

I aim to cast a vision for how the church should act in a world of increasing division and chaos, both in general and specifically in the Palmer SDA Church.

I have a new Bible hero. His example would make the perfect symbol of the mission for the church in our time, except that this symbol would be an inappropriate graphic. Not only did I fail to appreciate this person before, but I also completely failed to notice him. When I finally did, it reminded me of the Invisible Gorilla Experiment for selective attention. The video instructs you to count the number of times people wearing white pass the basketball. While the focus is directed to the passes, a person wearing a gorilla costume walks through the scene and pauses to beat his chest in the center of the screen. When viewers were asked how many times the ball was passed, they gave an eager answer. Then they are then asked, “But did you see the gorilla?”, 50% are shocked at their suggestion that there was a gorilla. He was right there, and they failed to see him. That's how I felt when I read Mark 14 a few weeks ago. Right in the middle of the final scenes of Christ's life, the intensity of the Lord's supper, the agony of Gethsemane, the drama of his arrest, and the injustice of his trial, I never noticed the man who walked into the scene and then out. In such a crowded story, you might expect an anonymous man to go unnoticed. But would you be surprised to learn that the man you failed to notice walked right through the middle of the scene of Jesus' arrest, and he stood out because he was naked?

Mark 14:51-52 And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, ⁵² but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.

If I knew his name, I would use it, but I don't, so I will continue to refer to him as the naked man. After I got over my initial amazement that I had missed the naked man, I had some questions. Was this just one of those scenes that Mark could not unsee, so he let it slip into the gospel account? Or is this scene inspired? Think about that. All scripture is God-breathed. Scriptures lofty images of God's holiness are inspired by the Holy Spirit. The same spirit specifically inspired Mark to think about a naked man and moved through Mark to record the story.

A bit more productively, I asked, why is this story in the Bible? It doesn't support the flow of the narrative. It seems like one of those tangents that should have been cut in the editing process. I didn't get it initially, but then the significance of the naked man flashed before me, and this naked man emerged as a genuine hero of faith. Before, I did not notice him. Now, I consider him a role model, not a supermodel, but indeed a role model. Yes, others might dare to be a Daniel, but I've been considering a different dare. I dare you to be like the anonymous naked man. There is something about him that you really should aspire to, and don't worry, there is no requirement for public nudity.

Earlier that evening, Jesus told his disciples, “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’” (v.27) They didn't believe him. Peter argues, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” (Matthew 26:33) Then Jesus was arrested. We'll pick up the story in verse 48, “And Jesus said to them, ‘Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me?’ ⁴⁹ Day after day, I was with you in

the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But let the Scriptures be fulfilled.” Then, notice what happens next... “And they all left him and fled.” (v.50) Those closest to Jesus were warned they would fall away; and denied it, but when the moment of crisis came, they deserted him. That is when the naked man showed up when everyone else fled. We are introduced to the naked man with these words, “And a young man followed him...” (Mark 14:51). They all fall away in verse 50, and in verse 51, he follows. What is striking is not that the man who followed Jesus was stripped naked but that the naked man followed Jesus. I dare you to imitate the naked man, not in the way you dress but in the way you act.

The disciples had experience with Jesus; he was a young man. They were properly clothed; he wasn't. Their names are recorded in the gospel account, sung in the lyrics of Sabbath School songs, and memorialized in the names of hospitals, churches, and schools worldwide; his name is not mentioned. But they fled, and he followed. We can learn from the anonymous naked man. I dare you to be like the naked man.

Perhaps he was improperly dressed because he couldn't afford clothes, but financial difficulty didn't stop him from following Jesus. Maybe he was lightly clothed because he didn't have the time to get dressed, but not being ready didn't stop him from following Jesus. Inconvenient timing, public ridicule, and the danger of soldiers didn't stop him from following Jesus. On a night of social division and political corruption, he just followed Jesus. On a night of angry mobs, protests, and riots, he just followed Jesus. On a night of religious mockery and abuse of spiritual power, he just followed Jesus. Oh, church, as our divided world continues to fall apart, just follow Jesus. In a moment of spiritual warfare, just follow Jesus. In a culture of self-indulgence, just follow Jesus. In a country divided by partisan politics, just follow Jesus. When you are as powerless as the anonymous naked man, just follow Jesus. When others give their energy to church conflict, just follow Jesus. When leaders fall and everyone else flees, just follow Jesus. When your career is threatened, your health is compromised, your grief is disorienting, your doubts have surfaced, your marriage is rocky, your emotions are unreasonable, and when your life is in chaos, just follow Jesus.

Here is “how just following” Jesus becomes a shared vision for the church. When you follow Jesus and I follow Jesus, we will find ourselves coming together. The pull of our time is to fall away. The call of our time is to come together. The more the world falls apart in crisis, the more the church should come together in Christ.

This vision of the church is given in our text, Hebrews 10: 19-25. We will take this text backward to see the reality of a divided world and the call for a united church.

Divided World

Hebrews 10:25 “...not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

The call for unity in Christ is “all the more” needed as the day approaches. Because division will increase in our world as we near the second coming of Christ. Notice the theme of division and falling away in these end-time verses.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 (New King James Version)

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, ² not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. ³ Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition

Matthew 24:6-13 (ESV)

⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. ⁹ “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

2 Timothy 3:1-5 (ESV)

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.

The more the world falls apart in crisis, the more the church should come together in Christ.

Did you notice that our church attendance spiked this month? It was higher than I have ever seen it. This was true not just in our church but in many churches in our valley and around the country. In early November, people flooded churches wherever there was a polling site. Some people lined up outside of churches for long waits because they wanted their votes to count in an election for the president of a divided country. Our country is feeling the anxiety of division.

The headlines of the division in America are not breaking news; they are continuing stories. We are at a point of conflict in our nation where nearly 50% of American adults believe that a civil war is likely in their lifetimeⁱ with incidents of civil unrest doubling in the past decade.ⁱⁱ Across the country this year, we have seen a daily average of more than 80 protest demonstrations.ⁱⁱⁱ When we expand our view to take in the global scene, we find that the division has not been quarantined. Just this week, the US authorized Ukraine to launch long-range weapons into Russia and to use anti-personal mines. What does a church do in this global climate? Just follow Jesus. The more the world falls apart in crisis, the more the church should come together in Christ.

In the ingeniously titled book, *The Party Crasher: How Jesus Disrupts Politics as Usual, and Redeems our Partisan Divide*, Joshua Ryan Butler argues that there are not just two major political parties in America but four major political religions. He asks the reader to imagine 1/3 of your congregation converting to a new religion and then proselytizing, debating, and breaking fellowship with those who disagree. He suggests that this is happening with the religions of political ideologies that are replacing our allegiance to Christ. We still call it Christianity, but something other than Christ has become the center of attention.

The religion of progress preaches the gospel that we can change the world. Its high priests are entrepreneurs and philanthropists. Scientists are its apologists, and universities are its sanctuaries. Its sacred texts can be found in the writings of the *New York Times* and CNN. Its messages are shared through the broadcasts of NPR and from the stage of TED.

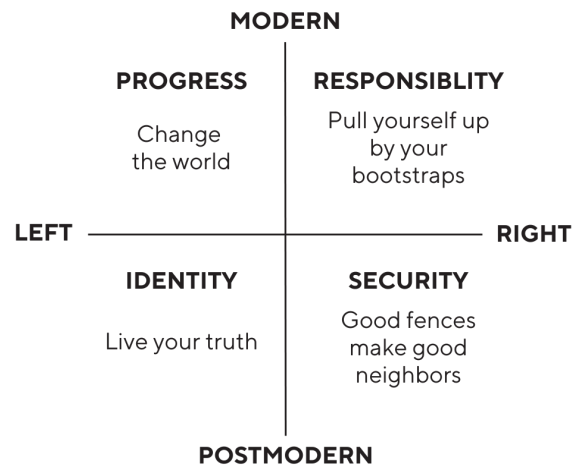
The religion of responsibility preaches to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. They advocate a limited government and uphold the virtues of hard work, family, and personal property. Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* print their sacred texts. Their temple is the home, paid for with their own money and maintained with their discipline.

The religion of identity evangelizes the world with the message, "Live your truth." Its prophets are pop stars. Its sacred texts are posted on TikTok and Instagram. Its catechism is echoed in the scripts of Disney hits. Discipleship is a journey of self-reliance that overcomes the obstacles of tradition, family, and authority to discover one's truest self.

The religion of security proclaims that good fences make good neighbors. The nation is its sanctuary, and Trump is its voice of authority.

Butler argues that Jesus doesn't belong under any one of these value systems. These values belong to Jesus. Each of these religions pledge their allegiance to a good thing. Progress, responsibility, identity, and security are all gifts from Jesus. And each can become an idol that competes with our allegiance to Jesus. Ancient idols are also representative of the good gifts of God. The goddess of fertility, the god of wealth, and the sovereign of wisdom all represent good things; they just take our allegiance from Christ. We are not followers of progress, responsibility, identity, and security; rather, we experience these blessings as we follow Jesus. It is a form of godliness that denies the power, Jesus.

4 POLITICAL RELIGIONS
The Party Crasher (by Joshua Ruan Butler)



As a crisis response, our world flocks to these quadrants. Increased crisis reinforces increased allegiance. Not so with the church! The more the world falls apart in crisis, the more the church should come together in Christ.

Butler’s quadrants got me thinking about possible false religions within the Christian church, not political religions but false Christian religions. I came up with some idolatrous quadrants of my own. Within the church are the idols of tradition, certainty, reform, and tolerance. If my religion becomes about one of these instead of about Jesus, I have been converted. We don’t pledge allegiance to a preference or style but to Christ. The more the world and the church experience crisis, the stronger the pull will be to the divided quadrants. We have a simple assignment. The more the world falls apart in crisis, the more the church should come together in Christ.

The invisible gorilla experience was reiterated in the invisible naked man experience and is tragically replayed in the invisible Jesus religion.

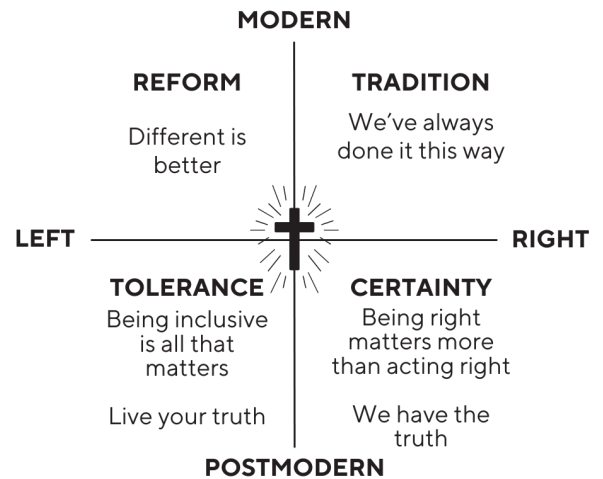
He is right there. He passes through and pauses to be seen, but we are giving our attention elsewhere. When we are asked, “but did you see Jesus?” we are still patting ourselves on the back for counting the passes. You didn’t tell me we were looking for a gorilla, I thought we would watching the ball? We feel accomplished when the fundraiser brings in money, but did you see Jesus? We went on a mission trip. But did you see Jesus? We have the truth. But did you see Jesus? We are responsible. But did you see Jesus?

United Church Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, **21** and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **22** let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. **23** Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. **24** And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works **25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The text calls for the church to come together, encourage each other, and meet together. And that coming together is centered in Christ. We don’t do it because we are such interesting people to socialize with but because Christ is our great high priest who enables us to draw near to God confidently.

4 FALSE RELIGIONS IN THE CHURCH



The following quote emphasizes the priority of coming together as a church when the world falls apart. “Oh, how many times, when I have seemed to be in the presence of God and holy angels, I have heard the angel voice saying, “Press together, press together, press together. Do not let Satan cast his hellish shadow between brethren. Press together; in unity there is strength.” Selected Messages 2 374.2 —[General Conference Daily Bulletin, April 13, 1891](#).

The following text reveals that the light of a broken world is a united church:

John 17:22-23 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

A divided world is not your problem to solve. Prophecy tells us that the world will fall apart and calls the church to press together. It is not your assignment to fix a world that is falling apart. It's a sign God meant to call his people to press together. God hasn't called you to hold the world together, but he has called you into a church he promises to hold together.

The division in our world will not end with the church passing a bill for peace but with the second coming of the prince of peace. It will not resolve with us electing the right president, but when Christ calls his elect to join him in the cloud. The Bible never tells us to stress about an election, but it does call us to make every effort to make our calling and election sure. The devil will use politics to distract us from righteousness. He will use the headlines of man's conflicting opinions to keep our attention off God's truth. The greatest threat of corrupt leadership is that it will distract us from following the leading of the Holy Spirit. Politics can accomplish great things for the world. But it is not God's chosen vehicle to carry the gospel to the world. The more the world falls apart in crisis, the more the church should come together in Christ.

So, we have plans to do that here in Palmer. There are so many things that we could focus on. But coming together in Christ is the most needed. Let's keep it simple. I dare you to be like the anonymous naked man. When others flee, you follow. When others give up on church, you engage in your church to help us come together in Christ. I want to tell you about a few of our plans for next year to help our church come together in Christ.

I am appealing for you to be engaged in the church today, not because the church is perfect but because we are following the one who is. You will see Jesus here. Not because salvation is found in the church but because Jesus is found in our church. You don't have to press together in my church, but any community following Jesus with undivided allegiance. To put both feet in the ministry of this church, you don't need to like my preaching, I just want you to love my Jesus. You don't have to follow us on Facebook, just follow Jesus. You don't have to prefer our worship music style to grow in your preference for Jesus over all else. I am not asking you to enjoy veggie meat at our fellowship meal, I am appealing to you to enjoy God in true fellowship with him. I am not asking to make yourself busy by volunteering for ministry. But if your life is too full for ministry, I will ask you to reprioritize. Do you let hours slip away in meaningless

activities that you justify as self-care? Do you say you're too busy but occupy your days with things you will regret on your deathbed? The church needs those hours. The ministry needs those efforts. Those who are falling away need your care. Your skills can be put to use. Your perspective can make us better. And all of this results in more people coming together in Christ when the default is to fall apart. Maybe you can't see how you can fit in. I do. We have a plan. It isn't perfect. You can make it better. Orient yourself toward the church so that more people will follow Jesus.

Continued Ministries- We will continue with the many ministries we are already committed to (i.e., AGA, outdoor ministry, prison ministry, sabbath school....) and enhance our unity in Christ focus with a few new initiatives.

Prayer Meeting- Our church has prioritized prayer this Fall, holding a prayer vigil and three weeks of prayer on Wednesday nights. We will meet again on January 8, Wednesdays at 7 p.m.

Life Groups- This year, we have been blessed with several strong small group gatherings. We want that to grow. It is great to connect here on Sabbath morning. However, a different level of connection happens in smaller settings. We need it. We have scheduled an open enrollment for life groups near the beginning of each quarter. You can sign up for a group and not have to commit to it for the rest of your life. These groups will meet weekly to share a meal, visit, and discuss the topic preached about the previous Sabbath. We need leaders. Life group leadership training will be on the first two Sabbaths of December following our fellowship meal.

Member Engagement – We have 530 members in our church. How many of them do you connect with? We haven't had an organized way of reaching out, visiting, and staying connected. But we are changing that. It has already begun with a mailing of newsletters and will progress to include phone calls, visits, service projects, and more. We need help. It is not simply an effort to fill our building. It is precisely what the sermon has been about. This is an effort to come together in Christ as the best response to a world that is falling apart.

Love Well Connect Group—During Sabbath school time, a new group will gather in the school's lower level to connect in a casual environment and worship in a contemporary style.

Sermons from Acts- In 2025, we will go through the book of Acts during the sermons. The stories of the early church call us to be a church that acts like Jesus. We are serious about growing that culture here. When one of our 530 members comes back, if they experience the same division here that they experience out there, they will not stay. If they are bold enough to wonder if the church is a safe place to come together in Christ, we want their experience with us to confirm it.

Connection/Evangelistic Events on the calendar:

Jesus, He's All You'll Ever Need Seminar with Mike and Pam Tucker, January 23-27

Reunion Sabbath, with Neil Biloff, September 13

Pentecost 2025, with Scottie Baker, November 7-15

The church is far from perfect. I urge you to engage with its ministry as part of your commitment to coming together in Christ. The more the world falls apart in crisis, the more the church should come together in Christ.

ⁱ Marist Poll National Adults, Interviews Conducted April 16-April 18, 2024

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1326688/public-opinion-possibility-civil-war/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/🇺🇸-the-us-political-violence-civil-unrest-in-6-charts/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://proxy.parisjc.edu:8293/statistics/1484654/us-riots-and-protests-by-state/>