

# THE SIGNS OF A TRUE CHURCH

Part 13 of Foundations 260 - OT. Deuteronomy 4:1-14.

Peter Foxwell. The Cornerstone Church. May 17, 2026.

## Dismiss the Middle School

### WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF A TRUE CHURCH?

**What makes a church a church - a community of God's people?**

If you were a new Christian searching for a church home, what would be on your checklist?

- How do you know if a group is just posing as a church?
- What makes a group of people into God's people?
- What qualifies us as the body of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit?

**What are the signs of a true church?**

## DEUTERONOMY 4

**Last week in our Foundations 260 OT reading plan, we arrived at the Book of Deuteronomy.**

And in chapter 4, I found an answer to our question. It describes what makes a group of people into God's people, the church.

**Chapter 4 is like the Preamble to the Constitution.** It lays a foundation on which Israeli culture was built.

Yes, it's the Old Testament, and yes, it's Israel, not the New Covenant Church. However, the principles in chapter 4 point to two signs of a true church.

**So, let me read Deuteronomy 4:1-14,** where Moses addresses the assembled nation in the valley of Moab, on the south-east border of the Promised Land.

## DEUTERONOMY 4:1-14 (CSB)

Now, Israel, listen (**pay close attention**) to the statutes and ordinances I am teaching you to follow, so that you may live, enter, and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 You must not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, so that you may keep the commands of the LORD your God I am giving you.

3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal-peor (**Numbers 25**), for the LORD your God destroyed every one of you who followed Baal of Peor. 4 But you who have remained faithful to the LORD your God are all alive today.

5 Look, I have taught you statutes and ordinances as the LORD my God has commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to possess. 6 Carefully follow them, for this will show your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the peoples. When they hear about all these statutes, they will say, ‘This great nation is indeed a wise and understanding people.’ 7 For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call to him? 8 And what great nation has righteous statutes and ordinances like this entire law I set before you today?

9 “Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves, so that you don’t forget the things your eyes have seen and so that they don’t slip from your mind as long as you live. Teach them to your children and your grandchildren.

10 The day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb (**Mount Sinai**), the LORD said to me, ‘Assemble the people before me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days they live on the earth and may instruct their children.’

11 You came near and stood at the base of the mountain, a mountain blazing with fire into the heavens and enveloped in a totally black cloud. 12 Then the LORD spoke to you from the fire. You kept hearing the sound of the words, but didn’t see a form; there was only a voice. 13 He declared his covenant to you. He commanded you to follow the Ten Commandments, which he wrote on two stone tablets. 14 At that time, the LORD commanded me to teach you statutes and ordinances for you to follow in the land you are about to cross into and possess.

# TWO DISTINCTIVES OF A TRUE CHURCH

**Our passage describes two signs of a true church.** These are the things that a new Christian should have on their checklist.

## **SIGN #1: A TRUE CHURCH LOVES GOD'S WORD.**

**God spoke and called Israel to himself**, binding the nation to himself by covenant words. God's word was their foundation. God spoke from Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-20), and Moses recorded it in **statutes, ordinances, and commandments** which he **taught** to the people.

In chapter 4, Moses reminded them to **pay close attention to the word (listen), to follow it carefully, to keep it, to remember it, and to teach it to the next generation**. They were not to **add anything** or **take anything away from it**.

The word was Israel's guide. It contained the **wisdom** that would make them a model for surrounding nations. It was a legal and religious system that reflected God's **righteousness**. So, the word was absolutely necessary.

**What about God's New Covenant people** - the followers of Jesus? What role does God's word play for the church?

**The New Testament parallel to Deuteronomy 4** is the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20. After his resurrection, Jesus gathered his people on a mountain and delivered a speech similar to Moses's. Jesus said:

*Matthew 28:18-20 (CSB) "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth (he is God). 19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

**The Great Commission teaches us that God** calls us to himself through the living word, Jesus Christ, who has the same universal **authority** as God.

Christ's words, therefore, are the words of God, so a true church **teaches** Christ's **commands**. And the followers of Jesus **observe** or commit to doing them. We do what Moses told Israel to do in Deuteronomy 4: pay close attention to it, follow it carefully, keep it, remember it, and teach it to the next generation.

**So, Jesus made his word essential in the church.** It's the foundation of our life together. The Bible forms us into God's people. It saves and transforms us whenever it is read, taught, studied, or obeyed.

**That's why the apostle Paul wrote:**

*Colossians 3:16 (CSB) Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you,*

*2 Timothy 3:16-17 (CSB) All Scripture is inspired by God (it is **God's word**) and is profitable for teaching (**what is right**), for rebuking (**what is not right**), for correcting (**how to get right**), for training in righteousness (**how to stay right**)<sup>1</sup>, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

**This is why the Cornerstone Church puts such an emphasis** on Bible reading, study, teaching, and application.

**What should that new Christian put on their checklist?** Probably something like this: Do the people love God's word?

That's a good start. But there is one other sign of a true church that we can draw from Deuteronomy 4.

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Wiersbe, Be Faithful, commentary on 2 Timothy.

## **DISTINCTIVE #2: A TRUE CHURCH LOVES GOD'S PRESENCE.**

Israel wasn't formed as God's people through clever human planning. A group of nomadic shepherds didn't say, "Hey, let's be a nation."

**No, God called Israel into existence by his word and his presence.**

Over and over again, God was manifestly present: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; to Moses in the burning bush; and to the nation at the Exodus, on Mount Sinai, and in the cloud and fire on their journey through the wilderness. God manifested his glory at the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle, and the Temple.

**Moses reminded the people that the Lord summoned them into his presence at Mount Sinai:**

*Deuteronomy 4:12 (CSB) Then the LORD spoke to you from the fire. You kept hearing the sound of the words...*

God came near, and his presence formed them into God's people.

*Deuteronomy 4:7 (CSB) For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call to him?*

**Is the situation the same for the New Covenant church?**

Yes. We depend on God's presence. He is the life of the church. But ...

**(See over)**

**In the New Covenant era, God's presence was manifested in Jesus Christ.** He was God with us, God made visible to us (for example, John 1:1-14).

Today, the New Covenant church is the temple in which he "lives," so to speak:

*1 Corinthians 3:16 (CSB) Don't you yourselves know that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you? (Also Ephesians 2:19-22).*

Remember the Great Commission? Jesus promised to be with his followers **"always, until the end of the age"** (Matthew 28:20).

**So, God's people love God's presence.**

OK, but how would that new Christian know that we love God's presence? Are there any definitive signs? Yes!

**Here are a few signs that God is present in a church community:<sup>2</sup>**

- There is spiritual life rather than dead religion.
- Jesus Christ is loved and honored as God.
- Gatherings are filled with joyful, engaged worship.
- Lives are changing.
- The members are gladly pursuing godliness - the fruit of the Spirit.
- The word of God is treasured, taught, and followed.
- Prayer is woven into every aspect of the community.
- People step up to serve because they expect the Spirit's power.

**A true church loves God's presence.**

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<sup>2</sup> See an online article at: <https://www.gotquestions.org/what-does-the-Holy-Spirit-do.html>

## HOLY COMMUNION UNITES WORD AND PRESENCE

**Today's teaching brings us to the mystery of Holy Communion**, which we will celebrate in a moment. God's word is made visible there, and his presence is manifested by the Holy Spirit in the bread and juice.

So it is a beautiful, wonderful, and sacred celebration. **We love it because:**

**Communion is more than a memorial** of Christ's sacrificial death. Jesus is present in a unique way as we eat and drink. One passage convinced me of this:

*1 Corinthians 10:16 (CSB) The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing (koinonia - participation) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?*

How it is that is a mystery. Charles Spurgeon said that it is "*the nearest communion with Christ that we have ever known*," calling it as close as one gets to heaven in this world.<sup>3</sup> Theologian Gavin Ortlund says that:

*"... Christ's body and blood are really present in the consecrated wine and bread of the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper... The one who participates worthily in the Lord's Supper — that is, by faith — truly is feasting upon Christ and his benefits ... This is more than a mere remembrance of Christ; Christ is active, **giving himself to us in an intimate way** in this Sacrament."<sup>4</sup>*

Christ's body remains in heaven, but his presence is with us by the Holy Spirit.

**So, I would add a third checkbox to my list.** A true church **loves** feasting on the spiritual food of the most sacred body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://ccel.org/ccel/s/spurgeon/till\\_he\\_come/cache/till\\_he\\_come.pdf](https://ccel.org/ccel/s/spurgeon/till_he_come/cache/till_he_come.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbPxgZ\\_AfOI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbPxgZ_AfOI)

# SMALL GROUP GUIDE

## Review

- Review Peter's May 17<sup>th</sup> teaching and study guide.
- What were the main insights of Peter's teaching?
- What questions do you have about the passage or Peter's teaching?
- What were the main applications or takeaways for your life?

## Discuss

1. The sermon said a true church loves God's word. What does that look like beyond just hearing a sermon each week?
2. The sermon said that God's presence creates God's people. How is that different from just a group of people who share beliefs or values?
3. The sermon mentions "spiritual life rather than dead religion." How would you recognize the difference in real life? Can a church emphasize God's presence but drift from God's word or vice versa? What dangers does that create?
4. What is the difference between viewing Holy Communion as a memorial instead of experiencing it as true spiritual participation in Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16)? How might your approach to and experience of Communion change if you truly believed Christ meets you there?

## Prayer Focus

- 247: "Lord, please add daily to the Cornerstone those who are being saved."
- Pray that the Cornerstone continues to love God's word and presence.