

In the age of the smartphone, there's an important question that comes up early in nearly every social situation, a question that, if not handled with care, has the potential to ruin an otherwise perfect lovely night out:

iPhone or Android? [let's do a side-by-side that adds logos and whatnot as we move through]

And in response to this question, there're a few camps of people. First there're the gadget folks - the people who care *deeply* about which device they have. If they're iPhone, they're Apple. They have a Mac and an iPad and probably an AppleTV and they keep hoping that iWatch is going to be announced (any day now!). The Android guys love them some Google - they run a PC and have some tablet you've never heard of. They sing the praises of Chromecast and are saving up for the moment they can buy Google Glass. (Full disclaimer: I'm in this camp.)

There are a few people who stay out of the debate altogether - they have a trusty old flip-phone or maybe a Windows phone.

And then there's the rest of you: you really just want a phone that works. One of the most stressful events in your life is upgrading your phone, because that means a trip to the store to talk to the phone guys there, who are trying to upsell you on a phone that's way more than you wanted to spend, with tons of features that look awesome but you're 90% sure you'll either forget about them once you walk out of the store or at a loss for how to find them in the phone itself.

You see the creeping world of the Apple and Google brands and it's frankly making you a bit claustrophobic. So: whether you're a lover or a tolerator of the smartphone age, you recognize something (even if you didn't realize it):

The rallying cry for the age of the smartphone is really all about branding. Branding isn't *technically* a new thing - advertisers have been branding for the better part of a century. But it's been in the last couple of decades, especially with the rise of mobile and wearable tech, that branding has become so all-encompassing.

Only a few years ago, you might throw a bumper-sticker on your car or wear a Mossimo t-shirt (remember those?) Now, brands are in your pocket, on your TV, in your car and on your car, on your wrist and your shirt and basically everywhere else.

This is all very intentional. Brand Ecosystem is the new corporate buzzword - companies want their products to be everywhere in your life. They want to shape your behaviors and beliefs, to get you wholly bought-in (literally) to their company, to their brand.

If you're thinking, wait a minute, that sounds very cult-ish, you're right. Corporations got this strategy from religion - that's why all the big companies now employ persons whose actual job titles are Brand Evangelists.

So in a world full of branding, in a culture full of corporations trying to sell you not just a product but a whole way of life, I want to spend some time thinking with you about God's brand, and what it looks like to be "bought-in" to God.

Now I'm guess that at least 75% of you just got that look on your face like you do if you've ever stepped on a piece of rotten fruit with your bare feet (eeew!). Because I just mentioned branding and God in the same sentence.

Branding feels so... corporate. So manufactured. So constructed and designed and inauthentic. We don't want that anywhere near our religion. We want our connection to God to be real. To be authentic, organic and personal.

In other words, we want real religion, not corporate church.

Of course that's what we want. So let's all take a deep breath: because remember I said that religion invented branding. We just didn't call it that. We called it devotion. Being wholly committed to something or someone. To orient your whole life around something bigger than yourself.

That's religion. Corporate America just took the idea (and techniques) and rebranded devotion as... well, *branding*.

I know, I know. You want to say, But Branding isn't religious! Branding is about products and software and logos and Religion is about church and God and spiritual practices.

But what is the goal of branding? Remember those "I'm a Mac/I'm a PC" commercials? [\[image\]](#) Branding isn't ultimately about products - there wasn't a single computer in any of those commercials. Apple was selling a look. A lifestyle. A set of beliefs and behaviors. Why does Apple want you to identify as a Mac person? Because if all they sell you is a computer, they sell a computer. But if they transform you into an Appleite, then they can sell you a computer and a phone and apps on that phone and a tablet and a cloud-subscription and music and movies through iTunes and basically anything else they dream up because you're bought in. You're part of their culture. You're adopting their beliefs and behaviors.

I'm hard-pressed to think of a better picture of worship in our contemporary culture. Worship is not ultimately about singing songs and saying prayers and listening to me talk. Worship uses those things (and much more) to create beliefs and behaviors, to shape our persons, to form us into God's image.

That's the ultimate goal of branding, and it's the ultimate goal of religion - we just don't call it branding. And frankly I couldn't care less what you call it. What I am deeply concerned about is what brand you're living. I care very much what you're devoting your life to, what is getting the best of your time, your energies.

Because if God is not your brand, if God is not shaping your life, behavior and beliefs, you're not heading anywhere good.

So if you will permit it, I'd like to play with the idea of God's brand for a bit. To investigate what devotion to God looks like.

It's not as though this idea of a God-brand is completely foreign to us - we live in a world of cross jewelry and tattoos, of Jesus bumper stickers and t-shirts, of agenda-driven Christian music and film.

But is that what the God-brand means? Is God another product we add to our lives, an aspect of our Persons we find a nice place for and then add where it fits? [\[NASCAR picture\]](#)

Though this is how many of us approach God - as an additive to our lives, as a component of our world we have to fit in somewhere, we know deep down that's not exactly right. That when God is one aspect of our lives and we're constantly having to tweak and shift and arrange to make sure he stays in there, we get exhausted, frustrated and overwhelmed.

Fortunately for us, the Scriptures offer us a better way. During the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost, we're asking Who is God? And for the answers, we're turning to how God has shown himself to humanity in the Scriptures. We're learning that God shows a new aspect of his character in these various encounters we read. And in the wake of that encounter, the people there, who've learned something new about God, mark it by naming God.

They take God's name - YHWH, and add an adjective to it. In this story today, we're going to meet YHWH-Nissi, Yahweh the Banner.

Strange name, right? What does it mean to say that God is a Banner? As we'll see in the story today, Banner is a military term. A "banner" is a flag ancient armies flew during battle. [Let's do a bunch of god banners here] So in the Egyptian army, for instance, the various divisions were identified by different gods - so the archers might be under Osiris and the charioteers under Anubis. The footsoldiers under Horace and the cavalry under Bast. In a pre-radio world, the commanders had to be able to watch the whole battle, identify who was where and give commands (mostly through flags and signals). The banners enabled this to happen.

So what does it meant to refer to God as YHWH-Nissi, Yahweh the Banner? Turn with me in your bibles to Exodus 17. If you grabbed a maroon bible of the rack on the way in our out of the pew in front of you, you can find Exodus 17 on page XXX. And if you don't own a bible, please keep that one as a gift from us.

In this story, we find Moses and his second-in-command Joshua leading God's people away from Egypt. God has just rescued them from slavery and now they're on the run through the desert, on their way to the mountain where God met Moses in the burning bush. In just a couple more chapters, they'll affirm God's covenant with them and receive the 10 Commandments.

But before they get there, they're accosted by another tribe, a group of people called the Amalekites. Let's read what happens:

While the people of Israel were still at Rephidim, the warriors of Amalek attacked them. Moses commanded Joshua, "Choose some men to go out and fight the army of Amalek for us. Tomorrow, I will stand at the top of the hill, holding the staff of God in my hand."

So Joshua did what Moses had commanded and fought the army of Amalek. Meanwhile, Moses, Aaron, and Hur climbed to the top of a nearby hill. As long as Moses held up the staff in his hand, the Israelites had the advantage. But whenever he dropped his hand, the Amalekites gained the advantage. Moses' arms soon became so tired he could no longer hold them up. So Aaron and Hur found a stone for him to sit on. Then they stood on each side of Moses, holding up his hands. So his hands held steady until sunset. As a result, Joshua overwhelmed the army of Amalek in battle.

After the victory, the Lord instructed Moses, "Write this down on a scroll as a permanent reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will erase the memory of Amalek from under heaven." Moses built an altar there and named it Yahweh-nissi (which means "the Lord is my banner"). -- Exodus 17:8-15

Here we see all the hallmarks of an ancient battle: The supreme commander - Moses - is above the battlefield. He's using his staff to direct the battle (under Yahweh's guidance). His second-in-command, Joshua, is leading the charge on the ground.

As long as Moses is translating God's commands down to Joshua, the Israelites are winning (which is nothing short of miraculous for a people who were slaves less than a month ago - slaves aren't known for their battle skills). Eventually Moses needs help to continue directing the battle, but in the end, God's people are victorious. They win the day.

And so Moses names the altar Yahweh-Nissi. Yahweh our Banner.

As in each of these weeks, there's so much to discuss here - Moses' role as the mediator, the importance of a community to "hold us up", and more. But let's focus in on that name Moses gives to God: Yahweh our Banner.

What does that name mean? It's telling that in the battle, Israel only had victory as they were able to follow Yahweh's commands. It wasn't enough that they flew God's flag, that they had God's logo on their banner. They also needed the divine guidance Yahweh gave to Moses, to orchestrate the battle. They needed to see and obey the directives they'd received from the God's-eye view of the battle they didn't have access to.

They had to put themselves wholly and completely under God's banner. God's command. That's what saying "God is my banner" really means.

That's not how we approach products and branding today. [image: Me Banner, add all the logos] We incorporate brands under our banner. We look to products, companies and even religion for how they can help us, how they can work our plan, help us accomplish our agendas. What matters is Me, my life, my way, my plan. We end up looking like NASCAR, with any number of allegiances all over - some larger, some smaller, but at the end of the day, it's all about me.

We are under the impression that God is here to make my life work more smoothly. That God is mainly concerned with my agenda, my needs and worries. In other words, God is under *my* banner.

But here in Exodus we see something wholly different. God is in charge. Israel is following God's lead. Anytime they can't see God's commands, they're losing. It's only when Moses keeps God's commands clearly visible, so that Israel can do exactly as God directs that they achieve victory.

This is what it means to be under God's Banner. To be under a banner is to have a clear sense of who you belong to, who you are supposed to be. The character you're to emulate. To be under a banner means you follow the head of the house. You're part of *their* brand, not the other way around.

That's why the word "brand" gets us all tripped up. As much as Apple and Google and everyone else wants us to adopt their whole system, their whole worldview, the vast majority of us never live under Apple or Google's banner. Most of us just use their products.

So we end up treating God the same way - as a product, a piece of our life, a disposable, occasional product. Is it any wonder we feel divided, confused toward religion? Is it any wonder we so often struggle to sense any real power or see transformation?

Let us come under God's banner. Let us adopt God's lifestyle, be part of God's house. Let look to Jesus as our prototype, our exemplar, our model to follow. In Ephesians 4, the writer offers us a vision of what this life lived together, under God's banner can look like:

These are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. -- Ephesians 4:11-16

Each of us, each of you, has certain gifts from God. We're all part of his body. And we all ought to use our gifts together. The more we do this, the more certain we become in our faith. The more we find unity and know who God is.

The more we follow Jesus, the more we become like him. The better we work together to be a faithful picture of him in our world. Together, we become healthy and full of love.

That sounds so much better to me than being pulled in every direction, always wondering which way to go, always wishing I was getting just a bit more out of my faith than I am.

[the God banner] That's why we need to be done with this divided loyalty and give ourselves wholly to God.

Let's be finished with trying to incorporate God in our lives and instead give our lives to God.

Let's stop asking how God can improve our situations and instead follow God's lead in every circumstance.

Let's stop hoping God will be part of what we're doing and join in on what God is doing.

Let's quit expecting God to be under our banners and let's all join under YHWH-Nissi, Yahweh our Banner.

We are the Church of God. We are House Jesus. Let us be the most loving, the most joyful, the most patient and kind and generous and faithful and gentle and self-controlled people in our city.

Memorization Challenge

One practice Christians have used for thousands of years to follow Jesus more faithfully is memorizing Scripture. When we take the time to memorize, that teaching permeates our souls. It soaks deep into us and begins to shape our thoughts and attitudes.

Just before that description of the Church we read in Ephesians, the writer gives us a vision for why all this is possible. In verses 5-6 of chapter 4, he says,

There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all. -- Ephesians 4:5-6

This is YHWH-Nissi, God our Banner. One LORD, one Faith, one Baptism. God is over all of us and living in all of us and showing the world who he is through all of us. If you're ready to declare yourself for House Jesus, if you're willing to live under God's Banner, memorize Ephesians 4:5-6 this week.

Communion SetUp

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