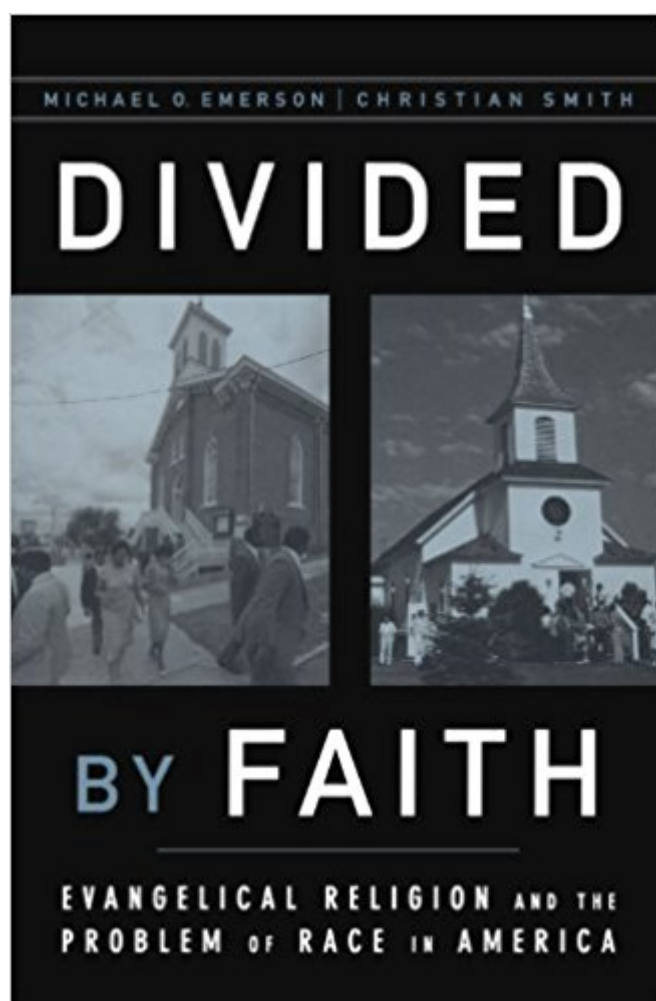


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# Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion And The Problem Of Race In America



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Divided by Faith by Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith has an ingenious, troubling argument. "[E]vangelicals desire to end racial division and inequality, and attempt to think and act accordingly. But, in the process, they likely do more to perpetuate the racial divide than they do to tear it down." Emerson and Smith, who conducted 2,000 telephone surveys and 200 face-to-face interviews in preparing this book, argue that evangelicals have a theological world view that makes it difficult for

them to perceive systematic injustices in society. In particular, evangelical emphasis of individualism and free will seem to predispose them to believe that most racial problems can be solved if individuals will only repent of their sins. Therefore, many well-meaning strategies for healing racial divisions (such as cross-cultural friendships) carry within them the seeds of their own defeat.

*Divided by Faith* also includes a brilliant, concise history of evangelical thought about race from colonial times to the civil rights movement. Clearly written and impeccably researched, this book ranks among the most compassionate and critical studies of contemporary evangelicalism.

--Michael Joseph Gross --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Evangelicals, argue sociologists Emerson and Smith, have gotten serious about racial reconciliation. This, they suggest, is a break from tradition. In the 19th century, many white evangelicals supported slavery but then upheld Jim Crow laws through the postwar years. Over the last half century, however, evangelicals have increasingly found racism unpalatable, a transformation culminating, symbolically at least, in the Southern Baptist Convention's 1995 proclamation that it repented for its role in slavery. Today, the Promise Keepers call for reconciliation, while evangelical theologians and publications explore what reconciliation means. But white evangelicals, though well-meaning, often unwittingly contribute to racism, say the authors. Smith and Emerson explain this seeming contradiction by drawing on Smith's earlier work, in which he argued that evangelicals have a piecemeal approach to social justice: they are inclined to fix immediate problems, such as feeding homeless people at a soup kitchen, rather than address systemic crises such as the unequal distribution of wealth. Smith and Emerson recycle the same argument, tweaked ever so slightly, here. The tools evangelicals use to combat racism—socializing more with members of another race, or integrating churches and racially segregated neighborhoods—are well-intentioned but ultimately not adequate to the task of eradicating deeply entrenched racist patterns. This is a valuable critique of evangelical approaches to social change, although those familiar with Smith's previous work will learn little. (June) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The author does an exceptional job navigating an extremely convoluted subject. Much has been written on the issues of God, Faith and Race in America, but this is a pivotal work. The book reads like a long academic paper, which is refreshing, the authors' assertions are driven by historical facts and reliable research all presented through a Biblical World View. Highly recommended.

I am completely convinced that I am not a racist; however, after reading this book, I have a belief system that contributes to the role of a racialized society. This book has opened my eyes to the ways that I continue to reinforce segregation within my church. My only complaint with the book is that it does not outline practical steps to overcome racialization. This is an excellent book to read!

"To address successfully the complexity of American race relations, this evangelical tendency toward quick-minded activism should be modified. With a few exceptions, evangelicals lack serious thinking on this issue. Rather than integrate their faith with knowledge of race relations, inequality, and American society, they generally allow their cultural constructions to shape one-dimensional assessments and solutions to multidimensional problems. This will not do."

Author's arguments rely on the inadequacy of the "evangelical toolkit". Author asserts the toolkit is inadequate, relies on a single unexplained footnote to substantiate the assertion, and then refers back to the toolkit's inadequacy dozens of times throughout the book to support other arguments. The book does include a collection of interesting data on race, politics and religion

Emerson, author of more than nine books and journals, teaches courses in race and ethnic relations, religion, urban sociology, poverty and justice, and research methods in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and his colleague Smith who served as the Stuart Chapin Distinguished Professor of Sociology in the university and author of several books. Collaborate to write this book, which was named the 2001 Distinguished Book of the Year by the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. The authors conducted a national telephone survey of more than 2500 Americans, interviewed almost 200 evangelicals, and collected data from a variety of different sources to base on their argument. Their main thesis is that America is a "racialized society" and religion, more specifically evangelical religion, without intention, makes the problem worse by focusing on strengthening the relationship that already exist in the same group. They state: Religion, as structured in America, is unable to make great impact on the racialized society. In fact, far from knocking down racial barriers, religion generally serves to maintain these historical divides, and helps to develop new ones..... The structure of religion in America is conducive to freeing groups from the direct control of the other groups but not addressing the fundamental division that exist in our current racialized society. (p. 18). At the individual level, the authors believe that the white evangelicals do not see that we have a racialized society; rather, they see racial problem only in individual cases and bad interpersonal relationships. By this the white evangelicals are minimizing

the race problem, and thus they offer poor solutions that are profoundly individualistic and interpersonal and do not exceed their individualistic view. These solutions do not touch "the system," because they do not include any financial or cultural sacrifices. "They maintain what is for them the noncostly status quo." At the organizational level, the authors believe that "the religious market" in America leads congregations to become focused on marketing themselves to "homogenous" congregations in order to survive as organizations in a competitive market, which generate internal growth and external division, leading to racially separate congregations. They argue that "internally homogeneous congregations more often provide what draws people to religious groups for a lower cost than do internally diverse congregations." In other words, the religious market principle leads the congregation to do what makes its "consumer" happy in order to stay, which consequently will cost the congregation to lose its power as a prophetic voice. Thus instead of providing "the moral force" to change what violates the moral standard of what evangelicals believe in, the congregation, unintentionally, perpetuates the status quo. I would have liked the authors to tackle the psychological issue of the race problem in America. They spoke about confessing and healing from the white evangelical side, but what about blacks? Do not they also need healing? I believe that the black people's self-image, not to minimize the racialized culture of America, needed to be addressed. The impact of hundreds of years of slavery and segregation cannot be wiped out in five decades. It is going to be a journey in the desert until the whole old generation dies and a new generation that "have a dream" rise up. In my point of view, the race problem is a two-way road. When both blacks and whites do their part, they will eventually end up sitting in one church, but this time in the same pews.

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

A must read for all who are concerned with the growing gulf in race relations in our country. The more enlightened we are and the more open we are trying to be still leaves us short of oneness with our fellow human. Why? The author answers the why better than anyone I know. He looks at the Bible and history and present circumstance to help us understand the racial gulf in the church. We might be more diverse but are we more one?

If you're willing to consider that your view on racial issues may be less than adequate, this book will help you see a much bigger and more accurate picture of what is going on and how you can contribute, and how you can stop adding to the problem.

I really enjoyed understanding where the split happened between the "white" church and the "African-American" church on social issues. This makes so much sense. We need each other to get a better rounded gospel. If you curious... buy it.

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