

BEING THE FULLNESS OF GOD IN CHRIST BY THE SPIRIT: EPHESIANS 5:18 IN ITS EPISTOLARY SETTING

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‘Do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation,
but be filled by the Spirit’.

Summary

The enigmatic command in Ephesians 5:18, ‘be filled by the Spirit’, is often understood in terms of the empowerment of individual believers for discipleship and ministry. Such an interpretation leads to difficulties in relating the command to the five participles which follow, and to the argument of the epistle as a whole. Reading the command as directed to the community as a corporate body, and the five participles which follow as participles of means, instead of result, solves a number of problems normally associated with this passage.

I. Introduction

Ephesians 5:18 has proved itself an elusive text. While it appears to offer insight into the practical struggles of discipleship to Jesus Christ and to illumine theological issues related to the Holy Spirit, one often is left puzzled by Paul’s apparently cryptic instruction.¹ Especially vexing is the nature of the relationship of the imperative in 5:18 to the five participles which follow in vv. 19–21.

In a modest attempt to relieve this difficulty, the present study will offer an interpretation of Paul’s command in Ephesians 5:18 which is read exclusively within the development of the argument of Ephesians. In particular, it will call into question the predominant understanding of the relationship between the imperative in 5:18 and

¹ Though Paul is referred to as the author, issues related to the authorship of Ephesians have no bearing on the argument of this article, since the discussion relates solely to the contents of the epistle.

the five participles in vv. 19–21. Before offering an alternative reading, however, it is necessary to cover some preliminary ground.²

II. The Context of Ephesians

The primary context for interpreting Ephesians 5:18 is the epistle itself. While this may be obvious, the internal context of the letter is often bypassed in favour of a variety of other contexts: a pre-determined biblical theology of the Holy Spirit, appeal to ‘principles of the Christian life’, the numerous ‘filling’ texts in Acts, or apparently similar contexts in Galatians and Colossians. Yet the present passage must be understood within the development of the argument of Ephesians itself before it can be drawn upon for wider theological reflection. Especially important are several key passages which develop the ‘fullness’ language alongside temple imagery, and the manner in which the Spirit is related to both.

According to Ephesians 1:23, the church is the place where the fullness of Christ dwells.³ Paul states that Christ ‘has been given as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness (πλήρωμα) of him who fills (πληρουμένου) all things in every way’. According to Clinton Arnold, πλήρωμα is best understood in light of the ‘fullness’ language in the Old Testament, which is often used to indicate the presence of God.⁴ Ezekiel 44:4 states that ‘the house of the Lord is full (πλήρης) of his glory’. In Jeremiah 23:24, the Lord asks, ‘Do I not *fill* (πληρώ) the heavens and the earth?’ Just as the Old Testament occasionally referred to the presence of God via ‘fullness’ language, so too in Ephesians 1:23 the church is the dwelling place of Jesus Christ, the place where his ‘fullness’ resides.⁵

² For a history of interpretation, see W. Hollis, ‘Become Full in the Spirit: A Linguistic, Contextual, and Theological Study of πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι’, (Ph.D.; Trinity International University, 2001), 8–16.

³ Πλήρωμα is in apposition to σῶμα and not to αὐτόν in v. 22. Syntactically, it makes more sense to see πλήρωμα in apposition with σῶμα, which immediately precedes it, than with αὐτόν, which is twelve words earlier. This also makes better sense of the phrase ἥτις ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ, which otherwise functions merely as an aside (A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* [WBC 42; Dallas: Word, 1990], 73; P.T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [PNTC; Leicester: Apollos, 1999], 150; contra E. Best, *Ephesians* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998], 184–85).

⁴ C.E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of its Historical Setting* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 83–85; O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 149–50.

⁵ Though the church is the fullness of Christ, the final clause in v. 23 notes that the church does not contain his presence in an exhaustive sense. In the Old

In 2:19–22, Paul argues that God has now brought Jews and Gentiles together in one new body. Two relative clauses in vv. 21–22 (ἐν ᾧ ..., ἐν ᾧ ...) expand upon the claim that this new entity is built upon the foundation of Christ himself (vv. 19–20). Four points must be emphasised. First, this new body, consisting of believers in Jesus Christ regardless of race, is a ‘holy temple in the Lord’ (v. 21) and ‘a dwelling of God by the Spirit’ (v. 22). Just as God dwelt in the temple in the Old Testament, so now the church is the new temple of God, the place where his presence dwells.

Second, Paul notes that the church is the dwelling of God ‘by the Spirit’ (ἐν πνεύματι). This dative clause most likely has an instrumental sense, so that the Holy Spirit is the means by which the presence of God is mediated to his people.⁶

Third, though this phenomenon is stated as an accomplished reality—both here and in 1:23—it is an ongoing process. Verse 21 states that though the building has been built (ἐποικοδομηθέντες), it is ‘being joined together’ (συναρμολογουμένη) and is ‘growing’ (αὐξέει) into a holy temple in the Lord’. In verse 22, they are ‘being built up’ (συνοικοδομεῖσθε) into a dwelling of God by the Spirit’. So, while the church as the dwelling place of God by the Spirit is an accomplished reality, it is also a process which stands in need of being increasingly actualised.

Fourth, the growth that is going on here is not the growth of individual believers as individual temples. Rather, the two συν- constructions in verses 21 and 22 indicate that the growth here is the growth of the corporate body of Christ.

Ephesians 3:14–19 contains the second prayer report of the letter, where Paul indicates that he is praying strategically for his readers in light of the reality that God has made the church to be his new temple by the Spirit.⁷ He prays that God would work powerfully in the lives of believers that they would come to a greater understanding of the love of Christ—that love that passes all comprehension—‘in order

Testament, God’s presence filled the earthly temple, while at the same time it filled the entire universe. Likewise the church does not contain the fullness of Jesus Christ without remainder. He is the One who ‘fills all things in every way’; that is, His reign as Lord and Head of all things includes everything in every place (cf. Eph. 4:10).

⁶ T.K. Abbott, *Ephesians and Colossians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), 76; G.D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 689; O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 221; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 158.

⁷ The digression in 3:2–13 interrupts the prayer report, so that 3:14–19 is based on what Paul has revealed in 2:19–22.

that you may be filled (πληρωθῆτε) to all the fullness (πλήρωμα) of God' (v. 19b). This passage reinforces the point that though the church as the dwelling place of God by the Spirit is already a reality, it is not yet fully realised and—practically, at least—stands in need of being manifested with ever increasing effectiveness.

In Ephesians 4:13 Paul states that the fullness of Christ and his own completeness is the standard against which the maturity of the church is to be measured. Jesus Christ has ascended to heaven to his place of ultimate authority after triumphing at the cross and as a result has given to his church gifts (4:10–11). These gifts are for the purpose of the spiritual growth of the church, 'unto the measure of the stature of the fullness (πληρώματος) of Christ' (vv. 12–13). The 'not yet' side of the Pauline tension is again made explicit at this point. While this fullness is spoken of as accomplished earlier in Ephesians, it is spoken of here more clearly as something which must be pursued, and for which God has sent the Spirit and gifted his church.

In Ephesians, then, the combination of 'fullness' and 'Spirit' language refers to *the abiding presence of God in Christ with, in, and among his people*. While Christ 'fills' all things in that his rule as Lord is cosmic in scope, his presence resides uniquely in the church (1:23; 4:10–13). God has created the church to be his new temple, the place on earth where he dwells 'by the Spirit' (2:22).

III. The Thrust of the Command: Individual or Corporate?

The command in 5:18 is often interpreted with reference to the private piety of individual Christians. Wayne Grudem, for example, reads the command in 5:18 in this way, stating that the 'filling of the Spirit' is a good way to describe 'second experiences' in a Christian's life, which result in increased sanctification and increased power for ministry.⁸ He claims that 'it is appropriate to understand filling with the Holy Spirit *not as a one-time event but as an event that can occur over and over again* in a Christian's life'.⁹ He also lists a number of steps Christians can take to experience greater filling of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

⁸ W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 781–82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 782 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 783, n. 34.

It appears, however, that such a reading illegitimately imposes an individualistic conception on a clearly corporate discussion.¹¹ As the preceding discussion demonstrates, the filling of the Spirit in Ephesians has to do with the abiding presence of God with his corporate people mediated by the Spirit.¹²

Further, this corporate thrust is reflected throughout the ethical section of the letter (4:1–6:9). In 4:1–16, Paul stresses the critical importance of the unity of the church and argues that the diversity in gifts among Christians is designed to further their growth in unity. In 4:17–24, he lays down the pattern of renewal that is to characterise Christian communities—putting aside practices associated with the ‘old humanity’ and taking up behaviours associated with the ‘new humanity’. He then illustrates how this works in practice in vv. 25–32 by dealing with sins which threaten the harmony of relationships among believers, stressing the manner in which they are to treat ‘one another’ (vv. 25, 32).

In 5:1–17, where Paul underscores the character of the Christian communities as ‘light’ vis-à-vis ‘darkness’, the commands are given as plural imperatives. They are to be careful to behave in a way that is ‘fitting among saints’ (v. 3). The context immediately after the command in 5:18 also has a corporate thrust to it, being dominated by the manner in which Christians are to relate to ‘one another’ (vv. 19–21).¹³ The command in 5:18, then, has in view the corporate

¹¹ T.R. Schreiner (*Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001], 338) warns contemporary Christians against unconsciously imposing their modern worldview onto New Testament texts. He notes that ‘Paul was not a Western individualist who indulged in a privatized Christianity’.

¹² For an excellent discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the corporate church, see G.D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 63–73. He notes that ‘God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather, he is creating a *people* among whom he can live and who in their life together will reproduce God’s life and character. This view of salvation is consistent throughout Paul’s letters. It is demonstrated most clearly in his references to the Spirit, who plays the key role not only in forming the people of God, but also in their life together and in their worship’ (66).

¹³ According to A.J. Köstenberger (‘What Does it Mean to be Filled with the Spirit? A Biblical Investigation’, *JETS* 40 [1997], 233), ‘the thrust of the passage is corporate, not merely individualistic. All of the expressions of lives full of the spirit are in relationships, be it among Christians at worship, in the home, or at the workplace. This corporate dimension to “being filled with the Spirit” is often inadequately recognised in a theology of a “Spirit-filled life” that deals primarily with an individual’s personal—even private—experience’. See also Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 722; G.B. Caird, *Paul’s Letters From Prison* (Oxford: OUP, 1976), 84.

community of the church, rather than the private conduct of individual Christians.

IV. The Contrast in Ephesians 5:18

The contrast in Ephesians 5:18 ('Do not...but...') typically is understood as one of control.¹⁴ Being controlled by wine—leading to drunkenness—is set in contrast with subjection to control by the Spirit.¹⁵ According to Lincoln, believers are here exhorted to 'allow the Spirit to have the fullest control that they are conscious of in their lives and to open themselves continually to the one who can enable them to walk wisely and to understand Christ's will and who can inspire their worship and thanksgiving'.¹⁶

A major weakness of this view is that the nature of this control is left unexplained or ambiguous. If subjection to the control of the Holy Spirit is in view, it is reasonable to expect some elaboration regarding just how this occurs. Such clarification, however, is absent from Ephesians.¹⁷

¹⁴ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 344–45; R. Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 237.

¹⁵ The proposal of C.J. Rogers, Jr. ('The Dionysian Background of Ephesians 5:18', *BSac* 136 [1979], 249–57) is a variation of this position. He argues that the passage be read against the cult of Dionysius, where intoxication by wine would lead to loss of self-control and worship expressed through sexual debauchery. This contrasts with control by the Spirit, leading to the worship of Jesus Christ in the church. A more recent proposal is that of P.W. Gosnell ('Ephesians 5:18–20 and Mealtime Propriety', *TynB* 44 [1993], 364–71), who argues that the phrase 'do not be drunk with wine' should be read against Greco-Roman mealtime practices where the evening meals were followed by discussion around the table. Interaction would be hindered if the participants were drunk. There is little in the letter itself, however, that would suggest that this specific problem is being addressed (O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 388). Best (*Ephesians*, 509) notes that most of Gosnell's evidence for this type of mealtime activity has been drawn from cultured authors, describing the lifestyles of those of the cultural elite. Though it is quite possible that a number of Paul's readers were drawn from such circles, it is unlikely that this would have been a widespread problem among the churches, and one which Paul addressed in such a cryptic fashion.

¹⁶ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 345.

¹⁷ Some scholars appeal to Col. 3:16 to explain subjection to the control of the Spirit. O'Brien (*Ephesians*, 393) makes such an interpretive move, stating that 'it is tantamount to letting Christ's word rule in our lives' (cf. also Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 268). But if this is what Paul meant, then why did he not make this clear in Ephesians? If the original readers did not have a copy of Col. when they received this letter, would they have been able to understand the command in Eph. 5:18?

The contrast in 5:18 is better understood in light of the distinction Paul has been developing in the preceding context between the behaviour that ought to characterise believers and the behaviour of the unbelieving world. In Ephesians 4:17–24, he describes the contrasting dynamics of the ‘old man’ and the ‘new man’. These do not refer to two competing natures within individual Christians, but rather the contrasting dynamics of the decaying old creation and the new creation, the church, which God has initiated and set within the old order.¹⁸

Unbelievers live according to ‘the futility of their minds’ (4:17), and are darkened in their understanding (v. 18). Therefore ‘they are excluded from the life of God’ and have given themselves over to ‘sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness’ (v. 19). They live according to the dynamic of the old creation, which is ‘being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit’ (v. 22).

In contrast to this is the life that is to characterise believers. They are to live according to the new creation dynamic, the ‘new humanity’, which ‘according to God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth’ (v. 24). Paul illustrates how this works practically in verses 25–32.

As children of God, they are to imitate him, walking in love and in purity, avoiding participation with unbelievers in those activities which bring God’s wrath (5:1–7). Paul then contrasts light and darkness (5:8–14) noting that believers have become ‘light in the Lord’ (5:8). They are not to participate with unbelievers in ‘unfruitful deeds of darkness’, but are to expose such deeds by living as light (vv. 11–14). He then contrasts wisdom and folly (5:15–17). He commands his readers to walk carefully as wise and not as unwise (v. 15) and to ‘understand what the will of the Lord is’ rather than being foolish (v. 17). The contrast that has been developing up to 5:18, then, is between two distinct ways of life: light and darkness, wisdom and folly, the ‘new humanity’ being renewed and the ‘old humanity’ heading for destruction.¹⁹

¹⁸ The expression *καὶνὸν ἄνθρωπον* (‘new humanity’) in Eph. 2:15 refers to the joining of both Jewish and Gentile believers into one united body. Though the co-existence of the ‘old humanity’ and the ‘new humanity’ obviously has implications for individual believers—some of which are spelled out in 4:25–32—the thrust of the ‘new humanity/old humanity’ discussion in 4:22–24 is corporate.

¹⁹ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 389–90; Köstenberger, ‘What Does it Mean to be Filled with the Spirit?’, 232; Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 720.

The contrast in 5:18 between drunkenness and being filled by the Spirit is best understood against these ‘two ways’ of life.²⁰ Paul sets up drunkenness as the epitome of the ways of darkness and of shameful, foolish living. It is the very essence of the ‘old humanity’ dynamic, which is to seek pleasure selfishly, indulging in behaviour that leads to destruction. Reading the contrast in this manner is consistent both with the immediate context and with Pauline usage elsewhere.²¹

V. The Content

In contrast to embracing the ways of darkness and folly, Paul commands his readers to ‘be filled by the Spirit’ (πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι). Before clarifying the exact meaning of Paul’s command, the force of the dative expression ἐν πνεύματι must be determined. This is difficult, however, since there is little in the passage to decide the case clearly.²² While some take the expression to indicate the content of the filling (i.e., ‘filled *with* the Spirit’),²³ there is little to commend this option. Against it is the rarity of the usage of ἐν with the dative indicating content. Normally a verb of filling takes a genitive of content.²⁴ Further, as indicated above, Ephesians consistently presents Christ or God as the content of the ‘filling’

²⁰ According to M. Turner (‘Ephesians’, in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, eds. D.A. Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Motyer, and G.J. Wenham [Leicester: IVP, 1994], 1242), ‘drunkenness was simply a regular, indeed proverbial expression of folly in Jewish Wisdom Literature, and contrasted with the Spirit who (equally proverbially) was seen as the source of wisdom and understanding’.

²¹ In 1 Th. 5:6–8 Paul identifies believers as ‘sons of light and sons of day’. They are ‘not of night nor of darkness’, (v. 5) and are not to sleep, but must be alert and sober (v. 6). Sobriety is set against drunkenness, which takes place ‘at night’ (v. 7). Similarly, in Rom. 13:12–13, Paul contrasts the ‘night’, which is about to pass, with the ‘day’, which is imminent. Believers must ‘lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light’ (v. 12). They are to ‘behave properly as in the day’ and ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’, instead of participating in activities that typically take place in the darkness, such as ‘drunkenness’ (v. 13).

²² According to Hollis (‘Become Full in the Spirit’, 244), ‘the use of ἐν πνεύματι throughout biblical and much of non-biblical Greek literature yields no clear evidence for determining the meaning of ἐν πνεύματι in Eph 5:18’.

²³ Best, *Ephesians*, 508; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 344; Köstenberger, ‘What Does it Mean to be Filled with the Spirit?’ 231.

²⁴ D.B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 374; F. Blass & A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (trans. & rev. R.W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 95.

language (1:23; 2:22; 3:19; 4:13), while it is likely that in 2:22 the Spirit is the agent of that filling.²⁵

It is preferable to read ἐν πνεύματι as instrumental (i.e., ‘filled by the Spirit’).²⁶ This is consistent with the flow of the argument, since ἐν πνεύματι is best understood in an instrumental sense in 2:22, and the Holy Spirit appears as the one ‘by whom’ (ἐν ᾧ) believers are sealed in 4:30.²⁷ While this leaves the content of the filling undefined, the uses of the ‘fullness’ language throughout Ephesians determine the content in 5:18. From the passages reviewed above, it is clear that in 5:18 the content is the fullness of God in Christ (by the Spirit).²⁸

VI. The Command

What does Paul mean by the command to ‘be filled by the Spirit’? Thus far, Paul has argued that the church is the new temple of God, the dwelling of God ‘by the Spirit’ (ἐν πνεύματι) in 2:21–22. He also notes there that, though this is an accomplished reality, there is a sense in which the church must grow into maturity. This is the same phenomenon referred to in 1:23, where Paul states that the church is ‘the fullness’ (τὸ πλήρωμα) of Christ. In light of this great reality, Paul prays that God would work powerfully in his people by the Holy Spirit (3:16), so that they might be so caught up in the incomprehensible love of Christ towards the end of being ‘filled’ (πληρωθῆτε) with all the ‘fullness of God’ (πλήρωμα τοῦ θεοῦ). In other words, he is praying that the church would grow in maturity (the *not yet*) and be empowered by God to live out its identity as the dwelling place of God by his Spirit (the *already*). Further, in 4:7–16, Paul notes that God has gifted his church with all manner of gifts so that the church might grow into a ‘mature man,’ unto the measure of ‘the fullness of Christ’ (τοῦ πληρώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ) (4:13).

In this light, when Paul directs his readers to ‘be filled by the Spirit’ with the fullness of God in Christ, he is commanding them to participate in this accomplished reality and to work towards its realization in greater effectiveness and fruitfulness. In other words,

²⁵ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 392; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 375.

²⁶ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 391–92; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 375.

²⁷ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 391.

²⁸ As O’Brien (*Ephesians*, 392) notes, ‘No other text in Ephesians (or elsewhere in Paul) focusses specifically on the Holy Spirit as the *content* of this fulness. It is better, then, to understand 5:18 in terms of the Spirit’s mediating the fulness of God and Christ to believers’.

Paul is commanding his readers to ‘be the temple of God,’ or, to ‘be the dwelling place of God by the Spirit’. They are to carry out their identity as the church and to fully realise what God has made the church to be—his fullness, his new temple, his dwelling place by the Holy Spirit.

VII. The Relationship of 5:18 to 19–21

How is this command to be filled by the Spirit to be carried out? This issue is best addressed by assessing the relationship of the command in 5:18 to the five participles in verses 19–21:

λαλοῦντες [‘speaking’]...
 ᾄδοντες [‘singing’]...
 ψάλλοντες [‘making melody’]...
 εὐχαριστοῦντες [‘giving thanks’]...
 ὑποτασσόμενοι [‘submitting’]...

The participles are most often understood as result or effect, though one rarely encounters an explanation of this view.²⁹ This position depends on the assumption that the contrast in 5:18 between drunkenness and being filled by the Spirit has to do with control. Since dissipation is the effect of drunkenness, the participles in vv. 19–21 must be the result of being filled by the Spirit.

This view also appears to be motivated by the assumption that the general thrust of the passage reflects the empowerment of believers by God for discipleship and ministry. God fills (i.e., empowers/controls) believers and they live the Christian life in his power. While one may affirm strongly that believers require the power of God by the Spirit for every aspect of Christian discipleship and ministry, one may also question whether this truth—taught clearly throughout the New Testament—ought to function as the controlling matrix for interpreting Ephesians 5:18.

A major weakness of this view is that it leaves unstated the manner in which the filling of the Spirit takes place. If the participles are interpreted as result, there simply is nothing to define what Paul means by this vague command. He merely tells his readers that these things will show up in their lives when they are filled with the Spirit, but he leaves them uninformed as to how this actually happens.

²⁹ E.g., Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 345; O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 394; M. Kitchen, *Ephesians* (London: Routledge, 1994), 98–99; M.Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (SPS 17; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 318.

A number of writers have recognised this problem and have suggested several factors that will lead to the filling of the Spirit. As stated above, Grudem lists a number of spiritual disciplines in which Christians can engage so that they will enjoy more of the Spirit's filling ministry.³⁰ While such teaching undoubtedly has an important place, where is the basis for such instruction in Ephesians 5? Where does this leave the original readers? Would they have had such a list? Is there evidence that they naturally assumed that Scripture memorization, prayer, an increase in personal purity, and fellowship would have led to the filling of the Spirit, a state of existence from which the practice of godliness naturally flows?

Wallace anticipates this objection and responds to it by appealing to the 'mysterious' nature of sanctification in the NT.³¹ But this obviously begs the question. Wallace cannot simply assume that this text must be understood as instruction on the sanctification of individual believers and then appeal to its mysterious nature to explain away difficulties.³² If another view can account for all the evidence in a reasonable fashion and with appropriate simplicity without making such an appeal, then that option ought to be preferred.

Since the participles in 5:19–21 are not best read as participles of result, we propose here that they be understood as participles of means; that is, they indicate the means by which the church carries out the command in 5:18. This reading makes good sense in that the

³⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 782.

³¹ Wallace (*Greek Grammar*, 639) writes, 'One of the remarkable currents of NT theology is a studied reserve on the *method* of sanctification. That is, the biblical authors speak positively about the ministry of the Spirit but typically refrain from telling how that ministry is to be implemented into the believer's life. Most likely, their theology is rooted in Jer 31:31, 34 (NRSV): "I will make a new covenant... No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD." This new covenant mentality of what might be labelled a "soft mysticism" is prevalent in the NT'. While Wallace is surely correct to stress that many aspects of God's work in sanctifying believers through the Holy Spirit are indeed mysterious, the thrust of this paper is to question the legitimacy of appealing to this phenomenon to interpret Eph. 5:18.

³² Understanding the participles as result simply cannot make sense of all the data in the passage. On the ground of a general appeal to Pauline theology, Wallace questions the validity of reading the participles as means. Yet such an objection legitimately could be turned against interpreting the participles as result. For example, Paul often writes that following Jesus Christ requires exertion, discipline and perseverance (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:24–27; Phil. 2:12; Col. 1:23). In light of such texts, one has adequate grounds to object to a scenario wherein discipleship and ministry are said to flow naturally as a result of having attained a certain state of spiritual existence.

context fits the description of such participles laid out by Wallace—they follow a somewhat vague and abstract finite verb and they serve to explain the verb, ‘defining more exactly what the verbal action is’.³³

On this scenario, the way in which the church carries out its identity as the dwelling place of God in Christ by the Spirit is ‘*by speaking* (λαλοῦντες) to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, *by singing* (ᾄδοντες) and *by making melody* (ψάλλοντες) in your hearts to the Lord, *by giving thanks* (εὐχαριστοῦντες) always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and to God the Father, *by submitting* (ὑποτασσόμενοι) to one another in the fear of Christ’.

This interpretation satisfies the question of *how* the filling of the Spirit in Ephesians 5:18 takes place, and answers that question in a way that is entirely consistent with the meaning of the filling of the Spirit throughout the letter. Furthermore, it rounds out the picture by explaining how the church participates in God’s design for the church. Paul (1) had previously described what the church was to be (the fullness of Jesus Christ, the dwelling place of God), (2) revealed that though this is a present reality, there are aspects which stand in need of completion, and, (3) prayed that God would work powerfully in His people to bring this about. In 5:18–21 he tells his readers specifically how they can live out this reality with strategic effectiveness.

While this reading corresponds well to the grammar of the passage and fits well within the flow of the letter, it is anything but a common construal of the relationship between the command in 5:18 and the participles in vv. 19–21. Wallace objects to an understanding of means on the grounds that it ‘may not fit well with the theology of the Pauline epistles—i.e., it would be almost inconceivable to see this text suggesting that the way in which one is to be Spirit-filled is by a five-step, partially mechanical formula!’³⁴ This objection is based on two misconceptions, however. First, it mistakenly assumes that reading the participles as means suggests that doing these things *leads to* one being filled by the Spirit. On the contrary, as indicated above, the participles serve to explain what is meant by the command in 5:18. The five participles do not *lead to* the filling by the Spirit, rather they indicate the *means by which* the command is carried out.

³³ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 629.

³⁴ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 639.

The second misconception is that in Ephesians the filling of the Spirit refers to the private piety of individual Christians, and is an existential or spiritual state that comes and goes based on how effectively one is fulfilling some unstated criteria. As demonstrated above, the filling of the Spirit in Ephesians is the abiding presence of God with his corporate people by the Holy Spirit.

The participles, then, are to be understood as participles of means. The church is to be the temple of God, the fullness of Christ by the Spirit *by* being the community that speaks God's word to one another, sings praises to the Lord, renders thanksgiving to God for all things in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and lives in relationships characterised by mutual submission.³⁵

VIII. Conclusion

Ephesians 5:18 is often interpreted without reference to the context of the letter of Ephesians itself. Yet the development of what Paul means by the 'filling of the Spirit' in the letter is crucial for understanding Paul's command in 5:18. Here he is commanding the corporate church to play their part in being the dwelling place of God on earth. This reading avoids the imposition of an a priori theological framework and premature appeal to other—however similar—Pauline contexts. It also has the advantage of accounting for the various data within an appropriately simple proposal.³⁶

³⁵ According to Schreiner (*Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 422), the 'participles are probably instrumental, conveying how one is to be filled with the Spirit'. Schreiner appears ambivalent, however, in his several treatments of Ephesians 5:18. He states elsewhere that the participles are the 'consequences' of 'being filled with the Spirit' (268), and that works of obedience 'are the result of being filled with the Spirit' (432). J. Gnilka (*Der Epheserbrief* HTKNT 10:2 [Freiburg: Herder, 1971], 270) and H. Schlier (*Der Brief an die Epheser: Ein Kommentar* [Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1971], 246) argue for a conception of the participles which is somewhat similar to that presented here, noting that they elaborate on how the command in 5:18 is to be carried out.

³⁶ Many thanks to Bruce Longenecker for reading and commenting on previous drafts of this article.