

## Right Christian, Wrong Christian

It all began with two labels: Right Christian and Wrong Christian.

Recently, a friend told me that he's not willing to attend a particular church in our town because the last time he visited this church, he noticed a young man wearing a baseball cap during the worship service. According to my friend, Wrong Christian is an irreverent little twerp who wears baseball caps during church. Maybe this isn't your issue. I have another dear friend who is literally unable to talk about charismatic churches without a noticeable amount of disdain in his tone of voice. To him, Wrong Christian is a charismatic guy who speaks in tongues and worships weirdly.

Maybe to you, Wrong Christian attends a church that allows female leadership. Or maybe Wrong Christian attends a church that *doesn't* allow female leadership. Maybe Wrong Christian went to a Christian college. Maybe Wrong Christian doesn't speak English. Maybe Wrong Christian is in a college fraternity. Maybe Wrong Christian drives a Hummer. Maybe Wrong Christian promotes Reformed theology. Maybe Wrong Christian dresses like she's in a music video. Maybe Wrong Christian is pro-choice. Maybe Wrong Christian takes the bus. Maybe Wrong Christian is just annoying. Maybe Wrong Christian is unequivocally pro-Israel. Maybe Wrong Christian is a Yankees fan. You get the picture.

My opinion of Wrong Christian was so strong that I not only avoided him, but I also actively condemned him. Perhaps you're not as opinionated as I am (although I'm sure many of you are). Maybe you have opinions but don't voice them in a forceful and condescending way. Or maybe you don't voice them at all—you're not around Wrong Christian very much, so you're not devoting a lot of time and energy to criticizing him. He's so far outside your circle of (Right) Christians that he barely exists. The mere act of creating Right Christian and Wrong Christian labels makes Wrong Christians a target of your criticism or simply dead to you—or both.

For the most part, I was happy to keep Wrong Christian at bay. There was just one (cosmic) problem. As I got to know Jesus, I began to realize that this was not exactly what he had in mind when he invited us to participate in his kingdom on earth. I discovered that Jesus apparently didn't get the memo concerning the colossal importance of my distinction between Right Christian and Wrong Christian. In fact, he doesn't seem to care much for this distinction at all. I think this is what God meant when he said, "So are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" in Isaiah 55:9.

There I was, convinced that I was defending Jesus by condemning Wrong Christian, when I

*Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart*

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*"Disunity in Christ reveals to us those very human tendencies that keep us divided. Along the way, Cleveland helps us to see, laugh at and rethink our very selves. . . . As a pastor serving a church of some thirty nationalities, I found it an extremely useful analysis of what hurts and helps unity."*

—Thabiti M. Anyabwile, senior pastor, First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman, and author of *The Decline of African American Theology*

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## BOOK EXCERPT

saw that Jesus was beckoning both Right Christian *and* Wrong Christian and inviting all of us to know more of his heart. As I read through the Gospels, I noticed that he had a habit of connecting with literally everybody: conservative theologians, liberal theologians, prostitutes, divorcees, children, politicians, people who party hard, military servicemen, women, lepers, ethnic minorities, celebrities, you name it. He was pretty serious about connecting, in spite of natural and ideological differences. And it doesn't end in the Gospels. He repeatedly disregards my Right Christian and Wrong Christian labels and continues to beckon me, even though I still tend to cling to such earthly distinctions. He's relentless.

Rather than using his power to distance himself from us, Jesus uses it to approach us. He follows his own commandment – often to his detriment, I might add – by pursuing *us* with great tenacity in spite of our differences. He jumps a lot of hurdles to reach us. I think that is beautiful.

I wonder how much Christ's heart is broken when we denigrate followers of Christ who differ from us. I shudder at the thought of it. Further, how much are we losing because of our differences? How much are the people for whom Christ died suffering because we remain paralyzed and divided by our differences when we should be working together as the hands and feet of Jesus in the world? There's got to be a better and more efficient way to carry out our roles within the mission of God. Surely, we can do better.

Overcoming differences. Laying aside conflict. Seeing culturally different others as God's gift to us rather than thorns in the flesh. That's what this book is about. The causes of these problems can be devilishly subtle. Sometimes they don't simply reside in our individual personalities, defects and sins. Sometimes we are affected in hidden ways by those around us. The values and perceptions of the groups with which we identify can have a covert affect on us. Unpacking those dynamics and how we can turn them to God's glory is also what this book is about.

In the following chapters, I will use some insights from social psychology to help us understand the unseen dynamics of how church-related groups form, why they persist, how they affect our behavior, thoughts and emotions, and how they create seemingly insurmountable hurdles that divide the body of Christ. We'll also discuss the many ways in which we can overcome these hurdles. (It turns out that they're absolutely surmountable.) And we'll get a glimpse of just how much the body of Christ can impact the world in incredible ways.

*--Adapted from Chapter 1, "Right Christian, Wrong Christian"*



**Christena Cleveland** (Ph.D., University of California, Santa Barbara) is a social psychologist who teaches at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is an award-winning researcher and gifted teacher who brings organizational experience to her efforts to build unity. She consults with pastors and organizational leaders on multicultural issues and speaks regularly at organizations, churches, conferences, universities and schools.

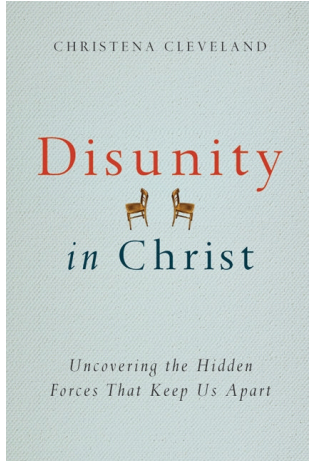
## The Epidemic of Christian Division

Despite Jesus' prayer that all Christians "be one," divisions have been epidemic in the body of Christ from the beginning to the present. We cluster in theological groups, gender groups, age groups, ethnic groups, educational and economic groups. We criticize freely those who disagree with us, don't look like us, don't act like us or don't even like what we like. Though we may think we know why this happens, Christena Cleveland says we probably don't. In this eye-opening book, learn:

- Why I think all my friends are unique but those in other groups are all the same
- Why little differences often become big sources of conflict
- Why categorizing others is often automatic and helpful but can also have sinister side effects
- Why we are so often victims of groupthink and how we can avoid it
- Why women think men are judging them more negatively than men actually are, and vice versa
- Why choices of language can actually affect unity

### How did you experience diversity growing up, and what inspired you to write *Disunity in Christ*?

**Christena Cleveland:** I grew up in Fremont, California, which at the time was the third most diverse city in America. Every day in the summer the Filipino, Mexican, black, Korean, white and biracial kids on my block would play kickball in the street and then break bread (or rather, popsicles from the ice cream truck) together. It never occurred to me that this type of crosscultural contact was unusual, nor was I savvy enough to know that our motley crew would make for a great photo shoot for a cheesy diversity brochure. Diversity wasn't "staged" in my life. It was simply my life. My school was diverse. The people who shopped and worked at the local grocery store were diverse. Even my church was diverse. While the vast majority of evangelical churches in the 1980s were racially homogenous, I was fortunate enough to have grown up in a multiethnic church that was almost exactly 25% black, 25% white, 25% Hispanic and 25% Asian. This made perfect sense to my young mind; living in a diverse city and attending a diverse church simply went hand-in-hand. Then I grew up and discovered that the body of Christ is plagued with not only racial/ethnic divisions but theological, political, class and other cultural divisions. I wrote this book to address this issue and lead others in unity.



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With a personal touch and the trained eye of a social psychologist, Christena Cleveland brings to bear the latest studies and research on the unseen dynamics at work that tend to separate us from others. Learn why Christians who have a heart for unity have such a hard time actually uniting.

**What message do you hope to convey in *Disunity in Christ*?**

**Christena:** So many of the processes that create and maintain cultural divisions in the church occur outside of our awareness. We don't even know that they are happening! This book is unique in that it helps people see the factors and processes that cause our divisions and gives them tools to overcome them.

**What do you hope readers take away from reading your book?**

**Christena:**

- An understanding of what they and others are doing to maintain divisions in the body of Christ
- Tools to start building bridges
- Hope