

When Is A Christian Filled with the Spirit?

Written by Tim Black
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A friend asked,

"When is a Christian filled with the Spirit?"

The Bible distinguishes four blessings of the Holy Spirit: the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" was a once-for-all redemptive historical event where Christ poured out the Holy Spirit on the whole church at Pentecost (Mark 1:8; Acts 1:5) and in the subsequent extensions of the Pentecost event in new geographical areas during the time of the apostles' founding the NT church (Acts 11:16), the "gift of the Spirit" is a one-time personal event which happens for all believers at their conversion (Acts 2:38; 10:45), the "filling of the Spirit" is a variable blessing (more at one time, less at another) God gives to believers on occasion for a particular purpose, but which we should actively seek as a matter of keeping in step with the Spirit we were given at our conversion (Ex. 28:3; 31:3; 35:31; Micah 3:8; Luke 1:41, 67; Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9, 52; Eph. 5:18), and the continued, unmitigated state of being "full of the Spirit" is a blessing God gives only to some individuals, but also which should be desired because it is a state of spiritual maturity and is the right state in which all believers should be (Deut. 34:9; Luke 1:15?; Acts 6:3, 5; 7:55; 11:24).

Offhand I don't think my church's confessional documents (the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, see <http://opc.org/wcf.html>) make these distinctions explicitly, though ch. 20.1 of the Westminster Confession says NT believers receive "fuller communications of the free Spirit of God." However, I can say the theology of these confessional documents agrees with the fourfold distinction I described above. Particularly, we do not believe Christians should seek a "second blessing" of the Spirit beyond the "gift of the Spirit" at conversion in the sense that the second blessing brings new blessings (such as "sinless perfection" or "entire sanctification," tongues, healing, prophecy, etc.) which are different in quality than the "fruit of the Spirit" in Gal. 5:22, or the corollary, that scripture approves in any way of (e.g., permits) the state of being a so-called "carnal Christian." Rather, by the Spirit's power and work, we should keep in step with the same Spirit we received as a gift at our conversion (in this regard, Phil. 2:12, 13 puts the two sides of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility together). Because He is the all-powerful, sovereign God, the Holy Spirit is sufficient to fill us (we have only God to thank for His gift!), but in our (ir-)responsibility, we sinners quench the Spirit (we have only ourselves to blame for not being "full of the Spirit" every day!)