

## Introduction

I read something interesting recently: we tend to prefer complexity over simplicity. I don't mean people prefer to read something longer or more detailed; I mean that when we are facing two competing theories for a certain thing, we tend to prefer the more complex one—even if we do not understand it.

The article explained marketers make great use of this. We're more likely to buy hair dye that claims it is ammonia-free, even if we have no idea why this makes one dye better than another. Years ago I read an article about computer programs—apps—that list features that no one wants because we'd rather have a more complex app. If you were looking for a particular app, for example, and you only need five features, you're more likely to buy the app that claims it has 50 features than you are the app that only has ten features, even if both have the same five features you will actually use.

The article claims this is because we prefer to save mental energy. Why think too hard about a thing? This product has bigger words on the label and sounds more impressive...*so it must be better*. Complexity bias, it says, is actually a mental shortcut.

It cites a study in which participants were given three numbers and were asked to explain the rule governing those three numbers. For example, they were given the numbers 2, 4, and 6. They were told these numbers follow a rule and they had to figure out the rule. Participants came up with all sorts of rules they thought governed the series. You add two to the previous number: 2 + 2 is 4, 4 + 2 is 6, etc. Or perhaps you add the previous two numbers: 2 + 4 is 6, and so the next number would be 4 + 6, and so on. Our brains want to figure out the pattern and guess the fourth number. In this case the fourth number was 228,883,120. Also 7, because the “rule” is each number just has to be higher.

After demonstrating the phenomenon further, the article ends by explaining how geniuses are those who are really good at eliminating unnecessary complexity. It links another article on the same site claiming Einstein's greatest ability was grasping the simplicity of things—not getting lost in the irrelevant details. Whereas you and I would get overwhelmed by the complexity, he saw through it and saw the simplicity.

In this sense the apostle Paul was a genius. He was able to get to the heart of a matter and break it down to its fullest simplicity. We see this most in his explanation of what it means to follow Christ. How are we to live a life that pleases the Lord? Many have an intricate and detailed theology of sanctification. I remember being a fairly new believer in college, learning how—theologically—to follow Christ. It was all so very complicated!

Here I am, more than 30 years later, clinging to the truth Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18. As we behold the glory of the Lord, we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. We become more like Christ by looking to Christ. We're in Ephesians 5.

<sup>Eph 5:15</sup> Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, <sup>16</sup> mak-

ing the best use of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Ephesians 5:15–21

## How You Walk

Last week we took a closer look at verses 18–19, seeing God’s desire for diversity in his church. This diversity is reflected in the worship music of a Spirit-led congregation as the people sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. These forms of music refer to vastly different cultural expressions. Psalms were quite common among Jewish Christians and hymns were quite common among Gentile Christians. Each would have been somewhat uncomfortable with the other style. Still, Paul urges the church in Ephesus to embrace a diverse style, though the vast majority in the church would have strongly preferred hymns over psalms.

What is remarkable about this is the expectation on the part of the apostle that the majority would strive to include the minority by embracing their musical preferences. Remember the first three chapters. Paul emphasizes there God has taken from the two groups, from Jew and Gentile, and is creating in Christ “one new man in place of the two, so making peace”. This emphasizes the need to embrace the cultural diversity of the people God is adding to his church.

This may mean a minority cultural expression is over-represented in a local church. A church cannot do this in an inauthentic way. Again, five jazz musicians can play a popular worship song, but asking them to play in a style other than jazz is still going to feel a bit like jazz. Paul isn’t suggesting we pretend to be something we are not. He’s saying we should seek to include everyone who might happen to come into this space, as well as seek to represent all those who are part of us.

In verse 15 Paul says to *look carefully how you walk*. He’s still explaining his first command in chapter 4. Because the work of God in Christ through his Spirit is for us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling by bearing with one another and being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit—both of which are necessary when it comes to musical preferences!—we must look carefully how we actually walk. This refers to our manner of life.

He’s building off his previous statements about being light and not darkness. We must walk as children of light because the works of darkness are unbecoming who we are in Christ. Our manner of life ought to reflect our identity in Christ. We have been transformed; our behavior must match this transformation.

There is a direction we must walk: not as unwise but as wise. We must walk into wisdom. He distinguishes wisdom from foolishness in verse 16. To walk in wisdom is to make “the best use of the time”. We must learn to maximize our time. Paul does not mean our meaning and purpose is productivity, though we must be productive. That would just feed into our American idol of productivity and accomplishment.

The context is our overall manner of living. Our time must not be spent foolishly. We must not spend our days in frivolous pursuits. The opposite is important: the days are evil. Because your identity is new in Christ, you must not live like the old you. The old you wasted the time because the old you was evil. Now, the *days* are evil, but *you* are not. You must, therefore, make the best of use of the time you have been given.

In verse 17 he continues: therefore, do not be foolish. Hear the implications of your new identity in Christ, which he has been driving at throughout the entire letter. Whereas you once were by nature children of wrath, now you are beloved children of God. Once you were darkness, now you are light. Once you were foolish, now you are wise. Foolishness would be pretending to be the old you. Instead of being foolish, he says to understand what the will of the Lord is.

What is the will of the Lord? We need to remember how Paul began this letter.

Eph 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup> even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. ~~In love~~

Ephesians 1:3–4

We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ, having been chosen in Christ before the world began, for this purpose: that we should be holy and blameless before him. *This is the will of the Lord.* This is what it means to make the best use of the time. This is what it means to be wise. To look carefully how we walk is to pursue holiness.

## Be Filled With the Spirit

In verse 18 Paul tells the Ephesian church, “Do not get drunk with wine”. There are two aspects to this command. Drunkenness, which really stands in for any mind-altering—and therefore *behavior*-altering—substance, is forbidden outright. No believer in Christ should become intoxicated or come under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

The first aspect of this prohibition is the connection in the first century between drunkenness and worship. Drunkenness was believed to be the source of ecstasy in worship and an encounter with the divine. The Greek god Dionysus—called Bacchus by the Romans—was believed to “fill” his worshipers with himself when they were drunk in worship. This led to a wild and chaotic experience, often with immorality. In verse 3 Paul says sexual immorality must not even be named among them. They are not to worship as pagans worship.

The second aspect of this prohibition is the controlling influence of drunkenness. Not only was drunkenness directly associated with idolatry, it brought a controlling influence over those who were intoxicated. People who are drunk do and say things they might not otherwise do and say. Their lives must not represent who they were before Christ, which is to say, those whose lives are controlled by anything and everything that isn’t the Lord.

Instead of being filled with alcohol or some other controlling substance, they are to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is to fill them and be the controlling influence in their lives, leading them to do and say things they might not otherwise do or say, only in this case, things that please the Lord.

Paul then provides five participles that help explain this controlling verb. Believers are to be filled with the Holy Spirit. What does this look like? It looks like addressing one another, singing to the Lord, making melody to the Lord, giving thanks, and submitting to one another.

It's interesting that corporate worship has two audiences. Worship is first and foremost worship of God. It is, therefore, directed to God. Paul says here, however, there's a second audience: "addressing one another". We don't worship one another. He means there is a participation together in worship that is directed to God. This destroys the very idea that one can worship God as effectively while on a golf course or on a boat in the middle of a lake. Being filled with the Spirit comes by addressing one another in worship. If you're by yourself, who are you addressing?

This worship is necessarily corporate worship. It is what we do together on Sunday mornings. So often Sunday worship is treated like one's personal quiet time that happens to be at the same time and in the same place as others who are having their personal quiet time. Nothing could be further from the New Testament's description of worship!

There are those who refuse to commit to a church because of this misunderstanding. So long as they engage in their personal and private worship somewhere on a Sunday morning, they've done their duty. You cannot obey the apostle's instructions here with that mindset. The worship he's referring to is a corporate worship in which the body of Christ addresses one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Singing all by yourself is not addressing one another. Singing *together in community* is how we address one another.

Paul adds that as we address one another in worship, we are *singing* and *making melody* to the Lord. While we address one another in corporate worship, our worship is directed to God himself. The idea of "making melody" can refer to singing, but it can also mean playing instruments. We worship God through song with instruments and our voices. As we saw last week, this worship is the body of Christ declaring together who God is and what God has done.

In verse 20 he adds that we must be giving thanks. He provides both the time for this thanksgiving and the reason for it: "always and for everything". Everything you and I have that is good comes from the Lord. James tells us "every good and perfect gift is from above". We have everything to be thankful for and at all times. Paul says be filled with the Spirit, giving thanks always and for everything.

Finally, he says to be submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Paul means an attitude or a posture toward one another. Clinton Arnold makes an important clarification here:

...mutual submission does not obviate the truth that we live these relationships out in a set of socially structured relationships—and this by God's design.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

In chapter 6, for example, Paul instructs children to obey their parents. This isn't controversial. We all get this intuitively. A household run by children—much less a *world* run by children—would be chaotic and disastrous. Submitting to one another does not eliminate these God-ordained relationships. Rather, it describes a posture toward one another.

Remember what Paul wrote in chapter 4 verse 2: with all humility and gentleness and patience we must bear with one another in love. These traits can only be lived out in

community. The idea here is what he wrote to the Philippians: they must “in humility count others more significant than yourselves”. He told the Romans to “outdo one another in showing honor”. Peter wrote we must “honor everyone” and “love the brotherhood” of Christ. Gordon Fee explains:

...we are to consider others, not in our *estimation* of them...but in our *caring* for them, in our putting them and their needs ahead of our own. ... Thus it is not so much that others in the community are to be thought of as “better than I am,” but as those whose needs and concerns “surpass” my own.

Gordon Fee, NICNT (Philippians)

To submit to one another is to place the other’s needs before our own. Notice carefully these five participles—addressing one another, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and submitting to one another—are controlled by the instruction “be filled with the Spirit”.

### Means, Not Result

One question scholars ask of this text is whether these five participles, again, addressing, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and submitting, are *participles of result* or *participles of means*. Let me illustrate the difference. If your child is lollygagging while eating her supper and you said to her, “Finish your supper, filling your belly with food”, the verb is “finish” and the participle is “filling”. (That’s awkward, but roll with me.) Filling her belly is the *result* of finishing her supper. When she will have finished, her belly will be full of food. This is a participle of result.

If, however, you said to her, “Finish your supper, eating every last bite”, you are emphasizing *how* she is to finish. This is a participle of means. You want her to clean her plate and we intuitively understand eating all her food is how she accomplishes your instruction. Most of us are native English speakers so we don’t have to analyze grammar like this, but we get it intuitively.

Are these five participles participles of *result* or are they participles of *means*? In other words, does Paul say to be filled with the Spirit with the result being they will address one another and sing and make melody and give thanks and submit to one another, *or* does he mean that by doing these things they will be filled with the Spirit?

Clinton Arnold answers this question by translating this text as, “Be filled with the Spirit *by* speaking to one another with spiritual psalms, hymns, and songs, and *by* singing and expressing psalms in your hearts to the Lord, *by* always giving thanks for everything” and “by submitting to one another”. He writes,

This passage reveals that one of the ways that believers are filled with the Spirit is by meaningfully participating with fellow believers in worship. Heartfelt and heart-expressed singing, thanksgiving, and worship thrill the heart of God, and he responds by stirring the work of the Spirit in our lives to a greater extent.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

As the Spirit leads us to worship Christ, God responds by stirring us even more with his Spirit, resulting in an even greater experience of God’s presence. Here we begin to see

the real contrast between being drunk with wine and being filled with the Spirit. *Corporate worship is a primary means of experiencing God's presence in this world.* We don't need illicit substances. We don't need to try to stir up an emotional response via mood lighting or fog machines and such. We don't have to conjure up God's presence.

When we assemble together in the name of Jesus, God enters into our presence. Throughout Scripture worship is the *response* to God's presence, so we respond by worshiping him. As we worship him together in community, he makes himself known to us. Even unbelievers can be aware of God's manifest presence! In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul writes about the whole church prophesying and an unbeliever entering into the assembly. Through their prophetic words, the unbeliever's heart will be laid bare and he will "declare that God is really among you".

As we worship God together the Spirit reveals himself more fully, so that even non-Christians can be aware of God's presence among us. Rather than seeking an emotional experience, we are to pursue worship together. It's interesting that Paul says to "not get drunk with wine, for that is *debauchery*". Debauchery means a senseless waste. It's empty and void of meaning and anything good. It isn't merely a waste of money, though it is that. It is a waste of all that is good and right. But consider the alternative, the wise use of time: corporate worship!

To worship together is to experience God together, for the Spirit is the mediator of Christ's presence among us. We experience him together.

## Life In the Spirit

What Paul is describing in this section is life in the Spirit. Specifically, he is describing a *church* that experiences life in the Spirit, but a church is made of individuals who walk in the Spirit. Each one of us must, therefore, strive to walk in the Spirit, which is to say, we must be committed to following the Lord Jesus *together*.

Here's the rub. Deep down we don't want this to be about all of us, together. Each one of us wants to be concerned only for ourselves, that way, if something goes wrong we don't need to do anything about it. After all, *you do you and I'll do me*. This is a central value in our culture. We don't want to be responsible for ourselves, let alone others.

It is impossible to see this attitude justified in Scripture. Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus as a cohesive, unified whole, not as a group of individual believers, each of whom happens to call that church "home". The commands in this letter are plural for a reason. Paul doesn't say, "Each one of you should look carefully how you individually walk". Instead he says, "Look carefully then how *y'all* walk"—he means together!

Life in the Spirit is life in community. To be filled with the Spirit is to be filled *together* as we pursue worship together. This is why Paul tells us to *look carefully* how we walk. The word "carefully" is very interesting. One lexicon says it means "pertaining to strict conformity to a norm or standard, involving both detail and completeness". *Ain't nothing casual about that!* We must pay attention to how we walk together, carefully ensuring the detail and completeness of that walk. By doing so we will make the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

We must approach life, he says, by paying careful attention to the details of life in the Spirit. We must conform ourselves to a strict norm or standard. What is that norm? What

is that standard? It is life in the Spirit. It is a life that is filled with the Spirit. Rather than waste our time in debauchery, in wasteful and useless activity, we must make the best use of the time by being filled with the Spirit.

Life in the Spirit is a life lived together in worship. It is more than the gathered assembly on Sunday mornings, but it most certainly is not less. As Protestants we tend to be somewhat fearful of overemphasizing the Sunday worship service, fearing that it may become mere ritual. We rightly recognize that all of life is to be worship. What we do from Sunday around noon until the following Sunday morning is, in fact, supposed to be spent in worship. This doesn't mean the Sunday worship service together is less important. Paul here is suggesting it is more important than we realize.

We must be filled with the Spirit. We are filled with the Spirit as we address one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. We are filled with the Spirit as we sing and as we make melody to the Lord with our heart. We are filled with the Spirit as we give thanks always and for everything to God. We are filled with the Spirit as we submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

A life that is controlled or influenced or led by anything other than the Spirit of God is a life of debauchery! It is a life that is wasted, that is spent on useless activity. From a worldly perspective one may well live a good life, work hard, raise a family, etc., but if that life is not spent worshipping the Lord, it is all for nothing. It is wasted.

Paul is calling the Ephesians and therefore us to live a life worth living. Life in the Spirit is life worth living. Life being led by and controlled by and guided by the Holy Spirit is a life with eternal significance, one in which we are truly human.

## Application

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright describes a time he was so overwhelmed at a concert that he and his fellow audience members gave the orchestra a standing ovation. (He was quick to point out this is much more rare in the UK than in the US.) The joy and excitement of what they experienced caused a spontaneous eruption of celebration in them so they stood and applauded. Here's how he described it in his book "Simply Christian".

What happens when you're at a concert like that is that everyone present feels that they have grown in stature. Something has happened to them: they are aware of things in a new way; the whole world looks different. It's a bit like falling in love. In fact, it *is* a kind of falling in love. And when you fall in love, when you're ready to throw yourself at the feet of your beloved, what you desire, above all, is union.

This brings us to the first of two golden rules at the heart of spirituality. *You become like what you worship.* When you gaze in awe, admiration, and wonder at something or someone, you begin to take on something of the character of the object of your worship. Those who worship money become, eventually, human calculating machines. Those who worship sex become obsessed with their own attractiveness or prowess. Those who worship power become more and more ruthless.

So what happens when you worship the creator God whose plan to rescue the world and put it to rights has been accomplished by the Lamb who was slain? The answer comes in the second golden rule: because you were made in God's image, *worship makes you more truly human*. When you gaze in love and gratitude at the God in whose image you were made, you do indeed grow. You discover more of what it means to be fully alive.

N. T. Wright, "Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense", pp. 147–148

To be fully alive is to experience God's salvation. Salvation is eternal life, and eternal life begins *now*. He says when you gaze in love and gratitude at the God in whose image you were made, you do indeed grow. As Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 3:18, as we behold the glory of the Lord we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. In other words, *we become like what we worship*.

The gospel is the very opposite of complexity bias. It is simple. It isn't about following a bunch of rules. It isn't about striving to meet a particular ethical standard. It isn't about being good enough and then being sorry enough about not being able to be good enough. The gospel is simple. Christ has accomplished your life and salvation.

One fact of human nature is we are wired to want to do something. Worship turns our gaze away from ourselves and onto Christ. When we look to Christ, we see that he has done everything for our life and salvation. Even as we *walk* in him, we discover we are *sitting* in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.