

FINGERPRINTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH - Acts 2:42-47

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Introduction: Marshall Leggett has said that the “Restoration movement is a movement within the church, calling the church back to the church of the New Testament.” I like that! That does something for me! That is what this Restoration Movement is about! We call the Church to come back to the Church of the Bible! Come back to this Church we find in the book of Acts!

But **how** do we recognize that Church? How can we identify the Church of the New Testament? What are its identifying characteristics? How do we know the difference between the Church of the New Testament and a counterfeit?

I want to talk about the ***Fingerprints*** of the New Testament Church.

Fingerprints are used to identify people because no two fingerprints are alike. Fingerprints are used to identify criminals, accident victims and even to open up our iPhones. Fingerprints are the one true way to positively identify someone. Even identical twins can be easily identified by examining their fingerprints.

So how can we positively identify the true church; the church that was born on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter two? How do we identify the Church of the New Testament? How can we tell the genuine from the counterfeit?

The answer is in the Fingerprints!

In Acts 2:42-47 we are given ten fingerprints of the church:

Jesus said “I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus had a plan for His church! He said, “No one sets out to build a tower without first sitting down and figuring out what it will cost.” (Luke 14:28). So Jesus had a plan for the Church. After spending 3 solid years with His chosen apostles, and after His death, and after His burial and resurrection, He spent a period of 40

intense days with these same apostles *giving instructions to them* about the establishing of His *Kingdom*: His Church. He breathed into them the Holy Spirit of God so that they would comprehend these things and He instructed them to “not leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the gift (the power) which would enable them to accomplish this great task: to establish His church! (Acts 1:4).

Then He ascended to Heaven, and they waited there in Jerusalem.

Ten days later, on the Jewish day of Pentecost, they were all together in one place and the Holy Spirit came in power! The Church was born!

There was a loud sound, “like the blowing of a violent wind from heaven” and there appeared to be “tongues of fire that separated and came to rest of each of them.” The apostles immediately went out into the streets of Jerusalem and began proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead, that He was the Christ, that He was in fact the long-awaited Messiah!

They were proclaiming this right there in downtown Jerusalem; just 50 days after the annual Passover Holiday which meant that there were still staying in Jerusalem, “God fearing Jews from every nation.” The city was packed and the people saw and heard all of the commotion the apostles were making. They saw it and they heard them preaching in other tongues. Preaching in the languages of all the different people, yet the apostles had not known these languages previously.

Now some people did not know what was going on and they said “these guys must be drunk to be carrying on like this....” But then Peter, “stood up with the eleven, raise his voice and said ‘No, no. These men are not drunk....it’s too early in the morning for that. No, THIS IS WHAT WAS PROMISED by the Prophet Joel! This is the fulfillment of that Bible Prophecy! This is God pouring out His Spirit on all His People! He does not dwell in tents made by human hands or stay behind curtains in temples. NO! He now lives and indwells the hearts of HIS People!’”

Peter went on to preach that first Gospel Message with power and conviction. He told them that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God and many other things. Then, in Acts 2:36 he said “Let all Israel know this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ!” When the people heard this

“They were cut to the heart” and they said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter answered, “Here’s what you need to do: You need to repent and be baptized. And your sins will be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the [indwelling presence] of the Holy Spirit. And this promise is for you and your children and your children’s children and all who are far off....”(Acts 2:36-39).

And Peter preached many other words and warned them and pleaded with them “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!” About 3000 people responded to the message that day and were baptized! 3000 people had their sins forgiven. 3000 people were empowered with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit!

The Church was born that day!

There is a saying that “A river is purest at its source.” So what did this original church look like? What did the church of the New Testament do? What were their defining characteristics? What were its fingerprints?

Here are the 10 Fingerprints of the Church of Acts: (2 thumbs and 8 fingers)

1. DOCTRINE (The first thumb)

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.”

The true Church of the New Testament was absolutely devoted to sound doctrine! It was a cornerstone of who they were. This is the essence of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. The word *disciple* means to be a learner and those early Christians were learners!

It was said of the Berean Christians that they were “more noble” than the Thessalonian Christians because they “received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” (Acts 17:11).

The great need of today is for the modern church to come back to the church of the New Testament and be *devoted* to sound doctrine! The church must be *more noble* by carefully examining the scriptures daily. The church must return to being a people of the book!

Paul warned Timothy that a “time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3).

Sound doctrine is not valued in the modern church. In fact, it is almost looked down upon. We hear things like:

“People don’t care how much you know, they want to know how much you care.”

“I’d rather see a sermon than hear one.”

“Churches are filled with people who know everything about Jesus.... but they don’t know Jesus!”

“They know all that Doctrine.... but they don’t love people.”

And on and on it goes.

Perhaps there is a legitimacy to some of these claims, but it seems to me that the pendulum has swung way too far in the other direction!

Remember, Paul charged Timothy to “watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Timothy 4:16). Both are important!

Many churches today are a mile wide and an inch deep! The modern church suffers from a lack of knowledge and teaching of sound doctrine.

There is a church I attend sometimes when I am not on the road. We have family there. It is an old established Church of Christ. Over the past 10 years they have done away with evening services, adult midweek services, and,

while they still have Sunday School, it is not really promoted and only a few attend. They do, however, still draw over 200 to their morning worship service. There are three full-time trained ministers on the staff and two part-time. The other day I was in attendance and I was struck by the closing statement that the associate minister made as he dismissed us. He thanked us all for coming out that morning and told us to enjoy the rest of our day and “we will see you next week.” There was just something about that remark that bothered me. It was as if to say, “Thank you for coming and hearing this 25-minute talk about applying Jesus to your life, and we will do it again in 7 more days, so ya’ll come back now, hear?”

If we are going to call the church back to the church of the New Testament, we must call them back to the Book! We must return to the study of Sound Doctrine!

I was fortunate to grow up in a church and home that valued sound doctrine and taught sound doctrine. My mother was a devout student of the Bible. She was taught by great Bible teachers like Seth Wilson and Don Dewelt. She herself taught Sunday school for over 65 years until her health no longer permitted her to leave the house. However, even then, she never stopped teaching and studying sound doctrine!

The first finger; the thumb; the cornerstone of the New Testament church is to value, teach, preach, and study sound doctrine!

2. FELLOWSHIP

“They were devoted to the Apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship.”

It says they “continued to meet together and eat together and enjoyed spending time together.” Jesus said elsewhere that the world will recognize you as my disciples by the way you “love one another” (John 13:35).

This is what the world was meant to see in the church. This is what makes the world sit up and take notice. This is what the world is desperately seeking for themselves.

“Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they are always glad you came” (theme from Cheers).

We often will say of our church that “we are a friendly church,” and perhaps we are. We are often very friendly and loving toward each other. In fact, most churches are friendly. Most churches will greet you, shake your hand, smile and tell you how happy we are that you chose to visit with us today. But here is some news: The world is not looking for a friendly church! There are plenty of those around. No, the world is not looking for a friendly church – it is looking for friends! The world is looking for genuine fellowship, New Testament Church Fellowship!

3. COMMUNION

“To the breaking of bread.”

The Lord’s supper, communion, (“The breaking of bread”) was central to the New Testament Church. We read later in Acts 20:7 that “on the first day of the week we came together to break bread.”

To the New Testament church, the first day of the week had become their Holy day. It was the day that Jesus arose from the grave. It was the day that He first appeared and then reappeared to His Disciples. It was the day that the church was born – on Pentecost. By the time we reach the book of Revelation, John even refers to the first day of the week as “The Lord’s day” (Revelation 1:10). Central to that Lord’s Day was “the breaking of bread.”

One of the irrefutable marks (fingerprints) of the authentic New Testament church is the weekly habit of “the breaking of bread” on the Lord’s Day. It is

our connection to a 2000-year heritage! It is the birthright of the New Testament church!

Back when I was finishing up my bachelor's degree, I found myself needing to take a course on Christian worship. It worked out for me to take the course from a Mennonite college in Indiana. Now these were good pious people, the Mennonites, but they had a few doctrinal issues. And one of them was *the breaking of bread*. They usually did it quarterly or something like that. Well, during the class lecture, the professor was talking about the key elements of Worship as found in Isaiah 6. One of those key elements of worship was what he called *repentance*. When Isaiah realized he was in the presence of the living God, he cried "woe is me..." So, the Professor taught, we too should have an element of *reverence and repentance* in our worship experience.

A young student raised his hand and asked, "How do we do this, Professor? Our services are usually all about rejoicing and thankfulness for our salvation and all that. How do we incorporate this repentance of which you speak?" The Professor kind of shrugged and said, "To be honest, it is hard. I struggle with it myself. It is just something you have to work at."

Well, I am usually one of those guys who thinks of what he should have said when it is too late, usually on the drive home. However, on this day I raised my hand and I said: "You know, if you guys would observe the Lord's supper every week as they did in the New Testament Church, you would have that element built into every service. Paul said, 'Let a man examine himself and then eat of the bread and drink of the cup' (1 Corinthians 11:28). The Professor smiled at me and said, "You make a good point, a very good point." Then he shrugged and said, "But our people would never go for that, and besides, it would become too common if we did it every week." That was the end of the discussion.

The Breaking of Bread was a central part of the New Testament church for repentance, reverence, remembrance, and many other reasons; not the least of which was the *proclaiming of the Lord's death until He comes again* (1 Corinthians 11:26). You see, we completely miss the point of communion when we think it is about us and the *warm fuzzy feeling* we get from it. First and foremost, we gather around the Lord's Table and break bread to *Proclaim His Death and to proclaim* the Cross of Christ. If a visitor should come to our assembly knowing nothing of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, he will have heard about it (or at least he should) when we gather around the table!

The breaking of bread is an indisputable fingerprint of the New Testament Church!

4. PRAYER

"They devoted themselves to *Prayer*."

The church of the New Testament was a praying church. The church of Acts advanced on their knees! Throughout the book of Acts we read of that church gathering together to pray!

In Acts 4 when the early church was met for the first time with opposition and possible persecution, Christians gathered together and prayed. Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish religious leaders and brought before them. They were questioned and threatened, yet they remained strong. When they were released, Peter and John returned to the church and reported to the people about the threats and orders to stop preaching that Jesus was the Christ. When the church members heard this they all prayed! They prayed hard!

They were not so unlike us in this way. I believe that we too would come together and earnestly pray if we were faced with the actual threat of

physical persecution. But I do not believe they prayed in the same way that we would. These New Testament Christians did not pray for God to remove this persecution from them. Rather, they prayed that God would give them even more boldness to continue to proclaim His name among the people!

The text says that when they finished praying “the place where they were meeting was shaken!”

If I could point to one element of the New Testament church that is so needed today it would be this one. It is time for the Church to come back to being a praying Church!

E. M. Bounds has said that “the church is always looking for better methods. God is looking for better men.”

5. REVERENCE

“Everyone was filled with awe...”

Now this was true not only from within the church but also those who were outside looking in. The KJV says that “fear came upon every soul.” There was this awesome sense of the Holy presence of God among the church.

We used to sing a song that said “surely the presence of the Lord is in this place. . . “

In Acts 5 there is the poor saga of Ananias and Sapphira. They essentially lied to the church leaders about the sale of some land and what do you know? *Bam!* They both dropped dead right there in church! (Church sure was exciting back in those days!)

The text says that “A great fear came upon the church that day, and all who heard these things.” (Acts 5:11)

In Acts 9:31 we read about the church “walking in the fear of the Lord.”

The modern church has certainly become very *casual* when it comes to worship and our attitude toward Christ. I am not talking about dress and our particular taste in music styles; I am talking about a *casual familiarity* that borders on profanity. To be profane is to take something that is sacred and make it common. It is good to laugh and rejoice in church. It is good to enjoy one another’s company. We are, after all, a family and there ought to be a sense of *family reunion* when we gather together. But there ought to be a sense of reverence when we come around the table. There ought to be times of *Awe!*

We must teach this to the next generation before it is too late. Teach them that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (Proverbs 9:10)!

6. WONDERS

“Many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.”

The church of the New Testament was a place where exciting things happened! Wonders and miracles happened!

Now, we often confuse excitement with entertainment.

I have a friend who preaches on the north side of Nashville, TN. He preaches in a small church of 120. Every day when he drives to his office he has to drive past a big mega-church just a few blocks down the street from his church. He said that one Sunday morning he was driving into church and they had signs and banners out in front announcing that today was the day of the big *Indoor Rodeo!* My friend just sighed and said, “How do you compete with an indoor rodeo?”

No, there is a big difference between entertainment and excitement! A circus will always draw a crowd! But one of the *Fingerprints* of the New Testament church is that it is a place where wonders happen! The church should still be an exciting place where miracles happen. It should be a place where lost people get saved, where broken marriages are healed, where alcoholics and drug users get clean. It should be a place where wonders happen!

The same Holy Spirit that was the source of power in the church of Acts has not changed! The Holy Spirit is the same yesterday, today, and forever! We have received the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit upon our baptism. He lives in us! He can do exceedingly and abundantly more than we ever could think or imagine according to His power that is at work within us, the church (Ephesians 3:20)! Therefore, we should attempt great things for God and expect great things from God!

The church should still be a place where wonders happen!

7. GENEROSITY

“They gave to anyone as he had need.”

Those first Christians that made up that New Testament church lived and gave generously! They knew that they had been given much and forgiven much and they lived grateful lives of generosity! All that they were and all that they had belonged to Jesus Christ!

P.V. Alexander, a great man of God from India, told me once that “if a man has two pairs of shoes, he is a rich man. If a man has two pair of pants, he is a rich man. If a man has two shirts, he is a rich man. If a man eats two meals a day, he is a rich man.”

I am a rich man!

So, what will I do? I know what Jesus said about how hard it is for a rich man to go to heaven. So what shall I do? I will do what God says to do. 1 Timothy 6:17-19 says to those who are rich in this present world (that's me) "to be generous on every occasion." So that is what I will do. I will live and give generously!

94% of all missions giving comes from Christians in the United States. I am convinced that this is the reason God continues to bless our nation. There is still a remnant of generous people who give toward God's agenda!

The New Testament Church was a generous church!

8. HARMONY

"They continued to meet together."

It says that those New Testament Christians ate meals together in their homes and enjoyed the favor of one another.

Jesus prayed in John 17:23 that His church would be "brought to complete unity, [so that] the world will know that you [the Father] sent me."

God will not bless a contentious church.

Some preachers were talking one day about their church slogans. One said this and one said something else. Finally, one of them said, "Well, our slogan is this: *If you wanna fight, come to First Church!*" Sadly, it feels like that sometimes.

Soldiers don't fight with one another when they are out on the battlefield. They are focused on the enemy! Soldiers fight one another when they have been cooped up in the barracks too long! They will fight over silly things like

pictures of girlfriends and card games. Maybe the reason there is so much disharmony in the church is because we are spending all of our time in the building and not on the battlefield?

We must guard and protect the harmony of the church. We must “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 3:4).

Harmony is a fingerprint of the New Testament Church.

9. JOY

“Praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”

I have an old book by Marvin Phillips called *The Joy Factor of Church Growth*. It is one of those books that impacted my approach to ministry in my early days and has stayed with me over the years. Marvin makes the case that *Joy* is contagious and is something that the world wants very badly to get in on. Joy is so much more than happiness and good times! Joy is something that cannot be taken from us. Joy is an anchor for the soul!

In Acts 16 Paul and Silas are imprisoned for preaching Christ. They were beaten and put into the stocks. At midnight they began singing and praising God. In other words, there was Joy regardless of circumstances! The jailor was listening!

Well, you know the rest of the story. An earthquake came, the chains were loosed, but Paul and Silas did not flee. The jailor came running in trembling asking “What must I do to be saved? What must I do to have what you have? What must I do to be able to sing at midnight?”

Joy is contagious. Joy is what the world needs. Joy is a fingerprint of the true church!

10. EVANGELISM (The other thumb)

“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

The church of Acts, the church of the New Testament, was a growing church. The Lord added and added to their numbers. Growth is normal. Growth is a sign of good health.

Vance Havner said that “growth is normal, but we have gotten used to abnormal so that when we see normal, we think it abnormal.”

The “normal” church of Acts was growing. They were evangelistic! It has been said that a “great commitment to the great commission is what makes a great church.” I would agree with that!

Jesus said in Acts 1:8 that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, [so that] you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the world.”

An evangelistic church is a mission minded church! A church that does not believe and invest in local and world missions does not believe or invest in God’s agenda! For God “so loved the world” that He gave His Son. When we love the world and invest in the world, then we are making God’s agenda our agenda and He will pour out His blessings on that church!

A church that does not believe in missions will soon become a mission field!

Jesus said that “we must work while it is day: Night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4)!

The church of the New Testament had a sense of urgency! Apocalyptic urgency!

Conclusion: So, there you have it. Those are the ten fingerprints of the New Testament Church: The Church of Acts: Sound Doctrine, Fellowship, Communion, Prayer, Reverence, Wonders, Generosity, Harmony, Joy and Evangelism.

Our great calling as a Restoration Movement is to be a voice, *calling the church back to the church of the New Testament!*

You might say, “Well, good luck finding that church. If you find it, let me know and I’ll join!”

To some, this may seem like only a dream. But it was Jesus’ dream for His church and it should be ours as well!

I DREAM OF A CHURCH

I dream of a church where the Word of God is preached with power and relevance, a church with lots of joyful people carrying Bibles and living God’s Word. A church filled with peculiar people, who are zealous to do good works, eager to help their neighbor and willing to get their hands dirty in the process. Where being fanatical about their faith is the norm and not the exception. A church whose members live such transforming lives that they are magnets attracting family members and friends to the Savior.

I dream of a church where miracles happen! Where broken lives are mended, marriages are restored, and emotional scars are healed. A place where lost people get saved, addicts get clean, alcoholics get dry, and the downtrodden get hope.

I dream of a church where people get together in small groups in homes everywhere: eating meals together, talking about real-life issues, growing, helping and encouraging one another in the faith. A fellowship where people can take off their masks and be authentic. Where backbiting, gossip, and slander are regarded as the worst kind of sin, and we love one another in a way that makes the world sit up and take notice.

I dream of a church where the children grow up learning about Jesus, talking about Jesus, and loving Jesus because they know that He loved them first!

I dream of a church that looks like its community but where the people live radically distinctive lives from the world. A church that functions as salt in a rotten society and as light in a dark place. Where Holiness is not just a word from bygone days conjuring up images of legalistic prudes, long dresses, and beehive hairdos... but Holiness is worn like an attractive garment drawing others to a Holy God.

I dream of a church that is for all people. The young and the old. The rich and the poor. The oppressed and the delivered. A place where all are welcome and can stand side by side in the presence of the living God, regardless of their politics, their credit score, or the tattoos they may or may not be wearing. Where the illegal alien and the blue-blooded aristocrat find the ground is level at the foot of the cross. I see a church that stands as an oasis, harboring wayfaring strangers from every corner of the earth.

I dream of a church that has Apocalyptic Urgency! A great commitment to the Great Commission and are willing to send out their best young men and women to be Christ's ambassadors to a fallen world, and to give sacrificially and joyfully to support God's agenda around the world and to make His name famous!

I do not dream of a big church. I dream of God's people BEING THE CHURCH! I do not dream of a mega-church, but of a living church, growing, not just in numbers, but in influence. I see a church that infiltrates its community like yeast working its way through a batch of dough. A church that begins like a tiny mustard seed but grows absurdly large, inviting weary travelers to take refuge under its shade and the birds to find rest upon its strong branches.

I dream of a church that is rooted in Christ, lives like Christ, and lives for Christ.

I dream of a church without limitations! I dream of a church without walls! I dream of a church!