

Articles and Sermons :: Continuous Enlargement -poonen

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Continuous Enlargement

by Zac Poonen

The Spirit-filled life is a life that is continuously seeking greater degrees of fulness. "I am pressing on," says Paul, nearly thirty years after his conversion, and as he was drawing to the end of his life (Phil. 3:14). He still has not attained. He is seeking a still greater degree of the fulness of the Spirit of God in his life, and is therefore straining every spiritual muscle toward this goal. "I am not perfect (complete)," he says in Philippians 3:12. But in verse 15, he seems to say the exact opposite: "Let us who are perfect (complete) be thus minded." This is the paradox of the Spirit-filled life - complete, and yet not complete; in other words, full and yet desiring a greater degree of fulness. The Spirit-filled state is not a static one. There are greater and greater degrees of fulness. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit leads us from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18) - or, in other words, from one degree of fulness to another. A cup can be full of water; so can a bucket; so can a tank and so can a river. But there is a vast difference of quantity between the fulness in the cup and the fulness in the river. The newborn convert can be filled with the Spirit immediately on conversion. The Apostle Paul too was a Spirit-filled man at the end of his life. But there is a vast difference between the fulness of the newborn convert and the fulness of the mature Apostle. The former is like a full cup whereas the latter is like a full river.

The Holy Spirit is constantly seeking to enlarge our capacity, so that He can fill us to a greater degree. This is where the Cross comes in. There can be no enlargement in our lives if we avoid the pathway of the Cross. This is why the Corinthians Christians were so shallow. They glorified in gifts and ignored the Cross. And so Paul exhorts them again and again in his two epistles to them, to accept the Cross in their lives. He exhorts them to be thereby enlarged (2 Cor. 6:13). If we accept the Cross consistently in our lives, we shall find the cup becoming a bucket, the bucket becoming a tank, the tank becoming a river and the river becoming many rivers. At each stage, as our capacity enlarges, we shall need to be filled and filled again. Thus will be fulfilled in us the promise of the Lord Jesus, "Rivers of living water shall flow from the inmost being of anyone who believes in me (He was speaking of the Holy Spirit)" (John 7:38, 39-LB). This also explains why Paul exhorts the Ephesian Christians to "be continuously being filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). Paul obviously never believed in a once-for-all experience of being filled with the Spirit. What he is speaking of here is a continuous enlargement of capacity for greater degrees of fulness. Paul himself accepted the Cross always. He says in 2 Cor. 4:10, "Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body (in ever-increasing degree)." One aspect of the Cross that he accepted was the disciplining of his bodily appetites.

The fulness of the Spirit is never a substitute for discipline and hard work. Paul still needed to pommel his body and bring it into subjection. He says, "Like an athlete I punish my body, treating it roughly, training it to do what it should, not what it wants to" (1 Cor. 9:27-LB). He disciplined his eyes in what they read and looked at, his ears in what they listened to, and his tongue in what it spoke. He disciplined his life in every area. Thus he was enlarged. Thank God for the crisis He gives us in our lives. But let us not forget that every crisis must lead to a process. Christ is not only the Door, He is also the Way. If we enter in through the narrow gate, we have to walk the narrow way. Let us never be guilty of emphasizing the crisis to the exclusion of the process. The new birth is a crisis, but spiritual life in the present tense is the important thing, not just the memory of a date in the past. Some are unable to remember the date when the crisis of the new birth took place. But we don't say that a man is dead merely because he can't remember his birthday! And yet, alas, to some Christians, the testimony of an experience is the only test of life! In relation to the fulness of the Spirit too, the important thing is the present tense reality of it, manifested in Christlike living and service. The memory of an experience in the past, however wonderful, is by itself of no avail. God is looking for men and women who will never be content with mere experiences and "blessings," but who will take up the Cross daily and follow Jesus and thus manifest in their lives and in their service the reality of those words, "It is no longer I, but Christ that lives in me." This, and this alone is the Spirit-filled life.