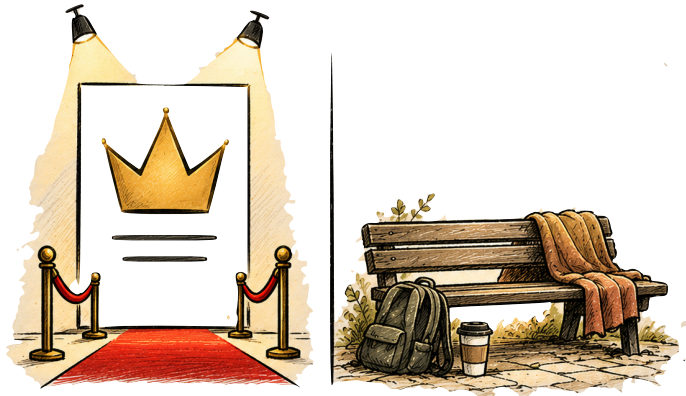


BRANDING VERSUS EMBODIMENT

When the Story We Tell Runs Ahead of the Life We Live

This is a difficult Field Note for me to write because I am good at branding. I have worked on important branding projects, and I know the value of a clear identity. The right words and images can help people notice, understand, and remember something.

That is also why I know how tempting branding can be when we want something to change. A new name, logo, website, or campaign gives us visible work to do. We can unveil it and say, “*This is who we are.*” But presenting ourselves differently can make us feel further along than we are.



Branding is business language. It helps attract people to something they can recognize. Churches have adopted that language because we want people to know we are here and feel welcome.

I understand the desire. I also wonder how much weight we are asking branding to carry.

A church can describe itself as welcoming, but a person discovers what that means when they bring a question no one expected.

We can say we love our neighbors, but our neighbors discover what that means when we learn their names and make time for their stories.

We can call ourselves a community where people belong, but someone finds out whether that is true when their life becomes complicated.

Those are moments when our aspirations meet someone else’s experience. If the invitation promises one thing and the life they encounter says another, it can feel like a bait and switch. No one has to intend deception for a person to feel the gap. When the words match the life, trust has room to grow.

A brand can describe what we hope to become.

It cannot do the work of becoming.

That work happens as Jesus forms us through prayer, Scripture, repentance, and the practice of loving people in ordinary life. It shows up in how we listen, how we handle disagreement, whether we tell the truth, and whether we stay present when someone is hurting.

Roots Before Fruits

We cannot unveil roots. They grow slowly, often where few people can see them. But over time, the life they sustain becomes visible in different places and different ways. That is when our words have something true to describe.

Jesus told His disciples that people would recognize them by their love for one another (John 13:35).

He called them the light of the world and said their good works would lead others to glorify the Father (Matthew 5:14–16). What people saw in His followers was meant to point beyond them to Him.

That leaves me with a question I have to ask of my own work: Are we giving more attention to the identity we want people to recognize than to the life Jesus is forming among us?

I know how to build a brand. I am less convinced that the Church needs to give branding the weight we often give it. A name or website may help someone find us. But when people are looking, living, and loving like Jesus, they make Him visible in places no campaign can reach.

Embody Jesus, and let Him show us what is taking shape. Then we can find honest words for what He has already begun.