



Candlewood Church



CALLED: To Be With Jesus

September 13, 2026

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BIG IDEA – Practicing the Way means that we are **called to BE with Jesus** and also **called to be together**.

Scripture Focus – And he went up on the mountain and **called to him those whom he desired**, and **they came to him**. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that **they might be with him and he might send them out to preach**. **Mark 3:13-14 ESV**

Jesus was a holy rebel — not against God, but against the way the world worked. Long before anyone called them "Christians," his first followers had a simpler name: **people of the Way**. And that Way was never a solo path. Mark tells us Jesus didn't just call his followers to be with him — **he called them to be with him, together**. Join us this Sunday as we begin to discover *Practicing the Way*.

I knew from my teen years on that the church was filled with **interesting** people. It is the best place to find the most **eclectic, eccentric people on the planet**. I've been in bar gatherings, bowling alley leagues, PTA's, private CEO advisory groups, and civic groups. **There is just nothing like the church!**

The Church is the most durable, long-lasting institution in the world. Even though technically it **officially launched in A.D. 33 making it 1993 years old**, it was **birthed and branched** out of Judaism which **over 4000 years before that**.

After I said YES to God, the Church was 100% effective for two things: One, leading and teaching me about worship and the Word of God and two, connecting me to the body of Christ and learning about the blood of Christ being thicker than water.

His blood became a binding force over my water-womb birth into the human race.

I learned to follow Jesus as my shepherd, to follow my under-shepherd pastor and commit to Christ's body as the family of God.

This is why this shirt bothers me so much.



I get the humor, but I don't think folks really understand how this all works.

The Apostle Paul writing to the church in Ephesus about the relationship between a husband-and-wife dips into a powerful analogy about the Church.

For husbands, this means love your wives, **just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault.**

Ephesians 5:25-27 NLT

It would be like wearing a shirt that said.



That is not gonna fly!

I may talk about my crazy family, but don't you dare talk about them!

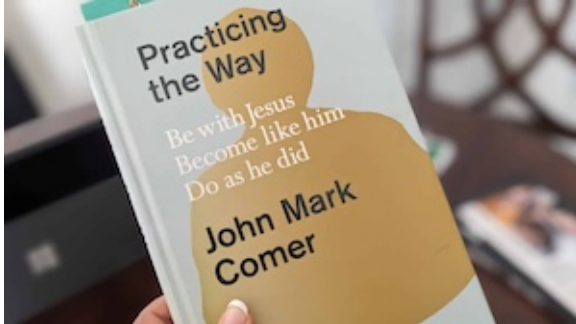
We honor the Church, the body and bride of Christ because Jesus died for the Church to perfect it.

John, the revelator, seeing the end of all things wrote in **Revelation 19:8**, “She has been given the finest of pure white linen to wear. For the fine linen represents the good deeds of God’s holy people.”

It may be trendy to love God and be disconnected from His Church, but it is not Biblical!

As I said a couple of Sundays ago, Luke describes the early church being called “**the Way**” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14).

John Mark Comer in his book, “Practicing the Way,” defines it as:



“a whole-life process of being with Jesus for the purpose of becoming like him and carrying on his work in the world.”

Or, more direct, “Be with Jesus. Become like him. Do as he did.”

Over the years we, the Church, has become a “two-tier” system, where there is “laity” and “professional pastor,” so real discipleship becomes optional.

Discipleship became something for the specially motivated, or seen as something only for “super Christians,” rather than the basic definition of what a Christian is. It is no wonder folks stopped referring to themselves as a “Christian,” because it became a political, sociological, label separated from who Jesus is.

The church is not the place to outsource “making” disciples, leaving it to the experts, or those gifted in evangelism. Our emphasis on the “making” side just went missing, because discipleship is seen as a singular function of just knowing the Bible.

This week we are focusing what it means **to be called to BE with Jesus** and also **called to be together**. We cannot and will not be effective without **being with Him and being together**.

SCENE ONE - The mountain, at night, alone.

The scene opens in Luke where he tells us what Mark left out:

Before any of this, Jesus spent the whole night in prayer

“One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night.” Luke 6:12 NLT

Before he ever called a name, he would BE with his Father.

Sit in that a moment.

What was that prayer time like?

It took the whole night?

What did Jesus talk about with Father God?

It's not a stretch to think much of that time must have been about the twelve men that Jesus would call the next day!

The most important thing about the calling of the Twelve happened **before there was anyone to call.**

This sets the gravity about everything that follows; **what looks spontaneous in Mark 3 was not unplanned at all.**

SCENE TWO — The summons: called, not qualified.

Mark is really specific with his language in these verses, which becomes really important to how we understand not only WHAT Jesus did, but WHY he did it.

And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. Mark 3:13 ESV.

Walk through

προσκαλεῖται... οὕς ἤθελεν αὐτός — he called to himself the ones he himself wanted.

First, let's contrast this against the norm of **what existed in the history of apprenticeship:**

A talmid auditioned for a rabbi.

Remember this: **grace precedes qualification.** Nobody in the list that follows had earned a seat.

We've always known that Jesus' **words and ways** are a total opposite of what was thought to be normal – **even among the experts in religion!** It's not just contrarian; **it's an upside-down experience for humans in almost everything we know and practice.** If you are new to faith, you'll start catching on that

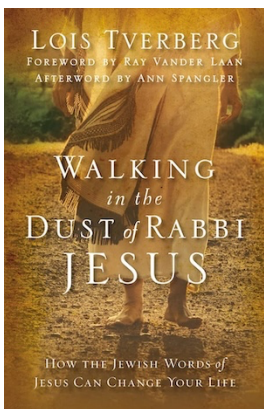
when God said, “**For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD,**” to Isaiah in 55:8 – **He wasn't kidding!**

The normal, **years-in-the-making**, way of making a disciple, an apprentice, was a rigorous, standard practice in Jesus' day. The **methods had been used for centuries** and **tradition believed it to be the most successful way of learning to be a rabbi**. To be a talmid meant that you found a rabbi you admired and studied them - **then they requested an interview with him**, auditioning so to speak. The rabbi screened for aptitude and commitment, **most were turned away**.

The rabbi was looking for specifics about **attention to the law**, as well as learning and living the hard but fruitful life of being a rabbi. **Most** were rejected because a **rabbi only took the absolute best**, most qualified. The one that guaranteed that the student would carry the master's **way of life** forward, keeping their reputation of the highest regard!

Beyond a skill — it was a "whole way of life."

A rabbi's *talmid* wasn't earning a certification in Torah exposition; the goal was, in the words of one background source, that "the disciple walks with God by living out in practice the teaching of his rabbi" — full behavioral and character imitation, not content transfer.



One of my favorite word pictures used by Lois Tverberg is the "[dust of your rabbi](#)" line.

It's not just a literary ploy to grab our attention, it's authentic, and it's not an urban legend.

It traces to **Mishnah Avot 1:4**, attributed to Yose ben Yoezer roughly two centuries before **Jesus — the Hebrew instruction is to "powder yourself in the dust of their feet,"** using a verb that literally means "**to powder yourself**."

The phrase can be read either as sitting at a teacher's feet or as walking behind him on the road: apprenticeship to a rabbi meant total-life absorption.

Jesus wasn't building tradesmen, he was building people who would eventually think, react, and love the way he did.

Jesus being a bit of a holy rebel, did not follow any of those tried-n-true, tested and approved, methods of choosing his followers.

Jesus runs the process backward — he goes and gets them!

Mark picks up the scene following Luke's, "night of prayer" moment.

Against that backdrop, Mark 3:13 is a reversal on its face: Jesus climbs the mountain and summons the ones *he* wants.

No auditions.

No candidates presenting themselves.

And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. Mark 3:14-15 NLT

The intentionality in Mark's verbs

Mark stacks up **four verbs that all push the same direction**. Commentators ([A.T. Robertson's Word Pictures](#) is the classic Greek-grammar source here).

- **προσκαλεῖται (proskaleitai)** — "summons to himself," a historical present that puts you inside the moment, and it's middle voice: **he calls them to himself, for himself**.
- **οὓς ἤθελεν αὐτός** — "whom he himself wanted." Robertson flags the **emphatic placement of αὐτός** ("he himself") at the end of the clause — grammatically unnecessary if Mark just wanted to say "wanted," so its presence is doing rhetorical work: **this was personal, self-determined choice, not a default or a compromise. A clear sign of intentionality**.
- **ἐποίησεν (epoiesen)** — "made/appointed" twelve. Robertson notes **this follows the night of prayer in Luke 6:12** and reads as a second, more formal act of selection out of the larger pool he'd already called up the mountain — **deliberation, then decision**.
- **ὠνόμασεν (ōnomasen)** — "named" them apostles, from *apostellō*, "**to send**."

Jesus also assigns them an identity before they've done anything to earn it. Also seen in [Luke 6:13](#) [At daybreak he called together all of his disciples and chose twelve of them to be apostles. Here are their names].

Mark writes this in such a way that we have to slow down and take in every word **about how and why Jesus chose these men**.

It's not hidden, but often missed, the not-so-subtle use of **individuals called** and **intentionally to be called together**.

Mark is making sure you don't miss that **it wasn't by accident, it is by design**.

Scene 3 — The list nobody would have assembled.

Let's pause here and let's read these names slowly.

He appointed the twelve: **Simon** (to whom he gave the name Peter); **James** the son of Zebedee and **John** the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); **Andrew**, and **Philip**, and **Bartholomew**, and **Matthew**, and **Thomas**, and **James the son of Alphaeus**, and **Thaddaeus**, and **Simon the Zealot**, and **Judas Iscariot**, who betrayed him. **Mark 3:16-19 ESV**

A motley crew...

- **Matthew**, who collected taxes for Rome.
- **Simon**, the zealot, who belonged to a movement built on killing men like **Matthew**. Fishermen who already knew each other, alongside men who had every reason to hate each other on sight.
- **James** and **John**, sons of Zebedee (who owned and operated a successful fishing franchise, nicknamed "sons of thunder."
- **Judas** — included in the same "them," given the same "with him," before anyone knew how his story would end. Jesus fully intended to keep him in the group as long as he could possibly do so.

Jesus didn't just call individuals with different resumes; he built a cataclysmic collision on purpose.

Jesus called them together before he ever asked them to get along.

It is clear the men were still going at each other (Luke 22:24) over all the years they were with Jesus – it must have been extremely frustrating for Jesus to be patient with each of them and at the same time be patient with them as a group.

It's John that records towards the very end, **not the beginning**, of their journey, at the **last** supper.

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. John 13:34-35 NLT

We feel the power of those words, "NEW," "LOVE," "ANOTHER," "RECOGNIZE"

Scene 4 — What "with him" was actually building toward.

Practicing the Way means that we are **called to BE with Jesus** and also **called to be together**. What's the purpose of **being with Jesus**, but being with Jesus **together**? It is exactly what Jesus wanted to reproduce in each and every one of us - **Sōlī ūnā** – Solo Together.

I don't want to get too deep into theology at this point, but the basis of our belief and practice of God is that God is miraculously three in one – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

You don't think that maybe God wants us to experience Him in this beautiful and wonderful **holy trinity?**

Early in Mark's gospel we know that Jesus calls his apprentices together and says, "I'm going to send you out." **Maybe a few were thinking, "Great I need to get away from these guys for a while!"**

"And he called his twelve disciples together and began sending them out two by two, giving them authority to cast out evil spirits." Mark 6:7 NLT

He called them to **be** with him. But also, that **they might be with him. Even in and on mission isn't** solo. This is how people will know that you are my disciples... you don't just love me and follow me – you love one another and follow me together - John 13:34–35.

Discipleship maturity is marked by **proximity that produces formation in each other.**

Why "that they might be with him" matters

ἵνα ὥσιν μετ' αὐτοῦ (that they might be with him) **is a purpose clause; grammatically, it states the goal of the appointing**, not an incidental detail.

Mark 3:14–15 actually gives two stacked purposes:

1. "that they might be with him" first,
2. "and that he might send them out to preach" second.

The order is the argument. Robertson's comment is direct: "they were not ready to be sent forth till they had been with Jesus for some time."

Presence precedes assignment.

Whatever the twelve were eventually going to do for Jesus, **the text makes it structurally dependent on who they became by being with him first.**

verse 14: ἵνα ὥσιν μετ' αὐτοῦ — "that they might be with him." That's **a plural subject and a singular purpose clause.**

However, Mark doesn't say "so that each of them might individually be with him;" he says twelve very different men were folded into one shared "with him."

Being with Jesus and being with each other aren't two separate calls stitched together: in this text they're one grammatical package.

Do we realize what that is saying?

If we extrapolate, just a little, we can talk about the wacky-ways and nit-picky attitudes we have about **BEING TOGETHER**.

Mark 3 is saying this! **BEING TOGETHER** inspires us, encourages us, reminds us of **BEING WITH JESUS**, but **BEING TOGETHER WITH JESUS** is the critical part of being formed into the image of Christ.

I wonder if Jesus or Mark would agree with the church should not look like this widely accepted concept of people groups.

"Birds of a feather flock together."

Church folks are pretty picky about everyone else being strange or annoying, yet cannot see the value of God building differences into a body of Christ!

In the world, **maybe cliques are just a fact of fallenness**. When we hear, Birds of a feather flock together, we assume we can only gather with folks that look like us, act like us, come from **the same color palette or social economic pool!**

We hear that people of different political persuasions cannot go to the same church or fellowship in the body of Christ. You don't think that Simon the Zealot had a completely different political persuasion as John the beloved, Zebedee's son? You don't think that Matthew and Peter were on different sides of the socio-economic isle?

Did anyone bother to tell Jesus that calling them **together** to **himself** should not be done and it would not work?



DIG DEEPER: In missiology: it's called the homogeneous unit principle, coined by Donald McGavran. His observation of mass-conversion movements in India, and it became foundational to a lot of American church growth strategy in the 20th century. McGavran's own line, the one that gets quoted (and winced at) most often: **"Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."** That's "birds of a feather" dressed up as a growth strategy — group people by affinity because it converts and retains faster.

The tension got named formally, inside the evangelical world, at the 1977 Lausanne Pasadena Consultation. The gathering was convened specifically to wrestle with McGavran's principle. Their own language doesn't soften it: **"If we have to choose between acquiescence in segregation for rapid growth and struggle for reconciliation at the expense of growth, we face a dilemma."**

They allowed that **a homogeneous congregation isn't automatically sinful — but insisted it "can never be complete in itself"** and has to keep reaching toward "the unity and variety of Christ's church," specifically invoking Ephesians 2's language of the dividing wall being torn down. The church's own missiologists looked at exactly what we are talking about and admitted the **strategy that grows churches fastest is in real tension with the reconciliation the gospel claims to produce**. That dilemma was named fifty years ago and mostly still hasn't been resolved — **most American churches still sort by affinity**, whether or not anyone would defend it out loud the way McGavran did.

Do you not remember that Apostles Paul and Peter clashed?

Galatians 2:11–14 is conflict exposed in our humanness. And it's about the Apostle Peter. The same Peter who lived Mark 3:14's "with him, together" for three years. The same Peter who **ate with Gentiles at Antioch without a second thought, and quietly withdrew from that table the moment some men from James show up! He was afraid of what his own people-group will think about him.**

Paul calls it out to his face, publicly, as inconsistent with the gospel.

Birds of a feather is not just a modern American church-growth invention — it's some kind of law of human nature!

It's the default setting in us and it even caused an apostle to drift back toward because of social pressure. This was decades after Mark 3.

It's not "the modern church has a problem the first church didn't have." It's "the modern church has the same problem the first church had, and it's been named and resisted since the beginning, not resolved by time."

Scene 5 — It wasn't automatic.

Don't let the "unity" vibe feel like it arrived easily, because it didn't.

Just look at one of the recorded blowups — Mark 9:33–35, the argument over who's greatest, or the parallel in Luke 22:24 that happens the very night of the Last Supper.

Love, harmony, and unity weren't the natural, starting condition of this group, they were the slow output of staying at the same table under the same rabbi.

Unity is not a natural affinity, it's a formed process.

Unity takes **work**.

Unity takes **practice**.

Unity does not happen by just attending a church!

Unity is the result of practicing the Way of Jesus.

REFLECTION

Being called, but not feeling qualified

- Where have you quietly disqualified yourself from real, close discipleship — waiting to feel more spiritually together before you let anyone get close?
- If Jesus called you the way he called them — before you had it figured out — what does that expose about how you've been trying to earn your way toward him instead of just showing up?

What being called together feels like.

- Who in your life, your family, your Life Group do you tolerate but would never describe as "placed there on purpose"? What changes if you actually believed that?
- Where's your own Matthew-and-Simon pairing — the person whose background, politics, wounds, or personality make being near them feel like friction instead of fellowship?
- Is there someone in this room this morning whose presence in your circle feels more like an assault than a divine assignment?

Staying at the table long enough to get it.

- Where have you quietly mistaken "I don't feel close to these people" for "these people aren't my people"?
- What conflict in your current community have you written off as permanent, when Jesus would see it as **unfinished formation** instead of a closed case?
- What old pattern of sorting people by comfort do you catch yourself slipping back into, even after real growth?

APPLICATION

- In what ways are you still trying to negotiate with God about your calling?
- Is the Holy Spirit speaking to you about someone you've pushed away when God purposely put them in your life?
- Have you made preferences more important than purpose or people?

SCRIPTURES

Ephesians 5:25-27 NLT **ON SCREEN**

For husbands, this means love your wives, **just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to**

present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault.

Revelation 19:8 NLT ON SCREEN

She has been given the finest of pure white linen to wear. For the fine linen represents the good deeds of God's holy people.

Luke 6:12 NLT ON SCREEN

One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night.

Mark 3:13 ESV ON SCREEN

And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him.

Isaiah in 55:8 ON SCREEN

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

Mark 3:14-15 NLT ON SCREEN

And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

Mark 3:16-19 ESV ON SCREEN

He appointed the twelve: **Simon** (to whom he gave the name Peter); **James** the son of Zebedee and **John** the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); **Andrew**, and **Philip**, and **Bartholomew**, and **Matthew**, and **Thomas**, and **James the son of Alphaeus**, and **Thaddaeus**, and **Simon the Zealot**, and **Judas Iscariot**, who betrayed him.

John 13:34-35 NLT ON SCREEN

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.



DIG DEEPER NOTES



Key Bible Verses About the Church as the Bride of Christ

Ephesians 5:25-27

- Description: This passage highlights the love Christ has for the church, comparing it to a husband's love for his wife.

- Key Points:
 - Christ gave Himself for the church.
 - He aims to present the church as a radiant bride, without blemish.

2 Corinthians 11:2

- Description: Paul expresses his commitment to the church, likening it to a betrothal.
- Key Points:
 - The church is described as a pure virgin promised to Christ.
 - This emphasizes the intimate relationship between Christ and the church.

Revelation 19:7-9

- Description: This passage speaks of the marriage of the Lamb, where the church is depicted as the bride.
- Key Points:
 - The church prepares itself for the wedding.
 - The righteous deeds of the saints are likened to fine linen for the bride.

Revelation 21:2

- Description: The New Jerusalem is portrayed as a bride adorned for her husband.
- Key Points:
 - This imagery connects the church with the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise.

Summary Table of Verses

Verse	Description	Key Points
Ephesians 5:25-27	Christ's love for the church	Radiant bride, without blemish
2 Corinthians 11:2	Betrothal imagery	Church as a pure virgin promised to Christ
Revelation 19:7-9	Marriage of the Lamb	Church prepares as a bride, righteous deeds
Revelation 21:2	New Jerusalem as a bride	Connection to God's ultimate promise

These verses collectively illustrate the profound relationship between Christ and the church, emphasizing themes of love, commitment, and preparation for a divine union.



Defining "Practicing the Way."

Comer's core definition, stated most directly: being an apprentice of Jesus is **"a whole-life process of being with Jesus for the purpose of becoming like him and carrying on his work in the world."** That single sentence is basically the DNA of the whole book.

"The Way" is a lifestyle claim, not a theology claim. Comer writes, "The Way of Jesus is not just a theology... it's exactly what it sounds like — a way of life," and pairs it with what he calls the marriage of truth and way: "The marriage of his truth (his teaching) and his way (his lifestyle) is how to get to the with-God life." Practicing the Way was never primarily about correct belief, it's Jesus' teaching wedded to Jesus' actual daily rhythms, adopted as your own.

Practice is the operative word, deliberately set against mere belief. His line — "you can't think your way to Christlikeness" — is aimed squarely at what he elsewhere calls the modern church's over-reliance on "information transfer": the assumption that more Bible knowledge automatically produces spiritual maturity. He's not against teaching, but he's arguing formation "is hard, slow," and happens through practiced habit, not through accumulating correct information. That's the whole reason the book is full of actual disciplines (silence, sabbath, fasting) rather than just more content to learn.

He names the failure mode this is responding to directly: a "two-tier church" where deep discipleship is optional — something for the specially motivated — rather than the basic definition of what a Christian is. He calls the result "the exhaust fumes of Christendom": a culture with Christian residue but not the actual apprenticeship underneath it. The church should not be outsourcing "making" disciples to the professionals. Our emphasis on the "making" side has gone missing, and discipleship is seen as optional.

Sources:

- [Best Quotes of Practicing the Way with Page Numbers — Bookey](#)
- [John Mark Comer: The Apprentice — Outreach Magazine](#)



Why the Church Still Sorts Itself by Affinity - The Homogeneous Unit Principle

"Birds of a feather flock together" has an actual name in church-growth theory: the **Homogeneous Unit Principle**, coined by missiologist Donald McGavran out of his observation of mass-conversion movements in India. McGavran's own line, still quoted (and still wincing-worthy) decades later: "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers." The principle became foundational to a lot of 20th-century American church growth strategy — group people by affinity, because it converts and retains faster.

The Church Named This Tension Itself — Lausanne, 1977

This isn't a strawman invented to knock down. The tension got named formally, inside the evangelical world, at the 1977 Lausanne Pasadena Consultation, convened specifically to wrestle with McGavran's principle. Their own language doesn't soften it:

"If we have to choose between acquiescence in segregation for rapid growth and struggle for reconciliation at the expense of growth, we face a dilemma."

The consultation allowed that a homogeneous congregation isn't automatically sinful, but insisted it "can never be complete in itself" and must keep reaching toward "the unity and variety of Christ's church" — explicitly invoking Ephesians 2's language of the dividing wall being torn down (Ephesians 2:14–16). That dilemma was named formally fifty years ago and still hasn't been resolved — most American churches still sort by affinity, whether or not anyone would defend it out loud the way McGavran did.

Even Peter Drifted Back — Galatians 2:11–14

The pull toward sorting by affinity isn't a modern American invention — it's gravity, and it grabbed one of the Twelve himself decades after Mark 3. Peter — who lived Mark 3:14's "with him, together" for three years alongside Matthew and Simon the Zealot — was later at Antioch eating freely with Gentile believers, no hesitation. Then men from James arrive, and Peter quietly withdraws from the table, afraid of what his own people-group would think. Paul calls it out to his face, publicly, as inconsistent with the truth of the gospel (Galatians 2:11–14). Formation doesn't make the pull toward homogeneity disappear forever; it has to be resisted again and again, by mature disciples too.

Suggested framing for a take-home line

"The church has had a name for 'birds of a feather flock together' for fifty years — and has known it sits in tension with the gospel for just as long."

Sources

- [The Pasadena Consultation: Homogeneous Unit Principle — Lausanne Movement](#)
- [Is It a Heterogeneous or a Homogeneous Unit Principle? — Missio Nexus](#)
- [A Critique Of McGavran And The Homogenous Unit Principle — Patheos](#)
- [Donald McGavran — Wikipedia](#)



What does the word "Christian" in America mean right now?

It functions less as a description of a practiced way of life and more as an identity label — and it's carrying at least three different, often competing meanings depending on who's using it and who's hearing it.

For a big chunk of the country, it's a **demographic/cultural marker with declining but still real weight**. Pew's 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study puts self-identified Christians at 62% of U.S. adults — down from 78% in 2007 and 71% in 2014, though that decline has leveled off since around 2020. **A meaningful share of that 62% isn't measuring practice or belief at all, just inherited identity — the box people check, not a description of how they live.**

For a lot of the public, especially outside the church, it's become **a political signal before it's a theological one**. Barna's polling on how Americans perceive evangelicals found the top descriptors people reach for are "religiously conservative" (37%) and "politically conservative" (27%) — political framing outranking spiritual framing. And the gap in perception by political lean is enormous: 41% of self-identified liberals describe evangelicals as "homophobic" versus 4% of conservatives; 35% of conservatives call them "caring" versus 13% of liberals. That's not a disagreement about Jesus — it's two groups looking at the same word and seeing almost entirely different things, largely sorted by politics rather than doctrine. Worth saying plainly: that's not a one-directional complaint either. Plenty of theologically serious, non-political Christians feel just as strongly that the label's been hijacked by partisan alignment as plenty of secular critics do — the capture of the word by politics is something people across the spectrum have separately noticed and separately resented, for different reasons.

And for a lot of the outside world, it's become **a word associated more with hypocrisy than with the person it's named after**. Barna's well-known research on how non-Christians perceive Christianity found the dominant associations were things like judgmental, hypocritical, anti-gay, and too political — and tellingly, close to half of young churchgoers themselves agree with those same descriptions from the inside. Roughly a quarter of both young non-Christians and young Christians said, in their own words, that Christianity today "no longer looks like Jesus."

The word "Christian" was never Jesus' term or the church's own first choice — it was a label pinned on them by outsiders in Antioch (Acts 11:26), **probably not entirely as a compliment**. What they called themselves first was "people of the Way" — a name that only makes sense if it's describing something visibly practiced, not just something believed or claimed. If the honest cultural read today is that "Christian" has drifted into identity, politics, and reputation, largely detached from a recognizable way of life.

Sources:

- [Religious identity in the United States — Pew Research Center](#)
- [U.S. Adults See Evangelicals Through a Political Lens — Barna Group](#)
- [A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity — Barna Group](#)