



## The One True Label

Good morning. It's a great day in the Kingdom! The human condition is so complex, that it defies being labeled, and yet, it seems that all we seek to do is label ourselves and each other. It's as though the labels we create could serve as some kind of shortcut to understanding or expression. It's the lazy choice. Instead of learning one another, which takes the investment of time, intelligence and emotion, we are content with stopping at each other's book spine.

I have written much in my life, and I can tell you that the hardest part of writing is choosing the title of your piece. The title must simultaneously challenge and invite the reader to open the book and discover its contents. Yet why don't we apply that to ourselves? There is one label that effectively does that, yet practically nobody uses it.

We choose labels for ourselves and for others. There isn't one Christian who understands fully the intent of Christ. There isn't one Methodist who walks in lock step with the exhortations of John Wesley. There isn't one human without sexual ambiguity. There isn't a single Conservative or Liberal who doesn't recognize the limitations of their viewpoints where situational ethics is concerned, and yet, our label makers are working overtime, producing labels at a tortuous pace, in danger of overheating from the constant grind of producing the labels that we can place between ourselves and others. Nobody stops to think we are not using the only label that Jesus taught.

Whether you are cis, ace, LGBTIA, straight, Republican, Democrat, married, single, white, black, Asian, WASP, catholic, alcoholic, rich, smart, athletic, millennial, sober,

boomer, crunchy granola, yuppie, yuppie, or what have you, your use of labels seeks to resolve the impossible complexity of the environments you grapple to perceive, but also contributes to some of the deepest problems that we face. Our society has a sickness that threatens it at its very core: “labelitis” (Any medical professional will tell you that the “-itis” suffix denotes unhealthy enlargement, or swelling.).

Jesus used none of these delineators. He identified the Scribes and Pharisees by their function, and was critical of their faith practices, but the Great Teacher never dismissed anyone with a label (*c.f.* the stories of Jairus and Nicodemus.) Instead, he taught us the one label that arises from our covenant with God and one another- “neighbor”.

“Who is my neighbor?” You are to love your neighbor as yourself. I am your neighbor, and you are my neighbor. Hello neighbor. It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood. You see, when you choose this label for yourself and others, there is nothing charitable, nothing compassionate, nothing merciful, that you would not do for your fellow neighbors in the hope and expectation of receiving the same grace and favor.

If you place labels between yourself and others, if you constantly signal your virtue, all you are doing is becoming more isolated and less neighborly. You can “unfriend” anyone on social media, but you can never “un-neighbor” them. Despite our differences in politics, race, age, gender identity, sexuality, intelligence or religion, and wealth, we are bound together by the human condition, the love of God, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I am fond of saying that we will all stand shoulder to shoulder on streets of gold, where the label you once proudly wore will be as dead and irrelevant as your long forgotten corpus. Take out your label maker and print out one last, eternal label: “N-E-I-G-H-B-O-R”, put it on, step outside, and welcome everyone to the neighborhood.

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