

15 You Christians are so divided how can I know which if any have got it right?

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This is the biggest and hardest question we Christians ever have to answer. Some Christians come close to shrugging off the question saying disunity doesn't matter. Different denominations, different styles and even different theological beliefs in the church isn't in itself division, they say, but a celebration of the rich diversity of church life. True Christians are known to God alone as there's no true church.

Other Christians hold that the visible church is part of the gospel so church unity is essential. Roman Catholic, Orthodox and some Anglican thinking says with St. Paul that *because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, because we all partake of the one bread* (1 Corinthians 10:17). Christian unity is when people are in communion, or literally can take communion, with the local bishop.

On either view the lack of communion between Christians, the divisions of the church are a serious obstacle to Christian belief. They seem to say Christianity doesn't work in practice. This is maybe why the Lord Jesus himself prayed these words for his church *May they all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me* (John 17:21). I

It's important to admit the sinfulness of Christian divisions. It's also important to get across that in the last 50 years almost all Christian denominations have entered into dialogue with each other. The Holy Spirit has been rebuilding the visible unity of Christians. In 1982 virtually all Christian traditions signed up in Lima to a statement on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry sponsored by the World Council of Churches. This document identifies the basic elements of the faith of the church through the ages and distinguishes them from secondary concerns.

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Nowadays the churches would say *no church has got it exactly right*. Despite past behaviour no one section of the church totally excludes any other. Every branch of the church is by definition partial and so falls short.

This has been a practical discovery as well. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu was asked how the Christian denominations in South Africa succeeded in uniting to lead the fight against apartheid he commented that *apartheid was too powerful a foe for disunited churches*. God gave a practical unity across denominations that focussed and strengthened the Christian challenge to racial discrimination. The fight against social injustice brings the churches together in the cause of Christ's kingdom.

St. Paul says *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her in order to ...present her to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle...that she may be holy and without blemish* (Ephesians 5:25-27). Through all the events

of human history there's a divine agenda revealed in scripture centred upon uniting and perfecting the church. Jesus the heavenly bridegroom is preparing his church as a bride. The whole history of the world is a servant of this task.

Why are Christians so divided? Because even if the church is a divine institution she's also human and sinful. There's been a battle between the humanity and divinity of the church right across the centuries. 2000 years on there is holiness in the church even if it is still filled with sinful people! The church is God's never ending family called by him to proclaim the *whole* faith to the *whole* world. This calling is being achieved despite her failings.

Christian unity is most evident in local congregations which have been called 'the hope of the world' (Bill Hybels). If you join a church you become part of a living hope. If you join a church, because you are a sinner, you also do damage to Christian unity. There's no perfect church because there are no perfect Christians.

You Christians are so divided how can I know which if any have got it right? Yes we are divided, there's no hiding the fact. That doesn't mean we've got it wrong though. Despite argument, disrespect, breaking of communion and an unwillingness to work together by Christians there's also much love in the church.

Jesus said '*by your love for one another you will be known as my disciples*'. He also pledged to keep providing that love by the continual outpouring of his Holy Spirit.

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