

Four Fingerprints of an Authentic Church **Acts 2:42**

I would like to take just a moment to explain to you the process of *POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION*.

How do you know somebody is who they claim to be??

- I could tell you.
 - But I can lie.
- I could present my identification,
 - But that can be easily faked.
- I could show you a picture of me with friends and family.
 - But in a world of deep fakes, A.I., and digital manipulation – How can anyone trust what they see anymore?

What evidence can I provide that positively identifies me, as ME??

- How can you know for sure the stranger you meet is the person you believe them to be or that they claimed to be?

In the world of forensic sciences the fastest and most visual way to make positive identification is through FINGERPRINTS.

What makes fingerprints so useful is their **uniqueness** and their **Persistence**.

- **Uniqueness**
 - Studies to date have never found two people who have identical fingerprints, *not even among identical twins*.
- **Persistence**
 - Also referred to as 'permanence' – is the principle that a person's fingerprints do not naturally change over their lifetime.

And now you are sitting there asking yourself, "What has this got to do with the book of Acts?"

GOOD QUESTION – Let me try to explain, as we look at **FOUR characteristics** that are part of the Positive Identification **of the Authentic Church**.

Last week we looked at that amazing *first spark* of the church, that in a single day saw about 3000 lost souls redeemed by the blood of Christ, by **grace** through their **faith**.

We saw the IMPACT of the Holy Spirit as new believers:

- Were CONVICTED – by the truth.
- REPENTED – by faith.
- And were OBEDIENT- through commitment to follow the teachings before them in baptism.

Upon the truth regarding Him, Jesus declared that He would build HIS church.

- Matt. 16:18

The word “church” – Greek: *Ecclesia* – means *a gathering of like-minded people*.

To be clear, there are LOTS of religions and religious gatherings of people.

- So how can we POSITIVELY IDENTIFY the church that identifies itself as being **Christ’s** church – that is - those who are like-minded with Christ?

We see that as soon as the **TRUE** church began, *to glorify God and lead people to Christ-*

Satan began working to initiate a **FALSE** church, *that honored the flesh and lead people astray.*

So, the question remains: Are there ways to POSITIVELY IDENTIFY an authentic church?

And the answer is: **YES**

In the same manner that a person may be positively identified by characteristics of their DNA or their fingerprints, which are UNIGUE and PERSISTENT, *so too can a true church be positively identified.*

Here in Acts 2:42 we find FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF AN AUTHENTIC CHURCH.

Acts 2:42

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Do you see them there?

- 1) Devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching**
- 2) Devoting themselves to fellowship**
- 3) Devoting themselves to the breaking of bread**
- 4 Devoting themselves to prayer**

Let's take these one at a time to understand each of these characteristics and ask ourselves **THREE QUESTIONS:**

- 1. What is unique about this characteristic?**
- 2. How does this characteristic persist?**
- 3. Am I identified by this characteristic? (Is this church?)**

#1) Devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching-

At it's core, this is the most essential and identifiable of all the characteristics of an authentic church

- By extension, this means it is a characteristic of an authentic Christian as well.

Simply put, if a church, or a Christian, is not devoted to the apostles teaching, they are not serving authentically.

Devotion: Greek: proskartereō – To attend constantly

Apostle: Greek: Apostolos - (biblically)A personal disciple of Christ sent by Him on a mission

Teaching: Greek: didachē – Doctrine, Instruction

The constant attention to the teachings of the Apostles is a **primary characteristic** to positively identify an authentic Christian and church.

Jesus commanded His Apostles to pass on what they had seen and heard.

- **Matthew 28:19-20** *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I commanded you;** and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Jesus gave the Apostles the Holy Spirit to guide their teaching and to give authority to their instruction.

- **John 16:12-13** *"I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. **But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth;** for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. "*

Having come from the Holy Spirit of God – the Apostles teachings, recorded for us in scripture – are trustworthy as the word of God

- **2 Timothy 3:16** All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Jesus expected all His disciples to follow those teachings. And warned of those who would not follow Him, because they did not love Him.

- **Luke 10:16** Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”
- **John 14:23-24** Jesus replied, “If anyone loves Me, **he will keep** My word. My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. **“He who does not love Me** does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Fathers’ who sent Me.

When His teaching was questioned, Jesus replied to the Jews:

- **John 8:45-47** “But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. ⁴⁶“Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? ⁴⁷“He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear *them*, because you are not of God.”

Paul declared of those who came later claiming to have a prophetic or spiritual word, as if from the Lord:

- **1 Corinthians 14:36-38**
Was it from **you** that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to **you** only? If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, **let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment.** But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.
- **1 Corinthians 2:12-13**
Now we have received, **not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God**, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, **not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit**, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

The Apostle Paul was thankful for those who received the Apostles' instruction rightly and followed them.

- **1 Thessalonians 2:13** For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, **you accepted it** not as the word of men, but for what it really is, **the word of God**, which also performs its work in you who believe.

So again – the FIRST distinguishing element of an authentic church is the devotion to the Apostolic teachings.

Our NEXT question is: Can we see the PERSISTENCE of this characteristic?

- **Are we DEVOTED to the true teachings of the Apostles?**
 - **Are they permanently fixed in our sermons, and our studies?**
 - **Are they being APPLIED across our ministries and worship?**

Hypocrisy does not sit well with our God.

- To declare one truth with your tongue and live another by your life is a sin often called out harshly by the Word of God.

Mark 7:6 He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: " 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Luke 12:2 There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.

Romans 10:3 Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

Titus 1:16 They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.

Your personal question on this characteristic of being identifiable as an authentic Christian-

- Is **Pine Grove Church**, are **YOU**, devoted to the teachings of the Apostles?
 - Do you study them?
 - Do you understand them?
 - Is the teaching they gave to us, that came from the Lord and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, shaping your life?

James 1:21-22 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

#2) Devoting themselves to fellowship-

Again: Devotion: Greek: proskartereō – To attend constantly

Fellowship: Greek: **koinōnia** – contributing, participating, sharing

One of the identifiable, endearing and enduring characteristics of the authentic church is its fellowship. It's **koinonia**.

In the beginning, one of the greatest blessings God bestowed on mankind was the fellowship they shared in the Garden of Eden.

Only mankind has the capacity to have a relationship with God at the level we do.

God created mankind FOR fellowship.

- **First with God**
- **Then God made woman for man – so that he would have a helper.**
- **Finally, God told man to be fruitful, to multiply and fill the earth**

The proper understanding of fellowship – **koinōnia** – which involves a fully devoted service to God through contribution, sharing, and participation, with others, serves us well as we look at the imagery that God gives us regarding the church.

The church is referred to as:

THE BODY OF CHRIST, **1 Corinthians 12:27** “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

- Noses and toes, but each part works to the better of the whole.

and THE FAMILY OF GOD, **1 John 3:1** “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God!”

Consider this message from the Apostle John:

1 John 1:3-4 “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you too may have **fellowship** with us;

and indeed, our fellowship is with **the Father**, and with His Son **Jesus Christ**. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

Through the teachings of scripture, we share in the fellowship of the saints gone before us – and in their – and now our – relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son, through the working of the Holy Spirit.

Within this is the understanding also is that the congregational gathering of the church is not optional.

- David declared – “I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord.” **Psalm 122:1**
- **Hebrews 10:22-25** let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and **let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.**

Friends, brothers, sisters, we NEED each other.

To complete one another, encourage one another, support one another, and care for another.

To laugh together, cry together, rejoice together, to suffer and to endure... **together.**

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing. But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Let us in love obey our Lord – and in **koinonia** contribute, participate, and share in the ministry of serving the One who lived, died, and rose again, that we might have eternal life.

This is the fellowship in Christ that is UNIQUE that positively identifies an authentic church.

John 13:34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

How can we see the PERSISTENCE of this characteristic?

- **Are we DEVOTED to the fellowship of the saints?**
 - **Are we committed to acts of love and service?**

Galatians 6:9-10 *Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.*

Your personal question on this characteristic of being identifiable as an authentic Christian-

What are you doing to being an active and healthy organ in the body of Christ?

- I pray you are being served, but I ask you- **"What are you doing to serve?"**

#3) Devoting themselves to the breaking of bread-

Have you ever considered how much the Lord appreciates food?

- Food is mentioned over 1200 times in scripture!

Solomon declared in **Ecclesiastes 9:7**

Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works.

Jesus was often found eating with the disciples, feeding the crowds, taking meals with the Apostles.

Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 10:31

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

And to the glory of the Lord, we read that when the saints of the ages are gathered together with Christ, we gather to enjoy the Marriage supper of the Lamb! – A feast in paradise for those who have overcome.

While taking meals together is a special time of fellowship the church should not forsake, this is not the characteristic most likely being spoken of in Acts 2:42.

While breaking bread together “Can” refer to simply taking a meal together, scripturally it is commonly associated with communion.

- 1 Cor 10:16

Matthew 26:26-28 *While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “**Take, eat**; this is My body.” And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “**Drink from it, all of you**; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.*

- **“Take eat”** Parsing: verb- Imperative / a command.
- **“Drink from it, all of you”** Parsing: verb- Imperative / a command.

In **1 Corinthians 11:23-26**, Paul records the instruction he received from the Lord regarding communion.

In his instruction the Lord said of the bread and the cup “**do this in remembrance of Me.**”

- **“Do this”** Parsing: verb – Imperative / given as a command.

Both the Roman Catholic church and the Protestant church recognize the command from our Lord to receive Communion. *“Take eat”* and *“Do this”* as being pretty straight-forward.

It is referred to either as a “sacrament” or an “ordinance” depending on the church’s charter.

Roman Catholics refer to communion as a “Sacrament” as their understanding is that grace is conveyed to an individual through participation in the rite.

Many Protestant and Evangelical churches have adopted “Ordinance” which can be defined as a “God ordained ceremony.”

The other Ordinance, or Sacrament, recognized by the church as a whole is Baptism.

While Baptism is generally a one-time event, communion is something the church is commanded to continually and regularly perform.

Some churches conduct communion weekly, some monthly.

- Scripture does not say how often to conduct communion – only that every time we do, we proclaim His death until He comes. (1 Cor 11:26)

More attention is given to the attitude of communion than to its frequency.

1 Corinthians 11:27-30 *Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason, many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.*

What is unique and identifiable in this characteristic is the re-occurring identification with our Savior who came from heaven to earth and offered His own body as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of God.

- Understand that in the religions of man-made gods, man offers his riches, himself, virgins or even children to appease the wrath of their god.

Our NEXT question is: Can we see the PERSISTENCE of this characteristic?

- Are we DEVOTED to the ordinance of Communion?
 - Does Pine Grove do so regularly and with a proper attitude of gratitude and awe of our Savior

Your personal question on this characteristic of being identifiable as an authentic Christian-

- Do you look forward to communion?
- Do you see the proclaiming of Christ Jesus' sacrifice for His people in the elements?
- Do you prepare your heart prior to taking the elements, seeking forgiveness among brothers and sisters in Christ and before God?

#4) Devoting themselves to prayer-

Prayer: Greek: proseuchē – a complex word with multiple meanings taken from the Greek Prosechō which is associated with coming near to something or engaging with someone.

What is prayer – Simply put, it is connecting to God on a very personal level. Drawing near to Him as the Greek word implies.

Prayer is not meditation, or reflection – it is an active conversation with our Creator, God and Savior.

Prayer can be audible, or it can be silent.

It can be public, or it can be private.

We can have formal prayers, and informal prayers.

They can be direct, or conversational.

Prayer is only prayer when it is prayed by faith. (*Otherwise you are just talking to ceiling...*)

- **James 1:6** But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave that is driven and tossed by the wind.

Prayer is effective when we pray in the name of Christ -

John 16:33 In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.

- This means praying for things that are the will of the Father – for even Jesus prayed in that way! (Luke 22:42)

James 4:3 tells us this-

You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Specific things we are told to pray for:

- We are told to pray for our enemies- Matt 5:44
- For God to send missionaries- Luke 10:2
- That we do not enter temptation- Matthew 26:41
- For ministers of the Word- Col 4:3, 2 Thes 3:1
- For government authorities- 1 Tim 2:1-3
- For relief from affliction- James 5:13
- And for the healing of fellow believers- James 5:16

What is unique and identifiable in this characteristic is that we pray to the One, True, and Living God.

Psalm 115:3-8 speaks of the religions of the world who cry out to the gods they fashion with their own hands.

But our God is in the heavens;
He does whatever He pleases.
Their idols are silver and gold,
The work of man's hands.
They have mouths, but they cannot speak;
They have eyes, but they cannot see;
They have ears, but they cannot hear;
They have noses, but they cannot smell;
They have hands, but they cannot feel;
They have feet, but they cannot walk;
They cannot make a sound with their throat.
Those who make them will become like them,
Everyone who trusts in them.

Our NEXT question is: Can we see the PERSISTENCE of this characteristic?

1 Thessalonians 5:17 tells us to pray without ceasing.

In Luke 18:1-8 Jesus teaches a parable about praying persistently, without losing heart, even when it seems like nothing is happening.

Luke 18:1 *Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart,*

Just because we do not receive an immediate answer does not mean God is not listening, if we have prayed rightly anyway.

God answers prayers in many ways. Sometimes the answer is yes, sometimes no, and sometimes it is wait.

- Our challenge is to pray in faith and leave the matter up to God after that.
- We pray, we wait. We remain faithful. We continue to pray, and we submit to His perfect will. Being willing to accept whatever His answer is to the matter.

Excuses to prayer:

"I don't know how to pray." / "I don't know how to say it to God."

Remember, this is the God who knew you before your birth. Who knew every one of your days before you drew your first breath.

This is the God who knows your heart, your mind, thoughts and your intentions.

Prayer is not about "informing" God about something – it is about demonstrating your relationship with Him, worship and reliance in Him.

Romans 8:26-27 In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Your personal question on this characteristic of being identifiable as an authentic Christian-

Simple question: How often do you pray?

If you struggle with when to pray, that's tough for me to help you with. You can literally do it anytime, anywhere.

- I do recommend having conversations with God throughout the day.
- I also recommend taking time to spend time alone with God, intentional in your conversations with Him.

The acronym **A.C.T.S.** has been helpful for many in formulating their prayers:

- **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, **S**upplication

P.R.A.Y. is another one:

- **P**raise, **R**epent, **A**sk, **Y**ield

In the end – it's less about what you say – and more about spending time saying it.

If you are walking with Christ, God is your heavenly *FATHER*. He really wants you to talk with Him.

SO there we go. A whole sermon from ONE VERSE – where we found FOUR characteristics to positively identify an authentic and healthy church.

Again, churches are made of people – so the question today is how identifiable are you as an authentic and healthy disciple of Jesus Christ?

My prayer for me, for Pine Grove, and for you, is that we intentionally seek to promote all of these in our daily lives, so that there is NO DOUBT that this church, and that YOU and I are walking rightly with our Lord as **HIS** church. Amen?
Amen.