

# **Drunk with the Spirit?**

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## **Introduction**

A doctrine claims that Christians should aim to be “drunk with the Spirit”, by analogy with being physically drunk with alcohol. The proponents of this doctrine claim support primarily from three verses in the New Testament. This brief article looks at those verses, to see if the claims made for them are justified.

## **Acts 2:15**

This verse reports the Apostle Simon Peter’s words to the crowds on the day of Pentecost. He said “Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.” (NRSV)<sup>1</sup>

Those who promote the doctrine of being “drunk in the Spirit” claim that this phrase means “they are not drunk in the way that you imagine (i.e., with alcoholic drinks), but they are drunk in another way, with the Holy Spirit”.

Sometimes doctrines are based on misunderstandings of what the Biblical text says. To see whether or not that is the case here, we need to follow good, standard hermeneutical procedure in order to understand the meaning of the original passage. This involves as a minimum two steps:

- looking at the context
- looking at the detail

Naturally, we must start with the context and not just “use” the verse that suits us, regardless of its original context and meaning.

## **The context**

Here we look first at the comments of the crowd and then the nature of Peter’s reply.

### The comments of the crowd

Acts 2 verses 1-4 describe the coming of the Holy Spirit on the 120 believers who were gathered in Jerusalem. Verses 5-12 report in extensive detail that people in the crowd who saw and heard this were “utterly amazed”. This passage of substantial length quotes them as commenting on the different languages that they were hearing.

In contrast with the detail of verses 5-12, verse 13 then briefly comments that “others made fun of them”. The Greek word ἕτερος [“héteros”] is defined by Gingrich in his “Greek New Testament Lexicon” as “other of two”. Here it is the plural, ἕτεροι [“héteroi”], so “others”, “some others” or “some” is an accurate translation. We note that the NRSV renders this word as “others” and the NIV (1984, 2011) renders it as “some”. In this context, both renderings convey essentially the same meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek is οὐ γὰρ ὡς ὑμεῖς ὑπολαμβάνετε οὗτοι μεθύουσιν, ἔστιν γὰρ ὥρα τρίτη τῆς ἡμέρας. All Greek quotations in this article are taken from the Greek text of the New Testament as printed in Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th revised edition, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013, which is the same as the Greek New Testament, 5th revised edition, published by the United Bible Society. (NA28/UBS5)

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It is thus totally justifiable to state that it was in fact only some of the visitors to Jerusalem who accused the believers of being drunk. That, after all, is what the passage says.

In fact, verse 13 goes on to explain precisely why this smaller group of people were saying that the believers had drunk too much wine. It uses the verb διαγλενάζω [“diachleuázō], which Friberg’s Lexicon defines as “jeer outright at, make fun of, ridicule”. Gingrich gives the translations “mock, deride, sneer or scoff”. All of these words indicate that the people were not making factual statements of what they actually saw or thought but sneering at the believers, that is, poking fun at them, ridiculing them. Acts 17:32 uses the same verb. There we read that some of the Athenians “sneered” (NIV) or “scoffed” (NRSV) at Paul’s statement that Jesus had risen from the dead.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the statement in Acts 2:13 clearly does not imply that the observers did indeed consider the disciples drunk, as is claimed by supporters of this doctrine. On the contrary, the rest of the very same verse explains why they said this: not as a rational assessment of the cause of the behaviour of the believers, but in order to ridicule them.

Apart from the mocking comments of a few in the crowd, there is no indication in the passage that the believers actually looked drunk, as claimed by the proponents of this doctrine. If the believers had really appeared to be drunk, in the culture of the time the response would not have been ridicule but anger and outrage. Remember that the Bible tells us that the observers were “God-fearing Jews” (v. 5). The reason for the mocking comment reported in verse 13 is clearly stated in the same verse: to make fun of the believers (NIV) or to sneer at them (NRSV).

### Prioritising what is important

It is also significant that, in accordance with standard literary and Biblical practice at the time, the principal reaction of the crowd is described in great detail, and normally first, while any secondary or subordinate reaction is only described after that and in much lesser detail.

It is thus fully justified by the words, the structure and the content of the report to conclude that the major reaction of most of those in the crowd was one of amazement and perplexity, while only a few others saw an opportunity to jeer at the disciples and ridicule them. Throughout history, ridicule has been a response used by opponents who did not have any rational basis for their criticism.<sup>3</sup>

### The nature of Peter’s reply

In his response, Peter dismisses these insults in a single sentence, giving a good reason why they could have no basis in fact (v 15). The very next thing he says is: “It’s only nine in the morning!” In other words, “What you are saying is untenable; it has no basis in fact. It’s not even plausible!”

He pointedly doesn’t say, “This is a different sort of drunkenness. Let me explain why we are drunk and what sort of drunkenness this is.”

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<sup>2</sup> Likewise some of the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders had jeered at Jesus on the cross seven weeks earlier, although the same Greek verb is not used in the description of that event. (Matthew 27:42, Mark 15:31, Luke 23:35) On neither occasion were the derisory comments justified.

<sup>3</sup> For a few of the many examples in the Bible, see 2 Chronicles 36:16, Nehemiah 2:19, Psalm 36:16, Psalm 89:50-51, Matthew 27:29, 31.

His short, sharp rebuttal of an indefensible claim rejects the sneering remarks of the mockers. He thus shows at the beginning of his response that it was important to reject their slanderous allegations. Having dismissed that false claim, he then goes on with one of the longest discourses recorded in the New Testament, in which he deals with the puzzlement of the majority (vv 16-39). In fact, verse 40 states that he also spoke “*many other words*” to warn his listeners and to plead with them to respond in repentance and faith.

In fact, when we look at the detail of Peter’s speech, we see that *the main theme is not the Holy Spirit but Jesus*: he explains briefly (verses 16-21) that what they were observing was the fulfilment of the promise in Joel of the outpouring of the Spirit, but he then moves on to focus on Jesus, his ministry, death and resurrection, and the crowd’s need to repent and be baptised (verses 22-40). We thus see that just six verses, five of them being a quotation from Joel, recount Peter’s words about the promise of the Holy Spirit, while nineteen verses are required to report his words about Jesus.

This should not surprise us, as Jesus himself had told them a few weeks earlier that the work of the Holy Spirit was not to promote the Holy Spirit but to point to Jesus: “When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.” (John 15:26, NIV)

### **The detail**

As stated above, those who promote the doctrine of being “drunk in the Spirit” claim that Peter’s initial phrase means “they are not drunk in the way that you imagine (i.e., with wine or other alcoholic drinks), but they are drunk in another way, with the Holy Spirit”.

However this is not what it says. Two things make this clear:

- the words used
- the word order

#### The words used

##### ὡς [“hōs”]

The Greek word that is translated “as” is ὡς [“hōs”]. This word merely means “as”. It does not mean “in the way that”.

The word ὡς [“hōs”] simply introduces a comparison with something, and does not imply that this is being contrasted with something else. The phrase simply says “as you suppose”. It is not saying, “This is one way of understanding the word or the situation, but there is another, different way of understanding it.”

In other words, the phrase from Acts 2:15 that is exploited by these preachers does not mean “they are not drunk in the way that you suppose, but they are drunk in some different way.”

##### ὅν τρόπον [“hon tropon”]

The New Testament does have a phrase that means “in the way that”, but it is not used here by Peter. The phrase for “in the way that” is ὅν τρόπον [“hon tropon”]. Like ὡς [“hōs”], it is used to introduce a comparison, and in many contexts it may mean little more than the word, ὡς [“hōs”], i.e., “as” or “like”. However, one could conceive of an interpretation that might claim that on certain occasions the use of ὅν τρόπον [“hon tropon”], “in the way that”, might imply a possible contrast with “in some other way”.

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Here are a few examples of the use in the New Testament of the phrase ὁν τρόπον [“hon tropon”].

Acts 1:11 says “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, thus will come in the way that you saw him going into heaven.” (my translation)<sup>4</sup>

This means “in the same way”, and could be interpreted to imply the idea “but not in some other way”.

In Acts 7:28 Stephen reports the words of a Hebrew slave in Egypt to Moses: “You surely don’t want to kill me in the way that you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?” (my translation)<sup>5</sup>

In Matthew 23:37 Jesus is recorded as saying “How many times I wanted to gather together your children, in the way that a hen gathers together her chicks under her wings.” (my translation)<sup>6</sup>

ὁν τρόπον [“hon tropon”] also occurs in a number of other places in the New Testament (as it does in the Jewish translation of the Old Testament into Greek, the Septuagint).

Unfortunately for the proponents of this novel interpretation of Acts 2:15, on the day of Pentecost the Apostle did not use the phrase ὁν τρόπον [“hon tropon”], “in the way that”; but the word ὡς [“hōs”], which simply means “as”, without implying the possibility of an alternative option. Therefore, Acts 2:15 does not support the teaching that claims that on the day of Pentecost Peter was talking of two different ways of being drunk. Quite simply, it does not say that.

### The word order

The original Greek word order is:

not for as you imagine these are-drunk<sup>7</sup>

For reasons of style, in Greek the word “for” does not occur in the first position in sentences. It is therefore normally the second word, as here. For reasons of English style it would need to be moved to the initial position in an English translation. This does not change its function in the sentence.

The word “not” can be flexibly placed at different places in a sentence. By putting it right at the beginning, its meaning is emphasised. It might therefore be best translated with the phrase “definitely not” or “certainly not”.

Looking at the sentence, we see that it has two components, each of which is a clause with its own verb:

- as you imagine
- these are certainly not drunk.

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<sup>4</sup> οὗτος ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀναλημφθεὶς ἀφ’ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οὕτως ἐλεύσεται ὁν τρόπον ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν.

<sup>5</sup> μὴ ἀνελεῖν με σὺ θέλεις ὁν τρόπον ἀνεῖλες ἐχθὲς τὸν Αἰγύπτιον;

<sup>6</sup> ποσάκις ἠθέλησα ἐπισυναγαγεῖν τὰ τέκνα σου, ὁν τρόπον ὄρνις ἐπισυνάγει τὰ νοσσία αὐτῆς ὑπὸ τὰς πτέρυγας

<sup>7</sup> “are-drunk” printed here hyphenated to show that this is one word in the Greek

The word ὡς [“hōs”], “as”, is not related in any way to the word “drunk” or to any part of the second clause, which contains the word “drunk”. It is related to the phrase “you suppose”, in the clause in which it is located, the first clause. We might therefore best translate the sentence as follows (inverting the order of the clauses for reasons of English style, without changing the meaning):

“For these people are certainly not drunk, as you suppose.”

If we wish to avoid the inversion of the two clauses in English, we could translate the sentence as follows:

“Contrary to what you suppose, these people are certainly not drunk.”

Whichever translation we may prefer, the word ὡς [“hōs”] is therefore not describing different kinds of drunkenness (“with wine” versus “with the Spirit”). It is not even in the part of the sentence that talks about drunkenness. It is describing what the listeners are alleging (and are recorded in verse 13 as having expressed).

### **1 Corinthians 12:13**

The second “proof text” used by the proponents of “drunkenness in the Spirit” is 1 Corinthians 12:13. This verse says “For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” (NIV)<sup>8</sup>

This is another key verse used by those who teach that we are to be “drunk, i.e., inebriated, in the Spirit.” However, this verse does not support such teaching, either, for the following reasons:

Two completely different and unrelated situations are confused here.

One is “to cause [someone] to drink (any liquid)”. The other is “to get drunk”.<sup>9</sup>

In English it is possible for some confusion to arise between the words “to (cause to) drink” and “to be drunk”, because in English “to (cause to) drink” and “to be drunk” (or “to get drunk”) are verbs with a common etymological origin (the verb “drink”), but in Greek this is not the case.

Greek uses two totally different words, and we need to observe which word is used here. The two words are ποτίζω [“potizō”] and μεθύω [“methuō”]. First, we must see the dictionary definition of each word.

ποτίζω [“potizō”] “to give someone a drink, to water [a plant or an animal]”

ποτίζω [“potizō”] means “to administer liquid to”. Thus it can be used in phrases like “to water plants”, “to take animals to drink” or “help someone (e.g., a child or a sick or injured person) to drink”, etc.

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<sup>8</sup> και γὰρ ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι ἡμεῖς πάντες εἰς ἓν σῶμα ἐβαπτίσθημεν, εἴτε Ἰουδαῖοι εἴτε Ἕλληνες εἴτε δοῦλοι εἴτε ἐλεύθεροι, καὶ πάντες ἐν πνεύμα ἐποτίσθημεν.

<sup>9</sup> Naturally, Greek also has a word for “to drink” (any liquid). It is πίνω [“pino”] and it occurs frequently in the New Testament (73 times), although not in any of the passages referred to in this article. It does not have any connotation that inherently implies the drinking of alcohol or of any other specific liquid, and it is not related to the word μεθύω [“methuō”], “to get drunk”.

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Thus, the liquid most commonly implied is water, although it might be milk or some other liquid. It carries no connotation that implies making anyone drunk, i.e., inebriated.

Adults are commonly described in the New Testament carrying out the action that is indicated by the verb ποτίζω [“potizō”]. For instance, in Matthew 25:35 Jesus says “I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.” (NIV)<sup>10</sup>

1 Corinthians 3:7 says “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” (NIV)<sup>11</sup>

μεθύω [“methuō”] “to drink to excess, to get drunk”

This word is about drunkenness, intoxication or inebriation. The opposite of this word is νήφω [“nēfō”], “to be sober”.

The New Testament repeatedly says (e.g., in Galatians 5:21, 1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7, 1 Peter 4:3-4) that Christians must not μεθύω [“methuō”], “get drunk” or “be drunk”.

The interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12:13 to justify a doctrine of “drunk in the Spirit” is based on muddling up these two totally different situations and two totally different Greek words, and it is not supported by the Greek, which does not confuse these two quite different actions and which does not use the word μεθύω [“methuō”], “to get drunk”, to describe any human experience of the Holy Spirit, either here or anywhere else in the New Testament.

Specifically, the word μεθύω [“methuō”] does not occur in 1 Corinthians 12:13.

### So what does 1 Corinthians 12:13 mean?

In order to understand fully the meaning of 1 Corinthians 12:13, it is helpful to observe the Hebrew speaking and writing style that coloured the way that Jewish believers in New Testament times thought and wrote. We need to look at two aspects of this:

- parallelism
- the Divine passive

### Parallelism

Parallelism is common in Hebrew poetical writing, for instance, in the Psalms and large sections of the prophets.

In this parallelism, many statements are made twice, in slightly different words. Frequently, the second statement is equivalent in meaning to the first, or explains it, or expands on it.

For example, in Isaiah 40:3 we read

“In the desert prepare the way for the Lord ;  
make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” (NIV)

This passage shows detailed parallelism throughout, as will be clear from the following table:

In the desert	prepare	the way	for the Lord
in the wilderness	make straight	a highway	for our God

<sup>10</sup> ἐδίψησα καὶ ἐποτίσατέ με

<sup>11</sup> ὥστε οὔτε ὁ φυτεύων ἐστίν τι οὔτε ὁ ποτίζων ἀλλ’ ὁ ἀυξάνων θεός.

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Each phrase in the first line is matched by an equivalent phrase in the second line. (In this table, I have moved the position of one phrase in the second line, to make the parallelism more obvious.)

This passage is quoted from in all four gospels, which shows that the writers of the New Testament were familiar with this writing style.

### The Divine passive

The third commandment is “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.” (Exodus 20:7, NRSV) In their determination to observe this commandment, over a period of time the Jewish people developed the belief that they should not pronounce God’s name or even say the word “God”.

This is reflected in the New Testament, where phrases such as “the kingdom of heaven” avoid the use of the word “God”.

Another way of avoiding mention of God’s name was to put sentences into the passive. For instance, in the statement “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4, NIV), the verb “comforted” is in the passive, i.e., we are told who will be on the receiving end of the comforting (“those who mourn”), but we are not told who will be doing the comforting of them. The implication is that it is God who is doing the comforting.

Passive sentences such as this are common in the New Testament, and in many cases the implied meaning is that it is God who is performing the action in question, but the word “God” is not used, possibly to avoid offending Jewish sensitivities. This is sometimes called “the Divine passive”. It also occurs in 1 Corinthians 12:13.

### The meaning of 1 Corinthians 12:13

1 Corinthians 12:13 shows both of these features: parallelism and the Divine passive:

“We were all baptised by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” (NIV) By taking out the parenthetical remark “whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free”, which is defining the meaning here of the word “we”, it is possible to see the parallelism more clearly:

We were all baptised	by one Spirit	into one body
we were all given to drink	the one Spirit	—

Even though there is no phrase in the second line to correspond to “into one body” in the first line, the presence of the word “all” in both lines emphasises the common experience of all believers, an idea that is expanded in the first line by the phrase “into one body”.

“We were ... baptised” and “we were ... given to drink” are both examples of the Divine passive: it is God who baptised us by the Spirit and it is God who gave us the Spirit.

The parallelism of meaning also goes further: just as this was not a *physical* baptism in water, it is also not a *physical* drink; in this verse, “baptised” and “given to drink” are both *symbols* for the filling by the Holy Spirit. And, as indicated above, the Greek word used here for “given to drink” has nothing to do with the Greek word for being drunk.



## **Ephesians 5:18**

The third “proof text” is Ephesians 5:18. This verse says “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.” (NRSV)<sup>12</sup>

The verse has two halves. It presents a contrast:

- the first half is about drunkenness and is in the negative
- the second half is about the Holy Spirit and is positive.

The first half does use the word for becoming drunken, and it says “don’t!”

The second half contrasts with this and states the opposite. It does *not* say “Don’t be drunk (i.e., drunken) on wine but instead do be drunk (i.e., drunken) on the Holy Spirit”.

The second half does not use any word related to drunkenness, or to drinking any sort of liquid at all. Instead, it uses the standard Biblical phrase for being “filled with the Spirit”. The Greek word for “to fill” is πληρώω [“plēroō”]. This word is in no way related to the word for drunkenness or to getting or being drunk.

Jesus was described as being “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This is derived from the same word “to fill”. Believers are instructed to have conversation that is “always full of grace” (Colossians 4:6). Stephen (Acts 7:55) and Barnabas (Acts 11:24) are described as “full of the Holy Spirit”.

But in the New Testament, being “full” or “filled” with the Holy Spirit is nowhere equated with drunkenness.

In Ephesians 5:18 we have, again, two passives:

- The first phrase is about being made drunk by wine, which is condemned.
- The second phrase is about being filled with the Holy Spirit, which is commanded.

The first phrase says that what causes the drunkenness is wine. The second phrase is a divine passive, in that it is God who does the filling with the Holy Spirit. This is absolutely not at all likened to being drunk with wine; it is contrasted with it.

## **Conclusion**

The whole terminology of this doctrine – “being drunk, i.e. intoxicated, in the Spirit” – is about going to extremes and doing things to excess.

1. It holds up drunkenness as something to be emulated or copied and says that being “filled with the Spirit” is analogous to being intoxicated with alcohol. The Bible, however, says that being filled with the Spirit is not something similar to or equivalent to being drunken, but something to be contrasted with it, the opposite.
2. Some of the proponents of this doctrine encourage their listeners to imagine a situation akin to drinking vast quantities of alcohol, indeed, to pretend to be drinking, and to act this out, holding their arms up as though they were holding an imaginary glass – or, better still, an imaginary barrel – and then to drink out of it, drinking in reality (not in imagination) the Holy Spirit. After engaging in this action, which they call a “prophetic act”, the speakers expect the participants to get drunk and to behave as if they really were drunk, this time not

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<sup>12</sup> και μη μεθύσκεσθε οἴνω, ἐν ᾧ ἐστὶν ἀσωτία, ἀλλὰ πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι

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- in their imagination, but with the real physical manifestations of drunkenness. This specifically goes against the clear teaching of Scripture, that any sort of drunkenness is wrong. (cf. Romans 13:13, Galatians 5:21, 1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7, 1 Peter 4:3, etc.)
3. The doctrine is about losing control, whereas the New Testament repeatedly exhorts Christians to exert self-control. (cf Acts 24:25, Galatians 5:23, 2 Timothy 1:7, 2 Peter 1:6, etc.)
  4. The doctrine is based on a misunderstanding (at best!) of the Bible verses that its proponents use to support their ideas.
  5. It is based on starting with an idea (the supposed desirability of being drunk – but in the Holy Spirit) and then trying to find Bible verses that can be made to appear to support it. Such an approach – starting with a non-biblical idea and then trying to find something in the Bible that can be claimed as support – has been used by many groups, from the mainstream church in past centuries (and sometimes much more recently!) to sects like the Jehovah’s Witnesses in the 20th and 21st centuries. As this article demonstrates, it is even occasionally used right up to the present day by misguided Christian groups and Christian leaders to try to persuade people concerning other ideas and doctrines that are in fact non-biblical.
  6. This does not do justice to what the Bible says, which is frequently not what we would wish it to say. It is being dishonest with the biblical text.
  7. In this particular case (as in others alluded to), it is based on an interpretation that is not supported by the passages quoted. And it is based on an application to the experiences of believers that goes against the tenor and teaching of the Bible.

The intentions of the proponents of this doctrine and their aim in using the terminology of being “drunk in the Spirit” may, perhaps, be good, but the teaching is, at best, unhelpful and, at worst, misleading, easily susceptible to misunderstanding and therefore dangerous. It glorifies the idea of drunkenness, and this is clearly anti-biblical, even if it is re-defined as “in the Spirit”. Under examination, it soon becomes clear that the verses to which these preachers turn for support do not actually say what these people claim that they say. They say something totally different and something that is often the total opposite of the interpretation that is given in this teaching.

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20.8.15  
revised 1.1.17.