How Do We Measure Devotion?

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Devotion can easily be confused with commitment. But while devotion is a fruit and outworking of the Holy Spirit, commitment is the believer's response to this.

To illustrate this, my perspective was challenged by a young man who shared on how he had finally come to understand devotion. He had been struggling in his faith for many years but just couldn't commit himself fully. Then one day, it was as if the light came on. He was convicted to read the Bible every day. That conviction to get up early to spend time reading and praying surely went against his natural desire to sleep in, but he surrendered to the conviction. As he continued in his commitment to this, it grew into a desire as he got to know Jesus personally and drew near to his Father God. As he continued to read the Word, he was increasingly convicted about certain areas of his life with which God was not pleased. He started to respond and act on each conviction, which in many instances went against his natural desires. Yes, he had a growing desire to follow Jesus and obey Him, but the conviction to do the right thing, even when it went against his desires, is what really revealed his growth in devotion to the Lord Jesus.

For years we have learned and taught God's blueprint for building churches, as set out in Acts 2:42-47. The four values mentioned in this passage that were put into practice by the early church are foundational to wholesome church life and relationships. However, I have come to realise that we should be careful how we apply these four values as the standard of a healthy

church.

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A few years back, a divinity student asked me whether I thought that this passage was descriptive or prescriptive, meaning either it is what happened in the early church or that this is how church should be done. I had to really think about this. His lecturer had told him that the passage was descriptive, though he was convinced it was prescriptive and what every church family should be like. As time has passed, I have become more convinced that the four values are descriptive of what was happening in the early church.

To explain, in Acts 2 we witness an incredible miracle. Jesus had been preaching for three years, summed up in, 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is near' (Matthew 3:2). Though thousands had been following Him, few were actually committed to paying the price it would require. His closest friends ran away, betrayed Him and denied Him when he was crucified.

This was the scene that set the stage for Acts 2. But then the promised Holy Spirit was poured out on the 120 faithful followers of Jesus, and everything changed. Once shy, fearful disciples became fearless, selfless preachers and testifiers of what they had witnessed, felt and touched. They preached 'Christ and Him crucified' and resurrected, repentance of sin and baptism, and that whoever accepted Christ and put their trust in Him would receive the Holy Spirit too.

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Three thousand were cut to the heart by the message, repented of their sins and put their trust in Jesus. The early church was born! "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). But where did their devotion result from? Not from the teaching or lifestyle of the apostles, but from a life-changing encounter with and infilling of the Holy Spirit! Jesus had promised that after He returned to His Father, He would ask His Father to send the Holy Spirit, who would not only be with His followers but in them.

What we see in Acts 2:42-47 is the fruit of the work, presence and indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the new believers. What does this mean for us? What I have observed is that we as elders, church leaders and community leaders, can easily fall into the trap of making the four values of Acts 2 prescriptive of how church, and specifically the lives of individual believers, should be evaluated.

We must be careful, however, that we don't use this passage to judge the lives of our church family. So while Jesus does encourage His followers to look at the 'fruit a tree produces' to recognise what type of tree it is, we must be careful not to use Acts 2 as our measuring stick, even though the passage does show us what the lives of Spirit-filled people looked like. It would be great if it were as easy as that, but don't we then run the risk of either becoming judgmental or religious? Should we not rather, first and foremost, lovingly draw those who we may have a concern about into a deeper devotion to Jesus and their heavenly Father? Should we not pray with them and for them, for a greater infilling and outflowing of the presence of the Holy Spirit in and through their lives?

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Alternatively, we can give in to the temptation to judge them and deem that they do not have the Holy Spirit at all or are resisting and not surrendering to Him. To be sure, the Bible teaches us all to be in step with the Holy Spirit, and leaders should also take care to set the example of being in step with Him in this.

So how should leaders respond when a young believer is still struggling with attending all the services and meetings of the church family? What if he isn't yet convicted to give his tithe, join a community or plug into any 'visual' ministry? How do we measure devotion? Jesus measured it rather simply in the following statement: "Are you following Me?" What we need to foster is relationship, and we as leaders can love those who are struggling into a growing commitment to 'plug in' without forgetting that there could well be issues that need to be resolved, healed or released in the person's life.

The evidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit is a growing devotion to produce the values of Acts 2:42-47. It is and always must be a work and outflow of the Holy Spirit, not of any pressure or expectation of leadership or even church practice. If it is, a local church can easily put pressure on its members to perform outwardly, without a deep, inner conviction and desire fueled by a growing relationship and surrender to the Holy Spirit. Pressure to conform too often results in producing the opposite of what we as church leaders want to achieve.

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and devotion to Jesus. Surely this will produce either a desire or conviction to spend time with the church family and to get involved in the community of believers. We may then expect that other fruit will become evident in their lives as they are encouraged in their walk with Jesus.

My conclusion is that Acts 2:42-47 is descriptive of the devotion in the early church resulting from the transformative encounter and subsequent indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in each believer. And we can experience the same in our personal lives and church family! We only have to remember that it is ‘not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord’ (Zechariah 4:6).