and graduate degrees in psychology. It was the right move for me, and it set me on the path to write this book.

Many thanks to Curtiss DeYoung for befriending me as soon as I arrived in the Twin Cities, mentoring me in the words and deeds of reconciliation and modeling how to empower diverse others.

I'm thankful for my forever friends Mardi, Emily, Ronee and Patrick, who I can always trust to have my back, as well as my prayer partners Elle, Stacy and Cristin, who provided lovingly strict accountability as I finished this book. I'm also grateful for my friends who pray for me when I'm writing and speaking: Rose, Maura, Tim, Avivah, Jon, Michelle, Julie, Jina, Juanita, Erica, Josie, Elisa and Ricardo. I feel clothed in their prayers even though many are far away.

I'm so glad to be part of a family that is committed to loving well across cultural differences. My dad is the best intercultural leader I know. I was fortunate to inherit not only his crosscultural DNA but also his passion for ministry. My mom's commitment to lifelong spiritual growth inspires me to maintain a teachable and humble posture. My super smart brother, John, knows how to disagree agreeably and models how to love well while effectively schooling people. And my sister, Des, is the best listener and most caring person I know. I learn from all of them, and in countless ways they have contributed to this book.

Last, I give honor to Jesus Christ, the author of unity and the chief reconciler.

1

Right Christian, Wrong Christian

I was taking a bus ride through the snow-capped Rockies in Colorado, complaining to myself about this guy at my church who drove me crazy. Ben and I were pretty much the only unmarried adults in our small church community, so we were often paired together during social events. As if this weren't annoying enough, Ben happened to be quite possibly the most offensive person I knew.

I wish I could say this wasn't the case, but everything about Ben bugged me—from his inflexible and preachy conservatism to his career as an engineer who designs nuclear warheads (I mean, *seriously*?) to his dorky Hawaiian-print button-downs (alas, perhaps his greatest offense). Anyway, there I was riding through Colorado, lamenting the fact that Ben was a part of my life and plotting ways to avoid interacting with him ever again. And suddenly I was confronted with the idea that Ben was going to be in heaven.

With me.

For all eternity.

And I would never, ever be rid of him.

Suddenly the idea of frolicking on the streets of gold seemed less enticing. *That's okay*, I quickly reassured myself. *Heaven is going to be a big, big place.*

Growing the Wrong Way

When I first began walking with Christ, I felt an immediate and authentic connection with any other Christian who crossed my path. Orthodox, Catholic, charismatic, Lutheran, evangelical, black, white, Asian, Ben—didn't matter. We were family.

But as I walked with Jesus, somehow my "growth" had been coupled with increasingly stronger opinions about the "right" way to be a follower. I started keeping people I didn't enjoy or agree with at arm's length. I managed to avoid most of the Bens in my life by locating them, categorizing them and gracefully shunning them, all while appearing to be both spiritual and community-oriented. Further, I could do all of this without wasting any of my precious brainpower. I was quite good.

I chose to build community with people with whom I could pretty much agree on everything. I invested lots of time and energy in fostering relationships with people who had similar ethnic backgrounds, were about my age, possessed similar educational degrees, professed similar theology, worshiped like me, voted like me and were fluent in the language of my postmodern, intellectual, wanderlustful, "diverse" culture. I sincerely thought that I was doing a fabulous job because, hey, I was "living in community," and isn't that what good Christians are supposed to do?

Over time, when I met other Christians, I found myself asking them what church they attended. Some answers were more acceptable than others. The way I saw it, there were two types of Christians: the wrong kind of Christian and the right kind of Christian.

It was that simple.

Wrong Christian was not a thinker. He hadn't read a book in the previous two years and had the limited vocabulary to prove it. (Although, come to think of it, he did read a book a few years back about a woman's rightful place in the home.) He voted based on one or two issues: abortion and homosexuality (two issues that Jesus didn't even mention *once*, mind you). Wrong Christian lacked

crosscultural sensitivity and somehow managed to avoid spending quality time with anyone who did not share his race and culture.

Naturally, he only dated women within his race, although he occasionally crushed on more "exotic" types. When he was not rockin' the suburbs in his gas-guzzling SUV, he surfed or played ultimate or some other inane "sport." He proudly served in the United States military and inexplicably (to me) was more concerned with the preservation of the Second Amendment than the First. He was a card-carrying and proselytizing Calvinist. In fact, the last time I was over at his house, I noticed that the acronym TULIP was boldly painted above his door. He voted Republican! Republican! Republican!

And he was a *he*. Seriously, did you expect Wrong Christian to be a woman? Pshaw.

Curiously, Right Christian was a lot more like me. While driving her Prius en route to the farmer's market, she self-righteously zipped past Wrong Christian's lumbering SUV, blithely unaware of the fact that Prius owners (and farmer's market shoppers, who are basically the same people) are consumers, just like everyone else.

She was a woman of the world; she was well traveled and able to thrive in any cultural setting (except for those conservative Christian ones in the flyover states, naturally). She boasted of the ethnic diversity of her friend group and joked that she and her friends looked like they had just walked off the pages of a United Colors of Benetton clothing ad. (Despite her high IQ—or perhaps due to it—she overlooked the fact that as well-educated, upwardly mobile, frequent Benetton shoppers, she and her friends were perhaps not as diverse as they thought.) She hopped onto the poverty, social justice and environmental bandwagons as well as any other bandwagons that were in vogue at the time.

She wasn't bound by political party affiliation. Rather, she thought for herself and voted independently (in other words, she voted Democrat! Democrat! Democrat!). Right Christian was a

reader and a writer. In fact, she'd *written* more books than Wrong Christian had read. She was an equal-opportunity dater. (Translation: she'd date anybody but Wrong Christian and his buddies.) She was strong. She knew that she was wonderful, charming and, quite frankly, a more valuable member of the body of Christ than Wrong Christian. All of these characteristics (and many, *many* more) made her Right Christian.

So it all began with two labels: Right Christian and Wrong Christian. The funny thing is, the more I talk with people about these labels, the more I realize that many of us carry our own descriptions of Right Christian and Wrong Christian. Perhaps in your opinion, my Right Christian is your Wrong Christian and my Wrong Christian is your Right Christian. Or maybe your Wrong Christian and Right Christian are totally different birds.

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 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 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 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 differ-

ences. 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 to love your neighbor as yourself—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.

Jesus, Unity and Fenway Park

About halfway through my graduate school program, I decided that I wanted a career in Major League Baseball. As a lifelong baseball fan—it's such a cerebral sport—and a budding social psychologist who studied group motivation, this wasn't an entirely ridiculous idea. At any rate, a few months later, I said goodbye to my research lab in California and moved to Boston to intern with the Boston Red Sox organization for a summer.

During those marvelous months, I became close friends with another intern named Sam. During our lunch breaks, we often sat in the empty grandstands at Fenway Park and talked about life, faith, good books and friends. Even though we often specifically talked about my relationship with Jesus, the summer was halfway over before Sam realized that I was an actual Christian. And let me tell you, he was not a fan of this idea.

He punched the seat in front of him.

"You're not a Christian," he insisted, vigorously shaking his head for extra effect.

"How's that?" I asked. I was confused.

"You're not like other Christians, Christena," he told me. "You're not judgmental and ignorant and dogmatic and anti-intellectual. Don't call yourself a Christian."

Sam was fired up.

"Well, I'm a follower of Christ, so by definition I'm a Christian." It was that simple to me.

"But you shouldn't associate with all of those ridiculous people who call themselves Christians. It makes you look bad," Sam responded.

I thought it was sweet of him to care about my reputation. I also thought it was sweet of him to think that I *wasn't* judgmental and ignorant and dogmatic and anti-intellectual.

This is when it occurred to me that Sam hadn't been introduced to the beauty and strength of Jesus' heart. Sam, like many other people, had no idea that Jesus pursues us in spite of the fact that we are all judgmental, ignorant, dogmatic and anti-intellectual at times. It also occurred to me that perhaps these sorts of conversations are why Jesus invites us to imitate him in pursuing each other. We represent Jesus well when we draw near to other believers, regardless of differences. This is how we show unbelievers Jesus' heart. And this is how we invite them to join us in following him. We need to be reminded of Jesus' words: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

And so I looked Sam in the eye and grinned. "Jesus doesn't distance himself from me even though, let's face it, I'm not always good for PR. I can do the same for other Christians."

He was shocked and suspicious. The idea was intriguing, but not at all logical. In Sam's world, you don't pal around with people who could ruin your reputation. But that sunny Boston day, right in the middle of the aging grandstands at Fenway Park, he saw a tiny bit of Jesus' heart. It's not logical, but it's definitely relational.

By walking in friendship with Sam (and many others like him), I have learned that the more we follow Christ's example by relinquishing Right Christian/Wrong Christian labels and crossing the boundaries of our world, the better we represent his vision to the world. This is both beautiful and scary to me. The beautiful part is

easy to talk about. I desperately want my friends to experience Jesus' heart. I bet you feel as strongly as I do.

I'm Not Making *These* Points

Before we continue our (admittedly one-sided) conversation, I'd like to be clear about what I am *not* saying. One, I'm not saying that differences in the body of Christ are trivial. I'm not suggesting that we just forget about our substantive, ideological differences or that we refrain from making strong statements concerning how we view faith in God and how we live out our faith in practical ways so we can happily move on to singing "Kumbaya" and making s'mores.

There's an analogy that wise King Solomon used to describe a good friendship. He said that two friends sharpen each other like iron sharpens iron (see Proverbs 27:17). I think it's curious that he chose iron, a material that is known for its strength and solidity, to describe a good friend. According to Solomon, a good friendship isn't a moral free-for-all, in which any difference is accepted or glossed over. Rather, a good friendship involves a healthy tension in which the friends challenge and encourage each other to draw closer to the heart of God. Each friend uses her strength to help the other friend grow stronger. Friends who share their different ideas about faith or life can help us to avoid some of the nasty effects of group polarization that I'll talk about later. Essentially, they draw us out of our own world and in doing so, help us to stay away from Right Christian/Wrong Christian labels.

Besides, principles and theology are important. They certainly fueled a lot of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Yes, we do need to have candid conversations about racial injustice in the church and beyond, how we're interacting with the natural environment, how we're caring for the homeless, how we're protecting the unborn, how we're defining atonement, who we are voting for and so forth. These are all necessary and valuable conversations.

The trick is to wisely use our Christian friends' ideology to humble us, strengthen us and enhance our understanding of God and the role we're called to play in his kingdom. And we should influence our friends in the same way. Like iron sharpens iron. This is a huge and complicated idea that warrants much more discussion. I'm looking forward to returning to this idea later on in our conversation.

Two, I am not saying that cultural differences within the body of Christ are inconsequential or petty. There's a "surfer" church in Santa Barbara, where I used to live. The church is located a couple of blocks from the beach, and the pastor is pretty well known in the global surf community. If you visit this church, you'll see lots of surfers and skaters and other types who typically associate with surfers and skaters. In his sermons, the pastor often uses examples from surfing to explain his points. I know very little about surfing (or why people would voluntarily get up at 4 a.m. to go jump in the freezing cold ocean), so his surf illustrations usually just leave me confused. But I notice that all of the surfers and skaters seem to nod appreciatively whenever he uses these examples. So in that sense, I'm all for the surfing analogies, and by extension, the surfer church.

Three, I am not saying that this crazy idea of dropping our labels in search of unity is easy. There are some real hurdles that make it difficult for different individuals and different groups to come together in healthy, meaningful and lasting ways. Hopefully our conversation in this book will help to demystify some of these hurdles and give you both the understanding and the hope to say goodbye to divisions in the body of Christ.

Ben, Again

Remember Ben, the poor guy I blasted at the beginning of the chapter? A few summers back, Santa Barbara was subjected to a series of devastating wildfires. We're talking fires of biblical pro-

portions; the whole city was covered in smoke and soot for most of the month of July. One of the wildfires threatened the homes of several people in our church community.

Most of us were backing away from the area affected by the fires, tending to our power outages, shutting our windows and so forth. But Ben was approaching the fire zone, checking on people in the church, offering to do anything to help them. He did this in spite of the fact that many of the people to whom he was offering help hailed from different ethnic backgrounds, voted for different candidates, held opposing eschatological views and dressed differently.

During that summer, Ben showed me what it looks like to relativize differences in order to love each other in sacrificial ways. As a member of the family of God, Ben uniquely demonstrates the character of Jesus. Ben is essential to me, and I would never have recognized this if I had forever cast him as Wrong Christian.

This revelation about Ben makes me wonder if our understanding of Jesus (and by extension, our role as his followers) is limited by our inability to see him represented in the diversity of the body of Christ. 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 must be a better and more efficient way to carry out our roles within the mission of God. Surely, we can do better.

Cultural differences in the body of Christ enable different types of people to draw near to the heart of Jesus. As his church, I'm grateful that we can follow in his example of being all things to all people. Jesus did a fantastic job of knowing his audience and speaking directly to their hearts. For example, Jesus talked sheep to shepherds, fish to fishermen, and bookish theology to bookish

theologians. He was all things to all people. I think that our differences enable us to speak richly and directly to the hearts of all types of people.

As we'll discover in the following chapter, culturally homogenous churches are adept at targeting and attracting a certain type of person and creating a strong group identity. However, attendees at such churches are at a higher risk for creating the overly simplistic and divisive Right Christian and Wrong Christian labels that dangerously lead to inaccurate perceptions of other Christians as well as hostility and conflict. What often begins as an effective and culturally specific way to reach people for Christ ends up stifling their growth as disciples. Perhaps this is because we often fail to make a distinction between evangelism and discipleship. People can *meet* God within their cultural context but in order to *follow* God, they must cross into other cultures because that's what Jesus did in the incarnation and on the cross. Discipleship is crosscultural. When we meet Jesus around people who are just like us and then continue to follow Jesus with people who are just like us, we stifle our growth in Christ and open ourselves up to a world of division. However, when we're rubbing elbows in Christian fellowship with people who are different from us, we can learn from each other and grow more like Christ. Like iron sharpens iron.

For this reason, I believe that churches and Christian organizations should strive for cultural diversity. Regardless of ethnic demographics, every community is multicultural when one considers the various cultures of age, gender, economic status, education level, political orientation and so on. Further, every church should fully utilize the multifaceted cultural diversity within itself, express the diversity of its local community, expertly welcome the other, embrace all who are members of the body of Christ and intentionally collaborate with different churches or organizations in order to impact the kingdom. And churches situated in multiethnic communities—I'm not letting

you off the hook—should absolutely be ethnically diverse.

Overcoming differences. Working through 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 effect 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 insights from social psychology to help us understand the unseen dynamics of how church-related homogenous 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.

Chapter 1 Questions

1. Do you have labels for Right Christian and Wrong Christian? If yes, how would you describe them?
2. We often create labels for Right Christian and Wrong Christian without consciously thinking about it. Where do these labels come from? How do we decide who is Right Christian and who is Wrong Christian?
3. Do you think God can use Wrong Christian to sharpen you? If yes, how so? If no, why not?
4. How do you think unbelievers perceive disunity between Christians? How do you think disunity between Christians affects unbelievers?

5. Do you think churches and Christian organizations should be multicultural? Why/why not?
6. Think about the ethnic and cultural demographics in your community. Does your church reflect those demographics? If not, why not?