which includes obeying for the right reasons. The ongoing intense struggle with sin is the normal Christian life and is always with us until we die. The believer seeks to battle sins with all his efforts, yet recognizes that though there will always be sin entangled with the best of his efforts, he will experience growth in Christ.