



Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America

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Through a nationwide telephone survey of 2,000 people and an additional 200 face-to-face interviews, Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith probed the grassroots of white evangelical America. They found that despite recent efforts by the movement's leaders to address the problem of racial discrimination, evangelicals themselves seem to be preserving America's racial chasm. In fact, most white evangelicals see no systematic discrimination against blacks. But the authors contend that it is not active racism that prevents evangelicals from recognizing ongoing problems in American society. Instead, it is the evangelical movement's emphasis on individualism, free will, and personal relationships that makes invisible the pervasive injustice that perpetuates racial inequality. Most racial problems, the subjects told the authors, can be solved by the repentance and conversion of the sinful individuals at fault.

Combining a substantial body of evidence with sophisticated analysis and interpretation, the authors throw sharp light on the oldest American dilemma. In the end, they conclude that despite the best intentions of evangelical leaders and some positive trends, real racial reconciliation remains far over the horizon.

Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America Details

Date : Published September 6th 2001 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published July 20th 2000)

ISBN : 9780195147070

Author : Michael O. Emerson , Christian Smith

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Race, Nonfiction, Religion, Christian, Theology, History, Social Movements, Social Justice, Sociology, Christianity, Faith

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Denise Huff says

Before you talk to others about what you think you know about race relations, read this book. You might discover that you don't really know the whole story. It's not an easy book to read, especially if you're a white evangelical--but it's a very necessary read. It's data driven; the authors did their homework with extensive research and interviews, and then they took the data and came to come shocking conclusions. If you long for racial reconciliation in the church (or elsewhere), it's a great book to get you thinking in ways you haven't considered before.

There are no quick fixes, no magic potion answers here, so don't look for those. But if you want to challenge your thinking and know where to go to go START finding answers, this is the book for you. (Hint--the answers aren't going to come from your homogeneous group!)

Phillip Howell says

Today I told someone this book was good. It was thought provoking and it made me think a lot about my cultural assumptions as a white evangelical. However, I didn't recommend this white evangelical to buy a copy and read it because I felt like the best advice was to encourage them to do their own "interviews." This book is the fruit of some historical and sociological research. The main research these authors did was interviewing with hundreds of people about race, religion and society in America. So instead of encouraging them to read this book I kept thinking we should encourage white evangelicals to spend the time meeting with others from different ethnicities and getting to know their stories. It would also be good to ask them how they think issues of race can be solved. I appreciate this book because these men took the time to listen and be open to various factors that are causing division in the church and in our communities. Reading their book would be one way to honor their work but many of us might be better served if we followed their example and see what conclusions we come to.

Dave says

Emerson opens up a can of worms... he gets below the surface of the average discussions on racism... expands the issue with his concept of "racialization" and really moves the reader to re-think his/her own racism. Whether you are into racial reconciliation or not, this book should be read by everyone.

Caleb says

"The congregation often looks to religion not as an external force that places radical demands on their lives, but rather as a way to fulfill their needs" (p164).

Divided by Faith is getting long in the tooth now (published in 2000), but it still offers a challenging window into conservative evangelical thinking on race. Emerson and Smith reveal (confirm?) that a majority of

American evangelicals take an individualistic and moralistic approach to racial issues. In so doing, no matter how well-meaning, they reproduce and in some cases exacerbate racial inequality.

Emerson and Smith, like most humanities and social science academics that I know, favor structural explanations and solutions for inequality. Such solutions usually mean state coercion, as the authors imply by criticizing individual freedom, choice, and similar "American" values. The book stops short of offering any solutions, which limits the power of its critique. The authors are so confident that their enlightened sociological perspective is adequate to diagnose the shortcomings of religious views on racial inequality, the "real" cause of racial inequality, and therefore the most effective solutions, but they refuse to give readers any idea of what a sociologically acceptable, structural solution would be. Are they afraid that most would find it unacceptable?

Still, the book is 2/3 right. Many Christians are consumerist beyond their knowing it in their lives and religious practice. We are too individualistic and only interested in justice to a comfortable degree. And racial divisions do indeed have structural components. For example, the book highlights a fascinating and troubling paradox: that the marketplace structure of American religion (you are free to choose where you worship and who you listen to) means that religion's potential to spread a prophetic and radical message is constrained by the need to attract and keep parishioners. So leaders who want to challenge the comfortable and racially segregated lives of their congregants risk losing their audience, so they can only be as challenging as their group allows. But what is the solution? Surely Emerson and Smith aren't advocating the establishment of religion? They don't really say beyond more vague references to "structural solutions." The implication is that producing economic equality through housing, education, and jobs policies will lead to integrated social lives (including religious).

So is their problem with evangelicalism that its frame prevents parishioners from adopting structural change? Or that religion itself should produce social change but doesn't because of its arbitrary emphasis on individual morality? Again, the authors never come out and say it, though they imply in the conclusion that Christianity could encourage much needed reconciliation and forgiveness, while the state (led by experts) creates policies that constrain and direct individual choices towards equality, integration, and interdependence.

My major annoyance with the book is the positivistic arrogance of sociology. The discussion of data and sociological "laws" needed to be supplemented by more history and humility. Indeed, if congregations segregate according to established sociological principle, what hope do we have? Sociology and religion come from two very different ways of knowing and understanding the world - approaches that are in some ways incompatible and in other ways complementary. Their complementarity is finally discussed in the book's short conclusion, but the tension between them was apparent throughout. Is sociology necessary to change evangelical views on race, or would better theology do just as well?

In short, *Divided by Faith* is an enlightening and frustrating read. It can help readers reflect on the realities of racial segregation within Christianity and what might be done. But it also reveals epistemological hubris and condescension of sociology. The book would be stronger if the authors challenged themselves to the kind of self-critical reflection that they demand of evangelicals.

James Kim says

Here's the thing...I really didn't want to like this book. In fact in the first several chapters I was convinced that this was a book written with an agenda and all that the author was doing was backing up his bias with data that supported his bias. The more I read the book, the more this book caused me to think and reflect on

the racialization of America and what role Evangelical Christianity has had in maintaining that racialization.

Where I am now is that the author presents the evangelical church with uncomfortable truths that we must reflect on and think through.

The solutions and the realities of internal bias for the familiar...I am not sure what to do with all that. In one sense, in order to lead you have spur one another to good works. But there's fine line where the spurring becomes spearing...and when that happens, you are no longer leading because eventually no one is following.

No matter where you are on this issue, the book is well worth the read and the discussions and reflections that are spurred on by the author are well worth thinking and praying through.

Daniel says

This book rocked my world. I developed a heart for racial reconciliation in college through InterVarsity and saw the need for it in the church at large. I watched as minority bible studies were formed, and collapsed, as some leaders were developed and as the fellowship remained relatively mono-ethnic.

This book, written from a sociological point of view, articulated a lot of the frustrations I have had over the years with the high inertia and heavy cost required for racial reconciliation. As they articulated how the very tools evangelicals used to deal with issues of race actually perpetuate the problem I could think of examples of this being true.

Though sobering, I would say this is a must read for any evangelical, heck any white American interested in issues of ethnic and racial reconciliation.

Mike E. says

This book is written by sociologists from Rice and UNC who write in the typical detached pseudo-objective world of scholarship. You will find no solutions here. They do not freely reveal their own experiences, convictions, world-views, etc. Their book is an analysis of white evangelicals and our perpetuation of what they call "racialization." In short, they argue that well-meaning (and fairly stupid) evangelicals perpetuate and even exasperate the disparate life experiences, economic opportunities, and social relationships of African Americans. They helpfully differentiate between racism, which America has basically left behind, and racialism, which is the condition of keeping blacks in their place in part due to a well intentioned over-emphasis on individual and inter-personal relationships while ignoring social, ecclesiastical, and governmental structures. Fortunately the authors are transparent about their critical book with no solutions. Near the end of the book they write, "Our analysis has not led us to specific solutions for ending racialization. (171)." From someone who lives in the real world instead of the academic world, we have no such liberty to write or think or live like that! Also, the book is dated. It was written in 2000 and I do not find it speaking to the situation on the ground here in the foothills of Northern California or in the more diverse and metropolitan Bay Area. Those things aside, I am glad I read this book for the following reasons:

(1) Their concise history of black-white relations from 1700 through the civil rights era to the present day (2000) was eminently helpful. Their chapter "From Separate Pews to Separate Churches" was educational for me. I had never thought through the reality that our churches were integrated prior to the Civil War. The

black man did not have the opportunity or resources to start and shepherd churches in the South until well after the Civil War. At that point both whites and blacks were for segregated churches (see p 39). In reality, Christ's church in America has never recovered. In large part we remain segregated today. The reasons for segregation have changed, but the reality has not.

(2) The book serves as a rebuke to Christians like me who believe that the make-up of local congregations should reflect, in their leadership and their membership, the racial, economic, and educational diversity represented in their communities at-large. Our neighborhoods are not integrated, but His church should be (Gal 3:28; Col 3:9-11, et. al.) The book serves as a challenge for us who believe the gospel should be visible by unifying very different peoples because of faith in Christ alone.

(3) The book introduced me to helpful categories and concepts. E.g., "The miracle motif is the theologically rooted idea that as more individuals become Christians, social and personal problems will be solved automatically (117)." The miracle motif misunderstands the ecclesial and corporate implications of the gospel. Another example is what the authors call "The Ethical Paradox of Group Loyalty." In short, they point out that individual unselfishness transmutes into group selfishness. When a bunch of well-intentioned, unselfish people get together and form a group identity, the group views actions to protect and strengthen the group as loyalty. The unintended consequences of this "loyalty" can be detrimental to others. This is cogently argued on 159.

(4) They highlighted the major shift that takes place in a white evangelical's view of a minority race when the white evangelical lives in a neighborhood with minorities, befriends some of them (have you had someone of a minority ethnicity to dinner at your home in the last year?), and finally develops a friendship with someone from the minority race that is of equal or higher socioeconomic status.

A fascinating and frustrating read that will be of interest to few people. What needs to be written are books that are well-informed biblically and historically that deal with both the implications of the gospel for ethnicities and various economic strata that have practical solutions for contemporary congregations in urban, suburban, small-town, and rural areas.

Barry says

This book is great at defining the problem and explaining why it is so intractable, but frustratingly lacking in any actionable solutions. The authors repeatedly and patronizingly criticize white evangelicals for being unable to properly address the problem of a racialized society because they have a limited "cultural tool kit," but never suggest which measures should be considered if they would only listen to those with a more enlightened "cultural tool kit," such as those held by, presumably, the authors themselves.

3.5 stars

Chris says

Fantastic book. It's been a few years since I first read it, and I have yet to come across such an excellent assessment of the issues of race in today's church. It also contains great material for helping White Christians understand the concerns of those of other racial groups. I wish all American Christians would read this book.

Nathaniel Taylor says

I can't recommend this enough, particularly to white Christians like me. Discusses the racial divide in the American church from a historical and sociological point of view in a way that's accessible, humbling, thought-provoking, and logical. Deeply challenging without shaming.

Paul says

A thought-provoking and convicting examination of why, despite a decades-long concerted effort on the part of evangelical Christians, race relations in America and among its churches remain in a state of de facto segregation. Emerson and Smith explore the sociological underpinnings of American evangelicalism and describe how the assumptions that make evangelicalism what it is also work against racial reconciliation, especially on a systemic level. Despite being more than 15 years old, it's impressive and depressing how well this book holds up. If I have any complaint, it's that there's no effort to really address what true reconciliation – individual AND systemic – would look like. The result is a book that is bleak, even fatalistic, although still one I would highly recommend to those trying to get a better handle on race relations in the modern American church.

Nicole Richardson says

I wanted to hate this book. Perhaps I even literally threw the book at the wall several times. But there's no denying how grateful I am to have let this book marinate my soul.

I never personally struggled with racism. So I walked through life thinking everyone is responsible for themselves and what they put in this world. And that's not false. But I discovered so much more. I discovered systemic racism. And it rocked me.

So before you speak out on race relations at all, I urge you to study about the history of our country, the history of our religion and how both are intertwined and are the foundation for the problems we are continuing to have today in a racialized society.

Nathan says

I honestly believe everyone in America should read this book, especially white America. I can't claim to know the solution now to solve racialization but this book has drastically open my eyes to the truth, depth and pains of racial injustice in our country and I think the last sentences of the books sum it up well..."Good intentions are not enough. But educated, sacrificial, realistic, efforts made in faith across racial line can help us together move toward a more just, equitable, and peaceful society. And that is a purpose well worth striving toward."

C. says

I found this book on a list going around Twitter with the heading 'Books that helped my white friends get it'. In the aftermath of an election that I was struggling to make sense of, this felt like a good place to start. While the book is nearly twenty years old, I found myself going - 'oh multiple times throughout it.

I am at best an amateur sociologist, it felt well written and researched, and overall readable for the most part. The most complicated and abstract part was probably the chapter looking at the sociology of groups and how the marketplace atmosphere of denominations and congregations within the U.S. discourages diversity and encourages homogeneity (particularly with the added emphasis of evangelism).

The author provides a brief history of evangelicals in the U.S., including looking at the complex views of slavery, the toolkits that Evangelicals use to explain the world, including a heavy emphasis on individualism, and relationships, and then provides both survey data, and data gathered with interviews about views on race. He also looks at how the structural aspects of how the church works and evangelizes in the U.S. reinforces segregation in a structural way, even without it being a specific desire of those in the congregations, and indeed those congregations may report a desire to improve race relationships. Overall, I feel as if I do have a more solid understanding of the why, if not the how to fix it.

And this isn't a how to fix it book. It is a look at explanation and history, it's not offering a way to solve the problem. A few ideas are given in the final chapters, but it lacks specific actions to take. In short I would consider this a really good read for anyone looking to explore the thinking of race among white evangelicals in particular, and more generally the history of racial segregation within churches and denominations.

david shin says

This is a very good sociology book on how evangelical America is just as divided (if not more) by race and socio-economics. It is a sharp criticism of the American church, of its racism and bias towards class and ethnicity. Truly a wake up call for anyone who says they're a follower of Jesus.
