

Modern Translations as represented by the NIV:

<sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, <sup>20</sup> always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup> Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

My Translation

<sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk by wine, in which is debauchery. But be brought to completion in the realm of the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> by speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, by singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; <sup>20</sup> by always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; <sup>21</sup> and by being subject to one another in the fear of Christ (Ephesians 5:18-21).

All major English translations translate Ephesians 5:18c as "... be filled with the Spirit." Though there is a variation on how to translate 18b, "which leads to debauchery" (NIV [The Greek is ἐν ᾧ ἐστὶν ἀσωτία]), all are firm on translating 18c as "be filled with the Spirit," with the understanding that just as one is not to be filled with wine, one should be filled with the Spirit. That is, most who read this verse take it to mean that the Spirit is the content of that which should fill the Christian. Though this is how many people take this there are commentators that object to this rendering. For example, O'Brien argues that the content with which Christians are to be filled "is the fulness of (the triune) God or of Christ."<sup>1</sup> According to O'Brien, the Spirit is the means by which the believer is filled with the God. He sees that the Triune God is the fullness, because Paul writes in 4:13, "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (NIV).

Though this interpretation has much to commend it, it seems to me that it is still not wrestling with what Paul is describing. O'Brien's reading is right, it seems to me, to argue that the Spirit is not the content of the filling,<sup>2</sup> but I think it is incorrect to see the Spirit as the means, as O'Brien does. Also, O'Brien's interpretation seems to suffer because he still understands the Greek word *plēroō* to mean 'fill'. I think a better rendering of *plēroō* in this instance is 'bring to completion or fulfillment'.<sup>3</sup> The phrase typically rendered 'with the Spirit' (*en pneumatī*), would then be rendered 'in the Spirit', emphasizing the realm or domain of the Spirit (traditionally referred to as the locative use of the dative). How are the Christians to be brought to completion in the realm of the Spirit? Paul gives the means by which Christians are brought to completion in vv. 19-21 with five participles (speaking, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and being

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<sup>1</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *Ephesians* (PNTC; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1999), 392.

<sup>2</sup> Because the prepositional phrase *en pneumatī* as the content with which one is filled is never attested. Greek does not use the preposition *en* plus the dative case (which we have here) to describe the content of the filling, instead normally verbs of filling are followed by the genitive to communicate the content of the filling. See O'Brien, 391.

<sup>3</sup> Entry number 5 in BDAG, 'to bring to completion an activity in which one has been involved from its beginning.'

subject).<sup>4</sup>

So then what Paul is saying is that Christians should be brought to completion in the dominion of the Spirit rather than living drunken lives of debauchery. How is that we as Christian are brought to completion? Paul describes this in 5:19-6:9. The one who progressively lives the way Paul describes in 5:19-6:9, will become more and more complete under the rule of the Spirit. So Paul here is not describing some kind of higher life for the Christian, with his talk of being filled with the Spirit. Instead, he is talking about living consistently under the rule of the Spirit. This is the expectation of all Christians, and this is what they are made for. They are made for completion, for perfection.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It must be noted as well, that verse 22 is dependent on 21, since the implied verb of 22 is found in 21. This means that 5:22-6:9 are linked, so that being brought to completion in the realm of the Spirit not only has implications for the gathered church (vv. 19-21), but also the Christian home and the Christian at work.

<sup>5</sup> I owe this interpretation to the help of A. B. Caneday.