

## Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

July 16, 2019

I've had computer woes all day, and haven't had time to be very creative . . . so here's an article from *Christianity Today* that I found helpful this week:

### Paul Says to 'Be Filled with the Spirit.' How Do We Obey a Passive Verb?<sup>1</sup>

(Perhaps a sailing analogy will help clear up the confusion.)

ANDREW WILSON | JUNE 21, 2019



Paul tells us to “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18), and we all nod approvingly. It sounds like the sort of thing we should do. But think about it for a moment, and it can sound rather strange. How on earth do you obey a passive verb?

If someone tells me, “Phone your mother,” I can do that. But what if someone says, “Be phoned by your mother?” Now I’m stumped. Not only is it unclear what I am supposed to do next, it’s not even obvious what the instruction means. Yet Paul simply tells the Ephesians to “be filled with the Spirit.” It can be confusing.

As a result, many Christians aren’t entirely sure what being filled with the Spirit *is*. Is it an experience we are supposed to have—and, if so, what kind? Is it a series of habits we are supposed to develop—and, if so, which ones? Reformed and conservative believers will often emphasize the habit side, based on the parallel instruction in Colossians to “let the message of Christ dwell among you richly” (3:16). Pentecostal and charismatic types will usually emphasize the experience side, invoking the baptism in the Spirit in the Book of Acts. So which is it: a habit or an experience?

This is where speaking English doesn’t help us. In the biblical languages, there is just one word for Spirit, breath, and wind (*ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Paul’s Greek). But in English, we have three different words: *breath* (from the Old English *braet*, meaning scent), *spirit* (from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning spirit or breath), and *wind* (from the German *wind*). So we don’t necessarily see a connection between being filled with the Spirit, filled with breath, and filled with wind. In fact, many of us probably think of being “filled with the Spirit” in terms of liquid, like a glass being filled with water, which raises various questions. (Why aren’t we full already? Do we leak? Can the Spirit be spilled?)

But Paul’s original wording—“be filled with the Spirit/breath/wind”—would make people think of being filled with air. It might call to mind a pipe or a trumpet, which can only fulfill its purpose when it is “filled with the breath.” Or, even better, you might think of a sailboat,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/july-august/andrew-wilson-paul-filled-spirit-sailing.html>

which requires a power beyond itself (the wind) to go anywhere. Paul is using a dynamic image, not a static one. A glass of water only needs filling once; a sailboat won't be useful without continual filling.

Reading the metaphor that way sheds new light on how to heed Paul's instruction. When you're sailing, is "being filled with the wind" an experience or a habit? Both. Catching the wind on a sailboat is clearly an experience—I vividly remember that first feeling of being seized and carried forward by a mighty power from elsewhere. But it is also a habit. If you don't put the sails up, pull the mainsheet fast, or adjust the jib, you won't go anywhere, even if the wind is blowing powerfully.

Sailing, in that sense, is the art of attentive responsiveness to an external power. You rely entirely on the external power to get you anywhere—sailors never imagine themselves to be powering the boat by their own strength—but you also have to respond attentively to whatever the wind is doing, which comes through cultivating awareness, skill, and good habits.

Being filled with the Spirit involves the same both-and. We pursue the experience of the Holy Spirit: Paul uses the language of filling and drenching, drinking and pouring. We rely entirely on the Spirit's immeasurable power, rather than our own strength, to get us anywhere. But we also develop habits. We respond attentively to what he is doing in and through us, a capacity that comes through awareness, skill, and practice. Paul mentions four such habits in subsequent verses: teaching one another, singing, giving thanks, and submitting to one another (Eph. 5:18–21).

Like the Christian life as a whole, being filled with the Spirit is both passive and active; it involves both experience and habit. We are called to feel things and to do things. God works, and we work. Whatever your church background—Reformed, charismatic, or somewhere in between—my encouragement is simple: Don't play down either side of the equation.

*Andrew Wilson is teaching pastor at King's Church London and author of Spirit and Sacrament (Zondervan). Follow him on Twitter @AJWTheology.*

