

What characterizes genuine Spirit-filled experiences?

1. **The experience itself is pretty unimportant, while God is seen as very important.** When people or movements are known for the experience they are having, and not the God they are worshipping, something is really wrong. *Experiences easily become self-referential and disconnected from the One who's supposed to be the author of it.* This is seen in the history of revivals (cf. Jonathan Edwards "The Religious Affections"). However, any experience that is real gives me a thirst for *Him*, and not for *more experience*. The Lord is my portion:

Psalm 73:25-26 "Whom have I in heaven but you?

And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart

and my portion forever."

2. **The experience puts Jesus and the gospel in the centre.** This is obviously closely connected to the last point, but reminds us that *the main work of the Holy Spirit is to take what is Jesus's and make it ours.*

John 16:13-15: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."

The Spirit always shows us our need of a Saviour and our sin. He sends us to Jesus and the salvation and blessings we have in Him. He wants to give us a heightened sense of the glory of Jesus and all his benefits. The point is: the experience is not about me, but about Him and all He's done.

3. **The experience is connected to the truth of the Scriptures.** The Spirit's work is to plunge me deeper into the truth of the word of God.

John 14:25-26 "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

He works through giving me a deeper appreciation of the truth of the Scriptures. He opens my eyes to see and feel these things as true.

Ephesians 1:17-19 "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."

So, I might know that John 3:16 is technically true, but it may still feel very unreal to me and not really impact my life. The Spirit's work is to enable me also to feel its reality so that it impacts my view of God, life, myself.

4. The experience affects my character, and not just my emotions. The Spirit is working to change the deep-seated orientation of our lives so that we change what we cherish and love most deeply. The work of the Spirit is to change the loves of our heart so that we turn from idols to the Lord.

Galatians 5:22-23 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

He produces Christ-like character in us. It is not by *gifting*, nor by *emotion*, that we know someone is filled with the Spirit, but by their *character and holiness*.

5. The experience gives me a deeper concern for mission and service. The striking thing when you read Acts is that the coming of the Spirit moves the church into preaching and serving.

Acts 1:8 "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The blessing of the Spirit is not for some kind of private, esoteric experience but pushes us out into the world to love people and tell them about Jesus. *God only blesses me to make me a blessing to others.*

6. The experience makes me love the brotherhood of believers. The work of the Spirit is not individualistic (me, my guitar and Jesus) but community-focused (read Galatians 5:13-26). He is generating a community of loving people - so being truly spiritual is about loving people. Experiences given by the Spirit are there to make me more committed to my brothers and sisters, to forgive them more, to be more gracious.

Ephesians 5:18-21 "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."

7. The experience may not always make me feel good. There can be an assumption, sometimes, that every experience given to us by God will be a positive one. Now, while there's endless joy and glory ahead of us, and many experiences of that now, God's goal in this life is not to make us feel good. Rather it is to make us fit for heaven - to make us holy. The Bible notes a number of negative experiences which God may give us for our good. The most obvious one is conviction of sin. Another one may be a fear of judgement (given to unbeliever). The psalms detail many experiences where God may well seem absent or far away (cf. Psalm 42-43). All these experiences are given to us by God for our good and our training.

Now, I'm not saying that every experience is meant to be characterised by all these things! Obviously, God works with us in different ways at different times. But these, I hope, are useful criteria for us to assess whether our experiences, overall, are really the work of the Spirit or simply the result of self-centred emotion and self-deception.