

The Spiritual Fingerprints of the Visible Church

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No fingerprints are alike. Today, should a criminal leave a good set of fingerprints at the scene of the crime, that criminal could be identified by them. Were you to be in an accident and your fingerprints are on file, you would be identified as well.

In this matter of fingerprints we find the very personal attention God has given to each one of us. It means that you and I are separate individuals, having separate personalities and no one who has ever lived – or ever will live – in this world can take your place. You were created by God with infinite care for a very definite purpose.

Added to the spiritual significance of fingerprints and the individual, we find another spiritual truth suggested here. For the honest inquirer, there lies before him a very real problem in this day of *truth* and *error*, for both truth and error are moving forward under the common caption of “the church.” Today right and wrong come wrapped in identical packages and the average person cannot distinguish, nor can he evaluate, the difference between that which is truth and that which is error. Therefore, the question arises, “How can each be brought into bold relief? Is there some positive method of identification in spiritual matters such as the system of fingerprints in the physical field?” Certainly the markings of the true and the false are not the same – therefore, we believe that we have spiritual fingerprints of the visible church and can identify that which is genuine and that which is counterfeit in this present age.

First of all, the true church is invisible. Paul said to the Corinthians:

For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Greeks, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13)

Certainly the whole tenor of Scripture would bear that out. If you would turn to Ephesians 1:22, 23 you would read language like this:

And [Christ] hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.

The true church is the invisible body of believers from the Day of Pentecost down to the *Parousia*, from the Upper Room to the upper air! The invisible church is the true church. While this is true, beloved, *the invisible church is to manifest itself in the world.* It is to be tangible.

When we hear people discussing the invisible church and paying little or no attention to the visible church, we think of the two country boys in the days when the airplane was really a novelty. While hoeing corn down in Alabama an airplane flew over them, and it was the first one they had seen. One boy, leaning on his hoe, turned to the other and said, “Ah sho would hate ter be up yonner in dat aeroplane.” And the other, leaning on his hoe said, “Ah sho would hate ter be up yonner wid out it.”

My friend, today a number of folk talk about belonging to the invisible church, but we do need to realize that the invisible church is also a visible church, and it must manifest itself in the world. Paul said to Titus, concerning a local, visible church in Crete:

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee. (Titus 1:5)

Now, friend, you cannot set an invisible church in order. It would be hard to ordain invisible elders and invisible officers in an invisible church. Obviously he is talking about that which is visible. Sometimes officers are invisible on Sunday night but, generally speaking, they are not invisible on Sunday morning! Officers and people should be visible – that is the way the church is to manifest itself in the world. Paul wrote that one of his great burdens was the care of the churches. He wrote to local churches in Corinth and Ephesus – they were visible churches. In the book of the Revelation, seven letters are written to seven local churches that, you must say, were visible churches in that day.

Now the question arises, how can you tell a true church from a false church? How can you tell the genuine from the counterfeit? Is it by the name that is out front, by the height of the steeple, by the sound of the bell, by the fact that it has a pulpit and that a minister stands back of the pulpit, that there is a robed choir, that there are ushers, and the service opens by singing the doxology and closes with the benediction? Is that the way?

In Acts 2:42 we are given four fingerprints of the church:

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Those are the four fingerprints of the visible church. Then someone says, “What about the thumb?” We are going to see that also, but let us look at the four fingerprints. In preparation for this we must note that it says they “continued steadfastly” in these things, and that is a tremendous expression. It means that they “persisted obstinately” in these things – that they “adhered firmly” to them. Therefore they were staunch and strong relative to the apostles’ doctrine, relative to fellowship, relative to the breaking of bread, and relative to prayer. These stones of the foundation were of tremendous significance to the early church. Beloved, they had a conviction concerning them.

The word “conviction” is an interesting word. We get the word “convict” from it, and a convict is one who is in a penitentiary because he was convicted of something. Today, we need “convicts” in the church because they are convicted of something – convicted of these four marks of the visible church.

The Index Finger: The Apostles’ Doctrine

We come now to note these fingerprints. The first one is called the “apostles’ doctrine,” and it is the print of the index finger. They are to continue in the apostles’ doctrine. When Paul was writing advice to Titus, who was to ordain elders in the churches, he wrote, “But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1).

That index fingerprint of the visible church is very important. The Greek word *didaskalia* (doctrine) is really “teaching” – that which the apostles taught. The teaching of the apostles was orthodox, and any teaching that departed from their orthodox position was heterodox.

We are not left in doubt as to their teaching, for we have documents today that tell us exactly what that teaching was. There is no need to guess about it, for it has been recorded in black and white. We know what they taught. Those churches that teach sound doctrine can be quickly identified. It is obvious that we cannot go into the apostles’ doctrine exhaustively, but we can highlight certain things that are important in these days.

I. Inspiration of God's Word

The apostles held a very high view concerning the inspiration of Scriptures. Paul wrote, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God..." (2 Timothy 3:16). Peter said,

Knowing this first, that no prophecy [and he was not just confining it to the things of the future, but all that is given of God] ***of the scripture is of any private interpretation.***
(2 Peter 1:20)

That is, you cannot interpret Scripture by lifting out one verse – you must look at that Scripture with other Scriptures. Why? Because Peter tells us in verse 21 of that same chapter that:

...holy men of God spoke as they were moved [the Greek word is *phero* – moved along just as when the wind gets into the sail of a vessel and moves it along] ***by the Holy Spirit.***

So they had a very high view of inspiration – they believed that the Bible is the Word of God. They believed in plenary, verbal inspiration. My friend, when a church does not believe that the Bible is the Word of God (while they have a right to believe as they wish), they do not have a right to call it a church – it is a religious club. The index finger points to a high view of inspiration.

II. The Deity of Christ

The apostles' teaching insisted upon the deity of Christ. While Scripture is abundant in proof of this, we feel that one Scripture will be sufficient:

For in him [Christ] ***dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.*** (Colossians 2:9)

"Dwelleth all the fullness," *pleroma* – all that God is, is in Christ. How much stronger of a statement would one want than that? They believed in the virgin birth of Christ; they believed He lived a perfect life; they believed His miracles were genuine.

III. The Gospel

The apostles' teaching included the gospel. What is the gospel? Paul makes it clear:

...I declare unto you the gospel...which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:1, 3, 4)

Paul could go so far as to say that this is the gospel – there is no other:

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that

which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:8)

IV. Regeneration by the Holy Spirit

Because the Lord Jesus said, “Ye must be born again,” the apostles believed that every sinner had to be born again before he could come into the church.

“Ye must be born again” was the favorite text of John Wesley. He was asked upon one occasion, “Why is it that you harp on that all of the time – why preach so much on the matter of ‘Ye must be born again’?” Wesley replied, “The reason I preach so much on ‘Ye must be born again’ is because ye must be born again.” That is also the teaching of the apostles.

V. Judgment to Come

They believed that heaven was real and hell was an awful reality.

VI. Blessed Hope

They lived in the blessed hope – that Christ is coming to take His Church out of the world. This we call the Rapture.

VII. The Trinity

The apostles believed in the Trinity. Relative to the doctrine of the Trinity we give you the following excerpt from *Time Magazine*:

For Adlai Stevenson, the week before Christmas was anything but merry and bright. It began with a somewhat embarrassing discussion of his personal religious beliefs, prompted by the fact that Stevenson, a Unitarian had quietly joined a Presbyterian Church. After some Unitarians had accused Stevenson of deserting his church; four pastors – two Presbyterians and two Unitarians – made public a letter to him asserting that he can belong to both churches without “inconsistency.” (January 2, 1956 issue; page 18)

A Unitarian is one who denies the deity of Christ and therefore denies the Trinity. So if this episode is to be believed, that means that the Presbyterian Church is Unitarian (but, thank God, I want to state that all the ministers are not). But a church that is not Trinitarian is NOT a church!

VIII. The Revelation

They held steadfastly to the teaching that Christ is coming again to set up His Kingdom on earth. This we call the Revelation.

Naturally, we know that there are some who are going to say, “Well, Preacher, you are just plainly narrow minded – on the basis of your argument it looks as if we do not have liberty as

Christians.”

In answering this, we shall ask that you follow us carefully, for our answer shall be given carefully: We believe, today, that any man has a right to be a Communist. However, my friend, if you are going to be a Communist, then you ought to buy a one-way ticket to a Communist country and go there! No man has a right to be Communist and remain in America – your liberty ends when you seek to destroy our form of government.

When we turn to consider spiritual things, we must say that you do not have to believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. You do not have to believe in the deity of Christ and that He died for your sins – you have the liberty not to believe these and the other great doctrines taught by the apostles. But do not misunderstand me when I state that if you do not believe these things, then you ought not to be behind the pulpit; you ought not to be a member of a church and as such attempting to destroy the doctrines set forth by the apostles. Your liberty of unbelief is wholly OUTSIDE of the church. If you are in the church, you ought to bear the spiritual fingerprints.

The Middle Finger: Fellowship

The second fingerprint at which we will look is that of the middle finger, and it is the mark of fellowship. This is the most interesting word of all and has many ramifications. For instance, the word for fellowship in the Greek is *koinonia* and from that we get the word “koine.” Adolf Deissmann, in his scholarly research in the field of archaeology, threw tremendous light upon New Testament Greek when he discovered the Koine, the vernacular – which means that the New Testament was written in the common everyday Greek of that time. This gives a good understanding of the statement:

...And the common people heard him [Christ] gladly. (Mark 12:37)

That language was shared by more people of the Roman Empire than any other language. It was understood on the wharves of Corinth and on every ship that sailed the Mediterranean. It was in common use in Jerusalem, in the Temple area, in Athens, on Mars Hill, and it found its way even into the amphitheatre. This language of the New Testament was a universal language. It was called “koine” because it was common to everyone.

We are told that the church “continued...[in] fellowship” (Acts 2:42). What is the meaning of that statement? It simply means that they had a common interest, a mutual concern. It means that they had an active participation, and it further means that they had a sympathetic understanding. They would come together and share the things of Christ – they could fellowship in a blessed way.

This so permeated their lives that practically everything was called a fellowship. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul calls the Lord’s Supper a fellowship:

*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?
The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?*

The Lord’s Supper is a fellowship that Christians share together.

Then there is a strange thing, certainly most worthy of note. Have you noticed his language

when he wrote to the Romans concerning the offering?

For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints who are at Jerusalem. (Romans 15:26)

The word for “contribution” that is used in the Greek is *koinonia*, meaning “fellowship. Paul did not stop with that use of the word. We find him writing to the Philippians:

Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel.... (Philippians 1:4, 5)

Tied up in that expression is fellowship in labor, love, sympathy, and suffering. Anything that Christians could share together was a matter of fellowship – so it is with us today. But the word had such a deep meaning in that day that when Paul arose in the meetings and said, “We are now going to have the *koinonia*,” they doubtless looked at each other and asked, “What does brother Paul mean? Are we going to have the Lord’s Supper or take an offering – or perhaps he is going to read the Word?”

The middle finger carries the mark of “fellowship” for the Christian. As we are reasoning together through these pages, this is, for us, fellowship around His Word.

Tertullian recounts that when the Roman government became suspicious of the early church, they sent spies into their services. The spies came back and said that the Christians were a peculiar type of folk – they did not have idols, instead they worshiped One by the name of Jesus, who was absent. Then they added, “How those Christians love each other; how they have fellowship (*koinonia*) one with the other.” That should be the mark of the Christian through all ages.

Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, did not say that we are to be so fundamental that we forget this. To the contrary, he said that we are to be found “...speaking the truth in love...” (Ephesians 4:15), and all fundamental truth should be taught in love. Then we find our Lord saying:

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.
(John 13:35)

When bitterness, hatred, gossip, and criticism invade the church they destroy the identity of the church to the world. If you have in mind to wreck a church, do not put a time bomb in it – just start a campaign of criticism and you will nullify the testimony of that church. The middle finger of the church must bear the fingerprint of fellowship, for our Lord has told us that fellowship in love, fellowship in sympathy, fellowship in labor, and fellowship in suffering must be evident to the world.

The Ring Finger: Breaking of Bread

The third fingerprint of the church is the breaking of bread. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread...” (Acts 2:42). The breaking of bread is the Lord’s Supper and is found in the print of the ring finger of the church. It tells

the world that we belong to Him and that we are awaiting the Bridegroom who is coming!

This is not just an idle ceremony through which we go. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, warned them about coming to the Lord's Table and failing to discern the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:29). What did he mean? Simply this: That we do not come to the Lord's Table just to eat or to satisfy our consciences in having gone through a meaningless ceremony. You, child of God, come to this table because in fellowshiping in these elements – the bread symbolizing His body, and the wine symbolizing His blood – you are saying that you are trusting the One who gave Himself on the cross for your sins and shed His precious blood that you might have life. That is what the early church meant and said to the Roman Empire by witnessing in its meeting in fellowship. They said, "We are waiting for Him to come – the matchless One who died for us!"

The Little Finger: Prayer

The fourth fingerprint is prayer. This is the mark of the little finger, and it most assuredly is *little* today. Though little, it is actually the most important finger of all. And when we refer to it as "little" we mean to impress upon you that it is the evident weakness of the church. The voice of a great saint of the fifteenth century reaches us today with the bold fact that the church goes forward on its knees. We need prayer in this hour – not by large groups, but preferably by small ones, groups of men and women who talk directly with God out of hearts of unflinching faith. The greatest encouragement I have had in my pastorate is the wall of prayer that stands behind my ministry.

How did the early church meet persecution? Did they meet it by fighting back? They did not. Did they meet it by some clever strategy? They had none. They met it by prayer.

When the persecution broke in earnest in Jerusalem and Peter was arrested, the Christians gathered for prayer in the home of Mary, the mother of John (whose surname was Mark). When Peter was released, he went to this home – while they were praying – and knocked on the door. Rhoda, the little maid ran from the door, without opening it, back to the group and said that Peter was at the door.

And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his [spirit]. (Acts 12:15)

This is an interesting picture. Here was the early church met together in prayer for the release of Peter – he was released according to their prayers, and they could not believe it. My friend, though they went with little faith they did pray to God, He heard that prayer, and He delivered Simon Peter. The greatest asset of the church is PRAYER. How tragic if we have a prayerless church in this hour!

What About the Thumb?

We are not going to omit the thumb. It is first.

But ye shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto

the uttermost part of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

“Ye shall be witnesses.” The early church was a witnessing church; in three hundred years they had covered the Roman Empire. Had the next three hundred years been like the first three hundred, by 600 A.D. they would have covered the entire world with the gospel! They were a witnessing church; they were clearly marked in this fingerprint of “witnessing.”

One of the last things that Homer Rodeheaver told me as we sat together on the platform at Winona Lake was, “Do you know that there are sixty thousand churches in America that did not have one single convert in 1952?” Yet this is the *business* of the church. We ask you to think of such a fact as this failure of sixty thousand churches in this age when the world is literally parched for a draught of the water of life.

There was quite an interesting editorial in *The Christian Century*, a liberal publication, and we feel that some quotations from it will be well to give here. This editorial appeared under the caption “Preaching: Hodgepodge or the Gospel?”

THE EVANSTON ASSEMBLY was a field day for administrators, organizers, committeemen, academicians, and liturgists. But when all of them had done their best, it was plainer than ever that the parish preacher in his pulpit is still the most important single element in Protestant strategy....Think what is done with the church’s main chance: vapid pep talks, arid skull sessions, half-baked politics, half-cooked therapies, little Bible stories that completely miss the point of the Bible...This is our preaching, by and large...The theological revival we talk about isn’t getting through. Too much of it is still in the meeting at the summit. The preachers, who are the only conduits, are not piping it through to the people who are parched for just what those preachers learned once. They can’t preach what they got from the living prophets. So they fall back on the hodgepodge of things that have “worked” for others. (April 27, 1955, issue)

The church has been called to be a witnessing church, and we must observe sadly that many Christians utterly fail in this respect. Several of our leading present-day evangelists tell us that the Lord continues to open doors for their ministry, but how desperately do they need the prayers of God’s people, for it is growing increasingly difficult to get the unsaved to the meetings. God’s children attend, but somehow they seem to forget to bring the unsaved with them. We need a witnessing church for this hour – the early church was known by the thumbprint of “witnessing.”

Paul could write:

Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we [pray] you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Dr. Phillips Brooks, a great preacher of a past generation, tells this story of one of the personal workers in his church in St. Louis, Missouri. A man came to the personal worker, heart-broken, and said, “I am a helpless sinner, and there is no hope for me at all. I have prayed and I have vowed until I am sick of unavailing efforts. I think I will give it up.”

The personal worker turned to the man and said, “If Jesus Christ were here upon this earth in bodily form and visible, what would you do?”

The man looked at him in amazement and replied, "I would go to Him at once."

The worker asked, "What would you say to Him?"

"Well," he said, "I would tell Him just what I have told you, that I am a helpless sinner. I would ask for forgiveness and ask Him to save me."

Again the worker had a question, "And what would He say?"

The man thought a moment, but did not reply. The worker asked the same question a second and third time. Then the man said, "He would say, 'I forgive you. You are saved.'"

My friend, Christ is not here in person today, He is not visible, and the church is here in His stead. Perhaps the world has difficulty in telling which is the false and which is the true because we, as ambassadors, are not making the fingerprints we should. But Christ has said that we are ambassadors, and we say in His stead that He will forgive you if you will come to Him, and "we [pray] you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."