

Why label? Why not just follow Jesus?

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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For about a month, there has been an ongoing discussion about the term “mainline.” I [posted that I refused to use it](#) because it has historic connections to upper class, white society and doesn’t adequately reflect the diversity of our social justice history. That spurred a number of [Internet conversations](#). Cathy Lynn Grossman of Religion News Service hosted a [survey](#) to rename the Mainline. Grossman [talked with a number of scholars](#), like [Diana Butler Bass](#), who weighed in [here](#).

I’ve been surprised at the defensiveness of keeping the term. As [Martin E. Marty wrote](#), it is a name its participants didn’t choose. It was made up for us and we slipped into it a few decades ago.

But here are some of the most interesting arguments I’ve heard around the discussion.

- **Like most inherited terms, I doubt 99% of the people who have uttered the term "mainline" know of the class connections.**

Perhaps people don’t know the reasons that we use the term, but history still forms who we are. And, if 99% of people don’t know where such an otherwise meaningless label comes from, then isn’t there something wrong with that? Shouldn’t we know where we came from?

“Mainline” has been wrapped up in elitism for a long time. Perhaps you may not be able to feel that connection if you’re in the middle of dwindling budgets. But for people on the outside, the feeling is there.

It’s not all bad. Sometimes that reflects our on-going commitment to education. But it can mean other things. Most of us have heard some variation on the old joke, “A Methodist is a Baptist who can read. A Presbyterian is a Methodist who went to college. And an Episcopalian is a Presbyterian who did well in the stock market.” The first time I heard the joke was in *A River Runs Through It*. The second time I heard it was from a man explaining why he wouldn’t join the

Presbyterian Church where he attended weekly. He was the president of a bank, and his connections at the Episcopal Church were too important for him to transfer his membership.

- **Carol entirely ignores the fact that mainline denominations are distinct traditions that have their own polity and styles that are not reducible to the theological sources that influence them.**

Oftentimes Northern Baptists are considered part of the Mainline. But I have not seen many lists that include the A.M.E. That makes me think that inclusion in the term has less to do with polity and more to do with something else.

- **Why try to rebrand the Mainline?**

For the record, I never used the term “rebrand.” But I do think it’s a good time to put a name on this endeavor—one that accurately reflects our important theological influences and names who we want to be. One that is more inclusive of all people—no matter what class or race. It is important to think of who we want to become. So, as [Charles Freeman wrote](#), it’s more about visioning than branding.

- **Why use a label at all? Why can’t we all just be followers of Jesus?**

This comes up a lot. It is, by far, the answer I get the most. I’m confused by the “no labels” argument. What is wrong with naming who we are? Historians, theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, and all of us who write and think about larger movements of thought use words. Labels are the tools of our trade. As every preacher knows, words cannot adequately contain the complexities of a person or movement. But as we learned from the past, someone is going to attach syllables to who we are, so why not have a bit of control over it?

I have personal reasons as well. Perhaps it is different depending on one’s gender and orientation, but there’s a church down the street that says on its sign:

Church. We follow Jesus.

Do you know what I expect to find there? A guy preaching. I suspect that the congregation is like the majority of churches on the planet and women are limited in leadership. Maybe I’m wrong, but I’d rather take my daughter to a

church community where I know she will have models for and expectations of spiritual leadership.

Perhaps it's my baggage, but when I see "we follow Jesus," I assume that they think I don't. When I see PC(USA), UMC, AME, UCC, DOC, etc., I know that they have a history of social justice and liberationist thought, and they've done the hard work of including that other half of the population into church leadership.