

HOW CAN I BE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT?

The Bible gives us a lot of encouragement to be '*filled with the Holy Spirit*', It does not tell us to 'do' things without telling us **how** to do it!

The Book of Acts has been described as Volume I of the history of the church. In it we see several examples of people receiving and experiencing the Holy Spirit. In an ideal world every Christian would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of conversion. Sometimes it happens like that (both in the New Testament and now), but not always - even in the New Testament. We have already looked at the first occasion of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2. Throughout the Book of Acts we see other examples.

When Peter and John prayed for the Samaritan believers and the Holy Spirit came upon them, Simon the Magician was so impressed he offered money in order to be able to do the same thing (Acts 8:14-18). Peter warned him that it was a terrible thing to try and buy God's gift for money. But the account shows that something very wonderful must have happened.

In the next chapter (Acts 9) we see one of the most remarkable conversions of all times. When Stephen the first Christian martyr was stoned, Saul approved his death (Acts 8:1) and afterwards began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged men and women off to prison (v. 3). At the beginning of chapter 9 we find him still '*breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples*',

Within the space of a few days, Saul was preaching in synagogues that '*Jesus is the Son of God*' (v. 20). He caused total astonishment, with people asking, '*Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name (of Jesus)?*'

What had happened in those few days to change him so completely? First, he had encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. Secondly, he had been filled with the Spirit (v. 17). That moment, '*something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again*' (v.18). It sometimes happens that people who were not Christians, or who were even strongly anti-Christian, have a complete turnabout in their lives when they come to Christ and are filled with the Spirit. They can become powerful advocates of the Christian faith.

At Ephesus, Paul came across a group who 'believed', but who had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. He placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:1-7). There are people today who are in a similar position. They may have 'believed' for some time or even all their lives. They may have been baptised, confirmed and gone to church from time to time or even regularly. Yet they may know little or nothing about the Holy Spirit.

Another incident occurs early in the Book of Acts that we will look at in a little more detail. It is the first occasion when Gentiles were filled with the Spirit.

God did something extraordinary which started with a vision that a man called Cornelius had. God also spoke to Peter through a vision and told him he wanted him to go and speak to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius. Peter went there to speak and halfway through his message, something remarkable happened...the Holy Spirit fell on those listening.

The Jewish believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even* on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God (Acts 10: 44-46).

THEY EXPERIENCED THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Peter had to stop his talk because it was obvious that something was happening. The filling of the Spirit rarely happens imperceptibly, although the experience is different for everyone. In the description of the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) Luke uses the language of a heavy tropical rain storm. It is a picture of the power of the Spirit flooding their beings. There were physical manifestations. They heard a gale (verse 2) which was not a real gale, but it resembled one. It was the mighty invisible power of the *ruach* of God; the same word as we have seen for wind, breath and spirit in the old Testament. Sometimes when people are filled, they shake like a leaf in the wind. Others find themselves breathing deeply as if almost physically breathing in the Spirit.

They also saw something that resembled fire (verse 3) Physical heat sometimes accompanies the filling of the Spirit and people experience it in their hands or some other part of their bodies. One person described a feeling of 'glowing all over'. Another said she experienced 'liquid heat'. Still another described 'burning in my arms when I was not hot'. Fire perhaps symbolises the power, passion and purity which the Spirit of God brings to our lives.

For others, the experience of the Spirit may be an overwhelming experience of the love of God. Paul prays for the Christians at Ephesus that they might have '*power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ*' (Ephesians 3:18). The love of Christ is wide enough to reach every person in the world. It reaches across every continent to people of every race, colour, tribe and background. It is long enough to last throughout a lifetime and into eternity. It is deep enough to reach us however far we have fallen. It is high enough to lift us into the heavenly places. We see this love supremely in the cross of Christ. We know Christ's love for us because He was willing to die for us. Paul prayed that we would 'grasp' the extent of this love.

When these Gentiles were filled with the Spirit they started 'praising God'. Spontaneous praise is the language of people who are excited and thrilled about their experience of God. It should involve our whole personality, including our emotions.

There are some who feel that our relationship with God ought to be free from too much emotion. Through fearing emotionalism many people's relationship with God becomes reserved. Every relationship of love involves our emotions. Of course, there must be more than emotions. There must be friendship, communication, understanding, and service.

If we do not experience any emotion in our relationship with God, then our whole personality is not involved. We are called to love, praise and worship God with *all* of our beings.

Why is it that 'emotionalism' is frowned on in church? In the cinema if a film produces laughter it is considered successful and also too, if it moves people to tears it is regarded as 'touching'.

At a Test Match the All Black supporters can be **very** emotional! So we are emotional beings and this is a good thing in regard to our response to our Creator. It ought to involve all our personality, mind, will and heart. The chief danger in most churches is certainly not over-emotionalism!

THEY RECEIVED A NEW LANGUAGE

As on the Day of Pentecost and with the Ephesian Christians (Acts 19), when the Gentiles were filled with the Spirit they received the gift of tongues. The word for 'tongues' is the same word as that for 'languages' and it means the ability to speak in a language you have never learned. It may be an angelic language (1 Corinthians 13:1) which presumably is not recognisable or it may be a recognisable human language (as at Pentecost).

The gift of tongues has brought great blessing to many people. It is, as we have seen, one of the gifts of the Spirit. It is not the only gift or even the most important gift. Not all Christians speak in tongues nor is it necessarily a sign of being filled with the Spirit. It is possible to be filled with the Spirit and not speak in tongues. Nevertheless, for many, both in the New Testament and in Christian experience, it accompanies an experience of the Holy Spirit and may be the first experience of the more obviously supernatural activity of the Spirit. Many today are puzzled by the gift. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul deals with a number of questions which are often raised.

What exactly is speaking in tongues?

It is a form of prayer (one of the many different forms of prayer found in the New Testament), according to Paul, *'for anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God'* (1 Corinthians 14:2). It is a form of prayer which builds up the individual Christian (v. 4). The gifts which directly edify the church are even more important, but this does not make tongues unimportant. The benefit of tongues is that it is a form of prayer which transcends the limitation of human language. This seems to be what Paul means when he says *'For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful'* (1 Corinthians 14:14).

Everybody to a greater or lesser extent, is limited by language. It has been recorded that the average native English speaking person knows 5,000 English words. Winston Churchill apparently used 15,000 words. But even he was limited to that extent. Often people experience frustration that they cannot express what they really feel, even in a human relationship. They feel things in their spirits, but they do not know how to put them into words. This is often true also in our relationship with God.

This is where the gift of tongues can be a great help. It enables us to express to God what we really feel in our spirits without going through the process of translating it into English. (Hence Paul says, *My mind is unfruitful*). It is not mindless; it is unfruitful because it is not going through the process of translation into an intelligible language.

In what areas does it help?

There are three areas in which many people have found this gift especially helpful.

First, in the area of *praise and worship*. We are particularly limited in our language. When children (or even adults) write thank you letters it is not long before they run out of language, and we find that words such as lovely, 'wonderful' or 'brilliant' are repeated over

and over again. In our praise and worship of God we can often find language limiting.

We long to express our love, worship and praise of God, particularly when we are filled with the Spirit. The gift of tongues enables us to do this without the limitation of human language.

Secondly, it can be a great help when praying under pressure. There are times in our lives when it is hard to know exactly how to pray. It can be because we are burdened by many pressures, anxieties or grief.

Thirdly, many people have found the gift a help in praying for other people. It is hard to pray for others - especially if you have not seen them or heard from them for some time. After a while, 'Lord, bless them' might be our most elaborate prayer. It can be a real help to start praying in tongues for them. Often, as we do that, God gives us the words to pray in English.

It is not selfish to want to pray in tongues. Although, '*he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself*' (1 Corinthians 14:4), the indirect effects of this can be very great. Jackie Pullinger describes the transformation in her ministry when she began to use the gift:

"By the clock I prayed 15 minutes a day in the language of the Spirit and still felt nothing as I asked the Spirit to help me intercede for those He wanted to reach. After about six weeks of this I began to lead people to Jesus without trying. Gangsters fell to their knees sobbing in the streets, women were healed, heroin addicts were miraculously set free. And I knew it all had nothing to do with me..."

It was also the gateway for her to receive other gifts of the Spirit:

"With my friends I began to learn about the other gifts of the Spirit and we experienced a remarkable few years of ministry. Scores of gangsters and well-to-do people, students and churchmen, were converted and all received a new language to pray in private and other gifts to use when meeting together. We opened several homes to house heroin addicts and all were delivered from drugs painlessly because of the power of the Holy Spirit."

Does Paul approve of speaking in tongues?

The content of 1 Corinthians 14 is excessive public use in church of the gift of tongues. Paul says, '*In the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue*' (v. 19, italics mine). There would be little point in Paul arriving at Corinth and giving his sermon in tongues. They would not be able to understand unless there was someone to interpret. So he lays down guidelines for the public use of tongues (v. 27).

Nevertheless, Paul makes it clear that speaking in tongues should not be forbidden (v. 39). With regard to the private use of this gift (on our own with God), he strongly encourages it. He says, '*I would like every one of you to speak in tongues*' (v. 5) and, '*I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you*' (v. 18). This does not mean that every Christian has to speak in tongues or that we are second-class Christians if we do not speak in tongues. There is no such thing as first and second-class Christians. Nor does it mean that God loves us any less if we don't yet speak in tongues. Nevertheless, the gift of tongues is a blessing from God.

How do we receive the gift of tongues?

Some say, "I don't want the gift of tongues." God will never force you to receive a gift. Tongues is just one of the wonderful gifts of the Spirit, and not the only one by any means as we've discussed. Like every gift it has to be received by faith.

Not every Christian speaks in tongues. Yet Paul says, *'I would like every one of you to speak in tongues'*, suggesting that it is not only for a special class of Christians. It is open to all Christians. There is no reason why anyone who wants this gift should not receive it. Paul is not saying that speaking in tongues is the be-all and end-all of the Christian life; he is saying that it is a very helpful gift. If you would like to receive it, there is not reason why you should not. Like all the gifts of God, we have to cooperate with His Spirit. God does not force His gifts on us.

What are the common hindrances to being filled with the Spirit?

On one occasion Jesus was speaking to His disciples on the subject of prayer and the Holy Spirit (Luke 11: 9-13). In that passage He deals with some of the principal difficulties we may have in receiving from God.

• Doubt

There are many doubts people have in this whole area, the principal one being, 'If I ask will I receive?'

Jesus says simply: *'I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you'*.

Jesus must have seen that they were a little sceptical because he repeats it in a different way: 'Seek and you will find'.

And again He says a third time: *'Knock and the door will be opened to you'*.

He knows human nature so he goes on a fourth time: *'For everyone who asks receives'*

They are not convinced so He says it a fifth time: *'He who seeks finds'*.

Again a sixth time: *'To him who knocks, the door will be opened.'*

Why does He say it six times? Because He knows what we are like. We find it very difficult to believe that God will give us anything - let alone something as unusual and wonderful as His Holy Spirit and the gifts that come with the Spirit.

• Fear

Even if we have cleared the first hurdle of doubt, some of us trip up on the next hurdle of fear. The fear is about what we will receive. Will it be something good?

Jesus used the analogy of a human father. If a child asks for a fish, no father would give him a snake. If a child asks for an egg, no father would give him a scorpion (Luke 11:11-12). It is unthinkable that we would treat our children like that. Jesus goes on to say that in comparison with God we are evil! If we would not treat our children like that, it is inconceivable that God would treat us like that. He is not going to let us down. If we ask for the Holy Spirit and all the wonderful gifts He brings, that is exactly what we will receive (Luke 11:13).

• Inadequacy

Of course it is important that there is no unforgiveness or other sin in our lives, and that we have turned our back on all that we know is wrong. However, even after we have done that, we often have a vague feeling of unworthiness and inadequacy. We cannot believe that God would give us anything. We can believe that He would give gifts to very advanced Christians, but not to us. But Jesus does not say, 'How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to all very advanced Christians.' He says, 'How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit *to those who ask Him*' (Luke 11:13,).

If you would like to be filled with the Spirit you might like to find someone who would pray for you. If you don't have anyone who would be able to pray for you, there is nothing to stop you from praying on your own. Some are filled with the Spirit without receiving the gift of tongues. The two do not necessarily go together. Yet in the New Testament and in experience they often do go together. There is no reason why we should not pray for both.

Some steps to Receiving

1. Ask God to forgive you for anything that could be a barrier to receiving.
2. Turn from any area of your life that you know is wrong.
3. Ask God to fill you with His Spirit and to give you the gift of tongues. Go on seeking Him until you find. Go on knocking until the door opens. Seek God with all your heart.
4. Open your mouth and start to praise God in any language but English or any other language known to you.
5. Believe that what you receive is from God. Don't let anyone tell you that you made it up. (It is most unlikely that you have).
6. Persevere. Languages take time to develop. Most of us start with a very limited vocabulary. Gradually it develops. Tongues is like that. It takes time to develop the gift. But don't give up.

Being filled with the Spirit is not a one-off experience. Peter was filled with the Spirit three times in the space of chapters 2-4 in the Book of Acts (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31). When Paul says, '*Be filled with the Spirit*' (Ephesians 5:18), he uses the present continuous tense, urging them and us to go on and one being filled with the Spirit.