

Why Can't Christians Just Agree—For the Sake of Church Unity?

By Louisa Macourt

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Why can't Christians just agree? Or, when they must disagree, why can't they disagree quietly?

Many people, both inside and outside the church, feel impatient and frustrated with in-fighting and dissent in the body of Christ—even over critical issues like racial and gender justice or domestic violence. See the recent response to Australian journalist Julia Baird's coverage of domestic abuse in the Christian church. Many of the initial responses accused Baird of undercutting the church in highlighting the issue.

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Essentially, because we, the church, are meant to be one body—united in faith and newness in Christ—disagreement is sometimes seen as a threat and a liability. And certainly, unity is the ideal for Christian community. But does striving for unity mean that we never disagree—on anything? That we never challenge bad ideologies and harmful practices for the sake of keeping the peace? That we ignore the ways Christians have failed the oppressed and vulnerable in order to save face?

We should be united in our primary mission—to bring the gospel to the world. But we should also be truthful about our failure to witness the gospel perfectly, and we should be faithful to *all* that the gospel entails, including the mandate to live justly.

And of course, we should also be united on the foundational tenets of Christianity: Jesus is God incarnate in human flesh. Jesus lived a perfect and blameless life. He died on a cross as a living sacrifice so humanity could be reconciled to God. He physically rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Jesus restored our broken relationship with God and made eternal life with God possible.

It's crucial that we the church are unified on these counts—publicly and privately. This is no space for dissent.

But some Christians argue that we should protect church unity at any cost. We should strive to agree on everything, and if we really can't agree, then at the very least, we should keep our dissenting opinions to ourselves.

For the sake of the gospel, we need a unified front—a face of agreement to show the world. We should hide disagreements over issues like patriarchy or racial injustice in the church from those who do not know Christ. Really, they insist, we should just get on with presenting the gospel.

Let's take a look at one example that's close to our hearts: Throughout church history, the role of women has been hotly debated. Today, dissenting churches and individuals who believe that women should be free to serve at all levels are often dismissed as liberals or heretics who reject the authority of Scripture. And



yet, the majority of those seeking to establish women in roles of leadership and teaching in the church do so out of a deep desire to be faithful to God's Word, plan, and purpose.

Rather than settling for quick solutions and shallow unity, let us practice both prophetic dissent and loving dialogue. Let us not be people who make assumptions about sisters and brothers who think differently than us. Rather, let us embrace challenging conversations for the sake of those who need us to have them.

There *are* real reasons to disagree within the body of Christ, after all. For example, egalitarians disagree over the role of women because we know there are high stakes: freeing half the church to serve and lead.

As the people of God, we are not just one person with one background, or one people group with one cultural background. We are a multitude with many different personalities, gifts, faith stories, family and cultural backgrounds, and ethnicities.

Considering that diversity of background and experience, it is not surprising that we understand various parts of the Bible differently. Some Bible passages and stories speak into our lives so much that we might even think they are written just for us. We bring our experience, our story, our lens, and our bias to the text.

For example, some Christians, and especially many Western ones, have never known what it means to have limited or no access to life's basic survival requirements—food, shelter, clothing, etc. Naturally, more privileged Christians have a different understanding of what it means for God to provide for our daily needs than those who struggle to access these resources. All this is to say—again—we bring our experience and our lens to Scripture.

For this reason, we *need* the diversity God has provided for in the body of Christ. We need the baby boomers *and* the millennials. We need men *and* women in leadership. We need the traditionalists *and* the charismatics. We need the Baptists *and* the Lutherans. We need the church in China and Iran just as much as we need the Western church.

And we also need pushback within the church over justice issues like empowering women in ministry or challenging systemic racism. It is far easier to just not talk about the hard things, especially when the hard things make us, the church, look bad. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't tackle them anyway.

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We should be a people that relishes diversity rather than minimizes it. And we certainly shouldn't feel threatened by it. We should be people who learn from one another and grow together in love. And we should be a people who welcome hard truths and thoughtful critique, because iron sharpens iron and makes us all more like Christ.

So, back to the original question: why can't Christians just disagree quietly? Do we need to protect those who do not yet know Christ from dissent in the church? Is it a unified front, however shallow, that will win people to Christ?

I don't think so. We need to be honest as believers about what the church looks like in reality—imperfect and flawed. We shouldn't be fearful of disagreement or diversity within the church. We shouldn't hide the truth of our complexity—one body with many stories, backgrounds, and gifts.

When we avoid gracious debate and wield swords like “heretic,” “fundie,” “wolf in sheep's clothing,” “liberal,” “non-Christian,” or any other dismissive label at our sisters and brothers in Christ, we damage our own body as well as our gospel witness before the world. We have too often been quick to judge those we disagree with or believe are in error, and slow to listen to their perspectives or engage in constructive, open-hearted dialogue.

Christians should be known for their love, for both their unity and their diversity, and especially for their willingness to lay down their lives and arguments to simply *be the church*. I pray that we will be quick to listen, slow to anger, and slow to speak. I pray that we will be full to the brim with grace. I pray that we will have tough conversations with humble and merciful hearts. And I pray that we will never allow injustice to stand simply because we are afraid to have hard conversations.



Louisa Macourt lives in Sydney, Australia, and is currently working in university ministry. Louisa is passionate about seeing women empowered to use their gifts to serve God.